A GENTRY COMMUNITY

Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century, c.1422–c.1485

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INTRODUCTION

The heated and often vitriolic debate, the 'Storm over the Gentry', which attempted to explain the origins of the English Civil War, produced much sound and fury.[1] Like any storm, it eventually abated, leaving in its wake, if not tattered reputations, certainly bruised egos and, no doubt, the belated recognition by some British historians that the age of chivalry is indeed dead. But it would be unfair to suggest that the sound and fury signified nothing beyond the obvious or that, after all, the debate had been little more than a storm in a tea-cup. On the positive side, the controversy soon revealed that theory had overrun the available evidence and that more research was required. A new generation of historians readily accepted the implied challenge, producing county and regional studies which shed light on, as opposed to generating heat about, the economic and political concerns of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gentry.[2]

Interest in the English gentry, however, has not been confined to historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. K. B. McFarlane, in his 1945 lecture on bastard feudalism, proposed that late medieval society would 'only yield its secrets to the investigator who can base his conclusions upon the study of hundreds of fragmentary biographies'.[3] A year earlier, McFarlane had

[1] R. H. Tawney, 'The rise of the gentry, 1558–1640', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 11, 1941, pp. 1–38; L. Stone, 'The anatomy of the Elizabethan aristocracy', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 18, 1948, pp. 1–53; H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'The Elizabethan aristocracy: an anatomy anatomized', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., 3, 1951, pp. 279–98; L. Stone, 'The English aristocracy – a restatement', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., 4, 1952, pp. 302–21; H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The Gentry 1540–1640*, Economic History Review Supplement 1, London, 1953; R. H. Tawney, 'The rise of the gentry: a postscript', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., 7, 1954, pp. 91–7. See, too, J. H. Hexter, 'Storm over the gentry', *Encounter*, 10, 5, 1958, pp. 22–34. A fuller version of the same article and a more complete bibliography appear in his *Reappraisals in History*, London, 1961, pp. 117–52.
[2] See R. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution*, London, 1977, pp. 113–25, 173–6, for an extensive bibliography.
[3] K. B. McFarlane, 'Bastard feudalism', *B.I.H.R.*, 20, 1943–5, p. 173.

attempted to counteract notions of the knights of the shire in parliament as the political pawns of the lords. 'If there is any tendency to underrate the capacity of these early M.P.s', he wrote, 'it can be corrected by a study of their lives ... As we make ourselves familiar with the lives and achievements of the country gentry, and especially of those who sat in the commons, the main outlines of local and central politics may be expected to emerge.'[4] McFarlane was asking for nothing less than the application of Sir Lewis Namier's method to studies of the fifteenth-century gentry.

'Namierization' of the fifteenth-century gentry had, in fact, already begun some years earlier, in 1937, when J. S. Roskell published his work on the knights of the shire in the palatinate of Lancaster.[5] Nevertheless, it was about thirty years before students answered McFarlane's specific call. Over the past ten to fifteen years, the 'slow and tedious work'[6] of providing biographies of the late medieval gentry has steadily progressed.[7] Most of these studies have concentrated on the gentry as economic and political entities but rarely, if ever, do we see them as fully rounded human beings. This failure cannot be attributed to any lack of sensitivity on the part of historians or to their refusal to follow the poet's injunction to 'listen to the voice'. The fact of the matter is that apart from a mere handful of families, the Pastons,

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[4] K. B. McFarlane, 'Parliament and "bastard feudalism"', first published *T.R.H.S.*, 4th ser., 26, 1944, pp. 53–79. Reprinted in K. B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. G. L. Harriss, London, 1981, pp. 12, 20–1.

[5] J. S. Roskell, *The Knights of the Shire for the County Palatine of Lancaster (1377–1460)*, Manchester, 1937, pp. 29–201.

[6] G. L. Harriss's introduction to McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century*, p. xxvii.

[7] G. G. Astill, 'The medieval gentry: a study in Leicestershire society, 1350–1399', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977; M. J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*, Cambridge, 1983; C. Carpenter, 'Political society in Warwickshire c. 1401–72', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1976; I. D. Rowney, 'The Staffordshire political community 1440–1500', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Keele, 1981; N. Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*, Oxford, 1981; S. M. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century*, Chesterfield, 1983. Shorter works include: P. W. Fleming, 'Charity, faith, and the gentry of Kent 1422–1529', in *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History*, ed. A. J. Pollard, Gloucester, 1984; A. J. Pollard, 'The Richmondshire community of gentry during the Wars of the Roses', in *Patronage Pedigree and Power in Later Medieval England*, ed. C. Ross, Gloucester, 1979; M. G. A. Vale, *Piety, Charity and Literacy among the Yorkshire Gentry, 1370–1480*, Borthwick Papers no. 50, York, 1976. More extensive biographies appear in C. Richmond, *John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman*, Cambridge, 1981; *Common Lawyers*.

the Plumptons, the Stonors and the Celys, the gentry have been silent about themselves and their concerns; there have been too few voices to hear.

Although historians have recognized the constraints imposed by the nature of the evidence and its scarcity, there has been recent concern that our view of the gentry is becoming too deterministic, too mechanistic.[8] We are in danger, it seems, of reducing the gentry's rôle to that of automatons whose reactions have been predetermined by economic, political or social forces outside their own control. The present study, therefore, is not merely an attempt to add to the pool of 'fragmentary biographies' called for by McFarlane but to do so in a way which will take these justifiable concerns into account. Naturally, the gentry's economic, political and social activities must remain central to any enquiry but our major concern has been to minimize the dragooning influence of predeterminism and to accentuate the essentially humanizing element of free will.[9]

While the late medieval gentry continue to warrant historians' attention, the specifically Leicestershire gentry are worthy of scrutiny. During the fifteenth century, the county witnessed and occasionally played host to events of national importance. Historians have noted that at times of political crisis Henry VI invariably forsook his capital and retreated, or intended to retreat, to what he increasingly regarded as the safety of the Midlands.[10] In fact it is a barometer of the troubled state of the realm that during the years 1456–61 the court's establishment at Kenilworth, Coventry and Leicester had become a semi-permanent arrangement.[11]

The reasons for these withdrawals to the Midlands are, of course, not difficult to fathom. The area was well placed to provide access to any corner of the kingdom, a consideration which was important not only for dealing with trouble but also for increasing the number of available options if further flight from danger were necessary. Also, contact with the south, and particularly London, could be maintained without jeopardizing

[8] C. Richmond, 'After McFarlane', *History*, 68, 1983, pp. 57–8.
[9] See Louis MacNeice's, 'Prayer before birth' which, in very general terms, anticipates Richmond's concerns.
[10] B. Wolffe, *Henry VI*, London, 1981, pp. 230, 252, 290–1; R. A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, London, 1981, pp. 253, 740–1, 777–8; see, for example, *An English Chronicle*, pp. 71, 198.
[11] Wolffe, *Henry VI*, pp. 302–5.

access to the important military recruiting grounds of Cheshire and Lancashire whose archers had provided such invaluable service as royal body-guards to Henry's predecessors.[12]

Just as important as these strategic reasons was the fact that within the counties of Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Northamptonshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire were centred those lands which formed the bulk of the honors of Tutbury and Leicester and the castle of Kenilworth, all appurtenances of the king's personal holding, the duchy of Lancaster.[13] Admittedly, the honors and castle in question had formed part of the queen's dower since 1445,[14] but her tenure seemed to have no adverse effect on the region's loyalty to the king. It is possible that Margaret's interest in, and concern for, her tenants even served to enhance that loyalty.[15] Strategic reasons apart, Henry's recourse to the Midlands in times of crisis indicates that the region's support for his cause was expected and suggests, too, that those expectations were largely fulfilled. The area bounded by Kenilworth, Coventry and Leicester, at least till 1461, was the king's territory. Furthermore, there is some indication that its Lancastrian sympathies could still manifest themselves as late as 1464 when a strong commission of oyer and terminer, headed by the earls of Warwick, Arundel and Worcester, was despatched to the county to quell disturbances there.[16]

Moving to the troubled year of 1471, we find a remarkable swing in the region's loyalties, but particularly in those of Leicestershire. It may be recalled that Edward IV arrived in Yorkshire from Flanders in March 1471 and here he doubtless supposed that his substantial estates in the county would provide him with a personal following. However, Hull refused him entry altogether; the city of York's welcome was less than enthusiastic and, even at Wakefield, near Edward's own Yorkshire estates, he

[12] J. F. Willard *et al.*, eds., *The English Government at Work 1327–1336*, 3 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1940, I, p. 341; John Capgrave, *The Chronicle of England*, ed. F. C. Hingeston, Rerum Britannicorum Medii Aevi Scriptores, Rolls Series, I, London, 1858, p. 264; J. L. Gillespie, 'Richard II's Cheshire archers', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 125, 1974, p. 11.

[13] Somerville, I, pp. 2–3, 7, 8.

[14] A. R. Myers, 'The household of Queen Margaret of Anjou, 1452–3', *B.J.R.L.*, 40, 1957–8, p. 82.

[15] *Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou*, ed. C. Monro, Camden o.s. 86, London, 1863, Johnson repr., London, 1968, pp. 98–9, 126–7, 146–7, 150–1, 154.

[16] *C.P.R.*, 1461–7, p. 303; C. Ross, *Edward IV*, London, 1974, p. 57.

gathered fewer supporters than he would have wished.[17] Surprisingly, it was not until Edward's march brought him to Leicester that there 'came to the Kynge ryght-a-fayre felawshipe of folks to the nombar of iij^m men, well habyled for the wers'.[18] The anonymous chronicler goes on to suggest that these followers were not attracted to Leicester from Yorkist territories in Wales or the Welsh Marches but were well-wishers of the chamberlain of Edward's household, the lord Hastings, and may have come from within Leicestershire itself.[19]

Leicestershire also played host to the final struggle between the houses of Lancaster and York, the battle of Bosworth being fought a few miles west of the county borough. Leicester was, indeed, the last sizeable English town to say farewell to Richard III on Sunday 21 August 1485 and the first to welcome the victorious Henry VII the following day.[20] However, to suggest that the worthies of the county played any significant part in this particular fray would be to strain the evidence, for Leicestershire nobility and gentry do not feature largely in the lists of casualties provided by Polydore Vergil and the Croyland continuator, and the latter's assertion that on Richard's arrival in Leicester, 'here was found a number of warriors ready to fight on the king's side',[21] is appropriately ambiguous. Nevertheless, it is fair to conclude that Leicestershire both witnessed and may have participated in some of the momentous events of the fifteenth century which facts make it an area worthy of study.

But our catalogue of momentous events merely tells us of the county's rôle in the calculations of kings, their fears and ambitions. It tells us nothing of the attitudes, fears and ambitions of the local aristocracy, the nobility and gentry, and especially the gentry who would have constituted the bulk of the politically active and aware. Indeed, it only raises a series of important questions. Who were the gentry and what were their concerns? How did they cope with the problems attendant on teetering and toppling crowns? If their horizons were hardly confined to cabbages, did they resent the intrusion into their community of the

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[17] *Historie of the Arrivall of Edward IV in England and the Finall Recouerye of his Kingdomes from Henry VI AD 1471*, ed. John Bruce, Camden o.s. 1, London, 1838, pp. 4, 5, 7.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 8.   [19] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[20] This and what follows is based on accounts of the battle found in *Croyland*, pp. 500–5, and *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History, Comprising the Reigns of Henry VI, Edward IV and Richard III*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis, Camden o.s. 29, London, 1844, pp. 216–17.   [21] *Croyland*, p. 502.

affairs of kings? Or did they relish the opportunity to play a part on the national stage? Answers to such questions can be forthcoming only by providing a detailed study of the local aristocratic community and the relationships formed not only amongst its members but also between them and the central government, either directly or through noble intermediaries. As a further response to McFarlane's challenge, it is these questions which the current study attempts to address.