

## Chapter III

Land and Income

The distribution of gentry estates within Leicestershire was very much a reflection of topographical realities.<sup>1</sup> The majority of their holdings were situated along the valleys of the Soar, the Wreake, the eastern Sence and the tributaries of these rivers and along the northern banks of the Welland in the south-east corner of Gartree hundred.<sup>2</sup> High concentrations of gentry estates also lay on the higher ground between Leicester and the Rutland border in the west and in southern Guthlaxton in the south. The region between Watling Street and the four-hundred foot contour east of Watling Street hosted modest concentrations of estates. But two areas of Leicestershire, Charnwood Forest, which spans the hundreds of Sparkenhoe and West Goscote, and the Vale of Belvoir, supported very few gentry holdings. In Charnwood's case, topographical features were the major determinant: its rocky outcrops, thin soils and poor drainage made early settlement and later subinfeudation unattractive, though the wastes of surrounding manors did extend into it.<sup>3</sup> The absence of gentry estates in the Vale of Belvoir was, however, a product of the region's domination by lord Roos's honor and lordship of

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<sup>1</sup> See Maps I, IV-VII.

<sup>2</sup> To confuse matters, Leicestershire has two rivers called Sence. The reference here is to the Sence which rises in the east of the county and flows westwards, entering the Soar about a mile from Blaby. The second, or western, Sence rises in the Charnwood region, flowing south-west into the Anker river.

<sup>3</sup> G.H. Dury, The East Midlands and the Peak, London, 1963, p. 28; T.L.A.S., vol. 15, 1927-28, pp. 2-32.

Belvoir which included the manors of Barkestone, Plungar, Bottesford, Redmile and Harby and lands at Normanton and Easthorpe.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the gentry's wealth was derived from these lands, either in the form of rents or by the direct use or sale of the land's produce. The differentiation among the various gentry groups which we have already witnessed in relation to income should, therefore, find further reflection in the extent and wider distribution of their estates. In order to test the validity of this assumption, one is forced to adopt the practice of counting manors. Of course, historians now recognize that the value of a manor depended not only on the variables of size and topography but also, to some extent, on the managerial skills of its lord.<sup>5</sup> But three further sources of difficulty have greater relevance to our present purposes. First, it is not always possible to determine whether a particular tract of land can be classed as a manor.<sup>6</sup> Second, an estate was rarely a static entity. It was added to through marriage, purchase or royal grant, while depletions resulted from sales, gifts to children, usually younger sons and daughters, or by confiscation.<sup>7</sup> Such changes to the estate can make the counting of manors a frustrating exercise. A third difficulty arises from the fact that the gentry often held manors in neighbouring or more distant counties. Any analysis of their Leicestershire properties will not, therefore, provide a complete picture of the landed foundations of their status within the

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<sup>4</sup> C139/104/39; C.P.R., 1461-67, p. 352; ibid., 1467-76, p. 27; Nichols, ii, 18, 38, 105, 300.

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Cooper, "The Counting of Manors", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd series, viii, 1956, pp. 377-89.

<sup>6</sup> The Belgrave family's holdings in Belgrave fall into this category. These holdings were classed as a manor by the early sixteenth century but there is no direct evidence that they were designated as such in the fifteenth.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Palmer was associated with no fewer than six manors but he never held more than five at any one time and for most of our period he had only four manors in hand. (See Appendix III).

shire. Despite these problems, a study of the gentry's manorial holdings reveals a close correlation between land distribution and status.<sup>8</sup>

Although the overwhelming majority of knightly, distrainee and esquire families possessed at least one manor in the county, the most extensive estates belonged mainly to the knightly families. Close to 60% of this group held between three and seven manors in Leicestershire and all had additional manors in other counties. Usually, these "foreign" manors were situated in two or three neighbouring shires but occasionally they were more widely scattered. The Shirleys, Ferrerses and Trussells owned estates spanning five, six and eight counties respectively.

Among the distrainees and esquires, Thomas and John Boyville, Thomas Palmer, Thomas Everynham and John Merbury controlled estates as extensive as those of some of the knights. Generally, however, both these groups lagged well behind their knightly superiors. The Boyvilles and Palmers excepted, of the remaining distrainees, over 83% held between one and three manors in Leicestershire and only two-thirds of distrainee estates extended beyond the county boundary, invariably into a single neighbouring shire. The esquires were even less well endowed with landed possessions. Over 90% of esquires held two manors or fewer in Leicestershire and in over 50% of cases their estates were confined entirely to the county.

The most surprising feature to emerge from our analysis of the tenurial qualifications of the gentry relates to the gentlemen at the lower end of the social hierarchy. Only one family in this group held lands identifiable as a manor, namely the senior branch of Farnhams who held a manor at Over Hall in Quorndon.<sup>9</sup> In part, the problem of determining the manorial status of some parcels of land may account for our

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix III.

<sup>9</sup> For this reason, the holdings of gentlemen have been omitted from Appendix III.

unexpected revelation, though it seems odd that this particular difficulty should surface only in relation to the gentlemen. It is more likely that just as there was little economic distinction between mere gentlemen and the wealthier of their non-gentle social inferiors so, too, there was little tenurial distinction between them either.<sup>10</sup>

As a general rule, the greater the number of manors held by a family in Leicestershire, then the more scattered was the estate. As most knightly families had between three and seven manors, they therefore had a greater tendency to have scattered estates (arbitrarily defined as three or more manors or clusters of manors situated at least six miles from each other) than the non-knightly gentry. The Shirley family's holdings in Leicestershire fall into this category. Their manor at Staunton Harold formed one nucleus, Long Whatton a second; a third nucleus was a cluster of manors consisting of Ratcliffe-on-Wreake, Ragdale and Willows, while Dunton Basset formed a fourth. Between a third and a half of knightly families held scattered estates though less than a tenth of distrainees and mere esquires did so.

About half the knightly and distrainee families held what may be termed a double-nucleated estate consisting of two manors or two clusters of manors at least six miles apart. The Malorys' manors of Walton-on-the-Wolds and Croxton, which were nine miles apart, formed this type of holding. Also, twice during the fifteenth century, Thomas Palmer possessed a double-nucleated estate, first, from 1442, when he purchased the manor of Lubenham, until 1450, when he then granted the manor to his daughter and son-in-law, Katherine and William Neville.<sup>11</sup> The second occasion was between 1462 and 1467

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<sup>10</sup> See above, p.46. Leicestershire was, of course, part of the Danelaw which, in general, "was a region full of small landholders" (Documents Illustrative of the Social and Economic History of the Danelaw, ed. F.M. Stenton, London, 1920, p. xlviii).

<sup>11</sup> L.R.O. DE220/58; C.C.R., 1441-47, p. 117.

when the crown temporarily granted him lord Roos's confiscated manor of Freeby.<sup>12</sup> For most of his life, however, Palmer had a compact estate in Leicestershire consisting of four manors at Holt, Prestgrave and Drayton, all within two miles of each other. Most of the esquires possessed compact estates, too, though in their case these were often based on a single manor.

This admittedly "bird's-eye" view of gentry holdings tells us nothing about how their estates were organized and managed. Nor does it indicate how the gentry were affected by, and reacted to, what has been variously described as a recession in agriculture or, more extravagantly, as an economic crisis.<sup>13</sup> Especially after the Black Death, prices of some agricultural products fell, labour became scarce and rents were reduced to attract a dwindling pool of tenants.<sup>14</sup> In response to changed economic circumstances, the greater landlords, the nobility and larger religious institutions, retreated from labour-intensive, and therefore expensive, demesne farming and either converted their arable to pasture or, more usually, leased out their demesne to tenants.<sup>15</sup>

The Leicestershire nobility were certainly not isolated from these economic problems. The Beaumonts' manor of Whitwick had been worth £52-13-4 nett in 1396. By 1413, four messuages had become decayed

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<sup>12</sup> C.P.R. 1461-67, p. 182; *ibid.*, 1467-76, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> C. Dyer, *Warwickshire Farming, 1349-c.1520. Preparations for Agricultural Revolution*, Oxford, 1981, p.1; M.M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, London, 1972, p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> Dyer, *op.cit.*, pp. 1-10; M.M. Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, 2nd. edn., Cambridge, 1966, i, pp. 595-600.. For movements in prices, see table below, p. 368.

<sup>15</sup> R.H. Hilton, "Medieval Agrarian History", *V.C.H. Leics.*, ii, pp. 181-185; F.R.H. Du Boulay, "Who were farming the English Demesnes at the End of the Middle Ages", *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd. series, xviii, no. 3, 1965, pp. 443-455; B. Harvey, "The Leasing of the Abbot of Westminster's Demesnes in the Later Middle Ages", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd series, xxii, no. 1, 1969, pp. 17-27; J.T. Rosenthal, *Nobles and the Noble Life 1295-1500*, London, 1976, p.70; R.H. Hilton, *The Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates in the 14th and 15th Centuries*, London, 1947, pp. 79-88.

and the manor was then worth £43-6-8.<sup>16</sup> Fourteen years later, in 1427, twelve of its thirty-one messuages were in the hands of the lord for lack of tenants.<sup>17</sup> But Whitwick's decline in value did not end there; in 1464 it was said to be worth a mere £24--6-8.<sup>18</sup> In almost seventy years, the manor had dropped in value by about 54%. Whitwick was not the only Beaumont manor to witness diminishing receipts. By 1413, the site of the manor of Loughborough, which formerly returned £4, was worth only £2 per annum and in the same year, four messuages which had once returned £4 were in a state of decay and worth nothing.<sup>19</sup> Other landlords besides the Beaumonts were also experiencing declining returns from their estates. In the year spanning 1399-1400, the minister's account for the Duchy of Lancaster manor of Castle Donington showed a sum of £5-4-11 $\frac{1}{2}$  for reduction and decay of rents and a rental for the same manor in 1462 regularly reveals reductions in customaries of over 30%.<sup>20</sup> At Enderby, the duke of Somerset's water mill which had once yielded £1-6-8. per year was reported to be in total ruin and therefore, one assumes, was worthless.<sup>21</sup> In order to compensate for declining rents and to reduce their rising labour costs, the nobility released further lands onto the rental market. Henry, lord Beaumont, was letting the site of the manor of Loughborough and his capital messuage at Ernesby by 1413 while William Zouche's entire manor of Claybrooke was leased by the middle of the century.<sup>22</sup>

Leicestershire religious houses were also affected by the changed economic climate. During the fifteenth century, Leicester Abbey retreated

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<sup>16</sup> T.L.A.S., vol. 15, 1927-28, p. 238.

<sup>17</sup> C139/35/49 ms.6; E149/140/6.

<sup>18</sup> E153/1880 ms.2.

<sup>19</sup> Quorndon Records, p. 129.

<sup>20</sup> T.L.A.S., vol. 14, 1925-26, pp. 54, 59-61.

<sup>21</sup> H.M.C. Hastings, i, pp. 346-347.

<sup>22</sup> L.R.O. 5D33/177, ff. 4, 82.

from demesne farming on most of its eleven manors in the county. By 1477 only the home farm and three nearby demesnes were still being cultivated; the demesne of all the other manors had been leased. One would therefore expect a rise in rental returns but such was not the case. In 1341 the Abbey's rents had yielded £266; in 1408 yields were down to £207; by 1477 rents returned only £177.<sup>23</sup> The Abbey also declined as a wool producer. The treasurer's receipt roll of 1297-98 shows that wool sales amounted to £220-3-10 which Hilton calculates as equivalent to 35% of the institution's income. In the mid-fourteenth century, sales of wool yielded about £200; by 1477 this figure had dropped to £70 and by 1493 Leicester Abbey had ceased wool production altogether.<sup>24</sup> R.H. Hilton's conclusion that the economic situation of landlords was critical, seems well-founded.<sup>25</sup> However, the question arises whether the economic situation of the lesser landlords, the gentry, was equally as critical as it appears to have been for the greater.

As it was their directly cultivated lands which provided the nobility with the flexibility to respond to the new economic dispensation, we should, perhaps, start with the demesne. Hilton has shown that for the early fourteenth century, the typical lay estate in Leicestershire consisted of manors which had small demesnes.<sup>26</sup> This feature continued into the fifteenth century and, although there was some room for isolated variations, generally there was little distinction between the size of noble and gentry demesnes. Lord Ferrers of Groby's manor at Lutterworth contained no demesne lands whatsoever.<sup>27</sup> But apart from Lutterworth, few manors had demesnes as small as the thirty acres at

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<sup>23</sup> Hilton, "Medieval Agrarian History", pp.182-184; Hilton, Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates, pp. 79-86 and *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp. 25, 28, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Hilton, "Medieval Agrarian History", p. 185.

<sup>26</sup> Hilton, Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> C139/119/33 ms.18.

Braunstone or the sixty acres at each of Cotesbach and Hemington.<sup>28</sup> Most demesnes consisted of at least one carucate.<sup>29</sup> Lord Roos's manor of Bottesford had 150 acres (about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  carucates) of demesne lands; Margaret Burgh's manor of Adloxtton, which passed to Anne Chesildon on Margaret's death, had 140 acres of arable in demesne; Richard Hastings' manor at Newton Harcourt had six virgates, or about 144 acres, of demesne while lord Ferrers' caput at Groby had a demesne consisting of 300 acres of arable.<sup>30</sup> The manor of Hallaton, part of a non-noble estate, had as many as four carucates (almost 400 acres) of arable but demesnes of this size, or larger, were rare.<sup>31</sup>

Hilton also concludes that in early fourteenth-century Leicestershire, labour services were light and that landlords therefore relied heavily on wage labour.<sup>32</sup> This was also the case in the fifteenth century. At Woodthorp there were thirty-two works, sixteen relating to haymaking and sixteen for reaping corn in August each year. Twenty-six works at Woodhouse were also confined to reaping at harvest time, as were the eighteen works on four virgates at Quorndon.<sup>33</sup> Admittedly, all of these works were confined to lands belonging to the Beaumonts, a noble family, but they cannot be considered as onerous. For the rest of

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<sup>28</sup> C139/87/43 ms.16.

<sup>29</sup> Hilton takes a Leicestershire carucate to equal 96 acres ("Medieval Agrarian Society", p.154) but as it consisted of the amount of land which an eight-ox ploughteam could plough in a year, the measurement depended very much on contours and the heaviness of the soil. A carucate could equal as much as 120 acres. Sir Thomas Blount's virgate (four virgates is taken as the equivalent of one carucate) at Adloxtton consisted of 30 acres of arable and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  acres of meadow (Village Notes, i, 14). The Hospital of Burton Lazars was given a half carucate of 35 acres in Newton Burdet in the twelfth century (Stenton, op.cit., p. xxxvii), making a 70 acre carucate.

<sup>30</sup> C139/140/39; L.R.O. 5D33/177, f.15; C139/83/58, ms. 5; C139/119/33, ms. 18; C139/170/40 ms. 7.

<sup>31</sup> L.R.O. 5D33/176, f.57. In 1507, John Villers' manor of Hoby (Howby) consisted of 800 acres of land (arable), 100 acres of meadow and 140 acres of pasture (C.I.P.M. Hen. VII, iii, no. 329).

<sup>32</sup> Hilton, Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates, p.15.

<sup>33</sup> C139/35/49 ms.6.



the year the Beaumonts needed to employ wage labour to perform such farm tasks as driving stray animals off their waste at Beaumanor.<sup>34</sup>

On gentry estates, villeinage was sufficiently rare to warrant special mention when it occurred. Out of ten tenants on the Ingleby fee of the manor of Hoby, only one, Thomas Webster, is recorded in a rental as holding his messuage and single virgate by villein tenure.<sup>35</sup> The gentry, like the nobility, relied overwhelmingly on wage labour. Ralph Shirley I's wage bill on the manor of Barrow in Nottinghamshire amounted to 46s. 8d. in 1413-14 and when John Farnham ploughed, planted and harvested crops on his leased lands at Woodhouse he had to employ the labour to do it.<sup>36</sup>

The gentry used their arable to produce a selection of grains and leguminous crops. In addition to the spring crops of peas, beans, oats and barley, John Farnham grew wheat which is a winter crop.<sup>37</sup> The pulses were probably used as winter feed for Farnham's stock while the barley was important to gentry households for producing malt for brewing.<sup>38</sup> A greater proportion of arable seems to have been devoted to spring crops than to wheat, thereby making the three-field rotation of crops impossible.<sup>39</sup> On the manor of Groby, however, the three-field system of rotation was practised; of the three hundred acres of arable, a hundred acres were allowed to lie fallow each year.<sup>40</sup> In this case the Ferrerses

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<sup>34</sup> Quorndon Records, p. 126.

<sup>35</sup> Bodl. Lib. Wood Empt. 7, f. 143d.

<sup>36</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/2194; Quorndon Records, p.124.

<sup>37</sup> Quorndon Records, p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> For the Farnham family's stock see below p.67. The household at Staunton Harold consisted of a kilnhouse containing a "heyre", a horse-hair fabric used for drying malt over the kiln, and a brewhouse. (L.R.O. 26D53/1949). It is not unusual to encounter references to kilns or, brewhouses in inquisitions post mortem (L.R.O. 5D33/176, f.57).

<sup>39</sup> See Quorndon Records, p. 117; W.G. Hoskins, The Midland Peasant, London, 1957, p. 69; Hilton, Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates, pp. 52-53. Hilton argues in favour of a four-field system of rotation.

<sup>40</sup> C139/119/33 ms.18; C139/170/40 ms.7.

must have regularly reduced the extent of their spring planting which suggests that they had few stock to be carried over the winter or, perhaps, that they were able to buy fodder on the open market.

In the absence of consecutive runs of manorial documents relating to gentry estates, it is impossible to reconstruct a reliable representation of how they exploited their landed resources over an extended period. At best, as we have seen, we may occasionally glimpse some aspect of the economy of the estate or of some part of it for a particular year but it must be stressed that the picture we receive for that year is a static image which, in the long term, may be atypical. However, the little evidence at our disposal suggests that the gentry were experiencing the same difficulties as, and adopting similar strategies to, the greater landlords.

The knightly families, but particularly those who held scattered estates, were, like the nobility and monastic houses, retreating from direct demesne cultivation. As early as 1413-14, the demesnes of the Shirley manors at Shirley, Hope and Hoon in Derbyshire, Ettington in Warwickshire, Colston in Nottinghamshire, Barnham in Suffolk and Ragdale in Leicestershire had all been leased.<sup>41</sup> An indenture of 1457 reveals that Thomas Erdyngton's demesne at Braunstone was being leased by Richard Reynold of the same place. Reynold was not the first to farm the demesne there. Before 1457, the lessee was Thomas Clerk and Clerk's predecessor on the demesne had been William Hatter.<sup>42</sup> Erdyngton had evidently withdrawn from direct agricultural exploitation at Braunstone for many years. This policy of withdrawal from cultivation applied, too, to Erdyngton's manor of Barrow-on-Soar. The entire manor was leased in 1435 to Richard Harcourt, Thomas Farnham

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<sup>41</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/2194.

<sup>42</sup> L.R.O. D.G.5/2

and three others for twenty years at an annual rent of £40.<sup>43</sup> The lessees' intention may have been to sub-let the demesne in smaller portions or they may have hired labour to work the land, thereby deriving their profits from its produce.<sup>44</sup> Either way, the arrangement reveals that the fifteenth-century gentry possessed the same capitalistic opportunism which is so highly valued in our own rapacious age. Richard Hastings was another who was leasing his demesne early in the century. In 1415 his capital messuage on the manor of Braunstone was farmed to two local husbandmen for nine years at an annual rent of £5.<sup>45</sup> It was not, then, just the distant demesne of scattered estates that was being leased. Braunstone was only about two miles from Hastings' caput at Kirby Muxloe.

For most of the gentry who held compact estates or single manors, leasing of the demesne, at least in its entirety, cannot have been a serious option. Their households still needed supplies of wheat for bread, barley for brewing and stock for meat and, of course, their stock required winter fodder. During times of uncertain prices, these needs could best be supplied by the direct exploitation of the demesne. Evidence for continued demesne cultivation and grazing is found in wills and inventories which frequently mention farm implements and stock.

In his will, John Hotoft referred to his "crops in the ground" at Knebworth and his bequests included a cart, harness, carthorses, plough-horse sheep and cattle.<sup>46</sup> Ralph Shirley III's manor at Staunton Harold carried two wains, nine horses, twelve draught oxen, two other oxen and a number of sheep and cattle.<sup>47</sup> In addition to wains and draught

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<sup>43</sup> H.M.C. Hastings, i, p. 72.

<sup>44</sup> For the Farnhams' involvement in this sort of activity, see above, p.57.

<sup>45</sup> H.M.C. Hastings, i, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> PROB 11/1/15/118.

<sup>47</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/1949.

animals, a cryptic reference to two "window sheets" and twenty-eight sacks stored in the kiln house suggests that Shirley was growing wheat. Window sheets may have been coverings for unglazed windows, though the need for such coverings in a kiln house seems unusual. They were more likely winnowing sheets used for separating chaff from grain. The sacks would have then been used to store the grain. Everard Dygby's estate also carried a wain as well as a plough, a pair of cart wheels, six plough-horses and various stock, while Ralph Woodford, Geoffrey Sherard, Thomas Pulteney and Thomas Keble all had sheep and cattle on their farms.<sup>48</sup> Although these references provide ample indication of continued cultivation and grazing of the demesne, the gentry's detailed and intimate knowledge of their implements and livestock testifies to the close interest they took in their agricultural capital.<sup>49</sup>

While the twin difficulties of the rising cost and shortage of labour could be alleviated by leasing demesnes, the gentry also encountered the problem of declining rents. Between 1414 and 1431, the Shirleys' receipts from rents were either stable, as on their manor of Hope, or else declined.<sup>50</sup> At Hoon, rents which had returned £18-18-4 in 1413-14, yielded only £17-18-6 by 1431, a fall of about 5%. The decline in rents on the manors of Sheldon and Ratcliffe-on-Soar was 8% and 11% respectively. The two accounts of 1414 and 1431 fail to cover the same manors but if we omit returns for those manors which are not common to both, then total receipts had diminished by about 30% in under twenty years. In six years, the rent on Margaret Flaunders' manor at Sheepy Parva declined from £2-16-8 in 1435 to £2-3-4 in 1441, a drop of about

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<sup>48</sup> PROB11/16/11/81-81v; PROB11/11/23/183-183v; PROB11/9/23/176v-177; PROB11/15/24/193v; PROB11/12/3/22v-23v.

<sup>49</sup> For the personal concern of landlords with manorial administration see R.H. Britnell, "Minor Landlords in England and Medieval Agrarian Capitalism", *Past and Present*, no. 89, 1980, pp. 7-8.

<sup>50</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/2194, 1980.

24%.<sup>51</sup> On the manors of Pippewall and Woodcote in Ashby de la Zouch, a decline in rent was accompanied by a longer lease. In 1410, the manors "with all woods [and] demesne lands" were leased for twelve years at £2-6-9 per annum. At the end of these twelve years, the same lands were leased for twenty years at an annual rent of £1-4-0, a startling drop in return of 48%.<sup>52</sup>

Longer leases were, of course, in the interests of the lessees who, if their leased lands required capital improvements, would expect security of tenure in order to reap the full benefits of their investments. That landlords expected improvements to be carried out can be seen in the abbot of Geronden's lease of the abbey's lands and tenements in Alton to Thomas Barwell of Odstone.<sup>53</sup> This lease was for sixty years but the first four years' rent was a nominal red rose per year followed by £1-18-4 in the fifth year and £3-1-0 each year thereafter. The low initial rent acknowledges capital outlay and minimal profits in the early stages of the lease.

Long leases could be in the lessor's interest, too. During times of falling rents it was preferable to have a tenant paying an agreed sum which was assured and would not be gradually reduced over a period of years. The alternative of empty tenements or falling rents with each new lease was an unattractive option. But long leases had serious disadvantages as well. Rents had to be sufficiently low to attract lessees. There was also a greater risk with long leases that the lessor would try to over-exploit his tenement. Edith Waryn, who leased lands in Thorpe Arnold for life from William Assheby of Welby, was charged with

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<sup>51</sup> C.A.D., vi, C6536, C6529.

<sup>52</sup> H.M.C. Hastings, i, p.6.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 8. See, too, C. Dyer, "A Small Landowner in the Fifteenth Century", Midland History, vol. 1, no. 3, 1972, p.10.

causing wastes and destruction to houses there.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the lessor needed to consider whether a long lease would reduce his flexibility if the economic pendulum were to swing back in favour of higher prices for demesne produce or of higher rents.

It appears, therefore, that the financial plight of the gentry was as critical as that of the nobility. But appearances can be deceptive. Given the relatively small size of the gentry demesne, a greater proportion of its produce was destined for consumption within the household rather than for the market. The conventional wisdom is that the gentry were therefore less likely to feel the effects of falling prices for demesne produce.<sup>55</sup> This argument has much to commend it. Rarely does one form the impression that the gentry were seriously affected by any economic recession and, except in the unusual case of Thomas Erdyngton who leased out the demesne on his caput at Barrow-on-Soar, rarely do we find the entire demesne on home farms being leased.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the gentry's comparative prosperity cannot be explained solely in terms of a buffer provided by demesne cultivation for home consumption.<sup>57</sup> Prosperity and subsistence farming rarely, if ever, co-exist.

We should not assume that rents or demesne produce constituted the only source of profit from land. In the de banco rolls, pleas of damage to trees and woods reveal that timber was an important economic resource. In 1428, John Bellers claimed that his oaks, ash, whitethorns and blackthorns on his land at Sutton Cheney had been damaged to the value of 40s by four husbandmen from nearby Cadeby.<sup>58</sup> Earlier in the

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54 Village Notes, iv, p. 273.

55 Postan, Cambridge Economic History, pp. 596-97, Postan, Medieval Economy and Society, p. 174.

56 H.M.C. Hastings, i, p.72.

57 For gentry expenditure, an indicator of prosperity, see below, ch. 7 and Appendix XII.

58 L.R.O. 5D33/172.

century, John Farnham's loss had been even greater. Trees worth £20 had been cut down and carried away from Quorndon in 1405.<sup>59</sup> The Farnhams in fact seem to have been uncharacteristically careless with their timber, though their losses are also an indication of the difficulties involved in protecting this particular resource. About thirty years later, Robert had £5 worth of trees stolen from Quorndon in 1434 and the following year Robert's uncle, Thomas, accused his life tenants at Loughborough, Robert and Eleanor Walker, of making wastes, sales and destruction of land, houses, woods and gardens contrary to law.<sup>60</sup> Among their numerous crimes the Walkers had felled twenty ash trees, ten pear trees and ten apple trees worth a total of 40s. Of course, it was in the claimant's interest to exaggerate the value of his loss but his plea at least had to be credible.

When the gentry were able to realize their profits from timber before it fell prey to the criminally inclined, the rewards could be substantial. In 1459, John Shirley sold to Thomas Stokes and John Forster for £20 the right to cut and cart wood and underwood between Staunton Harold and Ashby de la Zouch.<sup>61</sup> While sales of this order may not have provided a regular income, it is worth noting that £20 was the equivalent of about two years' income from Shirley's manor of Whatton. Sir Roger Swillington of Nottinghamshire also found his oaks in Priorwood in Leicester Forest an occasional, but highly lucrative, source of income. He sold the right to cut branches of oak there for two years, earning himself

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<sup>59</sup> Quorndon Records, p. 123.

<sup>60</sup> L.R.O. 5D33/172; Quorndon Records, pp. 139, 140.

<sup>61</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/504. John Forster, yeoman, had been appointed James Ormond's bailiff for Ashby de la Zouch in 1445 during pleasure at 2d. per diem; the appointment was later made for life. Forster was also one of Bartholomew Brokesby's feoffees while Thomas Stokes acted as feoffee for Thomas Erdyngton (H.M.C. Hastings, i, pp. 1, 2, 155, 300; Bodl. Lib., Wood Empt. 7, ff 164d-165 - mispaginated as 183d-184).

in the process the notable sum of 50 marks.<sup>62</sup> On the manor of Barrow-on-Soar, the sale of 3700 faggots, "lez polles" (poles), underwood, toppings and clippings of trees, bark and hedge grossed £11-14-0, or over 13% of the manor's total receipts.<sup>63</sup> References to branches, poles, toppings, clippings and underwood indicate the practice of coppicing or harvesting rather than wholesale destruction of stands of timber.<sup>64</sup>

Almost all references to sales and thefts of timber apply to the area west of the Soar, especially on the edges of Charnwood and Leicester Forests. Stands of trees in the east of the county tended to be small. One of the largest of these stands was Thomas Palmer's eighty acres of wood centred on his cluster of manors around Holt in the far south east.<sup>65</sup> The manor of Hallaton in the same area had fifteen acres while Adloxtton boasted a mere four acres of wood.<sup>66</sup> Further north, the Dygbys' manor of Tilton had thirty acres of woodland and there were also thirty acres on the Shirley manors of Willows and Ragdale.<sup>67</sup> The economic value of these small eastern woods was measured in shillings rather than pounds.<sup>68</sup>

Minerals were another source of income exploited by the gentry, though returns from these were considerably more modest than from timber. Ralph Shirley I's stone quarry (minera petrarum) at Barrow in Nottinghamshire made 8s. from sales in 1413-14.<sup>69</sup> Within Leicestershire itself, the range of minerals was more varied and included stone, coal,

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62 H.M.C. Hastings, i, pp. 22-23.

63 Quorndon Records, p. 164.

64 For the long survival of coppicing see J. Creasey, "Industries of the Countryside", Seasons of Change. Rural Life in Victorian and Edwardian England, ed. S. Ward, London, 1982, pp.81-83.. I am indebted to Mr. David Kent, for drawing my attention to this reference .

65 L.R.O. 5D33/174, f.263.

66 L.R.O. 5D33/176, f.57; L.R.O. 5D33/177, f.15.

67 L.R.O. 5D33/177, f.24; L.R.O. 5D33/86, f.1.

68 The fifteen acres of wood at Hallaton returned 8s.4d. per year. (L.R.O. 5D33/176, f.57).

69 L.R.O. 26D53/2194.



lime and slate. Coal had been mined in the county as early as the thirteenth century but even by the fifteenth, its economic significance had not yet become apparent.<sup>70</sup> On the manors of Pippewall and Woodcote the lessee's rights to coal seem to have been added to his lease as an afterthought and were lumped together with rights over stone.<sup>71</sup> Clearly, the area's ample supplies of wood reduced the attractiveness of coal and professional colliers, whose presence would indicate increasing mining activity, do not appear in the records until the 1490s.<sup>72</sup> Limestone, however, was more valuable. The manor of Barrow-on-Soar supported 85 lime pits which, in 1481, returned £2-16-8 from sales.<sup>73</sup> There were also slate pits at Barrow but in 1481 they returned no profit. Nevertheless, back in 1428, William Richmount, slater of Leicester, had been paid £1 per year over twenty years to re-roof with slate all the buildings on Thomas Beaumont's manors of Overton and Goadby.<sup>74</sup> Richmount's slate could have been bought from either Barrow or Swithland. As in the case of timber, the shire's mineral resources were confined to the region west of the Soar.

In the east of the county and along the Soar and other river valleys the numerous rivers, brooks and streams provided fish as well as sites for water mills. Once again, as with timber, the worth of fishing rights occasionally appears through the charges of theft brought before the court of common pleas. At Long Whatton, on one of the Soar's tributaries, fish valued at £5 was stolen from Thomas Assheby, while Hugh Boyville helped himself to £10 worth of fish from Elizabeth Scrope's "separate

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<sup>70</sup> C. Owen, The Leicestershire and South Derbyshire Coalfield 1200-1900, Ashbourne, 1984, p.20.

<sup>71</sup> H.M.C. Hastings, i, p.6.

<sup>72</sup> Owen, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>73</sup> Quorndon Records, p. 164. Lime from Barrow was being sold to build lord Hastings' new residence at Kirby Muxloe. (M..W. Beresford, and J.K.S. St. Joseph , Medieval England. An Aerial Survey, Cambridge Air Surveys, II, Cambridge, 1958, p.57.)

<sup>74</sup> H.M.C. Middleton, p.109.

fishing" at Great Bowden on the Welland.<sup>75</sup> Early in the century, on the manor of Castle Donington, fishing rights were let to farm together with mills, probably on the river Trent, for £12-4-4 per annum.<sup>76</sup> Thomas Palmer also owned two mills at Holt which he leased to a local miller for £3-16-8 per annum, though in this case the indenture of lease fails to specify whether the mills were water, wind, or horse, powered.<sup>77</sup>

The enterprising Hastings family managed to acquire a water mill where none had existed before. In 1439, Sir Leonard Hastings leased a site for a water mill at Ravenstone to John Hyne for life at a yearly rent of 6s.8d. and two capons. In return, Hyne was to erect a mill with flood gates. Just over eighteen years later, by which time the parties to the original agreement were both dead, we find Sir Leonard's son, William, leasing the now-completed water mill for eighteen years at an annual rent of 13s.4d.<sup>78</sup> The sums involved were admittedly a miniscule proportion of Hastings' total income but to acquire an economic asset which returned an increasing income without making any capital outlay whatsoever, calls not only for business acumen but also for imagination.

Sales or leases of timber, minerals, fishing rights and mills never rivalled receipts from rents. Nevertheless, they did provide an additional dimension to the gentry's income. At the same time they reveal the gentry's readiness to tap diverse sources of revenue in order to maintain their flexibility in uncertain economic times. Diversity, flexibility and opportunism are particularly apparent in the gentry's willingness to channel their activities towards animal husbandry, most notably sheep, but also cattle and pig, farming. A combination of horses and oxen had always been needed to work the demesne arable while a

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75 L.R.O. 5D33/172.

76 T.L.A.S., vol. 14, 1925-26, p.54.

77 L.R.O. DE221/4/1/101.

78 H.M.C. Hastings, i, p.11.

small number of cows and ewes and fat cattle were kept to supply the household with milk, cheese, butter and meat.<sup>79</sup> These draught animals and milch cows continued to feature in wills and inventories until the end of the century and beyond.<sup>80</sup> However, there are few references to larger herds and flocks until around the middle of the century when the gentry must have begun to convert to grazing on a more commercial scale.

Compared to the size of some monastic flocks which were numbered in thousands, the scale of the gentry's enterprise was apparently small.<sup>81</sup> Even by the early sixteenth century, Ralph Shirley III's entire flock at Staunton Harold numbered only 140 sheep.<sup>82</sup> Thomas Farnham was grazing 200 sheep at Woodhouse in 1448.<sup>83</sup> Three years later, Farnham's nephew, Robert, appears to have been breeding sheep for he had 200 "little lambs" at Hoton, Prestwold, Burton-on-the-Wolds and Cotes.<sup>84</sup> Thomas Pulteney was also breeding sheep, and bequeathed in his will a total of seventy ewes and lambs.<sup>85</sup>

Although the gentry's conversion to pastoralism would at first have been tentative, these figures probably underestimate the full extent of gentry sheep farming. Robert Farnham's 200 lambs indicate a flock of at least 400 if we assume one ewe for every lamb. Furthermore, wills refer to only a proportion of the testator's livestock. For instance, Geoffrey Sherard bequeathed sixty ewes "of my best" but made no reference to lambs, rams, wethers or lesser quality sheep whose existence

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79 Ewes' milk as well as cows' milk was used to make cheese. (R. Trow-Smith, A History of British Livestock Husbandry to 1700, London, 1957, p.119).

80 See, for example, L.R.O. 26D53/1949; PROB11/16/11/81.

81 Hilton, Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates, p. 67.

82 L.R.O. 26D53/1949.

83 Quorndon Records, p. 144.

84 Ibid., pp. 145-146.

85 PROB11/15/24/193v.

is nevertheless implied.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Everard Dygby refers to twelve ewes, sixty of his best sheep and to "the residue" but he provides no indication of how extensive that residue may have been.<sup>87</sup>

T.H. Lloyd's study of the wool trade in the late middle ages reveals that throughout the first half of the fifteenth century, wool prices were depressed.<sup>88</sup> Nett losses on the Duchy of Lancaster and Bruton Priory's sheep farms in Berkshire and Gloucestershire in the 1430s and '40s warn us that conversion to sheep pasture was therefore by no means a panacea for the economic ills which beset landlords. But we should not assume that the Leicestershire gentry turned to sheep farming in desperation or that they suffered from the vagaries of the market in the same way as large-scale wool growers.<sup>89</sup> Initially producing on a more limited scale, the gentry had less to lose if wool prices fell and by breeding their own stock they were well placed to increase or decrease the size of their flocks according to the demands of the market. By the later decades of the fifteenth century we find the gentry responding to those market demands by greatly increasing their involvement in animal husbandry.

According to an inventory taken at Thomas Keble's death in 1500, he had flocks totalling over 3,600 sheep on his Leicestershire lands and manors.<sup>90</sup> These flocks, together with wool-clips in hand, were estimated to be worth £228-10-1, or about 70% of the total value of Keble's stock, equipment and farm produce in store. The scale of his enterprise obviates any suggestion that Keble was turning to sheep farming in

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86 PROB11/9/23/176v-177.

87 PROB11/16/11/81v.

88 T.H. Lloyd, The Movement of Wool Prices in Medieval England, Economic History Review Supplement, 6, Cambridge, 1973, pp. 24-29.

89 Lloyd argues that "a healthy rent roll was ... preferable to the risky business of sheep farming" and that landlords turned to pastoralism in desperation. (ibid., p.29)

90 The inventory (Wilts. Rec. Off., 88:5/17a, mss. 1-4) is printed in E.W. Ives, The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 432-447.

desperation. Throughout the 1470s, '80s and '90s, he singlemindedly and vigorously pursued a deliberate policy of investing heavily in his chosen venture by buying land to support his flocks.<sup>91</sup>

Under the terms of Richard Hotoft's putative will, Keble had first inherited lands in Stretton but thereafter he extended his holdings by purchase and lease.<sup>92</sup> The Hotoft manor of Humberstone was originally alienated to John Staunton after Richard Hotoft's death but Thomas Keble later purchased it from John's brother, Thomas.<sup>93</sup> Another Staunton manor, Congerstone, was bought from Thomas Staunton's "cousin" and heir, Edward Church.<sup>94</sup> Lands in Hamilton, where the village had been abandoned as early as 1450 and later enclosed for pasture by the Willoughbys of Wollaton, probably in the 1470s, were sold to Keble in 1495.<sup>95</sup> About ten years before Hamilton was acquired, Keble had leased Potters Marston from the Benedictine priory of St. Mary in Coventry.<sup>96</sup> By 1500, this manor was stocked with 429 wethers.

In converting to pasture, Keble was both imitator of, and an example to, other landlords.<sup>97</sup> He was certainly not the first to recognize the profitability of pastoralism. As early as 1461, Thomas Assheby's manor of Lowesby had 600 acres of pasture and 230 acres of meadow.<sup>98</sup> The acreage of pasture was extended in 1487 when the village of Lowesby itself was enclosed.<sup>99</sup> Much the same process occurred on the Turpins' manor of Knaptoft where the 100 acres of meadows and 600 acres of pasture referred to in a fine of 1507, were the product of enclosure of the

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91 *Ibid.*, pp. 332-339.

92 C1/42/89-92.

93 C1/58/322.

94 *C.I.P.M.*, Hen. VII, ii, no. 497.

95 W.G. Hoskins, *Essays in Leicestershire History*, Liverpool, 1950, pp. 74-75.

96 Ives, *op.cit.*, p. 344.

97 For the gentry's readiness to imitate their neighbours' practices see M. Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England*, London, 1954, p. 211.

98 L.R.O.. 5D33/174, f.264d.

99 Hoskins, *Essays.*, p. 81.

village.<sup>100</sup> John Turpin acquired the manor by marriage in 1465 and the process of change must have begun shortly after that date for in 1482 he had 150 head of stock grazing there.<sup>101</sup> But the extent and obvious fruitfulness of Keble's conversion to pasture must also have acted as a beacon to attract others to adopt his policy. On Sir Thomas Pulteney's two manors of Misterton and Pulteney there was no arable land by the early sixteenth century. Misterton consisted of 100 acres of meadow and 800 acres of pasture worth £45-2-0 per annum, while the manor of Pulteney had 1000 acres of pasture worth £40.<sup>102</sup>

The procedure adopted by Thomas Pulteney to effect the change-over to pasture is unknown but evidence relating to other manors indicates that there were two basic patterns of change. On the countess of Shrewsbury's holdings at Bittesby the process was gradual until, in 1488, the last remaining 150 acres of arable were converted to pasture.<sup>103</sup> On John Villers' manor of Brooksby, however, action was taken quickly and decisively on 6 Dec. 1492. On that day four farms, involving 160 acres of arable, were enclosed.<sup>104</sup>

Of course, not all pasture was devoted to sheep farming. Thomas Keble owned 158 assorted bullocks, steers, cows and heifers pastured at Lubenham, Potters Marston, Thrussington, Hamilton and on his caput at Humberstone.<sup>105</sup> The presence of cows and heifers indicates that Keble

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>101</sup> Village Notes, v, pp. 391-392; Pedigrees, pp. 44-46; L.R.O. 5D33/172..

<sup>102</sup> C.I.P.M., Hen VII, iii, no. 204.

<sup>103</sup> Hoskins, Essays, p. 93; Beresford, op.cit., p. 210 citing E368/314 Eas. m.15.

<sup>104</sup> Hoskins, Essays, p. 98; The Domesday of Inclosures 1517-1518, ed. I.S. Leadam, 1897, rept. Port Washington, N.Y., 1971, p.237. It is impossible to say how much of Leicestershire had been enclosed by the time the commissioners of enclosures visited the county in August, 1517. Leadam calculates that in the hundred of Gartree, for which the commissioners' returns are fullest, 1.32% of the land had been enclosed, all of it for pasture (Domesday of Inclosure, p.222). In Framland, for which the record is incomplete, 330 acres were enclosed, all of it for arable. These Framland enclosures account for only 11% of total enclosures recorded by the 1517 commission, the remaining 89% being for pasture (88.9%) and parks (0.1%).

<sup>105</sup> Ives, op.cit., pp. 440-442.

was also breeding his own stock. Ralph Shirley III grazed sixty steers at Staunton Harold and John Turpin, in addition to his 100 sheep at Knaptoft, kept 50 steers there, too.<sup>106</sup> William Belgrave had a herd of unknown size but its existence was a source of annoyance and financial loss to Belgrave's neighbours whose crops were dispastured and trampled.<sup>107</sup>

It is doubtful that these cattle herds were intended for the London market. First, the herds were too small and, second, professional drovers whose presence in large numbers might indicate a thriving cross-country trade, were not particularly numerous in Leicestershire.<sup>108</sup> Small herds suggest that the cattle were intended to feed the household and to supply the local markets at Market Harborough and Leicester where there was a growing demand for hides to sustain the expanding leather industry.<sup>109</sup>

Despite even this later fifteenth-century scramble to convert to pasture, the gentry still did not totally abandon direct cultivation. At Potters Marston, Thomas Keble maintained two draught oxen, though his inventory makes no mention of a plough there.<sup>110</sup> If he had to lease a plough then it is unlikely that more than a few acres were devoted to cultivation. On his eastern property at Hamilton, however, more extensive cultivation is indicated by the ten pairs of draught oxen and seven working steers. About a mile away, on Keble's caput at Humberstone, there were three wains, two ploughs and six horses. As efficient ploughing was achieved by hitching a combination of horses and oxen to the plough there must have been exchanges of draught animals

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<sup>106</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/1949; L.R.O. 5D33/172.

<sup>107</sup> Village Notes, vi, p.85; T.L.A.S., vol. 16, 1929-31, p.60.

<sup>108</sup> For Leicestershire drovers see, for example, C.P.R., 1436-49, p. 327; ibid., 1461-67, p. 318.

<sup>109</sup> V.C.H. Leics., iv, pp. 37, 41-42.

<sup>110</sup> Ives, op.cit., p. 441.

and equipment between Hamilton and Humberstone.<sup>111</sup> Keble's crops included eighteen acres of barley in the ground at Humberstone and a quarter of malt in "the gardener". A "litell stakke" of wheat, estimated at four quarters, was stored in the barn. However, as one would expect, most arable was devoted to the production of pulses for fodder. Fifteen quarters of peas worth 30s. were already in storage at Humberstone in July. The Pulteneys, too, in spite of the lack of arable land on their main manors at Misterton and Pulteney, were able to continue cultivation at nearby North Kilworth, South Kilworth, Cotesbach and Cotes Devil, all within a three-mile radius of Pulteney.<sup>112</sup>

Evidence for swine herding is less plentiful than it is for pastoralism. As pigs are notoriously destructive of both pasture and arable, we would expect herds to be confined to the wastes of Charnwood and Leicester Forests where acorns were in plentiful supply.<sup>113</sup> John Farnham of Quorndon kept swine at Barrow-on-Soar on the edge of Charnwood but the size of his herd, if indeed it was a herd, is not recorded.<sup>114</sup> We do know, however, that Sir Robert Moton of Pekleton owned a swine herd. In 1462, Sir Robert's brother, Richard, quitclaimed to his widowed sister-in-law, Elizabeth, forty pigs on the Motons' manor of Cheadle in Staffordshire.<sup>115</sup> But there is no sign that the Motons reared pigs in Leicestershire, too. Nevertheless, circumstantial evidence points to more widespread swine herding than these examples suggest. In 1492, a subsidy roll for the borough of Leicester refers to an area in the

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<sup>111</sup> For ploughing, see Walter of Henley, *Husbandry*, ed. E. Lamond, London 1890, pp. 11-13.

<sup>112</sup> *C.I.P.M.*, Hen. VII, iii, no. 204.

<sup>113</sup> For sound advice on pig husbandry see Walter of Henley, *op. cit.*, p. 29; *Seneschaucie*, ed. E. Lamond, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-115.

<sup>114</sup> *Quorndon Records*, p. 122.

<sup>115</sup> *C.C.R.*, 1461-68, p. 147. See, too, *T.L.A.S.*, vol. 17, 1931-33, p. 129.



town called "le swyne market".<sup>116</sup> That a number of gentry were taxed on tenements in this area is hardly conclusive evidence of commercial pig production, but it certainly is suggestive of such.

Although the gentry's problems of declining rents, empty tenements and falling prices for arable produce were ameliorated by diversification and ultimately solved by those who expanded their pastures, a further response to dwindling receipts was to increase the size of the estate. There were a number of ways of achieving this solution but one of the quickest and least expensive was through marriage. Of five succeeding generations of Shirleys in the late fourteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, only one, John Shirley, failed to marry an heiress. Ralph I's father, Hugh, Ralph I himself, Ralph II and Ralph III all married heiresses, thereby extending the Shirley estate and, of course, adding to their income. Many other examples could be cited to illustrate the point but to avoid needless repetition we may confine ourselves to one further case, that of Margaret Bugge.<sup>117</sup>

Margaret, sister and heir of Baldwin Bugge, first married Richard Turville. The Turvilles held land at Normanton but their manor of Aston Flamville was a recent acquisition, gained through the marriage of Richard's father to the Flamville heiress. At the time of Margaret's marriage to Richard, probably some time before 1430, she had not yet succeeded to her brother's manors and lands. In fact, Richard Turville's premature death ensured that he never enjoyed the Bugge estate but he did sire a son, William, by Margaret. Having proved her capacity to bear children, Margaret next attracted the attention of Reginald Moton whom she later married. Reginald was more fortunate than Richard in that he

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<sup>116</sup> Bateson, ii, pp. 332-334. Among those taxed in the swine market were Thomas Keble, Everard Fielding, Richard Belgrave, Everard Dygby, Thomas Villers, John Danet and Nicholas Temple.

<sup>117</sup> For other examples, see Appendix III. References for the following may be found in Appendices III and X, reference column.

had the use and profits of Margaret's five Leicestershire manors and extensive lands until his death in 1445. The twice-widowed Margaret, with an obvious aversion to solitary and celibate life, but also probably conscious of the need for a protector to secure the rights of her daughters by Reginald Moton against the chicanery of Reginald's father, Robert, then took Thomas Everyngham as her third husband. Everyngham also enjoyed the use and profits of his wife's inheritance until he, too, died in 1465. Her duty to wedlock and her daughters now fulfilled, Margaret lived on in her widowhood until her own death in 1474. Her son, William Turville, now entered on the Bugge inheritance.

In the course of the fifteenth century, two members of the gentry, Reginald Moton and Thomas Everyngham, had, through marriage, enjoyed the benefits and profits of the Bugge estate, albeit temporarily. The economic rewards of marriage for the Turvilles were less immediate but more durable. There can be no doubt that Margaret's long-postponed endowment of her first husband's family was responsible for the inclusion of her grandson, John, among the worthiest men of the shire in the reign of Henry VII, though it took another generation before the Turvilles attained the dignity of knighthood.<sup>118</sup>

Holdings were sometimes inherited from more distant kin. Richard Hotoft's kinsman, John Hotoft, who was possibly Richard's brother but more likely an uncle or a cousin, left him his lands in Stretton. Richard, in turn, bequeathed the same lands, so his beneficiary claimed, to his first cousin twice removed, Thomas Keble.<sup>119</sup> However, it was not a common practice for distant kin to be so charitable.

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<sup>118</sup> B.L. Harl. 6166, f.60d; W.H.R., no.267. It will be appreciated that our intention here is primarily to show how the estate was extended through marriage. There can be no suggestion that marriages were contracted only in order to extend the estate. Marriage involved a wide range of motives which are discussed below, chapter VI.

<sup>119</sup> PROB11/1/15/118; C1/42/89-92. Also, see above, p.69.

Those gentry who failed to secure an heiress or who lacked generous kin folk could still expand their estate by purchase or lease or, as we have already witnessed in the case of Thomas Keble who bought the manor of Humberstone and leased the manor of Potters Marston, by a combination of both. The Palmers actually bought their way into the county in the early fifteenth century when Thomas's father, William, purchased the Trussell manor at Holt. Thomas later added to the estate by buying the second manor at Holt and manors at Drayton and Prestgrave with appurtenant lands at Cranoe, Bringhurst, Easton, Medbourne, and Burrough-on-the-Hill.<sup>120</sup> Palmer was still buying land in 1439 and 1442 when he acquired lands at Tugby, Goadby and Billesdon and the manor of Lubenham, about two miles west of Market Harborough.<sup>121</sup>

The Woodfords also owed their position among the county gentry to land purchases. In their case, the Leicestershire branch of the family was founded in the fourteenth century by John Woodford.<sup>122</sup> According to fifteenth-century family tradition, John, who lived to the ripe age of "five score years and seven", was the son of a gentleman of Salisbury but had gone to Melton Mowbray where he married a merchant's daughter and heir. No doubt his wife's inheritance enabled John to buy his lands and manors in Melton, Brentingby, Burton St. Lazars, Thorpe Arnold and Wyfordby. Capital was also probably amassed during John's war service in France where, again according to fifteenth-century tradition, he had fought at Poitiers and been present at the capture of Calais. For the remainder of the fourteenth century both John and his son, William, "a fulle discrete man and sufficiently learned in the law", built on John's

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<sup>120</sup> L.R.O. 5D/33/174 f.255. See Appendix III under Palmer.

<sup>121</sup> L..R.O. 5D/33/174 ff. 259, 260.

<sup>122</sup> B.L. Cotton Claudius, A XIII, ff. 3, 3d, 6, 9, 10d, 11, 8d-53d, 175 and passim.

earlier foundation, adding the manor of Knipton and many smaller parcels of land in Framland hundred.

It was clearly not beyond the gentry's reach to buy entire manors. That they were able to do so suggests either the possession of liquid assets or access to credit or, perhaps, a combination of both. There was £22.10.6d. in ready money at Staunton Harold when Ralph Shirley III died.<sup>123</sup> John Hotoft had even greater liquidity; in his will he could refer to 50 marks at his place in London and a further 200 marks stored in an "iron bownden coffer" at Knebworth.<sup>124</sup> Hotoft also referred to "all the dettys that be owyng in Essex" but failed to specify whether these debts were owed to him or whether he, himself, was the debtor. For the sake of his wife, who was bequeathed these debts, we can only hope that the former was the case. That most of the work of the court of common pleas involved the recovery of debts also points to the ready availability of loans.<sup>125</sup>

While some gentry could afford to buy whole manors, there can be no concealing the fact that such purchases were expensive. The manor of Humberstone, worth £20 per year, cost Thomas Keble 400 marks, or £266-13-4.<sup>126</sup> Many purchases of land were therefore on a less grand scale. In the fifteenth century, Sir Robert Woodford continued the policy of buying land begun by his great-grandfather and grandfather but his purchases were often of small plots, clearly designed to consolidate and round off the estate.<sup>127</sup> In 1433 he bought from Thomas Chancellor a croft and three selions of land in Wyfordby and half an acre in the fields

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<sup>123</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/1949.

<sup>124</sup> PROB11/1/15/118.

<sup>125</sup> See M. Hastings, The Court of Common Pleas in Fifteenth Century England, Ithaca, N.Y., 1947, pp.8, 26-27, 237.

<sup>126</sup> C1/58/322.

<sup>127</sup> This process of consolidation and rounding off can also be seen in an arrangement between Richard Langham and John Marschall of Kilby. Richard granted John "a little land, in exchange for other land there" ( H.M.C. Hastings, i, p.100).

at nearby Stapleford. Some years earlier, Woodford had also bought lands in Wyfordby from Geoffrey Poutrell.<sup>128</sup>

Bartholomew Brokesby similarly purchased small blocks of land, many of which abutted his own tenements. In 1428 he bought a toft lying between his own land and that of the Prior of Laund in Frisby and another toft was added to the first in 1435.<sup>129</sup> He also acquired five messuages, two tofts, 160 acres of land, twenty acres of meadow, four of pasture and 4d. rent in Frisby for 100 marks.<sup>130</sup> Brokesby made piecemeal acquisitions at Gaddesby as well. He first bought land there in 1431, adding seventeen acres of land and pasture bought from John Swift in 1433.<sup>131</sup> In 1434 another three acres of land were purchased and then "a place built on a site" bought from Alice Brokesby (obviously a relative) for 20s.<sup>132</sup> Small purchases continued to be added to the holding in Gaddesby until, by 1445, Brokesby's tenements there were returning £4-11-9 gross or £4-4-9 nett in annual rent.<sup>133</sup>

We should not assume, therefore, on the basis of the incontrovertible evidence which points to falling rents, neglected and decaying tenements and declining receipts from sales of grain from individual manors that the gentry were financially embarrassed, let alone facing an economic crisis. Owning smaller and more compact estates than the nobility or large religious houses, they were better placed to take a direct interest in their affairs and to react to changing economic demands. By increasing the size of their estates, they were able to mitigate the consequences of declining rents; by fully exploiting whatever resources were specific to their own manors and lands, they

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128 B.L. Cotton Claudius A XIII, ff. 57-57d.

129 Bodl. Lib. Wood Empt. 7, ff. 160d-161 (mispaginated as ff. 180d, 182d), 163d

130 *Ibid.*, f. 170.

131 *Ibid.*, ff. 106 132-132d.

132 *Ibid.*, f. 137d.

133 *Ibid.*, f139d. For additions, see *ibid.*, ff. 138-139d.

were protected against falling prices in other areas of the economy and by converting their arable to pasture to graze both sheep and cattle, they not only solved the twin problems of empty tenements and shortage of labour, but they were also in the best position to benefit from the growing demand for wool and hides in the later decades of the fifteenth century.

Even if our study of the financial plight of the gentry were confined to a consideration of their estates, we should have good reason to feel confident about their economic well-being. However, although the estate was the gentry's major source of income, it may not have been the only source. K.B. McFarlane, in his analysis of the financial position of the higher nobility, cogently argues that it is a fallacy to propose that "falling rents meant a poorer family".<sup>134</sup> McFarlane's main concern was to illustrate the fact that among the nobility, their pool of estates became concentrated into fewer hands and that, therefore, "their landed incomes were rising, not steadily but, more accurately, by leaps..."<sup>135</sup> As we have seen, some gentry families, such as the Shirleys and the Turvilles benefited in a similar way through advantageous marriages to heiresses. But McFarlane also draws attention to the nobility's extra-landed sources of income, particularly the rewards of war service abroad and of royal patronage at home.<sup>136</sup> We therefore need to consider whether the gentry, too, received income from beyond the confines of their own acres.

During the first half of the fifteenth century, the rewards falling to those who followed Henry V or the duke of Bedford to France could be substantial. William Worcester claimed that Sir John Fastolf won 20,000 marks in 1424 at the battle of Verneuil.<sup>137</sup> Even if Fastolf received only a small proportion of this glittering prize, he was still well recompensed

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<sup>134</sup> K.B. McFarlane, The Nobility of Later Medieval England, Oxford, 1973, p.186.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p.59.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., pp.182-184, 194-195.

<sup>137</sup> K.B. McFarlane, England in the Fifteenth Century, London, 1981, p.178.

for his efforts. Although it is impossible to provide an accurate tally of his receipts as a professional soldier, the remittances he regularly sent from France to his agents in England during the 1420s and '30s amounted to several thousand pounds. In the 1450s, Sir John claimed from Henry VI's treasury a further £11,000 as his due for war services.<sup>138</sup> For such as he, "the fortunes of war" clearly had a literal, as opposed to the more usual metaphorical meaning.

There is no evidence, however, that the war enriched the Leicestershire gentry on the same scale that it advantaged Sir John Fastolf.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, we may assume that they received their share of the pickings. For instance, Thomas Everyngham, like Fastolf, was also present at the battle of Verneuil where 36 prisoners were taken.<sup>140</sup> But even if the benefits of booty and ransom were denied to some, and there is no evidence for that claim either, then less spectacular gains were assured through wages. In April, 1419, Sir Richard Hastings received £42-9-4 $\frac{1}{2}$  in wages for himself, five men at arms and eighteen archers for one eighth of a year's service.<sup>141</sup> Hastings was serving regularly in France; in 1416 he had agreed to take nine men at arms and eighteen archers for a quarter year at £2 per day for himself, a shilling for his men at arms and 6d. for his archers; and in 1421 his military services were again secured at the same fee for six months.<sup>142</sup> Ralph Shirley was also paid war wages of £111-1-0 $\frac{1}{2}$  for himself, seven men at arms and twenty-three archers for a quarter year.<sup>143</sup> Admittedly, such sums did not make fortunes but they

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179-181.

<sup>139</sup> For Leicestershire gentry who saw war service, see Appendix IV(a).

<sup>140</sup> Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France, ed. J. Stevenson, 2 vols., London, 1861-64, vol. II, pp.394-395.

<sup>141</sup> W.H. Dunham, "Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers 1461-1483", Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. 39, New Haven, 1955, p.137.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.136, 139-40.

<sup>143</sup> Stemmata Shirleiana, p.42.

helped to ensure the gentry's continuing participation in a war in which riches could be found through ransoms and booty.

Although war indentures reveal that the Leicestershire gentry agreed to serve mainly for limited periods, the chances for reward needed to balance even these temporary periods of neglect of their estates. After Bedford's death, when the tide of war began to turn in France's favour, the prospect of large-scale gain diminished. The Leicestershire gentry became less willing to venture across the Channel, as revealed in the paucity of indentures and payments from the 1440s. But all passion for glory and, perhaps, riches, was not entirely spent by 1453. At least one Leicestershire knight, Sir William Trussell, accompanied Edward IV to France in 1475.<sup>144</sup>

A more regular and secure income than that yielded by the uncertain outcome of war was provided by royal service at home. The Wardrobe Books of both Henry VI and Edward IV reveal routine payments of gifts and wages to gentry members of the household but the greatest gains were the result of occasional grants.<sup>145</sup> The king's knight, Sir Thomas Erdyngton, and his wife, Joyce, received James, earl of Wiltshire's confiscated manor of Bordesley in Warwickshire from a grateful Edward IV.<sup>146</sup> Ralph Shirley II's office as esquire of the chamber also probably helped to secure him the Duchy of Lancaster's wardenship of the forest of High Peak in Derbyshire which, in 1443, he farmed out for nine years at an annual rent of 40s.<sup>147</sup> Thomas Everyngham, another esquire of the chamber, was granted in 1460 the stewardship of Cottingham Soke in Yorkshire and 10 marks per year as wages.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> E101/71/6, m.987.

<sup>145</sup> Wardrobe Books: E101/408-412, *passim*. For Leicestershire gentry who were members of the household, see Appendix IV(b).

<sup>146</sup> *C.P.R.*, 1461-67, p.186.

<sup>147</sup> *Stemmata Shirleiana*, p.43; *Somerville*, i, p.568.

<sup>148</sup> *C.P.R.*, 1452-61, p.580.



While royal grants provided welcome additions to the gentry's income, the crown could resume them with ease. We have already seen how Thomas Palmer enjoyed the profits of lord Roos' confiscated manor of Freeby for five years.<sup>149</sup> However, the original grant had been for ten years.<sup>150</sup> Similarly, Thomas Everyngham's grant had been for life but, as the Yorkist regime exempted him from the pardon of 1461, it is clear that he did not long have the use of Cotingham's income.<sup>151</sup>

A third, and probably the most lucrative, source of non-landed income was through the legal profession. Over thirty Leicestershire gentry can be identified as having either legal training or legal knowledge.<sup>152</sup> One of these lawyers, Richard Neele, was appointed serjeant-at-law in 1463, king's serjeant in 1464 and a judge on the king's bench during the readeption. When Edward IV returned to his realm in 1471, Neele was then transferred to the court of common pleas.<sup>153</sup> As early as July, 1461, the king had granted him a life annuity of £40 from the farm of Derby for unspecified service.<sup>154</sup> Thomas Keble was another who rose to the upper pinnacles of the law. He was appointed serjeant-at-law in 1486 and king's serjeant in 1495 and he served as justice of assize on the northern circuit.<sup>155</sup> Ives argues that a very junior judge might earn about £250 per year from fees, retainers and practice, while a king's serjeant earned in excess of £300.<sup>156</sup> Given these substantial

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149 See above, pp.52-53.

150 C.P.R., 1461-67, p.182

151 Wedgwood, Biographies, p.308.

152 See Appendix IV(c)

153 Foss, Biographia Juridica, p.474; C.P.R. 1461-67, p.387; C.C.R., 1461-63, p.173.

154 C.P.R., 1461-67, p.96; C.C.R., 1461-68, p.20.

155 Ives, *op.cit.* pp.64- 67. Keble had been retained by the Duchy as legal advisor from 1478 before becoming the Duchy's attorney-general in 1483 (Somerville, p.406, He was also retained by the city of coventry for an undisclosed fee and acted on its behalf in a dispute with the Coventry Priory. The city later offered Keble the recordership - a post which he declined.(Coventry Leet Book, pp.477, 524-528).

156 Ives, *op.cit.*, p.323.

rewards, it is not surprising that Thomas Keble could add so extensively to his estate.<sup>157</sup>

Except for Neele and Keble, the aspirations or abilities of most of the Leicestershire lawyers were more modest. Three men, Henry Sotehill, Richard Hotoft and Everard Fielding, were retained by the Duchy of Lancaster and Sotehill even rose to become king's attorney.<sup>158</sup> But most lawyers probably drew their fees from relatives, neighbours and acquaintances. Thomas Berkeley acted as his father's attorney and Thomas Hotoft used his niece's in-laws, Robert and Thomas Staunton, as pleaders before chancery in his dispute with Thomas Keble.<sup>159</sup> As revealed in deeds, charters and wills, lawyers were also widely used by other gentry as feoffees, witnesses and executors. No doubt, in addition to their fees they received douceurs either as tokens of gratitude or, perhaps, as symbols of more sinister intent. Ralph Shirley II's gifts of a doe to Thomas Chatterley, clerk of the justice of assize, and a buck to the justice's son, arouse one's suspicions on that point.<sup>160</sup>

By grasping whatever economic opportunities were available, whether in war, in royal service or in the legal profession, many of the gentry were able further to augment their income from land and, in fact, to add to their holdings. This opportunism and diversity in their financial interests combined with the flexible management of their estates, ensured that the gentry survived better than most, and certainly better than the major religious houses, the economic rigours of the early fifteenth century. But the accumulation of capital and its investment in land and livestock promised not merely survival but burgeoning expansion during the century's closing decades. With a strengthening of

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<sup>157</sup> See above, p.69.

<sup>158</sup> Somerville, i, pp.425, 454, 564, 569, 570; C.P.R., 1461-67, p.475.

<sup>159</sup> C1/9/189; C1/40/290.

<sup>160</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/293.

the gentry's economic position we would also expect some flexing of their political muscle. Perhaps the audacity of the late-sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gentry does not merely have its roots in the great plunder after 1540 but can be traced back to the more prosaic realm of careful husbandry in the fifteenth.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> See W.G. Hoskins, The Age of Plunder, London, 1976; H.R. Trevor-Roper, The Gentry 1540-1640, *Econ Hist. Rev. Supplements*, I, London, 1953.

## Chapter IV

A County Community and the Politics of the Shire

A possible hazard facing the historian who studies the gentry within the boundaries of a single shire is that the county itself may assume a greater significance in his thinking than it in fact possessed for the knights and esquires of the time. To express the problem another way, we may be tempted to assume that beyond the confines of their households and manors, the gentry saw themselves as part of a wider shire community. Yielding to such temptation is not entirely a self-indulgence, for the concept of a shire community was by no means foreign to contemporaries in the fifteenth century. From the point of view of the central government, the county was an administrative unit.<sup>1</sup>

In most cases, each of these units had its own sheriff. Admittedly, the sheriff was appointed by the king and accountable at the Exchequer but he was also drawn from the local community and, therefore, was sensitive to its needs. Even in those instances where two counties shared a sheriff, each had its own shire court to which members of the community owed suit. As the shire court's judicial function waned, local men still retained control over the administration of justice in their counties by being appointed to commissions of the peace. But the shire court continued to have a political rôle. Here, the county came together to receive information about government policy and to elect their representatives who would sit in parliament pro communitate

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<sup>1</sup> For the following see H. Cam, Liberties and Communities in Medieval England, Cambridge, 1944, pp.236-247; Sir F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I, 2 vols., 2nd. edn., Cambridge, 1952, i, pp.532-536; J.R. Maddicott, "The County Community and the Making of Public Opinion in Fourteenth-Century England", T.R.H.S., 5th series, 28, 1978, pp.27-43.

comitatus.<sup>2</sup> These M.P.s were responsible for conveying the community's political voice to London, while the county in its turn assumed responsibility for paying their expenses. In addition, the county was taxed as a unit, with local men assessing individual taxpayers within its borders, collecting the levy and ensuring the safe delivery of monies to Exchequer officials.

Although there is no doubt that the county formed a clearly-defined administrative unit, some historians have taken the matter further to argue in favour of a cohesive shire community. Sir Frederick Pollock and F.W. Maitland view the county as "not a mere stretch of land, a governmental district; it is an organized body of men; it is a communitatus".<sup>3</sup> Helen Cam also rejects any notion that the shire community was merely a convenient administrative construct designed to serve the needs of the central government. Instead, she sees it as "an organism, a unit held together by proximity, by local feeling and above all by common living traditions and common responsibilities."<sup>4</sup> J.E.A. Jolliffe similarly believes that "common obligation created common outlook".<sup>5</sup> Writing of the decades leading up to the "Period of Reform" in the thirteenth century, J.R. Maddicott can point to "the self-confident communities of the counties" whose assertiveness "possessed an internal dynamic of its own, derived largely from the strength of the local community and from the leadership provided by a powerful knightly class".<sup>6</sup> For these historians, the community of the shire had a real existence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cam, op.cit., p.236.

<sup>3</sup> Pollock and Maitland, op.cit., p.534.

<sup>4</sup> Cam, op.cit., p.247.

<sup>5</sup> J.E.A. Jolliffe, The Constitutional History of Medieval England, 4th edn., London, 1961, p.307.

<sup>6</sup> J.R. Maddicott, "Magna Carta and the Local Community 1215-1259", Past and Present, no.102, 1984, pp.64, 63.

<sup>7</sup> See Cam, op.cit., p.236.

However, that the gentry considered themselves to have been part of this shire community, let alone its leaders, is a proposition upon which opinion is now divided. Recent studies have suggested that the county had little or no part to play in determining the gentry's social or political affiliations.<sup>8</sup> According to these studies, social horizons were determined by the pattern of landholding and by the kinship network, neither of which was influenced by administrative divisions. At the same time, the fundamental political unit was the aristocratic affinity which, depending on a magnate's territorial holdings, may or may not have coincided with the county boundary.<sup>9</sup> Nigel Saul, on the other hand, while recognizing that retaining was inimical to the gentry's sense of identity with the shire, nevertheless argues that it was the idea of community which had triumphed by the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Michael Bennett similarly argues that for most of the gentry "the county ... provided the fundamental source of cohesion", though he also admits that among the upper gentry in particular, their interests and affiliations were sometimes wider than the county.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these diametrically opposed ideas, historians have eschewed giving vent to those vitriolic humours which devastatingly burned their mark on, but enlivened, the "Storm over the Gentry". In fact, hitherto there has been small need to resolve a conflict which can be

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<sup>8</sup> S.M. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century*, Derbyshire Record Society, vol. VIII, Chesterfield, 1983, pp.56-59; G.G. Astill, "The Medieval Gentry: A Study in Leicestershire Society, 1350-1399", unpublished University of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, 1977, pp.81-129;

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *op.cit.*, pp.57-58, Astill, *op.cit.*, pp.120-122; M. Cherry, "The Courtenay Earls of Devon: The Formation and Disintegration of a Late Medieval Aristocratic Affinity", *Southern History*, 1, 1979, pp.71, 76ff; C. Carpenter, "Political Society in Warwickshire c.1401-72", unpublished University of Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1976, pp.94-98.

<sup>10</sup> N. Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*, Oxford, 1981, pp.258, 259.

<sup>11</sup> M.J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism. Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"*, Cambridge, 1983, pp.21, 26 and *passim*.

easily accommodated by appeal to regional differences.<sup>12</sup> Were the issue merely a question of two types of communities then such restraint might be justified; but the problem cuts deeper than that. At its core lies the prospect of two kinds of gentry. On the one hand we see a gentry, if not entirely parochial in its outlook, at least restricted in its social horizons and constrained politically within the confines of a magnate affinity. On the other hand we may view the gentry as forming part of a wider social community, the shire community, in which they find a more independent political voice. In short, our perception of the gentry as social and political entities will depend largely on whether or not they considered themselves to have been leading members of the community of the shire. In order to address this issue we shall need first to determine the associations forged among the gentry. In the absence of personal correspondence, these relationships are best revealed through documents relating to land transactions which were an integral part of estate management.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, a gentry estate was rarely a static entity, It was usually subject to the twin processes of disintegration and consolidation. Depletion could result from sales, gifts for charitable or pious purposes or to younger children and, temporarily, from a widow's claim to her dower rights. Additional lands might be acquired by inheritance, through marriage to an heiress, by royal grant from a forfeited estate or by a simple process of purchase.<sup>13</sup> These changes to a landlord's holdings were seldom the sole concern of the contracting parties. As others, either spuriously or justifiably, might discover dormant rights to the lands in question, it was necessary to involve a wider group of people as witnesses to deeds and charters. This

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp.238-239.

<sup>13</sup> See above, p.50 and passim. See too, Appendix III.

need is not to suggest that the witnesses all had to be present at the sealing of a charter but their permission had to be sought, probably in writing, before their names were used.<sup>14</sup> We may therefore assume, at the very least, an acquaintance between the principals and their witnesses. These witnesses could vouch for the authenticity of the agreement were it ever to become the subject of dispute or of litigation between hostile claimants. The disposal of personal property in wills similarly required the assistance of executors, supervisors and witnesses.

Furthermore, the fifteenth-century gentry recognized the value of entrusting their lands to feoffees to the use of the feoffor. The origins of enfeoffments to uses are obscure but it seems that the gentry themselves were the first to employ the device and that only from the 1340s onwards did the nobility increasingly follow the example set by their social inferiors.<sup>15</sup> Thereafter, the growth of enfeoffments was rapid.<sup>16</sup> Given the flexibility they afforded the feoffor and the financial savings for his heir, such growth is not unexpected. The cestui que use was able to enjoy the benefits of his estate during his lifetime and he could then direct his feoffees to deliver seisin according to his will after his death. In this way, younger sons or daughters could be provided for at the expense of the heir without their benefactor having to make a gift while he was still alive. Alternatively, the feoffees could be directed to deliver seisin to the heir who thereby would escape the burdens of feudal incidents such as

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<sup>14</sup> Transcripts of Charters relating to the Gilbertine Houses of Sixle, Ormsby, Catley, Bullington, and Alvingham, ed. F.M. Stenton, Publications of the Lincoln Record Society, vol. 18, Horncastle, 1922, p.xxxi.

<sup>15</sup> Enfeoffments to uses are discussed at length by S.F.C. Milson, Historical Foundations of the Common Law, London, 1969, pp.169-188; J.M.W. Bean, The Decline of English Feudalism 1215-1540, Manchester, 1969, pp.104-179; T.F.T. Plucknett, A Concise History of the Common Law, 4th edn., London, 1948, pp.544-555.

<sup>16</sup> Bean, op.cit., p.120.



wardship, marriage and entry fines.<sup>17</sup> The estate, therefore, was not simply a source of economic profit; the gentry's need for witnesses and feoffees ensured that it was also a source of social interaction. If we can unravel the relationships and affiliations which this interaction produced, we may be better placed to understand the internal politics of the shire.

The most immediate relationships were those provided by a network of kinfolk.<sup>18</sup> As we would expect, members of the immediate family were often called upon to act as feoffees, witnesses to deeds and charters or as executors of, and witnesses to, wills. Sir Robert Moton I used his brother, Alan, as a feoffee for his manor of Peckleton in Leicestershire and another brother, Richard, as feoffee for his lands in Staffordshire.<sup>19</sup> When Thomas Hasilrigge and his son, William, leased lands at Noseley to the warden and chaplains of the chantry there, the witnesses to the indenture included two members of the Hasilrigge family, one from Noseley and another from nearby Rolleston.<sup>20</sup> The executor of Everard Fielding's will were his brother, Martin, and his son and heir, William, while Ralph Woodford's three younger sons, Mathew, John and Robert, were his executors.<sup>21</sup>

In-laws also served as executors and business associates. John Shirley's executors included his brother-in-law, Henry Willoughby, whose selection for the task may have been designed to safeguard the interests of his sister, John's wife, Eleanor Shirley.<sup>22</sup> Willoughby

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17 For the benefits of enfeoffment to use see J.L. Barton, "The Medieval Use", The Law Quarterly Review, 81, 1965, pp.572-574; K.B. McFarlane, The Nobility of Later Medieval England, Oxford, 1973, pp.68-73; Milson, op.cit., pp.176-180; Plucknett, op.cit., pp.546, 550-552; Bean, op.cit., pp.136ff.

18 Gentry family relationships are discussed at greater length in chapter VI below.

19 C1/13/163; C1/15/124; C.C.R., 1461-68, p.147.

20 L.R.O. DG21/28

21 PROB11/18/5/30; PROB11/11/23/182v-183v.

22 L.R.O.26D53/1947

subsequently became a feoffee of John and Eleanor's son, Ralph III, as did William Littleton, the husband of Ralph's wife's sister.<sup>23</sup> When the widowed Margaret German leased her water-mill and fishing rights at Cossington, her brother-in-law, Ralph Butler, husband of Margaret's sister, Elizabeth, acted as a witness to the agreement.<sup>24</sup> John Bellers II selected as feoffees for his manors of Eye Kettleby and Sysonby, his brother-in-law, Nicholas Griffin, and Ralph Woodford who was the husband of Bellers' niece, Elizabeth.<sup>25</sup> Two members of Ralph Shirley II's council were Thomas Staunton, a cadet of Ralph's first wife's family, and Sir Thomas Blount, Ralph's father-in-law by his second marriage.<sup>26</sup>

However, despite evidence which points to co-operation within families, it is quite clear that the family did not constitute a power-bloc or a sodality whose members were steadfast in their loyalty to one another. The Leicestershire gentry had sufficient reminders to impress upon them the truth of this fact. For example, among those who stole twenty-six sheep from Sir Robert Woodford's manor at Ashby Folville, was Sir Robert's own grandson and ultimate heir, Ralph Woodford.<sup>27</sup> Rights to property were later at the centre of a ten-year feud between Ralph and his uncle, Walter Woodford, and a dispute between Sir Robert Moton and his daughter-in-law, Margaret, was the subject of protracted proceedings before chancery.<sup>28</sup>

The growth in chancery's activity as a court of equity to adjudicate in disputes between feoffors or their heirs and feoffees further reveals

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<sup>23</sup> L.R.O.26D53/315,543.

<sup>24</sup> L.R.O. 44'28/116. For Margaret's relationship to Butler, see L.R.O. 44'28/115.

<sup>25</sup> C1/56/236

<sup>26</sup> L.R.O. 26D53/344.

<sup>27</sup> L.R.O. 5D33/172.

<sup>28</sup> C1/13/10; C1/13/162-163; C1/15/125-126; C1/22/114a-d.

that the trust placed in feoffees was often misplaced.<sup>29</sup> As often as not, it seems, family members were as adept at abusing that trust as non-family members were. Jane Staunton enfeoffed her father- and brother-in-law with manors bought from the proceeds of the sale of her inherited lands. These men then sold the manors for their own profit without any compensation to Jane.<sup>30</sup> Ellen Bellers similarly entrusted her manors to her father-in-law who in turn proceeded to treat the property as if it were his own.<sup>31</sup> While associations through marriage certainly extended the pool from which the gentry might draw their feoffees, the experiences of the Woodfords, Jane Staunton and Ellen Bellers reveal that members of both the immediate family and the wider kin still required rigorous vetting before appointment to positions of trust. It is hardly surprising, then, that the gentry should call on the services of a wider network of associates than could be supplied by the family and kin.

The limits to the gentry's reliance upon family members is revealed by Thomas Palmer's transfer of his manor of Lubenham to his daughter and son-in-law, Katherine and William Neville.<sup>32</sup> Palmer had enfeoffed nine men with his manor and the deed of transfer was witnessed by a further seven named men and unspecified "others". None of the named witnesses and only one of the feoffees, a John Palmer, was a relative of Thomas. In Thomas Erdyngton's lease of his capital messuage in Braunstone, none of the nine named witnesses was a relative.<sup>33</sup> When Erdyngton later sold his interests in Braunstone, the thirteen named witnesses to his quitclaim again did not include

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<sup>29</sup> For the fifteenth-century growth in appeals to chancery concerning enfeoffments to use, see M.E. Avery, "The History of the Equitable Jurisdiction of Chancery before 1460", *B.I.H.R.*, xlii, no. 106, 1969, pp.130-132.

<sup>30</sup> C1/58/322.

<sup>31</sup> C1/9/356.

<sup>32</sup> L.R.O. DE220/58 (bundle MTD/54).

<sup>33</sup> L.R.O. DG5/2.

relatives.<sup>34</sup> Six witnesses were, in fact, small-scale landholders, probably tenants, in Braunstone. No doubt their involvement was to safeguard the future interests of the purchaser. Limited reliance upon family members is also revealed in an enfeoffment made by Bartholomew Brokesby in April, 1445. Brokesby enfeoffed ten men in all his lands and tenements in twelve villages scattered within the area bounded by Dalby-on-the-Wolds, Little Dalby and Barkby.<sup>35</sup> Of the ten feoffees, only one, John Brokesby of Frisby, was a relative. Obviously, as with Thomas Palmer and Thomas Erdyngton, the expectation of family solidarity was not Bartholomew's foremost criterion for the selection of his associates.

Two of Brokesby's feoffees, William Wright of Gaddesby and John Bret of Rotherby, were his neighbours in these villages and their local knowledge of who owned which lands and by what right would have been an important consideration in their selection. Brokesby may even have bought some land from the Brets a few years earlier, for in 1442, Agnes Bret, John's wife, delivered seisin to Bartholomew Brokesby of a piece of meadow in Ashby Folville.<sup>36</sup> John's brother, William, had certainly bought lands from Brokesby, for he specifically refers to this purchase in his will.<sup>37</sup>

The reason for Nicholas Gerveys' selection as one of Brokesby's feoffees is not so immediately apparent. At Harby, he was five miles distant from Brokesby's outlying tenement at Holwell. However, in 1440, Gerveys had acquired a messuage, seven tofts and 180 acres of land at Chadwell and Wycomb as his share of the Hauberk inheritance.<sup>38</sup> As

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<sup>34</sup> L.R.O. DG5/5.

<sup>35</sup> Bodl.Lib. Wood Empt.7, ff.164v-165 (contemporary mispagination 183v-184).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 103v-104.

<sup>37</sup> L.R.O. 5D33/180.

<sup>38</sup> *Pedigrees*, p.80; *W.H.R.*, no.1136.

these lands were only about three miles from Holwell we may classify Nicholas Gerveys as a neighbour, too.

A further two feoffees, John Dansey senior and his son, John junior, lived at Somerby, just over two miles from Brokesby's manor and lands at Little Dalby. The Danseys also held lands of their own in Little Dalby and at Frisby, near Brokesby's caput honoris.<sup>39</sup> It may appear, therefore, that, as in the cases of William Wright and John Bret, the Danseys were chosen as feoffees because they were Brokesby's neighbours. But the relationship between the two families goes deeper than that. Bartholomew and John senior were acting as feoffees in the manor of Ashby-de-la-Zouch for Joan Beauchamp, lady Abergavenny, as early as 1417.<sup>40</sup> Brokesby was one of Joan's trusted servants who became an executor of, and a beneficiary under, her will. As Dansey also received a bequest, it is clear that he, too, was a Beauchamp retainer.<sup>41</sup> After Joan's death in 1435, the two men delivered seisin of the manor of Haselbeche in Northamptonshire to James Butler, earl of Ormond, husband of Joan's daughter, Joan.<sup>42</sup> A few months later, they conveyed lady Abergavenny's manor of Ashby-de-la Zouch to Humphrey, duke of Gloucester.<sup>43</sup> By 1440, Brokesby and Dansey were enfeoffed with lands in Essex with a reversion to Ormond, so it seems that when Joan Beauchamp died, they had promptly transferred their services to her son-in-law.<sup>44</sup>

None of the remaining four feoffees was a neighbour. Why Thomas Neele of Owston or Robert Neuton of Belgrave were enfeoffed must remain a mystery, though Neuton was later a juror at Brokesby's

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<sup>39</sup> C.I.P.M., 14 Hen.VII, no.133.

<sup>40</sup> T.L.A.S., vol.15, 1927-28, p.93.

<sup>41</sup> C67/38, ms.27; Dugdale, ii, pp.1031-32.

<sup>42</sup> C.P.R. 1429-36, p.506; G.E.C., x, p.125.

<sup>43</sup> H.M.C. Hastings, i, 1.

<sup>44</sup> C.P.R., 1436-41, p.435.

inquisition post mortem, a fact which suggests that he was knowledgeable about the disposition of the family's lands.<sup>45</sup> He may even have been a servant. Richard Byngham of Nottinghamshire and John Forster of Knighton, south-east of Leicester, were more distant still from Brokesby's lands. Byngham was a justice of the king's bench and it is possible that his involvement with Brokesby, also a lawyer, was through the law.<sup>46</sup> However, it is more likely that Byngham and Forster's association with Bartholomew was a product of their attachment to the Butlers. Byngham, like Brokesby, was a feoffee of James Butler junior by 1447 and two years earlier, John Forster, yeoman, had been granted the office of the bailiwick of Butler's manor of Ashby-de-la-Zouch.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to listing feoffees, Brokesby's indenture of 1445 was witnessed by seven named men and "many others" unnamed. Six of these men came from the same general area where Bartholomew held his estate in the north-east of the county. Some, such as Robert Woodford of Ashby Folville and Thorpe Arnold, William Villers of Brooksby, Walter Keble of Rearsby and Rotherby and Thomas Derby of Gaddesby, were Brokesby's very close neighbours in these villages. Only John Aubrey of Osgathorpe in West Goscote, about sixteen miles from Frisby, was not a neighbour. Like the Danseys, Richard Byngham and John Forster, Aubrey's association may have been through service to Joan Beauchamp. A William Aubrey, possibly John's father or some other relative, had been one of Joan's feoffees in the manor of Ashby-de-la-Zouch before 1421.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> C139/136/43 ms.2.

<sup>46</sup> H.M.C. Hastings, i, 1; C66/414, ms.20d. and Appendix IV(c).

<sup>47</sup> H.M.C. Hastings, i, 1, Byngham was sufficiently close to Brokesby to be made one of the executors of his will (C.C.R., 1447-57, p.358).

<sup>48</sup> T.L.A.S., vol.15, 1927-28, p.93.

Bartholomew Brokesby, therefore, seems to have had a number of criteria in mind when he selected his feoffees and witnesses. The first, most important criterion was that he should include men from his own area whose local knowledge about the owner's rights would assist in the estate's protection. As a bonus, these neighbours, by the fact that they were party to the indenture, were thereby removed from the pool of possible claimants or disputants who might threaten Brokesby's peaceful possession of his lands. A second criterion was that associates with whom he had worked closely in other fields, in this case in the Beauchamp and Butler affinities, should be approached for their help. The overlord could be requested to exert his or her influence were any of the feoffees or witnesses tempted to abuse their trust. Third, it was clearly a good idea to include lawyers such as, in this case, Richard Byngham, Thomas Berkeley and Walter Keble.<sup>49</sup> These men could ensure that the documents were "good, true and lawfully made".<sup>50</sup> Finally, the inclusion of John Brokesby as a feoffee, indicates that trusted family members could be called upon for their assistance. Of course, these categories were not mutually exclusive; John Brokesby was both a relative and a neighbour; the two John Danseys were neighbours and John senior was also an associate in the retinue of lady Abergavenny; Richard Byngham was a lawyer and possibly an associate, too, in the retinue of James Butler.

Furthermore, in Brokesby's selection of his helpers, we can discern two circles of association, one narrow and parochial, the other, while neither national nor regional, certainly much more diffuse than the former. This fact raises a number of important questions. First, we need to consider whether Brokesby's experience was typical of the rest of the

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<sup>49</sup> See Appendix IV(c).

<sup>50</sup> As did Robert Moton in another context (C1/14/24).

gentry. Second, if the forces of localism were uppermost, as is implied by the gentry's reliance upon neighbours, then their social horizons may be dismissed as being exceedingly narrow. We therefore need to test the relative strength of these forces. A third question relates to the degree of diffusion in gentry relationships for it is upon this that the vexed question of whether there was a county community will largely depend.

A closer scrutiny of the associates of other gentry reveals that they, like Bartholomew Brokesby, relied heavily on neighbours as witnesses to their transactions. The witnesses to John German's grant to Robert Hanson of his mill at Cossington included Thomas Erdyngton of Barrow-on-Soar, Richard Walsh of Wanlip, Richard Neele of Prestwold, Thomas Farnham of Quorndon and Robert Chamberlain of Seagrave.<sup>51</sup> The most distant of these men was Richard Neele who lived five miles from Cossington. All the others lived well within a three mile radius of Cossington. That the selection of associates was partly determined by the distribution of their estates can be seen, too, in Thomas Erdyngton's own lease of his capital messuage in Braunston.<sup>52</sup> One of the witnesses, William Hastings, lived at Kirby, about two miles from Braunstone. William Babthorpe, another witness, came from Nottinghamshire, but his wife's manor of Aylestone was less than two miles from Braunstone. Two further witnesses, John Nicol and John Tailor, were non-gentry neighbours in Braunstone itself. Similarly, in a quitclaim by Sir John Trussell to Thomas Palmer's father, William, of his manor and lands in Holt and Prestgrave, the four named witnesses came from Holt, Drayton and Brighthurst, all within a mile or so of Prestgrave.<sup>53</sup> The almost universal reliance upon neighbours seems to confirm the triumph of

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51 L.R.O. 44'28/110.

52 L.R.O. DG5/2.

53 L.R.O. DE221/4/1/36.



localism in the gentry's business dealings. As we have already suggested, there were very good practical reasons for involving neighbours in land transactions. Given that one of the gentry's prime concerns was the protection of the estate, their choice was not one of whether neighbours would participate in their affairs but rather of which neighbours would do so.

Thomas Erdyngton's lease and Sir John Trussell's quitclaim further reveal that witnesses were often drawn from non-gentle landholders. Very rarely, though, did such men fill the higher position of trust, that of feoffee.<sup>54</sup> Instead, the gentry preferred their social equals to act in this capacity. Thomas Palmer's feoffees in his purchased manor of Lubenham included John Boyville, Everard Dygby and John Bellers.<sup>55</sup> Boyville came from Stockerston, about two and a half miles from Palmer's caput. Dygby's Leicestershire manor of Tilton was about nine miles from Holt but his Rutland manor of Stoke Dry was only a mile from the county border and about three miles from Palmer's residence. Bellers came from Eye Kettleby in the Wreake valley, sixteen miles from Palmer's manors but he also held a manor at Medbourne, less than two miles from Holt.

However, the gentry's social horizons were not quite as parochial as this evidence might lead us to believe. All of the knightly families, about two thirds of the distrainees and just over 40% of the esquires held lands in other, usually neighbouring, counties. These families often used outsiders as witnesses, feoffees and executors. Marriage also helped to extend the gentry's body of associates, not only beyond their immediate neighbourhoods but also beyond the county boundary. John

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<sup>54</sup> A notable exception was John Belgrave's enfeoffment of John Reynold with all his lands in Leicestershire (C.I.P.M., 3 Hen.VII, no.419).

<sup>55</sup> L.R.O. DE220/58.

Coton of Thurcaston and Keyham used four of his Fitzherbert relatives, three of them brothers-in-law, as feoffees for his Leicestershire manors.<sup>56</sup> His only Leicestershire feoffee was Robert Moton of Peckleton who was not a neighbour. The Shirleys were another family who regularly relied on the services of their Derbyshire neighbours and kin.<sup>57</sup> Although the pattern of landholding and marriage helped to broaden the gentry's social horizons beyond the parochial, our evidence thus far suggests that there was no sense of a community of the shire which both determined, and was reflected by, gentry associations.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, as John Coton's use of Robert Moton as a feoffee reveals, localism, the pattern of landholding and family networks all had their limits as determinants of gentry associations. Moton was not one of Coton's neighbours; nor was he a relative. John Bellers' feoffees included Richard Neele and John Farnham, each of whom lived about a dozen miles from Bellers' manors of Eye Kettleby and Sisonby.<sup>59</sup> Neither Farnham nor Neele was a relative of Bellers. Richard Boyville, a nephew of Thomas Boyville, held a double-nucleated estate at Odstone and Turlangton but two of his feoffees, Thomas Palmer and Thomas Farnham, neither of whom was related to Boyville, lived about seven and twelve miles respectively from the closest nucleus.<sup>60</sup> One of the witnesses to John Trussell's quitclaim of Trussell manor at Holt to Thomas Palmer was Richard Hastings of Kirby Muxloe.<sup>61</sup> Once again, there was no family relationship between Hastings and Trussell or Palmer. Hastings did, however, also hold manors at Fleckney, Kilby,

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<sup>56</sup> C140/66/34.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Ralph Shirley II's feoffees for his manor of Whatton, Edward Longford from Derbyshire and Ralph's brothers-in-law, Walter and Thomas Blount, also from Derbyshire (L.R.O. 72'30/1/37).

<sup>58</sup> This is the conclusion reached by Wright, *op.cit.*, p.58; Astill, *op.cit.*, p.81 ff.

<sup>59</sup> C140/52/27.

<sup>60</sup> C140/17/23.

<sup>61</sup> L.R.O. DE221/4/1/66.

Newton Harcourt and Wistow which, like Holt, were all in the hundred of Gartree. The closest of these manors to Holt was Fleckney, over ten miles distant. Clearly, in these cases, the pattern of landholding and the kinship network had little part to play in the selection of associates. One is led to wonder, therefore, what these men, Hastings, Palmer, Farnham and Neele may have had in common.

A survey of available deeds and charters and of inquisitions post mortem in fact reveals these men or their heirs in high demand as witnesses or feoffees. Furthermore, in many cases they had no geographical or kinship links with the persons they were assisting. Nor were they alone in appearing as associates with almost tedious regularity. In addition to the Neeles and Hastingses among the knightly families, appear the Woodfords, Motons, Berkeleys, Trussells and, to a lesser extent, Thomas Erdyngton II. Palmer's fellow distrainees who were in demand included Boyvilles, Bellerses, Brokesbys, Asshebys, Dygbys, Hotofts and, less often, Pulteneys and Hasilrigges. Esquire families who regularly associated with other gentry were the Stauntons, Villerses, Kebles, Whattons and Sherards. Less regular associates included Walshes, Wyvilles, Skeffingtons and Entwysells.

There is no single thread which unifies each and every entry on this list of twenty-six individuals and families. However, a sizeable minority, over 46%, provided the workhorses of county administration as justices of the peace, commissioners, sheriffs or escheators. About 54% represented the shire in parliament. Over 61% were lawyers.<sup>62</sup> But before we consider the significance of these figures or try to draw conclusions from them one further piece of evidence, which may have a

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<sup>62</sup> These calculations are based on Appendices IV(c), V and VI. See, too, chapter V below.

bearing on the debate about whether there was a community of the shire, must be produced.

On 11 May, 1446, a declaration was drawn up to the effect that Elizabeth, wife of Robert Sherard, had given birth to a daughter, "christened and called Joan".<sup>63</sup> This strange document has survived among the Sherard papers but, given its contents, it is very likely that other copies were made for wider circulation. Joan, we are told, lived for only two hours. After her death, her body was taken to the parish church at Stapleford and buried in the churchyard there. No doubt, such personal tragedies were commonplace in fifteenth-century Leicestershire. Less commonplace was the perceived need to trumpet the Sherard's loss through a declaration "unto all Christian people [whom] these presents here to see or hear". From what we know about the Sherard family and from oblique hints in the declaration itself, however, we are in a position to hazard, not a complete explanation, but some general observations.

The declaration states that Robert was the son and heir of Laurence Sherard "that now is deceased" and that his wife, Elizabeth, was daughter and heir of John Durant, esquire, late of Cottesmore in Rutlandshire. Had their daughter, Joan, lived, she would have been heir general to the Sherard and Durant estates. The declaration is at pains further to point out that the child was "of many divers persons herd loud crie". It also stresses that it is reporting truthfully and that anyone doubting its veracity would be placing his soul in peril. We can only conclude that by 1446, there must have been some dispute about the heir to the Sherard or Durant inheritance or, indeed, to both. Perhaps there was malicious gossip that Robert Sherard was claiming that his marriage had never been consummated, thereby leaving him free to seek an annulment. Perhaps there were rumours that Joan had survived infancy. What is

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<sup>63</sup> L.R.O. DG40/481.

certain, is that the declaration was not specifically designed simply to forestall any problems or disputes that may arise in the future. By May 1446, the problem, whatever it was, was already present and the truth needed to be told immediately. As the pronouncement puts it, "in time of need [it is] damnable to [with]hold it".

Although there was clearly some form of crisis in the Sherard family, our prime concern is with the thirty-five men, the professed authors of the declaration, who tried to resolve the problem. It is unlikely that fifteenth-century childbirth had become such a public spectacle as to warrant the presence of thirty-five shire worthies. Obviously, these men had been informed by trustworthy witnesses of the circumstances of Joan Sherard's birth, brief life and untimely death. Nevertheless, their involvement does reveal the breadth of social contacts available to a member of the gentry. Nine of the thirty-five were clerics, mainly Leicestershire abbots and priors, One was a lord, namely Edward Grey, lord Ferrers of Groby. Three, Robert Bagoutt, John of Bothe and John of Stanley (or Stoneleigh, near Belvoir?), have eluded my researches but the remaining twenty-two belonged to the gentry and overwhelmingly to the Leicestershire gentry. Only three men, Robert and John Browe and Thomas Tunstall, can be positively identified as outsiders, while a fourth, Thomas Flower, may have been an outsider, too. The Browes held the manor of Teigh in Rutland, about three and a half miles from the Sherard's caput at Stapleford.<sup>64</sup> The two Roberts, Browe and Sherard, had also fought together at Agincourt in 1415.<sup>65</sup> By 1446, therefore, their relationship was longstanding. The relationship between Sherard and Tunstall was equally long-standing, for Tunstall

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<sup>64</sup> V.C.H. Rutl. i, p.178; ibid., ii, p.153.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., i, p.178; E101/69/5, ms. 419.

had also fought at Agincourt.<sup>66</sup> Thomas Flower, though, poses a problem. As early as 1422, a Roger Flower, father of Thomas, had acquired lands in Leicestershire at Leesthorpe, less than four miles from Stapleford.<sup>67</sup> These Flowers came from Oakham and were one of Rutland's leading gentry families.<sup>68</sup> But there was also a Thomas Flower of Edmundsthorpe in Leicestershire who witnessed Margaret Chitlow's quitclaim of lands to Thomas Berkeley in 1459.<sup>69</sup> The two Thomases may, of course, have been the same person, in which case our problem disappears. But even were they not, regardless of whether Robert Sherard's associate came from Leesthorpe or Edmundsthorpe, he was still a Sherard neighbour.

Of the remaining eighteen Leicestershire gentlemen, half were either relatives or neighbours or both. They included Sir Robert Woodford, Sir Laurence Berkeley and his son, Thomas, Bartholomew Brokesby, Anthony and John Malory and Thomas Assheby. All of these men were related to Sherard by marriage; Woodford, the Berkeleys and Brokesby were neighbours, too. John Bellers was also party to the declaration. He was not a relative but he was a neighbour. Surprisingly, none of Robert Sherard's brothers was associated with the pronouncement. Perhaps their attitude was part of the problem which this strange document was intended to solve. But their exclusion may also suggest that the involvement of Thomas Assheby, for example, or Sir Robert Woodford or the Berkeleys was not dictated by their familial relationship to Sherard but by some different consideration.

The other signatories to the declaration, however, are of greater significance to the argument. These men, who included William Villers

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<sup>66</sup> D.K.R. 44th report, p.560.

<sup>67</sup> V.C.H. Leics., v, p.278.

<sup>68</sup> V.C.H. Rutl., i, p.178.

<sup>69</sup> B.L. Harl. 265, f.135.

of Brokesby, Walter Keble of Rearsby, Richard Hotoft of Humberstone and Everard Dygby of Tilton, were drawn from much further afield and none was closely related to Sherard. Sir Robert Moton from distant Peckleton was also involved, as was Sir William Trussell from even more distant Elmesthorpe. It may be recalled that these gentry were among those who time and time again keep appearing as associates of their peers from all over the county; that they provided the workhorses for county administration and that the majority were lawyers.<sup>70</sup> Sherard himself was one of their number. Collectively, they appear to have constituted a shire establishment whose appeal may have resided in a combination of their administrative ability and legal training. Not only did they defend the gentry's interest within the county but their fellows also displayed a marked readiness to entrust them with the shire's voice in parliament. If this establishment provided the shire with an idea of community then that fellowship was something that was taken for granted; it did not need to be constantly reaffirmed in commonplace transactions but, as Robert Sherard's associates in 1446 reveal, it could surface in times of difficulty or crisis. Had Sherard merely been looking for powerful allies, he could have found them closer to hand in Rutland which was only about a mile distant from his caput, or in Lincolnshire or even Nottinghamshire which were about five and ten miles respectively from his residence. Instead, he almost exclusively turned his gaze inwards into his native county. He sought the assistance of Leicestershire allies, specifically men of his own shire community.

In part, this social cohesion may have been the product of Leicestershire's compactness. Leicester, the administrative centre of the shire, was also the geographical centre. Apart from the Vale of Belvoir, which formed an isolated wedge between Nottinghamshire

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<sup>70</sup> See above, p.99.

and Lincolnshire and where gentry holdings were sparse anyway, few areas of the county lay beyond fifteen to twenty miles of the county borough. Here, the meetings of the shire court were held, meetings which, for parliamentary elections, could attract as many as seventy representatives of the county's leading families.<sup>71</sup> In Leicester, too, a number of these families owned tenements.<sup>72</sup> No doubt, some of the produce of their farms was sold in the town's markets. Leicester and its shire court could provide a focus for social interaction among the gentry from all over the county and thereby help to broaden their social horizons beyond the immediate neighbourhood or kinship network.

However, this emphasis on Leicestershire's compactness should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the view that geographic peculiarities were uppermost in providing its gentry with a concept of the community of the shire. Nor is there any suggestion that the social experiences of the Leicestershire gentry were radically different from those of the gentry in other counties. In fact, the argument about Leicestershire has a more general application. It need not be the case that the gentry saw themselves as members of one community rather than another; they were not either narrowly parochial or members of a wider shire community; they were both. Rather like the ellipses in a Venn diagram, the social circles of the fifteenth-century gentry sometimes overlapped and sometimes one circle engulfed another. If we emphasise the purely local community at the expense of the community of the shire, then that emphasis is partly the product of the nature of the evidence which tends to focus attention on entirely local concerns. Not so well documented are those rarer moments of crisis

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<sup>71</sup> C219/14/1, pt.2, ms.102.

<sup>72</sup> Bateson, ii, pp.331-334



when, as the Sherard declaration shows, men could request and be granted the support of the wider shire community.

Although we may argue in favour of a community of the shire in social terms, whether the county also constituted a political unit is less clear. Historians have discerned political cohesion in Devonshire and Warwickshire but in both instances, that cohesion was imposed from above, by the Courtenays in Devon and by Richard Beauchamp in Warwickshire.<sup>73</sup> In neither case did unity survive the death or incapacity of its creators.<sup>74</sup> It is clear that in Devon and Warwickshire, the strongest political force was the affinity rather than the county. In these shires powerful resident magnates composed the political score which the gentry, if not always in perfect pitch and harmony, then played to order. Leicestershire, however, at least during the first sixty years of the century, was not subject to magnate domination. If the gentry there regarded the affinity as the natural political unit then they would need to look outside the county for good-lordship and to find it either among the magnates at large or with the king who, as Duke of Lancaster, was the most important, albeit absentee, lay landholder in the shire. In the former case, political cohesion within the county would be unlikely..

The social horizons of the Leicestershire gentry were certainly not so narrow as to preclude associations with the nobility from outside the county. Some of the more strenuous gentry followed noble captains to France in war retinues. Thomas Beaumont, Thomas Everyngham and Sir Richard Hastings all served under the duke of Bedford, while Everyngham may also have served with lord Scales and the earl of

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<sup>73</sup> Cherry, *op.cit.* pp. 71, 76 ff; Carpenter, *op.cit.*, pp.94-98.

<sup>74</sup> Cherry, *op.cit.*, pp.92-97; Carpenter, *op.cit.*, pp.98-99, 144-150.

Shrewsbury.<sup>75</sup> Everyngham and Hastings were both professional soldiers whose long careers in the field would have brought them into contact with an even wider group of lords than merely the military commanders they indentured to follow.<sup>76</sup> Robert Moton, John Shirley and Thomas Walsh fought respectively in the retinues of Richard, lord Grey of Codnor, Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick, and of Thomas Montague, earl of Salisbury.<sup>77</sup> Lord Grey was related to Moton through marriage to the uterine sister of Moton's wife and he also had modest landed interests in Leicestershire.<sup>78</sup> But most of these military alliances were of short duration and with members of the nobility who had little or no landed interest in Leicestershire. They were therefore politically insignificant for the county. It is worth noting that lord Roos's retinue at Agincourt, despite his manors and lands in the hundred of Framland, contained no members of the Leicestershire gentry.<sup>79</sup>

The Leicestershire gentry provided their social superiors with non-military service, too. We have already seen that Bartholomew Brokesby, Walter Keble and John Dansey were servants of Joan Beauchamp, lady Abergavenny.<sup>80</sup> Reginald Moton was probably also one of her servants as he, like Brokesby, Keble and Dansey, received a

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<sup>75</sup> B.L. Harl. 6166, f.69d; Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France during the reign of Henry the Sixth, 2 vols. ed. J. Stevenson, London, 1861-64, vol. II, pp.412, 434-435, [629]. There is some doubt about the identity of Shrewsbury's retainer. At least three Everyngham families held land in south Yorkshire, including the Everynghams of Newhall in Leicestershire. A.J. Pollard believes that Shrewsbury's follower was Thomas Everyngham of Stainbrough (A.J. Pollard, John Talbot and the War in France, 1427-1453, London, 1983, p.76 and n.33.).

<sup>76</sup> Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France, II, pp.394, 412, 435, [629]; E101/70/6, ms.725; W.H. Dunham, "Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers 1461-83" Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, vol. 39, 1955, pp.136, 137. For Everyngham see below Chapter V, n.79.

<sup>77</sup> J.S. Roskell, The Commons in the Parliament of 1422, Manchester, 1954, pp.93, 205; Stemmata Shirleiana, p.51; E101/71/2, ms. 833.

<sup>78</sup> Roskell, op.cit., p.205. See map. iii.

<sup>79</sup> Sir N.H. Nicolas, History of the Battle of Agincourt, 2nd edn., London, 1832, p.343.

<sup>80</sup> See above, p. 93.

bequest of a hundred marks under Joan's will.<sup>81</sup> These associations might suggest that lady Abergavenny was welding together a minor sodality in Leicestershire but an alternative interpretation is possible. Keble and Dansey were Brokesby's neighbours and Moton was married to Brokesby's cousin, Margaret Bugge.<sup>82</sup> Rather than Joan providing the link between these men, it is just as likely that Brokesby himself introduced his own associates and kin to the Beauchamp affinity.<sup>83</sup>

Bartholomew Brokesby and his fellows were not alone in entering noble service. Humphrey Stafford, earl of Stafford, and later, from 1444, duke of Buckingham,<sup>84</sup> had at least four Leicestershire men in his employ. In 1440, Richard Hotoft was retained at £2 per annum and two years later, when he became a member of the earl's council, he was granted a further £5 a year.<sup>85</sup> Another Stafford servant, William Heton, acted as steward of the earl's lands in Nottinghamshire and Rutland in 1440-41 and Robert Staunton was steward in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire from 1453 to 1457.<sup>86</sup> Thomas Whatton of Mountsorrel was Humphrey's bailiff at Maxstoke in Warwickshire in 1452-53.<sup>87</sup> Lord Zouche of neighbouring Northamptonshire also used the services of Leicestershire men. Thomas Palmer was one of his feoffees for his manor of Bushby and, as

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81 Dugdale, ii, p.1032.

82 C1/22/114a.

83 Cf. A.J. Pollard, "The Richmondshire Community of Gentry During the Wars of the Roses", Patronage, Pedigree and Power ed. Charles Ross, Gloucester, 1979, pp.53-54 where it is suggested that Sir John Conyers may have selected Richard, Duke of Gloucester's early retainers at Middleham for him.

84 G.E.C. ii, p.388.

85 C. Rawcliffe, The Staffords, earls of Stafford and dukes of Buckingham, Cambridge, 1978, pp.220, 234.

86 Ibid., p.204.

87 The Account of the Great Household of Humphrey, first Duke of Buckingham for the year 1452-3, ed. M. Harris, Camden Miscellany, fourth series, vol. 29, London, 1984, pp.11, 28.

a reward for "good counsel", was granted the stewardship of Zouche's Leicestershire manor of Thorpe Arnold for life.<sup>88</sup>

There can be no suggestion, however, that these affiliations provide accurate indicators of the gentry's political loyalties. Humphrey Stafford was, of course, an enthusiastic supporter of the Lancastrian regime. His son, also named Humphrey, was killed fighting for the king at St. Albans in 1455 while the duke himself died in the same cause at Northampton in 1460.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, two of the elder Humphrey's Leicestershire servants, Richard Hotoft and Robert Staunton, continued to be appointed to local administrative positions after the dynastic change in 1461, Hotoft as commissioner of arrest in 1461, as tax assessor in 1463 and as justice of the peace for Rutland in 1464. Staunton sat on various commissions and on the bench of J.P.s during the 1460s, '70s and into the '80s.<sup>90</sup> Heton and Whatton may have died before it became necessary for them to decide their political allegiances. With Heton's last appointment as justice of the peace in 1456 and Whatton's much earlier, in 1448, they had at least retired from public life.<sup>91</sup>

More important to the argument is the fact that each of Stafford's four Leicestershire servants was a lawyer. Lord Zouche's feoffee, Thomas Palmer, was also learned in the law. Indeed, of twenty-three Leicestershire men who served the nobility as feoffees, executors, stewards or counsellors, over 65% can be identified as lawyers. As such, they were selling their professional skills but not necessarily their political independence. Furthermore, as professional men, their services were called upon by a number of good-lords. Richard Hotoft,

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<sup>88</sup> L.R.O. 5D33/177, f.82.

<sup>89</sup> *G.E.C.*, ii, p.389.

<sup>90</sup> See Appendix VIII.

<sup>91</sup> See Appendix IX.

besides being retained by the earl of Stafford, also acted as feoffee for Henry, lord Grey of Codnor.<sup>92</sup> William Heton, Stafford's steward, had earlier been executor of William, lord Roos's, will which was drawn up in February, 1412.<sup>93</sup> Thereafter, Heton continued his association with the Roos family as steward and receiver for William's son, John, and as feoffee for both William's widow, Margaret, lady Roos, and a Sir Thomas Roos in Sussex.<sup>94</sup> Henry Sotehill, another lawyer, acted as feoffee for Richard, duke of York, Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, and, later, for George, duke of Clarence.<sup>95</sup>

That service is an unsure guide to political affiliations is further revealed by Everard Dygby I's career. In 1443, Dygby was a member of John Beaufort, duke of Somerset's, retinue in France.<sup>96</sup> By the end of the decade he was acting on behalf of Beaufort's enemy, Richard, duke of York, as the latter's feoffee for lands in Rutland.<sup>97</sup> Dygby's neighbour, Thomas Palmer, was also one of York's feoffees on the same occasion. After the change of regime, Palmer was referred to as "the king's servant" when he received his reward for good service to both Richard of York and to his son, Edward IV.<sup>98</sup> Relations between Dygby and Palmer appear to have been close. They sat together on the Rutlandshire bench of J.Ps. in 1446, 1448, 1456 and in 1458 and on various Rutland commissions between 1448 and 1459.<sup>99</sup> Dygby was one of Palmer's feoffees for the manor of Lubenham until 1450, becoming involved in the business side of the marriage of Palmer's daughter,

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<sup>92</sup> Village Notes, ii, p.228; Nichols, ii, p.557.

<sup>93</sup> Early Lincoln Wills, p.137.

<sup>94</sup> E372/275, ms. 52 dorse; C67/42, ms. 40; C.P.R., 1429-36, p.62.

<sup>95</sup> G. Richmond, John Hopton, A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman, Cambridge, 1981, pp.162, 184; C.P.R. 1467-77, p.530.

<sup>96</sup> "Calendar of the French Rolls, Hen. VI", D.K.R. 48th report, pp.357, 360.

<sup>97</sup> C.P.R., 1446-52, p.218.

<sup>98</sup> C.P.R., 1461-67, p.182.

<sup>99</sup> C.P.R., 1441-46, p.477; ibid., 1446-52, p.593; ibid., 1452-61, p.675; ibid., 1446-52, pp.140, 319; ibid., 1452-61, p.557.

Katherine, to William Neville when this manor was transferred to the young couple.<sup>100</sup> He was also feoffee for Palmer's manors and lands around Holt and Medbourne and was regularly called upon to act as witness to Palmer's charters and quitclaims.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, despite Dygby's former service to the duke of York and despite his close associations with York's servant, Thomas Palmer, he fought against Edward IV at Towton where he was killed. He was later attainted by Edward IV's first parliament which declared his lands forfeited.<sup>102</sup>

Although the gentry pursued service with lords from outside the county, two considerations indicate that these associations did not lead to political factionalism within it. First, most of the gentry served the nobility in a professional capacity, as lawyers providing "good counsel", as stewards, bailiffs and, occasionally, as feoffees. The subsequent careers of Richard Hotoft and Robert Staunton reveal that in political terms, these associations could count for little.<sup>103</sup> Second, the good relations between Thomas Palmer and Everard Dygby show that whatever conflict may have divided their superiors, partisanship was not necessarily allowed to poison gentry relationships within the shire where these men had to live and work together in its administration.

That contemporaries themselves recognised the limits of gentry loyalty to their noble masters can be seen, of all places, in William Hastings' actions in late 1459 and the subsequent attitude towards him adopted by Henry VI's government. Hastings, whose basic loyalty to the Yorkist cause has never been questioned, may have been among

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<sup>100</sup> L.R.O. DE220/58; DE220/60. The right hand side of the latter manuscript is torn but the reference to Everard, an uncommon name in the county in 1450, is almost certainly to Everard Dygby.

<sup>101</sup> L.R.O. DE221/4/3/60; DE221/4/1/59; DE221/4/1/96; DE221/2/178/2 ms.144.

<sup>102</sup> *Rot. Parl.* v, p.477; *C.P.R.* 1461-67, p.153.

<sup>103</sup> See above, p.108.

those who counselled against taking the field at Ludford.<sup>104</sup> Whatever his rôle on that occasion, after the Rout of Ludford when his Yorkist companions were scattering to Ireland and Calais, William made his peace with Henry VI, paid a fine of £100 and received a royal pardon.<sup>105</sup> Given the choice between self-preservation or loyalty to his master and exile, Hastings, on this occasion, chose the former. Like Henry Vernon who, over a decade later, received, and wisely ignored, repeated summonses to join with his lord, Clarence, and with Warwick against Edward IV,<sup>106</sup> Hastings knew when to trim his political sails. R.L. Storey's assertion that a lord's "retainers had no choice but to follow him into battle"<sup>107</sup> seems to attribute to lords a greater authority than they possessed and to retainers a lesser degree of independence than they in fact had.

While gentry-magnate associations did not lead to a fracturing of the shire's political mould, nor is it the case that the crown provided the cement of political cohesion. In fact, the crown's policy in the shire, but particularly Duchy of Lancaster policy, though not designed to do so, resulted in a weakening of royal control. In 1415 before his departure for France, Henry V entrusted certain of his Lancastrian lands, including the manors of Foxton, Smeeton and Langton in Leicestershire, to feoffees for the performance of his will.<sup>108</sup> Despite repeated attempts under Henry VI to prize these enfeoffments from the grasp of the feoffees, the lands were not returned to the Duchy until May, 1443. After 1422, Queen Catherine's dower of 10,000 marks was also a charge on the Duchy. Her assignment included the castle, town

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<sup>104</sup> Gregory's Chronicle, p.207.

<sup>105</sup> C.P.R., 1452-61, pp.552-577.

<sup>106</sup> H.M.C. Rutl., i, pp.2-4.

<sup>107</sup> R.L. Storey, The End of the House of Lancaster, London, 1966, p.16.

<sup>108</sup> For this and what follows, see Somerville, i, pp.199-212, 339-340.

and honor of Leicester, comprising the manors of Hinckley, Earl Shilton, Desford, Glenfield, Sileby, Belgrave, Swannington and Stapleford which remained in the dowager queen's hands until her death in 1437. In 1445, the honor of Leicester was again granted out, this time as part of Queen Margaret's dower, and the following year, the king's remaining Leicestershire manor, Castle Donington, was granted to feoffees for the performance of his will.<sup>109</sup> Apart from the loss of revenue which Henry VI suffered as a result of these grants, of greater importance for his relationship with the county gentry was his loss of directly disposable patronage.

Moreover, in the course of the fifteenth century, some of the honor's offices became sinecures for the nobility. In 1437, the stewardship was granted to John, lord, and later viscount, Beaumont, who retained it until 1460 when he was replaced by Richard, earl of Warwick.<sup>110</sup> Warwick's tenure was short-lived but he was succeeded by another nobleman, William, lord Hastings, in July 1461. Very briefly in 1485, a member of the Leicestershire gentry, Everard Fielding, was steward but the office soon reverted to noble control in the person of Edward, lord Hastings. The master forestership and stewardship of Castle Donington similarly passed into noble hands. Sir Ralph Shirley had been appointed master-forester for life in 1414 but in 1442 he was joined in office by the newly elevated viscount Beaumont. After Shirley's death in 1443, Beaumont retained the master-forestership alone until 1460. He was replaced by the earl of Warwick who in turn was succeeded by lord Hastings. These same men succeeded each other in the stewardship of Castle Donington from 1437 onwards. Although

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<sup>109</sup> Loc. cit.; T.L.A.S., 14, 1925-26, pp.42-43.

<sup>110</sup> For the remainder of this paragraph, see Somerville, i, pp.563-564, 568, 572, 573.



the constableness of the castle managed to remain longer in gentry hands, it, too, became a noble sinecure from 1461 to 1484.

For the most part, the other honorial offices, those of receiver, feodary and bailiff of Leicester, were granted to non-nobles. Nevertheless, these offices were not always reserved for the local gentry. Peter Barewell, sometime receiver between 1402 and 1407, had been mayor of Leicester.<sup>111</sup> Arnold Holker, receiver between 1407 and 1422, was a household official, though his deputy, William Belgrave, belonged to a minor Leicestershire gentry family. Thomas Staunton, also a member of the Leicestershire gentry, had been a household official before his appointment to the receivership in 1449.<sup>112</sup> The only Leicestershire gentlemen appointed as feodary and bailiff of Leicester were Richard Hotoft who was granted both offices in 1441, Alexander Villers, who was Hotoft's deputy bailiff from 1443, and Everard Fielding who was bailiff for a short time in 1485.

Occasionally, the distribution of gentry lands allowed for the appointment of some men to Duchy offices outside the shire. Sir Richard Hastings, who held manors and lands in Yorkshire, became steward of Knaresborough in 1422, remaining in office until his death in 1436.<sup>113</sup> Thomas Staunton, whose family held lands in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, was constable of Melbourne in Derbyshire in 1418 and steward there from 1437.<sup>114</sup> Thomas's kinsman, Robert Staunton, was bailiff of Allerton, Plumtree and Risley wapentakes in 1438-39 and again in 1473-74.<sup>115</sup> Like Melbourne, these wapentakes were part of the honor of Tutbury in

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<sup>111</sup> For references to honorial offices, see *ibid.*, i, pp.565, 566, 569-571.

<sup>112</sup> See appendix IV(b).

<sup>113</sup> *Somerville*, i, p.524.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, i, pp.558, 557.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, i, p.558.

Derbyshire. Leicestershire lawyers also found employment with the Duchy. Henry Sotehill was a Duchy apprentice at law between 1456 and 1466, and became deputy chief steward of the north parts in 1459.<sup>116</sup> Thomas Keble was also retained as an apprentice at law and later rose to become the Duchy's attorney general.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, appointments to offices outside the shire can not have been designed to enhance the king's political control within the county.

After the change of regime in 1461, there was no significant alteration of policy regarding appointments to Duchy offices in Leicestershire. As we have seen, the stewardships of the honor and of Castle Donington and the master-forestership remained in noble hands. In 1463, the receivership went to Thomas Palmer, no doubt as a further reward for his earlier good services to Richard and Edward of York.<sup>118</sup> William Moton's appointment to the receivership in 1480 was also probably made as a reward for services; he had been lord Hastings' retainer since 1475.<sup>119</sup> Piers Curtis, a household official and sometimes alderman, mayor and burgess of Leicester, was bailiff there from 1461 and became feodary in 1471.<sup>120</sup> Another bailiff, Richard Reynold, was a non-gentry lawyer who, like William Moton, had close affiliations with the Hastings family.<sup>121</sup> Emulating crown policy under Henry VI, Edward IV continued to use honorial offices to reward his supporters and household officials, some of whom did not belong to the gentry, rather than as a means politically to weld together the county's social élite.

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, i, pp.454, 425.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.454, 406; Grants etc. from the Crown During the Reign of Edward the Fifth, ed. J.G. Nichols, Camden Society, London, 1854, p.65.

<sup>118</sup> *Somerville*, i, p.566; *C.P.R.*, 1461-71, p.182.

<sup>119</sup> *Somerville*, i, pp.566-567; Dunham, *op.cit.*, p.119.

<sup>120</sup> Wedgwood, *Biographies*, p.244; Wedgwood, *Register*, pp.438, 461, 654; *Bateson*, ii, pp.296, 300, 304; *Somerville*, i, pp.571, 569-70.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, i, p.571, *H.M.C. Hastings*, i, pp.143, 145.

A further potential source of royal patronage, the household, was no more effective a tool than the Duchy of Lancaster for imposing political unity on the shire from without. In fact, for professional bureaucrats such as John Hotoft, controller of Henry V's household when he was Prince of Wales and, from 1423, Henry VI's household treasurer, employment in London only served to weaken his ties with his native county.<sup>122</sup> Hotoft retained his landed interest in Leicestershire but around 1412 he began to invest in property closer to the capital in Hertfordshire.<sup>123</sup> By 1428 he had become sufficiently settled there to be pricked as the country's sheriff.<sup>124</sup> John's newly acquired commitments in Hertfordshire, combined with his long absences in London, ensured that he had little or no political involvement in Leicestershire as an agent of the crown.

For most of the gentry who served Henry VI either as king's knights or as esquires of the chamber, attendance at court was less regular than for bureaucrats such as Hotoft.<sup>125</sup> Dividing their time between the king's presence and their own estates, they were in a position to keep him informed of events and concerns in their shires.<sup>126</sup> But we should not assume that the traffic in information was two-way or that these members of the king's affinity acted as agents for the crown when they returned to their respective counties. Of the eleven Leicestershire men who were either retained as king's knights or who were attracted to the royal household during Henry VI's reign, three, Thomas Hotoft, John Merbury and Ralph Shirley II, played no part in the administration of the shire as sheriff, escheator, justice of

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<sup>122</sup> Handbook of British Chronology, p.79; Warrants for Issues, 1399-1485, p.144.

<sup>123</sup> PROB11/1/15/118; V.C.H. Herts, iii, pp.115, 196, 391, 469.

<sup>124</sup> P.R.O. Lists and Indexes, ix, p.44.

<sup>125</sup> R.A. Griffiths, The Reign of King Henry VI, London, 1981, pp.296-297.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. C. Ross, Edward IV, London, 1974, pp.326-327.

the peace or on ad hoc commissions.<sup>127</sup> Four others, Henry Beaumont, Thomas Staunton, John Whatton and Thomas Walsh, had very limited rôles in local government both during and after their periods of service. Walsh was pricked once as sheriff in 1456. John Whatton was returned to the Coventry parliament in 1459 and was also made escheator in the same year but his political career in the county was otherwise undistinguished. Henry Beaumont and Thomas Staunton were also returned to parliament in 1446 and 1447 respectively but they, too, were political lightweights.<sup>128</sup> Neither man became sheriff or escheator or secured an appointment to the bench of J.P.s. Beaumont, in fact, never held any other shire office and Staunton's services in Leicestershire were not used again until 1457 when he was appointed to a commission of array.

Another household official, John Bellers II, had been M.P. in 1432, 1435 and 1450 and a justice of the peace since 1444 before he became an esquire of the chamber, but royal service notwithstanding, he was never pricked as sheriff and only infrequently was he appointed to ad hoc commissions. Royal service similarly brought few advances to the political career of Thomas Erdyngton who was king's knight by 1443. Admittedly, Erdyngton was pricked as sheriff in 1445 and elected knight of the shire for Leicestershire in 1446 but he had been sheriff there before, in 1434, and had been elected to parliament for Warwickshire in 1440. The careers of these men suggest that if the household were intended to be a political recruiting office and training ground for gentry who would carry the king's authority back into their

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<sup>127</sup> This and subsequent information about household officials and local government experience is drawn from Appendices IV(b) and V-IX.

<sup>128</sup> See Appendix VIII.

shires, then the success of its Leicestershire cohort was singularly lacking.<sup>129</sup>

Furthermore, only three of Henry VI's personal retainers and household officers with Leicestershire connections, Henry Beaumont, Thomas Everynham and William Grymmesby, remained sufficiently loyal to fight in his cause either at Wakefield or Towton.<sup>130</sup> A fourth, John Bellers II, must have been regarded with suspicion by the new regime for he was dropped from all Yorkist commissions of the peace but by 1463 he was commissioned as a tax assessor. Most of the others who had been politically obscure under Lancaster remained so after the Yorkists seized power. Thomas Erdyngton alone continued as a king's knight under Edward IV and in 1462 received a grant for life of one of the earl of Wiltshire's confiscated manors in Warwickshire.<sup>131</sup> He at least had not been transformed into a loyal son of Lancaster by his membership of Henry VI's retinue.

Under Edward IV, the knights and esquires of the household were not used to weld together a political community of the shire either. In the early years of the reign when the size of the household

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<sup>129</sup> A contrary view of the impact of members of the king's affinity on shire offices is taken by C.A. Robertson, "Local Government and the King's 'affinity' in fifteenth-century Leicestershire and Warwickshire", *T.L.A.H.S.*, vol. 52, 1976-77, pp.37-45. Three aspects of Robertson's study tend to exaggerate the extent of royal interference in local appointments. First, the inclusion of Warwickshire in his study leads to generalizations which may apply to that county but not to Leicestershire. Warwickshire was dominated by magnates with strong court connections; Leicestershire was not so encumbered. Second, too much emphasis has been placed on the bonds formed between lords and retainers who entered indentures to serve in France. As we have already seen, these associations were politically insignificant (see above, pp.108-111). Third, too little attention had been paid to the chronology of central and local service, thereby leading Robertson to assume a causal connection between household service and local government appointments when no such assumption is warranted.

<sup>130</sup> *Rot. Parl.*, v, p.477. I am assuming that the William Grymmesby late of London who fought at Wakefield and the William Grymmesby late of Grimsby who fought at Towton, were the same man. His connection with Leicestershire was through marriage to Anne, daughter and coheir of Reginald Moton. (Appendix XI).

<sup>131</sup> *C.P.R.*, 1461-47, p.186.

was drastically reduced,<sup>132</sup> two Leicestershire men, John Staunton and Thomas Erdyngton, entered the king's service as a page and king's knight respectively. Later, John Shirley, Sir William Trussell and William Villers also made their way to court. Of these five, only Trussell played any further part in the administration of his shire. The inescapable conclusion is that neither Henry VI nor Edward VI had a coherent policy of interference in Leicestershire's internal affairs. Such aloofness on the part of the crown yields to no ready explanation. It is possible though, that in the absence of magnate domination in Leicestershire for most of our period, there was little need for the king to use members of his own affinity as a makeweight in the county's political scales.

Even after 1461, when William Hastings was elevated to the peerage and granted the confiscated Beaumont and Roos estates to add to his own already extensive Leicestershire manors, very few of his retainers were drawn from his home county.<sup>133</sup> Of the sixty-seven retainers who can be identified with the midland shires of Derby, Stafford, Nottingham, Warwick and Leicester, thirty two were from Derbyshire, fourteen from Staffordshire, five from Nottinghamshire, two from Warwickshire and, according to Dunham, fourteen from Leicestershire. However, the latter figure is almost certainly an exaggeration. Given Hastings' obvious attempts to extend his influence into Derbyshire, many of his Leicestershire retainers, especially John and Ralph Shirley, the three members of the Staunton family and possibly Sir William Trussell as well, were chosen because of their landholdings in the former county. Trussell held extensive

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<sup>132</sup> D.A.L. Morgan, "The King's Affinity in the Polity of Yorkist England", *T.R.H.S.*, 5th series, 23, 1973, pp.4-5.

<sup>133</sup> Dunham, *op.cit.*, pp.28-29.

lands in Staffordshire, too, where Hastings was also building up his affinity. Sir Robert Harcourt was another retainer whose estate partly lay in Staffordshire. Once again, it may have been these Staffordshire connections which made Trussell and Harcourt attractive as retainers.

Of the eight Leicestershire gentry whose indentures to serve Hastings have survived,<sup>134</sup> five, John and Ralph Shirley, John Harcourt, John Danvers, and William Neville, played no part in the county's government; two William Trussell and William Moton had already served the county as M.P. (Trussell) and sheriff (Moton) before being retained. Thomas Entwysell alone may have owed his advancement to the shrievalty in 1482 to his association with Hastings but as he had sealed his indenture eight years earlier in 1474, there was clearly no haste either on Entwysell's part to claim his reward or on Hastings' part to assert political influence through his retainer.<sup>135</sup> Once again, the reasons for Hastings' forbearance are speculative. He may have regarded the expenditure in fees to his own neighbours an unnecessary extravagance. Being closer to hand, the Leicestershire gentry would have been more susceptible to informal influence in any case. But perhaps, too, Hastings knew when to leave well enough alone.<sup>136</sup> Blatant interference in the internal affairs of a county which, for at least the previous sixty years, had not been overburdened with magnate or crown authority, could have rankled local sensibilities.

We may confidently conclude that Leicestershire was not forged into a political unit by outside magnate intervention, by the king, or, indeed, after 1461 by its own resident magnate, lord Hastings.

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.119-20.

<sup>135</sup> See I. Rowney, "The Hastings Affinity in Staffordshire and the Honour of Tutbury", *B.I.H.R.*, LVII, 1984, pp.35-45 where it is argued that Hastings' political influence in Staffordshire was similarly used sparingly.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p.45.

Hastings' reluctance openly to meddle in the county's internal affairs further reveals that in Leicestershire the retinue was not an important political unit. Of course, some gentry did display an acute awareness of the political issues of the day. As we have already seen, Henry Beaumont, Thomas Everyngham and William Grymmesby not only took an interest in national politics but were also prepared to fight for their chosen cause.<sup>137</sup> And they were not the only Leicestershire gentry to do so. Henry Beaumont's kinsman, John Beaumont, Everard Dygby I, William Fielding and John Danet all fought for Henry VI in 1460-61.<sup>138</sup> About ten years earlier, in 1450, the county had also produced an active opponent of the Lancastrian regime when Sir William Trussell, grandfather of Edward IV's knight of the same name, participated in Cade's Rebellion.<sup>139</sup>

However, we should not assume that these partisan activists were typical. In fact, they constituted a very small minority of the county gentry. For men such as Thomas Erdyngton, who as one of Henry VI's knights became closely associated with the losing side, the key to survival was flexibility. Pope Pius II's perception of John Lex, a Lancastrian agent in Rome during the troubled year of 1460, was equally applicable to Erdyngton and his like. Pius believed that Lex "will do as others generally do nowadays, and acclaim the victors, and though at first he sided with the others he will now side with those in power".<sup>140</sup> Henry VI and Edward IV not only would have recognized this sentiment as a fact of political life but they also relied upon it to maintain their own survival.

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<sup>137</sup> See above, p.117.

<sup>138</sup> *Rot. Parl.*, v, p.477.; Wedgwood, *Biographies*, p.314; C.L. Scofield, *The Life and Reign of Edward IV*, 2 vols., London, 1923, new impression 1967, vol.1, p.156.

<sup>139</sup> *C.P.R.*, 1446-52, pp.355-356.

<sup>140</sup> *Calendar of State Papers: Milan*, i, p.35.



More numerous than the politically ambidextrous Erdyngton were those gentry who maintained their neutrality. In fact, most of the Leicestershire gentry showed a marked reluctance to become overly involved in the dangerous national politics of the day. Indeed, this reluctance itself amounts to a widespread political attitude. Nevertheless, a widespread attitude hardly equates with a county political community. But although we are not yet in a position to say that the gentry saw themselves as part of a shire political community nor are we in a position to jettison the proposition. If such a concept existed, then it is more likely to find expression not in national, but in purely local, county concerns. Only by focussing on county government may we be in a position to understand county politics.