Chapter VII

Life and Death

Life began for John Chesilden II on St Valentine's Day, Wednesday 14 February, 1425, at Seaton in Rutlandshire.[1] Although the Chesildens normally resided in Rutland, they had landed interests in Northamptonshire and, after 1428, in Leicestershire, too, when John II's grandmother, Anne or Amice, inherited the manor of Adloxton from her mother, Margaret Burgh.[2] Within a few hours of John II's birth, the stage had been set for his first public appearance in the near-by parish church of All Hallows whose distinctive chamfered spire had dominated the village for about 150 years.[3] Before the day was out, John would be baptised here and given the name which his father also bore. But first, John senior despatched a rider, William Baxter, to fetch lady Elizabeth Longford to be his son's godmother.[4] Meanwhile, the church was made ready; John Club carried fire to light the candles and John Murdok brought water to fill the font.

Once these preparations were complete and Elizabeth Longford had arrived, a procession set out from the Chesilden's house to travel the short distance to All Hallows. Apart from John Chesilden senior and Elizabeth Longford, most of those present were probably neighbours, household servants and local tenants. There is no indication that the infant's mother attended the baptismal service. Her presence was not

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1 C139/129/41; Handbook of Dates, ed. C.R. Cheney, London, 1978, p.118.

2 E149/141/20; C139/118/14, ms.6; T.L.A.S., vol. 11, 1919-20;, pp.419-21; Village Notes, i, pp.14-15.

3 N. Pevsner, ed. The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland, 2nd. edn., Harmondsworth, 1984, pp.505-506, plate 91.

4 The following is based on the inquisition into John II's age, taken in 1446,. See n.1 above.

required and her first post-natal visit to the church would follow some days later for the ceremony known as "churching".[5] Thomas Carter carried the child in his arms, offering what protection he could against the winter chill. The first sacrament was administered within the church and then John Bartville's wife, who may have been the midwife at the birth or, perhaps, John II's newly-appointed nurse, carried him back to his father's house where important guests celebrated the occasion with a feast.[6]

No doubt, simple tableaux very similar to that at Seaton were regularly enacted in Leicestershire, too. William Villers, who was born in 1405 at Brooksby, was also carried from his father's house there to the parish church of St Michael to be baptised.[7] This sacrament did not ensure a place in heaven but entry to that Kingdom was denied to those who did not receive it.[8] Given the high rate of infant mortality, delays between birth and baptism were therefore necessarily brief. But although birth and baptism provide a convenient introduction to the more personal side of the life of a fifteenth-century gentleman, our main concern is with what happened afterwards, with how the gentry lived their lives and, ultimately, with how they approached death. We have already met the Leicestershire gentry as landholders and farmers, as professional men, whether as soldiers or lawyers or both, as administrators and governors of their shire and as members of families. Illuminating as these aspects of their lives undoubtedly are, they provide a very limited image of the gentry as people. Indeed, it seems most

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5 The Catholic Encyclopedia, 16 vols. ed. C.G. Herberrnann et. al., New York, 1907-17, vol.III, p.761; M. Warner, Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary, London, 1976, p.75; B. Hamilton, Religion in the Medieval West, London, 1986, p.113.

6 See H.S. Bennett, The Pastons and their England, Cambridge, 1968, p.194.

7 C139/42/74.

8 The Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. II, pp.258-259 ff.

unlikely that we shall ever know them as fully rounded individuals.[9] In the case of John Chesilden II, for example, we are better informed about the day of his birth than about any other day in his life.[10] Nevertheless, by piecing together fragments of information relating to a number of gentry, we may glimpse a little of the lives they led and thereby, perhaps, reach some understanding of the men they were.

The least illuminated period of the lives of the Leicestershire gentry is their childhood. Children were often mentioned in wills but only as the recipients of bequests, usually sums of money to be set aside towards their marriage.[11] We learn nothing of their play, training or early education. However, if we adopt Sir Thomas Elyot as our guide, some generalizations are possible.[12] Infants were initially entrusted to the care of nurses, and women continued to dominate their upbringing until they attained the age of seven years. During this period, according to Elyot, the child received instruction in reading and the rudiments of Latin.[13] Elyot then envisaged that further education be provided by a male tutor who would introduce his charge or charges to Aesop's Fables, Lucian's Dialogues, Aristophanes' Comedies, the works of Homer, Virgil, Ovid and, eventually, Cicero and Plato.[14] In those Leicestershire

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9 Cf. C. Richmond, John Hopton. A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman, Cambridge, 1981. Despite Dr Richmond's sensitive and probing treatment of his subject, John Hopton remains a rather "wooden" figure. It is no consolation that the difficulties attached to fifteenth-century biography apply equally to members of the nobility (See M.A. Hicks, False, Fleeting, Purjur'd Clarence. George, Duke of Clarence 1449-78, Gloucester, 1980).

10 John's younger brother, William, seems to have lived on the family's Leicestershire manor of Allexton until about 1450 when John conveyed it to John Boyville before its sale to Walter Blount of Derbyshire (C1/19/473; T.L.A.S., vol. 11, 1919-20, p.421).

11 See, for example, PROB11/16/17/127; /1/15/118; /13/27/229.

12 Sir Thomas Elyot, The Gouernour, introd. F. Watson, London, 1937, pp.18-23.

13 Ibid., pp.21-22.

14 Ibid., pp.35-49.

households which supported a chaplain, the rôle of tutor was no doubt added to his religious and other duties.[15]

Sir Thomas Elyot's proposed intellectual diet admittedly reflects early sixteenth-century tastes. Its fare may not have been palatable in the fifteenth. An inventory of Thomas Keble's library makes no mention of books suitable for younger children, though he did possess a copy of Cicero's De Officiis, a work which also appears in Elyot's curriculum for adolescents.[16] But the absence of specifically children's books from the inventory may be explained in terms of their relative lack of monetary value rather than Keble's neglect of his son, Walter's , early education. In fact, Keble's will reveals him to have been just as concerned about young Walter's moral development as any sixteenth-century humanist was about the upbringing of his offspring.[17]

In contrast to Sir Thomas Elyot's concern for children's intellectual growth, a late-fifteenth-century Italian visitor to England draws attention to the general practice of sending boys and girls, from about the age of seven, "to hard service in the houses of other people".[18] Alice de Bryene's household certainly included a number of boys and although there is no indication of the social status of these youths, some may have been drawn from neighbouring gentry households.[19] Among the Leicestershire gentry, John Bellers was a page in Henry V's household in France at a time when he cannot have been much older than seven years.[20] William Villers was also a royal page at the court of Edward IV in 1479 and 1480, when he was probably in his early-to-mid teens.[21]

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15 See above, p.162, n.15.

16 E.W. Ives, The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England, Cambridge, 1983, pp.445-447; Elyot, op.cit., pp.47-48.

17 PROB11/12/3/22v-23v. See above, p.173.

18 Italian Relation, p.24.

19 Alice de Bryene, p.124.

20 Wedgwood, Biographies, p.63.

21 E101/412/10, f.36; 412/11, f.35.

Edward Trussell, too, spent some time in a noble household, that of lord Hastings, but in his case his father, William Trussell, had died, and Hastings owned the boy's wardship and marriage.[22]

Although these examples confirm that some Leicestershire children spent part of their formative years in the households of others, they can not be taken to imply that the practice of fostering was as widespread as the author of the Italian Relation suggests. The gentry could, alternatively, send their sons to one of the county's five schools at Leicester, Melton Mowbray, Loughborough, Castle Donington or Burrough-on-the-Hill.[23] By 1508, the school at Burrough, which was run by the rector, Richard Alkborough, had ten scholars, some of whom were drawn from the neighbouring gentry families of Assheby, Skeffington and Villers.[24] Assheby lived sufficiently close to Burrough to have been a day-boy but Alkborough most probably provided board and lodgings as well as tuition.

While there is little direct evidence of childhood experiences in Leicestershire, we are slightly better served for adolescent experiences. Many gentry adolescents and young men from the county progressed to higher education. Thomas Danet of Bromkinsthorpe attended Merton College at Oxford, from where he graduated as Bachelor in 1455. By 1471, he had become Doctor of Theology and this high academic attainment led him into royal service. In 1475, he was involved in negotiations at Namur between Edward IV and Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, and by the following year he had been appointed as king's almoner.[25]

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22 PROB11/7/10/76v-79. Hastings arranged for Edward's wardship and marriage to be sold with the first option to John Donne at £40 below the market value. Donne was Hastings' brother-in-law (see Appendix XII).

23 N. Orme, English Schools in the Middle Ages, London, 1973, pp.307, 311, 323.

24 Ibid., p.220.

25 A.B. Emden, A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500, 3 vols., Oxford, 1957-59, vol. I, p.540.

Another Leicestershire youth, William Villers, who was uncle or cousin of the king's page of the same name, also went to Oxford. He graduated as Bachelor in 1453, later becoming rector at Brooksby where his family held the advowson.[26] Both Danet and Villers were younger sons and it is clear that their attendance at university was intended to equip them for careers in religion.[27]

The favoured option for older sons and heirs, on the other hand, was the Inns of Courts. Some seventeen Leicestershire gentry attended Lincoln's Inn during the fifteenth century, while one, Richard Neele, was a member of Grey's Inn. A further sixteen gentry had legal knowledge, from which we may infer that they had some formal legal training.[28] No doubt, many Leicestershire fathers would have agreed with the sentiments underlying Agnes Paston's reinforcement of her husband's injunction to their son, Edmund, "to lerne the lawe, for ... ho so ever schuld dwelle at Paston, schulde have nede to conne defende hym self."[29] Not only was knowledge of the law necessary to the gentry for the defence of their own property but legal practice was also a lucrative source of income.[30] Whether pursued at university or one of the Inns of Court, education was valued, therefore, not merely, or in some cases, one suspects, not even, for its inherent worth but for the career paths and economic opportunities it provided. As with so many other aspects of their lives, the gentry's attitude towards formal education was essentially practical and utilitarian.

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26 Ibid., vol. III, p.1949; C138/12/22, ms.2.

27 It appears that Oxford rather than Cambridge was the preferred destination for Leicestershire scholars. I have not discovered the names of any Leicestershire gentry in the register for Cambridge (E.B. Emden, A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500, Cambridge, 1963).

28 See Appendix IV(c). Some may even have served apprenticeships in the central courts (M.J. Bennett, "Provincial Gentlefolk and Legal Education in the Reign of Edward II", B.I.H.R., lvii, 1984, pp.203-207).

29 Paston Letters 1422-1509, vol. II, p.72.

30 See above, p.81.

Of course, reading can also be for recreation and pleasure. Admittedly, Thomas Keble's library reflected his professional concerns and included a wide range of law books but he also owned copies of Mandeville's Travels, Boccaccio's Decameron and two separate editions of The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius.[31] The Travels and both editions of Boethius were printed but the Decameron, to judge by its description and price, was a manuscript edition. It was bound in black satin, richly decorated with gilded silver clasps and was worth £2. 13. 4.. Keble also read histories. He bequeathed his son, Walter, all his chronicles, except for a treasured, manuscript volume of Froissart's Chronicles which he left to lady Hungerford.[32] The estimated worth of this library, excluding the bequest to lady Hungerford, was £21. 14. 4, or about one fifth of the value of all Keble's household goods, furnishings and hangings.[33] Keble was obviously prepared to spend liberally to satisfy his broad intellectual tastes.

Surprisingly, an inventory made after the death of Ralph Shirley III, fails to mention any books whatsoever.[34] That John Rudding, the compiler of the inventory, should have overlooked these valuable possessions had they existed, seems improbable. Nor are books often mentioned in Leicestershire wills and the exceptions, apart from Thomas Keble's will, refer only to devotional works such as mass books and primers.[35] As the cost of manuscript volumes was measured in pounds and the cost of even printed works was rarely below a shilling, it is doubtful that testators subsumed their collections under the general terms, "goods and chattles", or "stuff of household" in their wills. That

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31 Ives, op. cit., p.445 n.24, 446.

32 PROB11/12/3/22v-23. The volume was kept in the chamber over the parlour and valued at £2. 13. 4. (Ives, op.cit., p.436).

33 Ives, op.cit., pp.447, 432-439.

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

35 PROB11/11/23/182v-183v; L.R.O. 5D33/180.

so few specific references were made to books, suggests that reading was not a favoured recreation among the majority of gentry.[36]

For most of these men, their pleasures were at once more simple and more strenuous. Hunting was a gentlemanly pursuit which not only provided an outlet for their energies but also enriched their tables with a variety of game. One particular mark of social distinction was the possession of a deer park which entailed the removal of land from cultivation or pasturage, the building of deer leaps and fences and the employment of labour to maintain them, all of which involved considerable expense. Ownership of a deer park was therefore a sign of status reserved mainly to the wealthier gentry. The Shirleys, for instance, had a park or frith at Staunton Harold, where they hunted red and tallow deer.[37] Besides providing venison for the Shirley's own household, their deer park was an important source of grace and favour and patronage which was dispensed to valued friends and relatives. In 1444, Ralph Shirley II distributed sixteen deer among his relatives, friends and acquaintances.[38] Ralph III granted his mother, Eleanor, the right to hunt for two does every winter and two bucks in summer for life. If she were averse to the exertion which hunting involved, she could, alternatively, appoint a "sufficient deputy" to take the kill on her behalf.[39] Presumably, "sufficient" implied someone of gentle status. The same Ralph later bequeathed the keepership of his park to his nephew and namesake.[40]

However, few gentry possessed, or indeed, could have afforded the luxury of, a deer park. But William Turpyn was content to substitute

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36 The Pastons, on the other hand, were, like the Kebles, avid readers (Bennett, op.cit., pp.110-113).

37 L.R.O. 26D53/293.

38 Loc. cit.

39 L.R.O. 26D53/83.

40 PROB11/19/1/8v.

illusion for reality by keeping two tame deer at Wigston.[41] Obviously, these animals did not provide Turpyn with the thrill of the hunt but he no doubt derived as much visual satisfaction from the deceit as did men of the nineteenth century from their newly-built "medieval" castles. In order to satisfy their pretensions, the more wealthy and upwardly mobile gentry could also create hunting-parks where none had existed before . In these cases, a royal licence was required and this usually entailed additional expense. Nevertheless, in 1448, Thomas Palmer was granted a licence to empark 300 acres at Holt without payment of any fine or fees.[42] Moreover, the grant included rights of free warren in all Palmer's demesne lands and woods in Holt, Prestgrave, Drayton, Bringhurst, Easton, Keythorpe, Tugby, Goadby, Medbourne, Lubenham, Leire and Frolesworth.

Free warren, in fact, provided the gentry with a more common object of the hunt than deer, giving them exclusive rights to all the smaller game on their own lands. These rights were fiercely, if vainly, defended against poachers. In 1468, Sir Thomas Berkeley accused William Purley of entering his free warren at Wymondham and stealing twenty hares, two hundred rabbits, twelve pheasants and twenty partridges.[43] Richard Neele's free warren at Prestwold was also prey to poachers, and William Villers of Brooksby discovered that his neighbours, John Trussell of Rearsby and John Sandy of Gaddesby, yeomen, had regularly stolen his pheasants over a ten-year period from 1441 to 1451.[44]

The gentry were just as adept at poaching as their social inferiors were and the free warren of absentee landlords provided them with their

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41 L.R.O. 5D33/86 f.87.
42 C. Ch. R., 1427-1516, vol. VI, p.100.
43 Village Notes, iv, p.316.
44 T.L.A.S. vol. 18, 1934-35, p.43; L.R.O. 5D33/177.

favourite targets. Alan Moton helped himself to a hundred rabbits and partridges and twenty hares and pheasants from lord Grey of Ruthin's free warren at Barwell, while John Langham, Baldwin Bugge, Thomas and Richard Hotoft and Thomas Appleby all hunted illegally in Queen Katherine's chase of Leicester.[45] Accusations of poaching sometimes indicate that the hunters used bows and arrows, though Thomas Farnham's possession of a greyhound reveals that dogs were also employed.[46] But whether the gentry hunted in their own, or poached from their neighbours' free warrens, the numbers and variety of game-birds and animals available to them point to the potential richness of their diet.

It is clear from the kitchen utensils at Staunton Harold and Humberstone that roast meats played an important part in gentry diets. Staunton Harold's kitchen contained five spits, one of which was suitable for roasting large carcasses while another two were specifically designed for poultry.[47] The kitchen at Humberstone was even better equipped, with no fewer than ten spits ("broches") of various sizes.[48] Alice de Bryene's household accounts reveal that she regularly dined on pork, mutton, lamb, pigeons and beef, most of which would have been roasted.[49] Having access to the coast, she also served fresh fish, molluscs and crustaceans but the Leicestershire gentry probably relied more heavily on smoked and salted fish or fresh-water fish from their own brooks and streams. The de Bryene household was also occasionally served rabbits and partridges but the fact that game was a comparatively rare adjunct to her diet suggests that Alice did not own rights of free

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45 Village Notes, i, p.145; ibid., iii, p.69; ibid., vi, p.17.

46 Quorndon Records, p.144.

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

48 Ives, op.cit., p.438.

49 For this and the following, see Alice de Bryene, pp.1-5 and passim. The page references are too numerous to cite individually.

warren on her lands, though there was no shortage of rabbits on her caput of Acton and on the nearby manor of Bures.[50]

Rich as the gentry's diet undoubtedly was, it can not be considered as particularly healthy. In addition to meat, they consumed vast quantities of bread and ale. Bread was baked daily for the de Bryene household, with production levels regularly above fifty, and rarely below thirty, white loaves each day. In one year from 1418 to 1419, 124 quarters of barley were devoted to brewing and, as the common yield from two quarters of barley was 112 gallons of ale, the total household consumption can not have been far short of 7,000 gallons for that year. The drinking of ale witnessed a marked increase during the warmer summer months. In August, 1413, when the harvest was being gathered, the added demand by Alice's boon workers raised production of ale to over 1000 gallons for the month. By way of contrast, the only reference to vegetables in her accounts is to green peas, used for making pottage, and the alliums, onions and garlic. Surprisingly, fresh fruit receives no mention whatsoever, though Alice did buy imported dried fruits, figs, dates, raisins and currants.

The gentry's demand for imported luxuries extended, to a lesser degree, to household furnishings. Ralph Shirley III owned six pieces of Flemish carpet and Thomas Keble had cushions covered with Bruges silk.[51] Both men also owned wall hangings, tapestries and bed coverings which bore intricate designs and were sufficiently expensive to suggest that they may have originated in the Low Countries. In the great chamber beneath the hall at Staunton Harold a counterpoint decorated with leaves and flowers and lined with wild beasts was worth £1. 13. 4,

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50 Ibid., p.134.

51 L.R.O. 26D53/1949; Ives, op.cit., p.435. It should be stressed that the use of carpets here does not denote floor coverings but rather rectangles of fabric used to drape items of furniture.

while a similar item in the great sealed chamber was valued at £2. Six tapestry hangings at Humberstone were priced at £4. 10. 0. and a counterpoint at £5.

Despite the presence of these luxury furnishings at Staunton Harold and Humberstone, the general impression one forms of the interior of gentry houses is that the emphasis was not entirely on display. At Humberstone, the "sore worn" red say in the hall, the "brokyn carpet" in the chamber over the buttery, the "olde brokyn" feather bed in the clerk's chamber and the "soreworne" tapestry counterpoint in the parlour were mirrored by similar signs of wear and tear at Staunton Harold. In the inner parlour there, a hanging of red say was "old [and] stayned". Four pieces of red say in the wardrobe chamber were "well worn", and tapestry in the great chamber beneath the hall was "old and sore worn". "Old", "stained", "worn" and "torn" were adjectives used, either singly or in a variety of permutations, to describe numerous other items. Nevertheless, the value of soft furnishings, whatever their state of decay, greatly surpassed the value of furniture at both Staunton Harold and Humberstone. The price of chairs, tables and cupboards was often measured in pence and rarely rose above a few shillings. Beds, however, especially the great feather beds with fabric canopies, could fetch between £1 and £2, a fact which helps to explain why they were often bequeathed in wills.[52]

What the gentry saved on furniture, they spent lavishly on plate. The author of the Italian Relation believed that most Englishmen of rank owned at least £100 worth of silver plate and, on this occasion, his views appear vindicated, at least as far as the upper gentry were concerned.[53] Ralph Shirley III owned two dozen assorted silver, silver-and-gilt and gilt

52 See, for example, PROB11/1/15/118-119; /16/11/81-81v; L.R.O. 5D33/180.
53 Italian Relation, p.29.

goblets, pots, bowls and basins, eighteen spoons and a gold chain worth a total of £197. 10. 6.[54] Thomas Keble's even more extensive collection of plate was valued at £255. 17. 10.[55] In addition to their monetary worth, many items of plate had sentimental value, too. John Hotoft had given his wife a silver and gilt rose-cup as a morning-gift after their marriage and he remembered to ensure that she retained possession of it following his death.[56] Thomas Pulteney's part-gilt basin and ewer were family heirlooms which he bequeathed to his son with instructions that they be passed on within the family.[57] John Turville's silver basin and ewer were similarly directed from heir to heir "while the world endureth."[58] The cost of such large pieces helps to explain why they were so highly treasured. Ralph Shirley III owned a pair of basins and ewers worth £11. 1. 8 and £16. 4. 4. respectively, while Thomas Keble's two sets were priced at £30. 10. 0. for the pair.[59]

To judge from their descriptions, the value of some silver items lay as much in the artistry of their design as in the weight of precious metal used. Gerard Danet of Bromkinsthorpe, for instance, owned an embossed ("pounsed") silver and gilt vessel and a gilt cup with a raised bottom displaying a greyhound's head, a motif derived from Danet's coat of arms.[60] The cover on Thomas Keble's gold salt was decorated with fine, gold oak-leaves.[61] Valued at £5, this salt was considered a suitable gift for lady Hungerford.[62] Walter Oudeby, Keble's "cousin", owned a silver and gilt great-cup patterned with enamel shepherds.[63] But

54 L.R.O. 26D53/1949.
55 Ives, op.cit., pp.442-443.
56 PROB11/1/15/118.
57 PROB11/15/24/193v.
58 PROB11/15/15/119v.
59 L.R.O. 26D53/1949; Ives, op.cit., p.443.
60 L.R.O. 5D33/180.
61 Ives, op.cit., p.443.
62 PROB11/12/3/23.
63 PROB11/11/29/233.

although the gentry took delight in particular items of precious metal, they also regarded silver and gold as an investment which could later be sold to raise capital. John Hotoft ordered that some of his silver be sold to raise money for his funeral expenses and Gerard Danet proposed the sale of a gold or silver chain to provide marriage portions for his daughters, Elizabeth and Mary.[64]

The gentry who could not afford gold or silver plate, found a satisfactory substitute in pewter . According to the author of the Italian Relation, the English used tin to "make vessels as brilliant as if they were of fine silver; and these are held in great estimation".[65] Ralph Shirley's pewter was valued at £2. 13. 4, while Thomas Keble's pewter was worth £3. 3. 0.[66] Everard Dygby II, who does not appear to have owned any silver-ware at all, bequeathed his pewter to his son, John, and daughters, Alice and Ellen.[67] Dygby also owned a number of brass pots, and similar brass-ware was to be found in the Shirley and Keble households.

A further object of lavish expenditure for the gentry was clothing. On this point, contemporary foreign writers and native legislators and commentators alike, were agreed, though whereas foreigners approved of English standards of dress, English governments and moralists roundly censored the vanity and wastage involved in the ownership of extravagant raiment.[68] Thomas Keble owned eighteen gowns ranging in colour from scarlet, crimson, violet and murrey to blue, green and brown.[69] Two of these, a night gown of grey wool (musterdevillers) and a

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64 PROB11/1/15/118; L.R.O. 5D33/180.

65 Italian Relation, p.11.

66 L.R.O. 26D53/1949; Ives, op.cit., p.438.

67 PROB11/16/11/81-81v.

68 Italian Relation, p.22; J. Scattergood, "Fashion and Morality in the late Middle Ages", England in the Fifteenth Century. Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium, ed. D. Williams, Woodbridge, 1987, pp.255-272; E.H.D., iv, nos. 681, 692.

69 Ives, op.cit., pp.443-444.

brown tawny gown, were decorated with black lambs' wool and another was furred with fox. Keble's black velvet jacket worth £1. 6. 8 was edged with martens' fur. Ralph Shirley owned a black velvet jacket, too, valued at £2.[70] His wardrobe was valued at £9. 10. 0 while that of Thomas Keble was worth £14. 19. 0.[71]

As in the case of beds, clothes were sufficiently expensive to be passed from one generation to the next. Thomas Keble retained his three wives' wardrobes after they died and then bequeathed them to a variety of nieces and female cousins and friends after his own death.[72] Elizabeth Sotehill similarly bequeathed a gown to her kinswoman, Catherine, and John Kendale left two silk belts with silver buckles to his kinswomen, and a violet gown and hood to his nephew or cousin and namesake.[73] When a suitable beneficiary could not be found to receive gifts of apparel, garments could still be unstitched to provide cloth for other purposes. Thomas Keble adopted this strategy, arranging for his doublets and other clothes of velvet and silk to be made into vestments "and disposid for my soule".[74] The pious intent of this bequest was no doubt designed to expunge the sin of pride which attended his possession of such grand attire in the first place.

Extravagance in clothing, however, was not merely frivolous pandering to the gentry's propensity to sin. Clothes may not have made the man but they did indicate what he was made of, a lesson which, for some inexplicable reason, escaped the attention of Henry VI's minders in April 1471. On that occasion, they paraded their witless king through London, dressed in "a long blue gown of velvet as though he had no

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

71 The latter sum omits the value of clothes belonging to Keble's dead wives. These garments were estimated to be worth £8. 18. 4.

72 PROB11/12/3/23.

73 PROB11/15/19/151v; L.R.O. 5D33/180.

74 PROB11/12/3/23.

more to change with".[75] The citizens, noticing the king's poverty, failed to rally to his cause. Clothes affirmed in a very public way that their owner could, in the words of William Harrison, "bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman".[76] Any comparison, therefore, between the richness of gentry attire and the shabby comfort of their private apartments once again highlights that distinction between the public persona and the private person.[77] Social status counted for little were it not publicly proclaimed to, and recognized by, the rest of society. Clothing , like the façades of gentry houses, was intended to impress. The insides of houses and their furnishings, which were not open to public gaze, could be, and were, much more prosaic.

A distinction between the public and private sides of gentry religion is equally marked, though it must be admitted in this case that evidence of their personal spirituality is difficult both to find and interpret. According to the Italian Relation, the English attended mass daily and recited the Lord's Prayer and the office of Our Lady "in a low voice, after the manner of churchmen; ... nor do they omit any form incumbent upon good Christians".[78] In paying due regard to the forms of their religion, the gentry provide no exception to this generalization. Many gentry households contained their own chapels where daily masses could be heard without too much interruption to more profane routines.[79] Dispensations were sought from the papacy, and granted, for them to hear masses before day-break and to have portable altars; and

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75 C. Ross, Edward IV, London, 1974, p.166, citing The Great Chronicle of London, p.215.

76 Quoted by G.E. Mingay, The Gentry, London, 1976, p.2.

77 See above, p.165.

78 Italian Relation, p.23.

79 For example, at Humberstone: Ives, op.cit., pp.444-445; at Holt: T.L.A.S. vol. 13, 1922-24, pp.234, 240.

numerous gentry owned mass books and primers which could act as guides for their owners' devotions.[80]

Nevertheless, respect for the superficial forms of religion does not necessarily indicate a deep-rooted spirituality. Regular attendance at mass may have merely provided a welcome respite from worldly concerns, an interlude of repose or, alternatively, it may have been a tiresome duty, performed out of habit. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to know what the laity thought about during their religious observances. Even the possession of an occasional pious or liturgical book was no guarantee that it was ever opened and read, especially if it had been received as part of a bequest, which may reveal its value to the benefactor rather than to the beneficiary. But although the fifteenth-century gentry are, for most of their lives, silent about spiritual matters, they are much more forthcoming in their last wills and testaments.

Of course, the historian needs to approach wills with some caution. First, they were invariably drawn up by clerks or notaries whose ample experience in performing this task led them to use set forms and phrases which may not have reflected the testator's own sentiments. For example, the bequest of one's soul to God, His mother and all the company of heaven or to some similar variation of the heavenly host, appears with such regularity that it was clearly a convention. Second, the imminent prospect of death may have concentrated the testator's mind on God and religion in a way that does not truly indicate the strength of his former conviction. However, despite the use of conventional forms and despite probable changes in the depth of piety over a lifetime, wills still remain one of the most important sources for the social historian. It may be argued, indeed, that as testators contemplated death, their own

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80 Papal Registers, 1427-47, vol. VIII, pp.38, 362; ibid., 1431-47, vol. IX, 231, 242, and passim; PROB11/12/3/23; /11/23/183v.

earthly mortality and the future welfare of their immortal souls, they were more likely to reveal not only their heart-felt attitudes towards religion but also their innermost selves as individuals.[81]

The greatest certainty in the mind of a gentleman was that God kept an accurate tally of all sins committed on earth. [82] Ultimately, if these debits on the Almighty's account-roll were not otherwise atoned for, one's soul would be subject to the cleansing but painful flames of Purgatory. To ease the soul's passage through Purgatory, the gentry spared no effort to square the account by ordering masses and prayers and by making pious bequests both to the Church and to the poor. Henry Sotehill exhorted his wife to keep his obit annually during her life-time with a requiem mass at the parish church of Stockerston.[83] John Hotoft wished for a thousand masses to be sung on the day of his funeral and he arranged for further masses during the seven years after his death, leaving £46. 13. 4. for this express purpose.[84] Ralph Shirley III also requested a thousand masses at his funeral as did Thomas Keble.[85] Keble went on to leave seven marks per year for twelve years, a total of £56, to find a priest at Humberstone to say daily placebo and dirige and mass for the repose of his own soul and the souls of his wives, his cousin, Richard Hotoft, his parents and of his dead son, Edward Keble.

Some gentry even began planning their obits long before they drafted their wills. Almost ten years before he drew up his will, Ralph Woodford conveyed to the Augustinian abbey at Owston for eighty years, 2s. in annual rent from a messuage and croft in Twyford in return for an annual requiem mass with placebo and dirige for the souls of Ralph and

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81 See J.P. Cooper's introduction to K.B. McFarlane, The Nobility of Later Medieval England, Oxford, 1973, p.xxxvii.

82 See, for example, Ecclesiastes, xii, v.14.

83 PROB11/14/31/244.

84 PROB11/1/15/118.

85 L.R.O. 26D53/1948; PROB11/12/3/22v.

Elizabeth, his wife.[86] Thomas Hasilrigge similarly leased lands at Noseley to the wardens and chaplains there for twenty-four years in return for two red roses and masses for the souls of himself, his son, William, and their wives.[87]

In addition, testators made bequests to individuals and religious institutions on the understanding that the beneficiaries pray for the repose of their benefactor's soul. Henry Sotehill bequeathed 20s. to the Grey Friars in London to pray for his and his father's souls during the life of Henry's wife, Joan.[88] Thomas Keble left five marks to Leicester Abbey, five marks to the college at the Newarke, also in Leicester, 20s. to the bead-house there, 13s 4d. to each of Leicester's three houses of friars belonging to the Dominicans, the Austins and the Franciscans, 20s. to the White Friars in London, £2 to the convent at Clerkenwell, £2 to the prioress and convent of Langley and various sums of money, livestock and household goods to named relatives and friends, including a gold salt and a book to lady Hungerford, to be remembered in their prayers.[89]

Some gentry bequests were towards the fabric of churches. William Bradgate left four marks to his parish church and half a mark to the churches of Ashby Magna and Bruntingthorpe, though he donated merely 6d. to the more distant Lincoln Cathedral.[90] Thomas Burton left money, usually half a mark but sometimes as much as a mark, to thirteen parish churches in Leicestershire.[91] John Woodford's donation of ten marks to the parish church at Wyfordby was specifically "ad fabrica campanilia".[92] John's great-grandson, Ralph, left no money to his parish

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86 C.A.D., iii, no.D840.
87 L.R.O. DG21/28.
88 PROB11/14/31/244.
89 PROB11/12/3/22v-23.
90 L.R.O. 5D33/180.
91 Loc. cit.
92 B.L. Cotton Claudius A XIII, f.62.

church of St Mary at Ashby Folville but on the off-chance that his previous benefactions had escaped notice, he drew attention in his will to the fact that he had earlier paid more than five marks towards the making of the chancel and another £2 towards the making of the church's steeple.[93] These sums were considered sufficient for Ashby Folville. Besides, numerous other churches and religious foundations had claims on Ralph's benevolence, including his private chapel in the parish church at Sproxton, to which he donated 20s. towards the making of a new table dedicated to St John the Baptist.

Most donations to churches and religious houses involved small sums of money and there was a marked reticence on the part of benefactors permanently to alienate parcels of their finite landed resources. Ralph Shirley III, however, who clearly, and probably justifiably, had much on his conscience,[94] was uncharacteristically liberal in his bequests to the church. Originally, his lands in Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and Bristol were intended to endow Geronden Abbey for ninety-nine years to find a priest to sing for his soul and those of his parents, his wives and his father- and mother-in-law, Thomas and Elizabeth Warner.[95] It was planned that the abbey would also administer alms for the poor. But Ralph soon changed his mind about the arrangement and a line was scored through this section of his will. [96] Nevertheless, he went on to order that £10 of the £10. 6. 8. issuing annually from the same lands should go towards finding an "honest priest" to pray at Loughborough and to maintain a free school there for the term of ninety-nine years, with the reversion to Ralph's right heirs.

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93 PROB11/11/23/183-184.

94 See above, pp.168, 172.

95 L.R.O. 26D53/1948.

96 The will is also printed in Stemmata Shirleiana, pp.410-416, but this edition fails to reflect the author's changes of heart found in the original.

He bequeathed the remaining 6s. 8d. to his servant, John Loutt, for life, with reversions to Geronden Abbey and then to Ralph's right heirs. At fifteen years' purchase, the lands in question could have fetched over £150 but it is worth noting that Ralph never intended that the family should permanently lose control of such valuable possessions. Instead, he struck a balance between the needs of his soul and the future economic welfare of his family.

In other circumstances, Ralph Shirley III's conscience may have led him to found a chantry, but his bequest to the chantry priest of St Michael's church at Melbourne in Derbyshire to found a free school, implies that the Shirleys already possessed a chantry there. In fact, very few new chantries appear to have been established in Leicestershire in the fifteenth century. The exceptions were those of Bartholomew Brokesby, John Boyville and Thomas Keble. In 1450, Bartholomew Brokesby's executors were licensed to found a chantry with two chaplains in the parish church of Saxelby.[97] John Boyville was granted a licence in 1465 to alienate land in mortmain worth £10 yearly for the establishment of a perpetual almshouse, though he died before his intention was realized.[98] Nevertheless, his attorney, Henry Sotehill, and his other executors were granted another licence three years later, allowing them to alienate £12 worth of land to found not only Boyville's almshouse but also a perpetual chantry dedicated to the Virgin Mary and housed in St Peter's church at Stockerston.[99]

It seems that Richard Hotoft wished to endow a perpetual priest to say divine service before the altar in Humberstone parish church rather than, as his brother, Thomas, maintained, to order a chantry to be built

97 L.A.O. Epis. Reg. XIX[Lumley], f.14
98 C.P.R., 1461-67, p.486.
99 C.P.R., 1467-76, p.113.

there.[100] At least, this was the interpretation made of Richard's intent by his cousin, Thomas Keble. Keble was probably correct, for the Hotofts already had a chantry at Stretton.[101] This chapel notwithstanding, Keble did eventually arrange for another at Humberstone, for he requested that a house be built there for the chantry priest out of the return from lands he had bought at Stretton and elsewhere.[102]

The permanent alienation of land worth about £150 made the founding of new chantries in the fifteenth century unattractive to all but the wealthiest gentry. Bartholomew Brokesby and Thomas Keble's lucrative careers in the law and in noble service ensured that they at least could afford the expense. Other superior families, such as the Shirleys, had little need for new foundations. They simply made bequests to pre-existing establishments. For most of the gentry, however, their own families had first call on their benevolence. The attitude of Robert Moton was probably typical of these men. He arranged for a chantry to be founded only if his heirs died without lawful issue.[103]

The gentry clearly had faith in the efficacy of prayers and masses to ease their souls through Purgatory. They also had hope of ultimate repose in heaven, for not a single Leicestershire will reveals any anxiety about the torments of hell. But the gentry also realized and, indeed, had it on high authority, that faith and hope were as nothing without charity.[104] While "charity" to St Paul obviously means more than doling out gifts to the poor,[105] Christ Himself had proclaimed to a young man

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100 C1/42/90-92.
101 C1/42/89.
102 PROB11/12/3/22v-23v.
103 PROB11/11/25/201.
104 1 Corinthians, xiii, vs.1-13, esp. v.13.
105 Ibid., v.3.

that whoever gave to the poor "shalt have treasure in heaven".[106] This was a message not lost on the gentry.

John Boyville's almshouse was intended to provide shelter for three poor people.[107] Thomas Keble also ordered the building of an almshouse attached to his chantry at Humberstone.[108] Ralph Woodford allowed for the donation of a more modest 13s. 4d. to the poor, though he extended additional benevolence to his poor tenants, who were forgiven a quarter year's rent.[109] Ralph Shirley III's original grant to Geronden Abbey had stipulated that the house find lodgings for four poor men and one woman but, later in his will, where the bequest to Geronden was reduced, the poor, as they usually do, lost out.[110] But their loss was somebody else's gain; Ralph directed his largesse into founding two schools instead. Nor was Shirley alone in offering his charity to education. Thomas Keble left twenty marks towards funding scholars at Oxford and Cambridge to study arts and divinity.[111]

Apart from doles to the poor and donations to education, the gentry also made bequests to public works. John Kendale, originally of Twycross in Leicestershire, had moved to London to become a pewterer and left 40s. yearly to repair the highway at Hampstead where he had relatives and where he himself may have lived.[112] Geoffrey Sherard left a similar sum to mend the bridge and highway around the village of Stapleford.[113] The bridge between Gerard Danet's house and the

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106 St Matthew, xix, v.21.
107 C.P.R., 1467-76, p.113.
108 PROB11/12/3/22v-23v.
109 PROB11/11/23/183-183v.
110 L.R.O. 26D53/1948.
111 PROB11/12/3/23.
112 PROB11/5/24/185v.
113 PROB11/9/23/176v-177.

Augustinian friary in Leicester must have been greatly dilapidated for Danet bequeathed a considerable £10 towards its mending.[114]

Despite these charitable bequests, it is by no means certain that they were made in the spirit intended by St Paul. For instance, there appears to be a hint of family self-interest in Gerard Danet's mending of a bridge between his house and Leicester or in Geoffrey Sherard's paving of the roads around Stapleford where he held a manor. There is much more than a hint of personal self-interest attached to gifts to the poor. It soon becomes apparent, in fact, that solicitude for the sufferings of the poor was not the gentry's prime motivation. Thomas Keble may have felt some concern for, and responsibility towards, his father's servants, Joan Nichol and Emmitt Lyez, who both had grown old and poor, but the relief he ordered for them was in return for their prayers for his soul and the souls of his friends and relatives.[115] Ralph Shirley III also expected that the recipients of alms at Geronden would pray for his soul.[116] Given that the poor were especially beloved of God, the reasoning behind the gentry's bequests was that prayers from this quarter would be listened to more attentively and receive greater favour.[117]

Although true (or Pauline) charity was not directed towards the poor, the gentry were not totally devoid of this virtue. In ordering masses and prayers for the souls of relatives and friends, they displayed a genuine concern for the welfare of others within their own social circle. The most usual beneficiaries of this concern were departed wives, parents and dead children but the gentry often extended their charity to a wider group than this. Thomas Keble ordered masses for his cousins and

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114 L.R.O. 5D33/180.
115 PROB11/12/3/22v.
116 L.R.O. 26D53/1948.
117 B.L. Manning, The People's Faith in the Time of Wycliff, 2nd. edn., Hassocks, 1975, p.148.

prayers for the soul of his good-lord, William Hastings.[118] Ralph Woodford similarly ordered prayers for a cousin, John Bellers, for all his ancestors in general and for his great-grandparents in particular.[119] Ralph Shirley III's bequest for masses for the souls of his parents-in-law, Elizabeth and Thomas Warner, suggests that they had no son of their own who could shoulder responsibility for the ease of their souls.[120] Henry Sotehill's charity was even more expansive. He called on the Grey Friars in London to pray for all Christian souls.[121]

Leicestershire wills leave a stong impression that the gentry's religion satisfied important psychological needs. They were familiar with the Church's doctrine on Purgatory and they relied completely on the clergy's rôle as mediator between man and God. They found comfort in the familiar. There is never any sign of those inner doubts and torments which later racked Luther and which were to rend western Christendom asunder. Nor is there ever any suggestion of anti-clericalism or any hint that the Church was not providing value for money. Admittedly, Ralph Shirley III required his executors to ensure that the chantry priest at Melbourne "be an honest priest and of good virtuous disposition and living". He further expected his executors to find "an honest priest" to sing and pray at Loughborough.[122] But we should not be tempted to read too much into these requests. Ralph was merely displaying a similar discrimination towards the clergy to that shown by John Dounton who, over a hundred years earlier, had demanded "a fit chaplain" to say masses for his soul in Withcote parish church.[123] Like any purchaser of

118 PROB11/12/3/22v-23v.
119 PROB11/11/23/183v.
120 L.R.O. 26D53/1948. See J.T. Rosenthal, The Purchase of Paradise. Gift Giving and the Aristocracy, 1307-1485, London, 1972, p.16.
121 PROB11/14/31/244.
122 L.R.O. 26D53/1948.
123 L.R.O. 5D33/180.

goods and services, these men expected nothing short of the best that money could buy. That they continued to disburse large sums to the Church, either as outright gifts or in return for masses and prayers, indicates their satisfaction with its ministrations. To borrow Dr Carpenter's phrase, their religion was "utterly conventional."[124]

Wills provide one further indicator of the perceived effectiveness of the Church's ministrations. Although testators never lost sight of the treasury of grace amassed by their own pious bequests, the anticipated intercession of the clergy on their behalf left them free to turn their gaze from their prospects in the next world to what was left of this. Ralph Shirley III prefaced his will by saying that he was dreading the profile of death, but to most of the gentry, including Ralph himself, of as much, if not greater, concern than the spectre of death was the spectacle of their departing. Nowhere was the gentry's preoccupation with their status in this world so marked as it was at their funerals when they were on the point of leaving it.

Those gentry who contemplated and ordered their own funerals, embarked upon the task with opulent vision and an eye for detail, combining in their arrangements the drama of the liturgy with the public spectacle and theatricality of a medieval mystery play. The backdrop was provided by the local parish church or a church attached to one of Leicestershire's monastic houses. Some testators, such as John Shirley,

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124 C. Carpenter, "The Religion of the Gentry of Fifteenth-Century England", England in the Fifteenth Century. Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium, ed. D. Williams, Woodbridge, 1987, pp.53-74, esp. p.58. If the Leicestershire gentry were attracted to Lollardy, they managed to conceal the fact in their wills. Thomas Noveray, a minor gentleman from Ilston-on-the-Hill, and John Belgrave, whose activities were centred on the parish of St Martin in Leicester and who may have been related to the Belgraves of Belgrave, seem to hav e been the only Lollards with gentry connections (J. Crompton, "Leicestershire Lollards", T.L.A.H.S., vol. 44, 1970, for 1968-69, pp.25-26, 29-30, 31). The Italian Relation's cryptic reference to "various opinions concerning religion" (p.23) may be nothing more than an indication of differing English and Italian observances.

were content to be buried "where hit shall please God."[125] In his case, it pleased God that his final resting place be a chapel attached to the church of Geronden Abbey.[126] But all of the gentry who had specific plans in mind, requested burial within the churches rather than outside in the church-yard. For Ralph Woodford, the chosen spot was before the image of Our lady in the church at Ashby Folville, towards the making of which, it may be recalled, he had paid five marks.[127] Gerard Danet, who had taken up residence in London, offered his executors the choice of the middle of the church of Blackfriars, "if possible", or in the parish church of St. Faith before the high altar.[128] Richard Perwych wished to be buried in the Lady Chapel of Lubenham parish church, while Robert Moton said he wanted to be interred in Peckleton church.[129] Like most of the gentry, he probably assumed that his body would lie beside those of his ancestors.

Paradoxically, the leading rôle in the ensuing drama was reserved for the deceased. By necessity, his was a passive contribution but lighting was used to focus attention on him. Ralph Shirley III requested "torches and other lights brennying about my corps".[130] Gerard Danet specified the number of torches at his funeral, thirteen and four great tapers.[131] In addition, Danet wished twelve escutcheons of arms to be arranged around his body. Thomas Pulteney ordered twenty-four torches, each emblazoned with his arms.[132]

The size of, and the parts played by, the remainder of the cast were determined by the amount of money the deceased had previously arranged to disburse. To ensure the presence at his funeral of as many

125 L.R.O. 26D53/1947.
126 L.R.O. 26D53/1948.
127 PROB11/11/23/182v-183v.
128 L.R.O. 5D33/180.
129 PROB11/14/30/233; /11/25/201.
130 L.R.O. 26D53/1948.
131 L.R.O.
132 PROB11/15/24/193v.

clergy as possible, Thomas Pulteney arranged for the payment of 8d. to every priest and 2d. to every clerk.[133] Ralph Woodford was similarly discriminating towards the orders of clergy in his bequests. He left 4d. to be paid to every priest who attended his funeral, 2d to every surpliced clerk and 1d. to clerks "without surplice".[134] While the prayers and masses offered by the clergy during the funeral assisted the deceased's soul in Purgatory, in our extended metaphor of funerals as theatrical productions they also provided the background score for the occasion.

No large-scale spectacle would be complete without its cast of extras, and gentry funerals were no exception to the rule. The core of this group was probably drawn from the household staff and tenants. Elizabeth Sotehill willed her staff to "bring me to the ground" and Ralph Woodford ensured the presence of his servants at his funeral by offering extra wages if they were there to pray for him.[135] Their ranks, however, were swelled by the poor who were attracted by the traditional doles made to them on these occasions. John Hotoft ordered the sale of some of his silver "in all possible haste" to raise £20 to be given to the poor at his funeral.[136] Both Thomas Keble and Ralph Shirley III left £20 for distribution among the poor on the day of their burials.[137] At times, some of these recipients of charity were expected to play a more active rôle in the drama. Ralph Woodford achieved a suitably sombre tone by having five poor men dress in black gowns with hoods and hold five torches above his hearse. For this they received 4d. each.[138] Twenty-four

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133 Loc. cit.
134 PROB11/11/23/182v-183v.
135 PROB11/15/19/151v; /11/23/182v-183v.
136 PROB11/1/15/118.
137 L.R.O. 26D53/1948; PROB11/12/3/22v-23.
138 PROB11/11/23/183-183v.

poor men at Thomas Pulteney's interment were to receive gowns bearing Pulteney's insignia, the leopard's head, on the front and back.[139]

The gentry were clearly prepared to expend large sums of money on their burials. According to John Rudding, Ralph Shirley III's funeral expenses amounted to £120. 16. 1.[140] The cost to Thomas Keble's estate of gifts to the poor at his funeral, gifts to the Church and bequests for masses and prayers came to about £100.[141] This sum does not include bequests of goods for pious purposes or bequests to lay-folk for their prayers. It almost certainly underestimates the cost of the funeral, for Keble's will makes no mention of a coffin or a funeral-feast.[142]

Some gentry requested tangible memorials to be erected after the funeral, and they set aside money to pay for these. Thomas Pulteney left £2 to the monastery at Combe towards glazing a window in the cloister. Thomas Keble requested a tomb to be erected over his and his wives' grave at Humberstone church. If this tomb was built, it has not survived, though the incised slab from the tomb of Keble's cousin, Richard Hotoft, has escaped destruction.[143] John Turville bequeathed ten marks for building an alabaster or marble tomb over his grave in All Saints' church at Thurlaston and this memorial to John and his wife still remains there today.[144]

On the other hand, John Shirley, with a dozen children and a widow to provide for, had little to spare for prayers and masses for his soul's ease, for gifts to the Church, for imaginatively lavish obsequies or for expensive memorials. Instead, he requested his "due mortuarye"

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139 PROB11/15/24/193v.

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

141 PROB11/12/3/22v-23v.

142 Thomas Pulteney ordered his executors to provide a dinner on the day of his funeral.

143 Pevsner, op.cit., p.272.

144 PROB11/15/15/119v; Pevsner, op.cit., p.409.

without prescription and entrusted his soul to God's mercy before going on to make provision for his large family.[145] It was left to John's son, Ralph III, to resolve the dilemma posed by the conflicting interests of family, immortal soul and proclamations of status. The fact that at the time of his own death, Ralph had still not paid his father's bequests to his brothers, suggests that at their expense he may have provided John with the masses and prayers his soul deserved and the funeral his status demanded .[146] Whatever tensions and disputes may have arisen in the family as a result of Ralph's action, these were private matters which he and his kin would have learned to live with. Largesse, on the other hand, was publicly dispensed. If the Shirleys were to maintain face in their county, that public generosity could not be scrimped on.

Extravagant expenditure on funerals made them very different occasions from the relative simplicity of baptisms. No doubt this difference was dictated by practical considerations. Baptisms were hastily organized, whereas funerals could be contemplated and planned. But funerals also stand in stark contrast to that careful husbanding of economic resources we have already witnessed the gentry exercising in relation to ther estates.[147] This contrast naturally raises the question, why? Of all those gentry upon whose obsequies we have focussed attention, only one, Thomas Keble, might be termed a parvenu and, even in his case, the epithet is a little strained. Few, if any, of these men needed to announce, paradoxically at their funerals, that they had "arrived" in the upper strata of county society. By the richness and variety of their attire, they had, after all, been announcing this fact throughout their lives. Nevertheless, their funerals do reveal a

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145 L.R.O. 26D53/1947.
146 L.R.O. 26D53/1948.
147 See chapter III above.

perceived need to reaffirm the position they already held, a need dictated by what Thomas Keble referred to as "the unstablenesse of the world".[148] Theirs was a competitive society which, like our own, extended small mercy to those incapable of meeting its challenges.

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148 PROB11/12/3/22v.

Conclusion

When John Leland's perambulations in the 1530s and 1540s brought him to Leicestershire, one of the first villages he visited was Stonton Wyville.[1] In the fifteenth century, the manor had belonged to the Wyville family, but in Leland's day it was held by Mr Brudenell. As Leland travelled deeper into the county he alluded to some of the old, familiar fifteenth-century families. Skeffingtons were still to be found at Skeffington and Hasilrigges continued to reside at Noseley. The Belgraves of Belgrave, whose income had been £13 per year in 1436, were doing sufficiently well for Leland to remark favourably on their income of £50 per year. [2] But there were also other changes besides that at Stonton Wyville. At Peckleton, where Motons had lived since the twelfth century, there were now Vincents.[3] New names emerge, too, from among the shire's parliamentary representatives in the first half of the sixteenth century, Sacheverell, Manners and Cave.[4]

There is nothing particularly startling in these changes or in the way they had occurred. Margaret, widow of William Wyvyll, had been forced to sell the reversion of the manor of Stonton Wyville to Robert Brudenell, whom she later married, in order to raise money to execute her first husband's will.[5] The Motons had died out in the male line with the death of Edward Moton in 1511 and their manors devolved to the descendants of those granddaughters whom Sir Robert Moton had tried to disinherit back in the 1440s.[6] Sir Ambrose Cave, originally from

1 The Itinerary of John Leland, 5 vols., ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, London, 1964, i, pp.13-21.
2 See Appendix II.
3 T.L.A.S., vol. 17, 1931-33, p.94.
4 S.T. Bindoff, The House of Commons 1509-1558, 3 vols., London, 1982, vol. 1, p.128.
5 Pedigrees, p.110.
6 See above, p.173.

Northamptonshire, arrived in Leicestershire by purchasing land, just as Thomas Palmer had done over a century earlier. The only difference between their two cases is that Cave's purchase, the manor of Rothley, had belonged to the Knights of the Hospital of St John before the order was dissolved in 1540.[7] Such variations to the composition of the gentry were not new. They had been occurring throughout the fifteenth century and for numberless generations before. Nevertheless, they do serve to highlight Thomas Keble's observation about "the unstablenesse of the world".[8]

This instability is a theme which many historians writing about the fifteenth century have chosen to develop. Margaret Aston confidently asserts that those who lived at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries "were conscious of living in a period of disaster".[9] Huizinga's magisterial study of forms of art and thought is Spenglerian in its gloominess.[10] His potent images of decline, decadence, death and decay mark the fifteenth century as the dull dénouement of the Middle Ages. In England, it seems, the picture is no less achromatic. There, the emissaries of gloom and doom stress the economic depression, a disastrous and protracted war in France, the decline of kingship, the increasing lawlessness and "political gangsterdom" of an overmighty nobility and the resulting drift to civil war.[11]

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7 Bindoff, op.cit., vol. 1, p.595; T.L.A.S., vol. 12, 1921-22, pp.36, 48.

8 PROB11/12/3/22v.

9 M. Aston, The Fifteenth Century: The Prospect of Europe, London, 1968, p.10.

10 J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, trans. F. Hopman, Harmondsworth, 1972.

11 M.M. Poston, The Medieval Economy and Society, London, 1972, p.174; A.R. Myers, England in the Late Middle Ages, 8th edn., Harmondsworth, 1974, pp.59-62; M.M. Poston, "Some Social Consequences of the Hundred Years' War", Econ. Hist. Rev., xii, 1942, pp.1-12, esp. p.3; S.B. Chrimes, Lancastrians, Yorkists and Henry VII, 2nd edn., London, 1966, passim, esp. p.178; M. M. Poston, "Revisions in Economic History. The Fifteenth Century", Econ. Hist. Rev., ix, 1939, p.166; R.L. Storey, The End of the House of Lancaster, London, 1966, pp.ix-x, 5 and passim.

While images of decline and decay have for long dominated the historiography of fifteenth-century England, our study of the Leicestershire gentry reveals a more promising side to late medieval life. Although the Leicestershire gentry were not immune to the economic problems of the day, they overcame and survived these difficulties better than most.[12] Their landed resources were less extensive than those of the Church or the nobility but this fact supplies part of the reason for their success, for it enabled them to take a closer interest in, and acquire a more intimate knowledge of, their estates. Management of these estates was careful, though never conservative. In fact, the gentry were sufficiently flexible to alter their management techniques in the face of changing economic circumstances. With the rising cost of labour, they converted, tentatively at first, to pasture. A drop in the price of arable land led them to exploit other resources such as woods and streams.

Many of the gentry also augmented their incomes by service in royal and noble households both in peace and war.[13] The most outstanding advance, socially and politically as well as economically, made by a Leicestershire gentry family, the Hastingses, was a product of royal service. But this case is exceptional and, usually, more assured and quite substantial rewards fell to those who, like Thomas Keble, carved out careers in the legal profession.[14] Opportunism and flexibility were the hall marks which made the gentry one of the economic success stories of the fifteenth century. Though some families, such as the Shirleys, experienced economic hardship, this was the product of long-lived dowagers and an abundance of off-spring who placed a strain on

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12 See above, pp.58-78.

13 See above, pp.78-81.

14 See Appendix IV(c).

finite resources, rather than any lack of entrepreneurial skill.[15] When families failed, it was for biological, instead of economic, reasons.[16]

Although most of the gentry made only modest economic gains by associating with the nobility, it should not be assumed that their prime motivation in the association was therefore political advancement. William Hastings may have provided a dazzling example of how service to the nobility could return handsome dividends but there were others who paid dearly for an over-zealous attachment to a disgraced political cause.[17] The more successful, such as Thomas Palmer and Thomas Erdyngton, flourished because they were equally flexible in their political affiliations as they were in the management of their estates. But in the intoxicating atmosphere of national politics, the key to survival for the majority was a wisely-considered neutrality.

Within the bounds of their own county, however, the Leicestershire gentry were undisputed leaders rather than followers. Decades of responsibility for the government of their shire had strengthened their idea of community, an idea which also found expression in their more important social interactions.[18] Their social and political affiliations were neither merely parochial nor merely regional or national. Indeed, they were never *merely* anything. Even widely connected gentry such as Leonard and William Hastings, Thomas Everyngham and Thomas Erdyngton, associated with a narrow group of friends and neighbours in their everyday transactions. In other English counties, the most important political unit was the noble affinity.[19] But

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15 See above, pp.179-180.

16 See Appendices III and X.

17 For example, Sir William Fielding, Everard Dygby I, Thomas Everyngham.

18 See above, chapters IV and V.

19 C. Carpenter, "Political Society in Warwickshire c.1401-72", unpublished University of Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1976, pp.94-98; M. Cherry, "The Courtenay Earls of Devon: The Formation and Disintegration of a Late Medieval Aristocratic Affinity", Southern History, 1, 1979, pp.71,76ff.

in Leicestershire, which was not dominated by any regional magnate or magnates, the county itself provided political cohesion. This shire community stood at the hub of a series of interlocking social and political circles, some of which were parochial and narrow, some of which extended beyond the county border into neighbouring shires and some of which could be regarded as national in scope. In this, Leicestershire's experience seems to have differed from that of Warwickshire or Devon, but more regional studies will need to be undertaken before the apparent conflict of views is resolved.[20] Undoubtedly, though, K.B. McFarlane's suspicion that gentry MPs had a greater independence of the lords than hitherto believed, is not only vindicated but seems to have a wider application beyond the knights of the shire.[21]

The gentry's independence extended also to relationships within their own families.[22] Attempts to portray these men as subject to the demands of the wider kin and the lineage, fail to withstand scrutiny. Disputes with relatives tended to centre on conflicting claims to property which suggest that self-interest rather than family interest was the main determinant of attitudes to kin. Nor should we neglect the simple determinant of personal taste. As Thomas Keble's family relationships show, some relations were liked and some were not and, I suspect, many were treated indifferently. The strongest ties were reserved for the gentry's immediate family, wives, children and parents, though here, too, there was room for a range of family feeling. Unfortunately, the attitudes and concerns of wives or, indeed, of gentry women in general, are not so well documented. Women usually reveal themselves in letters and although the Paston Letters amply reveal them as forceful

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20 Loc. cit.

21 K.B. McFarlane, "Parliament and 'Bastard Feudalism'", England in the Fifteenth Century, ed. G.L. Harriss, London, 1981, pp.12,20-21.

22 See above, chapter VI.

characters in their own right, no such collection of correspondence survives for Leicestershire. Nevertheless, the regular involvement of women in land transactions as feoffees, or as executors and supervisors of wills, indicates that their rôle was not passive.

No more was passivity the stamp and mark of their husbands. The world they inhabited may have been unstable but they were sufficiently resourceful to meet the economic and political challenges of their day. Words which compellingly spring to mind to describe them are "self-assured" and "confident". Of course, these epithets may well be a measure of the gentry's success at masking inner uncertainties behind a public face.[23] But I doubt that this was the case. Even at the approach of death, the gentry were confident of their place in the next world. They could hardly have been less so about their position in this.

K.B. McFarlane warned us against underrating the capacity of these men.[24] However, studies which focus on the nobility tend to do just that, presenting the gentry as pawns in a larger political game played by their social superiors. But on the smaller chess-board provided by a single county, and specifically a county such as Leicestershire which was not controlled by magnates, the gentry themselves were the major pieces. Lord Hastings recognized as much when he retained the king's knight, Sir William Trussell II, and the astute lawyer, Thomas Keble. For this reason, the gentry deserve our consideration, not as appendages to the nobility in their retinues, but in their own right and on their own terms.

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23 See above, pp.165, 234-235.

24 McFarlane, op.cit., p.12.

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Leicestershire Record Office (L.R.O.)

5D33	Farnham Manuscripts
72'30	Charters and Deeds
44'28	Rothley Manuscripts
26D53	Ferrers Collection
DE220	Peake Manuscripts
DE221	Peake (Neville of Holt) Manuscripts
DG5	Winstanley Manuscripts
DG21	Hazlerigg Manuscripts
DG40	Gretton (Sherard) Manuscripts
10D34	Wyggeston Hospital

Lincolnshire Archives Office (L.A.O.)

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