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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The petitions contained in this volume are all drawn from The National Archives, series SC 8, commonly known as 'Ancient Petitions'.¹ This class, containing over 17,000 separate requests, is an entirely artificial creation, the consequence of misguided attempts by nineteenth-century record-keepers to rearrange the medieval archives of central government into a regularised, homogeneous collection of records containing similar types of documents. The result was a large collection of petitions which satisfied their nineteenth-century keepers but which has been seriously detrimental to historical research. For example, readers will notice that few of the petitions printed here can be dated precisely. This is a consequence of the nineteenth-century reordering, when many petitions were separated from writs which would otherwise have provided a secure date for the case, because petitions did not contain a dating clause, and the crown's responses (usually endorsements) were rarely dated. The reordering also, in many cases, destroyed the provenance of the petitions, so that it has often proved difficult to establish where, and to whom, they were presented. Petition 161 in this volume nicely illustrates these difficulties, for without the fortuitous note-taking of Clemens Reynerus, who viewed the petition in its original file or 'bundle' in the seventeenth century, before it was rearranged, we would have no ready means of identifying it as a petition presented in the parliament of March 1330. This, however, is a rare exception. The twin problems of dating and provenance are important in explaining why the SC 8 petitions have been relatively underused in modern scholarship. Only recently have their importance and potential become fully appreciated, as a result of a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to publish detailed descriptions of their contents via The National Archives' on-line Catalogue and to provide free digitised images of the originals through its DocumentsOnline facility.² This volume is one of the fruits of the project's endeavours.

The volume has two basic aims. First, to demonstrate the great variety, and remarkable richness, of petitions as a source which illuminates the life and circumstances of religious houses in late medieval England; and second, to show the significance of petitions for the history of late medieval monasticism, especially the relations between the religious and the outside world. It has long been

¹ See now, G. Dodd, *Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007). See also, *Medieval Petitions: Grace and Grievance*, ed. W. M. Ormrod, G. Dodd and A. Musson (York, 2009).

² 'Medieval Petitions: A Catalogue of the "Ancient Petitions" in the Public Record Office', AHRC Resource and Enhancement Scheme. The principal investigator was Professor W. Mark Ormrod, University of York. See <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cataglogue/> and <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/>

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