

## 1. *The formation of the English gentry*

In his first foray into the question as to whether there had ever been a peasant society in England Alan Macfarlane distinguished between on the one hand the common-sense or dictionary definition of peasant ('countryman, rustic, worker on the land') and on the other the technical meaning of the term.<sup>1</sup> In order to facilitate comparative study and in particular to answer the question whether England was in fact a peasant society, Macfarlane attempted to construct an 'ideal-type' model in the Weberian sense. In his defence of his methodology he repeats Weber's advice: 'Hundreds of words in the historian's vocabulary are ambiguous constructs created to meet the unconsciously felt need for adequate expression and the meaning of which is only concretely felt but not clearly thought-out.' And again, 'If the historian... rejects an attempt to construct such ideal types as a "theoretical construction", i.e. as useless or dispensable for his concrete heuristic purposes, the inevitable consequence is either that he consciously or unconsciously uses other similar concepts, without formulating them verbally and elaborating them logically or that he remains stuck in the realm of the vaguely "felt".'<sup>2</sup> Despite such warnings, historians are often suspicious of model-building, suspecting that it may fail to locate the dynamics of a specific society and that it may cause the observer to distort his analysis in order to remain within his given framework. Nevertheless there are great gains to be had from close definition, as long as any definition or model is reformulated, even abandoned, if it fails substantially against empirical research. Not only does historical study gain in rigour, and debate become more meaningful and comprehensible, but definition also allows for more effective comparative study. The study of peasantries is a case in point.

There could hardly be a greater contrast with how the question of the 'gentry' has been handled. Indeed, the plain fact is that the study of the gentry has been

<sup>1</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *The Culture of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1987), p. 3; reprinted from David Green *et al.*, *Social Organisation and Settlement*, BAR International Series (Supplementary) 47 (ii), (Oxford, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> *The Culture of Capitalism*, Postscript, p. 207.

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conducted very largely within the realms of dictionary or common-sense study. As G.E. Mingay has written:

despite the lack of an agreed definition, 'the gentry' remains an indispensable term; it is one of those vastly convenient portmanteau expressions which historians are obliged to employ in formulating the broad generalisations that make up the main strands of the historical fabric. It is the more indispensable since it was so widely used by statesmen and writers of the past. 'The gentry' was a convenient symbol for them, too, and was evidently meaningful to their audiences.

But, as he goes on to say, in its broad usage 'the gentry' is a term more vague than helpful.<sup>3</sup> For no period is this truer than for the later middle ages.

One major reason for the continuance of common-sense usage of 'gentry' is undoubtedly its persistence as a living social term. It came to be used, of course, to cover the lower strata of landed society once nobility became restricted to the peerage; and, in this sense, its usage continues to the present day. However, this happened only slowly. Later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentators preferred to write of the peerage as the *nobilitas major* and the knights, esquires and gentlemen (to be joined after 1611 by the baronets) as the *nobilitas minor*. In common parlance, however, 'gentry', once synonymous with nobility, came to be used of the lesser nobility. Once interchangeable, these terms became complementary: 'nobility' and 'gentry'.<sup>4</sup> As J.V. Becket has written, 'The dissolution of the seamless noble robe, and its replacement by a distinctive nobility . . . took place gradually, until the early nineteenth-century writers were able to emphasize the loss of position.'<sup>5</sup> The nobility of the English gentry then became a matter of some debate. It is this narrow meaning of gentry which has been taken over into English historiography. Perhaps we should see this as one more result of the elite's success in maintaining a stable social and political system, to which the Stones have recently drawn our attention.<sup>6</sup>

Historians have by no means confined their use of the term gentry to England or to the age when it was a living social term. On the contrary, it has been readily exported. We read of American, Russian and Chinese gentry; we read of medieval gentry, of Anglo-Saxon gentry, and even of the gentry of the ancient world. It is used transhistorically and transculturally on the assumption that it will be readily understood. But is this not an illusion? As far as later medieval England is concerned, to look no further, it was not in fact a living social term, at least not in any way which resembles modern usage. The word gentry stems

<sup>3</sup> G.E. Mingay, *The Gentry: The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class* (London, 1976), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, M.J. Sayer, *English Nobility: The Gentry, the Heralds and the Continental Context* (Norwich, 1979), pp. 3–5, and J.C. Becket, *The Aristocracy in England 1660–1914* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 18–20.

<sup>5</sup> Becket, *Aristocracy in England*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 303–6.

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from 'gentrice' and its commonest usage was to indicate gentle birth and high rank or to describe the qualities shared by the gentle. For example:<sup>7</sup>

He wole han pris of his gentrye ffor he was boren of a gentil hous  
 (Chaucer, *Wife of Bath's Tale*)

For thy genterye, thus cowardly let me nat dye  
 (*Sir Beves of Hamtoun*)

And the gentry of wymmen thare es to hafe smal fete  
 (*Travels of Sir John Mandeville*)

It was occasionally used, by extension, as a synonym for the nobility but this seems to have been comparatively rare, at least before the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

One might have expected, therefore, that medievalists would have given some thought to definition, not least because questions of origin and questions of definition are intimately related. Their failure to do so stems partly from the factors already mentioned. But there may also be an historiographical explanation. The three great formative influences upon how medieval society has been perceived in England in recent times have been McFarlane, Postan and Hilton. Now all three, in their different ways, have advocated a broad approach to the subject and all of them have inspired studies of the gentry; but for none of the three was the gentry the central interest and the lack of rigour in matters of definition may well stem partly from this plain fact. There are no Ford lectures devoted to the origins of the gentry. Meanwhile, there has been much conceptual leaning upon early modern studies, where the problem of definition appears to be somewhat less acute.

The common-sense approach implies that the meaning of gentry is obvious. In practice, however, this is not the case, as reading the introductory chapters to studies of the medieval gentry of specific counties at specific points in time immediately makes clear. Most often scholars begin with the disarmingly simple question: Who were the gentry? One basic approach is simply to equate gentry with gentility; the gentry are all those who are accepted as, or who lay claim to being, gentle. Often this involves taking legislation or instances of recognition of the gentility of status groups at face value. After the sumptuary legislation of 1363 we can speak confidently of esquires as well as knights as gentle. The evolution of the esquire is a complex phenomenon which is as yet imperfectly understood. However, there can be little doubt that many of those so distinguished had been regarded as gentle for some time. Moreover, the same legislative act makes it clear that gentility extended beyond the esquires for it speaks of 'esquires and all manner of gentle men below the estate of knight'. And, when we look closely at thirteenth-century evidence, we become aware that gentility was by no means confined to the knights. Texts relating to household

<sup>7</sup> *OED*, 1st edn, vol. VI (1901), pp. 121–2; 2nd edn, vol. VI (1989), p. 455.

<sup>8</sup> The author of *Cleanmess*, for example, refers to the *gentryse* of the Jews and of Jerusalem – *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. H. Kurath *et al.* (Ann Arbor, 1954–), vol. IV (1963), pp. 77–8.

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or retinue make this clear enough. The *Rules* of Bishop Robert Grosseteste of 1240–2, for example, spoke not only of knights but also of gentle men (*gentis homines*) who wore livery. Gentility is often associated with service, and most particularly with household service. But it also existed in society at large. In a famous instance in the Somerset county court in 1204, Richard Revel informed the sheriff that he and his male kin were natives and gentle men (*naturales homines et gentiles*) within their locality (*patria*).<sup>9</sup> The sheriff replied that so, too, was he within his. It seems certain that gentility was widely felt and articulated within society long before legislation was in place to tell us so. The notorious Statute of Additions of 1413, by which the mere gentleman appears to come of age, is equally problematic. This act offers a clear line of demarcation between gentleman and yeoman. As an idea it was to prove enduring. As Shakespeare has Somerset say to Richard Plantagenet in *Henry VI, Part One*:

Was not thy father, Richard Earl of Cambridge,  
 For treason executed in our late king's days?  
 And by his treason stand'st thou not attained,  
 Corrupted, & exempt from ancient gentry?  
 His trespass yet lives guilty in thy blood;  
 And till thou be restor'd thou art a yeoman.

In reality, however, the line remained blurred, and in the law courts, which the act was basically designed to cover, men could be variously described as gentlemen or yeomen.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the full social acceptance of the mere gentleman took some time yet to achieve, as the thorough study of esquires and gentlemen of fifteenth-century Warwickshire by Christine Carpenter makes clear.<sup>11</sup>

The problem of delineating the gentry, moreover, is not a problem manifested only at the lower end of the social scale. Where is the line between gentry and higher nobility? Admittedly, we appear to be on relatively safe ground once we have a stable peerage from which to differentiate the gentry. However, the restricted peerage crystallised relatively slowly. Personal summons to parliament was a flexible instrument in the time of Edward I, and some flexibility remained

<sup>9</sup> *Curia Regis Rolls*, vol. III, p. 129; for a recent discussion of this case and its implications see my *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: A Study in English Society c.1180–c.1280* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Susan M. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century* (Chesterfield, 1983), p. 6, and Eric Acheson, *A Gentry Community: Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century, c.1422–c.1485* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 34. Acheson writes: “‘gentleman’ was adopted haltingly and with some confusion, as the omission of status and the procession of *aliases* in the Pardon Rolls reveal”.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Carpenter, *Lordship and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge, 1992), ch. 3: ‘Who Were the Gentry?’

For a wide-ranging discussion of gentility in the fifteenth century, see D.A.L. Morgan, ‘The Individual Style of the English Gentleman’, in Michael Jones (ed.), *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe* (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 15–35.

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throughout the greater part of the fourteenth century.<sup>12</sup> For earlier periods there is even more difficulty. If we are determined to stand on contemporary terminology, we have to negotiate the fluctuating and unclear concept of the baronage.<sup>13</sup> Some thirteenth-century barons were certainly rather insignificant figures, to mention only the least of the problems.

A second approach is to move from gentility to land. The gentry are the lesser landowners, or 'the lesser landowners with a claim to gentility'. Not only does the problem of demarcation with the higher nobility appear again – even in the fifteenth century there were some knights, like Sir John Fastolf, who were richer than some of the peers<sup>14</sup> – but at the lower end severe difficulties emerge. Once again, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century legislation appears to come to our aid in offering various property qualifications for holding local office – most often £20 – but in practice this is far from satisfactory.<sup>15</sup> It is quite restrictive, as no doubt it was intended to be. What, then, should be the cut-off point? One view, based on the income tax of 1436, defines the gentry 'very loosely' as 'all lay, non-baronial landowners with an income of £5 per annum or more from freehold property'.<sup>16</sup> There are advantages in adopting an all-inclusive approach; but there are also some problems. How inclusive should one be? Sources which give income levels are often unreliable, while the source of income may be as important in contemporary perceptions of status as its level. Is a rural estate the true prerequisite for gentry status? Not only do we come up against the problem of the upwardly mobile professionals, whose source of income is various, but there is also the problem of the towns. In a famous essay Rosemary Horrox argued eloquently for the existence of an urban gentry in fifteenth-century England and against the simple equation of land equals gentility. On the contrary, she points to a strong interconnection of urban and rural gentry at this time. Moreover, she suggests that although the terminology to describe the situation may have been lacking, these basic facts had long existed.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a recent discussion of the issues see C. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Later Middle Ages* (London and New York, 1987), ch. 2.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain 1000–1300* (London and New York, 1992), pp. 106–19.

<sup>14</sup> See T.B. Pugh, 'The Magnates, Knights and Gentry', in S.B. Chrimes, C.D. Ross and R.A. Griffiths (eds.), *Fifteenth-Century England* (Manchester, 1972), pp. 99–100.

<sup>15</sup> J.M.W. Bean employs the £20 unit of assessment in the income tax of 1412 as a means of structural analysis, whilst, however, stressing its limitations (J.M.W. Bean, 'Landlords', in E. Miller (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, III: 1348–1500* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 526–42).

<sup>16</sup> See S.J. Payling, *Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire* (Oxford, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Horrox, 'The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century', in J.A.F. Thomson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988), pp. 22–44. See also R.L. Storey, 'Gentlemen Bureaucrats', in C.H. Clough (ed.), *Profession, Vocation and Culture in Later Medieval England* (Liverpool, 1982), pp. 90–114.

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Over and above all of this we have the association of gentry with office-holding under the crown. But, naturally, the desire and capacity of men to hold office were extremely variable and some offices were more prestigious than others. Office-holding, too, has to be rejected as a sole criterion for gentry status.<sup>18</sup> In order to overcome these problems, scholars examining particular localities have tended to go for an amalgam of factors. Susan Wright, for example, in her study of the gentry of fifteenth-century Derbyshire, includes ‘all who in the period 1430–1509 provided a knight or were distrained, served as knight of the shire, sheriff, justice of the peace, commissioner of array, escheator or tax collector, together with those who were recorded in inquisitions post mortem or in five tax returns from 1412 to 1524–7 as having an income of £5 or over or as a tenant-in-chief’.<sup>19</sup>

In the matter of definition, medievalists have received no clear lead from their early modern counterparts. Some have looked for a property qualification (£10 of freehold land), but most have acknowledged the obvious pitfalls in this.<sup>20</sup> There has been much reliance on the tripartite structure of knight, esquire, gentleman, which by the sixteenth century was certainly more entrenched. Some scholars have emphasised the role of heraldry: ‘The official badge of gentility was the coat of arms and for the purposes of this study the term “gentry” has been taken to cover all families beneath the peerage which had a specific right to bear such arms.’<sup>21</sup> Of course, the heraldic visitations operated under the crown, from 1530 to 1688, as a means of regulating the gentry, and the kings of arms were empowered, under their commissions, to deface or remove bogus arms. In practice, however, possession of arms cannot be used quite so easily in this way. Heraldic visitations were intermittent, and not all gentry were armigerous.<sup>22</sup> Coats of arms may have expressed gentle status, but they did not define it. Sir Thomas Smith makes it clear in *De Republica Anglorum* (1583) that the reputation of being a gentleman came first, with the confirmation by a king of arms following, if necessary, thereafter. Moreover, such reputation was achieved by various means, including prowess at the law or study in a university. Or, as the same author puts it most famously, ‘who can live idly and without manual labour and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman . . . shall be taken for a gentleman’.<sup>23</sup> The same view was expressed by William

<sup>18</sup> And see below note 41.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry*, p. 4. A similar analysis opens Eric Acheson’s study of the Leicestershire gentry in the fifteenth century: ‘the family names gleaned from the 1428 and the 1436 subsidies, along with those who accepted the burdens of local government, provide us with our starting point of 249 families of either gentry or potential gentry status’ (Acheson, *A Gentry Community*, p. 38).

<sup>20</sup> For a summary of views on this see Acheson, *A Gentry Community*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>21</sup> J.T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War* (London, 1969), pp. 2–3.

<sup>22</sup> For criticism of this approach see Becket, *Aristocracy in England*, pp. 34–5, and works cited there.

<sup>23</sup> Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England*, ed. L. Alston (Cambridge, 1906), pp. 39–40. See also Sayer, *English Nobility*, pp. 3–7.

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Harrison.<sup>24</sup> Others spoke of the gentry as being those who were exempt from labour. In practice, however, the line between gentleman and yeoman remained blurred, and contemporaries confessed to difficulties in distinguishing between them.<sup>25</sup> It is possible, therefore, for a historian to speak of families who were 'occasional gentry', acting only as gentry in intermittent contacts with the wider world.<sup>26</sup> Early modernists have difficulty, too, with professionals and with urban residents with claims to gentility.<sup>27</sup> In reality, neither heraldry nor the tripartite schema helps the historian very much towards a definition. If the meaning of gentry is obvious, it is certainly not obvious from our sources.

Historians have subdivided the early modern gentry in other ways, differentiating county elite from parish gentry for example, or distinguishing between upper, middling and inferior gentry.<sup>28</sup> Later medievalists have tended to follow suit. Wright, for example, sees an enormous gulf – in economic, political and social terms – between the knights and esquires on the one hand, the 'gentry proper' as she calls them, and the ephemeral and ambiguous category of gentlemen on the other.<sup>29</sup> Acheson, too, speaks of the 'economic chasm' separating esquires from gentlemen.<sup>30</sup> Recently, Simon Payling has added a further dimension. He concentrates upon those he calls the 'greater gentry', the dozen or so wealthy families which, as he shows, dominated in fifteenth-century Nottinghamshire.<sup>31</sup> These are similar, both in numbers and in activities, to the 'county governors' whom Peter Clark sees operating in sixteenth-century Kent.<sup>32</sup> These approaches are perfectly valid in terms of analysis, of course, and they have paid great dividends. But what has to be stressed is that they are driven by external observation and not upon contemporary perception. And what is true of the parts is true of the whole. The plain truth is that 'gentry' as employed by historians is a construct.

In this respect it may be compared with 'aristocracy', which came to be widely used in England, it has been argued, precisely because of the confusion over the concept of nobility.<sup>33</sup> It is often used by historians as though it were synonymous with nobility, in the wider sense of the term. However, the terms are not strictly interchangeable as aristocracy may contain stronger connotations

<sup>24</sup> See Mingay, *The Gentry*, p. 2 and Acheson, *A Gentry Community*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> David Cressy, 'Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England', *Literature and History* 3 (1976), pp. 29–44.

<sup>26</sup> P. Clark, *English Provincial Society from the Reformation to the Revolution: Religion, Politics and Society in Kent, 1500–1640* (Hassocks, 1977), p. 126.

<sup>27</sup> See Cressy, 'Describing the Social Order', for example, for debate around these issues. For the content of gentility in this period see, in particular, J.P. Cooper, 'Ideas of Gentility in Early Modern England', in G.E. Aylmer and J.S. Morrill (eds.), *Land, Men and Beliefs: Studies in Early Modern History* (London, 1983), pp. 43–77.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Lawrence Stone, 'Social Mobility in England', *Past and Present* 33 (1966), p. 18; Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry*, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry*, p. 6. <sup>30</sup> Acheson, *A Gentry Community*, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Payling, *Political Society in Lancastrian England*, ch. 1, and *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> Clark, *English Provincial Society*, part 2. <sup>33</sup> Becket, *Aristocracy in England*, pp. 20–2.

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of leadership and authority, betraying its classical origins when it referred to a system of government.<sup>34</sup> There are no absolutes in the use of such terms.

The 'gentry', then, is a construct. The way it is used, however, leaves us open to Weber's strictures about the 'vaguely felt'. Arguably, this does have its virtues. Despite the lack of definition, historians of the English gentry have a remarkably consistent view about the parameters of their studies. A recent book on the society of Angevin Yorkshire, by Hugh M. Thomas, shows this clearly.<sup>35</sup> The author asserts that his book is about the gentry, and in the same mould as studies in later periods. This is shown not by conceptualisation, however, but by content. We find discussions of office-holding, of collective action, of relations with the crown and higher nobility, of crime, of manipulation of the law and arbitration, as well as of estates and improving landlords, of family, household and inheritance, and of religious sentiment. In other words, the common-sense approach to the study of the gentry is based upon a series of shared assumptions. It also allows historians to borrow fairly freely from one another in conveying a sense of, or a feel for, the society under scrutiny. When we look more closely, Thomas's recognition of gentry seems to be founded on his observation of increasing horizontal ties and of a sense of community among lesser landowners. Similarly, John Blair invokes 'the English country gentry' to describe the late Anglo-Saxon thegnage as a means of comprehending the evolution of the manor and the rise of the local parish church.<sup>36</sup>

But on the other hand, how can we be sure we are comparing like with like? Admittedly, there are many continuities; but, equally, there is hardly an area of life in which the fifteenth-century world, for example, was not radically different in some respects from that of the eleventh or twelfth. There is another reason why, at the present time, medievalists should concern themselves with the question of definition. Alongside the recent burgeoning of studies in the medieval gentry, what we might call the second wave, there are the beginnings of a discernible tendency to take a more evolutionary approach.<sup>37</sup> This is a positive development, although there are dangers. One is that the history of the gentry may be conceived as wholly linear, a question even of progress. In seeking understanding across time we need to look for breaks as well as continuities. The history of knighthood, for example, ought not to be seen as a straightforward and gradual shift from military and chivalric values to civilian duty.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See Jonathan Powys, *Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1984), esp. ch. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Hugh M. Thomas, *Vassals, Heiresses, Crusaders and Thugs: The Gentry of Angevin Yorkshire, 1154–1216* (Philadelphia, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> John Blair, *Early Medieval Surrey: Landholding, Church and Settlement before 1300* (Stroud, 1991), pp. 160–1: 'the appearance of a broad, locally-based class of minor aristocracy: the proliferation between 900 and 1066 of the English country gentry'.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Colin Richmond, 'The Rise of the English Gentry 1150–1350', *The Historian* 26 (1990), pp. 14–18, and also Carpenter, *Lordship and Polity*, pp. 39–49.

<sup>38</sup> As implied in Carpenter, *Lordship and Polity*, pp. 55–65. The comparative strength of fifteenth-century studies in this area carries the danger of contrasting a fifteenth-century present with a relatively undifferentiated pre-fifteenth-century past.



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Another is that we may be tempted to gloss over major differences in favour of superficial similarity, side-stepping serious shifts. More rigorous definition of the gentry is, therefore, long overdue.

Perhaps too much attention has been given to the problem of delineation of the gentry. Should we not ask, rather, what distinguishes a gentry as a social formation? What are its essential characteristics? When can we speak of the existence of a gentry, and when can we not?

Some characteristics are so obvious as to require little comment. Land was an important constituent. Members of the gentry are most often local seigneurs or landowners. However, as we have observed of both later medieval and early modern society, gentility was experienced more widely than this. Which observation brings us to the second characteristic. Gentry share with greater lords a nobility or gentility which is designed to express an essential social difference between them and the rest of the population. In other words, a fairly well-developed sense of social difference must exist; or, to put it another way, the gentry is predicated upon the existence of a nobility. Whether we think in terms of nobility or aristocracy does not seriously affect the issue.<sup>39</sup> Neither does the less developed sense of noble privilege in England compared to continental nobilities.<sup>40</sup> Nor, indeed, the peculiar separation of nobility and gentry which was to develop in England. The existence, and the persistence, of gentility is sufficient. But, if preferred, we can use magnates or greater aristocracy in place of higher nobility.

The remaining characteristics of the gentry, it seems to me, can be encapsulated in a single word – territoriality. Immanent rather than declared in most studies in the subject, territoriality is crucial to the understanding of the gentry as a social formation. All landownership is, in the most basic sense, territorial; but what distinguishes the territoriality of the gentry is its collective nature. This territoriality has four essential components: collective identity, status gradation, local public office and authority over the populace.

Collective identity can be expressed in various ways. There is a natural tendency for landowners and other locally significant men to develop ties of association with others of similar station, notwithstanding any vertical relationship they may have with territorial magnates or with a distant authority. However,

<sup>39</sup> European scholars have been much exercised as to when it becomes legitimate to talk in terms of a nobility and as to whether or not it is better to envisage a vaguer, less clearly defined aristocracy giving way to a more sharply perceived and increasingly juridically defined nobility. The best introduction to these problems is probably still L. Génicot, 'Recent Research on the Medieval Nobility', in T. Reuter (ed. and trans.), *The Medieval Nobility: Studies on the Ruling Class of France and Germany from the Sixth to the Twelfth Century* (Amsterdam, 1979), pp. 17–35. Because of the difficulties in perception stemming from the use of nobility in the middle ages, David Crouch has recently argued for the adoption of aristocracy in its place: *Image of Aristocracy*, pp. 2–9.

<sup>40</sup> On this point see, in particular, M.L. Bush, *Noble Privilege* (Manchester, 1983), and his précis of the English situation in *The English Aristocracy: A Comparative Synthesis* (Manchester, 1984), ch. 2.

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there is a qualitative difference between associations of this kind and the type of group identity which requires clear articulation of shared interests and concerns. Such interests can only be expressed through formal assemblies, whether of a local or a national kind. This is undoubtedly why historians have been so concerned about the existence or not of county communities, and why there has been so much interest in factors working for and against cohesion within local societies. Despite disagreements over the level of coherence of county societies, there can be no doubt that a capacity for collective self-expression is a vital ingredient of the gentry.

The significance of status gradations is that they express status in terms of horizontal bands, rather than in terms of service or vertical association. They result, therefore, from a type of abstract thinking which equates individuals in status terms across a given area. The major determinant of these perceived differences in grade tends to be wealth. True, other derivations of status may co-exist with the territorial one, but they are accommodated within its dominant framework.

The holding of local public office has to be understood in relation to the needs of the state or central authority. All such authority has to function by means of agents and agencies. In many cases, it works through salaried officials. In other cases, a bureaucratic solution is not feasible. It requires a high level of resource and a high degree of acceptance, especially given that revenue may have to be drawn from society in order to finance it. The alternative is to work through local society itself. This may be done, to some extent, via ties of dependency, such as vassalage. But, for the most part, it means drawing on the services of members of the local elite. From the point of view of the latter, the existence of an effective, but relatively distant, public authority is to be welcomed, as long as it remains within bounds. Between centre and locality, therefore, there is a mutual acceptance which is real but qualified. The centre may wish to define status in relation to government service; in some societies it succeeds in doing this. In others, however, it is forced to draw upon the services of men whose status and whose stake in society are anterior to the holding of office. This is the case with the gentry. Of course, there is status in unsalaried, public office; men would hardly seek it otherwise. But, to a great extent, the status acquired through office is incremental.<sup>41</sup>

And, finally, there is the matter of authority over the population as a whole. Naturally, the exercise of justice is the key to this. There can be no doubt that collective responsibility for the administration of justice is an important facet of the gentry. Justices of the peace figure prominently in all studies of the English gentry from the fourteenth century on. Their numbers and their duties

<sup>41</sup> It is important not to be beguiled, in this respect, by the aspirations of the crown. For an exaggerated sense of service to the crown in defining status within the emerging gentry see Carpenter, *Lordship and Polity*, ch. 3.ii.