WILLIAM LAUD'S REFORM OF ECCLESIASTICAL LAND TENURES: THE TRANSITION FROM LIVES TO YEARS

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Abstract

In the post-Reformation Church of England, bishops, together with the dean and chapter, bore responsibility for both spiritual leadership and the management of ecclesiastical estates. Following the statutes of 1571, it became standard practice to lease church lands either on fixed 21-year terms or, more traditionally, on "three-lives leases". By the early 17th century, however, rising life expectancy and sustained inflation rendered the latter increasingly impractical and financially disadvantageous to the Church. In response, Archbishop William Laud, with the support of Charles I, sought to standardize leasing practices across English dioceses by enforcing 21-year terms. This policy took little account of local variations and, as a result, provoked disputes over the redistribution of church wealth and the reconfiguration of local power relations. These conflicts deepened clerical – lay tensions and ultimately contributed to the wider institutional fragility that preceded the outbreak of the English Civil War.

Keywords: *William Laud, church lands, three-lives lease, 21-year lease.*

In early 17th-century England, disputes over the management of church lands exposed deep tensions between clerical landlords and lay occupiers. These conflicts reflected not only local economic pressures but also broader debates about the nature of ecclesiastical authority and property. To understand these conflicts, historians have examined the broader structures of English landholding and the long-term evolution of its tenurial arrangements. Earlier economic historians such as R. H. Tawney and

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Joan Thirsk established the broad contours of English land tenures in the 16th and 17th centuries. Their analyses, together with Eric Kerridge's work, demonstrate that English landholding in this period was characterized by considerable regional and economic diversity, and that landlords' strategies reflected local conditions rather than a single, uniform model. These regional and economic variations formed the background against which the Church's own land management evolved [Tawney 1912; Thirsk 1967; Kerridge 1953: 16–34; for a general synthesis, see also Clay 1981: 83–96].

Subsequent historiography shifted its focus from these broad economic frameworks to the Church's administration. Christopher Hill's 1956 study portrayed the laity as the chief beneficiaries of ecclesiastical dispossession, emphasizing the economic impact of property confiscation. Later historians, such as A. T. Brown, highlighted the varied systems of estate management within episcopal and capitular lands, showing how institutional structures shaped long-term financial outcomes. Felicity Heal and Rosemary O'Day further redirected attention from external loss to the Church's internal economy, examining its fiscal organization and social functions [Hill 1956; Brown 2014: 699–719; O'Day and Heal 1981]. Scholars such as Anthony Milton, Peter Lake, and Kevin Sharpe have examined various dimensions of the Laudian programme, particularly its administrative and fiscal discipline. Yet even in these studies, Laud's practical efforts to regularize the Church's material administration have attracted little detailed discussion [Milton 2021; Lake 1993: 161–185; Sharpe 1992].

Overall, while existing scholarship has largely elucidated the economic and institutional frameworks of the post-Reformation Church, the dynamics of ecclesiastical land management during the early Stuart period remain relatively neglected. In particular, little attention has been paid to the transition from life leases to 21-year leases initiated under Archbishop William Laud, and to its adverse effects on relations between the Church and its tenants. Nor has sufficient attention been given to how the resulting tensions related to contemporary debates on episcopacy during the Long Parliament and influenced the political climate of the late 1630s and early 1640s. In light of this, the present study takes church land leasing in the decade preceding the Civil War as its starting point, and demonstrates how Laud's reform, as an institutional intervention, intensified clerical–lay tensions, shaped political opinion, and contributed to the broader instability that ultimately culminated in the Civil War.

The three-lives lease and the Church's economic challenges

In 1535, at the beginning of the English Reformation, the Church, as one of the kingdom's principal landowners, derived a net annual income of nearly £ 400 000, whereas the crown's lands yielded only about £ 40 000. This striking disparity in wealth led Henry VIII, seeking to augment royal revenues and relieve fiscal difficulties, to enact the *Suppression of Religious Houses Acts* of 1536 and 1539.

These acts resulted in the transfer to the crown of roughly 60% of the Church's lands that were mainly monastic in origin, while at the same time the estates of the secular clergy remained untouched [Hoskins 1976: 121–122]. On the estimates of J. P. Cooper and others, the secular clergy in the early sixteenth century held at least four million acres of land (between 8 and 13% of the total area of England), which, after the upheaval, continued to form the material foundation for the Church's spiritual and administrative functions and was managed primarily by archbishops, bishops, and deans and chapters [Cooper 1967: 419–440; Elton 1955: 142; Hoskins 1978: 121].

These senior clergy, in managing the demesne that formed part of these ecclesiastical estates, did not directly cultivate the land; instead, they customarily leased their manors as separate units. Many of these tracts were granted to laymen under long leases of eighty or ninety-nine years, under which tenants, benefiting from low rents and highly favourable terms, could readily realize substantial profits by subletting the land at market rates. [Hill 1963: 14–18] Therefore, after Henry VIII's reforms, successive Tudor monarchs, exercising royal supremacy over the Church of England (with the exception of Queen Mary), often granted long leases of these lands to courtiers and other laymen, either as rewards or in exchange for political support. Such leases, however, often carried extremely favourable terms, causing a substantial depletion of church resources.

This practice of alienating church resources developed rapidly under Edward VI's reign; by the reign of Elizabeth I, bishops' lands functioned in practice as what monastic lands had been in her father's reign, namely "the fund from which pensions were paid and favours dispensed" [Hill 1956: 29]. The Act of 1559 (1 Eliz., c. 19) centralized the authority over episcopal estates in the crown, stipulating that "all grants by archbishops and bishops [...] other than for the term of one and twenty years or three lives from the making, or without reserving the usual rent, shall be void." However, leases with the Crown were specifically exempted from this restriction, so that bishops remained barred from granting long leases to lay lessees while still being allowed to conclude such agreements with the Crown. Accordingly, any bishop who wished to maintain the practice of long leasing was compelled to lease his estates to the Crown in the first instance. By this mechanism, the queen secured formal control over large portions of episcopal property, which she could then retain for her own use or redistribute to courtiers under long leases. In 1571, Parliament passed another Act (13 Eliz., c. 10), extending the leasing restrictions on bishops to virtually all clergy and ecclesiastical institutions, including deans and chapters, colleges, and charitable hospitals. The Act further strengthened the Crown's control over Church lands throughout England, enabling it systematically to acquire and redistribute Church resources for the benefit of secular elites [Hembry 1967: 1–3; Blackstone 1768: 320–321]. Such use of Church lands to support secular interests not only brought substantial economic gains to the lay landowning class but also gradually fostered a political culture that viewed Church estates as resources freely disposable by the state and the secular elite [Hill 1961: 87]. In turn, this development came at the expense of the Church's control over its own economic assets and further undermined its independence in both religious and social spheres.

By the closing years of Elizabeth I's reign, contemporaries had begun to recognise that, if the large-scale alienation of church lands were to continue, the Church would struggle to fulfil its religious and social responsibilities. Even the Queen found herself compelled to adjust her policy and to display a measure of moderation in the face of warnings that "there would hardly be a Cathedrall Church found in good repaire within England" [Harington 1653: 66–67]. Under James I, with foreign wars at an end and domestic tensions coming to the fore, the importance of the Church in maintaining the established order and consolidating the position of the ruling elite became increasingly apparent once more. Archbishop Richard Bancroft, in a sermon, observed that the interests of the Church and of the upper classes were aligned, that they shared common enemies, and that, through the pulpit, the Church could sustain the existing social order. The elites, therefore, were expected to respect the Church's wealth and dignity [Bancroft 1588: 24–27]. The King supported this idea by declaring at Hampton Court: "No bishops, no king, no nobility," underscoring the central role of the church (particularly the episcopacy) in maintaining social hierarchy and royal authority [Brewer 1839: 421]. He went further in 1604 by abolishing the exemptions reserved for the Crown in the aforementioned statute of Queen Elizabeth [Blackstone 1768: 320]. From that point onward, all newly granted ecclesiastical leases were meant to be subject to the statutory limit of twenty-one years or three lives, a provision that signalled the Crown's intended adjustment in the mode of exercising control over Church resources.

However, even though James I professed an intention to curb the further erosion of ecclesiastical estates, the vast system of *Patronage and Bounty* that he actively fostered posed a serious obstacle to this goal. To maintain the system, the king was obliged to continue granting church lands as rewards to loyal nobles and dependents; otherwise, he would have had to draw upon the already overburdened royal treasury. This structural tension was already visible in practice less than a month before the 1604 statute was formally enacted, when James secured in Parliament for his favourite, Robert Carr, a 99-year lease of the manor of Great Bedwin, then belonging to the Dean and Canons of Windsor [Hill 1963: 33–34].[1] This transaction suggests

[1] Patronage and Bounty: Linda Peck has pointed out that early Stuart England was governed as a personal monarchy, a form of rule grounded in hierarchy and systems of patronage. The King maintained his political control over both the centre and the localities by granting land, offices, or other privileges as forms of patronage, thereby consolidating his relations with nobles, courtiers, and the upper ranks of society [cf. Peck 1990: 4; Peck 1986: 31–61].

that, by the early 17th century, the political deployment of ecclesiastical estates had become an established feature of royal governance, one that restrictive legislation could not easily dislodge.

The consequences of such encroachment were severe: by the reign of Charles I, approximately six-sevenths of the revenues from church estates were being appropriated by lessees [Bruce 1845: 76]. For example, the Sherston & Aldrington Rectory in Wiltshire had been leased for ninety years since the reign of Edward VI; by the time of the Long Parliament's inquiry into church property, its annual rent still stood at £ 8, whereas its actual annual valuation had risen to £ 140, so that the lessee's profit accounted for more than 94% [Bodington 1920: 1–39]. Similarly, the Rectorie de Meere was leased in 1593 for eighty years at an annual rent of £ 46; by the time of the parliamentary survey of 1649, its total valuation had reached £ 308, with the lessee's net profit amounting to about 85% [Ibid.: 105–124].

At the time, the Church was not merely an institution for the dissemination of the sacred word. Instead, its social functions formed an essential foundation upon which royal authority rested. In an age lacking modern media such as newspapers or television, the Church exercised a profound influence over the political, economic, and moral outlook of the population through the pulpit. Beyond the pulpit, the publication of books was subject to episcopal licensing; education lay almost entirely under ecclesiastical control; and academic posts at Oxford and Cambridge were awarded largely to members of the clergy. The Church thus occupied a central position in sustaining social order and political obedience. As Sir John Eliot once observed, "Religion it is that keeps the subject in obedience" [Hill 1961: 77]. The effective performance of these social functions depended in no small measure on the material resources of the higher clergy. Land had long served as the principal form of wealth in England. By the late 1620s, however, bishops and other senior clergy had experienced a severe erosion of their estate revenues, and their capacity to fulfil social responsibilities within society had been correspondingly weakened. As tensions with Parliament intensified and culminated in its dissolution in 1629, Charles I increasingly emphasised the Church's role in the maintenance of social and political order. He acknowledged that "people are governed by the pulpit more than the sword in times of peace" [Petrie 1968: 200]. Within this framework, the restoration of the landed interests of bishops and other senior clergy, and the preservation of the Church's relative economic independence, emerged as a strategy through which Charles sought to reinforce royal authority and sustain political order during a period of acute strain.

This implied an urgent need for further reform of the leasing practices on church lands. At this juncture, in addition to enforcing more strictly the statutes prohibiting long leases, Charles I was compelled to address another form of tenure whose defects were becoming increasingly apparent – the three-lives leases. Since the enactment of

Elizabeth I's restrictive legislation, newly contracted leases on ecclesiastical estates had, in general, taken the form of 21-year terms or leases for three lives. The 21-year lease, as a fixed-term arrangement, needs little elaboration; however, the three-lives lease was a life-contingent form of tenure, its duration determined by the survival of three designated individuals named in the contract. The most common combinations included the lessee himself, his spouse, and his eldest son, or alternatively the lessee and two of his children; as long as any one of the three remained alive, the lease continued in force. Such leases required the lessee to pay an entry fine at the time of agreement, in addition to the annual rent thereafter.

In earlier practice, a lease for three lives was regarded as roughly equivalent to a 21-year lease. This perception derived from a statute of Henry VIII (32 Hen. VIII. c. 28), which permitted certain lands to be leased either for twenty-one years *or* for three lives. Subsequently, in land management and economic valuation, a three-lives lease came to be treated as broadly equivalent in value to a 21-year lease. This equivalence was based on an empirical calculation that assumed the remaining life expectancy at each succession to be about seven years, producing an aggregate term of approximately 21 years. Such an approach facilitated uniform treatment in financial transactions and in the valuation of renewals [Bellhouse 2017: 8–23; Blackstone 1768: 318–319].[2] The principal distinction between the two forms lay in the mode of rent payment. A 21-year lease typically required the lessee to pay a relatively small entry fine upon signing, followed by the payment of full rack-rents based on the land's actual value. By contrast, a three-lives lease required the lessee to pay a much higher initial entry fine, but thereafter only a nominal reserved rent, which was far below the real value of the land. Compared with the 21-year lease, the advantage of the three-lives lease for the leaseholder was that it secured lifetime tenure for himself and his immediate family; for the landowner, such a lease yielded a substantial lump-sum income in the short term, while virtually relieving him of the burden of rent collection in the future [Clay 1981: 83–96]. It was precisely on the basis of this historical practice and background that Elizabethan legislation placed the two lease forms on an equal footing, enabling ecclesiastical landlords to choose whichever suited their needs and providing lessees with different forms of tenure security.

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2 Treating a "three-lives" lease as equivalent to a 21-year term was a simplification derived from the practical needs of tax administration, valuation, and rent setting. In essence, it was an estimate based on average life expectancy, and did not mean that the combined remaining lifespans of the three persons named in the lease amounted to only 21 years. The "lives" specified in the lease had to be individuals already living at the time; unborn or future children could not be included. Given the high rate of infant mortality, there was little advantage in naming very young children, and therefore most of those named were adults [See "lease": Oxford Reference, n. d.].

However, the social and economic transformations of the late 16th and early 17th centuries gradually reduced the appeal of three-lives leases in the land market. As average life expectancy increased, it became increasingly evident that the actual duration of a three-lives lease often exceeded that of a 21-year term. A manual published in 1663 noted that such leases were then commonly equivalent to at least 27 years, and in some cases could extend to as much as 33 years [Clay 1981: 83–96]. This meant that landowners had to endure lower rental income over a longer period, with the actual duration of such leases remaining unpredictable and thereby increasing uncertainty in revenue. More critically, the Price Revolution had led to a general rise in prices, imposing significant economic pressure on landowners who relied on fixed rents. As inflation intensified, the real purchasing power of rents fell sharply, and their income declined in relative terms. In addition, the continuous rise in land values encouraged owners to raise rents to reflect market values; yet the long-term fixed rent structure of the three-lives lease prevented them from effectively profiting from the appreciation of land. Consequently, the earlier assumption of equivalence between the three-lives lease and the 21-year lease had become increasingly detached from the realities of the land market.

Although the three-lives lease had by then lost much of its appeal in the land market, some ecclesiastical landlords, constrained by their institutional position, still preferred to adopt this form of tenure. Unlike Catholic clergy, the clergy of the Established Church after the Reformation were allowed to marry and thus often had legitimate families to maintain. At the same time, ecclesiastical office was held for life; thus church property could be used only during an incumbent's tenure and could not be transmitted to descendants. Under these conditions, the three-lives lease functioned as a practical means of reconciling clerical tenure with familial provision. As noted above, such leases required the payment of a substantial entry fine upon agreement, which ecclesiastical landlords could appropriate in practice to augment their personal and familial wealth. More importantly, the entry fine was not treated as taxable personal income, making it an attractive means for the avoidance of taxation.[3] For these reasons, many senior clergymen resorted to life leases to provide future financial security for their widows and children [Cardwell 1839: 195–196].

Nevertheless, a high entry fine was often accompanied by low, fixed, long-term rents, which in effect created a hidden risk of reducing the disposable income available to ecclesiastical successors. Ecclesiastics typically attained senior offices at

[3] For example, when clergy were assessed for first-fruits or subsidies, the entry fine was normally not included in the calculation of their taxable income. *First-fruits* referred to the payment of a portion of a clergyman's first year's income to the Crown upon taking office; *subsidies* were taxes levied by the Crown in times of financial strain or to fund specific national undertakings, such as wars or royal expenditures.

an advanced age, and therefore the turnover of incumbents was relatively frequent. In the diocese of Winchester, for example, three bishops succeeded one another between 1594 and 1597. Such frequent changes meant that if one bishop let out his property under a three-lives lease, his successor would be left for the whole of his tenure with nothing more than a meagre rent. In periods of stable prices or slow inflation, such low, fixed rents could just about cover the basic expenses of successors; but from the late 16th century onward, the sustained price increases triggered by the Price Revolution gradually brought about a real decline in their income. In the estates of Lichfield Cathedral, the Flixton property was leased for lives in 1620 for an annual rent of £ 16; eight years later, the Brewood estate was similarly leased for £ 30. By the time of the parliamentary survey in 1649, however, these two properties were assessed at £ 122 and £ 185 respectively, figures that far exceeded the annual rents fixed under the life leases [Baugh et al. 1970]. Although at the time of agreement the low annual rent may have been offset by the payment of a substantial entry fine, from the successor's perspective, the long-term stagnation of rent levels meant that his disposable income failed to increase in line with inflation. In other words, the fixed annual rents of leases for lives increasingly diverged from market value in the context of inflation, posing a continuous and severe challenge to the financial management of ecclesiastical successors.

The financial constraints of successors affected both their personal living conditions and their capacity to manage church resources and fulfil their pastoral duties. As William Roberts, Bishop of Bangor, once complained to Laud, his predecessors leased out all the property of the diocese, even the corn mills, on lives leases, and the resulting poverty meant that "all clergymen of hope and worth [in his diocese] seek preferment elsewhere" [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 5: 359]. Such complaints were by no means exceptional: once the Church was unable to provide a basic livelihood or clerical dignity, the loss of clerical manpower became inevitable, and with it the pastoral function at the parochial level was thereby weakened. It may thus be said that although the three-lives lease provided a substantial one-time income for the incumbent ecclesiastical landlord, it did so at the expense of the long-term interests of the Church. This practice of "mortgaging the future" appeared all the more precarious in an age of soaring prices and thus became a major obstacle to the sustainable development of ecclesiastical finance.

Conception and implementation of Laud's reform

Based on the foregoing, the chief beneficiaries of three-lives leases were often the secular leaseholders of church lands. Laud also noted that in his time "the laity have the benefit, by the leases which they hold, of more than five parts of all the bishops', deans and chapters', and college revenues in England" [Scott and Bliss

1847–1860, 4: 192].[4] In his view, these revenues, originally dedicated to maintain and uphold the service of God, had long been diverted into secular hands, which seriously undermined both the authority of the Church and the Church's capacity to fulfil its religious responsibilities [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 6: 179].

As mentioned earlier, against the backdrop of a monarchy that increasingly emphasized order and unity, Charles I sought to consolidate his rule through the strengthening of the Church. As the King's most trusted Privy Councillor and Archbishop of Canterbury, Laud was keenly aware of the urgency of the King's concern. In his sermons, he repeatedly affirmed the inseparable relationship between Church and State, pointing out that "the Church cannot dwell but in the State [...] And the Commonwealth cannot flourish without the Church." Furthermore, the episcopacy was presented as an important force in maintaining the unity of the Church and the cohesion of the State [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 1: 64, 82–83]. In this way, Laud skilfully aligned his anxiety over the Church's economic plight and the waning authority of the episcopate with the monarch's need to strengthen his regime, thereby securing the King's support for his reform. On this basis, Laud proposed a systematic reform scheme, advocating shorter, fixed-term leases and a reduced entry fine, coupled with higher rents, with the aim of enabling the Church to share more effectively in the gains from rising land values. The 21-year lease appeared to fit this design particularly well, for it was expected to ensure a measure of control over tenure while allowing ecclesiastical landlords to adjust rents within a relatively short cycle and to collect entry fines at regular intervals [Heylyn 1671: 300]. Therefore, replacing the three-lives lease with a 21-year lease was almost inevitable.

It is worth noting that this line of reform did not arise suddenly but stemmed from Laud's long experience in the administration of ecclesiastical property. In fact, as early as 1626–1628, during his tenure as Bishop of Bath and Wells, Laud had already shown a strong concern for the management of church estates. In 1626, he drafted a document addressing the powers of episcopal stewards in dealing with the lands of their sees. It laid down that any lease for lives or for years granted by a steward during a vacancy, unless confirmed by the succeeding bishop, was invalid in law. More fundamentally, while bishops, as the owners of their lands during their incumbency, were entitled to administer them in accordance with the law, their authority was nonetheless circumscribed by common law, and even bishops could not grant leases

[4] "More than five parts" is an early modern expression used to denote an overwhelming proportion, often understood as something like well over four-fifths, rather than a precise fractional calculation.

for longer than three lives without the confirmation of the dean and chapter[5] [State Papers Online 1626; Hembry 1967: 221]. It can be seen that at this stage Laud had already begun to pay close attention to the issue of leases within the system of church lands and was inclined to strengthen their regulation through legal means.

In 1629, with the support of King Charles, Laud, then Bishop of London, took part in drafting and promulgating a set of *Royal Instructions* for the entire Church of England. Article 9 explicitly stipulated that any bishop nominated for translation to another diocese was, from the date of such nomination, not permitted to sign any three-lives lease, 21-year lease, or concurrent lease, and further characterised leases that "should almost undo the successor" of the bishopric as especially "hateful" [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 5: 308]. While this Article did not formally prohibit the use of three-lives leases, some scholars have pointed out that these provisions reflect the Crown's growing disapproval of life leases and suggest that official support for this form of tenure was beginning to wane [O'Day and Heal 1981: 145].[6]

By March 1634, when Laud was now Archbishop of Canterbury, his position had become increasingly unequivocal: he resolved to prohibit altogether the practice of leasing church lands on a life-term basis [Trevor-Roper 1988: 149, note 3]. Thus, in June, Laud conveyed his intentions through two Royal Letters, addressed respectively to the deans and chapters, and to the bishops and archbishops. The letters stated that, although the statutes of Elizabeth I had permitted bishops, and deans and chapters, to let church lands either on three-lives lease or on 21-year lease, "time and experience have made it apparent, that there is a great deal of difference between them, especially in church leases, where men are commonly in great years before they come to those places." In this context, it was warned that the conversion of term leases into life leases tended to produce a pattern in which the higher clergy would "put a great fine into his own purse to enrich himself, his wife, and children, and leave his successors [...] and the church destitute of the growing means which would come in to help them." If this practice continued, "scarce any bishop would be able to live and keep house, according to his place and calling." The letters therefore ordered that these higher clergy were not to convert church leases into life leases at their own discretion; instead, they were to seek, whenever possible, the conversion of existing life leases into leases reckoned by years [Bruce 1864: 88; Cardwell 1839: 195–196]. This prohibition, initially directed at the higher clergy, was gradually extended to the lower clergy

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5 The bishop's steward was a principal officer responsible for administering the bishop's manors and estates, presiding over manorial courts, and managing the secular and legal affairs connected with church lands.

6 According to Julian Davies, the directive required the conversion of life leases into leases for terms of years (clause 9), a provision most likely proposed by Laud [See Davies 1992: 29].

as well. For example, in 1634, the vicars of the diocese of Lichfield received a royal order requiring them to cease the granting of life-tenure leases [Baugh et al. 1970].

In August that same year, Laud issued further measures to supplement and extend the above directives. The new order required the bishops and deans and chapters to conduct a fresh survey and detailed registration of the lands under their jurisdiction, covering such information as acreage, location, names of tenants, leasing history, and the condition of the properties. They were also required to summon the lessees to verify the basis of their rents and to clarify the exact amounts due, together with any associated rights or obligations. If it was discovered that the lessee held land beyond the scope of his declaration, the bishops and deans and chapters were expected to report the situation to the King in order to "prevent the concealment of the church's land, and to discover such as go about to conceal the same" [Cardwell 1839: 197–198]. To encourage compliance with this order, Laud also rewarded clergy who distinguished themselves in its execution. For example, he promoted the Archdeacon of Anglesey to the bishopric of Bangor after he had uncovered church lands in the area worth £ 1000 that had previously been concealed [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 6: 390].

However, some deans and prebendaries of their chapters deliberately misinterpreted the King's Letter, claiming that the restriction applied only to leases signed jointly by the dean and chapter, while individual members of the cathedral body, including deans, archdeacons, and prebendaries, could continue to grant life leases in their own names. To close this loophole, the King issued another Royal Letter in October of the same year, explicitly reiterating that the leasehold restrictions set out in the earlier letters applied not only to the dean and chapter as a whole, but also to every individual member of the cathedral body [Wilkins 1737: 494]. Accordingly, in January of the following year Laud secured the issuance of a new set of Royal Instructions, requiring bishops to submit an Annual Report to their metropolitan confirming that they had strictly observed the letters "prohibiting them to change any leases from years into lives." The instructions further obliged bishops to report any breaches of the letters' provisions committed by other church members within their dioceses [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 5: 313].

This series of directives prompted several senior churchmen to respond actively and to begin rectifying the management of ecclesiastical estates. For example, William Piers, Bishop of Bath and Wells, conducted a detailed survey of the lands within his diocese, systematically recording lease types, tenants, and rents, with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the estate situation and laying the groundwork for subsequent adjustments to the leasehold system. Matthew Wren, Bishop of Hereford, in 1635 refused the request of Mr. Geeres to extend his life lease, for which the bishop was commended by the King as "an honest Church-man" [Wren 1750: 51].

John Bridgeman, Bishop of Chester, went further: for ten years he consistently refused to accept the large renewal fines offered by tenants, in order to ensure that his successors would receive a more stable and reasonable rental income. Moreover, fearing that his successor might deviate from this principle out of self-interest, he petitioned the King for a formal instrument confirming his practice [Bridgeman 1888: 447–448]. Bishop Roger Manwaring of St. David's, when faced with competing lease applications from three tenants, ultimately selected the applicant who offered no entry fine but was prepared to pay a reasonable annual rent and to respect the church and improve the affairs of the diocese. In his view, a truly trustworthy lessee was not one who "comes to ensnare me with great overtures for my self," but one who "treats with me upon fair proposals for the Church" [Lloyd 1668: 275].

Furthermore, when dealing with existing leases, bishops were particularly attentive to using legal means to correct abuses. In his time as Bishop of Chichester, Richard Montagu, upon discovering that the transfer of the Manor of Selsey might involve legal defects, brought an action in the Court of Common Pleas to recover it [Bruce 1864, 7: 206]. After his translation to the Diocese of Norwich, he expressed concern in his Annual Report for 1638 about the financial difficulties facing his see, recommending that the King issue an order establishing minimum rents for diocesan manors and lands to alleviate its financial distress.[7] Bishop Piers, having completed the land survey, found himself constrained by life leases that had not yet expired. In 1638 he brought a suit in the Court of Chancery against a secular tenant, Richard Harvey, accusing him of unlawfully occupying the church estate of Compton Dando and refusing to produce the alleged three-lives lease on which he claimed title [State Papers Online 1638; State Papers Online 1640]. Overall, under the combined impetus of the King and Laud, a number of church leaders actively responded to the reform and sought to adjust the three-lives leases in the old leasing system. Even if their readiness to act owed much to their close political or religious connections with Laud, their actions nonetheless provided practical illustrations of the reform.

Resistance to Laud's reform

In practice, not all senior churchmen supported this policy. Some even displayed a distinctly negative attitude toward Laud's reform. Among them, Richard Neile, Archbishop of York, argued with Laud on many occasions, insisting that there was no need to alter the existing pattern of church land leases. Thus, even though the *Royal*

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7 "Account by Richard Montagu, or Richard Montague, Bishop of Norwich, of the State of His Diocese [for the year 1638], Submitted to Laud in accordance with the King's Instructions" [Lambeth Palace Library 1638: 619–630].

Instructions of 1629 had reflected the King's increasingly cautious stance toward life leases, he nevertheless continued to grant them [Ornsby 1872: 240; O'Day and Heal 1981: 145]. John Cosin, later Bishop of Durham, likewise maintained that three-lives leases did not prejudice the interests of the diocese [Ornsby 1872: 240]. Other cases further illustrate this resistance. The Dean of Winchester was reprimanded by his Chapter for failing to comply with the prohibition [Goodman 1928: 139–141], while Robert Wright, Bishop of Bristol, was criticized by his successor for granting a manor on a three-lives lease [Bruce 1864: 315–316, 351–352]. Meanwhile, members of the Chapter of Winchester were ordered by Laud to rectify their neglect in converting expired three-lives leases into 21-year terms [Stephens and Madge 1897: 20].

Apart from personal interests, the reluctance of these senior churchmen to respond positively to the reform also reflected the particular circumstances of their dioceses. In the case of Winchester, for example, the practice of letting church lands on a life-tenure basis had long since been established. *The Winchester Lease-books* show that, although most holdings in the diocese were still based on 21-year leases in the middle of Elizabeth's reign, highly attractive properties such as Downton had gradually begun to shift to life terms. In 1594, Bishop Thomas Cooper went further by converting the manor of North Waltham from a fixed term to a life tenure, marking a milestone in the transformation of local leasing practices. His successor, Thomas Bilson, accelerated this process, so that by the time he left office in 1616, the majority of newly concluded leases were already for lives. By the time of Laud's reform, life tenure had long been an established practice in Winchester. Other dioceses, such as Ely and Chichester, underwent similar changes [O'Day and Heal 1981: 141–145]. This tradition generated a degree of institutional inertia within the diocese, which shaped clerical attitudes and posed a substantial obstacle to Laud's reform. Some clergy depended heavily on existing arrangements and believed that grants for lives offered greater economic advantages. This persistence of custom was further illustrated by a 1640 petition from the Bishop of Bath and Wells, who asked the King to be allowed to let small parcels of land in the diocese on three-lives terms, on the grounds that such leases were not only more beneficial to diocesan revenues but also "the custom of the see" [Hamilton 1882, 17: 340].

In addition, these higher clergy also had to maintain good relations with the local gentry as part of their social and political responsibilities. Gentry families held considerable status and prestige within local society and, from the 16th century onward, came to dominate the increasingly complex county administration through their control of key offices such as sheriffs and justices of the peace. Their loyalty and cooperation were therefore crucial to the Church's functioning and influence. As Peter Clark has observed, if the authority of the Church was to be maintained and the Reformation advanced, no bishop could afford to neglect relations with the local community [Clark 1977: ch. 5 and 10]. In practice, the leasing of church lands formed one of the principal means by which bishops sustained and managed these relationships. Lancelot Andrewes provides a revealing example. Although he twice declined bishoprics offered by Elizabeth I out of reluctance to compromise church interests,[8] once Bishop of Winchester he nevertheless granted Adderbury in Oxfordshire on a life lease to Sir Arthur Wilmot, a prominent local political figure. This decision illustrates the delicate balance Andrewes sought to strike between safeguarding church interests and securing secular support [O'Day and Heal 1981: 145]. Similarly, John Whitgift, Laud's predecessor as Archbishop, implemented a policy of lease renewals which ensured a steady increase in archiepiscopal revenues while also preserving close ties between landowners and tenants [O'Day and Heal 1981: 137].

In sharp contrast, during the 1630s, Laud compelled Sir Ralph Aston to surrender the manor of Whalley Rectory, previously held on a three-lives lease, and to renew it on a 21-year term. The new arrangement not only raised the annual rent by £ 60 but also imposed an additional entry fine of £ 1600 [O'Day and Heal 1981: 140–141].[9] This intervention had enduring repercussions for Laud's relationship with the local gentry. At his trial before the Long Parliament, Sir Ralph's son accused Laud of abusing episcopal authority and the jurisdiction of the High Commission by unlawfully forcing the surrender of the Whalley Rectory lease [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 4: 147; see Hamilton 1887, 18: 536]. As Peter Heylyn observed, it was Laud's failure to secure the loyalty of the local gentry that prompted the Kentish members of Parliament to take the lead in attacking him [Heylyn 1671: 505]. Between influential local neighbours and a distant archbishop, maintaining good relations with the nearby gentry was often the more prudent course [Trevor-Roper 1988: 173].

As major leaseholders of church lands and among the chief beneficiaries of three-lives leases, the nobility and local gentry were bound to view Laud's reform with deep resentment. For many years, rents on church estates had been set at low levels, allowing leaseholders to secure returns far in excess of prevailing market rates. In Wiltshire, for example, before 1642 the total rent from forty estates amounted to £ 1193 4s. 5d., whereas according to the Long Parliament's valuation, the market value of these lands was no less than £ 8967 18s. 3d. A comparable disparity is evident

[8] Because acceptance of these bishoprics was conditional upon making concessions to the Queen at the expense of the diocese.

[9] Before the Reformation, the Whalley Rectory was administered by the monastery of Whalley in Lancashire. With the progress of the Reformation, the estate was transferred in August 1547 to the See of Canterbury, and thus came into the possession of the Archbishop of Canterbury, by the time of William Laud.

in the case of the eight properties under the Dean and Canons of Windsor, which yielded an annual rent of only £ 264 14s. 8d., far below the Parliamentary valuation of £ 1639 18s. 4d. [Hill 1963 7–8].[10] On this calculation, the church received barely 13.3% of the total value of its lands, while as much as 86.7% of the profit was absorbed by the lessees; in effect, nearly nine-tenths of the income generated by church lands accrued to them.

At the level of individual estates, such arrangements could likewise yield substantial returns. For example, under three-lives leases, the Wokingham estate was valued at £ 200, yet after deducting rent the leaseholder retained an annual net return of £ 173. The Heytesbury & Knook Rectory, similarly held for lives, was valued at £ 310 and yielded a net income of £ 270. Most striking was the case of the Westbury Rectory, which, though assessed at £ 481, produced as much as £ 411 a year in net income after rent had been deducted. [Bodington 1919: 253–272; 1920 a: 1–39; 1920 b: 105–124] When set against the average incomes of knights and gentry in England, the economic significance of such returns becomes more readily apparent. In the early 17th century, knights in England generally possessed annual incomes ranging between £ 1000 and £ 2000, while gentry typically derived between £ 500 and £ 1000. In the northern and more remote parts of England, "a gentleman of good reputacion may be content with £ 300 and £ 400 yerly" [Fisher 1936: 23–24]. It follows that the income from even a single church estate was a significant component of the local elite's economic resources. Any attempt by the Church to review leases, raise rents, or reclaim revenues was therefore likely to touch directly upon the core economic interests of these leaseholders.

More importantly, under the traditional three-lives lease, when one of the named lives died, the tenant could usually negotiate with the landowner to add a new life in return for the payment of a renewal fine, thereby preserving the integrity of the three-lives structure.[11] In practice, landowners rarely refused such requests, which allowed these leases to be indefinitely renewed and, in effect, to confer long-term control of the land upon the leaseholding family. Over time, this continuity came to resemble a quasi-hereditary form that in some cases even obscured the very notion of ownership itself: the leaseholding family was regarded as the true proprietor of the estate, while the name of the actual owner was known only to lawyers and stewards [Hoskins 1959: 91–92]. In contrast, a 21-year lease had a fixed term, and upon its expiry the lessee had to renegotiate the terms with the landowner, facing

[10] It should be noted that this statistic includes, alongside "three-lives" leases, long leases (such as 80- or 99-year terms) as well as occasional 21-year leases.

[11] Typically, the new entrant was a relative or heir of the tenant, ensuring the family's continued control over the land. Upon payment of a "renewal fine", the original lease would be converted into a new "three-lives" lease, thereby extending the lessee's right of use.

the risk of increased rents or even the loss of the property altogether. Therefore, the transition from lives to years under Laud's reform effectively undermined tenants' control of ecclesiastical land, disrupted the stability of existing arrangements, and naturally prompted resistance on the part of those affected.

Therefore, in the Diocese of Winchester, some tenants and church landlords gradually developed a more flexible practice in the operation of three-lives leases in order to address the problems of the indeterminate terms and long renewal intervals. Under a typical three-lives arrangement, the tenant paid a renewal fine and nominated a new life only when one of the named lives died. However, in the Diocese of Winchester, tenants sometimes sought renewals on surrender even when there was no evident need for change. In 1634, Lord Wilmot requested a renewal of his lease of Adderbury in order to clarify some confusion in the earlier agreement and to add a new nominee; it was renewed again only five years later, in 1639. The lease of the Downton estate held by the Herbert family was renewed at least four times between 1610 and the outbreak of the Civil War. Two of these renewals were occasioned by the death of a life, while the others were made to add new lives [O'Day and Heal 1981: 146–147]. This pattern of frequent renewals meant that the timing of renewal was not solely dependent on the lifespan of individual nominees, thereby increasing the flexibility of the arrangement. It provided ecclesiastical landlords with a more reliable stream of income, making the practical effect of the three-lives lease approximate that of the 21-year lease promoted by Laud, while at the same time ensuring that leaseholding families continued to exercise long-term control over church lands.

Some tenants actively mounted counterattacks on the legal and political front. For example, in a petition submitted to the King in July 1634, Thomas, Lord Arundel of Wardour, reported that the current Bishop of Durham alleged defects in the lease of the Carterthorne coal mines, previously granted by his predecessor to Lord Eure, and sought to have it annulled by expediting the legal process. As one of the beneficiaries of the lease, Arundel requested that the King instruct the northern circuit to postpone the hearing to allow him time to prepare a defence. His request was granted, and he finally thwarted the bishop's attempt to cancel the lease [State Papers Online 1634 a; State Papers Online 1634 b]. Conflicts of this kind between the church and secular interests foreshadowed the broader social and political upheavals that would follow later in the century.

The failure of Laud's reform

Between 1540 and 1640, England witnessed a massive transfer of wealth, most visibly through the redistribution of land. Traditional landowners, as well as the rising groups of lawyers, government officials, and merchants, acquired substantial estates by purchasing or leasing properties that had formerly belonged to the Church and the Crown. This accumulation of land enabled these gentry to achieve not only a rise in social and economic status but also a solid foundation for their political power. In most constituencies, parliamentary candidates were in practice drawn almost exclusively from gentlemen who possessed a substantial amount of landed property, and, as might be expected, they were elected largely by voters whose own political influence rested upon landed interests. Consequently, an increasing number of newly risen gentry, whose position was grounded in landholding, entered the Commons as representatives of their respective counties or boroughs [Stone 1972: 80–84; Hill 1961: 17; Hill 1940: 17].

As previously noted, during Charles I's Personal Rule, the bishops' reform of church land leases encroached upon the landed interests of the gentry. Even if not all members of the gentry were directly affected by these reforms, in an age when land was closely tied to political power, any intervention in the established order of property was enough to provoke widespread unease. Furthermore, given that Laud and the King had already advanced the *Scottish Act of Revocation* – an attempt to recover all crown and church lands and leases that had been alienated to nobles and gentry since the early 1540s – this policy direction, although not implemented in England, could not fail to arouse concern among the English nobility and gentry [James 2017: 506–525]. Thus, when Parliament was reconvened in 1640, those MPs whose social standing and political influence were grounded in landholding naturally inclined toward resisting the Church's increasing assertion of control over its landed property.

As the chief architect of the reform, Laud consequently became the primary target of attack. During the Long Parliament, he was accused of having "made a statute against letting leases into three lives." This general charge was exemplified by the case of Whalley Rectory, in which Parliament further alleged that he had been guilty of "undue taking of gifts". Although Laud insisted that his actions were legal and necessary, the abolition of the three-lives lease, together with the imposition of fixed-term leases and the demand for high entry fines, were nevertheless cited in Parliament as evidence of his abuse of office for personal gain. To his critics, such practices were held to be evidence that economic exactions and the consolidation of authority could be pursued under the guise of reform [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 4: 141–149, 192]. Similar criticisms were also directed at other senior clergy. The MP Falkland accused "some Bishops and their adherents" of encouraging the clergy "to suites, and to have brought all suites to the Councel Table", thereby prompting them to demand more than their rightful income and respect [Nalson 1682: 769]. Pym likewise publicly condemned the greed and corruption of the clergy, identifying it as one of the four principal causes of the people's suffering [Kenyon 1966: 204].

Anger gradually spread from Parliament to the broader social sphere, and public hostility toward episcopacy mounted steadily. In December 1640, the citizens of London presented the famous *Root and Branch Petition* to the House of Commons, demanding the complete abolition of episcopacy. Among the numerous accusations made in the petition was that "the government of archbishops and lord bishops, deans, and archdeacons, &c., with their courts" served the personal interests of the clergy and was the "main cause and occasion of many foul evils, pressures and grievances… unto his majesty's subjects" [Gee and Hardy 1896: 537–545]. Shortly thereafter, in January 1641, the inhabitants of Kent submitted a similar petition, claiming that the episcopacy was "very dangerous both to the Church and Commonwealth" and "the occasion of manifold grievances to the subjects, their consciences, liberties, and estates" [Shaw 1900: 21].

Under this growing public pressure, Parliament gradually adopted more radical measures. On 1 March 1641, Laud was committed to the Tower of London. In November of the same year, the *Grand Remonstrance* was passed, condemning the King's policies and the role of bishops in both church and state affairs, and calling for the expulsion of all bishops from Parliament. Building on this momentum, Parliament soon moved to curb episcopal influence in the House of Lords by introducing the *Bishops' Exclusion Bill*, which sought to deprive them of their right to sit and vote in that House. The bill was passed in early 1642, and the King was forced to give his assent, thereby ending the bishops' presence in the House of Lords. Shortly thereafter, Parliament moved to strip the bishops of control over church lands through a series of ordinances. In March 1643, fourteen bishops, denounced as "notorious delinquents", were formally deprived of their ecclesiastical estates through sequestration [Kenyon 1966: 228–230; Shaw 1900: 204–205; Gentles 1980: 573–596]. In fact, expelling bishops from the House of Lords and sequestering their estates were essentially complementary political measures: land was not only the economic basis of episcopal power, but also a crucial foundation of the political authority they exercised as Lords Spiritual. Once their estates were seized, they lost both their material base as ecclesiastical landholders and, in due course, their effective place in Parliament.

The loss of episcopal power symbolized the decline of ecclesiastical authority and at the same time undermined one of the principal pillars of royal power. Expelling bishops from the House of Lords meant that the King lost a crucial ally in Parliament, and sequestering their estates deprived the Crown of one of its financial channels. In 17th-century England, apart from taxation and grants approved by Parliament, the clergy also provided financial support to the King through subsidies or benevolences voted in Convocation. Such financial cooperation between the bishops and the Crown could, on occasion, enable the King to secure essential resources even in the absence of parliamentary funding. For example, in 1640, when the Short Parliament refused to provide Charles I with funds, the Convocation nevertheless resolved to grant him six subsidies, payable over six years, amounting to as much as £ 120 000 [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 3: 284–286].[12] For this reason, once the bishops' seats and estates were stripped away, a crucial pillar of royal power was fatally weakened. Although the King had already left London, this institutional blow signified the collapse of the structural foundations upon which the monarchy had rested, further driving him toward armed confrontation with Parliament.

Laud's reform of church land leases was almost doomed to failure. First, he seriously underestimated the determination of secular tenants to defend their vested interests. The long-standing three-lives leases had enabled leaseholding families to hold church estates in a quasi-hereditary manner and reap over 80% of the profits. This deep economic reliance on the ecclesiastical estate, together with the social standing and political influence it conferred, made it impossible for them to relinquish their advantages in landholding with ease. Legal or administrative measures alone were therefore unlikely to bring about meaningful reform. Second, Laud placed his hopes for reform entirely on the support of royal authority and a handful of ecclesiastical allies, and his neglect of the political weight of his opponents prevented him from cultivating relations with the local gentry. Yet under Charles I's personal rule, the increasingly powerful gentry had already grown resentful of the Crown and the Church over arbitrary policies. Therefore, they seized upon Parliament in 1640 as a legitimate arena to express their protest and unite in action. Laud, having actively participated in the previous royal rule, became the primary target of Parliament's efforts to rectify the King's abuses, causing the reforms to lose their political footing.

Furthermore, the reform itself suffered from significant shortcomings, particularly a lack of flexibility and an excessive rigidity in its methods. Laud failed to take adequate account of the diverse leasing practices that had developed over time across different dioceses, implementing the reform almost simultaneously throughout England and leaving no scope for local adaptation or pilot schemes, a uniform approach that was particularly likely to provoke resentment. In the case of three-lives leases that were still valid, some bishops, eager to recover lands, did not wait for the leases to expire naturally but instead initiated lawsuits, attempting to reclaim property in advance on the grounds of technical flaws or defective title. This practice could easily be perceived by lessees as a violation of the equitable expectations

[12] The "subsidy" required parliamentary approval, whereas the "benevolence" did not. Whether the clerical subsidy granted by the Convocation in 1640 had received parliamentary approval was a matter of dispute. Laud maintained that it had been approved, but Parliament denied this claim, which became another charge brought against him.

attached to the lease and inevitably exacerbated their distrust and resistance to the reform.

Finally, the gentry, who commanded substantial economic resources, gained political skills and a growing sensitivity through their involvement in local governance. Supported by the burgeoning world of print, they began to wrest discursive authority in the public sphere from traditional elites, and their demand for a greater voice in affairs of state thus emerged as one of the defining trends of 17th-century English history. Laud's leasehold reform, however, sought to strengthen the authority of the Crown by bolstering the power of the Church and the episcopacy, which ran counter to the gentry's resistance to abuses of royal prerogative and their pursuit of parliamentary ascendancy. In this sense, the failure of his reform may, to some extent, be regarded as historically inevitable.

Conclusion

After Henry VIII's Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries, substantial lands remained in the hands of the secular clergy. From the later 16th century onward, however, these lands were persistently exposed to encroachments from both the Crown and lay elites. Although Elizabeth I sought to curb the most damaging forms of alienation by prohibiting excessively long leases and by establishing the three-lives lease and the twenty-one-year lease as the principal forms of ecclesiastical tenure, this settlement itself revealed new structural weaknesses by the late 16th and early 17th centuries: three-lives leases in particular contributed to a sustained decline in church revenues, as the greater share of profits accrued to secular leaseholders in this period. It was in response to this long-term erosion of ecclesiastical interests, and in an effort to reinforce the Church's role as a pillar of royal authority, that Laud, with the support of Charles I, advanced a programme of leasehold reform aimed at replacing life leases with leases for years, in the hope that the latter might offer a more effective means of restoring ecclesiastical income.

Yet, although Laud's reform promised in principle to increase ecclesiastical revenues, its implementation in practice proved far more complex than anticipated. Senior clergy, when leasing out their estates, had to balance personal and familial interests, long-established leasing arrangements, and the need to maintain good relations with the local gentry. This meant that leasing practices already varied considerably across different regions, rendering Laud's uniform model structurally ill-suited to local realities. More importantly, the reform generated significant resentment among lay tenants whose economic interests and political influence depended on their control of church lands. Such grievances helped to draw sections of the landed elite into parliamentary opposition in 1640, where the higher clergy were increasingly portrayed as corrupt and self-serving. As Christopher Hill observes, the conflict between Laud and Sir Ralph Aston had all but predetermined that this family, long regarded as important to the Church, would ultimately align itself with the parliamentary cause [Hill 1956: 329].

In historical terms, the redistribution of land and wealth has often entailed shifts in established power structures, and attempts to recalibrate such balances were bound to provoke resistance from vested interests, frequently serving as a catalyst for wider political conflict. Although Laud's lease reform did, in the short term, increase the incomes of some clergy and bring tangible economic gains to the Church, in the longer term it disrupted existing arrangements between ecclesiastical landlords and secular elites. Over time, disputes rooted in economic interests were increasingly reframed as political attacks on the episcopal system itself, contributing to the erosion of its authority. These developments, in turn, formed part of the broader process that deepened the King's political isolation in London and propelled the kingdom further along the trajectory toward civil war.

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