Prologue: what are they like?

This book concerns two men, a stockingmaker and a magistrate, who both lived in a framework-knitting village just south of Nottingham at the turn of the nineteenth century. It focuses on Joseph Woolley the stockingmaker, on his way of seeing, and on the way he framed his own experience in writing. His experience included the activities of magistrate Sir Gervase Clifton, administering summary justice (and other kinds of justice too) from his country house, Clifton Hall, which stood close by the village in which Woolley worked his knitting frame. Both men wrote, but produced very different kinds of writing. Woolley's private diaries and accounts total nearly 100,000 words; from the 1770s onwards Clifton kept much briefer records of his work as a magistrate. Their writing coincides for six years between 1800 and 1815. In this book, the magistrate's writing is used to contextualise and confirm what the working man had to say about everyday life and labour, men and women, sex, love, and the law, in early nineteenth-century Nottinghamshire.

Joseph Woolley's diaries have been in the public domain since 1992, when they were deposited in Nottinghamshire County Record Office. Twenty years before that, a local historical society had borrowed them from a surviving Woolley family member; members discussed and transcribed the diaries between 1973 and 1977, though the Clifton Society transcription (and others, apparently produced in the 1980s and 1990s by local historians) were not made available to the public.[1] So Joseph Woolley's (untranscribed) writing made its first public appearance on the deposition of his diaries in Nottinghamshire Archives, in a period when interest in labour and working-class history was on the wane among academic historians working and writing within the frame of

[1] Nottinghamshire Archives (hereafter NA) DD 1979/1, Clifton Historical Society Minutes, 1973–7. Also Family History UK, Nottinghamshire, www.forum.familyhistory.uk.com/showthread.php?t=4861

post-structuralism and cultural studies.[2] The historiographical timing of the diaries' deposition may account for the little attention paid them by historians interested in the history of emotion, masculinity, sexuality, violence, and the everyday life of the English working class. They are, on the other hand, widely known among local historians and genealogists of the East Midlands, and among historians of the hosiery and knitwear manufacture. (Though 'very useful on the everyday life of working people in the period . . . not a lot on framework knitting', notes Denise Amos at the Nottinghamshire Heritage Gateway website.[3])

Joseph Woolley's volumes of accounts and anecdotes do indeed allow unprecedented access to ordinary, everyday, working-class life in the era of Luddism. But there was a time, right at the beginning, when I first started work on his diaries, when I felt ambivalent about the stocking-maker. I was used to mixed feelings when writing about lives lived in historical time. I found the campaigning socialist journalist Margaret McMillan (1860–1931) one of the most irritating people I have ever encountered, though I still think that her political project was impeccable (or as impeccable as – say – Keir Hardie's) and her analysis of the relationship between nutrition and culture in working-class life, quite profound.[4] In the case of the radical policeman and soldier John Pearman (1819–1908) I felt a deep respect and admiration for a working-class man who kept his political opinions to himself through his quarter-century as a policeman, and who possessed such original powers of analysis in regard to the imperialism he had earlier served as a soldier in India. Whilst I spent much of my time when transcribing his memoirs and tracking down the radical literature he read thanking God that I wasn't married to him (there is enough about Rose Pearman in his 'Memoir' to suggest that life with him was a rather dispiriting affair) I also frequently exclaimed: Yes! You are *so* right! (in your analysis of class and imperialism). I learned a good deal from John Pearman. I understand that a lot of my early trouble with Joseph Woolley was to do with ways in which, in my imagination, he fell short of the measure set by Pearman.

And John Pearman's 'Memoir' was much easier to work with than were Joseph Woolley's diaries. It was shorter (6,000 words as opposed to 100,000), it was written in a very short space of time, and it was

[2] David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (eds.), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
[3] Denise Amos, 'Framework Knitters', www.nottsheritagegateway.org.uk/people/
[4] Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret MacMillan, 1860–1931*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick NJ, 1990.

focused on ideas. Pearman was concerned to relate his experience as a member of the uniformed working class to what he had learned about the British imperial state. He read widely in the free-thought and radical press, and though he did not name his sources, they were easy enough to find. It was easy to measure his growing republicanism, his atheism, and his socialism against imperial events of 1880–3, and to follow him as he reinterpreted his role as agent of the British military state in its annexation of the Punjabi territories after the Sikh Wars (1845–9). He did not write about his drinking, or about fighting – or about his work as policeman (or as the sawyer and railway worker he had been before he enlisted). He did not write about the sex life of his locality. He did not write anything at all about his friends and neighbours, whilst Woolley's writing pullulates with them. Pearman did not write a diary; he wrote what he said he wrote: a memoir. It was short enough for a publisher to think a book largely made up of literal transcription of it a good idea. My intervention in Pearman's writing was restricted to an introduction and some detailed annotation. The feeling of having behaved as honourably as a historian can – of really letting Pearman 'speak for himself' – was deeply gratifying. I still think it the most satisfying work I have ever done.[5] It is not possible to proceed in this way with Joseph Woolley's diaries – because of their length and their arbitrary detailing of the minutiae of everyday life. Many pages are taken up with his accounts. The Woolley diaries are not sustained by the articulation of one main idea as was Pearman's writing ('Oh John Bull you are a great rouge [rogue]').[6] Here I have tried to compensate for my position as reluctant gatekeeper of Woolley's words by quoting as much as I think a reader (and my prose) can bear.

This confession is provoked by the recent ethical turn in historical studies. There are questions now about the historian's responsibilities to the dead and gone that were not asked – that were not conceptualised – in the 1980s. Beyond the post-structural, cultural, linguistic, subjective, and archival 'turns' in historical studies, and beyond historiographical questions asked from the postcolony about the West as the Subject, or 'I', of historical writing, historians have started to question their relationship to their subjects, asking juridical questions to do with rights, duties, obligation, and ownership.[7] Who owns history? Who has the

[5] Carolyn Steedman, *The Radical Soldier's Tale: John Pearman, 1819–1908*, Routledge, London, 1988.
[6] Steedman, *Radical Soldier's Tale*, p. 206.
[7] See the 21st International Congress of the Historical Sciences (Amsterdam, August 2010), Panel on 'Who Owns History?' (especially Anton de Baets, 'Posthumous Privacy'), and Panel on 'The Rights of the Dead'. www.ichs2010.org/home.asp

right to speak for the dead? For particular categories of the dead?[8] New protocols of imagining and writing have emerged from Holocaust history and sociology – from the event that 'resisted ... long-standing frameworks of historical reasoning, development, and emplotment ... Who can claim the moral ground to consider the meaning ... of the lives and deaths of others?'[9] Some argue that Holocaust history and sociology underpin both the subjective and ethical turns in historical studies. 'I have not always written [personally]' says Leo Spitzer, discussing historical representations of the Holocaust. He explains that academic historians like him tend to avoid the personal voice: 'a seamless narrative and impersonal, omniscient, historical voice' usually masks 'the constructed nature of historical inquiry and writing'. He wanted 'to show how the historian is invested in the construction of a historical account – how he or she shapes and constructs it as an embodied being, with a subjectivity and personal history that need to be taken into account'; he started to resist the conventions of history-writing.[10]

Perhaps I was trained in the production of seamless narratives and to use an impersonal historical voice (though I do not remember such training). Rather, I was schooled to understand historical research and writing as a form of political thinking, from my earliest days in a perfectly ordinary South London girls' grammar school. At twelve I was asked to write about whether or not (having taken all arguments into consideration) I would have signed the death warrant for Charles I in 1649; at fourteen to discuss my relationship to the Jacobite cause and the rebellion of 1745. These were history lessons founded on the injunction to *know which side you're on*. I cannot be on any side of Sir Gervase Clifton (I am indifferent to him, rather than disliking him); but I evidently do believe myself to be on Joseph Woolley's side. I ought to have liked him, right from the beginning. Why did I not? Was I disappointed at his not being (or not appearing to have been) a Luddite? But comfortably placed university historians have no right to disapprove of those who had not the wherewithal to

[8] Sebastian Jobs and Alf Lüdtke (eds.), *Unsettling History: Archiving and Narrating in Historiography*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main (distributed by the University of Chicago Press), 2010.

[9] Daniel William Cohen, 'Memories of Things Future: Future Effects in "The Production of History"', in Jobs and Lüdtke (eds.), *Unsettling History*, pp. 29–49; this quotation p. 43.

[10] Julia Baker, 'A Conversation with Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer', in Christina Guenther and Beth A. Griech-Polelle (eds.), *Trajectories of Memory: Intergenerational Representations of the Holocaust in History and the Arts*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle, 2008, pp. 3–12.

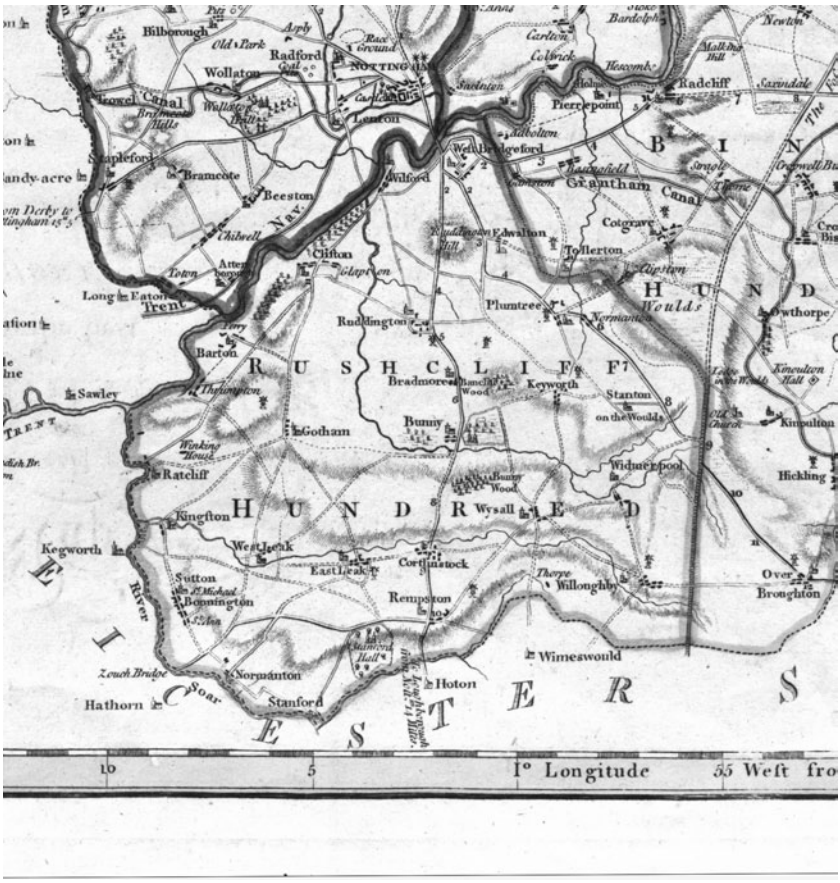

Figure 1b. Rushcliffe Hundred, Nottinghamshire (detail from Figure 1a)

become working-class heroes (or heroines). Neither did I have the right to feel offended at his apparent misogyny, or to be bored by his interminable narratives of drunken nights out and pub-yard fights. I knew all of that. I should have been simply grateful to him for allowing unprecedented access to the everyday of an early nineteenth-century Midlands county. I *was* grateful, right from the start, that he did not come with a story of suffering as his passport to the historical record: he was not an abject child-labourer, child-murdering maidservant in the condemned cell, pauper pleading for relief before a magistrate, for whom I must feel the diminishing, subordinating impulse of

sympathy.[11] I did not have to (or want to) rescue *this* 'poor stockinger . . . from the enormous condescension of posterity'.[12] When I finally understood that my relationship with him did not have to be shaped by my superior sentiments of sympathy, I began to like him a lot more. And then I transcribed. I copied out, in my own writing, Joseph Woolley's words, slowing my reading to the pace at which *he* had put them on the page. Transcription makes you read very thoroughly indeed – for the spaces and absences, the intended ironies, the literary allusions, the jokes. You discard your earlier presumptions and assumptions; a man is revealed as no misogynist at all, but as a writer who empathised with the difficulties of many women's lives, who noticed violent and deeply unhappy sexual relationships and recorded them, who wrote about women as if they were the same kind of creatures as men. Someone read through the window of transcription becomes – a writer.

Thinking of the eighteenth-century British *philosophes* and friends with whom he spent time when working on *Enlightenment*, Roy Porter said that he found their company and their conversation congenial: 'I savour their pithy prose, and feel . . . in tune with these warm, witty, clubbable men.'[13] But I never could have looked forward to an evening with Joseph Woolley down the Coach and Horses. Nor he to one with me, for that matter. Joining him in the Clifton public house would have been far too much like meeting my father for a drink in the Horse and Groom, Streatham High Road, *c.* 1967, friends and I, all of us home from university for Christmas. An old charmer with an authentic working-class background and a fund of stories about Up North, he charmed them all. Many years later the stories would turn out to have

[11] Leora Auslander discusses the power of historians and archivists of post-Shoah memory to make immortal ordinary people whose stories of suffering are a passport to the historical record in a way their everyday life would not have been. Being victim or survivor of 'a world-historical cataclysm changed [their] relation to history; it both generated far more detailed documentary traces than would otherwise have existed, and made people, who would have otherwise have [*sic*] gone unnoticed, noticeable'. 'Archiving a Life: Post-Shoah Paradoxes of Memory Legacies', in Jobs and Lüdtke (eds.), *Unsettling History*, pp. 127–48; pp. 129–30. One origin of the social-history mission to 'rescue' historical subjects is 'doing empathy' as described by Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments. By Adam Smith, Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow*, A. Millar, London and A. Kincaid and J. Bell, Edinburgh, 1759. Also Jules Michelet, 'Préface de l'Histoire de France' (1869), in *Oeuvres complètes, Tome IV*, Flammarion, Paris, 1974, pp. 11–127. Susannah Radstone discusses related issues in 'Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics', *Paragraph*, 30:1 (2007), pp. 9–29.

[12] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* [1963], Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 13.

[13] Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*, Allen Lane at the Penguin Press, London, 2000, p. 6.

been about ... leaving (the North, other women besides my mother, a child along the way – and us: the pathetic family of his middle years). But the stories were so bound up in secrets that even their shape was uncertain.[14] They still aren't known; will never be known.[15] Then, at the end of his tale, high on audience appreciation, my father cracks a joke, politically incorrect you'd call it now, that silences all of us. And I – in shame and embarrassment – protective of him, defensive – retort silently, defiantly to my friends (I did not *say* this): 'Yeah. Well. You want working-class? That's what you get.' The added embarrassment of being down the Coach and Horses with Joseph Woolley in October 1801 would have been the unmerciful teasing of his friends, and that some woman, for a laugh, would have emptied a hat full of piss over my head.[16] (He and I could always have talked about the books we'd read, as Chapter 2 of this book relates.) My assumption in reading and accounting for Joseph Woolley's diaries has been not that I have a right to speak for working-class men (dead or alive) out of my superior and experiential knowledge, but that they – my father; Joseph Woolley – will *keep their secrets*.

Most of us round the pub table in 1967 were students of history, currently being schooled in a Thompsonian account of the English working class. Had we known about Joseph Woolley, we would probably have wanted him to be a different kind of working man from the one he actually was. He lived in Nottinghamshire, at the epicentre of the machine breaking crisis of 1811–13, but he does not appear to have been a Luddite. We could not have imagined him thronging the pages of Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, turning experience of labour relations in the stocking trade and the relationships of everyday life into class consciousness (or something like it). We could not have employed him to fill out the contours of 'the radical artisan'. Ten, twenty years on, there were to be many nineteenth-century workers to occupy our historical imagination, *who were not as the workers ought to have been*. After Jacques Rancière's publication of *La Nuit des prolétaires* in 1981 (translated as *Nights of Labor* in 1989) there was much agonistic discussion among Anglophone historians (particularly the British) about the book's artisans, who did not define themselves in relation to their work or their trade, but in

[14] 'Gracious exterior, but the rooms are small and mean / and so papered over with secrets that even their shape / is uncertain, but it is the shape of the past.' John Ashbery, 'The Ridiculous Translator's Hopes', in Ashbery, *And the Stars Were Shining*, Cancarnet, Manchester, 1994, p. 16.
[15] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Virago, London, 1986, pp. 48–61.
[16] For teasing, see below p. 255, n. 15; for the hat incident, p. 111.

relation to a world of ideas.[17] Rancière's workers wrote, but not accounts of their social and labour struggles, not about the making of class; they produced poetry and romantic reveries of childhood. Rancière announced his poets and dreamers in 1979 at a Ruskin History Workshop when he described 'an important literary movement among French workers in the mid-nineteenth century ... they wrote poetry ... gain[ed] their identity through other means than history and memory'.[18] A severe difficulty for historians of the British working class was the story Rancière told of their intention, not to ameliorate working conditions and social relations, not (as in some strictly Marxist version of the tale) to organise for a world turned upside down, but rather to read and write themselves into men worthy of the respect of their betters; by writing, to become full citizens of the republic of letters. Rancière was to call 'into question the projections of proletarian authenticity only recently constructed by social historians around the figure of the radical artisan'.[19] The historical story of the radical artisan, the one we were in the process of acquiring in 1967, would be undone by a 'philosopher-historian ... question[ing] the significance of workplace changes, skill loss, trade unionism as response, and more deeply ... [casting] doubt upon the conceptual verities that have been associated with the word "artisan"'.[20] But those were historiographical developments of the twenty years after our night in the Horse and Groom.

And Joseph Woolley was not even a man *like them*: he was not like Rancière's worker-writers. He wrote a diary and account book, not

[17] *La Nuit des prolétaires: archives du rêve ouvrier*, Fayard, Paris, 1981; *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury, intro. Donald Reid, Temple University Press, Philadelphia PA, 1989.

[18] Jacques Rancière, '"Le Social": The Lost Tradition in French Labour History', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, pp. 267–72.

[19] Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2005, p. 162.

[20] 'Book Reviews', *Oral History Review*, 20:1/2 (1992), p. 124. For skilled labour / the labour aristocracy in relation to the historiography of organised labour: Geoffrey Crossick, 'The Labour Aristocracy and its Values: A Study of Mid-Victorian Kentish London', *Victorian Studies*, 19 (1976), pp. 301–28; H. F. Moorhouse, 'The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy', *Social History*, 3:1 (1978), pp. 61–82; Joe Melling, 'Aristocrats and Artisans', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 39 (1979), pp. 16–22; Robbie Grey, *The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth-Century Britain, c. 1850–1900*, Macmillan, London, 1981; John Breuilly, 'The Labour Aristocracy in Britain and Germany: A Comparison', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 48 (1984), pp. 58–71; John Rule, 'The Property of Skill in the Period of Manufacture', in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meaning of Work*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 99–118; Keith McClelland, 'Some Thoughts on Masculinity and the "Representative Artisan" in Britain, 1850–1880', *Gender and History*, 1 (1989), pp. 164–77; Derek Matthews, '1889 and All That: New Views on the New Unionism', *International Review of Social History*, 36 (1991), pp. 24–58.

poetry, not *une rêve d'enfance*, not an entry ticket to the republic of letters. Neither did he produce the kind of personal narrative that might be appropriated to the genre of 'working-class autobiography', to be read in the 1980s and 1990s as a text of self-formation and identity. He appears not to have shared his writing with anyone else (a wise precaution, given that so many of his 100,000 words concern the sex life of his friends and neighbours) and he did not write for publication. Certainly, in the way of the *Nights of Labor* artisans, Woolley's work was not the focus of his emotional life: he did not love his knitting frame, and an *artisanal* identity was just what came with, and was useful, for the job. He too spent his nights drinking, but with drink and talk the end in view, not intoxication with the written word. *His* proletarian nights were spent in the Coach and Horses, talking about who was doing what with whom (or, strictly speaking, his Saturday, Sunday, and Monday nights were spent this way; like the majority of stocking-makers working in an outputting system, he earned his living from a very intense four-day week). He was *in Luddism*, as later chapters of this book will argue (you could not be in Nottinghamshire in 1811–12 and not be *in Luddism*), but he was not 'a Luddite', in the way that its historians have written the Luddites. If you want to account for Joseph Woolley, you must write against many accreted historical assumptions about *men like him*.

Joseph Woolley structured his many character assessments and annals of bad behaviour in South Nottinghamshire, *c.* 1800–15 by means of the modern comic form 'What *are* you/what *am* I/ *like*?' These are rhetorical questions asked of someone who has done something stupid or ridiculous, the answer (usually unspoken) being quite obvious – *they are like that*. It is also, when asked of oneself, a question that craves an indulgent smile: you know me; I'm just playing my usual part; be tolerant. The interlocutor is not asked to judge, but rather to provide affirmation of another's traits and peculiarities of behaviour. It is not a serious question; the laugh is embedded: you ask it of having just put the teapot in the fridge – 'what am I like?' – or running your car into a gatepost, not of running over a child. In Joseph Woolley's time and place it was a way of knowing that existed in conjunction with more formal judgements of men and women *like him*, issued by their social betters. Handbooks to the common law told magistrates what the common people *were like*: about their habits, manners, and perpetual tendency to noisy violence. Newspaper reporters, novelists, and pamphleteers developed techniques of writing to tell readers what working people *were like*. These are sometimes all we have, two hundred years on, for the historical interpretation and understanding of the poorer sort. But because Joseph Woolley was a

writer, we can turn around historical assumptions about *men like him*, attempt to read the words he wrote without the accreted commentary of his social betters and his historians. That is why this book will begin with Woolley as a reader and writer before he is written as a framework knitter, or an artisan, or a worker. This is done to inscribe a *mentalité* before putting in place the social and cultural context that also made him what he was.

And the magistrate who is the second subject of this book? What of him? What was he like? It is not a question often put by or to members of social elites, who do not need or crave the indulgence of their audiences; so for him, there is *what he was*. Sir Gervase Clifton, Bart (1744–1815) of Clifton Hall, Clifton, Nottinghamshire came into his Nottinghamshire estates in 1766. He returned home from London with a wife, and to appointment as Sheriff of Nottingham, becoming Deputy Lieutenant of the county in 1793.[21] Entered onto the Commission of the Peace, he attended his first meeting of quarter sessions in January 1770.[22] Two years later he started to record his business as a single magistrate. Like most magistrates, he spent much more time sitting as a single justice than he did in sessions. He attended twenty-four meetings of quarter sessions between 1770 and 1781, twenty-three of them before the death of his wife and a newborn baby son in 1779.[23] He was absent from his estates for most of most years after 1779, so justice, or the opportunity for a good moan about the neighbours, had to be sought elsewhere by the aggrieved of Clifton, Glapton, Wilford, Barton, Ruddington, and the wider district. His notebooks proclaim his last sitting as a JP in November 1810, but Joseph Woolley's diaries show him to have been active in February 1815, seven months before his death. Seventy-two boxes and forty-six volumes hold the Clifton family and estate papers – correspondence, deeds, manorial records, political papers, and accounts, from the twelfth to the twentieth century.[24] But there are no letters, personal writings, diaries, account books, or library inventories to give access to Sir Gervase. He is hidden from view in a way that the framework knitter is not hidden, because of the survival of two very different sets of documents. For Clifton there are two surviving justicing notebooks in

[21] *Whitehall Evening Post*, 29 Nov 1796.
[22] *St James's Chronicle & British Evening Post*, 22 May 1766; *London Chronicle*, 14 Feb 1766; *London Evening Post*, 14 Feb 1766; *Gazetteer & New Daily Advertiser*, 16 Feb 1766; NA, QSM 1/29, Quarter Sessions Minute Books, Mich. 1767– Mids. 1773 (8 Jan 1770).
[23] *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 10 Sep 1779; NA, QSM 1/31, Quarter Sessions Minute Books, Mids. 1778–Epiph. 1782 (21 Jan 1781).
[24] University of Nottingham, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Clifton of Clifton.