Introduction

'tis a great trust

Sir Henry Parker, 1693

Seventeenth-century England can be seen as a series of distinct, although overlapping, structures. The central structure of the government and the legislature overlapped the structure which consisted of a patchwork of counties and their governments. In turn these structures are overlapped by a third for the realm can also be perceived as an array of towns and villages directly or indirectly connecting with one disproportionately large city, London. Yet another structure was the church with its dioceses and hierarchies, its jurisdictions and its complex patchwork of lands and livings. There was a further underlying structure of great significance: England was made up of landed estates, predominantly owned by the nobility, the gentry, the church and the Crown.[1] These estates were omnipresent. They were not confined to the countryside for they penetrated into every borough and town and, indeed, into the very capital itself. English society was composed of landlords and tenants, and some English landholders were both. It naturally follows that one cannot understand the workings of English society without studying the relationships between landlords and tenants. At the interface between them stood one man whose activities were of crucial importance to both: the estate steward.

Stewards make useful witnesses for modern historians because of two characteristics shared by many landowners among the nobility and greater gentry: absenteeism and an insatiable curiosity about the estates from which they were absent. For a Sir John Lowther of Whitehaven, a Lord Fitzwilliam of Milton, a Lord Weymouth of Longleat, absence of body did not imply absence of mind. For the men who were charged with caring for the estate few matters were considered too trivial to draw to the attention of the most august of landlords. Nor need they fear rebuke for troubling him

[1] Three other groups of landlords were smaller but still significant: the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, the great London companies and the endowed grammar schools.

with trifles. It is true the curiosity and concern of landlords varied widely. There was a vast difference in the degrees of concern for their estates and the region in which they stood between a Fitzwilliam or a Lowther, both of whose concern with local detail was limitless, and that unamiable employer, the second Viscount Cholmondeley, whose mind seems to have been dominated by the fruits of his estate, the shortcomings of his servants and the management of his racehorses. Nevertheless the difference is more of degree than kind. The social or economic historian will still find the near 2,000 surviving letters Cholmondeley sent to his chief steward an invaluable resource, whilst the mere handful of his steward's letters which have survived from the hundreds the steward must have written can only lead us to contemplate wistfully the great archive that might have been. In general stewards were likely to be rebuked if they sent less than a letter a week, and even then could be rebuked if they were less detailed than their masters deemed appropriate. It was in no way remarkable for the new steward of Longleat to promise his kinsman-employer that he would not fail to 'give an account of your affairs here' by 'the return of every carrier (and oftener if occasion be)'.[2]

It naturally follows that the survivors from the constant flow of letters the stewards wrote can provide historians with a window on provincial society, a society which included about 90 per cent of all English people, and no other provincial source which historians could study is quite as rich in detail or all embracing in subject matter.[3] The historian of the nineteenth century can turn to a much wider and diverse array of sources, including, of course, the numerous body of provincial newspapers. The historian of provincial France can turn to the detailed and conscientious reports of an army of officials, especially the intendants in their provinces during the *Ancien Régime*, and the prefects in their departments throughout the nineteenth century. For the historian of seventeenth-century England such sources are lacking, and the reports of stewards, however variable in quality, however fragmentary or haphazard their survival, assume great significance. It is the purpose of this book to examine the role and activities of the steward in some detail, not primarily in order to understand how seventeenth-century estates were managed, but rather in order to increase our understanding of the workings of seventeenth-century society. The

[2] William Thynne to Sir James Thynne, 27 September 1658, Thynne ix, fo. 47.

[3] The obvious alternative is court records, always a rich source for historians, but court actions possess drawbacks as a source of information about the normal workings of society since, whether at the county or the metropolitan level, they are by their nature exceptional. Most Englishmen and women never saw the inside of a court above the level of a court leet, and a majority of those who did would have only been spectators. Most problems and disputes were solved without litigation. Indeed it was one of the functions of the steward to seek to achieve this.

records they have left to us serve such a purpose admirably. When we read their letters, reports, memoranda and accounts we find ourselves contemplating English society through the eyes of men who were peculiarly well placed to observe that society in action.

The steward's prime function of running an estate, of managing the relations between a landlord and his tenants, together with his second, 'ambassadorial', role of serving as his master's voice, as well as his eyes and ears, in the affairs of the region or county in which the estate stood, gave him a particular significance which was unintended and of which he was probably unaware himself. We cannot understand the workings of English society in the early modern period if we do not understand how the capital interrelated with the local community, politically, administratively, socially, culturally. The estate steward played a crucial role at the interface between the 'Great Society' of metropolitan London and the local community. It was not a role he was employed to play, but rather a role which fell to him because of the unusual position he occupied locally. He was the indispensable link between the small but socially, economically and therefore politically powerful propertied elite, and the rest of society, between the governors and the governed. The steward, therefore, was a 'mediator' in the anthropological sense of the word. He was perfectly placed to act as the vital 'broker' between the metropolitan society with which he was constantly in touch, and the local community in which he lived. Often a man of considerable ability and usually of wide experience, he tended to be more knowledgeable of the world beyond the confines of his region than his neighbours, not least because he was the beneficiary of a flow of intelligence from the capital not merely from his master but also from members of his master's London household, his goldsmith, London lawyer and other metropolitan residents. On the other hand his year-to-year residence in his region, his day-to-day contacts with tenants, neighbouring gentlemen and clergymen, magistrates and lawyers and his frequent visits to its urban centres at times of sessions and assizes, markets, fairs and parliamentary elections, gave him a far wider and yet more detailed knowledge of his provincial fiefdom and the surrounding region than even its owner could possess.

The role of the steward as a 'mediator' between governors and governed, between capital and province, between the 'great society' and the 'popular' culture of the local community, is sometimes explicit but always implicit throughout the following chapters.[4] Here it is only necessary to offer the briefest of summaries. The stewards were the conduit through which flowed from the centre a variety of intelligence concerning national events,

[4] For an exploration of the steward's mediating role see Hainsworth, 'The Mediator'.

politics and policies, impending elections, taxation and legislation, whether actual or proposed, the danger of war and the prospect of peace. These wider concerns would form part of a more constant flow of instructions relating directly to the estate: leases, fines, a variety of other tenancy matters, seasoned from time to time with instructions relating to patronage, benevolence and simple charity. In return the steward was a conduit not simply for reports about the estate and requests for instructions and decisions, but also for a flow of intelligence about local reactions to national affairs: legislation, taxation, elections, county and borough politics, wages and prices, natural disasters, the impact of disease or the weather, the problem of the poor. If communities felt moved to draw up and sign a loyal address congratulating the monarch on escaping assassination or on making peace with France, it was often the steward of the district's leading landlord who was asked to transmit it to London. If the community had been sluggish in displaying its loyalty it was the steward, prompted by his master, who stirred its members to action. The role of the steward as his master's 'ambassador' and intelligence gatherer is discussed at length in Chapter 6. All appeals for charity, benevolence, forbearance, a variety of patronage, passed through the conduit of the steward to the landlord, that potent but distant focus of influence. The names of candidates for bedesmen's places, for the occupancy of almshouses, for incumbencies of vicarages, however selected locally, were transmitted by the steward to the landlord and his decisions conveyed by the steward to the beneficiaries and to the community concerned, roles explored in Chapters 8 and 9. The steward even served as the medium by which architectural fashions and horticultural innovations leaped the gulf between capital and province as he supervised the remodelling of his master's mansion or assisted such horticultural and landscaping specialists as London and Wise to develop the mansion's orangeries, gardens and parks, functions discussed in Chapter 13.

His function as the interface between landlord and tenant is explored in detail in Chapter 4. Here it is only necessary to emphasise that this was his chief mediating role. He had to keep his master's lands let. This meant not only that he had to find tenants for vacant farms, since all landlords had a horror of having lands come 'in hand', but had to strive constantly to hang on to good tenants. Since desirable tenants were increasingly scarce in the agriculturally depressed second half of the seventeenth century this was no easy task. The understandable desire of the landlords to see their rents increase was regularly confronted by an equally understandable demand from the tenants that their rents should fall. The steward had the onerous duty of mediating between these and other conflicting claims. He knew his master's lifestyle, indeed his very status, was dependent on his income

which must, therefore, be sustained. On the other hand harmony and consensus were more likely to achieve this than confrontation, tenant resistance and, ultimately, abandoned farms. Elsewhere I have described estate stewards in this period as 'governors', not simply in the 'vice-regal' sense but in the sense employed by engineers; that is, devices which operate to smooth out irregularities in the beat of an engine and sustain its smooth, even operation.[5] Without the stewards' constant mediating between otherwise irreconcilable extremes, the mechanisms of English society might have broken down during the period between the Restoration of Charles II and the death of Queen Anne, years marked by frequent wars abroad and agricultural depression and political turmoil at home. On the other hand, the stewards' role as surrogate landlord was of great significance to the nation as a whole. The governing elite of the realm, whether in Parliament, holding the great offices of state, in ambassadorial posts, or in the army or navy, could not have fulfilled that governing function if they had been confined to their estates engrossed with the day-to-day detail of running them. Their stewards set them free to discharge wider, public, responsibilities. How the stewards did this is the concern of the following chapters.

[5] See Hainsworth, 'Essential Governor'.

1

The rise of the estate steward

Land is more precious than to be lost for want of looking after.
Charles Agard, steward, 1659[1]

The estate steward had been a familiar figure in rural England for centuries before the Stuart era saw him rise to a greater prominence. In Ely Cathedral stands a rude stone monument commemorating Ovin, steward to the eighth-century queen, St Etheldreda. Ovin was more likely a household majordomo than an estate administrator, but there is no need to penetrate the gloom of the Dark Ages in search of such shadowy figures. The mediaeval period provides ample evidence of identifiable men pursuing stewardship as a career. In the thirteenth century manuscript texts appeared describing the duties of a manorial steward, notably the anonymous *Seneschaucie*, which covered the duties of all estate servants, while Walter of Henley's *Husbandrie*, although concerned with farming rather than the techniques of estate management, appears to have found its audience in part among stewards. Many other texts 'were reference books of experienced estate stewards who probably acted as teachers in their profession'.[2] Lay stewards and bailiffs became a feature of monastic estates during this century, partly as a result of the injunctions issued by Archbishop Peckham who was determined that monks should not live outside their monasteries. However, this was a great age of demesne farming, and with the decline of demesne farming later in the mediaeval period the popularity of these texts declined and it may be that the office of steward became less significant.[3] Nevertheless the office survived. In fourteenth-century Gloucestershire several estate stewards prospered to such a degree that they founded gentry families of their own, whilst during the same century men who were already

[1] To the Earl of Dorset, 1 December 1659, Sackville U269/C63.
[2] Dorothea Oschinsky, 'Mediaeval Treatises on Estate Management', *Econ. HR*, 2nd ser., vol. 8, no. 3 (1956) (hereafter Oschinsky, 'Mediaeval Treatises'), 308. For a fuller discussion of these texts, together with the edited texts themselves, see Oschinsky, *Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting* (Oxford, 1971).
[3] Oschinsky, 'Mediaeval Treatises', 304, 309.

members of gentry families served as steward for manors of the Duchy of Lancaster.[4] In fifteenth-century Norfolk a socially less-distinguished steward, Richard Calle, had the audacity to aspire to marry his master's daughter, and Margaret Paston had so little regard for filial piety that she defied her parent's strenuous objections to the match – a melodrama familiar to readers of the Paston letters.[5]

Misalliances aside, there can be no doubt that some men had found in stewardship a career open to talent earlier than the early modern period. Such opportunities must have expanded after the English Reformation with the acquisition of substantial but scattered monastic estates by the laity and the Crown. Sir Thomas Thynne, whose harsh, not to say brutal, acquisitive features gaze sombrely down on us from the wall of his elaborate and beautiful mansion, Longleat, seems to have used his position as steward to the Earl of Hertford (subsequently Protector Somerset) to found the fortunes of a gentry family which subsequently entered the nobility.[6] The fact that at least 190 Members of the Parliaments of Elizabeth I had been, still were or were destined to become stewards is an indication not simply that in the sixteenth century stewardship was a respectable calling, but that it could be a means of climbing the ladder of degree.[7] The status of the steward naturally varied with the status of his master. Men of humbler station served landlords of humbler status and performed a more restricted range of duties. Nevertheless, during the first decades of the Stuart era some stewards at least can be observed discharging wide responsibilities on behalf of absentee landlords. Examples would include Richard Marris on the Yorkshire estates of the first Earl of Strafford or even earlier that notable antiquarian John Smyth of Nibley, the long-serving estate steward of the Lords of Berkeley, and in less exalted station such men as Thomas Crewe and his successor John Peck supervising the Denbighshire and Flintshire estates of Sir John Trevor, or William Vernon at Rufford serving Sir George Savile.

In summary then, the full-blown estate steward discharging wide and varied responsibilities who was a conspicuous figure in every shire during

[4] Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires: the Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1981), 64 ff.; Michael J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight* (Cambridge, 1983), 72–3.

[5] H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1968), 42–6.

[6] Thynne died in 1580. His great-grandson, Sir Thomas Thynne, who inherited Longleat on the death of a cousin, was raised to a viscountcy by Charles II in 1682.

[7] Some of this 190 were undoubtedly stewards-of-courts (for the latter see below), not estate stewards, but it is difficult to disentangle the two from the source used (particularly as some men almost certainly were both). However, courtiers and officials holding Crown sinecures have been excluded; based on *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1558–1603*, ed. W. Hasler, 3 vols. (London, 1981).

the later Stuart period, had already emerged during the sixteenth century and was becoming more numerous before the Civil War. Nevertheless as a feature of the provincial landscape he does not seem to have seized upon the imaginations of contemporary writers – certainly not of those who produced the fashionable 'character books'. Of the seventy-seven essays in John Earles's *Micro-cosmographie* (c. 1627) not one is devoted to the estate steward, and other similar works are equally silent.[8] Perhaps as a consequence of this neglect by contemporaries he has met with a similar neglect from historians, even those devoted to the study of English social and economic life in the early modern period. It may be significant that historians have paid far greater attention to the sixty or seventy years prior to the Restoration of Charles II than they have to the sixty years succeeding it, and the former is much less rich in steward records than the latter. This may have contributed to the tendency among modern historians to consider the steward as only emerging as a significant professional functionary during the eighteenth century. A pioneering historian of the professions in England has observed that stewards 'had staked their claim to professional standing' by 1730 and that landowners during the first half of the eighteenth century who possessed large or scattered or potentially rich estates 'discovered' that they needed full-time salaried agents to tend them. 'By the beginning of George II's reign they had become an accepted part of the landed community in every part of England.'[9] This summarises the process well but places it too late. The statement would be more accurate if James II or even Charles II were substituted for George II, while 'discover' is hardly appropriate to a situation with which the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of early Georgian landowners had been equally familiar. There has been a tendency to consider stewards in the seventeenth century as little more than rent collectors. Professor Clay has asserted that it was in the eighteenth century that stewards acquired the skills of surveyors, a knowledge of land law, and acquired the technical skills needed to improve their masters' estates through various forms of agricultural innovation.[10] Clay has also observed that the movement towards 'ring fence' estates owed a good deal to 'the increasing professionalization of estate administration as the period wore on' and 'the increasing tendency to employ the modern type of land steward, who saw his task not just as that of a mere rent collector but as an active manager whose business it was to improve his employer's property to the utmost'.[11] Again he appears to be referring to

[8] Interestingly, of the 1,000 or so titles drawn from the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods and printed in facsimile in *The English Experience* series, not one is specifically devoted to the duties of a steward. See further my essay 'Estate Steward'.
[9] Holmes, *Augustan England*, 24.
[10] Christopher Clay, 'The Management of Estates', in Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, 5(ii) 243.
[11] Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, 5(ii) 180.

the period 1720–50, and even beyond, rather than the period 1660–1720. If by 'improve' he refers to 'agricultural innovation' then this time frame is no doubt well judged. Historians who examine the records which stewards left behind them during the seventeenth century will find scant evidence that they were involved in agricultural improvement. This is hardly surprising since many of the improvements in agricultural practice were not discovered until the eighteenth century, and the vast majority of their masters were not themselves involved in farming or even stock rearing. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that a lack of technical expertise in improved agricultural methods inevitably downgraded or restricted the significance of stewards and their functions.[12] As to surveying, stewards had an increasing body of surveyors to call in at need (when they were not expert surveyors themselves as was Lord Cholmondeley's William Adams), and where their knowledge of the land law did not stretch or could not be augmented by their master's library, they could mobilise their master's local lawyer or have their master take counsel's advice in London, and they often did. At least as early as the second half of the Stuart period men with wide knowledge, great experience and a determination to expand and develop the resources of the estates entrusted to their care can be found across the English shires. Any implication that in the seventeenth century stewards were confined to routine tenant concerns like collecting rents and fines and negotiating leases is mistaken, as this and the succeeding chapters seek to demonstrate. Professor Beckett has written that 'in the world of 1660 the chief management tasks involved collecting rents and overseeing established farming methods'.[13] In fact the chief management tasks then and for years after would have involved struggling to keep old tenants and finding new ones, and few stewards whose records I have examined devoted their time to overseeing farming methods other than to police the provisions of the tenants' leases relating to care of the soil's fertility. Certainly the duties of the steward were passing through a gradual evolutionary process during the seventeenth century, probably most clearly observable in the activities of stewards as election agents, and certainly the degree of professionalism and the variety of functions and responsibilities varied widely from steward to steward and estate to estate. It is the contribution of the stewards on the more complex estates to the rich texture of provincial life which this work will particularly examine. Whilst emphasising that eighteenth-century stewards discharged a variety of functions Professor

[12] Joan Thirsk has identified stewards as influencing the more positive attitude to their estates which landowners displayed as early as the later seventeenth century. Thirsk, 'Large Estates and Small Holdings in England', in P. Gunst and T. Hoffman, eds., *Large Estates and Small Holdings in the Middle Ages and Modern Times* (Budapest, 1982), 74.

[13] Beckett, *Aristocracy in England*, 142.

Beckett has observed that 'despite their acknowledged importance relatively little is known about individual eighteenth century stewards'. This statement would be even more appropriate if it was applied to seventeenth-century stewards.[14] This neglect has been unfortunate because the steward played a rich variety of roles which took him into practically every aspect of provincial life, not simply in the rural areas where his prime responsibilities lay, but also into every country town.

As an occupation of profit and some prestige the office of estate steward was familiar enough to rural society in early modern England, and certainly well before the Civil War. The word steward had in fact already three different meanings, denoting different, although sometimes overlapping, functions: household steward, steward-of-courts and estate steward. In noble families since at least mediaeval times 'steward' had been the title given to the officer charged with the responsibility of organising and administering the lord's household. It was in large households an onerous but very prestigious position, sometimes occupied by a kinsman of the lord, often by a member of a gentry family. Households were often peripatetic between castles and mansions standing on widely separated estates. The steward moved with, or ahead of his master, setting up the household in whichever of his centres of authority the lord chose to spend the succeeding weeks. A typical household steward was Sir Henry Heydon (obit 1503) the son of a prominent lawyer with estates at Heydon and Baconsthorpe, Norfolk, who was steward to the household of Cecilia, widow of Richard, Duke of York.[15] When a lord became accustomed to dividing his time between one rural estate and a town house in London, and particularly when the latter became his established base with only occasional, if regular, rural visits, the structure of his household inevitably changed. London households were more expensive to maintain for much of the goods and services, and especially food, which sustained them had to be purchased. The size of the lord's 'family' diminished because fewer servants were employed. The significance of the household steward correspondingly shrank. He was, indeed, during the succeeding centuries to decline in status and significance to that plebeian if imposing majordomo, the Victorian

[14] John Beckett, 'Estate Management in Eighteenth Century England: the Lowther–Spedding relationship in Cumberland', in J. Chartres and D. Hey, eds., *Land and Society* (Cambridge, 1990), 56, 57. I am indebted to Professor Beckett for his kindness in sending me a copy of this article. Professor Clay wrote his invaluable two-volume synthesis of English economic life during the period 1500–1700 without any reference to estate stewards significant enough to bring them to the attention of the index. This is in no sense a criticism. Works of synthesis cannot synthesise what has not been done as this writer discovered early in this project (see Preface above). C. G. A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500–1700*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1984).

[15] See entry in *DNB*.