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The Origins of the English Gentry

The gentry played a central role in medieval England, yet this is the first sustained attempt to explore the origins of the gentry and to account for its contours and peculiarities as a social formation. The book offers definition and conceptual vigour, and argues that the gentry, a kind of lesser nobility, was formed between the mid-thirteenth and the mid-fourteenth century.

The book deals with the deep roots of the gentry, but argues against views which see the gentry as formed or created earlier. It investigates the relationship between lesser landowners and the Angevin state, the transformation of knighthood, and the role of knights in the rebellion of mid-thirteenth-century England. The role of lesser landowners in the society and politics of Edwardian England is then put under close scrutiny. The book moves on to explore the effects of the explosion of commissions which took place from the 1290s onwards, the rise of the House of Commons and the emergence of justices of the peace – which produced a veritable partnership in government between the crown and the gentry. Finally it emphasises changes in social terminology and the rise of social gradation, the emergence of the county as an important focus of identity, the gentry's control over the populace, and its openness to the upward mobility of professionals.

PETER COSS is Professor of Medieval History, School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University. His previous books include *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: A Study in English Society c. 1180–c. 1280* (1991), *The Knight in Medieval England* (1993) and *The Lady in Medieval England* (1998).

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In memory of Rodney Hilton (1916–2002),
great scholar and friend

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Preface

The Origins of the English Gentry stems directly from an essay published in *Past and Present* 147 (May 1995), entitled ‘The Formation of the English Gentry’. In this essay I lamented the lack of conceptual rigour in the use of the term ‘gentry’ and offered a six-point definition. I argued, further, that the gentry was formed in ‘an accelerating process’ between the mid-thirteenth and the mid-fourteenth century. What follows is essentially an amplification of that study. The amplification is required because some of the issues were dealt with rather cursorily there and require a more extended treatment than I was able to give them at that time. I have been especially conscious that the process of gentry formation has not only to be described but to be fully explained. This could only be done in an extended study. In developing and refining my argument, moreover, I have also been able to take account of some important work that has been published during the intervening years.

My principal concern throughout the book has been to understand the origins of the gentry. It is intended, therefore, not as a history of the gentry *per se*, but as a contribution to that history. Of necessity, I have restricted my chronology and concentrated on the issues I consider central. I have approached the subject historiographically so that the reader can appreciate where my interpretation diverges from other, often more traditional, expositions. In doing so I have drawn on the work of a great many scholars and I have engaged constructively and, I hope, amicably with their views. I wish to acknowledge my debt to them, not only where I have concurred but also where I have disagreed. History, it should never be forgotten, is a collective enterprise and our understanding is forwarded by debate and the testing of hypotheses as much as by the accumulation of evidence.

The immediate research for this book was undertaken during the academic year 1999–2000, and I am most grateful to Cardiff University for the sabbatical leave which made it possible. It is underpinned, however, by earlier research, much of which is published elsewhere. Three of my essays, being especially germane, are republished here. In addition to ‘The formation of the English

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gentry', which constitutes the greater part of chapter 1, these are 'Identity and the gentry c.1200–c.1340', published in P.R. Coss and S.D. Lloyd (eds.), *Thirteenth Century England II* (Woodbridge, 1988) and 'Knights, esquires and the origins of social gradation in England', published in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, vol. 5 (1995), which, with a small amount of readjustment, constitute chapters 8 and 9 respectively. I am most grateful to the Council of the Royal Historical Society for permission to reproduce the essay from its *Transactions*.

During the preparation of the book I have accumulated numerous other, more personal, debts. I would like to thank the following for their kindness in allowing me to draw directly on their unpublished theses: M.J. Fernandes, R.C. Gorski, J.S. Illsley, C.H. Knowles, T.E. MacIver, J.D. Mullan, and J.A. Quick. I owe very special thanks to Dr Richard Gorski for his great generosity in allowing me to study his lists of fourteenth-century office-holders and commissioners, and indeed for allowing me to print his Warwickshire list covering the years 1290–1348 as my Appendix V. Without this access chapter 7, in particular, would have taken a great deal longer to produce. I am most grateful, too, to David Crook of the Public Record Office, Kew, who very kindly drew my attention to the three volumes of unpublished transcriptions by C.A.F. Meekings from the dorse of the patent rolls covering the years 1232–46, and to Paul Brand who similarly drew my attention to the obsolete manuscript calendars and indexes from the Patent Rolls, still extant in the Public Record Office, covering the years 31–57 Henry III and 10–16 Edward I. These sources greatly eased the research for chapters 3 and 6. I would also like to thank Maurice Keen and Anthony Musson for allowing me to read work of theirs in advance of publication, and Ann Williams and Rosamond Faith for their close reading of an early version of chapter 2 and for saving me from error. Andrew Ayton, Clive Knowles, John Maddicott and Chris Wickham not only read the whole typescript but made innumerable suggestions and invaluable observations. I have also greatly profited from a series of stimulating conversations with Maurice Keen over a range of issues discussed in the book. Whatever its merits or demerits may prove to be, it is a much better book for the intervention of these scholars. Needless to say, they are responsible neither for its errors nor for interpretations with which they may disagree. I would also like to thank the staff of Cambridge University Press, and in particular my copy-editor, Frances Brown, for her patience in ironing out inconsistencies. And, finally, as always, I owe colossal thanks to my wife, Angela Coss, who has commented on numerous drafts of the text, perfected the footnotes, typed the index and offered liberal advice at every stage of the work.