The Origins of the English Gentry

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1. The formation of the English gentry

In his first foray into the question as to whether there had ever been a peasant society in England Alan Macfarlane distinguished between on the one hand the common-sense or dictionary definition of peasant ('countryman, rustic, worker on the land') and on the other the technical meaning of the term.¹ In order to facilitate comparative study and in particular to answer the question whether England was in fact a peasant society, Macfarlane attempted to construct an 'ideal-type' model in the Weberian sense. In his defence of his methodology he repeats Weber's advice: 'Hundreds of words in the historian's vocabulary are ambiguous constructs created to meet the unconsciously felt need for adequate expression and the meaning of which is only concretely felt but not clearly thought-out.' And again, 'If the historian...rejects an attempt to construct such ideal types as a "theoretical construction", i.e. as useless or dispensable for his concrete heuristic purposes, the inevitable consequence is either that he consciously or unconsciously uses other similar concepts, without formulating them verbally and elaborating them logically or that he remains stuck in the realm of the vaguely "felt".² Despite such warnings, historians are often suspicious of model-building, suspecting that it may fail to locate the dynamics of a specific society and that it may cause the observer to distort his analysis in order to remain within his given framework. Nevertheless there are great gains to be had from close definition, as long as any definition or model is reformulated, even abandoned, if it fails substantially against empirical research. Not only does historical study gain in rigour, and debate become more meaningful and comprehensible, but definition also allows for more effective comparative study. The study of peasantries is a case in point.

There could hardly be a greater contrast with how the question of the 'gentry' has been handled. Indeed, the plain fact is that the study of the gentry has been

¹ Alan Macfarlane, *The Culture of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1987), p. 3; reprinted from David Green et al., *Social Organisation and Settlement*, BAR International Series (Supplementary) 47 (ii), (Oxford, 1978).

² The Culture of Capitalism, Postscript, p. 207.

conducted very largely within the realms of dictionary or common-sense study. As G.E. Mingay has written:

despite the lack of an agreed definition, 'the gentry' remains an indispensable term; it is one of those vastly convenient portmanteau expressions which historians are obliged to employ in formulating the broad generalisations that make up the main strands of the historical fabric. It is the more indispensable since it was so widely used by statesmen and writers of the past. 'The gentry' was a convenient symbol for them, too, and was evidently meaningful to their audiences.

But, as he goes on to say, in its broad usage 'the gentry' is a term more vague than helpful.³ For no period is this truer than for the later middle ages.

One major reason for the continuance of common-sense usage of 'gentry' is undoubtedly its persistence as a living social term. It came to be used, of course, to cover the lower strata of landed society once nobility became restricted to the peerage; and, in this sense, its usage continues to the present day. However, this happened only slowly. Later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentators preferred to write of the peerage as the nobilitas major and the knights, esquires and gentlemen (to be joined after 1611 by the baronets) as the nobilitas minor. In common parlance, however, 'gentry', once synonymous with nobility, came to be used of the lesser nobility. Once interchangeable, these terms became complementary: 'nobility' and 'gentry'.⁴ As J.V. Becket has written, 'The dissolution of the seamless noble robe, and its replacement by a distinctive nobility...took place gradually, until the early nineteenth-century writers were able to emphasize the loss of position.⁵ The nobility of the English gentry then became a matter of some debate. It is this narrow meaning of gentry which has been taken over into English historiography. Perhaps we should see this as one more result of the elite's success in maintaining a stable social and political system, to which the Stones have recently drawn our attention.⁶

Historians have by no means confined their use of the term gentry to England or to the age when it was a living social term. On the contrary, it has been readily exported. We read of American, Russian and Chinese gentry; we read of medieval gentry, of Anglo-Saxon gentry, and even of the gentry of the ancient world. It is used transhistorically and transculturally on the assumption that it will be readily understood. But is this not an illusion? As far as later medieval England is concerned, to look no further, it was not in fact a living social term, at least not in any way which resembles modern usage. The word gentry stems

³ G.E. Mingay, *The Gentry: The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class* (London, 1976), p. 1.

⁴ See, in particular, M.J. Sayer, English Nobility: The Gentry, the Heralds and the Continental Context (Norwich, 1979), pp. 3–5, and J.C. Becket, The Aristocracy in England 1660–1914 (Oxford, 1986), pp. 18–20.

⁵ Becket, Aristocracy in England, p. 19.

⁶ Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, An Open Elite? England 1540–1880 (Oxford, 1984), pp. 303–6.

from 'gentrice' and its commonest usage was to indicate gentle birth and high rank or to describe the qualities shared by the gentle. For example:⁷

He wole han pris of his gentrye for he was boren of a gentil hous (Chaucer, *Wife of Bath's Tale*)

For thy genterye, thus cowardly let me nat dye

(Sir Beves of Hamtoun)

And the gentry of wymmen thare es to hafe smal fete

(Travels of Sir John Mandeville)

It was occasionally used, by extension, as a synonym for the nobility but this seems to have been comparatively rare, at least before the sixteenth century.⁸

One might have expected, therefore, that medievalists would have given some thought to definition, not least because questions of origin and questions of definition are intimately related. Their failure to do so stems partly from the factors already mentioned. But there may also be an historiographical explanation. The three great formative influences upon how medieval society has been perceived in England in recent times have been McFarlane, Postan and Hilton. Now all three, in their different ways, have advocated a broad approach to the subject and all of them have inspired studies of the gentry; but for none of the three was the gentry the central interest and the lack of rigour in matters of definition may well stem partly from this plain fact. There are no Ford lectures devoted to the origins of the gentry. Meanwhile, there has been much conceptual leaning upon early modern studies, where the problem of definition appears to be somewhat less acute.

The common-sense approach implies that the meaning of gentry is obvious. In practice, however, this is not the case, as reading the introductory chapters to studies of the medieval gentry of specific counties at specific points in time immediately makes clear. Most often scholars begin with the disarmingly simple question: Who were the gentry? One basic approach is simply to equate gentry with gentility; the gentry are all those who are accepted as, or who lay claim to being, gentle. Often this involves taking legislation or instances of recognition of the gentility of status groups at face value. After the sumptuary legislation of 1363 we can speak confidently of esquires as well as knights as gentle. The evolution of the esquire is a complex phenomenon which is as yet imperfectly understood. However, there can be little doubt that many of those so distinguished had been regarded as gentle for some time. Moreover, the same legislative act makes it clear that gentility extended beyond the esquires for it speaks of 'esquires and all manner of gentle men below the estate of knight'. And, when we look closely at thirteenth-century evidence, we become aware that gentility was by no means confined to the knights. Texts relating to household

⁷ OED, 1st edn, vol. VI (1901), pp. 121–2; 2nd edn, vol. VI (1989), p. 455.

⁸ The author of *Cleanness*, for example, refers to the *gentryse* of the Jews and of Jerusalem – *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. H. Kurath *et al.* (Ann Arbor, 1954–), vol. IV (1963), pp. 77–8.

or retinue make this clear enough. The *Rules* of Bishop Robert Grosseteste of 1240–2, for example, spoke not only of knights but also of gentle men (*gentis hommes*) who wore livery. Gentility is often associated with service, and most particularly with household service. But it also existed in society at large. In a famous instance in the Somerset county court in 1204, Richard Revel informed the sheriff that he and his male kin were natives and gentle men (*naturales homines et gentiles*) within their locality (*patria*).⁹ The sheriff replied that so, too, was he within his. It seems certain that gentility was widely felt and articulated within society long before legislation was in place to tell us so. The notorious Statute of Additions of 1413, by which the mere gentleman appears to come of age, is equally problematic. This act offers a clear line of demarcation between gentleman and yeoman. As an idea it was to prove enduring. As Shakespeare has Somerset say to Richard Plantagenet in *Henry VI, Part One*:

Was not thy father, Richard Earl of Cambridge, For treason executed in our late king's days? And by his treason stand'st thou not attainted, Corrupted, & exempt from ancient gentry? His trespass yet lives guilty in thy blood; And till thou be restor'd thou art a yeoman.

In reality, however, the line remained blurred, and in the law courts, which the act was basically designed to cover, men could be variously described as gentlemen or yeomen.¹⁰ Moreover, the full social acceptance of the mere gentleman took some time yet to achieve, as the thorough study of esquires and gentlemen of fifteenth-century Warwickshire by Christine Carpenter makes clear.¹¹

The problem of delineating the gentry, moreover, is not a problem manifested only at the lower end of the social scale. Where is the line between gentry and higher nobility? Admittedly, we appear to be on relatively safe ground once we have a stable peerage from which to differentiate the gentry. However, the restricted peerage crystallised relatively slowly. Personal summons to parliament was a flexible instrument in the time of Edward I, and some flexibility remained

¹¹ Christine Carpenter, Lordship and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499 (Cambridge, 1992), ch. 3: 'Who Were the Gentry?'

For a wide-ranging discussion of gentility in the fifteenth century, see D.A.L. Morgan, 'The Individual Style of the English Gentleman', in Michael Jones (ed.), *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe* (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 15–35.

⁹ Curia Regis Rolls, vol. III, p. 129; for a recent discussion of this case and its implications see my Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: A Study in English Society c.1180–c.1280 (Cambridge, 1991), p. 10.

¹⁰ See, for example, Susan M. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century* (Chester-field, 1983), p. 6, and Eric Acheson, *A Gentry Community: Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century*, c.1422-c.1485 (Cambridge, 1992), p. 34. Acheson writes: "gentleman" was adopted haltingly and with some confusion, as the omission of status and the procession of *aliases* in the Pardon Rolls reveal".

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throughout the greater part of the fourteenth century.¹² For earlier periods there is even more difficulty. If we are determined to stand on contemporary terminology, we have to negotiate the fluctuating and unclear concept of the baronage.¹³ Some thirteenth-century barons were certainly rather insignificant figures, to mention only the least of the problems.

A second approach is to move from gentility to land. The gentry are the lesser landowners, or 'the lesser landowners with a claim to gentility'. Not only does the problem of demarcation with the higher nobility appear again – even in the fifteenth century there were some knights, like Sir John Fastolf, who were richer than some of the peers 14 – but at the lower end severe difficulties emerge. Once again, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century legislation appears to come to our aid in offering various property qualifications for holding local office – most often $\pounds 20$ – but in practice this is far from satisfactory.¹⁵ It is quite restrictive, as no doubt it was intended to be. What, then, should be the cut-off point? One view, based on the income tax of 1436, defines the gentry 'very loosely' as 'all lay, non-baronial landowners with an income of £5 per annum or more from freehold property'.¹⁶ There are advantages in adopting an all-inclusive approach; but there are also some problems. How inclusive should one be? Sources which give income levels are often unreliable, while the source of income may be as important in contemporary perceptions of status as its level. Is a rural estate the true prerequisite for gentry status? Not only do we come up against the problem of the upwardly mobile professionals, whose source of income is various, but there is also the problem of the towns. In a famous essay Rosemary Horrox argued eloquently for the existence of an urban gentry in fifteenth-century England and against the simple equation of land equals gentility. On the contrary, she points to a strong interconnection of urban and rural gentry at this time. Moreover, she suggests that although the terminology to describe the situation may have been lacking, these basic facts had long existed.¹⁷

- ¹³ See, for example, David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain 1000–1300* (London and New York, 1992), pp. 106–19.
- ¹⁴ See T.B. Pugh, 'The Magnates, Knights and Gentry', in S.B. Chrimes, C.D. Ross and R.A. Griffiths (eds.), *Fifteenth-Century England* (Manchester, 1972), pp. 99–100.
- ¹⁵ J.M.W. Bean employs the £20 unit of assessment in the income tax of 1412 as a means of structural analysis, whilst, however, stressing its limitations (J.M.W. Bean, 'Landlords', in E. Miller (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, III: 1348–1500 (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 526–42.
 ¹⁶ See S.J. Payling, *Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Notting-*
- ¹⁰ See S.J. Payling, Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire (Oxford, 1991), p. 3.
- ¹⁷ Rosemary Horrox, 'The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century', in J.A.F. Thomson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988), pp. 22–44. See also R.L. Storey, 'Gentlemen Bureaucrats', in C.H. Clough (ed.), *Profession, Vocation and Culture in Later Medieval England* (Liverpool, 1982), pp. 90–114.

¹² For a recent discussion of the issues see C. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Later Middle Ages* (London and New York, 1987), ch. 2.

Over and above all of this we have the association of gentry with officeholding under the crown. But, naturally, the desire and capacity of men to hold office were extremely variable and some offices were more prestigious than others. Office-holding, too, has to be rejected as a sole criterion for gentry status.¹⁸ In order to overcome these problems, scholars examining particular localities have tended to go for an amalgam of factors. Susan Wright, for example, in her study of the gentry of fifteenth-century Derbyshire, includes 'all who in the period 1430–1509 provided a knight or were distrained, served as knight of the shire, sheriff, justice of the peace, commissioner of array, escheator or tax collector, together with those who were recorded in inquisitions post mortem or in five tax returns from 1412 to 1524–7 as having an income of £5 or over or as a tenant-in-chief'.¹⁹

In the matter of definition, medievalists have received no clear lead from their early modern counterparts. Some have looked for a property qualification (£10 of freehold land), but most have acknowledged the obvious pitfalls in this.²⁰ There has been much reliance on the tripartite structure of knight, esquire, gentleman, which by the sixteenth century was certainly more entrenched. Some scholars have emphasised the role of heraldry: 'The official badge of gentility was the coat of arms and for the purposes of this study the term "gentry" has been taken to cover all families beneath the peerage which had a specific right to bear such arms.'²¹ Of course, the heraldic visitations operated under the crown, from 1530 to 1688, as a means of regulating the gentry, and the kings of arms were empowered, under their commissions, to deface or remove bogus arms. In practice, however, possession of arms cannot be used quite so easily in this way. Heraldic visitations were intermittent, and not all gentry were armigerous.²² Coats of arms may have expressed gentle status, but they did not define it. Sir Thomas Smith makes it clear in *De Republica Anglorum* (1583) that the reputation of being a gentleman came first, with the confirmation by a king of arms following, if necessary, thereafter. Moreover, such reputation was achieved by various means, including prowess at the law or study in a university. Or, as the same author puts it most famously, 'who can live idly and without manual labour and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman ... shall be taken for a gentleman'.²³ The same view was expressed by William

¹⁸ And see below note 41.

¹⁹ Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry*, p. 4. A similar analysis opens Eric Acheson's study of the Leicestershire gentry in the fifteenth century: 'the family names gleaned from the 1428 and the 1436 subsidies, along with those who accepted the burdens of local government, provide us with our starting point of 249 families of either gentry or potential gentry status' (Acheson, *A Gentry Community*, p. 38).

²⁰ For a summary of views on this see Acheson, A Gentry Community, pp. 29–30.

²¹ J.T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War* (London, 1969), pp. 2–3.

²² For criticism of this approach see Becket, *Aristocracy in England*, pp. 34–5, and works cited there.

²³ Sir Thomas Smith, De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England, ed. L. Alston (Cambridge, 1906), pp. 39–40. See also Sayer, English Nobility, pp. 3–7.

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Harrison.²⁴ Others spoke of the gentry as being those who were exempt from labour. In practice, however, the line between gentleman and veoman remained blurred, and contemporaries confessed to difficulties in distinguishing between them.²⁵ It is possible, therefore, for a historian to speak of families who were 'occasional gentry', acting only as gentry in intermittent contacts with the wider world.²⁶ Early modernists have difficulty, too, with professionals and with urban residents with claims to gentility.²⁷ In reality, neither heraldry nor the tripartite schema helps the historian very much towards a definition. If the meaning of gentry is obvious, it is certainly not obvious from our sources.

Historians have subdivided the early modern gentry in other ways, differentiating county elite from parish gentry for example, or distinguishing between upper, middling and inferior gentry.²⁸ Later medievalists have tended to follow suit. Wright, for example, sees an enormous gulf - in economic, political and social terms - between the knights and esquires on the one hand, the 'gentry proper' as she calls them, and the ephemeral and ambiguous category of gentlemen on the other.²⁹ Acheson, too, speaks of the 'economic chasm' separating esquires from gentlemen.³⁰ Recently, Simon Payling has added a further dimension. He concentrates upon those he calls the 'greater gentry', the dozen or so wealthy families which, as he shows, dominated in fifteenthcentury Nottinghamshire.³¹ These are similar, both in numbers and in activities, to the 'county governors' whom Peter Clark sees operating in sixteenth-century Kent.³² These approaches are perfectly valid in terms of analysis, of course, and they have paid great dividends. But what has to be stressed is that they are driven by external observation and not upon contemporary perception. And what is true of the parts is true of the whole. The plain truth is that 'gentry' as employed by historians is a construct.

In this respect it may be compared with 'aristocracy', which came to be widely used in England, it has been argued, precisely because of the confusion over the concept of nobility.³³ It is often used by historians as though it were synonymous with nobility, in the wider sense of the term. However, the terms are not strictly interchangeable as aristocracy may contain stronger connotations

²⁴ See Mingay, *The Gentry*, p. 2 and Acheson, *A Gentry Community*, p. 35.

²⁵ David Cressy, 'Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England', *Literature and* History 3 (1976), pp. 29-44.

²⁶ P. Clark, English Provincial Society from the Reformation to the Revolution: Religion, Politics and Society in Kent, 1500-1640 (Hassocks, 1977), p. 126.

²⁷ See Cressy, 'Describing the Social Order', for example, for debate around these issues. For the content of gentility in this period see, in particular, J.P. Cooper, 'Ideas of Gentility in Early Modern England', in G.E. Aylmer and J.S. Morrill (eds.), Land, Men and Beliefs: Studies in Early Modern History (London, 1983), pp. 43-77.

²⁸ See, for example, Lawrence Stone, 'Social Mobility in England', Past and Present 33 (1966), p. 18; Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry*, p. 29. ²⁹ Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry*, p. 6.

³⁰ Acheson, *A Gentry Community*, p. 43.

³¹ Payling, Political Society in Lancastrian England, ch. 1, and passim.

³² Clark, English Provincial Society, part 2. ³³ Becket, Aristocracy in England, pp. 20-2.

of leadership and authority, betraying its classical origins when it referred to a system of government.³⁴ There are no absolutes in the use of such terms.

The 'gentry', then, is a construct. The way it is used, however, leaves us open to Weber's strictures about the 'vaguely felt'. Arguably, this does have its virtues. Despite the lack of definition, historians of the English gentry have a remarkably consistent view about the parameters of their studies. A recent book on the society of Angevin Yorkshire, by Hugh M. Thomas, shows this clearly.³⁵ The author asserts that his book is about the gentry, and in the same mould as studies in later periods. This is shown not by conceptualisation, however, but by content. We find discussions of office-holding, of collective action, of relations with the crown and higher nobility, of crime, of manipulation of the law and arbitration, as well as of estates and improving landlords, of family, household and inheritance, and of religious sentiment. In other words, the common-sense approach to the study of the gentry is based upon a series of shared assumptions. It also allows historians to borrow fairly freely from one another in conveying a sense of, or a feel for, the society under scrutiny. When we look more closely, Thomas's recognition of gentry seems to be founded on his observation of increasing horizontal ties and of a sense of community among lesser landowners. Similarly, John Blair invokes 'the English country gentry' to describe the late Anglo-Saxon thegnage as a means of comprehending the evolution of the manor and the rise of the local parish church.³⁶

But on the other hand, how can we be sure we are comparing like with like? Admittedly, there are many continuities; but, equally, there is hardly an area of life in which the fifteenth-century world, for example, was not radically different in some respects from that of the eleventh or twelfth. There is another reason why, at the present time, medievalists should concern themselves with the question of definition. Alongside the recent burgeoning of studies in the medieval gentry, what we might call the second wave, there are the beginnings of a discernible tendency to take a more evolutionary approach.³⁷ This is a positive development, although there are dangers. One is that the history of the gentry may be conceived as wholly linear, a question even of progress. In seeking understanding across time we need to look for breaks as well as continuities. The history of knighthood, for example, ought not to be seen as a straightforward and gradual shift from military and chivalric values to civilian duty.³⁸

³⁴ See Jonathan Powys, Aristocracy (Oxford, 1984), esp. ch. 1.

³⁵ Hugh M. Thomas, Vassals, Heiresses, Crusaders and Thugs: The Gentry of Angevin Yorkshire, 1154-1216 (Philadelphia, 1993).

³⁶ John Blair, Early Medieval Surrey: Landholding, Church and Settlement before 1300 (Stroud, 1991), pp. 160-1: 'the appearance of a broad, locally-based class of minor aristocracy: the proliferation between 900 and 1066 of the English country gentry'. ³⁷ See, for example, Colin Richmond, 'The Rise of the English Gentry 1150–1350', *The Historian*

^{26 (1990),} pp. 14-18, and also Carpenter, Lordship and Polity, pp. 39-49.

³⁸ As implied in Carpenter, Lordship and Polity, pp. 55-65. The comparative strength of fifteenthcentury studies in this area carries the danger of contrasting a fifteenth-century present with a relatively undifferentiated pre-fifteenth-century past.

Another is that we may be tempted to gloss over major differences in favour of superficial similarity, side-stepping serious shifts. More rigorous definition of the gentry is, therefore, long overdue.

Perhaps too much attention has been given to the problem of delineation of the gentry. Should we not ask, rather, what distinguishes a gentry as a social formation? What are its essential characteristics? When can we speak of the existence of a gentry, and when can we not?

Some characteristics are so obvious as to require little comment. Land was an important constituent. Members of the gentry are most often local seigneurs or landowners. However, as we have observed of both later medieval and early modern society, gentility was experienced more widely than this. Which observation brings us to the second characteristic. Gentry share with greater lords a nobility or gentility which is designed to express an essential social difference between them and the rest of the population. In other words, a fairly well-developed sense of social difference must exist; or, to put it another way, the gentry is predicated upon the existence of a nobility. Whether we think in terms of nobility or aristocracy does not seriously affect the issue.³⁹ Neither does the less developed sense of noble privilege in England compared to continental nobilities.⁴⁰ Nor, indeed, the peculiar separation of nobility and gentry which was to develop in England. The existence, and the persistence, of gentility is sufficient. But, if preferred, we can use magnates or greater aristocracy in place of higher nobility.

The remaining characteristics of the gentry, it seems to me, can be encapsulated in a single word – territoriality. Immanent rather than declared in most studies in the subject, territoriality is crucial to the understanding of the gentry as a social formation. All landownership is, in the most basic sense, territorial; but what distinguishes the territoriality of the gentry is its collective nature. This territoriality has four essential components: collective identity, status gradation, local public office and authority over the populace.

Collective identity can be expressed in various ways. There is a natural tendency for landowners and other locally significant men to develop ties of association with others of similar station, notwithstanding any vertical relationship they may have with territorial magnates or with a distant authority. However,

³⁹ European scholars have been much exercised as to when it becomes legitimate to talk in terms of a nobility and as to whether or not it is better to envisage a vaguer, less clearly defined aristocracy giving way to a more sharply perceived and increasingly juridically defined nobility. The best introduction to these problems is probably still L. Génicot, 'Recent Research on the Medieval Nobility', in T. Reuter (ed. and trans.), *The Medieval Nobility: Studies on the Ruling Class of France and Germany from the Sixth to the Twelfth Century* (Amsterdam, 1979), pp. 17–35. Because of the difficulties in perception stemming from the use of nobility in the middle ages, David Crouch has recently argued for the adoption of aristocracy in its place: *Image of Aristocracy*, pp. 2–9.

⁴⁰ On this point see, in particular, M.L. Bush, Noble Privilege (Manchester, 1983), and his précis of the English situation in *The English Aristocracy: A Comparative Synthesis* (Manchester, 1984), ch. 2.

there is a qualitative difference between associations of this kind and the type of group identity which requires clear articulation of shared interests and concerns. Such interests can only be expressed through formal assemblies, whether of a local or a national kind. This is undoubtedly why historians have been so concerned about the existence or not of county communities, and why there has been so much interest in factors working for and against cohesion within local societies. Despite disagreements over the level of coherence of county societies, there can be no doubt that a capacity for collective self-expression is a vital ingredient of the gentry.

The significance of status gradations is that they express status in terms of horizontal bands, rather than in terms of service or vertical association. They result, therefore, from a type of abstract thinking which equates individuals in status terms across a given area. The major determinant of these perceived differences in grade tends to be wealth. True, other derivations of status may co-exist with the territorial one, but they are accommodated within its dominant framework.

The holding of local public office has to be understood in relation to the needs of the state or central authority. All such authority has to function by means of agents and agencies. In many cases, it works through salaried officials. In other cases, a bureaucratic solution is not feasible. It requires a high level of resource and a high degree of acceptance, especially given that revenue may have to be drawn from society in order to finance it. The alternative is to work through local society itself. This may be done, to some extent, via ties of dependency, such as vassalage. But, for the most part, it means drawing on the services of members of the local elite. From the point of view of the latter, the existence of an effective, but relatively distant, public authority is to be welcomed, as long as it remains within bounds. Between centre and locality, therefore, there is a mutual acceptance which is real but qualified. The centre may wish to define status in relation to government service; in some societies it succeeds in doing this. In others, however, it is forced to draw upon the services of men whose status and whose stake in society are anterior to the holding of office. This is the case with the gentry. Of course, there is status in unsalaried, public office; men would hardly seek it otherwise. But, to a great extent, the status acquired through office is incremental.41

And, finally, there is the matter of authority over the population as a whole. Naturally, the exercise of justice is the key to this. There can be no doubt that collective responsibility for the administration of justice is an important facet of the gentry. Justices of the peace figure prominently in all studies of the English gentry from the fourteenth century on. Their numbers and their duties

⁴¹ It is important not to be beguiled, in this respect, by the aspirations of the crown. For an exaggerated sense of service to the crown in defining status within the emerging gentry see Carpenter, *Lordship and Polity*, ch. 3.ii.

increased significantly under the Tudors.⁴² None the less, they were already a prominent feature of English society during the later medieval period. It is easy to see why they should figure so prominently in gentry studies. They became the cornerstone of English local government. Their authority extended beyond the individual, private interests of the local seigneurial courts, and eventually it superseded them. Most significantly, it was authority over a defined area, whether one is talking of the county as a whole through quarter sessions or locally over the parishes where as individuals they resided. Athough they were not formally elected by them, the justices represented the collective social power of the members of the gentry.

I would suggest, then, that the defining characteristics of the gentry as a social formation are as follows:

- 1 A gentry is a type of lesser nobility.
- 2 Although based on land and landownership, it is able to encompass other types of property, including urban property, and to accommodate a steady influx of professionals.
- 3 It is a territorial elite. It transcends status derived from service or personal association, on the one hand, and the authority derived from mere landlord-ship, on the other. Given that levels of wealth vary, there is a natural tendency towards the development of social gradation.
- 4 It relates to a public authority which is both active and relatively distant; that is to say, a public authority which requires the services of a local elite but which is unable to support a paid bureaucracy in the localities.
- 5 It seeks to exercise collective social control over the populace on a territorial basis, reinforcing individual status and power.
- 6 It has a collective identity, and collective interests which necessitate the existence of some forum, or interlocking fora, for their articulation.

When, then, can we speak of the existence of a gentry and when can we not? The argument of this book is that the English gentry was formed in an accelerating process from the middle decades of the thirteenth century to the mid-fourteenth. By the middle decades of the fourteenth century a recognisable gentry was in existence.

I am conscious at the outset that my view on the origins of the gentry is in contention with two others: one that regards the gentry as already present in the late Anglo-Saxon state, and one that sees the gentry as the direct and

⁴² Among other studies, see M.L. Zell, 'Early Tudor JPs at Work', Archaeologia Cantiana 93 (1977), pp. 125–43; A. Hassell Smith, County and Court: Government and Politics in Norfolk, 1558–1603 (Oxford, 1974), part 2: 'Office-Holding: Its Significance in County Politics, 1572–1603'; Clark, English Provincial Society, esp. ch. 4: 'The Structure of Politics: The Growth of Stability'; Cliffe, The Yorkshire Gentry, ch. 11: 'The Government of the County'.

immediate product of the Angevin legal reforms. It seems to me, however, that a nobility, a sufficiently broad landowning class, a central authority (in practice, kingship) and public courts are all in the nature of preconditions. They were certainly present in tenth- to twelfth-century England, but they do not in themselves signal the presence of a gentry, except perhaps under the very broadest of definitions. A more traditional argument is that it was the Angevin polity, with its institutional growth, its substantially increased liaison between localities and central government, and the sharp increase in its deployment of local men - the famous 'self-government at the king's command' - which provided the seed-bed from which the gentry grew; or, as Jean Scammell has recently put it, Henry II was the 'midwife' of the English gentry.⁴³ However, whilst it is undeniable that Angevin England witnessed momentous legal and governmental changes, not least the birth of the English common law, and that these changes were of significance in terms of the genesis of the gentry, it is quite another matter to envisage the gentry arising directly out of them. Moreover, such a view tends to mask the continuities that undoubtedly existed between late Anglo-Saxon and Angevin England.

Chapter 2 deals explicitly with these matters and examines the deep roots of the gentry. It takes cognisance of the challenge from late Anglo-Saxon history and reflects on the current reassessment of the Angevin legal reforms, most particularly their genesis and historical significance. However, athough I argue against the two positions outlined above, my primary purpose in the chapter is not a negative but a positive one. It is to trace the development and maturation of a lesser nobility from late Anglo-Saxon times through to Angevin England – the lesser nobility upon which the evolution of the gentry is predicated.

Chapter 3 deals more fully with the Angevin legacy by examining the role of the lesser landowners as jurors and the like and as agents of the state during the reign of Henry III. That legacy, I argue, has been seriously misunderstood through the failure to distinguish between its different dimensions, principally between the ubiquitous public obligations of knights and free men on the one hand and the receipt of high-status commissions from the crown on the other. Such commissions were enjoyed by a much narrower body of knights and others who functioned as trusted agents of the state. This failure to distinguish between distinct phenomena has created in the minds of historians a monolithic and cohesive knightly class which did not exist in this period.

The resulting distortions will be seen when we come to discuss the political relations between landowners and the state in chapter 5. In the meantime, in chapter 4, I turn to a matter which is equally significant but in large measure

⁴³ 'The Formation of the English Social Structure: Freedom, Knights, and Gentry, 1066–1300', *Speculum* 68, no. 3 (1993), p. 618.

internal to the history of the nobility itself, the transformation of knighthood from the rather all-embracing Angevin variety to the more exclusive and fully chivalric knighthood that had triumphed in England by the middle decades of the thirteenth century. The result was a stronger and better-defined elite mentality. As is well known, this phenomenon was accompanied by a serious fall in the number of knights. It is a phenomenon which needs to be explained if we are to understand the origins of the gentry correctly. This necessarily involves reviewing the debate on the crisis of the knightly class. In 1975 I published an essay entitled 'Sir Geoffrey de Langley and the Crisis of the Knightly Class in Thirteenth-Century England'.⁴⁴ This essay was wrongly formulated in certain key respects, chiefly in its chronology and in its failure to distinguish clearly between two different hypotheses, viz. Hilton's crisis hypothesis and Postan's hypothesis of decline. In chapter 5 I conduct a thorough review of the debate and its ramifications. I conclude by stressing the importance of resource issues and by reaffirming that there is a connection between instances of seigneurial failure and the more widespread phenomenon of retreat from knighthood. Both are explicable within the broad social and economic climate of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, although not solely in terms of external factors acting upon the economy of lesser landowners as I had previously suggested. The discussion highlights some of the tensions which existed within landed society. The net result, however, was a more exclusive knightly class, even if the full consequences of this tended to be medium rather than short term.

Chapter 5 completes a triad of chapters that centre on the first half of the thirteenth century, by looking at the role of knights in contemporary politics. This role has tended to be distorted by historians. Many years ago R.F. Treharne wrote, famously, that the role played by the knights in the period of reform and rebellion, 1258–67, constituted a critical phase in the rise of a new class, 'a new class produced largely by the operation of the Angevin administrative machine'.⁴⁵ For him the knights were 'a small well-knit class of men, substantial in wealth, secure and authoritative in local position, expert in the art of local government, and possessing a sound knowledge of both the strength and the defects of the system which they worked'.⁴⁶ In reality, the idea that there was a wide and spontaneous involvement in a movement of reform by a cohesive knightly class schooled in collective responsibility by 'self-government at the

⁴⁴ Past and Present 68 (1975), pp. 3–37; reprinted in T.H. Aston (ed.), Landlords, Peasants and Politics in Medieval England (Cambridge, 1987).

⁴⁵ R.F. Treharne, 'The Knights in the Period of Reform and Rebellion, 1258–67: A Critical Phase in the Rise of a New Social Class', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 21 (1946–8), pp. 1–12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

king's command' is impossible to sustain. Given that knightly society was less cohesive and knightly involvement in the judicial and administrative structures of post-Angevin England more variegated than portrayed by Treharne, it is not surprising that things did not quite happen in that way. In chapter 5 I examine the political relationship between lesser landowners and the state, by means of a close study of the turbulent years 1225-7 before turning to the events of 1258-67. Much centres on the nature and functions of the county court. It is true enough that counties communicated collectively from time to time with the central government, receiving charters and addressing petitions.⁴⁷ Two features are particularly striking, however, in the relationship between the crown and the counties. One is the socially inclusive nature of the representations made at county level. The other is its prevailing negativity. The objective was to keep the government at bay. When we examine the operation of the county court more generally it hardly appears as a forum for political debate, and still less as an organ for the expression of specifically knightly interests. There are important lessons here for how we should approach the essentially baronial revolt of the year 1258.

Notwithstanding these correctives, however, the period of reform inaugurated in 1258 was something of a watershed. A relatively broad political community was asked to participate in the process of reform. In particular, a central authority now called upon county knights to act as agents channelling criticism and complaints to the government in parliament. Consequently the county was to become, in the course of time, a genuine forum to express the views of local elites. Highly significant here was the linking of local complaint with parliament and with the machinery for redress. One of the characteristic features of the English polity in the time of Edward I was precisely this integration.

The stage was being set, as it were, for the transformation of the lesser nobility into the gentry. Chapter 6 puts that stage under scrutiny. In the England of Edward I we can observe how the more exclusive knighthood which was a product of the early to mid-thirteenth century coalesced to provide a strikingly powerful vehicle for expressing the social and cultural hegemony of the higher reaches of secular society. We can also observe the role played by the knights within the Edwardian polity, a political system which both consolidated the innovations of the period of reform and at the same time preserved the function of county knights as members of judicial commissions. The motives which inspired their participation begin to be clearly observable. As is well known, the drawing of representatives to Westminster became an increasingly regular feature of this polity. The growth in regular petitioning to parliament was bound

⁴⁷ J.C. Holt, 'The Prehistory of Parliament', in R.G. Davies and J.H. Denton (eds.), *The English Parliament in the Middle Ages* (Manchester, 1981), pp. 1–28, and J.R. Maddicott, 'Magna Carta and the Local Community, 1215–1259', *Past and Present* 102 (1984), pp. 25–65.

to have the effect of strengthening the representative nature of the county, as the meeting of the Commons provided a regular channel for communication between government and local interests.⁴⁸

It is likely that a stronger sense of collective identity was starting to emerge among the lesser nobility at this time. It is tempting to speak of a proto-gentry operating within the Edwardian polity. To do so, however, risks exaggerating the speed of developments, and the term might be better preserved for the early decades of the fourteenth century when several elements in what I have called the territoriality of the gentry were spectacularly enhanced. A sea change occurred, in fact, during the last two decades of the reign of Edward I, in what I call an explosion of commissions. This explosion and its consequences are the subject of chapter 7. My contention is that the gentry stems in large measure from the needs of an expanding royal government, chiefly - though by no means exclusively - owing to the increasing demands of war. A growing percentage of county knights was called upon to participate in high-level commissions of one sort or another. They functioned as tax collectors, as commissioners of array, and in various judicial capacities, including that of keeper of the peace. At the same time they were being called upon increasingly to represent their counties at parliament, a development that was itself by no means unconnected with the needs of war. By the 1320s, if not before, at least 75-80 per cent of county knights were functioning in various capacities as agents of the state.⁴⁹ What was achieved was effectively a partnership in government.

It was in the 1320s that the Commons emerged as a political force. Separated institutionally from the Lords and dominated by county knights, the Commons became the mouthpiece, one might say, of an emergent gentry. Although continuous Parliament Rolls survive only from 1339, sufficient can be pieced together from the 1320s and 1330s to show continuous pressure on the government being applied by the Commons and a strong concern with the abuse of power by the great lords.⁵⁰ A particular concern was with law and order. In short, the expression of Commons policy, fluctuating and inconsistent though it may have been, can be discerned. The three-cornered polity of the later middle ages, comprising crown, magnates and Commons, was now in place. It would be wrong, however, to concentrate solely upon events at the centre. Although we should

⁴⁸ The seminal work here is by J.R. Maddicott: 'The County Community and the Making of Public Opinion in Fourtenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 28 (1978), pp. 27–43; 'Edward I and the Lessons of Baronial Reform: Local Government, 1258–80', in P.R. Coss and S.D. Lloyd (eds.), *Thirteenth-Century England I* (Woodbridge, 1986), pp. 1–30; and 'Parliament and the Constituencies, 1272–1377', in Davies and Denton (eds.), *English Parliament in the Middle Ages*, p. 62.

⁴⁹ To judge, that is, from a very detailed analysis of the knights of Warwickshire. See below, pp. 168–79.

⁵⁰ For a recent review of the evidence here see W.M. Ormrod, 'Agenda for Legislation 1322–c.1340', *English Historical Review* 105 (1990), pp. 1–33.

be careful not to glamorise the county court or to dismiss its shortcomings, local articulation of interests and grievances must have been greatly aided by the existence of a national body in which collective concerns could be voiced.

What partnership in government meant to local lords is best seen on the ground. The first half of the fourteenth century was crucial in terms of the development of collective control over the populace. By the middle of the fourteenth century a large measure of devolved justice had been achieved, the most significant and enduring feature of which was the transformation of the keeper into the justice of the peace.⁵¹ To understand how this occurred we need to consider not only governmental need but also the needs of the landowners themselves, and most especially their need to participate increasingly in the exercise of royal justice. If we focus solely on the relationship between the lord and the state we can, at best, only partially comprehend. No lord could afford to neglect his material base. This meant not only the protection of one's interests through the courts, the running of estates by means of officials and the marketing of produce. It also meant dealing with peasants. Judicial authority was a matter of vital importance to lords, of whatever level. Courts were important in terms of income, of course, but they were also essential in terms of social control without which income and status, that is to say lordship, could not be assured. It is important, therefore, to consider the effect of the development of the central courts during the thirteenth century upon their judicial power. In general, the greater the growth in the jurisdiction of the central courts, the more the horizons of tenants widened. Consequently it was far better, from the landlord's point of view, that he, rather than justices coming in from outside, should handle the operation of royal courts.

To be sure, private courts had a lot of mileage in them yet; and it is important not to exaggerate the speed of change. As yet, it is a question not of a shift away from manorial control but, rather, of the emergence of an additional plane of authority. Royal jurisdiction had grown to such an extent that there was no going back, and everyone knew that. Since the landlord could not operate individually in this respect, as he could in his own court, the only recourse was for the landowners to operate collectively as justices of the peace, hearing and determining cases that came before them. Their status, collectively, would be ensured.

What the government and the professional justices preferred, no doubt, was that local men should keep the peace by receiving indictments but that justice should be done by the professionals. Equally, the higher lords stood to lose a great deal if they failed to involve themselves in the commissions and if they

⁵¹ The early history of the justices of the peace has been subject to serious revision recently. This is taken on board below, pp. 181–7.

failed to influence the choice of justices. The end result was a compromise, or rather a series of compromises. The government bowed before gentry aspirations, but the justices were appointed by the crown, and their appointment generally took account of the realities of both local and central power. The JPs were drawn, therefore, from three groups: from the gentry predominantly, but also from the magnates and from the professional lawyers.

Up to the 1320s high-status commissions, of the various kinds, were predominantly the preserve of knights. From then on, however, the commission-holding elite widened to include landowners who were sub-knightly as well as administrators and lawyers. From the same decade the social groups from which the county MPs were drawn similarly widened, signalling the absorption both of successful professionals and of sub-knightly landowners into the social elite. When we study the careers of individuals it is particularly striking that professionals tend to be called upon as commissioners predominantly after their acquisition of a major stake in the land.

Two contemporary and complementary developments of major significance are dealt with in chapters 8 and 9. One is the stronger sense of identity between lesser landowners and the shire which appears to have developed during the early fourteenth century. Once again it looks as though the 1320s may be especially significant. The question of identity, however, is a difficult one, and chapter 8 takes a deliberately broad sweep across the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Social identity has many dimensions and they are not mutually exclusive. Looking across the period one can detect a series of interlocking identities among provincial landowners. These include what might be described as the immediate neighbourhood, the broader locality, the lordship or component of a lordship (whether this be the vestiges of an old honour or a magnate affinity), the sub-county in some instances, and, of course, the county itself. How far county sentiment existed in the thirteenth century is a difficult question, but there are grounds for supposing it was present in at least a limited form. There are also gounds for supposing that this sentiment heightened in Edwardian England. Petitioning to parliament and interaction with the central assembly were now added to the traditional roles of the county in terms of administration and of communication with the crown. The effects of all of this became stronger over time. It is notable that during the 1320s the sheriffs were returning writs with endorsements which spoke of milites residentes and of knights who were commorantes within their counties. The evidence is fragile but it is surely indicative. Furthermore, the appearance of this terminology coincides with the time when the Commons was becoming assertive politically.

It was during this same period that the status gradations which were to be such a longstanding feature of the English gentry began to emerge. This is the subject of chapter 9. There are some indications that status was already beginning

to be understood territorially during the thirteenth century. The distinctions, however, were rather inchoate. What happened in the fourteenth century was of a different order, and it became permanent. The esquire now emerged as a clear gradation below the more prestigious chivalric knight. However, this did not happen overnight. On the contrary, it was long delayed, and when it finally occurred esquire was more than just a residual category for those families who had ceased to produce knights. Notwithstanding its lingering service and military connotations, esquire now came to designate membership of a particular social rung. This was the time when esquire replaced valet as the term used to describe non-knightly retainers in indentures. It was also the time when the heads of families of local substance who had never been knightly joined the collaterals and the once-knightly in sealing heraldically. What was happening in the localities was reflected in the sumptuary legislation of 1363, when parliament attempted to regulate apparel by statute. The rung of esquire, as it finally took shape, was a fairly inclusive one, and was achieved, no doubt, at the expense of subtler, and more local, distinctions. Nevertheless there was room for considerable future development. The esquire did not subsume all of the gentiles, and the arrival of the gentleman in the fifteenth century produced some realignment. But the decades immediately prior to the sumptuary legislation had been crucial. The gradual working out of the territorial idea of status produced a nation-wide system of social gradation within the emergent gentry. It can hardly be coincidental that this occurred at the very time when the emergent gentry was becoming increasingly conscious of itself politically. With the appearance of definite social gradation the gentry finally came of age.

The various manifestations of the 'territoriality' of the gentry coalesced during the first half of the fourteenth century: the development of horizontal banding, the enhanced capacity for collective self-expression, the emergence of collective power over the populace and the development of a true partnership with the crown in government as opposed to mere agency of the state. By the middle of the century the gentry had been formed.

The process of gentry formation has been fully described. However, it also needs to be explained. Much of the explanation is, of course, inherent in what has gone before. The manpower needs of the state and the self-interested response to those needs take us a long way towards an understanding. The rise of the Commons and the impact of that rise upon the counties were vital ingredients. Nevertheless, there are additional social factors to be addressed, factors which help to explain the appearance of social gradation and to determine the future contours of the gentry. These are discussed in the final chapter. Why was it, I ask, that England ultimately failed to develop a caste nobility around the phenomenon of knighthood? Why was it that the future lay with a restricted nobility and a gentry which embraced the knightly, the sub-knightly and a steady influx of lawyers and other professionals? How and why did the several social groups which came to constitute the gentry combine in the manner they did? In answering these questions we are taken deep into the social structure: into the demarcation between higher and lesser nobility, into increasing professionalisation, and, most importantly, into the coincidence of interests and similarity of life-style between the knights and their fellow landowners who were directly below them.