Survival as a parish priest in seventeenth-century Dorset

Background
This study investigates how the clergy of Dorset survived during the seventeenth century, a period of major social, political and religious change. The landscape of Dorset, on the south coast of England, comprises areas of chalk downs, clay vales, coastal ridges and heathland (Fig. 1). Following the Leicester tradition, a central focus is on the impact of the landscape on clergymen’s survival strategies, in terms both of agricultural income from glebe and tithes, and of topographical location.

Methodology
Data on individuals’ family backgrounds, education, benefices, parochial and non-parochial activities, tax payments, wills and inventories have been gathered for around 1,500 clergy known to have been active in the 289 parochial livings of Dorset from 1600 to 1700. Together with parish-level data on topography, geology, agriculture, valuations of livings and churchwardens’ accounts and presentments, these are being analysed to examine economic, geographical, social, political and religious opportunities and risks to clergymen’s survival.

Preliminary Findings
In the poorest parishes, incumbents might increase their incomes by serving more than one cure, while those in richer livings were more able to supplement their income with preferments to higher Church appointments. Many incumbents were ousted during the civil wars and Interregnum, especially in West and South Dorset (Fig. 2), perhaps because of their proximity to local garrisons, but military and overseas postings offered alternative avenues for employment.

Evidence from inventories indicates that incumbents of downland parishes (Fig. 3) tended to have influential patrons or wealthy family, enabling them to invest in property and other activities. A dearth of glebe land meant that most did not engage directly in farming.

The survival of a larger number of wills and inventories from the Blackmore Vale (Fig. 4) suggests that many incumbents in this region were sufficiently wealthy to have property to bequeath. Self-sufficiency was perhaps easier in this region, given the enclosed nature of the glebe land.

Incumbents of heathland parishes (Fig. 5) derived little income from the land, and either lived in relative poverty, or turned to alternative ways of earning a living, such as writing poetry.

Trixie Gadd, Centre for English Local History
Email: tmg11@le.ac.uk