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*The Price of Crown Land at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century*¹

By R. B. OUTHWAITE

DID the periodic sale by the Crown in the sixteenth century of large quantities of ex-monastic and other landed property depress the market price of land? Attempts to answer this question must start from two seemingly contradictory positions. On the one hand the simple demand and supply functions derived from our elementary economics, coupled and strengthened with some contemporary observations, would suggest that attempts to dispose of large quantities of property would depress the prices such sales might be expected to fetch. George Goring, the son of a former Receiver of the Court of Wards, wrote in such terms to Sir Robert Cecil in 1594. "All my father's goods here", he stated, "are seized to Her Majesty's use, and his lands are now by a jury to be enquired of; his debt is great, and somewhat is gone awry, else could it not be so. My humble suit is, that it may please you to be a means unto my Lord Treasurer that I may be the seller of my father's lands and goods to say Her Majesty. If I be not, I shall be undone, for I think when there is a commission to sell, they will sell for half their value."² The downward pressure upon prices would be intensified, thought some contemporaries, if the sales had to be made quickly. Sir John Fortescue, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and an experienced sale commissioner, dwelt upon this point when refusing Robert Cecil's private offer of a house at Chelsea. He could not provide money, he explained, "otherwise than by the sale of Hendon, which is not to be done upon a sudden without great loss".³ The contrary position is that occupied by Prof. H. J. Habakkuk, to whom we owe so much for deepening our knowledge of the land market in this period. He has argued not only that there was in the long-run—in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a whole—a marked stability in the rate of return from land purchase,⁴ but also that in short-run periods—in particular decades of intensive royal selling such as the 1540's and the 1590's—the Crown was able to dispose of very considerable amounts of property without experiencing any fall in sale prices.⁵ This paper is an attempt to relate what actually happened in one of these periods of intensive selling, the late 1590's and early 1600's. More specifically, the sales examined are those which began with the commissions to sell Crown lands appointed on 18 February 1599 and 20 May 1601,⁶ sales which realized over £371,000, a sum which comprised well over a third of the total proceeds of royal

¹ My thanks are due to Profs. Robert Ashton and Ralph Davis for the encouragement and criticism they gave to an earlier draft of this paper. They are in no way responsible for any errors that have found their way into this present, much amended version.

² Hist. MSS. Comm., Salisbury MSS. iv, 508. ³ Ibid. viii, 387.

⁴ 'The Long-Term Rate of Interest and the Price of Land in the Seventeenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, v (1952), 26–45.

⁵ 'The Market for Monastic Property, 1539–1603', *ibid.* x (1957–8), 362–80. (References to Habakkuk hereafter refer to this work.)

⁶ These commissions are enrolled on the Patent Rolls, C. 66/1497 and 1554. Despite a search through many Chancery Docquet Books it has proved impossible to discover how and when these commissions were actually terminated. The last important batch of ratings in each sale occurred, however, on 14 Dec. 1599 and 13 Feb. 1602, which makes the effective length of each sale ten and nine months respectively.

land sales in the Elizabethan period. This was by far the most intensive period of royal selling in the second half of the sixteenth century, and thus it raises in an acute form the problem of whether or not these voluminous and urgent sales created anything like a buyers' market for property. A detailed examination of the prices obtained in these two sales, however, must be prefaced by a few comments on how the purchase price of land was reckoned in this period.

I

The purchase price of any piece of royal landed property was calculated by multiplying its net annual value, as contained in the Particular rendered by the auditors of the land revenue office, with a factor representing a number of years' purchase. Professor Habakkuk has clearly shown that this practice conforms in principle with that used in private transactions and that in the latter the normal market rate throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries appears to have been 20 years' purchase of the clear improved value.¹ Those scholars, such as Savine, Fisher, Youings, and Habakkuk, who have examined the early Tudor sales of monastic property, are agreed that in the 1540's the Particulars represented an approximately exact valuation of the properties concerned and that these properties were sold generally at 20 years' purchase.² The conclusion would, therefore, appear to be inescapable: namely, that down to the end of the 1540's the Crown received generally the full, or normal, market price for all property which was alienated by outright sale. Although Prof. Habakkuk was not the first to draw attention to the gradual increase in the general level of the rates applied in the sales of royal property from the 1550's onward, he was the first to subject this phenomenon to rigorous scrutiny. In so doing, he modified the view put forward by Dr Youings, namely, that the increase in the number of years' purchase "may have been due to a generally increased demand or more particularly to the appearance among the purchasers of a number of merchants",³ and showed that the most likely explanation is that "Since the Commissioners lacked fresh estimates of the true annual value, they had [in a time of inflation] to adjust the number of years' purchase. The method they appear to have finally settled on was to make an approximate estimate of the extent to which annual value had risen above current income, and then multiply the current income by a number of years' purchase sufficiently high to take account of the disparity, i.e. to ensure that the true annual value yielded five per cent on the purchase price."⁴ Prof. Habakkuk's reasoning is borne out by the answers given by the auditors, who drew up the Particulars, to the questionnaire drawn up by the commissioners of the 1601 sale.⁵ Frequently to be found on a Particular is the auditor's statement that he did not know "of what value the said lands are of

¹ Habakkuk, *op. cit.* p. 363.

² A. Savine, *English Monasteries on the Eve of the Dissolution* (Oxford, 1909), p. 72; H. A. L. Fisher, *The History of England from the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of Henry VIII* (1919), p. 497; Joyce A. Youings, 'The Terms of the Disposal of the Devon Monastic Lands, 1536-58', *English Historical Review*, LXIX (1954), 20, 57-8; Habakkuk, *op. cit.* pp. 362-3.

³ Youings, *op. cit.* p. 31. ⁴ Habakkuk, *op. cit.* p. 366.

⁵ The commissioners' instructions to the auditors, in which the questionnaire is incorporated, have not been found. Hence the question has to be inferred from the answers found inscribed on the Particulars themselves.

over and above her Majesties rent".¹ Obviously, therefore, the commissioners' question—and consequently their method of rating—must have been framed on the lines suggested by Prof. Habakkuk. That these adjustments were made so as to try to correspond with the norm of 20 years' purchase of the rack-rent is also attested by the fact that fixed rents were almost always sold so as to yield to the purchaser an income of 5 per cent.

As all this suggests, the problem facing the commissioners in the late sixteenth century was to determine to what extent the net annual value, which usually corresponded with the rent at which the property was being leased, lagged behind the market value. The lag was considerable in the case of nearly all this property, for the bulk of it was monastic land which had been recurrently leased at the "old", i.e. pre-1540, rent.² Apart from the fact that we should not expect the inflation of the real (or market) values of this ex-monastic property to have proceeded uniformly, complications were introduced with the sale of land which had come more recently into the Crown's possession, for in some of these cases the annual rent may have represented an improved rent, and in other cases—some ecclesiastical property for example—the current rents may have been even more unreal than those on monastic property. We should expect to find, therefore, some degree of variation above and below the standard rates of purchase applied in each of these sales. Bearing these things in mind, let us proceed to an examination of the general level of ratings in the last two Elizabethan land sales.

II

Prof. Habakkuk's view that the land sales of the 1590's did not precipitate a fall in price appears to be based on a sample of purchases, taken from the 'Books of Particulars for Land Sales',³ which revealed that "by the 1590s the most common rating was 40 years' purchase" and that "the range of ratings generally employed by the Commissioners . . . did not often rise above 42 years' purchase or fall below 38."⁴ A fuller and more convenient account of the outcome of the 1599 and 1601 sales, however, can be found in a series of schedules, drawn up in 1609 at the request of Sir Julius Caesar, which list the amount of property sold, and the rates at which such property was assessed, in all the major Elizabethan land sales. It is clear that these schedules are based on those 'Books of Particulars' used by Prof. Habakkuk. From these books the Jacobean compilers of the schedules

¹ P.R.O. L.R. 2, 73, no foliation.

² For examples of the static nature of the Crown's rent on monastic properties see the author's unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 'Studies in Elizabethan Government Finance' (Nottingham, 1964), pp. 253–6.

³ P.R.O. L.R. 2, 72–3. The original commissions had appointed a person to keep the "booke of rates and caste upp the same". In 1599 John Conyers, Auditor of the Imprests, was appointed to perform this task, while in 1601 the choice fell on Francis Neale. Prof. Habakkuk's 'Books of Particulars' are Conyer's and Neale's 'booke of rates'. It must be pointed out that these books contain some Particulars appertaining to properties which were rated but not subsequently sold. Approximately 10 per cent of those entries relating to the land sale of 1589, for example, can be fitted into this "fictitious" category. This can be seen by comparing each entry in the appropriate Book of Rates (L.R. 2, 70–1) with the items in the collector's account (P.R.O. A.O. 1, 393/2). The absence of similar collectors' accounts for the 1599 and 1601 sales makes the checking of entries for these sales a far too laborious process. The most likely explanation of the fictitious entries is that they represent cases where agreement was reached at the time of the rating, and therefore an entry was made in the Book of Rates, but where for some reason the transaction subsequently fell through.

⁴ Habakkuk, *op. cit.* pp. 366, 375. The sample appears to be "65 grants taken at random from those made in 1599".

separated and listed the different rates of purchase applied in the sale, and totalled the annual values alienated and sale proceeds at these different rates. The schedules supply, therefore, a complete summary of the commissioners' overall performances.¹ The schedule for the 1599 sale is reproduced as Table 1.

Table 1

Manors, lands, tenements, tithes, and other hereditaments sold in fee simple

Years' purchase	Annual value			Sale price		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
35	24	8	8	855	3	4
36	58	1	8	2,085	3	4
37	300	2	11	11,105	7	11
38	500	1	3½	19,002	8	3½
39	181	11	10½	7,082	3	1½
40	2,956	3	10½	118,247	15	10
41	119	4	0	4,887	4	0
42	267	1	9	11,217	13	6
43	131	4	2½	5,642	0	11½
44	130	8	4	5,738	6	8
45	435	18	1½	19,616	3	7½
46	132	14	10½	6,106	4	3
47	52	9	8	2,466	14	4
48	86	8	11½	4,148	8	0
49	37	8	0½	1,932	15	0½
50	325	10	6¾	16,276	8	1½
51	8	15	4	447	2	0
52	30	11	1½	1,587	18	4
54	20	10	0	1,107	0	0
55	57	11	4	3,166	3	4
60	72	0	8	4,322	0	0
65	4	0	0	260	0	0
70	35	7	7½	2,476	13	9

Cottages, mills, rents reserved, and such like sold in fee simple

30	37	14	8	1,132	0	0
34	34	19	4	1,188	17	4

Remainders sold in fee simple

10	37	14	1	377	0	10
13	12	0	0	156	0	0
15	36	2	4	541	15	0
16	62	0	0	992	0	0
20	11	9	8	229	13	4

Quillets of land sold in fee simple

64	10	0		32	0	0
80	16	8		66	13	4
100	10	0		50	0	0
"A some in grosse"	6	12	8	370	0	0

Manors, messuages, lands, tenements, and other hereditaments sold in fee farm

28	28	6	8	793	6	8
30	438	6	8	13,150	0	0
31	2	13	4	82	13	4
40	12	6	0	492	0	0

¹ In fact, a more than complete summary, because of the existence of the fictitious items in the Books of Particulars, on which the schedules are based. Although this mars the exactness of the schedules, their usefulness outweighs this comparatively minor flaw.

<i>Years' purchase</i>	<i>Advowsons</i>			<i>Sale price</i>		
	<i>Annual value</i>					
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
5	6	0	0	30	0	0
6	30	13	9½	184	2	7½
7	31	10	0	220	10	0
8	48	13	8	389	9	4
9	124	4	6¼	1,118	0	8¼
10	126	1	10	1,260	18	4
12	66	6	7	795	19	0

If we omit the sale of advowsons and ignore the fee farm sales, both of which were comparatively unimportant,¹ the total annual value of all property sold in fee simple was £6,280 4s. 11½d.² The calculations below (Table 2) express the annual values sold in various ranges of ratings as percentages of this total annual value.

<i>Years' purchase</i>	<i>Annual value</i>			<i>% of total annual value</i>
	£	s.	d.	
10-20	159	6	1	2.5
30-34	72	14	0	1.1
35-39	1,064	6	4¾	16.9
(38-42)	(4,024)	2	9¼	(64.1)
40	2,956	3	10¼	47.1
41-45	1,083	16	5	17.2
46-50	634	12	1½	10.1
51-60	189	8	5½	3.0
over 60	119	17	7½	1.9

Prof. Habakkuk's judgments on the general level of the rates, therefore, appear to be fairly sound, as far as this sale of 1599 is concerned.³ More land was sold at 40 years' purchase than at any other single rate. In fact, nearly one-half (47.1 per cent) of this property went at that one rate, while nearly two-thirds of it (64.1 per cent) fetched between 38 and 42 years' purchase. What is perhaps more doubtful is whether these conclusions can in themselves support the conclusion about the absence of a fall in price, for both Prof. Habakkuk's sample and these tables neglect what is perhaps the most relevant consideration—the chronology of the 1599 sale. If the individual transactions which comprise this sale are viewed chronologically, ranged according to the days on which the ratings were made,⁴ an interesting and rather different fact emerges. It is noticeable that some time around the end of June the general level of the ratings falls. This becomes clear if the entries in the Book of Rates relating to sales in fee simple are divided into two categories: those made before the end of June and those made from the beginning of July (see Table 3). Whereas before the end of June

¹ This is also justified by the fact that the discussion of rates of purchase in Habakkuk is concerned mainly with the rates applied to sales in fee simple.

² This differs from the "official" total, i.e. that returned by the compiler of the schedule, which was £6,208 4s. 3½d.

³ In the early 1590's, however, very little land was sold in the ranges mentioned by Prof. Habakkuk. In the sale of 1589-90 only 4 per cent of the total annual value alienated in fee simple went at 40 years' purchase; over three-quarters (76.1 per cent) went at rates between 30 and 38 years' purchase. See Outhwaite, *op. cit.* pp. 259-61.

⁴ This means rearranging the transactions in the Book of Rates, for there the items are not entered in strict chronological order.

no less than 88 per cent of the ratings were made at 41 years' purchase or more, from the beginning of July only 16 per cent fall into this category. Prof. Habakkuk's view that 40 years' purchase was the most common rating appears now to be true only of the later phase of the sale: in the later months nearly 58 per cent of all the ratings were made at this level, but in the earlier months only 8 per cent.

Table 3

<i>Number of ratings March to June, and (% of total no. of ratings in this period)</i>	<i>Years' purchase</i>	<i>Number of ratings July to December, and (% of total no. of ratings in this period)</i>
4 (2.4)	10-30	14 (3.9)
0} (1.2)	31-35	3} (22.0)
2}	36-39	77}
13 (7.9)	40	210 (57.9)
41} (44.8)	41-45	44} (14.0)
33}	46-49	7}
72 (43.6)	50-100	8 (2.2)
Total 165		363

At the bottom end of the price scale there was rough comparability in the 10-30 years' purchase range, which was the range applied by the commissioners to the sale of "remainders" or "reversions",¹ but a marked dissimilarity in the 31-39 years' purchase bracket; hardly anything was sold at these rates before July (1 per cent), but over a fifth (22 per cent) of all the ratings made from July onwards fall into this price range. There would seem to be a *prima facie* case for a marked fall in the level of the ratings in the course of the 1599 sale.

The Jacobean schedule for the sale of 1601 does not, as in the previous sale, differentiate between lands sold in fee simple and lands sold in fee farm. For the sake of comparability we must first remove the fee farm sales.² The corrected schedule (of lands sold in fee simple, excluding advowsons) comprises Table 4. Excluding advowsons, as in the 1599 sale, the total annual value of all property sold in fee simple was £2,703 19s. 2½d. and in Table 5 the annual values sold in various ranges of ratings are once again expressed as a percentage of this total annual value alienated.

Table 4

<i>Years' purchase</i>	<i>Annual value</i>			<i>Sale price</i>		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
5	30	12	9	153	3	9
14	4	0	0	56	0	0
15	43	15	2	656	7	6
16	13	0	4	208	5	4
20	2	13	4	53	6	8
30	227	19	0	6,838	10	0
33	32	13	2½	1,077	16	6½
35	451	2	10½	15,829	17	8½
36	322	13	3½	11,616	10	5
37	288	6	1	10,667	5	1
38	471	16	5	17,929	3	10
39	67	14	9½	2,631	18	1½

¹ The sale of land which had previously been granted in fee taile—i.e. granted to a person and his legitimate male heirs in perpetuity—and which would revert to the Crown with the failure of the lawful male line.

² This is done by referring to the individual entries of fee farm sales in the Book of Rates.

<i>Years' purchase</i>	<i>Annual value</i>			<i>Sale price</i>		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
40	638	5	11¼	29,531	17	6
41	68	16	10½	2,822	11	10
42	18	11	5	779	19	6
45	20	14	9	933	17	6
60	1	2	11¼	71	16	3

If Table 5 is compared with the similar one for the previous sale (Table 2), several interesting differences emerge. In the 1599 sale, for example, 32 per cent of the total annual value alienated was rated at 41 or more years' purchase; in 1601 the comparable figure was 4 per cent. The amount rated at 40 years' purchase, moreover, dropped from 47 per cent in 1599 to 23 per cent in 1601. Finally,

Table 5

<i>Years' purchase</i>	<i>Annual value</i>			<i>% of total annual value</i>
	£	s.	d.	
5-20	94	1	7	3.5
30-33	260	12	2¾	9.6
35-39	1,601	13	6	59.2
40	638	5	11¼	23.6
41-45	108	3	0½	4.0
60	1	2	11¼	0.04

whereas in the previous sale 17 per cent was rated at 35 to 39 years' purchase, this range now encompassed 59 per cent of the total. There can be little doubt that the general level of the ratings dropped between the sale of 1599 and that of 1601.

Table 6

<i>Number of ratings 1601 sale and (% of total)</i>	<i>Years' purchase</i>	<i>Number of ratings July-December 1599 and (% of total)</i>
12 (9.6)	5-30	14 (3.9)
10 } (51.2)	31-35	3 } (22.0)
54 } (29.6)	36-39	77 } (57.9)
37 (29.6)	40	210 (57.9)
10 } (8.0)	41-45	44 } (14.0)
0 } (1.6)	46-49	7 } (2.2)
2 (1.6)	50-100	8 (2.2)
Total 125		363

This conclusion holds true even if we make a different type of calculation—the number of fee simple ratings made at particular rates—and confine comparisons only to the later phase, the post-June phase, of the 1599 sale, when, as we have seen, the ratings were appreciably lower than they were earlier in the year. Table 6 reveals that even less was rated at 41 years' purchase or above in 1601 (9.6 per cent) than in the post-June 1599 period (16.2 per cent). The proportion of ratings at 40 years' purchase fell by nearly a half. Finally, three-fifths of the ratings were concluded at less than 39 years' purchase in comparison with one-quarter in the earlier period. Thus the downward movement which set in during the 1599 sale appears to have continued into that of 1601.

III

How do we explain this progressive fall in the ratings? It is easier to say what did not cause it than what did. The difference in the levels before and after the end of

June 1599 represents a fall in price that was real rather than illusory. The difference was not due, for example, to the prevalence in each period of different types of sale. The downward shift was not the result of the earlier period being devoted primarily to fee simple sales and the later to fee farm sales, since Table 3 deliberately excludes the latter, which normally went at lower rates of purchase because such sales entailed the continuation of payment to the Crown of the current rent. Nor was the downward shift due to these two periods being dominated by sales of different types of property. In other words, the high ratings of the pre-July period are not due to the fact that the Crown sold only, or mainly, those types of property such as manors with a low proportion of fixed rents and large leasehold farms, which might be expected to bring in high rates, while the later period was dominated by the sale of, for example, rectories and tithes, which normally fetched lower rates. This fall can be found in all types or classes of property. To take just one example, Table 7 lists all those cases where fee simple sales of "spiritualities"—rectories, tithes, and portions of tithes—were rated apart from

Table 7

<i>Years' purchase</i>	<i>April-June 1599</i>	<i>July-December 1599</i>	<i>1601</i>
41 and above	27*	4†	3‡
40	4	30	0
39 and below	2	46	19§

* In fact the lowest rating here was 43 years' purchase.

† The highest rating here was 45 years' purchase.

‡ All three went at 41 years' purchase.

§ In fact all but one of these went at 38 years' purchase or less.

other classes of property; the marked downward drift is still evident.¹ Nor does it seem to be the case that the earlier phase was dominated by sales of monastic property and the later phase by sales of more recent, and therefore possibly "improved", acquisitions; unimproved monastic property was rated in both periods, for instance, but at markedly dissimilar rates. Similarly the length of the reversionary interest does not appear to have exercised any influence on this falling trend; properties were sold to leaseholders in both periods, for example, but the rates were anything from 10 to 50 per cent higher in the early period than in the later.² There are no obvious dissimilarities in the geographical location of properties sold in these two phases. All in all, there are no apparent differences in the general degree of attractiveness of the properties in the two periods—however one defines attractiveness. When one attempts to explain the even lower ratings of the 1601 sale, many of the same possible explanations have to be dis-

¹ The reason for including tithes with rectories is that they were normally rated according to the same criteria: in the sale of 1589-90, for example, out of 25 instances where tithes were separately rated, 16 went at 30 years' purchase, and out of 53 separate ratings of rectories, 42 went at that rate. See Outhwaite, *op. cit.* pp. 263-4.

² This can be seen from the ratings on "spiritualities" sold to leaseholders in 1599. The ratings on seven such sales from April to June were 45, 50, 60, 55, 44, 45, and 44 years' purchase; on eight such sales from July to Dec., they were 40, 40, 30, 40, 40, 40, 40, and 39. The ratings for this sale are to be found in two volumes, L.R. 2, 72 and 73. In the latter, however, they occupy fos. 1-90 at the beginning of the volume and fos. 1-48 towards the end of the volume. Separating these two collections are the entries relating to the 1601 sale (no foliation). 73A thus refers to the first collection of entries relating to the 1599 sale, 73B to the second. The information above is drawn from L.R. 2, 72/14b, 18b, 62b, 81, 135b, 154b, 264b, and L.R. 2, 72/149b, 208, 283, 303b, 304b, 308, 325; 73A/6.

missed. Once again it is impossible to explain the fall in terms of differences in types of sale, types of property, or geographical location. Nor can the fall be explained in terms of deflation in the general price level which might have reacted on land values; all the evidence suggests that prices were higher in 1601 than they were in 1599.¹ Nor is it easy to believe that there was any marked deterioration in the quality of lands coming forward to be rated, either in the course of one sale or from one sale to the next. The view that the most attractive lands went first, the less attractive later, is difficult to hold: first, because the annual value alienated in each sale constituted only a very small percentage of the total annual value of the Crown's landed assets; and secondly, because it is arguable to some extent that the Crown's general policy *vis-à-vis* the alienation of its property was to try to sell first the inferior properties and to retain the superior ones. In case doubts still remain on this critical issue, however, we might examine several cases of properties which by chance were rated twice in the course of these sales. The manor of Great Glen, Leicestershire, was one such property. An entry in the Book of Rates shows that it was first rated on 7 June 1599 for the tenant at 52 years' purchase.² It must be remembered that an entry into the Book of Rates signifies an agreement; where purchasers and commissioners disagreed at the time of the rating no entry was made. For some reason, however, possibly subsequent reflection over the price,³ the deal was abandoned. Four months later, on 18 October, the same manor, the property absolutely unchanged, was rated for Sir John Grey (the tenant) at 40 years' purchase.⁴ In four months, therefore, the price of this manor fell by 23 per cent. On 14 June 1599 the rectory and grange of Birdsall, Yorkshire, was rated for Roger Thorpe, one of the leaseholders, at 55 years' purchase.⁵ Once again the contract appears to have fallen through—fortunately for Thorpe, for two years later, in June 1601, he bought the same property at 41 years' purchase.⁶ In two years, therefore, its price dropped by 25 per cent. Certain lands called "Oldborowe" lands, in Kent, were rated at 40 years' purchase for Michael Stanhope in November 1599, but this sale also was never completed.⁷ Two years later the same lands went at 36 years' purchase.⁸ These falls in the ratings applied to the same properties make it difficult to believe that there was a gradual trend towards inferiority, and tend to support the conclusion that the general decline in the ratings represented a fall in price that was real rather than illusory. Why, then, was there this falling trend in the prices of Crown property between 1599 and 1601?

The explanation needs to be cast in two parts. First it is necessary to explain why the general level of prices fell in the course of the 1599 sale, and, secondly,

¹ See E. H. Phelps Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables Compared with Builders' Wage-Rates', *Economica*, n.s. xxiii (1956), 312; W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest Fluctuations and English Economic History, 1480-1619', *Agricultural History Review*, xii (1964), 46.

² L.R. 2, 72/70b.

³ Though there is no evidence to suggest this really was the reason in this case; there could be other reasons for the abandonment of such contracts—the Crown's subsequent refusal to part with the property, the purchaser's inability to raise the necessary cash, etc.

⁴ L.R. 2, 72/295. ⁵ *Ibid.* 72/81.

⁶ *Ibid.* 73, no folio. The property was actually rated for William Bell, but the purchase money was paid into the Exchequer by Roger Thorpe.

⁷ *Ibid.* 73B/37. "Oldborowe" may possibly be Oldbury. I owe this suggestion to the kindness of Dr A. M. Everitt.

⁸ *Ibid.* 73, no folio.

why the general level was lower in 1601 than in 1599. Although there are explanations common to both falls, this two-part explanation is necessary because the falling trend in the sale of 1599 is too abrupt, too discontinuous, to explain solely in terms of gradual, piecemeal adjustments of price to an inadequate market demand, which might be said to be one such common element. The downward revision of prices which occurred at the end of June 1599 was so sudden and steep as to suggest a conscious and radical change of policy on the part of the Crown and its sale commissioners.

At the beginning of the 1599 sale the commissioners were provided by the Crown with an interesting list of instructions, in which there were some items stipulating the rates at which they were to aim in selling various classes of property. They were told, for example, that "No mannor, landes, or tenementes, in possession or reversion, uppon estate for yeeres, lief or lyves, to be sould under 60 yeeres purchase, yf the same by industry may be so sould: otherwise to be sould for so many yeeres purchase as by industry maie be obtained." Similarly, no rectories or parsonages, tithes or portions of tithes were to be sold in fee simple for less than 50 years' purchase; and no manors, lands, tenements, or hereditaments were to be granted in fee farm for less than 40 years' purchase. To each of these instructions was added the proviso "otherwise to be sould for so many yeeres purchase as by industry maie be obtained".¹ The reason for the generally high level of the ratings in the first part of the 1599 sale is that down to the end of June the commissioners strove to keep to the letter of their instructions; they wrestled with purchasers of tithes and rectories to get 50 years' purchase or thereabouts, and with purchasers of manors, lands, and tenements to get as near to 60 years' purchase as they could. At the end of that month, however, there appears to have been a deliberate change in their pricing policy; they abandoned the attempt to wring high rates from purchasers and became prepared to accept in the great majority of cases a flat rate of 40 years' purchase.² In other words, the commissioners lowered their intentions, if not their actual performance,³ by 20 per cent in the case of spiritualities and 33 per cent for most other properties.

The most obvious explanation of this occurrence is that the earlier rates were too high, but this begs the question of what in these circumstances is meant by the

¹ These instructions to the commissioners, dated 9 March 1599, are printed in J. Payne Collier (ed.), *The Egerton Papers* (Camden Soc. Publications, 1840), p. 285. They also laid down rather stringent regulations concerning the tenures to be granted. Briefly, socage tenure was to be granted for all sales of manors, lands, tenements, and hereditaments of the net annual value of £10 and under; all manors, lands, etc., of a value greater than £10 and less than £20 were to be held by knight service of one of the Queen's honours; while all manors, lands, etc. of the value of £20 and above were to be held *in capite*. These conditions were much more severe than those of the previous sale by commission (1589-90): see Outhwaite, *op. cit.* pp. 231-3.

² The view that this was a deliberate change of policy is strengthened by the fact that there were other policy changes in this sale. The rather severe and burdensome tenurial conditions of the original instructions, for example, were enormously lightened by amendments made on 19 June 1599. These allowed the commissioners to grant socage tenures for the sale of all manors under £20, all lands and tenements under the value of £40, and all rectories and tithes under £50. Knight service by one of the Queen's honours was allowed for manors valued at £20-30; lands and tenements of £40-60, and tithes and rectories of £50-70. Tenures *in capite* were now reserved for all manors of a value of £30-40, all lands and tenements of a value of £60 and above, and all rectories and tithes of £70 and above. The commissioners were also ordered initially that no manor with a net annual value greater than £30 was to be sold, but it is clear that by June this ceiling had been raised to £40. See Collier, *op. cit.* p. 302.

³ Because the level of rates achieved fell short of those specified in the instructions.

term "too high". Does it mean, for example, that the rates were set above the market level? If so, it is hard to see why so many people should have been prepared to buy royal properties at prices above market levels, when, as Prof. Habakkuk has stated, there was plenty of private property available at the customary, lower market price.¹ If we accept the impossibility of large quantities of land being sold above the market price, and accept, therefore, that the sales in the earlier months of 1599 were probably made at the market price, then the fall in the ratings must represent a fall below the customary market price. One reason why this should have occurred was that the early guiding ratings were "too high" in another sense, in that although the early rates were equatable with normal market rates, not sufficient people were prepared to buy, and to do so quickly, to give the Crown the total volume of money which it required for its immediate purposes. By dropping prices and easing the tenurial conditions, however, it was able to secure a larger volume of sales and so obtain the total amount required. The sales of 1599–1601 must certainly be seen as occurring in a financial context that was not so much pressing as desperate. When the commission to sell land was set up in February 1599 the Exchequer was practically empty. Parliamentary taxes were already being collected, but were being eaten up at a frightening rate by the war in Ireland; the Crown had a debt outstanding of £177,000² and its credit was near exhaustion. Large amounts had to be raised by the sale of land, and raised quickly, if the war was to go on. The initial response to the sale was far too sluggish for the Crown's liking, however, and it appears to have been this factor which brought about the policy revisions late in June. Thereafter the tempo of the sale increased noticeably; the average number of ratings per month doubled,³ a factor which adds some support to the notion that the reason for the downward revision of prices was that business had hitherto been too slow. The price fall must almost certainly be seen as a conscious decision dictated by financial exigencies; the virtual imposition of a flat rate of 40 years' purchase looks suspiciously like the desperate measure of a hard-pressed government.

Unfortunately the instructions given by the Crown to the commissioners in 1601 do not appear to have survived, so we have no declaration of intentions similar to that of the 1599 sale. The commissioners, therefore, have to be judged entirely by their actual performance, the most striking feature of which is the sinking of the general level of the ratings below the flat rate of 40 years' purchase which had been imposed generally in the later phase of the previous sale. Once again this must be interpreted as a fall of the market price, and a reason for it can again be found in a level of demand which was inadequate to give the Crown the volume of sales required to maintain a financial position which was no less desperate in 1601 than in 1599. The debt remained near £180,000 and Elizabeth's credit was practically exhausted, the parliamentary taxes granted in 1597 had been collected and consumed, and the summoning of a new Parliament had been delayed by the Essex rebellion. Meanwhile Ireland remained an abyss for royal

¹ Habakkuk, *op. cit.* p. 377.

² This is the formal debt, i.e. loans raised on securities. On the financial situation in these years, see Outhwaite, *op. cit.* pp. 64–9.

³ Calculated from Table 3. August and September are excluded as, seemingly for administrative reasons hardly any business was done during these months. This was a feature of all the later Elizabethan land sales.

cash and the only substantial source of extraordinary revenue left unexploited was the sale of land. In these circumstances the Crown was not in a strong bargaining position; it could not afford to lose potential purchasers by insisting on high rates; it became prepared to accept as near to 40 years' purchase as purchasers would go.¹ The interesting feature of the 1601 sale, however, is that so little land went at 40 years' purchase, the rate at which so much had been disposed in 1599. This seems to point to a relative relaxation of demand in 1601, induced conceivably by the heavy sales of the previous commission. Thus it is arguable that when the Crown disposed of large quantities of property in a short space of time, the sales gradually depressed prices.

But did the sales depress market prices generally? Is there any evidence that the rate of purchase in private transactions fell during periods when the Crown was actively engaged in selling land? This aspect of the subject still requires investigation. It is possible, however, that this did not happen, partly because of imperfect communication and resultant lags within the market, and partly because private sales and royal sales were dictated by conventions which although notionally similar were in a practical sense very different. The price of land in private transactions, Prof. Habakkuk has argued, was fixed by largely conventional considerations; where property was rack-rented it was automatically sold at 20 years' purchase. The minds of both buyer and seller were conditioned to thinking of this as the normal market price. But in royal sales at the end of the sixteenth century the rent was very far from being a rack-rent, and although the commissioners attempted to adjust the number of years' purchase to compensate for the lag in value so as to equate the price with 20 years' purchase, the fact that there was considerable room for disagreement about the extent to which the current annual value lagged behind the market value introduced a variable element into these transactions which makes them more akin to modern transactions than to their conventional counterparts in the private market of the period. If, as is possible, the heavy royal sales did not depress prices in the private market, then we have also to ask why demand was not shifted from private to public transactions on such a scale so as to halt or reverse the downward drift of prices in the royal sales. Falls in price could occur without inducing a clamorous new demand because the selling of royal land was not a continuous process; the sale might well be terminated before news of the price fall spread widely. The news would spread slowly because purchasers who were lucky enough to experience the fall would not necessarily publicize their good fortune. This could be foolish in an age dominated by local and factional jealousies, professional informers, seekers after defective titles, and arbitrary acts of royal resumption. The same purchasers would not necessarily intensify their good fortunes by buying more royal property, principally because their initial purchases may have stretched to the limit their available financial resources. By the time they had mobilized new cash resources, the sale might well be over. Students of the early modern period should not be surprised to discover imperfections in this as in other markets.

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¹ There is a perceptible falling trend in this sale also. The signs are that the commissioners began by attempting to get more than 40 years' purchase but that their hopes and performance quickly sank.