Introduction

At the first Privy Council meeting of Charles I's reign, early in April 1625, the Earl Marshal, Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel and Surrey, set out a bold agenda for the reform of the honours system and the resurrection of the aristocracy. As discussion turned to the reforms to be implemented at the start of the new reign, he proposed that it was both 'honourable and necessary to limit honours; that titles should not be distributed broadcast as in the past, but only to persons of quality and of noble birth'. He then elaborated on this under three headings: first, the need 'to maintain the ancient nobility'; second, the damage done by sale of office and title; and third the importance of the king letting 'his council share in the things he wishes to announce [and] publishing them as having been discussed with the councillors'.[1]

This was a bold and risky move because it would inevitably be seen as an attack on the royal favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, who was largely responsible for the continuing traffic in titles. Sure enough, Buckingham immediately spoke against it, arguing that the earl was casting aspersions on the memory of the late king and seeking to restrict the present king's capacity to reward merit. Arundel found himself isolated in the face of the favourite's disapproval. However, he had calculated that Charles would be sympathetic to this idea of a return to the traditional status quo and, in this, he was proved correct. A few days later the king came down to the council in person and issued an instruction that 'henceforth no honors shall pass either in England or Ireland until the Erle Marshall be first acquainted therewith.'[2] But getting Charles to agree in principle was often much easier than getting him to commit himself in practice, and when push came to shove he sided with Buckingham. During 1626 he allowed the favourite to persuade him that the needs of the war against France and Spain justified a new round of selling honours and creating titles. The abuses that Arundel complained of continued apace and he

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[1] *CSP Ven 1625–1626*, pp. 12, 21.   [2] *APC 1625–1626*, p. 24.

found himself a marked man, first of all barred from the royal court and then stripped of the authority of his office of Earl Marshal.[3]

In April 1625 the reforms proposed by Arundel had become particularly pressing because the English aristocracy appeared to be facing the threat of terminal decline. Social commentators lined up to pronounce on the diminishing respect for the noble order and the waning of their power and authority. The newsletter writer, Joseph Mede, picked up on calls for a 'resumption of honours . . . the number of our nobility being grown too great for . . . the ancient and due esteem of that order'; the Venetian ambassador echoed a general complaint that 'the number' of 'titled persons' had been 'so constantly multiplied that they are no longer distinguishable from common people'; and the poet, Michael Drayton, lamented that now the worthless 'Drone . . . dares grow/To any title Empire can bestow'.[4] Perhaps, the most evocative analysis was offered by Sir Henry Spelman who, in his *History of Sacrilege*, completed in the early 1630s, looked back on what he saw as 50 years of noble decline. He recalled that as a young man, he had witnessed 'with what great respect, observance and distance principal men of countries applied themselves to some of the meanest barons'. But now, as a consequence of the 'ancient honour of nobility' being granted 'to the meanest of people . . . the whole body of the baronage is . . . fallen so much from their ancient lustre, magnitude and estimation' that even 'inferior gentlemen' would 'accost' them with a 'familiarity' that made him wonder at 'the declination of the one or the arrogance of the other'.[5] This was a trend that most contemporaries believed had been exacerbated by the ascendancy of Buckingham. Not only was the continuing sale of honours draining away the honour and prestige of the order, but his determination to dominate royal counsels had led to a sidelining of the 'ancient nobility' and their displacement from their traditional role as *consiliarii nati*, a king's 'natural counsellors'. Arundel saw it as his main purpose in politics to reverse this trend and restore the English aristocracy to their 'ancient lustre' and 'magnitude'. This was the agenda he set out in 1625 and following Buckingham's assassination in August 1628 he was able to claw his way back into royal favour and embark on the programme that he had outlined in 1625, this time with the wholehearted support of the king.

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[3] K. Sharpe, 'The Earl of Arundel, his circle and the opposition to the duke of Buckingham, 1618–1628', in *Faction and Parliament*, ed. K. Sharpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 219–34.

[4] *Court and Times*, i.335; *CSP Ven. 1626–1628*, p. 607; R. McCoy, 'Old English honour in an evil time: Aristocratic principle in the 1620s', in *The Stuart Court and Europe*, ed. R.M. Smuts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 149.

[5] H. Spelman, *The History and Fate of Sacrilege* (London, 1698), p. 224; L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558–1641* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 747–8.

This book is a study of the policies implemented by Charles and Arundel in pursuit of this programme. It focuses on two closely related themes: first, the royal project to revive and reinforce the status of the aristocracy, and at the same time fashion them into a loyal, court-based, 'royalist party' capable of upholding the monarchy; and second the efforts made by the king and his Earl Marshal to reform the honours system. In this context 'the aristocracy' will be understood as synonymous with the English 'nobility', or more precisely the parliamentary peerage. During the seventeenth century 'aristocracy' was generally used in its original, Aristotelian, sense to refer to a system of government in which the 'best men', equipped with the virtue and capacity to rule in the interests of the state and its citizens, wielded power. This was what Arundel had in mind when he insisted on the need for the 'ancient nobility' to resume their traditional role in counselling the king. But 'aristocracy' and 'aristocrat' have also long been understood by political and social commentators (particularly since the era of the French Revolution) to refer to the elite groupings at the top of various societies. In this sense the term has generally been used interchangeably with 'nobility' or 'noblemen' (derived from the Roman *nobiles* or 'known') to describe those whose birth, wealth and status set them apart as a social elite. This has also been qualified in the English context where a distinction has generally been drawn between *nobilitas maior* and *nobilitas minor*, the former consisting of those peers who were summoned to sit in parliament and who enjoyed a limited range of privileges, such as freedom from arrest and outlawry, and the latter the gentry classes, comprising knights, esquires and gentlemen.[6] It is with the former group that we will be mainly concerned in this study: the 120 or so English peers who sat in the House of Lords.[7]

The aim will be to trace the fortunes of the English aristocracy through the various schemes and policies promoted by the king and his Earl Marshal to restore their 'ancient lustre' and recruit them as the main source of political support for the crown. The lack of a sustained investigation of this topic is one of the more surprising gaps in the recent historiography of early Stuart England. It has long been a staple theme of continental studies of state building and the rise of absolutism, with often exhaustive analyses of monarchs' policies in dealing with their noble elites. Yet the last detailed exploration of the topic for early Stuart England was 45 years ago in Lawrence Stone's *magnum opus* on *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*; and there Stone's main preoccupation was with the inflation of honours rather

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[6] W. Doyle, *Aristocracy; A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 1–7; Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, pp. 53–5.

[7] The number of peers in the House of Lords stood at 99 in June 1625, 126 in 1628, 112 in April 1640 and 123 in March 1642: *Proceedings in Parliament 1625*, pp. 583–90; *Proceedings in Parliament 1628*, v.15–24; *LJ*, iv.45; PA, HL/PO/JO/5/1/8.

than crown policy towards the nobility more generally.[8] This omission is the more remarkable because it was an area of government that Charles, himself, took very seriously indeed. In contemporary parlance, he was the 'fount of honour', which meant that he was responsible for distributing titles and regulating honours in such a way that virtuous service of crown and commonwealth was seen to be rewarded, and the existing social hierarchy was maintained. He shared the view of his father that the exercise of this particular prerogative was the sphere in which monarchs 'doe most expresse the image of that imortall God which hath placed them on their thrones. [It was] their chiefest calling and worthiest of their care'. He also recognised that it was crucial to the maintenance of royal authority. He described his nobles as those 'persons in rank and degree nearest to the royal throne', who, 'having received honour from himself and his royal progenitors, he doubted not would . . . be moved in honour and dutiful affection'. He regarded them as his natural partners in government, standing alongside the bishops as one of the twin pillars on which rested the effective management of the state.[9] If his monarchy was to prosper and flourish it was as important to him to promote the welfare of his nobles and respect for the honours system as it was to promote Laudian reform in the church. Yet, whereas the campaign for the latter has been analysed exhaustively, the former has received only cursory treatment. Caroline Hibbard has shown that Charles took a close and persistent interest in the welfare of aristocrats, going out of his way to arbitrate their quarrels, arrange dynastic marriages and satisfy their legitimate ambitions for honour; while Kevin Sharpe in *The Personal Rule of Charles I*, sees the king as embarking on a self-conscious policy to enhance the prestige and 'ancient lustre' of the nobility.[10] Beyond this, however, there has been little attempt to explore the directions in which the king's concerns might have taken him.

This study will seek to fill the gap and then move on to analysing the political responses of the aristocracy in the crucial period from the First Bishops War in 1639 to the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642. The emphasis will be on exploring how far the aristocracy were willing to perform the role that Charles had assigned to them, and the degree to which his efforts to fashion them into a 'royalist party' were successful. Much of the recent work in this area has highlighted the extent of aristocratic dissidence, most notably John Adamson's powerful

[8] Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, ch. III and pp. 750–2.
[9] BL, Lansdowne MS 152, fo. 38; Rushworth, ii.1163.
[10] C. Hibbard, 'The Theatre of Dynasty', in *The Stuart Court and Europe*, ed. R.M. Smuts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 156–76; K. Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), pp. 417–22.

and ground-breaking study *The Noble Revolt* that analyses the role of
a group of noble rebels in precipitating the civil war.[11] Here, however,
the main focus will be on the other side of the aristocratic equation. I
will concentrate on the 60 per cent of the politically active nobility who
eventually sided with the king in the summer of 1642 and provided him
with the support needed to take on his enemies and actually fight a civil
war.

The second theme of the book picks up on the other main aspect of
Arundel's 1625 agenda: the more general need to reform the system
for granting and affirming honours and titles. There was a long history
behind Arundel's proposals at the April council meeting. They were the
latest version of a succession of initiatives promoted since the mid six-
teenth century by Earl Marshals and the heraldic establishment to get
to grips with the problem of how to restore the integrity of what can
broadly be described as 'the honours system'. 'Honour' in early modern
England is generally best understood as the qualities, sets of values and
standards of behaviour that entitled an individual to status and esteem.
In this sense, as contemporaries readily acknowledged, it was inseparable
from 'aristocracy'. 'Aristocrats' and 'nobles' were those who possessed
and displayed 'honourable' attributes such as virtue, courage and antiq-
uity of lineage, which qualified them for elevated social rank.[12] However,
the term 'honour' or 'honours' could also be used to describe the formal
titles and marks of distinction conferred on those regarded as 'noble'.
From the mid sixteenth century the processes for granting and affirming
these were becoming increasingly institutionalised in response to growing
anxieties over the maintenance of order and hierarchy. The Earl Marshal
and the heralds, who were officially responsible for regulating 'honours',
established an increasingly formalised system for controlling claims to
titles, the right to display arms and precedence within the noble order.
Such concerns continued to command attention in Charles's reign, the
more so because of the sale of titles and apparent downgrading of 'quality
and noble birth' that Arundel alluded to. These topics have often been
seen by early modern historians as of interest only to antiquarians and
specialists in heraldry. But medieval historians, such as Maurice Keen
and Peter Coss, have demonstrated that they are central to understand-
ing the self-image and conduct of the ruling elite, and they are therefore
of immediate relevance to any analysis of Charles's relationship with his

[11] J. Adamson, *The Noble Revolt. The Overthrow of Charles I* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicol-
son, 2007); M.E. James, *English Politics and the Concept of Honour 1485–1642* (Past &
Present Supplement 3, 1978), pp. 84–8; McCoy, 'Old English Honour', pp. 133–55.
[12] Doyle, *Aristocracy*, pp. 32–5; J. Powis, *Aristocracy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 8–14.

aristocracy.[13] Alongside an analysis of specific policies directed towards the peerage this book will explore the Crown's efforts to promote and defend honour more broadly by investigating the effectiveness of reforms instituted by Charles and Arundel in the Court of Chivalry and Office of Arms. To begin with, however, it is important to analyse the context for all this, by examining the pressures and challenges faced by the aristocracy and the honours system prior to Charles's reign.

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[13] M. Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), chs. 7–9; M. Keen, *The Origins of the English Gentleman* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002); P.R. Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England 1000–1400* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1993); P.R. Coss and M. Keen (eds.), *Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002).

1   The honours system in late Tudor and early Stuart England

Heralds and Earl Marshals in late Tudor England

All over Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century there was a tightening up of definitions of nobility. Everywhere there was concern to limit the rise of social upstarts, prevent those who did not have secure titles from claiming noble privileges, such as tax exemption, and fix in place existing hierarchies in the face of unprecedented social mobility. A status that much of the time depended on collective social judgment and relatively relaxed assumptions about wealth and status became a matter of providing legal proofs of noble descent or the right to bear arms.[1] England has often been seen as a special case in matters relating to nobility because its gentry and aristocracy did not enjoy the extensive privileges of their European counterparts. Nonetheless during the late Tudor period there was a similar concerted effort to tighten up the regulation of status. Once again, the main reason was anxiety over the problems of maintaining order and degree, prompted, in particular, by the concern that the aristocracy and gentry were being deprived of the means to carry out their traditional roles of governing and defending their country. There was general agreement that something must be done to stabilise the social order and ensure that the different ranks within it discharged their customary duties. What this should be, however, was subject to a wide variety of proposals. Humanists urged fundamental changes in education, Protestant reformers advocated a moral and spiritual crusade and the 'commonwealthmen' promoted inquests into evils such as enclosure, backed by judicial and executive action.[2] One concrete

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[1] R.G. Asch, *Nobilities in Transition 1550–1700* (London: Arnold, 2003), ch. 1; J. Dewald, *The European Nobility 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 19–32; I.A.A. Thompson, '*Hidalgo* and *pechero*: the language of "estates" and "castes" in early-modern Castile', in *Language, History and Class*, ed. P. Corfield (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 53–78. I am grateful to Ronald Asch for advice on this issue.

[2] Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, pp. 22–36; J.P. Cooper, 'Ideas of gentility', in J.P. Cooper, *Land, Men and Beliefs in Early Modern History* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1983), pp. 51–4; Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge:

outcome of all this energy and industry was a great raft of regulatory bills and statutes, covering everything from poor relief and vagrancy to the regulation of dress and manners, culminating in the Statute of Artificers of 1563 that, by codifying all the existing rules relating to wage assessments and apprenticeship, sought to provide a template for the lives of the non-noble classes.[3] Another was to give much greater powers to those whose professional responsibility it was to supervise matters relating to noble status: the heralds.

The heralds had become established in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with the power to grant and regulate coats of arms, direct heraldic funerals and conduct visitations of the local gentry.[4] These powers were considerably extended in the mid Tudor period when the crown entrusted the heralds with a primary role in policing the honours system and acting as the arbiters of order and degree. The first royal visitation commission, granted to Thomas Benolt, Clarenceux King of Arms, in 1530 was expanded in 1552 to give them specific responsibility for ensuring that there was 'discent, order and due reformacon' in the display of coats of arms and other 'tokens of nobilitie and honour', and that none 'beare and use the same', 'except they be lineally descended of blode and name' from ancestors approved 'by the the lawe of armes'. For the first time the crown also spelled out sanctions, stipulating that any abuses were to be reported to the Privy Council and the Earl Marshal.[5] Then in July 1555 the heralds were granted a new charter that established the three kings of arms, six heralds and three pursuivants as the Office of Arms, 'a corporation with perpetual succession'. They were endowed with estates and a settled base at Derby House where they were able to set up a library to keep their 'records, rolls and pedigrees', thus providing an unprecedented genealogical and armorial resource.[6] However, the biggest step forward took place in the 1560s, with a series of reforms

Cambridge University Press, 1978), i.224–8, 240; A. Fletcher and D. MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions* (Harlow: Longman, 5th edn, 2004), pp. 6, 10–11.

[3] G.R. Elton, *The Parliament of England 1559–1581* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 262–75; S.T. Bindoff, 'The Statute of Artificers', in *Elizabethan Government and Society*, ed. C.H. Williams (London: Athlone Press, 1961), pp. 56–94; G.R. Elton, *The Tudor Constitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 466–70.

[4] A. Ailes, 'The development of the heralds' visitations in England and Wales', *The Coat of Arms*, 3rd ser., 5 (2009), 7–23. I am grateful to Adrian Ailes for valuable advice on this topic. See also A. Ailes, 'Elias Ashmole's "Heraldical Visitacion" of Berkshire 1665–6' (Oxford University DPhil thesis, 2008); A.R. Wagner, *Heralds of England* (London: HMSO, 1967).

[5] *Munimenta Heraldica*, ed. G.D. Squibb (Harleian Soc., new ser., 4, 1985), pp. 131–2; *Visitations of the North*, pt. 1 (Surtees Soc., 122, 1912), p. 199.

[6] *Munimenta Heraldica*, pp. 20–7; Wagner, *Heralds of England*, pp. 182–3.

managed by the young Earl Marshal, Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, and his mentor, Lord Burghley.[7]

The Earl Marshal had emerged as the crown minister responsible for overseeing the honours system since the lapse of the office of Lord High Constable in 1521, following the treason and execution of the Duke of Buckingham. However, Norfolk was the first to develop this role to the full and by the end of the 1560s he had transformed the scope and range of the heralds' activities. There were initial indications of this in a new visitation commission issued to Norroy in June 1561. Picking up on the language of social reform, its declared aim was to ensure that 'every person and persons, bodys politique, corporate and others, may be the better knowen in his or their estate, degree and misteries, without confusion or disorder', and, in particular, that 'the nobilitye' be 'preserved in every degree as apperteyneth as well in honor and in worship'.[8] To this end the heralds were equipped with new powers. Their primary task remained to investigate coats of arms and pedigrees, and record these in their register. But they were now given authority 'to reprove, comptroll and make infamous' by public proclamation and humiliation any who 'shall usurpe or take upon him or them any name or title of honour or dignitie, as esquire, gentleman, or other'. In other words, they were now being made responsible for monitoring the critical divide between gentleman and commoner. Armed with these powers, from July 1561 onwards, the provincial kings began an extensive round of visitations which, by the mid 1570s, had covered virtually every county in England. In earlier visitations the main emphasis had been on authorising coats of arms but in this round descents and marriages became the primary focus of attention, with the recording of sometimes lengthy pedigrees in the visitation office books and the first appearance of the rectilinear format of the modern family tree in place of the earlier narrative descents. This led to a much fuller and more comprehensive visitation process, with a substantial rise in the number of gentry families being included and far more detailed information on descents, often accompanied by 'proofs' in the form of charters, indentures, seals and 'church notes'.[9]

[7] Cecil was a professed admirer of the duke as an exemplar to the nobility, writing of him in October 1565 when several of the reforms relating to the heralds were being put in place, 'I think England hath not had in this age a nobleman more likely to prove a father and stay to his country': C. Read, *Mr Secretary Cecil and Queen Elizabeth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955), p. 332.

[8] *Visitations of the North*, pp. 204–6; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls 1560–3*, p. 92.

[9] Ailes, 'Development of heralds' visitations', 15–21; Wagner, *Heralds of England*, pp. 185–6, 206; A.R. Wagner, *The Records and Collections of the College of Arms* (London: Burkes Peerage, 1952), pp. 69–70, 78–81.

However, the extension and reform of the visitation process was only part of Norfolk and Burghley's campaign. On 5 December 1566 a bill for 'Confirming the Letters Patents and Corporation of the kings [and] Heralds of Arms' was given a first reading in the House of Commons.[10] As well as enshrining the charter of 1555, it proposed that the ancient Earl Marshal's court, the High Court of Chivalry, should be re-established as the 'Court of the Company of the kings and Herraulds of the Office of Arms'. It was to continue to have oversight of all matters relating to 'heraldrie . . . and the ancient law of arms'; but its remit was to be extended to a general oversight of the honours system. It would now have the power to resolve disputes about descents or pedigrees, enforce the registration of funeral certificates for noblemen and gentlemen, curb the activities of illegal arms painters and prevent the defacing of monuments. Furthermore, as back up to the new authority given to the heralds, it would determine any questions that related to the 'using or usurping of any title, name or addicon of esquire or gentleman'. Finally, it was to become a court of record, meeting twice yearly at set times under the supervision of the Earl Marshal and heralds, which meant that its proceedings were to be officially recorded and became valid as fact in legal proceedings. Had this bill become law it would have equipped the Elizabethan regime with a powerful mechanism for regulating the upper classes. However, for reasons that are unclear, it never progressed beyond its first reading.

Nonetheless Norfolk was able to further extend his own and the heralds' powers in a series of regulations issued from 1561 onwards and codified in the 'Earl Marshal's Orders' of 18 July 1568. These stipulated first of all that grants made by the kings of arms were to be authorised by the Earl Marshal or one of his deputies (Burghley or Leicester) and then recorded in a register that was to be presented to the Earl Marshal once a year for inspection; then, second that the executors of deceased nobles and gentleman be required to provide a funeral certificate giving their date of death, place of burial and habitation and family details, even where there had been no herald in attendance. All this documentation would be kept alongside the visitation books to provide a comprehensive record of the descents, marriages, residences and coats of arms of the landed elite.[11]

Taken together these reforms would have established the Earl Marshal as the principal arbiter of honour and degree, equipped to address many of the concerns raised by commentators and moralists, and offer the

[10] *CJ*, i.79; the full text is in CA, Heralds, vol. II, fos. 743–52.
[11] *Munimenta Heraldica*, pp. 97–105; Wagner, *Heralds of England*, pp. 110, 187, 197; Ailes, 'Development of heralds' visitations', 16–17.