

Social security in late medieval England: corrodies in the hospitals and almshouses of Durham Priory*

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ABSTRACT

Historians have debated the extent of poor relief and social security provision in late medieval England, yet our knowledge about the inmates of hospitals and almshouses remains limited. Corrodies – grants of food, clothes and shelter – have been seen as a way of alleviating poverty in old age. Utilizing the evidence of 260 corrodies, this article explores the gender, marital status and length of time recipients held their positions in two hospitals and two almshouses in Durham. Far from catering just to ageing male retainers, as is often thought, corrodies provided security for men and women of all ages.

The extent of poor relief and the effectiveness of social security provisions in late medieval England have been widely debated.¹ If a person had sufficient resources there were various options available to them for securing protection against the potential depredations caused by poverty and old age, ranging from joining a guild or fraternity through to securing a maintenance contract or some form of annuity.² If they did not have such resources, individuals might rely upon family support or some form of charitable almsgiving, be it the more ad hoc distributions left in wills or the more systematic provisions of ecclesiastical or urban institutions.³ The quantity and quality of these provisions have, however, been much disputed because they have underpinned a range of debates surrounding the impact of the Reformation upon English society, which saw the dissolution of many such charitable institutions and their subsequent replacement by the poor laws. As a result, opinions have varied from an older view that pre-Reformation poor relief was inadequate, impractical or downright inept to the more recent arguments that such institutions did what they could with the resources available to them

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¹ See, e.g., C. Dyer, 'Poverty and its relief in late medieval England', *Past & Present*, ccxvi (2012), 41–78; P. Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531–1782* (Basingstoke, 1990); P. Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999); M. K. McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England, 1350–1600* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 59–94; and L. A. Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law, 1500–1700* (Woodbridge, 2004).

² G. Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England, 1250–1550* (Oxford, 2015); R. M. Smith, 'The manorial court and the elderly tenant in late medieval England', in *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives*, ed. M. Pelling and R. M. Smith (London, 1991), pp. 39–61; and E. Clark, 'Some aspects of social security in medieval England', *Journal of Family History*, vii (1982), 307–20.

³ For hospitals and almshouses more generally, see E. Prescott, *The English Medieval Hospital, c. 1050–1640* (London, 1992); S. Sweetinburgh, *The Role of the Hospital in Medieval England: Gift-Giving and the Spiritual Economy* (Dublin, 2004); N. Orme and M. Webster, *The English Hospital, 1070–1570* (New Haven, Conn., 1995); and J. A. A. Goodall, *God's House at Ewelme: Life, Devotion and Architecture in a Fifteenth-Century Almshouse* (Aldershot, 2001).

and that they had a genuine impact on society.⁴ One of the reasons for such debates has been the lack of sources relating to poor relief with, for example, 'English medieval hospital patients being notoriously difficult to document', in no small part because 'few hospitals have left original registers of the inmates they admitted before the Reformation'.⁵ This article sheds new light upon the nature and extent of late medieval poor relief by analysing the gender, marital status and potential age of recipients of corrodies granted at two hospitals and two almshouses in late medieval Durham.

Corrodies are themselves a significant example of where the worlds of annuities and almsgiving meet, as they have often been thought of as a specific form of social security in old age, whereby favoured servants or moderately wealthy individuals might retire to the relative comfort of an infirmary or almshouse.⁶ A corrody was an allowance involving what Barbara Harvey defined as a 'bundle of privileges', which took the form of food, clothes and shelter, and occasionally money, and which was often granted to the recipient by an ecclesiastical institution, normally for life.⁷ Although the precise nature of these grants – and their generosity – varied enormously, most were given out by such institutions for a limited number of reasons: they could be bought for an upfront payment of cash or a donation of land, they could be granted to servants of the ecclesiastical institution itself for loyal service, they could be imposed upon the institution by the crown in order to reward royal favourites, or they might be designated to particularly needy individuals as a form of charity. In this fashion, corrodies have traditionally been seen as 'retirement arrangements', which enabled 'people to plan for reliable shelter and provision of food in their retirement years'.⁸

Despite our general understanding of their use, questions and controversies about corrodies remain. How much of a financial burden were they upon monastic houses in late medieval England? Unfortunately, it is difficult to calculate the financial commitment they may have involved for ecclesiastical institutions because we do not know the length of time for which most corrodies were held. This is because although the initial grants most commonly survive, we have little information about when the corrodian (the holder of the corrody) died.⁹ This, in turn, raises the issue of why corrodies were granted in the first place. Were they really a form of social security in old age or has this been taken for granted by historians who have echoed the advice given by medieval commentators like John Fortescue, who in 1470 suggested that honest retainers 'be rewarded with corrodies and have honest sustenance in their old age when they may no longer serve'.¹⁰ If, for instance, people routinely held them for twenty or thirty years, their recipients were unlikely to be infirm with age at the time of the initial grant, and yet we know so little about the longevity of people who entered medieval hospitals and almshouses. Moreover, what are we to make of individuals who held multiple concurrent corrodies, sometimes at the same institution? Are we to suppose that such individuals travelled in a circuit, supping at a different abbey or hospital for each meal of the day? Or, rather, were corrodies nothing more than a form of medieval rent-seeking, a guaranteed income, albeit often in kind, which were to be accumulated like any other benefice?

One of the reasons so many uncertainties remain despite numerous studies of medieval corrodies is because previous historians have been forced to rely upon relatively small samples of evidence.¹¹

⁴ N. S. Rushton, 'Monastic charitable provision in Tudor England: quantifying and qualifying poor relief in the early sixteenth century', *Continuity and Change*, xvi (2001), 9–44.

⁵ C. Rawcliffe, *Medicine for the Soul: the Life, Death and Resurrection of an English Medieval Hospital, St Giles's, Norwich, c.1249–1550* (Stroud, 1999), p. 162; and Orme and Webster, *English Hospital*, p. 107. See also the limited information on almshouses in Goodall, *God's House*, pp. 123–40.

⁶ For some of the literature on old age, see, e.g., D. Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c.1300–c.1500* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 178–9; J. T. Rosenthal, 'Retirement and the life cycle in fifteenth-century England', in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. M. M. Sheehan (Toronto, 1990), pp. 173–88; E. Clark, 'The quest for security in medieval England', in Sheehan, *Aging and the Aged*, pp. 189–200; and J. T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 108–14.

⁷ B. Harvey, *Living and Dying in England, 1100–1540: the Monastic Experience* (Oxford, 1993), p. 179.

⁸ A. D. Fizzard, 'A competent mess': food, consumption and retirement at religious houses in England and Wales, c.1502–38', *Journal of Medieval History*, xlix (2023), 111–34, at p. 112. For this repeated view of corrodies, see Youngs, *Life Cycle*, p. 179; and P. Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 81–3.

⁹ One of the few studies to provide any estimates is P. H. Cullum, *Cremetis and Corrodies: the Care of the Poor and Sick at St Leonard's Hospital, York, in the Middle Ages* (Borthwick Papers, lxxix, York, 1991).

¹⁰ Sir John Fortescue: *On the Laws and Governance of England*, ed. S. Lockwood (Cambridge, 1997), p. 120.

¹¹ One exception to this is the large number of royal appointments to corrodies, yet these have their own methodological problems, not least because we often do not know if the royal 'request' of a corrody resulted in one being granted (J. H. Tillotson, 'Pensions, corrodies and religious houses: an aspect of the relations of crown and church in early fourteenth-century England', *Journal of Religious History*, viii (1974), 127–43, at p. 135).

A. Hamilton Thompson, for example, discussed corrodies in an impressionistic fashion by drawing upon a range of examples from a variety of places to get a sense of their purpose and role in medieval society.¹² Richard I. Harper's more systematic study of the fourteenth-century corrodies granted by the archbishops of Canterbury was nevertheless based on just thirty such grants, out of which only six were awarded to women, while A. G. Little and Eric Stone's work was based on nine corrodies at the Carmelite Friary of Lynn.¹³ Ian Keil studied a far larger set of ninety-six corrodies at Glastonbury Abbey, though these were widely dispersed between 1281 and 1537, and included only eight female recipients.¹⁴ Allison Fizzard's more recent study of retirement practices spread its net across eight religious houses and one hospital to capture thirty corrodies from the early sixteenth century, while Adrian Bell and Charles Sutcliffe's economic analysis of the profitability of corrodies drew information from twenty-seven individual grants (of which three were to women) and twenty-four jointly held corrodies spread across six abbeys, one hospital and one priory.¹⁵ Finally, in perhaps the most significant and extensive study of medieval corrodies, Harvey traced sixty-five of them at Westminster Abbey between 1250 and 1540, noting that it was actually 'quite unusual to uncover a grant in monastic sources in the half century or so before the Dissolution' and arguing that corrodians were 'in general less numerous than historians have commonly supposed'.¹⁶ With only a few hints about the age of corrodians or the length that they held their allowances for, and with very little information about women recipients in general, conclusions have therefore often been tentative and impressionistic, relying upon a handful of illustrative examples.¹⁷

The lack of information about corrodies, especially surrounding the length of time for which they were held, has in turn produced disagreements among historians. Some, such as Thompson, have argued that corrodies were a costly and irresponsible move by heavily indebted abbots who, desperate for ready cash, gambled by selling corrodies for immediate money and so burdened their houses with future commitments of unknown length, which 'corroded and gnawed on monastery finances'.¹⁸ This condemnation echoes that of ecclesiastical authorities such as the papal legate Ottobuono, who, at the Council of London in 1268, stated that the sale of corrodies defrauded the sick and the poor, while the likes of Hubert Walter, archbishop of Canterbury, compared the sale of corrodies to simony.¹⁹ By comparison, Bell and Sutcliffe have questioned the financial burden corrodies represented, arguing that their sale was likely to be profitable for many ecclesiastical institutions.²⁰ No matter which side of this debate historians have favoured, there has been a tendency to interpret the later history of corrodies in terms of a narrative of decline from some previous golden age. In defending the use of corrodies for charitable purposes in the fourteenth century, for example, Harper concluded that 'there cannot be any defence of the institution of the corrody' when they granted extravagant provisions to recipients and that 'in the fifteenth century, the corrody may have become a liability rather than an asset for monasteries'.²¹ Keil held a similar view, arguing that 'the history of corrodies is the illustration of an institution, intended originally for helping the poor, which became the means of providing comfort for the wealthy'.²² Summarizing both her own study and the field more generally, Harvey thought that 'what began as a livelihood, comparable to that of a monk, for one who would

¹² A. H. Thompson, 'A corrody from Leicester Abbey, A.D. 1393–4: with some notes on corrodies', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*, xiv (1925), 113–34.

¹³ R. I. Harper, 'A note on corrodies in the fourteenth century', *Albion*, xv (1983), 95–101; and A. G. Little and E. Stone, 'Corrodies at the Carmelite Friary of Lynn', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, ix (1958), 8–29.

¹⁴ I. Keil, 'Corrodies of Glastonbury Abbey in the later Middle Ages', *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, cviii (1963–4), 113–31. Most royal grants of corrodies were similarly to men (A. K. McHardy, 'Such maintenance as ...': corrodies of the crown', in *Fourteenth Century England XII*, ed. J. Bothwell and J. S. Hamilton (Woodbridge, 2022), pp. 29–46).

¹⁵ A. Fizzard, 'Retirement arrangements and the laity at religious houses in pre-Reformation Devon', *Florilegium*, xxii (2005), 59–79; and A. Bell and C. Sutcliffe, 'Valuing medieval annuities: were corrodies underpriced?', *Explorations in Economic History*, xlvii (2010), 142–57.

¹⁶ Harvey, *Living and Dying*, pp. 188–90.

¹⁷ For the rarity of evidence on corrodies in Scottish monasteries, see H. S. Brown, 'Lay piety in later medieval Lothian, c.1306–c.1513' (unpublished University of Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis, 2006), pp. 195–204.

¹⁸ A. H. Thompson, *The English Clergy and Their Organization in the Later Middle Ages: the Ford Lectures for 1933* (Oxford, 1947), p. 174.

¹⁹ Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 180.

²⁰ Bell and Sutcliffe, 'Valuing medieval annuities'.

²¹ Harper, 'Note on corrodies', p. 97.

²² Keil, 'Corrodies of Glastonbury Abbey', p. 118.

become a resident member of the monastic household, ended, more often than not, as a basketful of consumables for one who would need never actually put in an appearance in the monastery'. Given that medieval corrodies could be bought, she concluded that 'the system was to a large extent captured by the middle class', who 'supplanted peasants and minor gentry in the queue'.²³ These views have fed into larger debates about the provision of poor relief in late medieval England because historians have followed medieval commentators in viewing practices like the granting of corrodies as diverting crucial funds away from actual poor relief and charitable giving.²⁴

Much about the nature, function and extent of corrodies remains hidden from our view. The present study provides insights into many of these issues by utilizing the records of Durham priory, one of the most important Benedictine foundations in the North-East of England. The priors were in direct control of appointing what they termed corrodies in one of two hospitals and two almshouses near the city, and, given this right of appointment, a large number of grants – some 260 – were recorded in the priors' registers between 1400 and 1520, 102 of which were made to women.²⁵ The characteristically meticulous monks also recorded the previous holder of the corrody, meaning that we are able to estimate the length of time for which individuals held them. The first section of what follows, therefore, explores the ad hoc references to corrodies at Durham, demonstrating some of their nature and early history, and showing the ways in which local patronage played a role in their allocation. The second section analyses the 260 grants, examining the length of time for which they were held, the seasonality of these grants, their distribution by gender and the lives of the corrodians.²⁶ The final section draws out the wider significance of this study for our understanding of social provisions in late medieval society. The evidence from Durham priory shows that corrodies could be utilized to reward ageing and infirm servants but were also often granted to monastic servants throughout their service, rather than simply as a reward in old age.²⁷ It demonstrates that women tended to hold their positions for much longer than men, potentially because they lived longer but also suggesting that they may have been granted them earlier in life and perhaps for different reasons. Above all, this article shows how corrodies filled – at least for the lucky few who received one – a hole in the social provisions of late medieval society, providing one way in which people of all ages might prepare for the worst the world had to offer.

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Medieval monks had an arsenal of patronage at their disposal, from the granting of an office through to a financial benefice. In this sense, there was relatively little to distinguish between a pension, an annuity, an allowance and a corrody, though by and large the last of these, which occupies this article, involved in-kind payments of food, clothes and shelter, whereas the first three of these tended to involve a simpler cash payment. As a result, corrodies were one of the many ways that monks rewarded their servants or sought to acquire land, and they became an important avenue of interaction between lay people and monastic institutions. Some of the earliest examples of corrodies at Durham priory come from the twelfth century. At some point in the second half of that century, for example, Elias, son of Adam Moorsley, quitclaimed (that is, formally renounced) to the priory his rights to eighty acres of land at Moorsley, with a toft, croft and two and a half acres of meadow, in return for a small life tenancy and a corrody.²⁸ Similarly, around 1200 Ralph, son of Elwood, sold a house and toft in Coldingham, Scotland, to the Durham monks there in return for 30s and a corrody for two years,

²³ Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 209; and Youngs, *Life Cycle*, p. 179.

²⁴ For an old view of medieval charity and poor relief, see R. H. Snape, *English Monastic Finances in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1926); and E. M. Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief* (Cambridge, 1900). For this view of corrodies, see Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 209; Thane, *Old Age*, p. 83; and Youngs, *Life Cycle*, p. 179.

²⁵ Much of what follows utilizes the registers of Durham priory and owes a considerable debt of gratitude to generations of archivists, including Alan Piper and Michael Stansfield, who have catalogued and digitized much of the material and made it accessible online. All citations are to the originals in Durham University Library Archives & Special Collections, Durham Cathedral Archive (hereafter 'D.C.D.'). My own translations have been used here.

²⁶ In addition to the hospitals and almshouses discussed here, the monks were also involved in a range of charitable activities, including the cathedral school and more general almsgiving.

²⁷ For a royal example of this, see L. Usilton, 'John de Stratford and his corrodies', *Medieval Prosopography*, xxxi (2016), 137–55.

²⁸ D.C.D., 4.7.Spec.1, 4.7.Spec.15.

which is one of the few references we have to a corrody running for less than the term of a person's life.²⁹ Harvey suggested that, in fact, such grants may have been far more common than the remaining evidence indicates and that the records of shorter grants like this have not survived as regularly as life grants because they represented only a short-term commitment and so were not as painstakingly copied over into monastic registers.³⁰ At some point between 1273 and 1285, Agnes Swineshead of Boston was granted a corrody for herself and her maid and, also in the later thirteenth century, the priory's carpenter was granted a corrody, presumably in return for his service to the house.³¹ Even from this early stage in their history, then, we can see the various forms that corrodies might take and the variety of reasons they were granted, from rewarding loyal service to an in-part payment for the acquisition of land.

From the early fourteenth century onwards references to corrodies survive in much greater numbers. For instance, in 1321 Marjorie de Swainston was granted a corrody for life, as was Jean de la Sauferay, mother of Henry Carlisle, the following year.³² We see here a greater frequency of female corrodians than records elsewhere have suggested.³³ Rewarding service was an overriding factor in many grants but it would nonetheless be wrong to assume that such grants were simply about providing a refuge for infirm and aged servants so that they could retire into the monastic community that they had served their entire lives.³⁴ After all, many corrodies were granted at the time of a person's initial appointment to office – not just once they were elderly – and were to run alongside their stipend as a benefit of their position.³⁵ There was a whole host of chaplains who received a corrody as part of their payment, such as Eustace de Insula, who was granted a corrody and 20s a year by the keeper of Sherburn Hospital in return for his work in the hospital's chapel.³⁶ Adam de Coldingham was granted a corrody and allowances for a servant at Coldingham priory in 1326, and Robert de Wederhale was granted a corrody, a robe and 13s 4d by the almoner, along with a house beyond the gate of the manor at Bearpark in 1332, in return for his service in the chapels there.³⁷ In 1386 Thomas de Lomley and William de Strygat, chaplains, were granted a corrody for life of an allowance as was served to two monks. This included cloth for two clerks' robes each year at Christmas, a chamber with a chimney and latrine that had been the dwelling of Peter de Walworth, along with the adjoining terrar's chamber. They were to receive a yearly allowance of coal, wood and candles, and the corrody was to be withdrawn if either of them was absent for any length of time.³⁸

A particularly illustrative example of a grant to an active servant of the priory is revealed in the licence given to Robert de Masham in 1362. He was the doorkeeper of the priory and received permission to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land on the condition that he did not make any claims upon the benefits of his office – including his corrody – until his return.³⁹ Another example is that of William Bolton, who was described as a servant of the prior in 1417 when he was granted a corrody in the Hospital of Witton Gilbert, with the usual stipulation that he pray for the souls and benefactors of the hospital and all the faithful dead. William could possibly have been infirm and so was moving into the hospital but the grant goes on to specify that he should not attempt to defraud the priory or reveal the monks' secrets and that he swore to collect the farms of the sacristy of Durham efficiently, suggesting he was actually still carrying out his duties.⁴⁰ Similarly, in 1420 Robert Cok of Allerton, smith, bound himself to serve for his life in the office of *valectus* of the granaries or janitor of the priory gate, receiving in return a corrody, a valet's garment and a stipend of 26s 8d, although if he

²⁹ D.C.D., Misc.Ch. 854.

³⁰ Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 186.

³¹ D.C.D., Cartuarium Vetus, fol. 10v; Loc.III:40, m.1d (4).

³² D.C.D., Register II, fols. 76r, 79v.

³³ In 1380 Catherine, widow of John de Bishopdale, was also granted a corrody for life as served to one monk (D.C.D., Register II, fol. 213r).

³⁴ For similar grants to people in active royal service, see Usilton, 'John de Stratford'; and McHardy, 'Corrodies of the crown'.

³⁵ For this practice elsewhere, see *The Register of the Common Seal of the Priory of St. Swithun, Winchester, 1345–1497*, ed. J. Greatrex (Hampshire Record Series, xi, Winchester, 1979), *passim*, but see, e.g., pp. 92–3.

³⁶ D.C.D., Misc.Ch. 6376+.

³⁷ D.C.D., Register II, fols. 94v, 104r.

³⁸ D.C.D., Register II, fol. 214v.

³⁹ D.C.D., Register II, fols. 170r–v.

⁴⁰ D.C.D., Register III, fol. 57r.

was away from the priory for a week or more on the priory's business, he was to receive only half the corrody during his absence.⁴¹ There was clearly an expectation that many corrodians would be present at the priory, not least because some corrodies were held in part payment for their job, and many grants included the stipulation that the corrody would be withdrawn if the holder was absent from town for more than four days until their return.⁴² By comparison, other grants accompanied the initial appointment of an officer or servant but stipulated that the corrody was to be taken up only once they had retired. For example, in 1418 William Aley, the priory cook and purchaser of victuals, was granted a servant's corrody for life once he was incapacitated by old age or infirmity and so was unable to administer the kitchen.⁴³

It has often been noted that the crown was particularly fond of granting out corrodies at monastic houses, cajoling the monks to find provisions for royal favourites and in so doing, foisting potentially long-term financial commitments upon the reluctant brethren.⁴⁴ Yet we also see patronage of a more local nature having the same effect. For example, in 1315 the prior granted William Heron two corrodies for himself and his *garcio* at the instance of their friend J. de Insula, with the grant specifically noting that, in order that J. de Insula, their defender and promoter, should feel heeded, William was to receive a common pittance (an additional dish, often of superior quality) over and above the custom of the priory.⁴⁵ Similarly, in 1439 Richard Bukley, clerk and master of Kepier Hospital, granted a corrody in the hospital, in the form of bread, beer and food as received by the priests serving there, to Robert Strothere, esquire, at the request and mandate of Robert Neville, bishop of Durham.⁴⁶ Several grants of corrodies also allude to unspecified favours rendered and, it was hoped, to be rendered, by their holder in the future, such as that to Margaret, widow of William Pymund, in 1369.⁴⁷ In 1467 John Yodale of Durham and Matilda, his wife, were similarly granted a corrody for unspecified favours, taking each week, at the pantry, seven monastic loaves and seven gallons of conventual beer; at the kitchen, certain food, meat and fish according to the requirements of the day and season; and in all things just as did the chaplain of St. Mary's chantry in St. Margaret's chapel, Durham.⁴⁸ Then in 1493 John Blackburn of Tudhoe and Cicely, his wife, were granted a similar corrody to take as John Yodale had while he lived or as his wife, Matilda, still took, indicating that she was still drawing her corrody some twenty-six years after the initial grant had been made.⁴⁹

Why, then, were corrodies so controversial? This last example perhaps explains some of the problems: particularly long-lived individuals could become an excessive financial burden upon the institution. Nor were all corrodies equal: some were considerably more generous in their terms than others. Most of those discussed above (and nearly all of those in the next section) are what we might think of as a 'monks' corrody', that is, at the level of food and shelter that a monk of Durham priory would normally enjoy. Yet some were clearly different, thought of as a squire's corrody, with more generous provisions and sometimes with stipends and pensions attached. For example, in 1423 Thomas Fery of Durham and Joan, his wife, were granted a corrody, which included an annual pension of £7, and a furred garment as a bishop's gentleman (*generosus*) received.⁵⁰ If too many corrodies with such generous provisions were granted, they could become costly indeed, with ecclesiastical figures concerned that the practice would cast down monastic houses 'into the well of destitution'.⁵¹ Moreover, relations between the monks and their corrodians could sometimes break down, as

⁴¹ D.C.D., *Register III*, fol. 71v.

⁴² This is included in Thomas de Alnaby's corrody of 1366, for example (D.C.D., *Register II*, fol. 210r).

⁴³ D.C.D., *Register II*, fol. 226r. Robert de Hemmyngburgh the elder had received a similar grant of a squire's corrody so long as he was able to serve as a squire, and of a weekly allowance for life once he became incapacitated by infirmity or old age (D.C.D., *Register III*, fol. 30v).

⁴⁴ One of the problems of studying the requests for corrodies by the crown is that we do not know what proportion were successfully refused by monastic houses (Tillotson, 'Pensions, corrodies and religious houses', p. 135).

⁴⁵ D.C.D., *Register II*, fols. 52v–53r. For the definition of pittance, see Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ D.C.D., *Register III*, fol. 240r.

⁴⁷ D.C.D., *Register II*, fol. 211r.

⁴⁸ D.C.D., *Register IV*, fols. 195v–196r. For a discussion of the food history of corrodies, see Fizzard, 'A competent mess'.

⁴⁹ D.C.D., *Register V*, fol. 20v.

⁵⁰ D.C.D., *Register III*, fol. 100v. Similarly, in 1390 John de Plumpton was granted a corrody for life, with a weekly allowance including a cooked dish called Sundaymes, a chaldron of coal once a year, or the right to the place of one sister in their infirmary next to the abbey gate when a vacancy arises and, if they think fit, a house in the Bailey of Durham, should he wish to stay there.

⁵¹ Bell and Sutcliffe, 'Valuing medieval annuities', p. 144.

perhaps had happened in the early fourteenth century, when Nicholas of Medomsley; John Holyf, miller of Prudhoe; and Anastasia of Bruntoft each released the priory of arrears owed to them as part of their corrody.⁵² In part to protect themselves against this, Thomas de Claxton and Beatrice, his wife, entered into a bond of 200 marks with the prior when they received their corrody in 1386, with the provisions to be received by Thomas and Beatrice and their servants in the priory's bakehouse and cellar.⁵³ Similarly, it is clear that at least some members of the priory were upset about how the corrodies were managed, with a complaint against the way the prior granted corrodies against the wishes of the convent being included in an anonymous list of complaints about mismanagement of the priory in the late fourteenth century.⁵⁴ That corrodies could become excessive is clear from another Durham example when Thomas Langley, bishop of Durham, ordered an enquiry into the condition of the hospital of Northallerton, which the master, John Neuton, reported was ruinous and burdened with corrodies in 1409.⁵⁵

This section has recounted the story of corrodies as it has most often been told. We are forced to draw inferences from such vignettes as these, where the occasional example of a particularly long-running corrody or reference to a servant still surviving decades later provide tantalizing glimpses into the potential age of corrodians and the burden that they represented. Similarly, we gain a sense that women could be corrodians – and this no doubt lay behind some of the criticisms of their use in a monastic setting – yet there is little sense of whether such examples reveal the norm or were unusual. Were female corrodians more likely to be elderly widows, fitting the general stereotype of corrodians retiring from the world and spending their final days in the relative comfort of an infirmary or almshouse, or were they perhaps younger widows who were being forced into early retirement by their families, who sought control of the family's resources? Was it instead men, having served the monastery faithfully all their lives, who retired in ill health for their final months, and how far can we assume that such men and women were in fact single just because they held a corrody solely in their own names? Indeed, have we too readily accepted the stereotype of the corrody as the medieval equivalent of a pension given to the elderly and were they, as some of the examples above have suggested, simply held by particularly favoured individuals throughout their lives?

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In order to answer such questions, we can turn to the registers of Durham priors who recorded grants of places in two of their hospitals and two almshouses in their *Registrum Parvum*.⁵⁶ These formed a current register, or letter-book, of priory business, into which the monks copied documents issued by the prior, including letters, appointments, memoranda, commissions, licences, leases and, most important for our purposes, grants of corrodies. Unfortunately, the monks were not consistent in entering business into the registers and so there are gaps in the sample that are the result of defective record-keeping rather than changes in the actual level of granting corrodies. For example, around fifteen to twenty documents a year were being entered in the register in the years 1407–11, which then drops away to nothing in some years before picking up again from 1424 to around fifty documents in 1432, before falling away again.⁵⁷ We should, therefore, be cautious of reading too much into such abeyances, and it is clear that corrodies began to be routinely included in the registers only from the 1430s onwards (see Table 1). Despite these reservations, the surviving material provides us with a

⁵² Nicholas of Medomsley in 1322; John Holyf, miller of Prudhoe, in 1322 after he had been paid 13s 4d; and Anastasia of Bruntoft in 1339 (D.C.D., Misc.Ch. 4909; Misc.Ch. 3954; Misc.Ch. 4277, respectively).

⁵³ D.C.D., *Register II*, fol. 215r.

⁵⁴ D.C.D., 2.8.Pont.12. A similar complaint made against the abbot of Whitby in 1366 resulted in the visitors wanting to know the number of corrodies sold there, the identity and age of the corrodians, and the sum they had received, presumably in efforts to calculate their value and whether they represented an excessive burden on the abbey's finances (*Documents Illustrating the Activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks, 1215–1540*, iii, ed. W. A. Pantin (Camden 3rd ser., liv, 1937), p. 279).

⁵⁵ *The Register of Thomas Langley, Bishop of Durham, 1406–37*, i, ed. R. L. Storey (Surtees Society, clxiv, Durham, 1949), p. 102.

⁵⁶ There were other hospitals and almshouses in the Durham region – such as Kepier and Sherburn hospitals – but this article is restricted to places in the four institutions discussed below.

⁵⁷ See the catalogue compiled by Alan Piper and Michael Stansfield for more details. For more about letter-books and registers more generally, see W. A. Pantin, 'English monastic letter-books', in *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait*, ed. J. G. Edwards, V. H. Galbraith and E. F. Jacob (Manchester, 1933), pp. 201–22.

unique insight into the uses and purposes of corrodies, and supplies many details about their holders. All of the institutions to which corrodians were appointed were relatively close to the priory: the Hospital of Witton Gilbert lay perhaps four miles distant; the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene was situated near Gilesgate, just on the outskirts of the city; the infirmary lay just outside the priory proper and was distinguished from the monastic infirmary inside the precinct; and the Maison de Dieu was a little further to the north.⁵⁸ The almoners' accounts reveal the hospitals to be relatively small affairs, having perhaps only five brothers or sisters each, while the two almshouses were much larger at around twenty-eight brothers and sisters in the lay infirmary and fifteen in the Maison de Dieu, many of whom were non-resident.⁵⁹

Table 1. Grants of corrodies by the priors of Durham, 1400–1520

Decade	Male	Female	Male and female	Total
1400s	3	1	–	4
1410s	–	–	–	0
1420s	4	2	–	6
1430s	17	10	2	29
1440s	14	8	4	26
1450s	4	4	2	10
1460s	10	13	3	26
1470s	19	21	9	50 ^a
1480s	6	6	4	16
1490s	15	9	5	29
1500s	15	17	4	36
1510s	8	11	7	28 ^b
Total	115	102	40	260

Source: Durham University Library Archives & Special Collections, Durham Cathedral Archive (hereafter 'D.C.D.'), *Registrum Parvum II, III and IV*.

^aOne corrody from the 1470s has a blank space for the name.

^bTwo corrodies in the 1510s were granted to two women jointly.

The majority of such corrodies were what Harvey defined as 'standardized arrangements', in that they granted the holder a 'monk's corrody' or a 'servant's corrody', which entitled the holder to the daily ration of bread, ale and cooked dishes that was given to a monk, forming a 'package that would have been familiar to everyone who ever put his head inside the monastic kitchen or refectory'.⁶⁰ The almoners' accounts provide evidence of the annual expenses incurred by these arrangements, though these are normally totalled for the inmates of the infirmary and the Maison de Dieu, the former costing in the region of £6 8s per annum for approximately twenty-eight brothers and sisters, whereas the latter was cheaper, with the accounts recording payments of only 5d to each person for their soulsilver.⁶¹ By comparison, the almoner paid out 24s per annum for each individual in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene and 12s for those in the Hospital of Witton Gilbert.⁶² Some of these discrepancies in payments probably stem from whether individuals were resident or not, though it seems that inmates of the two hospitals received more beneficial arrangements than those in the infirmary. In particular, the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene appears to have been especially favourable and this

⁵⁸ For old age among the monks themselves, see A. J. Piper, 'The monks of Durham and patterns of activity in old age', in *The Church and Learning in Late Medieval Society: Studies in Honour of Professor R. B. Dobson*, ed. C. Barron and J. Stratford (Donington, 2002), pp. 51–63; and M. Heale, '“For the solace of their advanced years”: the retirement of monastic superiors in late medieval England', *Journal of Medieval Monastic Studies*, viii (2019), 143–67.

⁵⁹ R. B. Dobson, *Durham Priory, 1400–1450* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 167–9.

⁶⁰ Harvey, *Living and Dying*, pp. 181–2.

⁶¹ D.C.D., Almoners' Accounts, 1338–1539. The accounts also include regular statuses, giving insights into the living conditions inside the hospitals, with, for example, a whole host of bedding and coverlets being itemized.

⁶² These are, in general, payments to inmates and the likely costs of running these institutions were considerably higher, with many references to the repair of buildings and the carrying and provisioning of food and materials running throughout the accounts.

supports Barrie Dobson's conclusion that the hospital was commonly used to support the monks' own relatives.⁶³

The almoners' accounts also name the individuals in the two hospitals on an annual basis, though individuals in the infirmary and Maison de Dieu unfortunately remain an anonymous group of unnamed 'brothers and sisters'. The exception to this is in the almoners' rentals, where we encounter the named inmates of the hospitals and almshouses, but the rentals survive for only a handful of years in the early sixteenth century.⁶⁴ Despite these limitations, the accounts and rentals corroborate the evidence from the priors' registers, though it is clear that the registers have not captured every single grant made in this period.⁶⁵ For example, the almoners' account of 1501–2 details the occupants of the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene as Joan Bee, Marion Gamlesby, Roger Laveroke, Thomas Shele and William Pawlyng.⁶⁶ By utilizing the grants from the priors' registers, we can see that Joan held her place there until 1507; Marion until 1503; Roger until 1510; Thomas until later that accounting year in 1501, when he was replaced by his widow, Agnes; and William until 1510.⁶⁷ The priors' registers may not capture every inmate across this period, but they are the closest we can come to recreating a full register of admissions to the two hospitals and two almshouses.⁶⁸

Previous studies have noted that while women were granted corrodies these tend to be in such small numbers that their inclusion could be seen as exceptions, perhaps to reward particularly generous benefactors or protect especially vulnerable widows.⁶⁹ Yet so common were women among the corrodians of Durham that Dobson suggested that 'some attempt was made to maintain an even balance of the sexes'.⁷⁰ One of the reasons for this difference between Durham and elsewhere may well have been that the priors had in their patronage established positions – both residential and not – in two nearby hospitals, an infirmary and a Maison de Dieu, enabling them to accommodate a much wider range of people, including women, than the grants of ad hoc positions elsewhere may have allowed.⁷¹ Furthermore, although 217 of the grants were made in the name of a single individual, it would be wrong to assume that any of these corrodians – male or female – were actually unmarried. In fact, references to wives and husbands run throughout many of these grants and licences. For example, the grant to John Marchall of a place in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene in 1447 was to him alone, but he received a licence to live outside until his present wife died, after which he was expected to take up residence.⁷² John Short received a similar grant in 1448, as did Thomas Gresmer in 1464 and Thomas Brown in 1465.⁷³ Such grants were not held jointly by husband and wife – there is no mention in these grants of these wives receiving such benefits once they were widowed or of them being expected to take up residence in the hospitals or almshouses after their husbands' deaths – yet their holders were clearly married.⁷⁴ Some wives may well have fallen through the bureaucratic cracks, such as Joan, the wife of Robert Wryght, who is mentioned in a marginal notation as jointly holding with her husband in 1515, even though the original grant was made in his name alone.⁷⁵ Another

⁶³ Dobson, *Durham Priory*, p. 168.

⁶⁴ D.C.D., Bursar's Book J (1517–18), fols. 76v–87r; Almoner's Rentals (1501–3), fols. 14v–15r, 30v, 45v; Almoner's Rentals (1532–7), fols. 12r–13v, 29r–30v, 49v–51r, 72r–74v, 92r–93v. The rentals also distinguish between expenses of residents and non-residents, but unfortunately these do not survive in sufficient quantity to allow any real longitudinal study. For other glimpses of provisions for paupers, see D.C.D., Almoner's Small Cartulary.

⁶⁵ We sometimes have, for example, a grant that names a previous holder, but there is no evidence of the initial grant to that person surviving in the *Registrum Parvum*.

⁶⁶ D.C.D., Almoner's Account, 1501–2.

⁶⁷ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 115v, 139r, 166v, 177v, 188r.

⁶⁸ A handful of ad hoc corrodies not related to these institutions continued to be granted throughout this period – such as that to Thomas Fery and Joan, his wife, discussed above – yet these were very rare occurrences and tended to accompany another grant such as a pension.

⁶⁹ See the introduction for a discussion of these previous studies.

⁷⁰ Dobson, *Durham Priory*, p. 168.

⁷¹ Of course, other institutions had access to a range of hospitals, almshouses and infirmaries in this period, though many, such as the hospitals at Sherburn and Kepier in Durham, were not as directly within their patronage.

⁷² D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fols. 25r–v.

⁷³ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fols. 28v–29r, 120v–121r, 124v–125r. The reverse situation was also true, where women such as Elizabeth Batemanson were granted a corrody in the infirmary with licence to live outside while her husband lived but with the stipulation that she was to enter upon his death (D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 112v).

⁷⁴ Where grants were made jointly to married couples, they often included a similar licence to remain outside the infirmary or hospital until one of them died, when the survivor would then enter the institution (D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 16r–v).

⁷⁵ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 198r–v. The almoners' accounts have a similar tendency to record only a single person in the hospitals – usually the husband – even where the grant was originally made jointly in the names of husband and wife.

example may be that of Henry Hertlaw, who was granted a corrody in the Maison de Dieu in his name alone in 1440, but whose corrody was regranted in 1460 in his name and that of Marion, his wife, perhaps indicating that he had married in the intervening period (though the rules of the hospitals and almshouses specified that inmates would have required a licence from the prior to remarry) or that he thought to add her name to the corrody in case of his death.⁷⁶

We may be able to detect the presence of yet more married corrodians in the language of the grants, which often contain a standard phrase that recipients who failed to observe the statutes and customs of the position or who committed adultery, fornication or contracted marriage would be deprived of their corrody. Yet the marriage phrase subtly hints that some were currently married, such as Henry Kelyngall, whose 1516 corrody notes that he should not resort to a marriage beyond his present one, as did John Champney's grant in 1517.⁷⁷ Although such wives largely escape our attention, some clearly did end up receiving the corrodies once their husbands had died, even though there was no formal mechanism for this in place within the terms of their grants. For example, Robert Hoton and Robert Watson were both granted corrodies in their own names alone, yet in 1463 Beatrice and Janet, their respective widows, were each granted a corrody as previously held by their husbands.⁷⁸ The reverse could also occur, as in the cases of Agnes Foster and Alice Laveroke, who held corrodies granted in their names alone but whose husbands – John and Roger, respectively – were granted these corrodies in 1497, as happened to William Jacson on the death of Isabel, his wife, in the following year.⁷⁹ Given the potential for inconsistencies in the language and formulae used in the grants, as well as gaps in the coverage of the registers, we cannot quantify the number of corrodians who were actually married but it is clear that we cannot assume that seemingly solo recipients were in fact single.⁸⁰

Although the registers contain dates of corrodies granted to a new recipient (as opposed to the death of the current holder), there is a distinct seasonal pattern to them that might reflect broader mortality trends (see Table 2). It suggests that the winter months (December to February) were the deadliest, with some 40 per cent of corrodies being regranted in this period as opposed to around only 20 per cent for each of the other seasons, with February alone accounting for forty-five grants, nearly the same as June, July and August combined. This largely follows the seasonal pattern of other hospitals but is even more pronounced than, for example, the seasonal mortality of infirm priests at Clyst Gabriel (Exeter) in the early fourteenth century, where winter accounted for the most deaths at 28.5 per cent but was closely followed by autumn at 26.3 per cent.⁸¹ Given that many corrodians at Durham had permission to live outside of the hospitals and almshouses, this does not necessarily reflect a pronounced seasonal mortality rate caused by communal living.⁸² Instead, it may represent anxieties around corrodies themselves, with the prior particularly eager to fill some places over the winter months that had been allowed to lie empty for a short period or, indeed, reflect the clamour for such places that presumably increased during the depths of winter when food and shelter were most in demand. Unfortunately, annual fluctuations in this data may reflect trends in record-keeping as much as the frequency of grant-giving but some spikes in particular years – in 1439 and several years in the 1470s for example – suggest plague and other hardships killed corrodians and left their places free to be regranted.⁸³

⁷⁶ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fol. 122r; *Register* IV, fol. 135v.

⁷⁷ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 206r, 211r.

⁷⁸ See D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 39v (initial grant to Robert Hoton in 1450), *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 118v (grant to his widow in 1463), *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 118v (initial grant to Robert Watson of unknown date, grant to his widow in 1463). Robert Cachersyde was similarly granted a corrody in the infirmary in 1491, only for his widow, Joan, to take it up in 1497 after his death (D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 18v, 53v).

⁷⁹ See D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 145r (initial grant to Agnes in 1470), *Registrum Parvum* IV, fol. 49r (grant to her widower in 1497), *Registrum Parvum* IV, fol. 32v (initial grant to Alice in 1494), *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 55v–56r (grant to her widower in 1497).

⁸⁰ For a similar reason, it is difficult to draw out much significance from an analysis of the number of widows recorded. Around half of all women who received a grant were described as widows, but there are considerable inconsistencies with the nomenclature, making it difficult to draw conclusions from this rough number, especially with the number who may have remarried, as these examples suggest.

⁸¹ Orme and Webster, *English Hospital*, p. 124; and N. Orme, 'A medieval almshouse for the clergy: Clyst Gabriel Hospital near Exeter', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xxxix (1988), 1–15.

⁸² For the mortality of Durham monks, see J. Hatcher, A. J. Piper and D. Stone, 'Monastic mortality: Durham Priory, 1395–1529', *Economic History Review*, lix (2006), 667–87.

⁸³ Unfortunately, the evidence is not robust enough to see if plague years displayed a different seasonal pattern (A. J. Pollard, 'The North-Eastern economy and the agrarian crisis of 1438–1440', *Northern History*, xxv (1989), 88–105).

Table 2. Seasonality of corrody grants by the priors of Durham, 1400–1520

Month	No. of grants	Percentage
January	27	11
February	45	18
March	25	10
April	12	5
May	15	6
June	19	8
July	13	5
August	16	7
September	16	7
October	17	7
November	14	6
December	25	10
Total	244 ^a	100

Source: D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum II, III and IV*.

^aThe total number is lower than that given in Table 1 because some grants do not specify the month in which they were given out.

At many other ecclesiastical institutions in medieval England, corrodiess were granted on a seemingly ad hoc basis. In times of financial need, monks may have turned to corrodiess as a way of raising funds, while some rulers – especially Edward I and Edward II in the early fourteenth century – applied pressure for corrodiess to be granted to their favoured servants.⁸⁴ By comparison, at Durham in the fifteenth century, the priors utilized the patronage of their almshouses and hospitals to maintain a relatively steady number of places. Unlike other institutions that might need to provide chambers and sufficient space for a sudden flurry of corrodians, the Durham monks could thus meet a variety of demands upon their resources, providing not only for their servants and their own relatives but also for members of the community more broadly. As a result, the monks meticulously recorded the previous holder of the corrody and so, where the registers are kept most diligently, we can trace the descent of some positions over the generations, allowing unique insights into how long each person held their grant, as can be seen in the example given in Table 3. Robert Gryndisdale, a gentleman living in the South Bailey of Durham city, held this corrody in the infirmary for four years before it passed to the former cook of the abbey, who held it for nearly two years, when it passed to Thomas Raa, also from the South Bailey of Durham, who held it for a little over a year.⁸⁵ This pattern of short-lived occupancy was then completely reversed by the grant to John Short of Jarrow, some fifteen miles away, who held it for around twenty-nine years before it passed to Agnes Durham, who held it for around twenty-seven years, after which it was granted to William Forest of Durham, who held it for another eight years.⁸⁶

This evidence allows us to see the length of time for which individuals held their corrodiess and so provides us with an insight as to whether they really were used as social security for the elderly. From his study of the corrodiess granted in the first half of the fifteenth century at Durham, Dobson thought that ‘most men and women admitted by Wessington [prior of Durham, 1416–46] to his hospitals and almshouses were genuinely old (the average length of tenure before death was less than five years) and at a period when the demand for charity exceeded the supply, the prior fulfilled his traditional

⁸⁴ For examples of the royal use of corrodiess, see L. Usilton, ‘Edward II’s indigent army: a study of royal corrodiess’, in *Death, Sickness and Health in Medieval Society and Culture*, ed. S. J. Ridyard (Sewanee, Tenn., 2000), pp. 215–46; and Tillotson, ‘Pensions, corrodiess and religious houses’. Dobson, for example, thought that Durham ‘avoided, as other religious houses did not, the worst abuses associated with the granting and selling of corrodiess’ and avoided royal appointments by the fifteenth century (Dobson, *Durham Priory*, p. 167).

⁸⁵ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum II*, fols. 78v–79r, 97v, 118v.

⁸⁶ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum II*, fol. 136v; *Registrum Parvum III*, fol. 144v; *Registrum Parvum IV*, fols. 52v, 150r.

Table 3. Descent of a corrody in the infirmary outside Durham priory

Date	New recipient	Previous holder
28 February 1434	Robert Gryndisdale, gentleman of Durham	Constance del Hall'
28 February 1438	Thomas Bawde, former priory cook	Robert Gryndisdale
26 February 1440	Thomas Raa of Durham	Thomas Bawde
20 April 1441	John Short, dwelling in Jarrow	Thomas Raa
13 March 1470	Agnes Durham	John Short
12 August 1497	William Forest of Durham	Agnes Durham
31 December 1505	Isabel Emerson	William Forest

Source: D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, III and IV.

obligation of care for the aged and diseased.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, Dobson provided no references or basis for this estimate and it is not clear what subset of corrodies he utilized. He was, however, echoing the advice given by medieval commentators like Fortescue about providing provisions for servants in old age.⁸⁸ Certainly, it was common for gentry retainers, household servants and civic officials to be provided for in this way and not just in monastic houses, as in the case of the York macebearer Robert Burgeys, who, 'now suffering old age and illness', was given an annuity and tenement for life in York in 1476 because of his previous 'good and gracious service'.⁸⁹ Yet, as Harvey argued, previous historians have often started from the a priori belief that corrodians were in search of security and were thus characteristically old aged – 'the senior citizens of medieval society, permitted to pass their declining years in an agreeable form of sheltered accommodation' – an assumption that she criticized, concluding instead that 'the typical corrodian was perhaps somewhat younger and more active, and corrodians in general less numerous, than historians have commonly suggested'.⁹⁰ What, then, do the Durham corrodies reveal?

Firstly, it is not clear at all that the average length of a corrody at Durham was below five years as Dobson suggested, with only 27 per cent of the total being for such a term (see Table 4). Another 21 per cent ran for five to nine years and a further 20 per cent between ten and fourteen years, but there was a not inconsiderable group of corrodies that lasted much longer, with around a third of the total running for fifteen years or more. Within the sample of 260 corrodies, we have 123 cases that provide us with information about both the initial grant and the subsequent regrant, which allows us to see for how long individuals held their grants. This also means that we are often working with those from the mid to late fifteenth century because we do not have the initial grant for those at the start of the century; nor do we know when those in the early sixteenth century were renewed. It also means that there are some imbalances in this smaller sample, not least that male corrodians are now over-represented, as they comprise 55 per cent of these 123 corrodies, as opposed to 44 per cent of the full sample. It may well be that recording practices or other biases lie behind this discrepancy but, given the relatively small numbers involved, which are spread across a century or more of registers, it could also be pure happenstance. Despite these reservations, the gender differences appear stark, with considerably more male corrodians holding for shorter periods than women. Thus ten (50 per cent) out of the twenty corrodies that were held for twenty-five years or longer were held by women, compared to only seven (35 per cent) by men and three (15 per cent) by men and women jointly. Of course, it might be expected that the latter – corrodies held jointly – would run for longest since they were valid for the lives of two individuals and ran until both had died. Nevertheless, the difference between grants to men and those to women is considerable. Likewise, for corrodies held for shorter periods, twenty-four (73 per cent) out of the thirty-three corrodies running for up to five years were held by men, compared to only six (18 per cent) by women and three (9 per cent) jointly.

⁸⁷ Dobson, *Durham Priory*, p. 169.

⁸⁸ Lockwood, *Sir John Fortescue*, p. 120.

⁸⁹ *The York House Books, 1461–1490*, i, ed. L. C. Attreed (Stroud, 1991), p. 5.

⁹⁰ Harvey, *Living and Dying*, pp. 180, 209.

Table 4. Length of corrodies at Durham priory, 1400–1520

No. of years	Male (%) ^a	Female (%)	Male and female (%)	Total (%)
Less than 1	7 (10)	1 (3)	-	8 (7)
1–4	17 (25)	5 (13)	3 (18)	25 (20)
5–9	19 (28)	5 (13)	2 (12)	26 (21)
10–14	8 (12)	11 (29)	5 (29)	24 (20)
15–19	2 (3)	4 (11)	3 (18)	9 (7)
20–4	8 (12)	2 (5)	1 (6)	11 (9)
25–9	4 (6)	3 (8)	1 (6)	8 (7)
30–4	1 (1)	3 (8)	-	4 (3)
35–9	1 (1)	1 (8)	1 (6)	3 (2)
40+	1 (1)	3 (8)	1 (6)	5 (4)
Total	68 (100)	38 (100)	17 (100)	123 (100)

Source: D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, III and IV.

^aPercentages should be read down the columns (i.e., 10 per cent of all male corrodians held their grant for less than one year).

Examples from either end of the spectrum demonstrate the diversity of experiences. At the shorter length of time, we find the likes of John Champney, who was granted a place in the infirmary on 7 October 1517, but this was then given to Katharine Davyson a month later on 8 November; Thomas Henrison's place ran only from 5 February to 31 March 1439, when it was taken up by his widow; and William Herryson occupied his corrody from 30 September to 18 November 1501.⁹¹ Given that the end date is when the corrody had been granted to another person, it is entirely possible that these men were in the infirmary only for a matter of days or weeks, suggesting that they were indeed infirm and that the granting of a corrody was a last act of charity on the part of the prior. Although it was possible to be removed from a corrody for breaking the customs and statutes of the hospitals and almshouses, and thus the short terms of some men could represent nothing more than bad behaviour, the phrasing of the grants – as when John Champney's corrody is said to have been 'lately held' when he was alive – suggests most corrodies were ended by death rather than by forfeiture. There are also a handful of examples of individuals who surrendered their corrodies in exchange for another, perhaps at a preferred institution or on more beneficial terms, yet this was extremely rare. Wherever such corrodians can be identified, they have been excluded from the current sample because they would unduly skew the analysis towards shorter stays.

At the other end of the spectrum lie particularly long-lived women, such as Ellen Dunne, who held a corrody in the Maison de Dieu from 12 January 1473 until 22 October 1516.⁹² That Ellen could have been comparatively young when she took up the corrody is suggested by the way that she had been passed it in 1473 by Katherine Shalden, her mother, who was still alive at the time. The longest-held joint corrody was that of John Bell and Mundana, his wife, who were granted a corrody in the Hospital of Witton Gilbert on 26 October 1477, which was not regranted until 22 October 1516.⁹³ That John and Mundana were similarly young and hale is suggested by the fact that just a week before they were granted their corrody in 1477 they both received a lease from the priory of the manors of Witton Gilbert itself and that of Belasis, both for the term of thirty years.⁹⁴ It is, of course, possible that some places were deliberately left vacant by the prior – perhaps as a cost-cutting measure – thus explaining some of the particularly lengthy-seeming corrodies, but grants appear to have been given out in a timely fashion when places were available. For example, where a corrodian died in possession of two corrodies, these were normally regranted in relatively quick succession, as upon Agnes Durham's

⁹¹ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fol. 211r; *Registrum Parvum* II, fols. 100v, 102v; *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 121r–v.

⁹² D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 152v; *Registrum Parvum* IV, fol. 207r.

⁹³ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 178v–179r; *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 207r–v.

⁹⁴ Witton Gilbert had an annual rent of 102s and Belasis of £6 13s 4d and the payment of 12 quarters and 6 bushels of wheat; these were not poor corrodians, and the grant is likely to have been an additional perk rather than being relied upon for subsistence (D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 179r–v).

death in 1497, when her position in the infirmary was given to William Forest on 12 August and that in the Maison de Dieu soon after to John Barne on 31 August.⁹⁵

On average, corrodies at Durham priory held by men ran for 10.1 years, those held by women ran for 16.8 years and those held jointly averaged 16.6 years. This compares favourably to Patricia Cullum's findings for the life expectancies of inmates at St. Leonard's Hospital, York, where she found the life expectancy for men was 8.1 years compared to 10.7 years for women, and is much longer than Dobson's previous estimates.⁹⁶ It is possible that this gender gap reflects demographic trends among a relatively small sample size and that female corrodians simply tended to be longer-lived, though in all likelihood it also reflects upon the purpose of the corrodies themselves. It seems highly likely that the prior utilized a significant portion of the corrodies in exactly the way Fortescue and Dobson envisaged: as a reward for elderly or infirm male servants of the priory to retire in relative ease. Some were even explicitly granted on this understanding. For example, in 1439 Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, sent a letter to the prior, John Wessington, pointedly noting that John Holme, esquire, had long served the prior unrewarded and requesting that he be granted a 'lyvelode' (stipend).⁹⁷ Wessington appears to have agreed – or at least conceded to the pressure – for in the same year, Holme, who had been the prior's chamberlain, received a corrody in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene 'for his good and praiseworthy service to the prior's predecessor and himself over a long period'.⁹⁸ Holme occupied the place until 1447, suggesting that he was on the older side of the average Durham corrodian. In this fashion, Dobson thought that Wessington used 'at least a third of the places at his disposal to provide what amounted to a small retirement pension to ex-servants of the monastery'.⁹⁹

Although some corrodies were clearly used to reward retiring servants, we should be cautious of necessarily assuming that such corrodians were ex-servants and, as in some of the examples noted above, many were still active servants of the priory. John Dale fits the bill of a retired servant perfectly, for example. Appointed as keeper of the priory's livestock in 1412, Dale was given a squire's allowance of food and drink, a stipend and the chamber in the priory that used to be the terror's hall while in office and a promise of a corrody when incapacitated by old age or infirmity.¹⁰⁰ Described as the prior's servant in his eventual corrody, he was duly granted a place in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene on 18 April 1447, after thirty-five years of service.¹⁰¹ His stay was to be a short one and the corrody was regranted on 11 February the following year, suggesting that he had indeed been elderly or infirm.¹⁰² Yet some servants were able to receive the benefits of a corrody before their twilight years, such as John Stele, cantor, who was appointed in 1430 to teach the Durham monks and eight secular boys to play the organ and sing. In return, Stele was to receive a stipend and livery of a gentleman of the priory, a house in the Bailey and the promise of a reduced allowance and corrody in old age or infirmity.¹⁰³ However, John appears to have pre-empted the latter clause, receiving a corrody in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene with Helen, his widowed mother, in 1452.¹⁰⁴ They were granted licence to live outside the hospital while John was alive but after his death, Helen, if still alive, was to enter the hospital. In the event, Helen died before her son, with John renewing the corrody in 1466 for himself and Agnes, his daughter, with the latter holding it to 1489.¹⁰⁵

Just as in the pressure exerted by the crown or the earl of Northumberland, some of these corrodies were granted out of patronage or at the request of others. Robert Layng, for example, received a corrody in the Hospital of Witton Gilbert in 1436 at the request of one John Brownslett and, out of regard for John, the prior granted Robert permission to remain outside the hospital for as long as he remained

⁹⁵ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fol. 52v.

⁹⁶ Cullum, *Cremetts and Corrodies*, p. 26.

⁹⁷ D.C.D., Loc.XXV:165.

⁹⁸ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fols. 123r–v.

⁹⁹ Dobson, *Durham Priory*, p. 168.

¹⁰⁰ D.C.D., *Register III*, fol. 40r. He is subsequently referred to in the priory's registers as the prior's page, and as the keeper of several different parks in the following decades.

¹⁰¹ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 14v.

¹⁰² D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 28v–29r.

¹⁰³ D.C.D., *Register III*, fols. 137v–138r; *Register IV*, fol. 60r.

¹⁰⁴ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 50v.

¹⁰⁵ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 132r; *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 16v–17r.

in John's service.¹⁰⁶ Corrodians even sought to pass on their position to their own servants, such as Joan Bradbery, who received permission from the prior that her place in the infirmary would pass to Agnes Essh, her servant, after Joan's own death.¹⁰⁷ In effect, the prior was granting out a reversionary right to the corrody, potentially alienating it for decades to come. Some corrodians used this as a way to pass on their rights to their children, as when Joan, the daughter of Eleanor Catlynson, received a grant of a corrody in the infirmary in 1477 but she was to receive it only when it became vacant upon her mother's death.¹⁰⁸ In the same year, the prior granted John Swynton and Katherine, his wife, the corrody in the Maison de Dieu, which Joan Swynton, John's mother, currently held, as soon as it became vacant on her death.¹⁰⁹ Another way corrodians attempted to provide for their children was to receive a licence to surrender their own corrodies to the use and benefit of their children, as both Katherine Shalden and Agnes Diky did in 1473 to Ellen Dunne and John Palesser, respectively.¹¹⁰ As we have seen, this was a potentially effective method of keeping the benefit in the family, as Ellen went on to hold it for forty-three years. Although most jointly held corrodies were granted to husband and wife, this was not always the case and several recipients held their grant alongside a child, as John Stele did above. For example, in 1510 the grant of a place in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene to George Stanper, merchant of Newcastle, and his wife, Joan, also included Nicholas, their son, and, in 1514, the grant of a place in the Maison de Dieu to Agnes, the widow of James Nicholson, included their daughter, also named Agnes.¹¹¹ Even when there appears to have been no formal mechanism for inheriting a corrody, some children went on to gain that of a parent, as in 1476, when William Whelpdale and Margaret, his wife, were granted a corrody in the infirmary that Alice Tendell, the late mother of Margaret, had held while she was alive.¹¹²

Although Harvey suggested that corrodians were increasingly non-resident towards the end of the Middle Ages, and the priors of Durham did routinely grant licences waiving residency requirements, many corrodians were active and present members of the community. For example, Richard Robynson, who was fortunate enough to be granted three concurrent corrodies in the Maison de Dieu and the two hospitals in the early sixteenth century, was recorded as one of the witnesses to a petitioner who had received stolen goods and subsequently entered the cathedral requesting sanctuary.¹¹³ Unfortunately, much of the information that we have about the residential status of corrodians tends to be prescriptive rather than descriptive, and so we know that many individuals received permission to live elsewhere but have little confirmation that they in fact did so, or of whether or not they eventually took up residence. Some clearly were resident in one of the hospitals or almshouses from the moment of their initial grant, while others were expected to take up residence upon the death of a spouse – though, again, whether or not this occurred is often unclear – and still others lived out their lives in some 'respectable place' outside of these institutions. It is also not always clear what the motivation was behind the granting of corrodies: unlike at some other institutions, such as Westminster Abbey, we do not know if places were purchased in the fifteenth century and, if so, for how much. Although many were granted to servants and relatives of the monks themselves, it is probable that property transactions lie behind at least some, though these are often buried beneath convoluted conveyancing and leasing practices. For example, Emma, widow of William Palfrayman, was granted two concurrent corrodies on 12 February 1435 and, just three days later, leased her two burgages in Durham city to the prior during her lifetime.¹¹⁴ Emma held these corrodies until her death in 1447, when she was described as a sister of the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene.

¹⁰⁶ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fol. 91r.

¹⁰⁷ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 180v.

¹⁰⁸ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 179v.

¹⁰⁹ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 177r–v. For an example of a reversionary grant where the recipients do not appear to have been immediately related, see that of 1475, when William Whelpdale and Margaret, his wife, were granted a corrody in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene, which John Emmotson had just obtained, as soon as it should happen to become vacant by the death of John or in any other legitimate way (D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 167r–v).

¹¹⁰ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 152v–153r.

¹¹¹ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 188r, 195v.

¹¹² D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 167v. For examples of royal corrodies being exchanged, see McHardy, 'Corrodies of the crown', pp. 38–9.

¹¹³ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 139r, 193v, 213r; *Register* V, fol. 173r.

¹¹⁴ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fols. 84r–v, 86v–87r.

What becomes clear from these last two examples is that some individuals held multiple corrodies from Durham priory at the same time, something that we infrequently encounter at other institutions given the rarity of such corrody grants (see Table 5).¹¹⁵ Who were these people, and what was the purpose of holding several monks' corrodies, each of which, after all, was supposed to be sufficient to provide for a single person? Some of the recipients of such multiple grants were probably relatives of the prior or of the monks who were given especially beneficial treatment, as for example, during John Wessington's time as prior, when one John, son of Walter Wessington was granted a corrody in the Hospital of Witton Gilbert in 1434. Perhaps the most extravagant use of such grants to relatives, however, was made by Richard Bell, who, as prior, granted to one Alice Bell a corrody in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene in 1466, along with one in the Hospital of Witton Gilbert in 1470 and one in the Maison de Dieu in 1474, as well as another to be held jointly by Edmund Bell, the prior's servant,

Table 5. Multiple concurrent corrodies held at Durham priory, 1400–1520

Recipient	Maison de Dieu	Infirmary	St. Mary Magdalene Hospital	Witton Gilbert Hospital
Agnes Thomson, widow	28 April 1503 / 18 June 1504			
Alice Bell, gentlewoman ^a	12 August 1474		18 February 1466	12 February 1470
Cecily, widow of Thomas Bradbery		15 March 1459		5 January 1462
Emma, widow of William Palfrayman		12 February 1435	12 February 1435	
Henry Baly ^b	21 February 1502	24 July 1502		
Isabel Thomson, widow ^c		21 July 1512		22 October 1516
Joan, lately widow of William Wharram		6 March 1439		6 March 1439
John Buteler, his servant			12 February 1470	29 June 1468
John Salamond		20 June 1507	20 June 1507	20 June 1507
John Short	11 February 1448	11 February 1448	11 February 1448	
John Whitfeld	10 July 1486	1 January 1488		
John Wynter		18 August 1507 / 6 January 1511		
Richard Haysand and Emma, his wife	4 October 1439	1 February 1426		
Richard Robynson ^d	3 August 1512		27 March 1503	4 October 1518
Robert Gryndisdale, gentleman ^e	1 March 1433	28 February 1434		
Thomas Lee ^f		2 July 1460	1 January 1462	
William Whelpdale and Margaret, his wife		4 February 1476	5 September 1475	

Source: D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum II, III and IV*. The table shows the date of the initial grant of a corrody at each institution.

^aBell also jointly held another corrody at St. Mary Magdalene with Edmund Bell, her son (granted 23 March 1475).

^bThe infirmary corrody was held jointly with Baly's wife, Ellen.

^cThe Witton Gilbert corrody was held jointly with Margaret Browell.

^dThe Maison de Dieu corrody was held jointly with Robynson's wife, Marion.

^eThe Maison de Dieu corrody was held jointly with Gryndisdale's wife, Isabel.

^fThe St Mary Magdalene corrody was held jointly with Lee's wife, Joan.

¹¹⁵ For an example of a person holding multiple corrodies, see Usilton, 'John de Stratford'. When the crown appointed an individual to multiple corrodies, it is often not clear whether they held them concurrently or whether this represented a high rejection rate from monastic houses (see, e.g., Tillotson, 'Pensions, corrodies and religious houses', pp. 135–6).

and Alice Bell, Edmund's widowed mother, in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene in 1475 (though this may have been a regrant of her first corrody but with her son now added).¹¹⁶ Others were clearly used to reward particularly favoured servants such as John Salamond, who received three concurrent corrodies, all on 20 June 1507.¹¹⁷ John was one of the cantors of the cathedral and, in addition to these corrodies, he also became keeper of the garden of Durham castle in 1508 for his service to the bishop and received the revenues of this office and 1d per day as his wages there.¹¹⁸ It is perhaps surprising that only two of the seventeen people holding multiple corrodies did so jointly: after all, it would make sense for a husband and wife to have more than one corrody in order to account for their joint needs. In practice, however, it seems likely that where corrodies were held jointly, each person received the full allowance of a monk rather than having to share. Yet where individuals did hold a second or third concurrent corrody, it was often done jointly, as in the case of Isabel Thomson, widow, who held a corrody in the infirmary from 1512 but who received an additional one in the Hospital of Witton Gilbert from 1516 in both her name and that of Margaret Browell, one of only two examples in the Durham registers of two women holding a corrody jointly.¹¹⁹

The expectations placed upon corrodians were not overly onerous – generally speaking, they were to follow the rules of the institution, to not fornicate or commit adultery and to not remarry – yet some clearly chafed at such restrictions. For example, Richard Haysand and Emma, his wife, were granted a corrody in the infirmary outside the priory gate by the almoner in 1426 and then jointly received one in the Maison de Dieu in 1439.¹²⁰ At some point after this date Emma died, for Richard's position in the infirmary was regranted in his name alone on 1 January 1444 but with a licence by the prior, in view of Richard's 'bodily infirmity from old age and gout, and for his faithful service to him for twenty years and more, as well as in the future', for him to contract marriage with Katherine, widow of William Langley, sister of the infirmary, granting them leave to stay in some respectable place outside the infirmary.¹²¹ As was indicated in the licence, Katherine was herself a corrodian, having been granted her own place in the infirmary in 1439.¹²² The monks were clearly well aware of the potential for liaisons and the dangers of having men and women in close proximity under their roofs. Roland Brooke was granted a similar licence in 1461. Although he and his late wife, Denise, had held a corrody in the infirmary and so were supposedly to abstain from remarriage, Roland was granted a licence to 'aspire to a second marriage, where God should provide for this, and stay outside the said infirmary with his wife'. This was in light of 'his deserving behaviour and bodily infirmity by which, as he asserts, he is so wearied that he can scarcely live without a helpmeet'.¹²³ Rather than obtaining advance permission to remarry, a few sought forgiveness after the event instead, such as Alice, formerly the widow of William Bell, who was regranted her corrody in the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene 'notwithstanding that she rashly and unexpectedly has had recourse to a second marriage, *de facto* although not *de jure*, as she asserts'.¹²⁴ She was pardoned for contracting marriage with Thomas Fairher 'for certain legitimate reasons proposed before the prior on her behalf', though undoubtedly part of this leniency was because the prior in question was one Richard Bell.

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The Durham evidence sheds considerable new light upon the use of corrodies in late medieval England, not least in the large number of women who held such grants. Whereas previous studies have acknowledged the presence of women among the corrodies granted by ecclesiastical institutions,

¹¹⁶ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fol. 79v; *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 130r, 143v–144r, 156r.

¹¹⁷ It is possible that some people who appear to have held two concurrent positions had, in fact, surrendered their first in exchange for a corrody in a different institution and the documentation of this has simply not survived. However, it is clear that many corrodians were holding multiple grants concurrently, especially as in this example, where they were all granted on the same day.

¹¹⁸ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fol. 166v; *Register* V, fols. 110v–111r.

¹¹⁹ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* IV, fols. 193r, 207r–v.

¹²⁰ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fol. 107v.

¹²¹ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fol. 180v.

¹²² D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* II, fol. 105v.

¹²³ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fol. 107v.

¹²⁴ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum* III, fols. 136v–137r.

they have been forced to rely upon a handful of illustrative examples to speculate upon their position and role, leaving us to assume that they operated similarly to the more numerous examples of male corrodians. Yet what becomes clear is that corrodies could function significantly differently for women. Perhaps most starkly, women tended to hold their corrodies for considerably longer than their male counterparts. Although this could have been the result of different life expectancies in a relatively small sample size, it is more likely that women simply received their corrodies at a younger age. This, in turn, has potential implications for our understanding of the purpose and use of corrodies in medieval society. Given that more men held their corrodies for relatively short periods of time, this corroborates the traditional view that some such grants provided a place of retirement when infirmity and old age rendered them incapable of work. By comparison, women on average received their corrodies earlier in the life cycle, and, although a considerable number of female recipients were described as widows, we should be cautious of necessarily associating this with old age: widowhood is not, after all, the preserve of the elderly. Nor should we assume that grants to a sole corrodian always imply that the recipient was single since not a few wives (and even some husbands) lurk in the shadows of our grants, sometimes ready and waiting in the wings to take up the corrody itself upon the death of their spouse. This too is significant because we see here the various methods by which people tried to pass on their allowances, at times even surrendering them in favour of their children, at others, simply adding them to the corrody itself, potentially lengthening the grant by decades. Although it is not clear why so many women clearly sought such lengthy positions in these hospitals and almshouses, it probably reflects a pervasive anxiety about the potential depredations of poverty.¹²⁵

All of this has significant implications for our understanding of corrodies in late medieval England. They certainly did have a function as a form of social security in old age, and many retainers and servants at Durham priory entered into service with the expectation – even the promise – of an allowance when they were incapacitated by infirmity or old age. Yet previous studies have tended to overlook the extent to which corrodies were also granted to current servants. Indeed, corrodies might be seen as a perk of working for a major ecclesiastical institution such as Durham, where servants could drop into the kitchen, cellar or pantry and draw upon their daily provisions when in town. If anything, many of the grants suggest that the corrody was a potentially more significant financial commitment when granted to current servants, whose allowance would then be reduced when they became too old to carry out their duties. These Durham examples also help us to answer the much-debated question of how significant a financial burden such corrodies represented for their institutions. Unfortunately, we do not have the purchase price for most of the above corrodies – and, indeed, many were not purchased at all but rather granted for service or charitable reasons – yet this Durham evidence demonstrates the need to understand the composition of corrodians at an institution when considering the burden they represented. If predominantly male, perhaps many of whom had been granted a corrody for service or in the expectation of favours to be rendered, such corrodies might run for a relatively short period, but if predominantly female, especially if many had received these from family members, then they were more likely to run for decades than years.

If corrodies were granted to both men and women, and not just to the elderly but also to those with many years of active service ahead of them, what then does this reveal about late medieval society? Perhaps what it suggests, above all, is that people of all ages, women as well as men, sought some form of guarantee against the hazards of the late medieval world, be it through joining a guild or fraternity or seeking out a corrody in a local hospital or almshouse. The Durham corrodies were not of the more extravagant kind since they provided recipients with a potential place to stay and sufficient food and drink to meet their needs, but little else, accounting for shillings' rather than pounds' worth of expenses. Yet they were clearly sought after, being held onto for decades and sometimes even inherited or passed onto others. The increase in royal requests for corrodies during the Great Famine of 1315–17 – one of the worst subsistence crises in documented European history – is perhaps illustrative of why: food

¹²⁵ A. T. Brown, 'The fear of downward social mobility in late medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History*, xlv (2019), 597–617; and J. M. Bennett, 'Women and poverty: girls on their own in England before 1348', in *Peasants and Lords in the Medieval English Economy: Essays in Honour of Bruce M. S. Campbell*, ed. M. Kowaleski, J. Langdon and P. R. Schofield (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 299–323.

and shelter were precious commodities during periods of hardship.¹²⁶ Although fluctuations in the number of grants of corrodies at Durham may represent changes in the diligence of record-keeping as much as peaks and troughs in the number of annual grants, it is perhaps unsurprising that grants spiked in 1439 and again in the 1470s, years known for agricultural hardship and plague.

In a society with no formal provision of poor relief, people sought out protection wherever it could be found, as can perhaps be seen in the example of William Young, who held a corrody in the Maison de Dieu at Durham from 1486 to 1508. In 1503 the prior and many of the great and the good of the county signed testimonial letters that their neighbour, one William Young, labourer of Durham, ‘by casual fortune has lost his goods and by misfortune and sudden chance has found his wife suddenly dead, a young child, eight weeks old or thereabouts, at her breast, and also having four or five young children, none able to dress themselves, by which William is greatly impoverished and not able to provide for his children unless all Christians to whom this letter comes give him charitable alms’.¹²⁷ Whether or not this was the same William Young, corrodian, is unclear, but it was precisely these kinds of problems that a position in a hospital or almshouse could, at the very least, help mitigate, guaranteeing some form of relief to fall back on when all else failed. Harvey and others have noted that corrodies elsewhere in England were increasingly ‘captured by the middle class’, and certainly there are signs of this happening at Durham, especially in the regularity with which relatives of the monks found their way into the priory’s hospitals and almshouses. Yet perhaps because the Durham monks had a relatively large number of such places in their patronage, there was a continued commitment to using at least some of these in alms as, for example, in the corrody once held by Roger Laveroke, which had a marginal note next to it in the prior’s register that it had now been diverted by William Brown for the relief of boys.¹²⁸ Far from being restricted to ageing male retainers, corrodies were an important form of social security in late medieval England for those lucky enough to receive them.

¹²⁶ For the corrodies, see McHardy, ‘Corrodies of the crown’. For the Great Famine, see W. C. Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, 1996); and P. Slavin, *Experiencing Famine: a Fourteenth-Century Environmental Shock in the British Isles* (Turnhout, 2019).

¹²⁷ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum IV*, fols. 137v–138r.

¹²⁸ D.C.D., *Registrum Parvum IV*, fols. 55v–56r.