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978-0-521-82933-5 - Transforming English Rural Society: The Verneys and
the Claydons, 1600–1820
John Broad
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1 Introduction

This book is an extended case study of a family and its estates in midland England. It demonstrates how great landowning families and their dynastic ambitions moulded the rural economy, shaped the landscape of England, and interacted with rural society and village communities to produce effects that are still strongly visible in the twenty-first century. Modern estimates suggest that by the late nineteenth century elite landowners (the aristocracy and gentry) had accumulated estates that covered over half of the cultivable land area of the country.¹ They managed a panoply of ancient tenures involving copyholds and manorial courts that were the direct descendants of medieval villeinage. However, early modern landowners gradually altered tenures towards modern contractual arrangements especially in the south and east of England. Leases for short or medium terms (up to twenty-one years), or increasingly year-to-year tenancies, replaced lifehold arrangements, fines, heriots, and labour service requirements, and farm rents more closely reflected the real profitability of the land for those who worked it.

The long transition from medieval patterns of rural landholding and social relations to the great estates of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England involved a variety of changes in countryside. Modernising estate management practices significantly changed landlord–tenant relationships as well as tenures. Over thirty-five years ago, Lawrence Stone demonstrated how the great Tudor landowners exploited their estates more intensively to increase income in the face of high inflation.² They attempted to assert new forms of property right over dormant or undefined aspects of rural land and custom. They tested local definitions of custom to increase personal control of the land at the expense of village communities, asserting their rights as manorial lords to enclose woods and commons, or brokering (with whatever necessary coercion) enclosure by

¹ F. M. L. Thompson, 'The social distribution of landed property in England since the sixteenth century', *Economic History Review* 2nd series, 16 (1966), pp. 505–18.

² L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (Oxford 1965), esp. chs. 4 and 6.

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mutual agreement.³ They began the process of turning a system of tenures based on overlapping use rights over land into modern concepts of freehold landownership with fixed boundaries and few shared rights.⁴ Where landowners consolidated landholdings it concentrated their power and enhanced the efficiency of estate management. Elite families' success in making this transition varied enormously. It could reflect the strength of individual vision and dynastic purpose, but chance events such as significant patterns of births, marriages, and deaths, were as important as marriage alliances and spendthrift sons.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries changes in elite lifestyles also helped to re-define the relationship between landowners and country dwellers. In the Tudor world a relatively small group of aristocratic families moved between their estates and court society. Court life was expensive, uncertain in its financial rewards, and dependent on access to networks and patrons whose favour rose and fell in political whims and winds. Kings and Queens up to and including James I made frequent progresses around the country to display themselves to their subjects. Their prime aim, apart from enjoying the hunting, was to reinforce ties of loyalty in a society without police force, standing army, or modern media, and to meet many of those middling members of the elite who made up the justices and militia officers of devolved local government. The social world of the elite changed significantly after 1660. The landowning elite gained a much greater influence in politics. Although court office remained important, the expansion of government and bureaucracy, of army and navy, and above all the regular meeting of parliament and its changing role in government, broadened opportunities. There were other factors in play. London, already England's dominant city, was becoming a European metropolis. A consumer revolution brought a wide range of exotic products and novelties from distant parts of the globe to an expanding commercial entrepot. A parallel social revolution brought a wider range of landed families to spend part or all of the year in London to enjoy the 'season' with its range of entertainments, social contacts, and spectacles.⁵

These changes had significant effects on relationships in the countryside. They were expensive, demanding higher returns from the elite's major source of wealth, land. Rents were raised, contributing to the break up of crumbling feudal ties and loyalties between landowners and tenants. Hospitality and charity

³ Two local microstudies of the process are S. Hindle, 'Persuasion and protest in the Caddington Common enclosure dispute, 1635–1639', *Past and Present* (1998), pp. 37–78; H. Hanley, 'The inclosure of Pitstone Common Wood, 1612', *Records of Buckinghamshire* 29 (1987).

⁴ G. E. Aylmer, 'The meaning and definition of "property" in seventeenth-century England', *Past and Present* 86 (1980), pp. 87–97. Such rights are now so dominant as to be considered 'natural', and as having existed since time immemorial.

⁵ The relationship of the country gentry and London's social world has been the subject of an excellent study in depth of the late seventeenth-century Verney family: S. Whyman, *Sociability and Power in late Stuart England: The Cultural World of the Verneys 1660–1720* (Oxford 1999).

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became increasingly depersonalised and institutionalised in a regulated and managed rural world in which the steward or bailiff was more obviously the paid servant of the landowner than an intermediary between the farming community and their squire.⁶ The role of the country house itself changed. From the eighteenth century onwards it increasingly separated the elite family and their guests from servants and local people. Parallel sets of stairs and passages made servants an invisible presence in essentially elite discourses rather than an accoutrement of local power and prestige to be displayed on public and semi-public occasions.⁷ The Tudor and Stuart great house was a place where tenants came to pay their rents, exchange words with the Lord of the Manor, and perhaps attend a tenants' annual feast. The eighteenth-century mansion, surrounded by its park, gradually superseded it. Careful landscaping and tree planting were designed to minimise or exclude contact with farmers and villagers. It displayed power primarily to fellow-members of the elite, not to the population of the surrounding countryside.

Changes in elite attitudes to the localities where they concentrated their estates and built their country seats powerfully influenced the neighbourhood. Village studies suggest that over the period from 1500 to 1900 economic pressures on farmers and smallholders concentrated landownership and farming units amongst a small number of owners even in communities where elite families were not major land purchasers.⁸ Small and even medium-sized units of ownership and agricultural production, those between five and forty acres, tended to diminish or even disappear widely across eastern and southern England. These changes in the size of holdings paralleled expanding market participation, and an increasing ease in transferring land.

These changes were particularly marked where great landowners and squires had significant concentrations of land. There, enclosure, the extinction of manorial rights, and conversion of tenures from copyhold to leasehold could go hand in hand with an increase in farm sizes. The scale of enlargement depended on many factors: the terrain and soil, prevalent farming patterns and labour availability, and access to markets. Landlords and agents generally preferred larger farms because there were fewer individuals to negotiate with, and tenants

⁶ F. Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford 1990); D. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton 1989).

⁷ M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (Harmondsworth 1980).

⁸ A whole range of studies has come to rather different conclusions about the timing and underlying pressures driving these changes. See particularly, W. G. Hoskins, *Midland Peasant* (1957); A. C. Chibnall, *Sherington: Fiefs and Fields of a Buckinghamshire Village* (Cambridge 1965); M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge 1974); G. Nair, *Highley 1660–1880* (Oxford 1988); P. R. Edwards, 'The decline of the small farmer: the case of Rushock, Worcestershire', *Midland History* 21 (1996), pp. 73–100; H. R. French, and R. W. Hoyle, 'The land market of a Pennine manor: Slaidburn, 1650–1780', *Continuity and Change* 14 (1999), pp. 349–83.

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with capital were more able to pay their rents regularly and punctually. Elite landowners drove through these changes primarily to maximise their income. Until the mid-seventeenth century, the word ‘improvement’ rarely related to the more efficient use of marginal land, or the adoption of new crops, rotations, and techniques. Although elite interest in farming innovations increased from the second half of the seventeenth century, most landowners’ improvements were aimed to increase their rent rolls.

Landowners sought prosperous tenants on large farms, but larger farms meant fewer farmers in the community, and this influenced the occupational structures of villages. There are few studies of social change in communities dominated by large estates. By the nineteenth century writers on rural affairs noted divergent village typologies and the emergence of two stereotypes. There were ‘closed’ communities, those dominated by small numbers of owners, or a single person, and ‘open’ villages characterised by buoyant populations, large numbers of landowners, smaller farm sizes, and an occupational structure diversified away from agricultural to craft and service occupations. Modern analysis broadly supports these findings, but points to a range of intermediate village typologies.⁹ Most research has compared village structures at one or more moments in time, but not the processes involved in creating a ‘closed’ village. There has been no study of the practicalities of altering tenures, enlarging farm sizes, encouraging emigration, and manipulating land and people to create the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century squire’s village and park. There are examples of massive depopulation and removal of houses across the country. In Buckinghamshire, the Temples did so at Stowe and Royalist soldiers at Boarstall demolished village houses to bolster its Civil War defences. They were never rebuilt. There are famous eighteenth-century examples of new villages built away from the park and mansion in a wholesale re-modelling. The Grenvilles rebuilt Wotton Underwood, while Nuneham Courtenay in Oxfordshire and Milton Abbas in Dorset are fine examples of planned villages. There is, however, no detailed study of an estate village apart from Michael Havinden’s account of the Lockinge estate in Berkshire, which is almost exclusively about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰

Village studies covering periods from the late medieval to the nineteenth century have concentrated on a variety of ‘peasant’ villages – agricultural, textile, and mining – all characterised by diversified landownership and a ruling

⁹ B. A. Holderness, ‘“Open” and “close” parishes in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, *Agricultural History Review* 20 (1972), pp. 126–39; D. Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth-century Britain* (1980); S. Banks, ‘Nineteenth-century scandal or twentieth-century model? A new look at “open” and “closed” parishes’, *Economic History Review* 41 (1989), pp. 51–73.

¹⁰ M. A. Havinden, *Estate Villages: A study of the Berkshire Villages of Ardington and Lockinge* (London 1966).

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community elite composed mainly of yeomen, farmers, and minor gentry. They are fundamental to our understanding of the structure and mentality of rural England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, they became less typical over time and a diminishing force by the nineteenth century, when elite landownership dominated the English countryside. Those landowners did not create mansions and parks in half of England's villages. Many villages were predominantly owned by absentee great landowners who undertook similar changes in land organisation and farm size, but remained more distanced from parish issues.

This book bridges a gap in our knowledge of the dynamics of rural society, by focusing on changes in social relationships as well as in landscape and farming practice. It places them in the context of what was going on in the landowning family: the dynamics of dynastic aggrandisement, the role of demographic chance, and of external disaster in altering outlooks and planning horizons. It maps the changing relationship of the landed elite to court, parliament and the merchant and financial community, and their relative influence in decision-making over two centuries.

The book's subject is the Verney family and the three parishes of Middle, East, and Steeple Claydon in north Buckinghamshire. The period from 1600 to the early nineteenth century is covered by one of the richest archives for an upper gentry family in Great Britain. It spans the years from the first residence at Claydon of the Verney family to the extinction of the first Verney dynasty. In that time they rose from a middling gentry family with court connections, to the upper gentry with knighthoods and baronetcy, and finally into the peerage. In the middle of the eighteenth century they were leading landowners in Buckinghamshire, vying in size of estates and political ambitions with their near-neighbours, the Temple/Grenville clan based at Stowe and Wotton Underwood. At its height their family income brought them just within the class of great landowners who were at the pinnacle of the nation's political and social system. After the financial debacle suffered by the Verneys in the 1780s, the family recovered to retain the Claydon estate, but little other land. Their estate around Claydon in the 1820s has been substantially maintained through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The year 1820 is therefore a natural end point for this narrative of dynastic endeavour.

The same period also saw the transformation of the three village communities where the Verneys held sway. In 1600 all three villages had similar populations, social structures, and farming patterns, though Steeple Claydon was somewhat larger than East and Middle Claydon. East Claydon parish included the settlement of Botolph (often called Bottle) Claydon. All three parishes had freeholders and open fields characteristic of a majority of parishes across southern and midland England at that period. There were copyhold tenants who farmed land as their fathers had before them. There were also resident minor gentry

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families in all three parishes. Middle Claydon was exceptional in having a large manor house, and substantial pasture enclosures. The Giffords who built the house had been there since the 1530s, not as owners but as lessees of the manor estate.

By 1820 ownership, landscape, and village communities had been transformed. Middle Claydon House became the main seat of the Verney family in 1620. By buying out freeholders and copyholders, enclosing and converting the open fields to pasture, they turned the parish into a ‘closed’ village which in 1798 had only eight farming families in a parish population which had fallen from a mid-seventeenth-century peak of around 250 to only 103. East and Steeple Claydon had significantly different histories. The Verneys gained a significant foothold in East Claydon in 1662, but lost it before becoming the dominant landowners in 1729, with exclusive control from around 1765. After 1730 they began to change it as they had Middle Claydon, and by 1820 the whole parish had been divided into pasture farms held on yearly tenancies by specialist dairy farmers. After enclosure the population stabilised and did not rise at the end of the century, unlike most parishes in southern England. Steeple Claydon followed a different path. The Verneys deliberately thwarted its enclosure in the 1680s fearing the development of a rival estate close at hand. The Chaloner estates were sold in small lots to local farmers and investors, and Steeple Claydon remained an open-field village for 115 years. Its freeholders and copyholders farmed the old systems with ingenuity, in an adverse economic climate for small farms. Many diversified into trades and service occupations. They divided their houses and built new ones on common land at the edge of the parish. By 1801 the population had more than doubled to 646, and Steeple Claydon had taken on many of the characteristics of an ‘open’ village. Although the Verneys bought land there as it became available, they had only acquired about one third of the acreage by 1795.

The Verneys were a powerful ingredient in the formation of differentiated societies and economies in the three Claydon parishes between 1600 and 1820. Much has changed in people’s breadth of experience, education, mobility, and outspokenness over the last 200 years, but patterns of social and physical development and differentiation set in the Claydons by 1800 did not substantially alter until fifty years ago.

This brief synopsis raises basic issues about the roles of landed families and the development of village societies and typologies in the transformation of English rural society between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. No single microstudy can provide a model that explains the methods or timing of changes, but the Verneys experienced much that was typical of their social group. They participated in local politics and as members of parliament, but never held high political office, or gained substantial wealth from politics. However, they retained long-term connections with mercantile and financial groups that were unusual amongst their peers, but more common amongst

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the puritan gentry of the early seventeenth century with whom the Verneys should be grouped by tradition and education.¹¹ Their city links after 1640 provide a fascinating parallel with the family's fifteenth-century rise as London merchants from a Buckinghamshire gentry base. An openness to merchant ideas and knowledge was characteristic of Sir Ralph Verney's views from 1640 onwards. He maintained cordial contacts over decades with merchants who had helped him during exile in France. He was persuaded that apprenticeship to one of the great merchant companies was an acceptable career for his younger son John, who unexpectedly succeeded him.

Later contact with merchant and financial wealth came through the Verneys' unusually consistent policy of finding heiresses from non-landed families to marry their eldest sons. This major factor in their eighteenth-century expansion had two drawbacks. One was that the family's social networks locally and nationally were narrowed. They were not near the centre of fashionable groupings at court, in politics, or in aristocratic society as they had been between 1610 and 1685. The second was perhaps less predictable but devastating. Constant marriage to heiresses, themselves the products of small families, reduced family size and eventually produced a childless marriage. In 1810 the direct Verney line failed, and their estates passed to the Calverts, with whom they had strong links by marriage. They changed their names and took on the mantle of the Verney tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Many features of the Verneys' family history were typical of the landed upper gentry and aristocracy, but they also had their idiosyncrasies. How typical were the Claydons of English village community experience? Every village has unique qualities, but also lies in an agricultural and landscape region. The Claydons lie in a region of north Buckinghamshire that is part of that well-studied region, midland England, where the complexities of open-field agriculture and enclosure have tantalised rural historians for generations. They are some fifty miles north, and slightly west of London, well within the 100-mile radius of London considered acceptable for elite landownership in the eighteenth century. Yet the Claydons remain amongst the most rural areas of the south midlands even early in the twenty-first century, lying between the M1 and M40 motorways and not within easy commuting range of London. Only in the last thirty years has there been substantial building of modern 'infill' housing for local urban commuters.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Claydons lay in a countryside of villages and market towns. Even Buckingham and Aylesbury struggled towards 3,000 inhabitants. Until the 1720s East and Middle Claydon lay on one of London's main arterial roads to the midlands, running through Wendover and Aylesbury to Buckingham, Brackley and Banbury to Birmingham, and clearly

¹¹ J. T. Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry* (London 1984), pp. 108ff.

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described by Ogilby in his road map of 1675.¹² There was traffic of carriers' wagons, stagecoaches, and herds and flocks of animals, while East Claydon's inn was a recognised staging post for many services. This road gave easy access to London for correspondence and goods between Verney family members and their estate officials. Two miles away, Winslow was a local market and information source for Claydon's farmers and the Verneys' stewards. However, Buckingham and Aylesbury were less important than Bicester in Oxfordshire and Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire for marketing the livestock and dairy produce of Claydon's tenant farmers.

The Claydons, not surprisingly given their name, lie on thick and heavy Oxford clay subsoil. Water is plentiful, with springs rising from the gentle slopes at the south, and running northwards to Padbury and Claydon brooks and onwards to the Ouse at Bedford, and out to the Wash. The woodland to the south lies on the watershed between the Thames and the Ouse. Among the thin-soiled woods are steep dips to the south and south-west with long views, and not far away the hillier Jurassic outcroppings at Quainton and Brill. The underlying clay is too heavy to produce good soil under modern soil classifications, and is not suitable for highly intensive exploitation. It had been usable for arable cultivation under the medieval open-field system, but was equally if not better suited to pastoral agriculture.

The woodlands are a reminder that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries this area was part of Bernwood Royal Hunting Forest, part of a series of linked medieval hunting reserves that stretched from Oxford to Stamford on the Lincolnshire/Northamptonshire borders. Bernwood had contracted to three parishes by the fifteenth century and was disafforested in 1632.¹³ Yet many parishes in north-west Buckinghamshire retain the imprint of a forest past to the present day. They have remained well wooded over the centuries, especially where there have been elite owners. In other areas extensive commons, sometimes shared between two or more parishes, survived into the eighteenth century.

There were many deserted villages in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries on the heavy clay of Ashendon hundred where Middle and East Claydon lay, while many other villages underwent considerable partial enclosure. Both East and Steeple Claydon had enclosed at least one third of their area before their open fields were eliminated in the eighteenth century. Much of this wooded area of north-west Buckinghamshire was gradually put down to pasture by 1800 and used for dairying – for cheese, later butter, and after the coming of the railways liquid milk and milk products. It was part of a farming region

¹² John Ogilby, *Britannia: By a Geographical and Historical Description of the Principal Roads Thereof* (London 1675).

¹³ J. Broad and R. Hoyle (eds.), *Bernwood: The Life and Afterlife of a Forest* (Preston 1997).

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that stretches almost thirty miles from the area around Thame in Oxfordshire, through north-west Buckinghamshire to western Northamptonshire.

The Claydons display many typical features of rural parishes in southern and midland England. No urban settlements within striking distance could compete for economic influence with London. Many parishes were suitable for conversion into the seats of the landed elite, and to the agricultural practices of a highly market-orientated rural economy. It was an area in which peasant farmers were rapidly becoming transformed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries into either prosperous tenant farmers, or a land-poor group of village artisans and labourers. The variety of trades and crafts that were scattered through town and countryside often disappeared under fierce competition from specialised and innovative industries in the north and the midlands, and from the sweated trades in London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Long-standing industries with local prominence and primarily regional markets, such as Brill ceramics and Long Crendon needle-making, went into terminal decline. Weaving and spinning were increasingly confined to the very poor with the roughest of materials, hemp and flax, often provided by overseers for work-fare projects. Leather working was once important, but declined with regional specialisation in the eighteenth century. Lace making flourished in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but by the mid-nineteenth century gradually lost its battle to compete with machine-made lace from Nottingham, and survived only as a 'craft' industry. These changes characterised much of southern England and can be observed in the transformation of the Claydons over 200 years.

This study is possible because of the size of the surviving archive at Claydon House, which gives both continuity and detail over long periods. Its greatest riches lie in the correspondence, which is fullest for the years from 1630 to 1745. Estate papers have survived more patchily leaving no long run of rentals or accounts. The papers after 1745 are voluminous but polyglot, covering some areas in great detail, but leaving us in ignorance of all but the basic outline of other major events. The estate charters and deeds go back to the thirteenth century, and provide a substantial record of family settlements, land purchases, and leasing agreements through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The whole is a remarkable testimony to a family's interest in, and caring for, its past members and endeavours.

The Verneys and their archives have attracted historians since the middle of the nineteenth century. John Bruce edited and commented on the early papers and charters. Florence Nightingale's sister, Parthenope Verney, with great assistance from S. R. Gardiner, shaped and selected four volumes of Verney memoirs covering the seventeenth-century history of the family, and directly quoting from many of the letters. The four volumes were ably crafted and remain of great use to historians, though their focus on individuals and their activities has its limitations. Parthenope's daughter-in-law, Margaret, assisted

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on two volumes and produced two volumes of her own from the eighteenth-century letters. These volumes are much less digestible than their predecessors, but contain many interesting extracts from the letters and papers.¹⁴

In the second half of the twentieth century, Peter Verney's book, *The Standard Bearer* was a readable and lively account of Sir Edmund Verney's life and career, but added little to our knowledge. Lawrence Stone also became interested in the Verneys and produced a short article based on the archive. More importantly he set two research students to work on the papers. In the late 1960s Miriam Slater worked on family relations in the seventeenth century, though her thesis and book are almost exclusively about the 1640s. More recently Susan Whyman has researched the career of Sir John Verney, sensitively illuminating the cultural history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, particularly the relationships of town and country, and merchant and landed society. I have benefited greatly from their research and from conversations with them, particularly with Susan Whyman, but their studies are tangential to the central themes of this book. Finally, Susan Ranson's labours under the auspices of the Claydon House Trust have recently made available for the first time a substantial and serviceable catalogue and part calendar of those parts of the Claydon House archives that have not been microfilmed.¹⁵

This study takes the form of parallel chapters covering family and dynastic matters, estate management and community social relationships in three periods. The first concentrates on the early seventeenth century, dealing with the family's choices and dilemmas before, during, and after the English Civil War. The chapter on the estate and community focuses primarily on Middle Claydon and its transformation, with relatively little on East and Steeple Claydon. The period closes in 1657 when Sir Ralph Verney's son Edmund came of age, and the financial crisis of the Civil War had been overcome, while at Claydon the freeholders had been bought out, copyholds extinguished, and enclosure was complete. A new era in estate management and village relationships was beginning.

The second section covers a time span from 1657 through to c. 1740. This period is the most fully documented from the Verney archives. The family's financial and marriage strategies and land purchases are analysed in a period when city money as well as dowries swelled the family coffers. By 1730 the family had a permanent residence close to the capital, but Middle Claydon was

¹⁴ J. Bruce, *Letters and Papers of the Verney Family down to the End of the Year 1639*, Camden Society 56 (1853); F. P. Verney, and M. M. Verney, *Verney Memoirs of the Seventeenth Century* (4 vols. 1892–6); M. M. Verney, *Verney Letters of the Eighteenth Century* (2 vols. 1930); P. Verney, *The Standard Bearer: The Story of Sir Edmund Verney, Knight-Marshal to King Charles I* (1963).

¹⁵ M. Slater, *Family Life in the Seventeenth Century: The Verneys of Claydon House* (London 1984); Whyman, *Sociability and Power*; S. R. Ranson, 'The Verney papers: a catalogue' (t.s. 1994, available at the Historical Manuscripts Commission).