Introduction

The heated and often vitriolic debate, the "Storm over the Gentry", which attempted to explain the origins of the English Civil War, produced much sound and fury. [1] Like any storm, it eventually abated, leaving in its wake, if not tattered reputations, certainly bruised egos and, no doubt, the belated recognition by some British historians that the age of chivalry is indeed dead. But it would be unfair to suggest that the sound and fury signified nothing beyond the obvious or that, after all, the debate had been little more than a storm in a tea-cup. On the positive side, the controversy soon revealed that theory had overrun the available evidence and that more research was required. A new generation of historians readily accepted the implied challenge, producing county and regional studies which shed light on, as opposed to generating heat about, the economic and political concerns of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gentry.[2]

Interest in the English gentry, however, has not been confined to historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. K.B. McFarlane, in his 1945 lecture on bastard feudalism, proposed that late medieval society would "only yield its secrets to the investigator who can base his

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1 R.H. Tawney, "The Rise of the Gentry, 1558-1640", Econ. Hist. Rev., xi, 1941,pp. 1-38; L. Stone, "The Anatomy of the Elizabethan Aristocracy", Econ. Hist. Rev., xviii, 1948, pp. 1-53; H.R. Trevor-Roper, "The Elizabethan Aristocracy: An Anatomy Anatomized", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd series, iii, 1951, 279-298; L. Stone, "The English Aristocracy - A Restatement", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd series, iv, 1952, pp. 302-321; H.R. Trevor-Roper, The Gentry, 1540-1640, Economic History Review, Supplement 1, London, 1953; R.H. Tawney, "The Rise of the Gentry: A Postscript", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd series, vii, 1954, pp. 91-97. See, too, J.H. Hexter, "Storm over the Gentry", Encounter, X, v, 1958, pp. 22-34. A fuller version of the same article and a more complete bibliography appear in his Reappraisals in History, London, 1961, pp. 117-152.

2 See R.C. Richardson, The Debate on the English Revolution, London, 1977, pp. 113-125, 173-176 for an extensive bibliography.

conclusions upon the study of hundreds of fragmentary biographies".[3] A year earlier, McFarlane had attempted to counteract notions of the knights of the shire in parliament as the political pawns of the lords. "If there is any tendency to underrate the capacity of these early M.P.s", he wrote, "it can be corrected by a study of their lives. ... As we make ourselves familiar with the lives and achievements of the country gentry, and especially of those who sat in the commons, the main outlines of local and central politics may be expected to emerge".[4] McFarlane was asking for nothing less than the application of Sir Lewis Namier's method to studies of the fifteenth-century gentry.

It was about thirty years before students answered McFarlane's call, but over the past ten-to-fifteen years, the "slow and tedious work"[5] of providing biographies of the late medieval gentry has steadily progressed.[6] Most of these studies have concentrated on the gentry as economic and political entities but rarely, if ever, do we see them as fully

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3 K.B. McFarlane, "Bastard Feudalism", B.I.H.R., xx, 1943-45, p. 173.

4 K.B. McFarlane, "Parliament and 'Bastard Feudalism'", first published T.R.H.S., 4th series, xxvi, 1944, pp. 53-79. Reprinted in K.B. McFarlane, England in the Fifteenth Century, ed. G.L. Harriss, London, 1981, pp. 12, 20-21.

5 G.L. Harriss's introduction to McFarlane, England in the Fifteenth Century, p. xxvii.

6 G.G. Astill, "The Medieval Gentry: A Study in Leicestershire Society, 1350-1399", unpublished Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, 1977; M.J. Bennett, Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Cambridge, 1983; C. Carpenter, "Political Society in Warwickshire c. 1401-1472", unpublished Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1976; I.D. Rowney, "The Staffordshire Political Community 1440-1500", unpublished Keele Ph.D. thesis, 1981; N. Saul, Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century, Oxford, 1981; S.M. Wright, The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century, Derbyshire Record Society, vol. VIII, Chesterfield, 1983. Shorter works include: P.W. Fleming, "Charity, Faith, and the Gentry of Kent 1422-1529", Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History, ed. T. Pollard, Gloucester, 1984; A.J. Pollard, "The Richmondshire Community of Gentry During the Wars of the Roses", Patronage Pedigree and Power in Later Medieval England, ed. C. Ross, Gloucester, 1979; M.G.A. Vale, Piety, Charity and Literacy Among the Yorkshire Gentry, 1370-1480, Borthwick Papers no. 50, 1976. More extensive biographies appear in C. Richmond, John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman, Cambridge, 1981; E.W. Ives, The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England: Thomas Kebell, A Case Study, Cambridge, 1983.

rounded human beings. This failure cannot be attributed to any lack of sensitivity on the part of historians or to their refusal to follow the poet's injunction to "listen to the voice". The fact of the matter is that, apart from a mere handful of families, the Pastons, the Plumptons, the Stonors and the Celys, the gentry have been silent about themselves and their concerns; there have been too few voices to hear.

Although historians have recognized the constraints which the nature of the evidence imposes, there has been recent concern that our view of the gentry is becoming too deterministic, too mechanistic.[7] We are in danger, it seems, of reducing their rôle to that of automatons whose reactions have been predetermined by economic, political or social forces outside their own control. The present study, therefore, is not merely an attempt to add to the pool of "fragmentary biographies" called for by McFarlane but to do so in a way which will take these justifiable concerns into account. Naturally, the gentry's economic, political and social activities must remain central to any enquiry but our major concern has been to minimize the dragooning influence of predeterminism and to emphasize the essentially humanizing element of free will.[8]

While the late medieval gentry continue to warrant historians' attention, the specifically Leicestershire gentry are worthy of scrutiny. During the fifteenth century, the county witnessed and occasionally hosted events of national importance. Historians have noted that at times of political crisis Henry VI invariably forsook his capital and retreated, or intended to retreat, to what he increasingly regarded as the

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7 C. Richmond, "After McFarlane", History, vol. 68, 1983, pp. 57-58.

8 See Louis MacNeice's, "Prayer before birth" which, in very general terms, anticipates Richmond's concerns.

safety of the Midlands. [9] In fact it is a barometer of the troubled state of the realm that during the years 1456-61 the court's establishment at Kenilworth, Coventry and Leicester had become a semi-permanent arrangement.[10]

The reasons for these withdrawals to the Midlands are, of course, not difficult to fathom. The area was well placed to provide access to any corner of the kingdom, a consideration which was important not only for dealing with trouble but also for increasing the number of available options if further flight from danger were necessary. Also, contact with the south, and particularly London, could be maintained without jeopardizing access to the important military recruiting grounds of Cheshire and Lancashire.

Just as important as these strategic reasons was the fact that within the counties of Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Northamptonshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire were centred those lands which formed the bulk of the honors of Tutbury and Leicester and the castle of Kenilworth, all appurtenances of the king's personal holding, the Duchy of Lancaster.[11] Admittedly, the honors and castle in question had formed part of the queen's dower since 1446[12], but this seemed to have no adverse effect on the region's loyalty to the king. It is possible that Margaret's interest in, and concern for, her tenants even served to enhance that loyalty.[13] Strategic reasons apart, Henry's recourse to the Midlands in times of crisis indicates that the region's support for his cause was expected. That he continued to do so suggests those

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9 B. Wolffe, Henry VI, London, 1981, pp. 230, 252, 290-1; R. A. Griffiths, The Reign of King Henry VI, London, 1981, pp. 253, 740-41, 777-778.

10 Wolffe, op.cit., pp. 302-305.

11 Somerville, i, pp.2-3, 7, 8.

12 A.R. Myers, "The Household of Queen Margaret of Anjou, 1452-3", B.J.R.L., vol. XL, 1957-58, p.82.

13 Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou, ed. C. Munro, Camden Society, 1863, reprint 1968, pp. 98-99, 126-127, 146-147, 150-151, 154.

expectations were largely fulfilled. The area bounded by Kenilworth, Coventry and Leicester, at least till 1461, was the King's territory, and there is some indication that its Lancastrian sympathies could still manifest themselves as late as 1464.[14]

Moving to the troubled year of 1471, we find a remarkable swing in the region's loyalties, but particularly in those of Leicestershire. It may be recalled that Edward IV arrived in Yorkshire from Flanders in March 1471 and here he doubtless supposed that his substantial estates in the county would provide him with a personal following. However, Hull refused him entry altogether; the city of York's welcome was less than enthusiastic and even at Wakefield, near Edward's own Yorkshire estates, he gathered fewer supporters than he would have wished.[15] Surprisingly, it was not until Edward's march brought him to Leicester that there "came to the Kynge ryght-a-fayre felawshipe of folks to the nombar of iij^{m} men, well habyled for the wers".[16] The anonymous chronicler goes on to suggest that these followers were not attracted to Leicester from Yorkist territories in Wales or the Welsh Marches but were well-wishers of the chamberlain of Edward's household, the lord Hastings, and may have come from within Leicestershire itself.[17]

Leicestershire also played host to the final struggle between the Houses of Lancaster and York, the battle of Bosworth being fought a few miles west of the county borough. Leicester was, indeed, the last sizeable English town to say farewell to Richard III on Sunday 21 August, 1485 and the first to welcome the victorious Henry VII the following day.[18]

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14 C. Ross, Edward IV, London, 1974, p. 57.

15 Historie of the Arrivall of Edward IV in England and the Finall Recouerye of his Kingdoms from Henry VI A.D. 1471, ed. John Bruce, London, 1838, pp. 4,5,7.

16 Ibid., p.8.

17 Ibid., p.9.

18 This and what follows is based on accounts of the battle found in Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland with the continuations by Peter of Blois and Anonymous Writers, trans, Henry T. Riley, London, 1854, pp. 500-505 (hereafter,

However, to suggest that the worthies of the county played any significant part in this particular fray would be to strain the evidence, for Leicestershire nobility and gentry do not feature largely in the lists of casualties provided by Polydore Vergil and the Croyland continuator, and the latter's assertion that on Richard's arrival in Leicester, "here was found a number of warriors ready to fight on the king's side,"[19] is appropriately ambiguous. Nevertheless, it is fair to conclude that Leicestershire both witnessed and may have participated in some of the momentous events of the fifteenth century which fact alone makes it an area worthy of study.

But our catalogue of momentous events merely tells us of the county's rôle in the calculations of kings, their fears and ambitions. It tells us nothing of the attitudes, fears and ambitions of the local aristocracy, the nobility and gentry, and especially the gentry who would have constituted the bulk of the politically active and aware. Indeed, it only raises a series of important questions. Who were the gentry and what were their concerns? How did they cope with the problems attendant on teetering and toppling crowns? If their horizons were hardly confined to cabbages did they resent the intrusion into their community of the affairs of kings? Or did they relish the opportunity to play a part on the national stage? Answers to such questions can be forthcoming only by providing a detailed study of the local aristocratic community and the relationships formed not only amongst its members but also between them and the central government, either directly or through noble intermediaries. As a further response to McFarlane's challenge, it is these questions which the current study attempts to address.

Croyland), and Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History, ed. Sir Henry Ellis, London, 1844, pp. 216-27.

19 Croyland, p. 502.

Chapter I

Leicestershire: the County, the Church, the Crown and the Nobility.

Lying almost in the centre of England, Leicestershire has assumed a strategic importance from at least Roman times. The Fosse Way, which connected the Roman camps at York and Lincoln with the recreational hot springs at Bath, bisects the county and passes through the then sizeable Roman settlement of what is now called Leicester.[1] Watling Street, too, which provided contact between London and Chester, marks the south-western border of the present-day county.[2]

The ninth-century Danes, like the Romans before them, also recognized the area's military significance. Leicester, along with Derby, Nottingham, Lincoln and Stamford, was one of the famous Five Boroughs, control of which was seen as so important to the consolidation of the Danelaw and its possible extension over what remained of Anglo-Saxon England.[3] Danish insight did not escape the notice of Edward the Elder who realized that his success in reasserting Anglo-Saxon dominion over the Danelaw depended upon the capture of these towns.[4] The line of fortresses built by Edward and his sister, AEthelflaed, suggests that both sides understood that the midland area held the key to the domination of England.[5]

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1 R.G. Collingwood, Roman Britain, new edn., London , 1953, p.19; F.Haverfield, The Roman Occupation of Britain, London, 1924, p.199.

2 J.D. Margary, Roman Roads in Britain, 2 vols., London, 1957, ii, p.23.

3 H.R. Loyn, Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest, Harlow, 1981, pp.56-57.

4 F.M. Stenton, "The Danes in England", Proc. Brit. Acad., XIII, 1927, p.206.

5 F.T. Wainwright, "AEthelflaed, Lady of the Mercians", The Anglo-Saxons, ed. Peter Clemoes, London, 1959, pp.58-59.

In the post-Conquest period, Leicestershire's importance was no less marked. It seems that William the Conqueror laid waste to the county in 1068,[6] no doubt an indication that here, as in the north, the "Norman Yoke" was not altogether welcomed, but also confirmation that the shire's subjugation was seen as necessary for the safety of the regime. A similar consideration may well have prompted Henry III's march through Leicester in 1264.[7]

In the seventeenth century the county failed to play host to any of the major battles of the civil war, though the battle of Naseby was fought a mere five miles or so beyond its southern border. But it should not be taken that the protagonists in this conflict ignored Leicestershire's significance, for the king's forces occupied Leicester before the battle of Naseby and Fairfax reasserted parliamentary control of the town after the battle.[8] It appears, then, that Leicestershire's importance to the control of England was not merely a fifteenth-century aberration.

This view of the shire's strategic value is not to suggest, however, that it was possessed of topographical attributes which made it more attractive to the tramp of marching feet or the clash of arms than any number of other English counties. Throughout the Middle Ages, and beyond, the cockpit of England was very much a movable arena. In Leicestershire's case, the prime consideration on that count seems to have been its central geographical location. Nevertheless, topography can not be ignored, for the nature of the land has a direct bearing on land tenure which in turn will affect the economy and the internal politics of the shire.

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6 F.M. Stenton, "Introduction to the Leicestershire Domesday", V.C.H. Leics., i, pp.283-84.

7 F.M. Powicke, King Henry III and the Lord Edward, 2 vols., London, 1947, ii, p.462.

8 M. Ashley, The English Civil War, London, 1974, pp.119-125.

Most of Leicestershire consists of undulating plain covered with boulder clay and varying in height from two- to five-hundred feet above sea level.[9] This conjunction of low hills and a veneer of boulder clay has made the county eminently suitable for agriculture. The perceptive eye of the seventeenth-century traveller, Celia Fiennes, certainly noticed its richness in corn and grassland[10] and William Camden judged the soil to be "rich and fertile".[11] Nevertheless, to the west, in the Charnwood Forest region, elevations reach as high as nine hundred feet above sea level;[12] but such modest crags failed to impress one nineteenth-century topographer who dismissed them as "too insignificant to form striking subjects for the pencil, or to excite the higher emotions of sublimity".[13] Aesthetic considerations apart, the Charnwood area's topography determined its economic development and did have significance for medieval land tenure.[14]

Not only is the county devoid of spectacular mountain ranges but it also lacks major rivers. The upper reaches of the Avon and the Welland form most of its southern border with Northamptonshire, and

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9 V.C.H. Leics., i, pp.1-2; D. Holly, "Leicestershire", The Domesday Geography of Midland England, eds. H.C. Darby and I.B. Terret, 2nd. edn., Cambridge, 1971, p.353. See Map I.

10 The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes 1685-c1712, ed. Christopher Morris, London, 1982, p.145.

11 William Camden, Britannia, 4 vols., 2nd. edn., trans. Richard Gough, 1806, reprint 1974, ii, p.301.

12 G.H. Dury, The East Midlands and the Peak, London, 1963, p.28.

13 J. Curtis, A Topographical History of the County of Leicester, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, 1831, p.xxxv.

14 For Charnwood's economic significance see below pp.11, 13, 64, 72. The wastes of the manors of Barrow, Groby, Whitwick and Shepshed and about 780 acres of the waste of Loughborough manor converged on the Charnwood Forest area. Shortly after the Conquest these manors were held by the earls of Chester and Leicester. By the fifteenth century part of the wastes had been cleared by religious beneficiaries of twelfth and thirteenth century grants of land there and the manors in question had passed, mainly by a process of female descent, to lord Ferrers of Groby, lord Beaumont of Beaumont, lord la Zouche of Ashby and lord Lovel, and by grant to the Erdyngtons. The fact that Charnwood forest had never been a royal forest in post-Conquest times may have helped to ensure that the area never fell under the sway of a single landlord. (T.L.A.S. , vol. 15, 1927-28, pp.2-32.)

the Trent similarly forms part of the boundary between Leicestershire and Derbyshire to the north. But the only rivers of any note within the county are the Soar, which rises in the south-west and flows northward through Leicester to the Trent, and the Soar's tributary, the Wreake, which rises in the east near Wymondham and flows westward to join the Soar east of Rothley.[15] Alluvial deposits along the banks of these rivers and of their many tributary brooks and streams provided the meadow land which was so highly prized by medieval landholders.[16]

The Soar Valley conveniently divides the county into two distinct areas. Today, the western part occasionally reveals the smears of two centuries of industrial toil, whereas the east is still oriented towards agriculture. However, a twofold division can be seen as early as Anglo-Saxon times when the western portion is said to have been virtually uninhabited.[17] In the light of more recent investigations we must allow for a degree of exaggeration in such statements.[18] Nevertheless, the Domesday survey certainly reveals that the less fertile soils and the paucity of meadow in the west made the area unattractive to early settlers and ensured it would remain the poorer half of the county until the eighteenth century.[19] The Domesday evidence is further supported by the Lay Subsidy returns for 1524-25 which show that western Leicestershire was paying less than twenty shillings per square mile while parts of the eastern region were paying forty shillings and more per square mile.[20] We can assume on the basis of this evidence that the

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15 Ordnance Survey, 1:50,000, 129, 130, 140, 141. See Map I.

16 Holly, op.cit., p.346.

17 V.C.H. Leics., i, p.221.

18 See C. Taylor, Village and Farmstead. A History of Rural Settlement in England, London, 1984, pp.109-124.

19 W.G. Hoskins, Leicestershire. An Illustrated Essay on the History of the Landscape, London, 1957, pp.3, 18; Holly, op.cit., pp.321, 353, 357.

20 A.H.R. Baker, "Changes in the Later Middle Ages", A New Historical Geography of England Before 1600., ed. H.C. Darby, Cambridge, 1976, p.196.

general picture of a more depressed west will hold for the fifteenth century as well.

The difference between the east and west also extends to the distribution of woodland. By the fifteenth century the east was almost devoid of wood except for limited stands near the Rutland border around Owston.[21] The west, in contrast, boasted two large woodland areas, the Leicester Forest, just west of Leicester, and Charnwood Forest which lay to the north-west of the town. Surprisingly, these wooded areas escaped the notice of William Camden who claimed that the county was mostly without wood.[22] Wood-clearing was, of course, an on-going process, but Leland noted the well-wooded land between Bradgate and Leicester in the early sixteenth century and in the early eighteenth century Daniel Defoe could still comment on the "fine forest" between Market Bosworth and the Soar Valley.[23] The fact that the towns of both Leicester and Loughborough were built mainly of wood until the end of the seventeenth century indicates that timber was in plentiful local supply even at this late date.[24] Although the sale of timber and of pannage and pasture rights may have given the western woodland areas some economic significance, when compared to incomes from rents, the returns would have been relatively modest, thereby reinforcing the general economic backwardness of the western region.

Despite the west's comparative poverty, Leicestershire was still, overall, one of the most populous midland counties and one of the

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21 Holly, op.cit., pp.344, 355, 357. This area had formed part of the Royal Forest of Leicester and Rutland but the Leicestershire section had been disafforested in 1235. R.A. McKinley, "The Forests of Leicestershire", V.C.H. Leics., ii, p.266. See below, Chapter III.

22 Camden, op.cit., p.297.

23 The Itinerary of John Leland, 5 vols., ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, London, 1964, i, p.17; Daniel Defoe, A Tour Through England and Wales, 2 vols., London, 1928, ii, p.88.

24 The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes, p.145; The Itinerary of John Leland, i, p.14.

wealthiest. With a conservatively estimated population of about 51,000 people (based on the poll tax returns of 1377) Leicestershire outstripped its midland neighbours to the north and west.[25] In wealth, it fell within the median range of English counties, being neither as poor as Derbyshire to the north nor quite as rich as Northamptonshire to the south.[26] Given that the calculations are based upon figures for the whole county and would therefore include the more backward west, the east of the county must have been a very wealthy area indeed.

These comfortable economic circumstances were not the consequence of mineral resources. Coal deposits in the north-east of the county were being mined as early as the fourteenth century, but their full potential was not to be realized till a later age[27]. Slate was quarried at Swithland and high quality mortar-lime was extracted from extensive pits at Barrow-on-Soar. Both were used in the building industry.[28] However, there is nothing to suggest that the medieval extractive industry was on anything but a small scale, no doubt important to the very local or parish economy and to the income of individual landholders, but insignificant to the economy of the shire as a whole. Furthermore, Leicestershire in the fifteenth century had not as yet developed its reputation as a manufacturing county, though hosiers were already present in Leicester then.[29]

As one would expect in a pre-industrial economy, the shire's economic activity was confined almost exclusively to agriculture. R.H.

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25 J. C. Russell, British Medieval Population, Albuquerque, 1948, p.132. Russell's use of a multiplier of 3.5 has been criticised as being too low. See J. Krause, "The Medieval Household: Large or Small?", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd ser., ix, 1957, p.432; M. McKisack, The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399, Oxford, 1959, p.313.

26 R.S. Schofield, "The Geographical Distribution of Wealth in England, 1334-1649", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd ser., xviii, 1965, p.504.

27 V.C.H. Leics., iii, pp.30-32.

28 Curtis, op.cit., pp. xxxiii-xxxiv; V.C.H. Leics., iii, p.43.

29 W.H.R., no. 613.

Hilton stresses the subsistence level of medieval agriculture there, with only a small proportion of the produce of tillage, namely barley, peas and beans, some wheat and negligible quantities of rye and oats, reaching the market.[30] However, Leicestershire was also a wool producing area, noted for the quality, and therefore the value, of its staple which was taken to the fairs of the east coast. While some of this wool was manufactured locally into cloth, for the medieval period this industrial output was not of great economic significance.[31] Although sheep were grazed throughout the county, the most important areas were the higher ground or wolds in the north-east, and to the west of the Soar Valley in the Charnwood Forest. Since the latter area had been colonized by the monastic orders in the twelfth century, wool production became economically important to religious houses, at least until the end of the fourteenth century.[32]

Despite this ecclesiastical involvement in the county's economy, few monasteries in Leicestershire aspired to great wealth and influence. As with the rest of the Danelaw, Leicestershire was not burdened with the vast estates of a great Benedictine house such as the very wealthy Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset or St. Albans in Hertfordshire or the plethora of prosperous houses of the west-midland counties of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire.[33] One must assume that any pre-

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30 R.H. Hilton, The Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates in the 14th and 15th Centuries, London, 1947, p.64; R.H. Hilton, "Medieval Agrarian History", V.C.H. Leics., ii, pp.174-175. For a contrary view see E. Power, The Wool Trade in English Medieval History, London, 1941, pp.1 and 39 n.1.

31 Hilton, The Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates, pp.31-32; R.A. Pelham, "Fourteenth Century England", An Historical Geography of England before A.D. 1800, ed. H.C. Darby, Cambridge, 1936, p.250; R.A. McKinley, "Medieval Political History", V.C.H. Leics., ii, pp.93-96.

32 Hilton, V.C.H. Leics., ii, p.190; V.C.H. Leics., iii, p.132, n.14.

33 Documents Illustrative of the Social and Economic History of the Danelaw, ed. F.M. Stenton, British Academy, Records of the Social and Economic History of England and Wales, vol.v, London, 1920, pp.liii-liv; R.H. Hilton, A Medieval Society. The West Midlands at the end of the Thirteenth Century, London, 1967, pp.25-28.

Conquest monastic foundations which may have existed in the area, were, along with the diocese of Leicester, swept away by the Danish invasions and settlement of the ninth and tenth centuries.[34] Whatever the reason, the fact remains that all fifteenth-century religious houses in the county were founded after the Norman Conquest and mainly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when the scale of their endowment was modest.[35] The only Benedictine foundation was the small alien cell at Hinkley. That this was granted to Mount Grace Priory, the Carthusian foundation in Yorkshire in 1415, is, perhaps, as much an indication that its marginal income could no longer sustain continued independent existence as it is of Henry V's wartime chauvinistic fervour. [36] Nor was Hinkley alone in being a poorly endowed house. By the middle of the fifteenth century Aldermanshaw, another alien cell belonging to the Cluniac order, was in ruins and Charley Priory, a house of Augustinian canons, was similarly described in 1444.[37] One must admit that these are abnormal cases. In fact, most of Leicestershire's assortment of priories and abbeys managed to survive well enough until the Dissolution on incomes ranging from as low as £20 per year at Bradley Priory to about £400 at Launde Priory and Croxton Abbey.[38] Such relatively limited resources were insufficient to permit these houses an overweening influence on the economy or the politics of the shire as a whole.

The single possible exception to this might have been the Augustinian abbey of St. Mary-in-the-Fields at Leicester. At the

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34 F.M. Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 3rd edn., London, 1971, pp.437-438, 445. For a revisionist view see P. Sawyer, The Age of the Vikings, 2nd edn., London, 1971, pp.144-145.

35 See note 32 above. R.A. McKinley, "The Religious Houses of Leicestershire", V.C.H. Leics., ii, pp.1-30.

36 Sir William Dugdale, Monasticon Anglicanum, 6 vols., eds. J. Caley, H. Ellis and B. Bandinel, London, 1817, vi, p.1030; D. Knowles and R.N. Hadcock, Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales, London, 1971, pp.52-58, 83, 88.

37 Knowles and Hadcock, op.cit., pp.96, 98, 139, 153.

38 Ibid., pp.138, 141, 149, 163, 184, 187.

Dissolution, St. Mary's had a nett income of £951 and held more manors within Leicestershire than any other landholder, whether ecclesiastical or lay.[39] Leaving aside the obvious dangers inherent in counting manors,[40] one must bear in mind that a proportion of this income was derived from holdings outside the county and it also included revenue from spiritualities. It would be unwarranted, therefore, to consider it as entirely indicative of the abbey's economic or political influence based on land held within the county. Furthermore, during the fifteenth century the abbey suffered an economic decline. By the end of the century it had ceased to be a wool producer and, like most owners of large estates, had come to rely on income from rents.[41] The extent of this decline can be gauged by the abbey's debt of £410 at the Dissolution.[42] Whatever the reasons, Leicester Abbey does not appear to have been a major force in the county, either socially or politically.

After 1399, the greatest lay, as opposed to ecclesiastical, estate in Leicestershire belonged to the king by right of his Duchy of Lancaster. The Duchy's honor of Leicester was not, of course, coterminous with its county namesake. With parts of the bailiwick of Sileby lying in Nottinghamshire and Rutland, and the entire bailiwicks of Warwick and Northampton lying within those counties, 78 (that is, half) of the honor's 156 midland vills were outside the county altogether.[43] Also, the Duchy, like the Abbey of St. Mary at Leicester, witnessed a movement away from direct involvement in agriculture and, by the fifteenth century, had

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39 Hilton, The Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates, p.6.

40 See J.P. Cooper, "The Counting of Manors", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd ser., viii, 1956, pp.377-389.

41 Hilton, The Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates, pp.79-91; A. Savine, English Monasteries on the Eve of the Dissolution, Oxford Studies in Social and legal History, vol. I, ed. Paul Vinogradoff, Oxford, 1909, p.55, 149, 154. This was a trend of the times. (Power, op.cit., pp.37-38).

42 Dugdale, op.cit., i, p.462.

43 L. Fox, The Administration of the Honor of Leicester in the Fourteenth Century, Leicester, 1940, pp.11, 20, and map between pp.74-75.

rented out its properties.[44] Any influence which the king wielded in the county in right of the Duchy of Lancaster came from the profusion of honorial offices such as stewardships, receiverships and the various posts of forester, bailiff and castle-constable which lay within the royal gift.[45] These offices were sought after not only for their salaries but also for the prestige and power they could bestow. Therefore, although the king's holdings in Leicestershire were slightly more modest than those of the Abbey of St. Mary, and although he too was a "rentier" with the added disadvantage of being far removed from local affairs, he was, nonetheless, potentially well placed to assert his influence because of the patronage at his disposal. This patronage was not confined to the honor of Leicester either, but flowed from the wider Duchy and from the Crown itself.[46]

If we apply the already established economic division of the county into distinct eastern and western zones to the way in which the Duchy of Lancaster possessions were distributed, there appears to be little correlation between the two. Thirty-three of the seventy-eight Leicestershire vills, or about 42%, lay west of the river Soar, but an analysis on a hundredal basis proves more revealing. In the south-east, in the hundreds of Gartree and Guthlaxton, there were altogether thirty-three vills; in Sparkenhoe in the south-west, twenty-five; in West Goscote to the north west, eight; in East Goscote, east of the lower Soar, twelve; and in Framland to the extreme north-east of the county there were no Duchy vills.[47] In West Goscote most of the Duchy's eight vills were to be found either along the Soar Valley or close to it in the valleys

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44 Somerville, i, pp.93-94.
45 Ibid., pp.563-575.
46 But see below, chapter IV.
47 For distribution of vills see n.43 above. Hundredal divisions are to be found in John Nichols, The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester, 4 vols., London, 1795-1815 (hereafter cited as Nichols). See Map II.

of the Soar's eastward-flowing tributaries. Only Ravenstone fails to comply with this generalization, being situated in the west of the hundred beyond the Charnwood Forest. In Sparkenhoe, nineteen Duchy vills (76%) were in the more prosperous west of the hundred, skirting the less attractive Leicester Forest, or Chase, area. Although one may reasonably conclude, on the basis of this brief analysis that the distribution of Lancastrian vills is indeed a reflection of topographical and, therefore, economic realities, the aim here has been to draw attention to the fact that in Framland, East and West Goscote and in the east of Sparkenhoe, Duchy of Lancaster possessions were relatively sparse. As it happens, these are the areas where one finds the bulk of the estates of the upper aristocracy, the nobility.

Those nobles with major holdings in Leicestershire in the period under consideration were the lords Roos, Thomas and Edmund;[48] the lords, later viscounts, Beaumont, John and William;[49] the lords Ferrers of Groby, William Ferrers, Edward Grey and Thomas Grey;[50] the lords Lovel, William, John and Francis;[51] the dukes of Norfolk, John Mowbray I and his son, John II;[52] the lords Zouche of Harringworth, William I, William II and John;[53] and, after 1461, William lord Hastings.[54] Other nobles such as James Butler, earl of Wiltshire,[55] the Greys of Codnor,[56]

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48 Thomas died 1464. Edmund died 1508 (G.E.C., xi, pp.105-107).

49 John died 1460. William died 1507 (Ibid., ii, pp.62-63).

50 William Ferrers died 1445. The title passed to Edward Grey (died 1457) in right of his wife, Elizabeth, William Ferrers' granddaughter and heir. Thomas Grey (died 1501) was Elizabeth and Edward's grandson. (Ibid., v, pp.354-362).

51 William died 1455. John died 1465 and Francis died probably in 1487. (Ibid., viii, pp.221-225).

52 John I died 1461. John II died 1476. (Ibid., ix, pp.607-609).

53 William I died 1462. William II died 1468. John died 1526. (Ibid., xii, pp.944-946).

54 Died 1483. (Ibid., vi, pp. 370-371).

55 Died 1461. (Ibid., x, pp.126-128).

56 Ibid., vi, pp.130-133; Nichols, ii, p.557.

the Greys of Ruthin,[57] the Scropes of Masham,[58] the Scropes of Bolton,[59] and the Beauchamp and Neville earls of Warwick[60] were seised of lands and rights too inconsequential to involve them in the politics of the shire.

Although Thomas lord Roos took an interest in the local politics of Lincolnshire and, to a lesser extent, Norfolk, Yorkshire and Northamptonshire,[61] he displayed an almost total lack of concern for the internal affairs of Leicestershire. In part this may be explained by the geographical isolation of those manors he held in demesne which were closely confined to the north-eastern corner of the hundred of Framland in the Vale of Belvoir, and in part to the fact that he possessed very few overlordships elsewhere in the county.[62] In addition to these constraints, in the first half of the fifteenth century the Roos estates were burdened by a series of minorities, culminating when Thomas came of age in 1446.[63] While the Roos males tended to be comparatively short-lived, their women-folk clung tenaciously to life with a pertinacity rivalling that of Margaret of Brotherton in the fourteenth century.[64] Thomas' grandmother, Margaret lady Roos, lived until 1430; his aunt Margery, wife of John lord Roos, survived her husband by almost sixty years, eventually dying at a ripe age in 1478; and his mother, Eleanor, outlived

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57 G.E.C., vi, pp. 155-160; Nichols, ii, p.869.
58 G.E.C., xi, pp.567-570; Nichols, ii, pp.18, 19.
59 G.E.C., xi, pp.543-546; Nichols, ii, pp.446, 509.
60 G.E.C., xii, pp.378-397; Nichols, ii, p.635.
61 C.P.R., 1452-61, p.603; G.E.C., xi, p.105; Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, 2 vols., ed. N. Davis, Oxford, 1971-76, vol. II, p.185. (hereafter, Paston Letters).
62 Nichols, ii, pp.18, 38, 296, 300, 713. For distribution of manors held in demesne by the nobility, see Map III.
63 C.P.R., 1441-46, p.445.
64 Margaret outlived her brother, two husbands, her children and her eldest grandson. R.E. Archer, "Rich Old Ladies: the Problem of Late Medieval Dowagers", Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History, ed. T. Pollard, Gloucester, 1984, pp.28-29; K.B. McFarlane, The Nobility of Later Medieval England, Oxford, 1973, p.66; G.E.C., ix, pp.600-601.

her son by three years.[65] A widow's jointure was a heavy burden on the patrimony and for most of the fifteenth century each succeeding lord Roos failed to have full possession of his estate.

Onerous as these tricks of fate undoubtedly were, they alone need not have proved permanently prejudicial to the family fortunes. However, Thomas's political miscalculations and his son Edmund's insanity had more enduring adverse consequences. Thomas' unswerving loyalty to the Lancastrian cause, even after the change of regime in 1461, led to the forfeiture of his estates and his subsequent execution in 1464.[66] Following the swing of the political pendulum in 1485, Edmund regained his lands and titles only to lose his wits shortly afterwards. Found to be "not of sufficient discretion", he was placed under the guardianship of his brother-in-law, Sir Thomas Lovel, under whose roof he passed his days until his death, without issue, in 1508.[67]

As with the lords Roos, the lords Beaumont had interests outside Leicestershire, again notably in Lincolnshire where they had received grants of land when the barony was created early in the fourteenth century.[68] However, unlike the Rooses, they played an active part in Leicestershire affairs.[69] This was surely a reflection of the more central location of the manors they held in demesne, for although these were largely concentrated in the poorer and less densely populated western part of the county where the process of subinfeudation had been relatively slow, they at least were not confined to an isolated corner of the shire.[70]

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65 Ibid., xi, pp.102-104.
66 Ibid., xi, p.105.
67 Ibid., xi, p.106.
68 Ibid., ii, p.59.
69 C.P.R., 1429-31, p.619; ibid., 1436-41, p.584; ibid., 1441-46, p.473; ibid., 1446-52, p.590.
70 See Map III.

The Beaumont manors were grouped in the north and east of Sparkenhoe and in West Goscote on the edge of Charnwood Forest. In addition to these, in 1447 and 1453 John, viscount Beaumont, inherited two manors from his maternal grandmother and her sister, one at Hallaton and one at Thorpe Langton, and these provided the family with further interests in Gartree hundred in the south-east.[71] Also, unlike the Rooses, the Beaumonts held a number of overlordships in each of the county's six hundreds.[72] Given the extent of these holdings it would be surprising had the Beaumonts not played a significant part in local affairs.

Nevertheless, the fate of the Beaumonts closely parallelled that of the Roos family and their end was just as ignominious. John Beaumont, like Thomas Roos, supported Henry VI in his struggle against York and, in July 1460, he was killed at the battle of Northampton.[73] John's son, William, was unable to reconcile himself to the Yorkist regime. Although he managed to survive until the advent of the Tudors, when he was restored to his honours, he, like Edmund, lord Roos, subsequently lost his reason.[74] The Beaumonts, therefore, one of Leicestershire's leading noble families, had no part to play in county politics once the Lancastrian dynasty was overthrown in 1461.

Unlike either the lords Roos or the lords Beaumont, the lords Ferrers of Groby appear to have confined their interests almost entirely to Leicestershire, at least until 1457. William, lord Ferrers of Groby, was appointed to every commission of the peace in the county between 1422

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71 V.C.H. Leics., v, pp.124, 206; Nichols, ii, p.661; G.E.C. ii, p.62.

72 Gartree: V.C.H. Leics., v, p.214; Nichols, ii, pp.460, 568. Framland: ibid., ii, pp.18, 195. Guthlaxton: ibid., iv, p.11. Sparkenhoe: ibid., iv, passim. East Goscote: ibid., iii, pp.64, 366, 498. West Goscote: ibid., iii, pp.1114-1116.

73 Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles, ed. J. Gairdner, Camden Society, 1880, p.74.

74 G.E.C., ii, p.63.

and the year of his death, 1445.[75] No doubt his influence on local affairs can be explained in terms of the extensive overlordships he held in each of the county's six hundreds, though the manors he held in demesne were confined to Groby in Sparkenhoe, Bradgate in West Goscote and Lutterworth in Guthlaxton.[76] After 1445, Edward Grey, who held the title, lord Ferrers of Groby, in right of his wife, Elizabeth, granddaughter and heir of William, assumed the latter's rôle in county politics until his own death in 1457.[77]

After that year, neither Edward Grey's son, Sir John Grey, nor his grandson, Thomas, maintained Ferrers involvement in Leicestershire politics. Sir John was killed fighting for the king at the second battle of St. Albans in 1461 and, keeping in mind the consequences which befell the lords Roos and Beaumont for failing to predict Lancastrian defeat, one may be tempted, for the sake of symmetry, to explain the eclipse of the Ferrerses of Groby in similar national-political terms. However, symmetry is elusive in this case and an explanation for the loosening of Ferrers ties with Leicestershire must be sought elsewhere.

It may be recalled that Edward Grey held the title, lord Ferrers of Groby, and its attendant lands in Leicestershire in right of his wife, Elizabeth.[78] The heirs, therefore, would have to await Elizabeth's death before entering the Ferrers inheritance. By the time Elizabeth did eventually die in 1483, her son, John Grey, was himself long dead and Thomas Grey's local interests had already concentrated themselves in Warwickshire where he had inherited the lands of his paternal

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75 C.P.R., 1422-29, p.565; ibid., 1429-36, p.619; ibid., 1436-41, p.584; ibid., 1441-46, p.473.

76 V.C.H. Leics., v, passim; Nichols, ii-iv, passim; T.L.A.S., vol. 14, 1925-26, p.87; T.L.A.S., vol. 16, 1929-31, p.50. For manors held in demesne see Nichols, iv, p.630; ibid., iii, p.661.

77 G.E.C., v, pp.357-360; C.P.R., 1446-52, p.590; ibid., 1452-61, p.669.

78 See above, n.50.

grandmother, Joan Astley.[79] As a consequence, neither John nor Thomas was in a position to involve himself in Leicestershire politics. Furthermore, sometime before 1462, Elizabeth took as her second husband, Sir John Bourchier, a younger son of Henry, earl of Essex.[80] Sir John's interests seem to have lain in Essex where he was certainly buried.[81] There is no evidence to suggest that he used his marriage to Elizabeth to extend his influence into the Midlands.

While the lords Ferrers of Groby, William Ferrers and Edward Grey, exercised their influence in Leicestershire from their caput honoris within the county, the seat of Lovel power lay beyond its boundaries at Tichmarsh in Northamptonshire.[82] Their considerable holdings, which extended even into Oxfordshire and Wiltshire, prompted one historian to refer to John, lord Lovel, as "one of the wealthiest of peers below the rank of earl".[83] It is hardly surprising, then, that the Lovels were consistently appointed to the commissions of the peace in these three shires.[84]

However, in Leicestershire, Lovel holdings were relatively minor, consisting mainly of two manors and land in Sparkenhoe and the overlordship of a manor and lands in Gartree hundred.[85] Nevertheless, William, lord Lovel, was regularly appointed to Leicestershire commissions of the peace until his death in 1455, and although his son and heir, John, appears not to have taken the same interest in the county,

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79 G.E.C., v, pp.360-362; ibid., iv, p.419; V.C.H. Warw., vi, p.17; ibid., iv, p.179.

80 G.E.C., v, p.360.

81 V.C.H. Essex, ii, p.175; H.W. King, "Ancient Wills", Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society, vol. I, no. 146, pp.147-150.

82 V.C.H. Northants., iii, pp.143-146.

83 Ross, op.cit., p.438. For Lovel manors in Oxfordshire and Wiltshire see V.C.H. Oxon., iv, p.367; ibid., vi, pp.82, 127; ibid., viii, p.60; ibid., x, p.234; V.C.H. Wilts., v, p.53; ibid., ix, pp.81, 176; ibid., xi, p.240; ibid., xii, p.112.

84 C.P.R., 1429-36, pp.622, 626; ibid., 1436-41, pp.587, 592; ibid., 1441-46, pp.476, 480; ibid., 1452-61, p.681.

85 H.M.C. Hastings, i, p.296; V.C.H. Leics., v, pp.77, 257.

the William Lovel, knight, who was appointed to the commissions of the peace in 1456 and 1457 was probably John's young brother, the lord Morley.[86]

After 1457, Lovel appointments to the bench of Justices of the Peace in Leicestershire ceased. Furthermore, in May 1463 John Lovel transferred his manors at Bagworth and Thornton and his lands at Thornton and Desford to William, lord Hastings, in return for a reciprocal transfer of Hastings' manors in Yorkshire to Lovel.[87] Changes were also made to the Lovel overlordship of the manor of Carlton Culieu some time after 1455. The nature of these changes is unclear, but it seems that the overlordship passed out of Lovel possession.[88] Taken together, such evidence, sparse as it is, suggests that a conscious decision was made to withdraw from the county, though whether this decision was made voluntarily for sound economic reasons, or under pressure from lord Hastings, is open to speculation.

Of the remaining noble families with lands in Leicestershire, two, the Mowbrays and the Zouches, played little part in the politics of the shire. Mowbray lands in the county were part of the Segrave inheritance, acquired when Elizabeth Segrave, sole heiress of John, lord Segrave, married John, lord Mowbray.[89] These extensive Segrave estates were mainly confined to the hundreds of Framland and East Goscote, but as with most lords whose caput honoris lay outside the county, the Mowbrays would have become "rentiers" by the fifteenth century rather than remaining demesne farmers.[90] The same applies to the lords

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86 C.P.R., 1429-36, p.619; ibid., 1436-41, p.584; ibid., 1441-46, p.473; ibid., 1446-52, p.590; ibid., 1452-61, p.669. For lord Morley see G.E.C., ix, p.219.

87 H.M.C. Hastings, i, p.296.

88 V.C.H. Leics., v, p.77.

89 G.E.C., xi, pp.609-610.

90 For the trend towards renting see V.C.H. Leics., ii, p.182; G.A. Holmes, The Estates of the Higher Nobility in Fourteenth Century England, Cambridge, 1957, pp.112-116. For Mowbray holdings in Leicestershire see Nichols, ii and iii, passim.

Zouche who were consistently appointed to commissions of the peace in their native Northamptonshire, occasionally to those in Rutlandshire, but only from 1478 onwards to those in Leicestershire.[91]

No list of Leicestershire nobility would be complete without mention of one of the fifteenth century's most powerful peers, William, lord Hastings. The Hastings family held lands in Yorkshire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire, but their caput honoris was in Leicestershire where they held the manors of Kirby Muxloe, Newton Harcourt, Kilby and Wistow.[92] In addition to these manors, they possessed lands in the town of Leicester itself, in Glen Magna, Ravenstone, Ashby Parva, Appleby Magna and Braunston.[93] Such extensive holdings assured the Hastings family a foremost position among the county's leading gentry. Not surprisingly, William's father, Sir Leonard Hastings, who was one of Richard, duke of York's retainers, played an active rôle in local politics in the late 1440s and early 1450s. He served on commissions of the peace from 1448 until his death in 1455;[94] he was appointed sheriff of the counties of Leicestershire and Warwickshire in 1453;[95] and in 1455 he was elected to parliament as knight of the shire for Leicestershire.[96]

However, it was Sir Leonard's son, William, who laid the foundations of the family's greatness. Like his father before him, William was a retainer of Richard, duke of York. He was present at the "Rout of Ludford bridge" in October 1459, but may have been among

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91 For Northants, see C.P.R., 1429-36, p.622; ibid., 1436-41, p.587; ibid., 1441-46, p.475; ibid., 1452-61, p.673. For Rutland see ibid., 1429-36, p.623; ibid., 1452-61, p.675. For Leics. see ibid., 1476-85, p.564.

92 H.M.C. Hastings, i, p.xiii.

93 Ibid., p.294; Nichols, i, p.273; ibid., ii, p.575; ibid., iii, p.932; ibid., iv, pp.21, 430, 616.

94 C.P.R. 1446-52, p.590; ibid., 1452-61, p.669.

95 P.R.O. Lists and Indexes, no. IX, p.145.

96 Wedgwood, Register, p.653.

those who counselled against fighting the king and who afterwards, in response to an appeal to the king's grace, received "mercy bothe of lyffe and lym".[97] That such was the case is suggested by the fact that Hastings suffered in neither life nor limb. He was not attainted by the Coventry parliament which met the following month, but was instead fined £100 and, along with his brothers, Thomas and Ralph, was pardoned his misdemeanors.[98]

There is little conclusive evidence to indicate that Hastings played a major part in the events leading to the change of dynasty, though that he did so, may be inferred from the rewards he subsequently received. He was not with the duke of York at Wakefield, but he was probably at the battle of Mortimer's Cross with the earl of March.[99] Allowing that he was at Mortimer's Cross, one would be surprised had he not attended the meeting at Baynard's Castle which approved the decision to make Edward king, though he is not specifically named as having been present.[100] At the end of March, however, he fought at the battle of Towton where his martial accomplishments were sufficiently marked for him to receive a knighthood.[101]

Thereafter, Hastings' rise in power and prestige was rapid. On the national level he was appointed councillor and created chamberlain of

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97 Gregory's Chronicle, p.207.

98 For the fine and pardon see C.P.R., 1452-61, pp.552, 577. W.H. Dunham, "Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers, 1461-1483", Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, vol. 39, 1955, p.20, asserts that Hastings was attainted (no reference provided). That this was not the case see Rot. Parl. v, pp.349, 368.

99 C.L. Scofield, The Life and Reign of Edward the Fourth, 2 vols., London, 1923, reprint 1967, vol. I, p.137. Charles Ross maintains that "there is no evidence that Hastings was in Edward's company". (Ross, op.cit., p.31, n.3). While it is true that William Worcester omits Hastings from his list of those present at Mortimer's Cross, (see William Worcester, Itineraries, ed. J.H. Harvey, Oxford, 1969, pp.203-205), Clement Paston's letter to his brother , John, dated 23 January, 1451, strongly suggests that Hastings was present (see Paston Letters, vol. I, p.197).

100 C.A.J. Armstrong, "The Inauguration Ceremonies of the Yorkist Kings, and their Title to the Throne", T.R.H.S., 4th series, xxx, 1948, p.56.

101 Paston Letters, vol. I, p.197.

the king's household; on 8 May, 1461, he was made receiver general of the Duchy of Cornwall and this appointment was followed a few days later by the constableship and stewardship of Rockingham Castle; the same month he was appointed master of the mint in London; in June 1461 he was elevated to the peerage as baron Hastings; in July he added the chamberlainship of north Wales to his many other offices.[102] Moreover, within Leicestershire itself his power was no less enhanced. Apart from the stewardship of the Duchy of Lancaster possessions within the county, Hastings was granted the forfeited estates of Lancastrian supporters, lord Beaumont, lord Roos and the earl of Wiltshire. Thereby, a member of the gentry was transformed into the county's pre-eminent nobleman.[103]

As we have seen, noble authority in Leicestershire was diffuse until 1461. The Roos family, the Mowbrays and the Lovels all had major holdings outside the shire but, despite their economic interest within it, they took little active part in its politics. Although the Beaumonts were appointed to commissions of the peace, they were more powerful in Lincolnshire where they had their major residence. Only the lords Ferrers of Groby resided in Leicestershire. Yet, as indicated above, their influence in the county waned after 1457.[104] Now, after 1461, with the grant to William Hastings of the Leicestershire manors belonging to the Lancastrian lords, Roos, Beaumont and the earl of Wiltshire, the authority of the nobility within the shire became concentrated in the hands of one man.

Despite these changed circumstances, it would be unwarranted to assume that this authority automatically manifested itself in greatly

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102 J.R. Lander, 'Council, Administration and Councillors, 1461-1485", B.I.H.R., xxxii, no. 86, 1959, p.168; C.P.R., 1461-67, pp.9, 13, 26, 130; C.C.R. , 1461-68, p.61.

103 C.P.R., 1461-67, pp. 103-104 ; ibid., 1467-77, p.26.

104 See above, pp.21-22.

increased noble control of the shire's administration and politics. The interests of the nobility were rarely, if ever, confined merely to a single county. Such interests tended to be at least regional, spanning a number of counties, and, more often than not, were national as well. In fifteenth-century Leicestershire this was no less true of William Hastings than it was, say, of the lords Roos and Beaumont.

Leicestershire, therefore, provides us with an interesting area in which to study the fifteenth-century gentry. There were no great monasteries to dominate, and therefore complicate, local society and politics. The king, as Duke of Lancaster, was an absentee landlord. There was no magnate of the first order who held the county in his thrall or pair of magnates who vied with each other for control. Most of Leicestershire's nobility were non-residents for whom the county was of secondary importance. In short, Leicestershire is just the sort of county in which we would expect to find an assertive local community, well attuned to assuming responsibility for its own administration and unlikely to accept gracefully what it may consider to be unwarranted outside interference in its affairs.

Of course, it may be pointed out that wherever we look, English government in the middle ages was essentially local government, carried on by those who lived in and knew the areas where they held sway.[105] It is equally true that by the fifteenth century, the battle for control of that government had already been fought between the nobility and lesser personages below the rank of baron with the latter, the gentry, emerging as the victors.[106] Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that a study of the gentry in Yorkshire, for example, could do justice to its subject without

105 A.B. Ferguson, The Indian Summer of English Chivalry, Durham, North Carolina, 1960, p.127.

106 H. Cam, "The Legislators of Medieval England", Proc. Brit. Acad., vol. xxxi, 1945, p.144; H.M. Cam, "Cambridgeshire Sheriffs in the Thirteenth Century", Liberties and Communities in Medieval England, Cambridge, 1944, p.28.

taking into account the pervasive presence of the Percies and Nevilles or that historians should ignore the dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk and the earls of Oxford in East Anglia when the Pastons certainly could not - at least not for long. We may agree with Cam that the gentry had their hands on the helm of local administration but only rarely had they the opportunity independently to plot the course as well. Leicestershire appears to offer one of these rare opportunities.

Chapter II

The Gentry in the Fifteenth Century

Who or what were the gentry is a question which has vexed many historians of the medieval and early modern periods. A few, whose concern is with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where debate about the gentry is almost unavoidable, obviously consider that the term, "gentry", has passed sufficiently into the lingua franca of the discipline for it to require neither definition nor explanation.[1] More tentative scholars, while admitting that the term defies simple definition, are rarely more forthcoming.[2] Still others are content in the knowledge that the gentry filled the social and economic gap between the barons and the yeomen.[3] The latter view has the twin advantages of being disarmingly simple while at the same time being stamped with the authority of Stubbs.[4]

For historians of the sixteenth century, the gentry is seen to consist of landowners bearing the title, knight, at the group's uppermost level, followed in status by the esquire and, finally, the gentleman at the lowest stratum.[5] In the seventeenth century, this trio of status groups was

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1 See, for example, H.R. Trevor-Roper, The Gentry 1540-1640, The Economic History Review Supplement, I, London, 1953; A. Everitt, Suffolk and the Great Rebellion 1640-1660, Suffolk Records Society, vol. III, 1961.

2 A. Fletcher, A County Community in Peace and War: Sussex 1600-1660, London, 1975, p.22.

3 See below n.4 and n.5.

4 W. Stubbs, The Constitutional History of England, 3 vols, 5th edn., Oxford, 1903, iii, p.563.

5 G.E. Mingay, The Gentry, The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class, London, 1976, p.3; R.B. Smith, Land and Politics in the England of Henry VIII. The West Riding of Yorkshire: 1530-46, Oxford, 1970, p.65; L. Stone, The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641, abridged edn., Oxford, 1967, p.28; J. Cornwall, "The People of Rutland in 1522", T.L.A.H.S., vol. XXXVII, 1961-2, p.15.

joined by a fourth, the artificial Jacobean creation, the baronets, whose ostensible purpose was to fill that wide gap perceived to exist between the knights and the parliamentary peerage. They therefore ousted the knights proper from their elevated position within the hierarchy of the gentry.[6] This is still the most widely held view of the gentry and it is the model which, it seems, is implicitly adopted even by those who shirk the task of providing the term with an explicit definition.

More adventurous spirits have sought a greater precision in their definitions, a precision based on land tenure and income. One sometimes finds the gentry defined as those landowners below the parliamentary peerage who held freehold land providing an income of at least £10 per annum.[7] While such a definition pretends to mathematical exactitude, we would do well to be cautious. Tawney has already pointed out that there were freeholders whose holdings were so insignificant that they had to sell their labour for wages in order to subsist. Moreover, and more apposite to our purposes, he has reminded us that not all members of the gentry held their lands by freehold.[8] Even Smith and Cornwall both admit that some £10 freeholders may have been yeomen and that some gentlemen had recorded incomes as low as £5 per annum.[9] These caveats would suggest that something more than form of tenure or mere income was involved in determining status.

Our picture of the gentry becomes further complicated when we learn that merchants, lawyers and office-holders were accorded gentlemanly status. Also, a liveried retainer was regarded as a gentleman

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6 Stone, op.cit., pp.43-48.

7 T.B. Pugh, "The Magnates, Knights and gentry", Fifteenth Century England 1399-1509, eds. S.B. Chrimes et.al., Manchester, 1972, pp.96-97; Smith, op.cit., pp.65-66; J. Cornwall, "The Early Tudor Gentry", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd series, xvii, 1964-65, pp.460-470.

8 R.H. Tawney, The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century, London, 1912, pp.37 and passim.

9 Smith, op.cit., pp.65-66; Cornwall, "Early Tudor Gentry", pp.462-465.

but may have ceased to be so once he doffed his livery.[10] These complexities have, of course, elicited comment from those historians who are forced to use the term, "gentry". Tawney admits that it is a group "ragged at its edges"; Smith confesses to a degree of arbitrariness when drawing the line between gentry and yeomen; and Professor Stone, in an attempt to accommodate complicating material, has been constrained to resort to an inelegant construct which sets a rural-based hierarchy beside four occupational hierarchies.[11] Such concessions suggest a justifiable feeling of unease about the term, "gentry".

The only point of agreement is that the gentry consisted of knights, esquires and gentlemen who shared gentle status. Any movement beyond this point will produce provisos, qualifications and, eventually, disagreement. Unfortunately, if we look back beyond the sixteenth century, our single point of agreement ceases to hold as well, and we are still left with the question, who or what were the gentry? Perhaps the best way to resolve our problem is to adopt an atomistic approach and to trace the development of the gentry as a status group through the development of its component parts.

The origins of the English gentry can be found in Anglo-Norman society as it developed after the Conquest and, particularly, in the Anglo-Norman knight whose knighthood indicated that he had successfully completed his military apprenticeship. At this stage, knighthood implied military proficiency; it had not yet provided a mark of social

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10 F.R.H. Du Boulay, An Age of Ambition, London, 1970, p.72; E.W. Ives, "The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England", T.R.H.S., 5th series, 18, 1968, p.157; R.H. Tawney, "The Rise of the Gentry, 1558-1640", Econ. Hist. Rev., xi, 1941, p.4; R.L. Storey, "Gentlemen-bureaucrats", Profession, Vocation and Culture in Later Medieval England, ed. C.H. Clough, Liverpool, 1982, pp.91-95.

11 Tawney, "The Rise of the Gentry", p.4; Smith, op.cit., p.65; L. Stone, "Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700", Past and Present, no. 33, 1966, pp.17-21.

distinction.[12] This continued to be the case for as long as the knight's function remained essentially military and for as long as his equipment for war consisted of the simple conical helmet, the hauberk and the swift, light horse as depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry. In the eleventh century a knight could finance his arms and armour from lands little more extensive than those of the wealthier peasant.[13]

By the thirteenth century, however, the picture was quite different. The lightly armed and armoured knight of the eleventh century had been superseded by the knight bearing full body armour. His horse, too, had become protected by armour so that it needed to be strong and heavy to carry the additional weight. These developments raised the cost of equipping a knight by as much as five to ten fold, which, one historian has suggested, was much faster than the rate of increase in the income derived from land.[14]

While the cost of military accoutrements was increasing, impositions did not end there. The actual ceremony of dubbing could be expensive, especially if it occurred at court, and the feudal incidents due from knights ensured that the financial demands were on-going.[15] Furthermore, the burdens placed upon these later knights were never merely military and monetary. Increasingly, they were called upon to perform civil duties which, in the words of Stubbs, were "severe and

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12 Sir F. Stenton, The First Century of English Feudalism 1066-1166, 2nd edn., London, 1961, pp.131-142.

13 S. Harvey, "The Knight and the Knight's Fee in England", Past and Present, no. 49, 1970, reprinted in Peasants, Knights and Heretics, ed. R.H. Hilton, Cambridge, 1981, p.145.

14 S. Painter, Studies in the History of the English Feudal Barony, Baltimore, 1943, pp.41-42; N. Denholm-Young, History and Heraldry 1254-1310, London, 1965, pp.19-20.

15 Michael Powicke, Military Obligations in Medieval England, London, 1962, pp.69-70; F.M. Nichols, "On Feudal and Obligatory Knighthood", Archaeologia, 39, 1863, p.214.

engrossing".[16] Unlike his eleventh-century counterpart, the thirteenth-century knight needed wealth to support his calling and his wealth, so the argument goes, transformed him into a man of considerable social standing.[17] His status was further enhanced by the administrative, judicial and police duties which fell to him. Look as we may for the gentry in the first one-and-a-half centuries after the Conquest, we find only knights.

Nevertheless, by the mid-thirteenth century it was becoming increasingly clear that the knights alone were no longer equal to the tasks foisted upon them by the central government. Many, whose income would have supported knighthood, preferred to avoid the dignity, thereby escaping its more onerous obligations.[18] The resulting decline in the number of knights prompted government attempts to stem the tide by issuing writs of distraint.[19] No doubt, distraint of knighthood was initially designed to force men of substance to be dubbed in order to provide strenuous knights for the king's army. At the same time it ensured a supply of knightly officials, though it has been argued that at the outset the foremost consideration was to raise revenue from the fines.[20]

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16 Stubbs, op.cit., p.563; G. Lapsley, "Buzones", E.H.R., xlvii, 1932, pp.193, 554, 565; McKisack, op.cit., p.189; Sir Maurice Powicke, The Thirteenth Century 1216-1307, 2nd. edn., London 1962, p.539; R.F. Treharne, "The Knights in the Period of Reform and Rebellion, 1258-1267: A Critical Phase in the Rise of a New Class", B.I.H.R., xxi, 1946-48, pp.2-4.

17 Harvey, op.cit., p.172.

18 Denholm-Young, op.cit., p.158; Sir Maurice Powicke, op.cit., pp.539-41; Ferguson, op.cit., pp.4, 13.

19 Nichols, "On Feudal and Obligatory Knighthood", pp.202-204; F.M. Stenton, "The Changing Feudalism of the Middle Ages", History, new series, xix, 1934-35, p.299; N. Denholm-Young, "Feudal Society in the Thirteenth Century: the Knights", History, new series, xxix, 1944, p.116.

20 A.L. Poole, Obligations of Society in the XII and XIII Centuries, Oxford, 1946, p.4. For the opposing view see Michael Powicke, op.cit., pp.73-74; Sir Maurice Powicke, op.cit., p.546.

Be that as it may, the major significance of distraint of knighthood is that it reveals official recognition of a group of men, akin to knights in wealth, but who were prepared to forego the status bestowed by knighthood. By the end of the thirteenth century these men were beginning to fill many of the administrative, judicial and legislative positions formerly reserved for belted knights.[21] In them we see the genesis of the later-medieval esquires, though it was as late as 1370 before the notoriously conservative heralds gave esquires their own idiomorphic stamp of social approval.[22]

In the fourteenth century we therefore find knights and esquires whom historians sometimes refer to as "the gentry".[23] Yet, this medieval gentry patently fails to mirror the model created for the sixteenth century with its trinity of knights, esquires and gentlemen; the gentleman appears to be missing. Unfortunately, he is not to be found in the French gentil-homme either, for in the fourteenth century gentilis and nobilis were interchangeable terms which were equally applicable to an esquire and an earl.[24] Despite the claim that "nobility had parted company with gentility" by the second half of the fifteenth century, the heralds, even as late as 1530, appear to have been unaware of the separation.[25]

"Gentleman", as a term of worship, does not, in fact, begin to appear until after the Statute of Additions of 1413 which stipulated that original writs and indictments should record the status of defendants.[26]

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21 Nichols, "On Feudal and Obligatory Knighthood", pp.201, 224.

22 N. Denholm-Young, The Country Gentry in the Fourteenth Century, Oxford, 1969, p.4.

23 Stubbs, op.cit., pp.544-575; N. Saul, Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century, Oxford, 1981, p.30 and passim.

24 G.R. Sitwell, "The English Gentleman", The Ancestor, 1, 1902, pp.68-71; A.R. Wagner, English Genealogy, London, 1960, pp.105-106.

25 McFarlane, op.cit., p.275; A.R. Wagner, Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages, 2nd. edn., London, 1956, p.77.

26 Storey, op.cit., p.90; Sitwell, op.cit., pp.64-65, p.73.

But the Statute of Additions notwithstanding, as a description of rank and status the use of the term, "gentleman", was adopted haltingly and with some confusion, as the omission of status and the procession of aliases in the Pardon Rolls reveal.[27] We need to be wary, therefore, about welcoming too readily the newly-found gentleman into the bosom of the fifteenth-century gentry.

This outline of the development of a status group, the gentry, should reveal that the term is exceedingly flexible in meaning. For historians of the fourteenth century, knights and esquires constituted the gentry; for historians of the sixteenth, the gentry consisted of knights, esquires and gentlemen. But the student of the fifteenth century is in a particularly invidious position. Should he, like his fourteenth-century counterpart, though with less justification, ignore gentlemen altogether? Or should he adopt the sixteenth-century model of the gentry and include gentlemen, even though they were only just beginning to join their superiors, the knights and esquires? Personal preference initially favoured the latter option but, as we shall see, the dilemma eventually resolves itself.[28]

If deciding what constituted the fifteenth-century gentry poses difficulties, the task of isolating the determinants of gentry status is even more perplexing. The Statute of Additions fails to shed light on the problem, as does the law in general. Indeed, it has long been recognized that there was no legal distinction between free men of gentle, and those of non-gentle, status.[29] While the laws were silent on the issue, Sir John

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27 For omissions of status see, for example, the Pardon Roll of 1450, where the status of William Manston and John Septvans is unstated (C.P.R., 1446-52, p.373). That each may have been at least of esquire status see P.P.C. , vi, pp.287-289. For the use of aliases see Storey, op.cit., pp.93-95.

28 See below pp.46-48, 51-52.

29 Sir F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, The History of English Law, 2 vols., 2nd edn., London, 1923, vol.1, pp.407-11.

Fortescue, that fifteenth-century repository of legal, constitutional and probably archaic, wisdom, is no more forthcoming. His reference to the knights (miles), the esquire (armiger) and the non-gentle franklin as being "well-off in possessions"[30] not only ignores the gentleman altogether but is also notable for its lack of precision.

Nevertheless, Fortescue does alert us to the dangers of relying on economic considerations as a determinant of social status. He considers £5 per annum to be "a feyre lyvynge ffor a yoman",[31] but also draws attention to the many yeomen (valetti) who could spend in excess of £100 per annum.[32] Given that distraint of knighthood was levied on those with incomes of £40 and more, some yeomen, despite their social inferiority, were, by Fortescue's reckoning, economically superior to many knights. The point that income is an uncertain guide to status is reinforced when we discover that in 1436 Robert Barnevile and John Blaby each had declared incomes of £6 per year. However, while Barnevile was regarded as a yeoman, Blaby was reported to be a gentleman.[33]

A herald's grant of coat armour is hardly a determinant of status either. While these grants announced that a family belonged to the gentry, the grant itself did not so much confer status but was, instead, a formal recognition of one's social position. Similarly, the proposition that if one lived like a gentleman and if one were reputed to be a gentleman, then one was a gentleman[34] would make just as much logical

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30 Sir John Fortescue, De Laudibus Legum Anglie, ed. S.B. Chrimes, Cambridge, 1949, pp.68-69.

31 Sir John Fortescue, The Governance of England, ed. C.Plummer, London, 1885, p.151.

32 Fortescue, De Laudibus...., pp.68-69. The term valetti could conceivably be translated as "esquires", though, given the context, Chrimes' translation, "yeomen", seems preferable.

33 E179/192/59; C.P.R. 1446-52, p.534; C.P.R. 1436-41, p.6.

34 Mingay, op.cit., p.2; Du Boulay, op.cit., p.70; Wagner, English Genealogy, pp.111, 129.

and historical sense were it turned on its head. But William Harrison's oft-quoted aphorism that whoever "will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman [will be] reputed for a gentleman ever after"[35] exposes the nub of the problem. It reveals that even in the late sixteenth century, a gentleman was recognized instinctively, intuitively. Objective measures of status were elusive in the fifteenth century, too; they can scarcely prove to be less so to modern historians. This is not to suggest that there was no link between income and status but merely that the link can not be reduced to a simple mathematical equation.

The difficulties involved in delineating the gentry in theoretical terms are legion, but if we move to the concrete and attempt to isolate those families of fifteenth-century Leicestershire which were accorded gentle status, the undertaking is no less daunting. Heralds' visitations which, despite their shortcomings, may have provided a starting point, do not exist for the county in the fifteenth century.[36] In the absence of any contemporary or near-contemporary register of the shire's social élite, one must turn, therefore, to a variety of material the original intent of which was quite different from our own purposes.

As it was a function of the gentry to perform the duties of local government, one possible approach would be to recognize those who held local offices as constituting the country gentry. These would include sheriffs, knights of the shire, justices of the peace, escheators, commissioners of array, coroners and tax collectors. However, two problems immediately present themselves. In the fifteenth century, Leicestershire and Warwickshire shared a common sheriff and escheator so that although some of these officers were members of the Leicestershire gentry, others came from the neighbouring county. Also,

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35 Quoted in Mingay, op.cit., p.2.

36 For the deficiencies of heralds' visitations see A. Everitt, The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-1660, Leicester, 1966, pp.33-34, n.3.

there is always the danger that in concentrating upon the office holders alone, one will focus attention not on the representatives of the gentry as a whole but on a sub-set of the gentry, those work-horses of local administration, the buzones.[37] Furthermore, one must bear in mind that even substantial gentlemen may not have played a consistently active rôle in local government.[38]

In order to overcome the latter problem, it is necessary to turn to the tax returns surviving for Leicestershire in the period 1422-85. The most helpful of these is the graduated income tax of 1436 which was granted by parliament in December 1435 to finance the war effort in France.[39] The tax was levied on nett incomes exceeding £5 per annum and derived not only from freehold land but also from annuities and offices. Contributions to the tax were scaled according to income. Those who earned £5 per year paid 2s.6d. plus 6d. for every pound between £5 and £100; income between £100 and £400 was taxed at 8d. in the pound while those who earned over £400 were taxed at 2s. in the pound on their entire income. The 1436 subsidy was therefore designed to tap the wealth of the nation and to provide a more equitable distribution of the tax burden than was achieved by the old fifteenths and tenths.

Although barons and other members of the nobility dealt directly with the chancellor and treasurer, the non-noble population was accountable to special commissioners appointed in the shires. These commissioners, "certain sufficient persons by [the king's] counsel to be named",[40] were empowered to examine the county's freeholders and to assess and levy the subsidy. They were then required to make their

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37 Lapsley, op.cit., passim.

38 C. Richmond, John Hopton, A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman, Cambridge, 1981.

39 For this and what follows, see Rot. Parl., iv, pp.486-487.

40 Ibid., p.486.

returns to the Exchequer to which they also reported the names of defaulters.[41]

From the surviving returns to the Exchequer, it is clear that the commissioners or their clerks could exercise considerable discretion about the amount of information to be recorded and about the form in which that information was presented. For example, the return for the counties of Cambridge and Huntingdon includes names of freeholders arranged in columns, a list of the other counties where taxpayers held lands and an assessment of their nett income.[42] The return for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire is likewise arranged in columns and includes not only the taxpayer's nett worth but also calculates the amount payable.[43] In this case, too, the clerk seems to have intended to include the names of other counties where the taxpayer held freehold land but, after doing so for Thomas Blount, he clearly recognized the extra effort such prolixity would involve; he did not provide the same information about the remaining taxpayers. The Lincolnshire return similarly omits mention of holdings in other counties but, once again, lists the names of freeholders in columns on the left hand side of the manuscript, followed by their nett income and the subsidy payable on the right hand side.[44] This return is also noteworthy in that it assesses many incomes down to shillings and pence whereas most returns, including that for Warwickshire and Leicestershire, report incomes rounded off to the nearest pound.

The commissioners for Warwickshire and Leicestershire were much less concerned about superfluous detail or even about the neatness

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41 The names of defaulters are to be found in P.R.O. Exchequer, Accounts Various, E179/240/269 where the clerk provided a note if payment had been made in another county.

42 E179/240/268.

43 E179/240/266.

44 E179/136/198.

of their return than the commissioners for Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Huntingdonshire or Cambridgeshire. Their return eschewed the use of columns; it failed to enrol other counties where taxpayers held land and the calculation of the amount of subsidy levied on each freeholder was not recorded.[45] Nevertheless, the Leicestershire section of the return provides us with names of those persons in the county whose declared nett income was at least £5 per annum from freehold land, annuities and fees. These names can be supplemented by those of the county's tenants-in-chief, found in the subsidy on knights' fees collected in 1428.[46]

Unfortunately, details of the 1450 graduated income tax have not survived for Leicestershire.[47] Nevertheless, the family names gleaned from the 1428 and the 1436 subsidies, along with those who accepted the burdens of local government office provide us with our starting point. Their names are listed in Appendix I. This list does not include those sheriffs and escheators whose appointment was based on their standing in Warwickshire rather than Leicestershire; non-Leicestershire justices of the peace have also been omitted.[48]

Appendix I provides the names of 249 families, but it would be unwarranted to claim that all those of gentle status have been included, that all who have found a place on the list belonged to the gentry, or even, if their gentle status be accepted, that they can be counted specifically among the members of the Leicestershire gentry. For example, the Danvers family not only failed to aspire to government

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45 E179/192/59.

46 Feudal Aids, iii, pp.118-126.

47 R. Virgoe, "The Parliamentary Subsidy of 1450", B.I.H.R., lv, 1982, p.125.

48 Sheriffs: P.R.O. Lists and Indexes, no.ix, pp.145-146. Knights of the Shire: Return of Every Member; Wedgwood, Register. Justices of the Peace: C.P.R. Escheators: P.R.O. List of Escheators for England, T.S. volume, Round Room, pp.170-171. Commissioners of Array: C.P.R. Coroners: C.C.R.; C.P.R. Tax Collectors: Feudal Aids, iii, p.106; E372/275 ms.45 dorse; E179/241/368; E179/133/72, 82, 86; C.F.R.

positions within the shire but also managed to avoid detection in the tax returns. Their inclusion is based on the chance survival of a charter of 1458, to which John Danvers, esquire, of Swithland, acted as a witness.[49] His presence serves as a reminder that others of his status may have left no record whatsoever. Also, the Pykewell family appears because Margaret Pykewell was taxed on her income of £5 in 1436.[50] However, she was the widow of John Pykewell, the merchant and wool-packer from the borough of Leicester, and can not, therefore, be included among the county gentry.[51] Still others, about whose status there can be no such reservations, must be rejected on the basis that their holdings in Leicestershire were secondary to more extensive manors held in other counties. Sir Thomas Grene, for example, falls into this category. He derived an income, probably in excess of £15.6.8., from his manor of Kegworth and lands in Claxton and Long Whatton.[52] Nevertheless, his social interactions and political activities were confined to Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire where most of his lands were situated. He was certainly a gentleman, but not of the Leicestershire gentry. These considerations, combined with a paucity of contemporary references to some families, demand that the task of exclusion, already begun with non-Leicestershire sheriffs, escheators and justices of the peace, be extended to a further 76 families.

Of the remaining 173 families, listed in Appendix II, fourteen provided at least one knight in the period 1422-1485 and another thirteen families were sufficiently wealthy for their heads to become knights had they wished to do so.[53] At least one of these distrainee families had

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49 L.R.O. 5D33/108/87.

50 E179/192/59.

51 Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls ... of the city of London, A.D. 1413-37, ed. A.H. Thomas, Cambridge, 1943, p.249; Village Notes, vi, p.242.

52 C140/13/21.

53 E372/275; E372/284; E159/234; E159/242; E159/243.

provided a knight by 1487 when Thomas Pulteney was dubbed at the coronation of Elizabeth of York.[54] However, throughout the period under consideration, the Pulteneys must be counted among the potential, rather than actual, knights.

The incomes of twelve of the fourteen knightly families is known, with all earning at least £40 per annum. This sum was regarded at the time as the minimum required to support the dignity. Little can be said of certainty about the incomes of the remaining two families, the Hastingses and the Neeles. Sir Richard Hastings held lands in Northamptonshire and Yorkshire as well as Leicestershire and Warwickshire.[55] The commissioners for Northamptonshire reported to the exchequer that he had failed to appear before them but a clerk later recorded that Hastings had been assessed in Yorkshire.[56] Unfortunately, the enrolled account for Yorkshire has not survived.[57] The inquisitions held after the deaths of Sir Richard Hastings and his brother, Sir Leonard, in 1437 and 1455 respectively, are no more helpful. Both inquisitions outline the extent of Hastings' holdings but fail to indicate their value.[58] The most that can be said about Sir Richard's income is that he was wealthy enough to lend the king £106.13.4 in 1436 towards the cost of the wars in France and that this sum matched the amount lent by Bartholomew Brokesby whose income was £230 per annum.[59] The family, therefore, probably ranked as one of the wealthiest in Leicestershire, even before its windfall of grants made by a grateful Edward IV.

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54 W.A. Shaw, The Knights of England, 2 vols., London, 1971, vol. 1, p.142.
55 C139/83/58.
56 E179/240/269.
57 H.L. Gray, "Incomes from Land in England in 1436", E.H.R., xlix, 1934, pp.610-611, 611, n.1.
58 C139/83/58; C139/162/22.
59 P.P.C., iv, pp.323-324.

No such assumption can be made on behalf of the Neele family. Sir Richard Neele's association with the law was, doubtless, a lucrative source of income. In 1469, when he was justice of the King's Bench, Richard was granted 110 marks yearly "for the better maintenance of his estate".[60] But, in the absence of any tax assessment, the most that can be said about the family's economic status, as opposed to Richard Neele's personal earnings, is that it enjoyed an income of at least £40 per annum.[61]

If we allow Sir Richard Neele and Sir Richard Hastings incomes of £40 and £200 respectively,[62] then the median income for the knightly families is £100 per annum with a mode of £103 per annum. It follows, therefore, that three knightly families, the Erdyngtons, the Shirleys and the Hastingses, possessed economic resources which set them apart from the others. Their incomes were about twice that of their nearest rivals and their lofty economic position is partly reflected in the ties of marriage they formed with members of the nobility.[63]

Between the actual and potential knightly families there lay a wide economic gap. The median income for distrainees was £40 per annum which is less than half the median for their knightly counterparts. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that the highest income recorded for

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60 C.P.R., 1467-77, p.176.

61 The first reference to Richard Neele comes in 1442 when he served as knight of the shire and justice of the peace in Leicestershire. (Wedgwood, Register, p.31; C.P.R., 1441-46, p.437; E101/590/34). He later served on the King's Bench and in the Court of Common Pleas. (E. Foss, The Judges of England, 9 vols., London, 1848-64, cited in T.L.A.S., 17, 1931-33, p.3). For judges' incomes see below pp.81-82.

62 Statistically, the exact amounts are irrelevant to the argument which can tolerate, in the case of Hastings, a deviation of between -10% and +100% (£180-400) and, in the case of Neele, a deviation of +125% (£40-£90).

63 Thomas Erdyngton married Joyce, grand-daughter and coheir of Hugh, lord Burnell (G.E.C., ii, p.435, n.f.). Sir Richard Hastings married Elizabeth, daughter of Henry, lord Beaumont, while his brother, Sir Leonard Hastings, married Alice, daughter of lord Camois (H.N. Bell, The Huntingdon Peerage, London 1820, p.12). Ralph Shirley's second wife was Elizabeth, sister of Walter, lord Mountjoy (Nichols, ii, pp.716-717). The issue of gentry marriage with members of the nobility is discussed more fully in chapter VI.

any of the Leicestershire gentry, of whatever status, belonged to a member of this group. In 1436, Bartholomew Brokesby paid tax on £230 but he consistently refused to assume knighthood. The reasons for this deprecation remain uncertain. Obviously they were not economic. Nor can Brokesby be accused of attempting to shirk his political responsibilities. He represented the county as knight of the shire in five parliaments between 1422 and 1432, laboured on numerous commissions and was not only appointed to, but regularly served on, commissions of the peace.[64]

But although Bartholomew Brokesby was the equal of the greater knights in economic terms, it must be noted that in the 1436 return, his income of £230 was recorded in two separate amounts of £100 at the head of the list of Leicestershire taxpayers and of £130 at the very end.[65] One of these sums, probably the former, clearly refers to Brokesby's income from freehold land while the other amount may have derived from fees and annuities. Brokesby certainly had a long career of service to the social, political and even clerical élite. He had been executor to both Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, and Joan Beauchamp, lady Abergavenny, and had also been one of the latter's feoffees and a beneficiary under her will.[66] In the late 1430s and early '40s we find him acting as a feoffee for James Butler, earl of Ormond.[67] Another Leicestershire taxpayer, Walter Keble, whose income was also derived from, and recorded under, two separate sources, earned £100 as a feoffee for Butler's son and heir.[68] It is unlikely that Brokesby, acting in a similar capacity for the father, should have earned anything less. If this is the

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64 Return, pp.302, 308, 313, 316, 321; C.P.R., passim; E101/590/34.
65 E179/192/59.
66 C67/38, ms.27; C.P.R. 1422-29, p.486; Dugdale, ii, 1032.
67 C.P.R. 1429-36, p.506; ibid., 1436-41, p.435.
68 E179/192/59.

case, then at least £100 and possibly £130 of Brokesby's income was personal to himself; his reported income does not reflect the economic status of the Brokesby family in the long term. There is, therefore, no justification on the basis of wealth in allowing to the Brokesbys membership of the tiny elite of greater knightly families.[69]

More surprising than the wealth of Bartholomew Brokesby, however, is the discovery that four of the distrainee families whose representatives were taxed in 1436 admitted to incomes well below the anticipated £40 per annum.[70] Of course, Henry VI's government was not averse to using what Fortescue called, "exquysite meanes",[71] to raise revenue. Yet it is inconceivable that the authorities should have wished further to alienate the political nation by attempting to collect fines illegally from esquires earning less than £40. Parliamentary opposition to distraints was sufficiently vocal to ensure caution on that point.[72] Even if we concede that annual variations in income were inevitable, this provides an inadequate explanation for such a wide discrepancy between the £40 accepted as a minimum for distraint and the declared incomes of these four families.[73] One can only conclude that some commoners were, not surprisingly, as adept as the baronage at concealing their wealth from tax assessors.[74] The same conclusion is suggested by the rounded figures given for earnings and the suspiciously high cluster of incomes, about a third, of £5. The tax assessments should therefore be regarded as indicating minimum income.

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69 As would occur under Gray's classification of greater knights, actual and potential. (Gray, op.cit., p.623).

70 Astley, Hotoft, Malory and Wyvyll.

71 Fortescue, Governance of England, p.119.

72 Rot. Parl., v, p.20.

73 For their declared incomes see Appendix II.

74 See T.B. Pugh and C.D. Ross, "The English Baronage and the Income Tax of 1436", B.I.H.R., vol. XXVI, 1953, pp.1-28.

Once again, there is no justification for viewing the lesser distrainees along with the lesser knight as a distinct group.[75] If we omit the greater actual and potential knightly families from our calculations,[76] then the median income for lesser potential knights was still less than half that for the lesser actual knights.

Although the distrainees were accorded the status term, esquire, there was just as wide an economic gap between them and ordinary esquires as existed between knights and potential knights. Forty-six families provided mere esquires in the period 1422-1485 and the incomes of thirty of these, or just over 65%, is known. Owing to the greater size of this group, the imperative to estimate the unknown incomes is not as categorical as it was with the knights and distrainees. The known incomes of the esquire families ranged from £6 to £54 per annum with a mode of £26 and a median of £20. The median income for mere esquires was therefore half that for distrainees.

This orderly regression down the social scale is destroyed once we move beyond the esquires. Most surprising of all is the economic chasm which separated them from the gentlemen. The highest recorded income for the latter group was the assessment of £8 for Thomas Herdewyn. The modal income was only £6, less than a quarter that for the esquires, and many gentlemen earned as little as £5. Indeed, one suspects that some gentlemen whose incomes were not recorded earned less than £5 per annum. In fifteenth-century Leicestershire there was, therefore, little economic distinction between gentlemen and the wealthier peasantry. For the purposes of comparison, this sub-gentry group has been included in Appendix II.

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75 Gray, op.cit., p.623.

76 That is, Erdynton, Hastings, Shirley and Brokesby.

A further unexpected revelation relates to the size of the group of mere gentlemen. Only fourteen families can be identified as belonging to this sub-set and, in the case of at least two, their status was equivocal. In 1416, Thomas Noverary was described as a husbandman, but by 1419 he was regarded as being of gentle status.[77] Also in 1454, when Thomas Sampson received his pardon for not appearing before a court, he was referred to as a yeoman.[78] Nevertheless, three years earlier, in a charter dated 1451, he had been termed a gentlemen.[79]

Contemporaries in the fifteenth century were clearly uncertain about who should be admitted to the gentry at the group's lowest level. Indeed, for those aspiring to gentle status, the process of acceptance by their would-be peers may have taken some years and spanned more than one generation. But these considerations hardly explain why the number of mere gentlemen should appear so low. A more likely explanation is to be found in the nature of the evidence used. It will be recalled that our register of families was compiled from the subsidy on knights fees collected in 1428, from the graduated subsidy on incomes collected in 1436, from those who were fined for failing to accept knighthood and from those who did accept the burdens of local administration. It is not so much the case, therefore, that our net has been cast insufficiently wide; it may be the case, however, that we have not trawled deeply enough or, perhaps, that the weave of our net has been too open to entrap the smaller fry, the lesser gentry. Either way, it appears that for practical reasons the fifteenth-century gentry must be regarded as encompassing knights and esquires. But we should be cavalier indeed were we to consign the mere gentlemen to historical oblivion merely on the basis of

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77 Village Notes, iii, p.24.
78 C.P.R., 1452-61, p.182.
79 C.C.R., 1447-54, p.277.

an analysis of their income. To add depth to our image we now need to examine the gentry's tenure of land.