

THE FASHIONING OF THE TUDOR-STUART GENTRY

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When I gave the Neale Lecture at University College, London, in 1982 I did not then feel that I had chosen a subject that would have engaged Sir John Neale's best attention.¹ I feel rather differently about my theme in this paper, which is the revised text of another Neale Memorial Lecture which I delivered at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester in 1987. Professor Neale studied the gentry in the House of Commons; in these reflections I examine some of the same gentlemen at home, in their local communities, pursuing their daily round. I am thereby able to acknowledge my debt to Sir John's teaching at the University of London between 1945 and 1947 which, together with the work of Professor Tawney, anchored me in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Neale concentrated on the political concerns of gentlemen in the sixteenth century, but their agricultural interests are an equally prominent theme in their history. In tracing the origins of their enthusiasm and the way in which it was turned into effective action, we observe, in fact, a novel interest among a few turned into a strong convention among many. This was the substance of my first Neale Lecture which dwelt on the crucial influence of books in shaping the gentry's ideas and guiding their policies. For two or three generations gentlemen had virtually ceased to farm their home farms, and had leased them to others. Then the classical books on agriculture entered into their reading, and became extremely influential, first of all in arousing their zeal for farming as a satisfying and honourable occupation, and then in arousing their curiosity in particular plants, animals, and practices that were mentioned in the classical texts but were unfamiliar to them. As gentlemen became more absorbed in this subject, some of them by the middle of the sixteenth century were writing their own books, and very deliberately writing in English so that everyone could understand them. The bookish influences can be identified in their correspondence, in some of the very phrases they used which were lifted from the textbooks, and in their own doings, which sometimes slavishly copied the bookish advice.

Books were not, of course, the only guide to action. Every

¹ Its title was 'New Style Demesne Farming in Early Modern England', not yet published.

gentleman was influenced by conversation in the circle of his family, friends, his neighbours, and tenants. The gentry were great travellers around the country, and many went around Europe and beyond; they picked up ideas everywhere. But among all these sources of knowledge and experience, we have access to the books whereas we cannot listen to their conversations. Moreover, the books were among the most powerful means of giving ideas wide publicity, and so enlisting more gentlemen to act upon them.

Two illustrations must serve to show the insights to be obtained from reading the books read by contemporaries. The first has followed from my asking myself why gentlemen thought it so necessary to have an artichoke garden on their demesnes. Globe artichokes became an extremely fashionable vegetable when Henry VIII became passionately addicted to them. He was introduced to them by Francis I in France, and it is likely that Catherine of Aragon also encouraged that taste. Jane Grigson calls the globe artichoke the aristocrat of the Renaissance kitchen garden. But was it necessary to have a whole garden of them? Would not a row or two in the kitchen garden have been sufficient? It is probable that we come near to the full explanation in reading Thomas Hill's *Gardeners Labyrinth* of 1577. Hill enumerated the virtues of this vegetable, and among them he made the remark that 'tenderly boiled and eaten' they strengthen the stomach 'that men children may be conceived'. As the birth of male heirs was among the most important considerations in gentry families, we have to take this piece of folklore seriously. In the twentieth century similar fancies prevail, which are urged as scientific truths at one moment and discarded at the next.²

The power of books similarly explains the gentry's interest in distilling the essences of plants of all kinds. In the fifteenth century apothecaries and monastic houses distilled essences for medical purposes. But in this activity they were almost alone, apart from some noblemen whose houses had still-houses at an early date; the Earl of Northumberland's Household Book shows one in 1512.³ The situation changed dramatically in the sixteenth century, when interest spread among innumerable gentry, until it was an almost obligatory convention to have a still-house. An important stimulus behind this movement was the publication in 1527 of a translation of Hieronymus von Braunschweig's *Virtuous Book of Distillation of the Waters of all*

² *The Lisle Letters*, ed. Muriel St Clare Byrne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 2, 203; *Jane Grigson's Vegetable Book* (London: Penguin, 1983), 15–17; Dydimus Mountain, *The Gardeners Labyrinth* (repr. New York: Garland, 1982), 59. Artichoke gardens are found at Theobald's House, Herts., Henry Oxinden's house at Great Maydeacon, Kent (1640), and Queen Henrietta Maria's Wimbledon House.

³ C. Anne Watson, 'Burnt Wine and Cordial Waters: The Early Days of Distilling', *Folklife*, 13 (1975), 58ff; *The Regulations and Establishment of the Household of Henry Algernon Percy, the Fifth Earl of Northumberland at the Castle of Wressle and Leconfield in Yorkshire* (London, 1905), 371.

Manner of the Herbs, in which the translator urged readers to 'learn the high and marvellous virtue of herbs, know how inestimable a preservative to the health of man God hath provided, growing every day at our hand'.⁴ The original German author was a doctor in Strasbourg, who published in 1519 in German, and was writing especially to help the poor to cure their illnesses.⁵ The English translator likewise stressed the value of this work 'for the common people that have no physicians, nor can get no medicinal substance for lack of money'. It is unlikely that such sentiments signified any hope that the common people would read these books. But through the gentry for whom the health of themselves, their families, and their servants was a major concern, the poor did benefit. The gentry steeped themselves in the subject, and a still-house or still-room became essential on their manorial estates. The probate inventory of Armigill Wade, dying at Belsize Park in 1568, for example, names his still-house and several books on distilling. Part of the garden design for Sir Christopher Hatton's new house at Holdenby in Northamptonshire in the 1580s included a still-house.⁶ Sir Thomas Smith, Elizabeth's Secretary of State was, in the words of Mary Dewar, his biographer, 'ludicrously anxious' about the distilling of his herbs at home in Essex while he was absent on a diplomatic embassy in France. In fact, the anxiety was far from ludicrous; its reasons were made clear in one of Thomas Smith's letters home to his man in charge: he felt he owed his life to the medicines distilled from the essences of herbs which he had taken, 'as this winter'.⁷ Among other gentlemen, a more scientific curiosity may have been mingled with the medicinal imperatives. This is suggested in the case of Walter Raleigh and the Earl of Northumberland, who whiled away their long days in the Tower early in James I's reign, distilling herbs and minerals.⁸

Eventually, of course, distilling duties in the manor house passed from gentlemen to their wives, and the poor benefited from their humanitarian care. But at an earlier stage when distillation ceased to be a secret revealed only to a few, it passed through the phase of becoming a fashionable interest of gentlemen, and the books give us the first clear clues. After the translation of Hieronymus von Braunschweig, more books followed, like Conrad Gesner's *The New Jewell of Health* in 1576, and the still better known book of John French, *The*

⁴ Hieronymus von Braunschweig, *The Vertuose Boke of Distyllacyon of the Waters of all Maner of Herbes* (London: Laurens Andrewe, 1527).

⁵ Idem, *Das Buch zu distillieren* . . . (Strassburg: durch I. Grüninger, 1519).

⁶ PRO, E159/357, 532; Joan Thirsk, 'Forest, Field, and Garden: Landscapes and Economies in Shakespeare's England', *William Shakespeare: His World, his Work, his Influence*, ed. John F Andrews (New York: Scribners, 1985), i. 265.

⁷ Mary Dewar, *Sir Thomas Smith: A Tudor Intellectual in Office* (London: Athlone Press, 1964), 143.

⁸ Joan Thirsk, 'Raleigh's England', *Raleigh and Quinn: The Explorer and his Boswell*, ed. H.G. Jones (Chapel Hill: North Caroliniana Society, 1987), 45.

Art of Distillation, in 1650.⁹ Family papers and other documents elaborate on the same theme, and, indeed, surprise with their abundance.

Books, in short, are a valuable guide to the intellectual baggage of the gentry. They were powerful agents fashioning the gentry, shaping their attitudes, giving them a philosophy of life, and directing their actions. One cannot be sure which individual would be most influenced by which sentences in which books. But the passages marked in books show us some of the matters which attracted particular attention, while gentlemen's commonplace books tell us some of the things which they noted and wanted to remember.¹⁰ Although every individual likes to feel different from the rest, in practice, groups of people, whether of the same temperament, or undergoing the same experiences, or belonging to the same class, cluster around certain common ideas, and then join together in action directed at common objectives. Things were no different in the sixteenth century from the twentieth century.

The gentry, then, were being fashioned, not only as individuals, but as likeminded groups. Conformist tendencies were strengthened by the 'educational revolution'. The gentry comprised the largest group attending the universities and inns of court.¹¹ They were among the first to read all the new literature that came to hand as the printing presses expanded their output throughout Europe, producing a multitude of books in that international language, Latin.¹² Having access to much new learning from near and far was a novelty in the sixteenth century that conferred on books a certain revered authority. Indeed, so important were their contents thought to be that a considerable circle of gentlemen at court in Henry VIII's reign, and again under Elizabeth, thought it their duty to translate many foreign books into English.¹³ Their subject matter gives a clue to some of the fashions that came and went. Nor were the books for translation haphazardly chosen. Much may be learned from noticing the decades

⁹ *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599–1605*, ed. D.M. Meads (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1930), 72, 104–6, 137, 170. For other books see also *De Distillatione* by Giovanni Battista della Porta, Rome, 1608 (it may be significant that Battista's *De furtivis literarum notis*, 1590, was dedicated to the Earl of Northumberland, who shared in Raleigh's experiments in the Tower of London); and L. Castelan, *Traicté des eaux distillés*, 1627.

¹⁰ For further discussion on this matter, see Joan Thirsk, 'Plough and Pen: Agricultural Writers in the Seventeenth Century', *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R.H. Hilton*, ed. T.H. Aston *et al.* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), 295ff.

¹¹ See L. Stone, 'The Educational Revolution in England, 1540–1640', *Past and Present*, 28 (1964), 41–80, and the large subsequent literature.

¹² E.L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: University Press, 1979).

¹³ For some translations, including those of the classics, see C.H. Conley, *The First English Translators of the Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927); William J. Harris, *The First Printed Translations into English of the Great Foreign Classics* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1909); Julio-César Santoyo and Isabel Verdaguer, eds., *De clásicos y traducciones. Clásicos españoles en versiones inglesas: los siglos XVI y XVII* (Barcelona: PPU, 1987).

in which different categories of literature were singled out for special attention, classical texts, books about theology, the history of the world, horses, plants, architecture, and medicine. The gentry passed the books around among themselves, quoted them, discussed them, and compared different editions of the same text. Frequently they were most carefully read and digested. After all, it was a bookish precept that gentlemen should allocate a certain time of every day to study – after they had given orders for the day's tasks to the servants. Some of them have left clear evidence that they followed that rule strictly. Their reading, in consequence, was a serious business. It influenced their outlook towards their other tasks of managing their households and estates, and administering their local communities.¹⁴

Some of the general humanist reading of the time undoubtedly heightened the consciousness of the gentry of their role in society. The importance of Sir Thomas Elyot's *Book named the Governour* (1531) is regularly emphasized in this connection. But other books were equally widely read, offering yet more food for thought on the duties of a gentleman towards those around and dependent on him.¹⁵ Such humanist ideas also made the gentry critical of the nobility, whom they considered to be wastrels, given over to the pursuit of pleasure, hunting, gambling, time-wasting.¹⁶ Serious thinkers among the gentry sought to act differently.

In attempting to define the intellectual baggage of the whole gentry class, we focus attention on many trends of thought and action that were widely accepted and followed. Among these may be numbered the Puritan enthusiasms of some of the gentry, the drive to maximize the income of their estates, and their resistance to excessive taxation and other financial demands from Westminster. But it is also possible to discern smaller groups of gentry, clustering together regionally, having their own distinctive ethos, their own special preoccupations, and showing a notable energy in working towards locally appropriate goals. Lordship, in short, could have a different flavour in different parts of the country.¹⁷

This fact is not surprising when one recognizes the diverse economies of England's regions, the differing status of the gentry in different parts of the countryside, and their uneven geographical distribution between the regions. Their varied situations were bound

¹⁴ This is clearly shown by Konrad Heresbach in his *Four Bookes of Husbandry* (repr. New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 2v–3.

¹⁵ For example, the works of Antonio Guevara, said to have been the best-read author in Europe. It is worth noticing that Sir Thos. Elyot almost certainly knew Guevara since they were both in attendance on the Emperor Charles V at Tunis. This fact gives a different slant to the allegation that Elyot plagiarized Guevara's work.

¹⁶ For some brief remarks on these lines, see H.A. Mason, *Humanism and Poetry in the Early Tudor Period* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), 85–7.

¹⁷ I broached this subject, taking one individual, Sir Walter Raleigh, as the example, in 'Raleigh's England', 35–49.

to make them different kinds of people. In England overall the gentry constituted between 2 and 3 per cent of the population.¹⁸ But a comparison of certain counties in the southern half of England shows them living at very different densities. Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire were counties of roughly similar size, with 330 and 200 gentry respectively in the mid-seventeenth century. Kent and Suffolk, on the other hand, had twice the number of acres but had between three and four times the number of gentry.¹⁹ This suggests that either the Kentish and Suffolk gentry had much smaller estates everywhere, or they were much more congested in some parts of these two counties than in others. In fact, it is likely that both statements are true. Northamptonshire is also a good example of further regional diversity. It had two very different kinds of landscape: the western half was vale, the eastern half was forest. Different landscapes were gentrified at different times.

In general, we know that it took a long time for gentlemen to consider living in forest country. They withstood even longer the idea of living in fens and on moorlands. Indeed, in all pastoral country they were far less numerous than in arable areas. This posed problems in finding enough JPs to enforce the law effectively in grassland country. An insight can be gained into this patchy distribution from an unexpected quarter: a study of foreigners' comments on the English landscape shows them almost invariably visiting gentlemen's houses in sheep-corn country. That is where most gentry lived, or, at least, the most outgoing gentry with interests in the wider world. Foreign visitors did not see the deep enclosed pastoral country because fewer gentry lived there, and those that did did not have the kinds of households geared to giving great hospitality.²⁰

But while, in some areas, a patchy distribution of gentry obtained at the beginning of the sixteenth century, this state of affairs underwent considerable change thereafter. Disafforestation of the forests, drainage of the fens, improvement of pasture to make better arable land drew the gentry into new areas of the country. In a recent study of some seventeenth-century Norfolk gentlemen farmers, the author described several who had fertile land east of Norwich but then acquired and began to improve some of the poorer land to the north-west, as though, she said, things were becoming 'claustrophobic' in the older cultivated areas.²¹ That is one way of describing

¹⁸ Julian Cornwall, 'The Early Tudor Gentry', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd Ser., xvii (1965), 457.

¹⁹ C.G.A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England, 1500-1700* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), 1, 157-8; A. Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion* (Leicester: University Press, 1966), 33-4.

²⁰ Joan Thirsk, 'Ausländische Wahrnehmungen des englischen Landlebens im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert', *Reiseberichte als Quellen europäischer Kulturgeschichte*, ed. Antoni Maczak and Hans J. Teuteberg (Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek, 1982), 119-20.

²¹ Elizabeth Griffiths, 'The Management of two East Norfolk Estates in the Seventeenth Century, Blickling and Felbrigg, 1596-1717' (University of East Anglia Ph.D. thesis, 1987), 19.

this phenomenon. By Elizabeth's reign, for several different reasons the gentry were searching further afield to find suitable estates. One of the compelling reasons was the substantial rise in their numbers.

The situation is dramatically portrayed in an unpublished study by Michael Havinden of gentry in Somerset, showing that there were 159 gentlemen in the county in 1569, 352 in 1623, and about 439 in 1641.²² In other districts a similar impression requires verification by the counting of numbers. Behind these trends lay the efforts of many younger sons of gentlemen, and aspiring young men from other classes, seeking out properties that might gradually be enlarged, consolidated, built upon, and turned into estates. The search drove them into many neglected areas of country, although we should not always picture them being unwillingly driven; other considerations lured them cheerfully on, principally, the intellectual conviction that all land, however barren, was capable of improvement, and, secondly, that their efforts were better spent on tackling really neglected land than in upgrading arable that was already in reasonably good condition. That last conviction came from the reading of books, which was then endorsed by experience.²³

These two articles of faith, coupled with young gentlemen's compelling need to carve out a living somehow, exercised strong influences for change in the economic and social structure obtaining in different tracts of country. The ideal purchase for a stylish gentleman was a manor that embraced a village with its parish church, and had land stretching to the parish boundary. But such estates were not on the market every day of the week, and many young men had to be content with a great deal less. In the Vale of Tewkesbury, for example, and in the county of Staffordshire, a considerable number of gentlemen in the seventeenth century lived only in hamlets, sometimes in a house without any others in the immediate vicinity. The lifestyle of such gentlemen was plainly different from those in village-centred manor houses.²⁴ Nevertheless, their arrival in such places augured the beginnings of a fresh process of taming the countryside. It now had to be tamed to suit the gentry's needs and, one must add, that involved the taming of the independent-minded people who already lived there, those whom John Aubrey described generally as 'lawless, nobody to govern them, they care for nobody, having no dependence on anybody'. Norden at the beginning of the seventeenth century had called the same people 'naturally more stubborn than in the champion countries'.²⁵

²² I am grateful to Michael Havinden for permission to cite his findings. They are also used in Clay, *Economic Expansion*, 158.

²³ The evidence for this was presented in my first Neale lecture in London, to be published.

²⁴ Joan Thirsk, *The Rural Economy of England* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), 165–6.

²⁵ Cited in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV, 1500–1640*, ed. Joan Thirsk (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), 111.

The gentry in some districts of the English countryside in the Tudor-Stuart period, then, were like colonists in uncharted or unsubdued territory, bringing with them vigorous ideas for changing the scene. We readily accept the notion that the English gentry in Ireland, and later in the New World, were modelling the landscape to suit their tastes. They were doing similar things in England too; in fact, one of them expressed exactly that viewpoint when he asked why men invaded the territory of others when they had such good opportunities at home.²⁶ Against this background, one can make a more discriminating search for the untamed wildernesses of England in the seventeenth century, in order to identify the groups within the gentry who inhabited those areas, examine their lifestyles and establish their different patterns of action. They were making their way in a countryside not yet fully gentrified, where there was still much room for manoeuvre; the landscape had not yet been moulded to suit their ways, but it was capable of being fashioned anew, just as the gentlemen themselves were in the process of being fashioned by the current ideas of the time. Such gentry were conscious of their dynamic role in society, and seem to have formed fraternities with common interests.

Professor Hassell Smith has made discerning observations on this score concerning Nathaniel Bacon at Stiffkey, in Norfolk. While his family circle linked him with people in more distant parts of the country, particularly London and its environs, locally his clearly defined and satisfying circle of friends was found in a piece of country between the rivers Stiffkey and Glaven. Between 1578 and 1593 common Puritan sympathies were a prominent characteristic of this group, whose members were all dedicated to the task of arranging Puritan lectures to be given weekly in the churches in the district.²⁷ This paper, in contrast, concentrates on fields of economic endeavour, but here too one can perceive clusters of friends and collaborators, whose combined efforts made a local impact of a different kind. But when they set to work they propelled change just as energetically and effectively. Moreover, a chronological sequence can be seen in their enterprise, and in their palpable achievements, differentiating the regions from one another. While some clusters were not energetically at work until the second half of the seventeenth century, others were visibly active and effective in the early sixteenth century. In short,

²⁶ Gabriel Plattes, *A Discovery of Hidden Treasure* (London, 1639), Epistle Dedicatory. There are hints of a colonizing gentry, including Sir Arthur Throckmorton, in the Northamptonshire forests in A.L. Rowse, *Raleigh and the Throckmortons* (London: Macmillan, 1962), chapter XVI.

²⁷ Hassell Smith, 'Puritanism and "Neighbourhood": A Case Study in Late Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century Norfolk', in *Regional Studies in the History of Religion in Britain since the Late Middle Ages: Papers Presented to the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Regional and Local Historians in Tertiary Education, held at the University of York, July 1984*, ed. E. Royle (Hull: Humberside College of Higher Education, [1986]), 81-93.

different pieces of countryside received the gentry's attentions at different times.

Among the earliest active clusters of gentlemen is one found in Kent. Up-and-coming gentry clustered on the rim of the Weald, both on the north and south sides, in the early sixteenth century, pushing to the fore with schemes that so exactly coincided with government policy in Henry VIII's reign, that the ideas seem to have been deliberately coordinated. Either they sprang from the fertile brains of the Kent gentry themselves or the gentry readily implemented the ideas of others. It is not perhaps surprising to find Kentish gentlemen seizing the earliest opportunities. They had such ready access to court and hence to court preferment, lucrative offices and grants of land. They were so near to Greenwich Palace, so easily available to assist at court ceremonies, so useful when needed to attend at Dover or Gravesend when dignitaries arrived from the Continent. One of the families in question was the Guildfords of Rolvenden. Sir John had been controller of the household of Edward IV, his son Richard was controller of Henry VII's household, and his son, Henry, controller of Henry VIII's household. Who could have been better placed to absorb and act upon new ideas and new projects under discussion at Henry's court? Kentish gentry had a headstart over the gentry from all other counties, except perhaps Essex.

Some of the economic purposes that occupied their energies were the promotion of iron production, the growing of madder, woad and hops to reduce foreign imports, and the improvement of the English breed of horses. Among the Kentish families involved were the Guildfords of Rolvenden on the southern side of the Weald, on the edge of the marshland, and, on the northern rim, the Fanes of Hadlow, the Sidney family of Robertsbridge, who soon moved to Penshurst, and the Culpepers. From the 1520s onwards they were promoting very effectively iron forges, charcoal burning, timber management, and horse breeding, while the promotion of hops, woad, and madder lurk in a misty background.²⁸ The result was a transformation of the landscape on the rim of the Weald. From being a pleasure ground for the chase, the forest land was used as a source of timber for the expanding iron industry. It then became pasture for horse breeding. Some of it was then improved for arable, though this last effort was less successful than the other enterprises. At the same time these gentlemen, urged on by Henry VIII's personal fancies, interested themselves in the fashionable business of horticulture. It is this part of Kent which gives the county

²⁸ For the national context in which the Kentish gentry operated, see Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: University Press, 1978), 24ff. For horse breeding, see Thirsk, *Rural Economy*, 375ff. For iron working, see J.J. Goring, 'Wealden Ironmasters in the Age of Elizabeth', *Wealth and Power in Tudor England: Essays Presented to S.T. Bindoff*, ed. E.W. Ives et al. (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 204–27; D.W. Crossley, *Sidney Ironworks Accounts, 1541–1573*, Camden Fourth Series, 15 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1975).

the name of the garden of England, and, of course, the Culpeper name lives on in this connection into the twentieth century. Thus a group of gentlemen on the rim of the Weald made a distinctive contribution to changes in the region. Yet they do not conform to the stereotyped image of gentlemen in the sixteenth century. They were certainly not fanatical sheepfarmers and enclosers. They were likeminded gentlemen, moved by common local concerns that were embedded in the countryside where they belonged. Their activities, moreover, touched only the perimeter of the Weald. They left untouched another wilderness in the deeper Weald which Hasted could still describe in the later eighteenth century (1778–99) in such phrases as ‘dreary, gloomy, forlorn, obscure, very little traffic, little known, little frequented, deep, miry clay, not one gentlemen now resides’.

Another piece of country containing pockets that were being tamed in the first half of the seventeenth century was the fenland around the Wash. In 1580 the JPs of the Holland division of Lincolnshire had complained of the want of gentlemen there to inhabit.²⁹ But when drainage started, gentlemen were not reluctant to invest in it, and in land improvement afterwards. They gradually familiarized themselves with this neglected countryside, seeing its potential when once drainage methods were improved in the seventeenth century. By the time of the Interregnum, another group of up-and-coming gentlemen, former Parliamentary officers, were willing to reside there. They moved into the Huntingdonshire fen and set up model farms, which commanded the admiration of William Dugdale when he saw them in 1657. He particularly noticed the handiwork of Colonel Castle, Anthony Hammond, Colonel Underwood, and Sir Edward Partridge.³⁰ How many others were members of this circle? This was also the district where John Thurloe, secretary of state during the Commonwealth, made his home, building a house at Wisbech. He was the son of an Essex parson, who had moved up in the world during the Civil War.³¹ He may well have been one of the same circle. Certainly, this area of fen looked for a time like a little commonwealth of Parliamentary land improvers, with their plantations of fruit trees, garden stuff, woad, flax, hemp, willows, rapeseed, and fishponds. It was in notable contrast with the situation in 1625 when the county of Huntingdonshire had been considered to be very ‘defective in persons of quality residing therein’, and poor because the owners of the land were citizens of London who were non-resident and let the land to tenants.³² Gentry had taken up their abode in the fens, and were intent on pursuing the Commonwealth policy of improving the land and the condition of society.

²⁹ Joan Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming* (London: repr. Methuen, 1981), 47.

³⁰ *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, V.ii, 1640–1750*, ed. Joan Thirsk (Cambridge: University Press, 1985), 323.

³¹ *DNB* sub Thurloe.

³² PRO, SP 16/8/86.

During the same period, between about 1550 and 1650, another cluster of likeminded gentry springs prominently to attention, living in south-west Leicestershire on either side of the great divide between the forest and the felden of Warwickshire. This forest was ripe for development in the sixteenth century, and between 1550 and 1700 much woodland was turned over to pasture, the pasture was then improved, and some of it converted to arable. Finally, the area was able, more effectively than before, to support itself with its locally-produced grain instead of relying always on the felden areas. This achievement was made possible because ruthless enclosure was moderated and made acceptable. The area had earlier passed through many painful experiences of enclosure, including the Midland revolt in 1607. Enclosure was a prerequisite of land improvement, yet how could it be carried out without destroying the livelihoods of husbandmen and cottagers? An answer was anxiously sought within a circle of likeminded gentlemen, many with Parliamentary sympathies, who discussed it at length in the 1640s and 1650s, and set out to demonstrate that a fair and just enclosure agreement was possible.

These gentry all lived rather close to each other, in the Birmingham, Coventry, Rugby, Lutterworth area. They included, firstly, Walter Blith of Allesley (just north-west of Coventry), author of a book on farming improvement, who expressed in his writing his regret at the sight of wastes, commons, moors, and common fields, badly managed and yielding little, when they could create so much more work if better cultivated. Second was Joseph Lee, rector of Cotesbach, who wrote vehemently in favour of enclosure (his village had been embroiled in 1607 in the Midland revolt) and who, in 1650, found himself with Blith as his neighbour in Cotesbach, and actually witnessed Blith's will. Third was Francis Blith, Walter's brother, another active Parliamentarian who became a well-to-do landowning gentleman in the Blith family's native village of Allesley and participated in its enclosure in 1652. Fourth was Edward Whalley, Major-General of the Midland counties, who was much involved in discussions with Leicestershire and Warwickshire JPs at Quarter Sessions before arriving at an enclosure procedure which he presented to Parliament in 1656 as a bill to assist regulated enclosures more generally. Fifth member of this circle was Sir William Dugdale, friend of the Bliths, living at Coleshill, not far from the Blith family home, and author of many books including one on *The History of Imbanking and Draining* (in the fens). He is said to have spent a great deal of money on improving his estate. Final member of this group was Sir Clement Fisher of Great Packington, belonging to a respected and old-established landowning family.³³ It is certain that more detail on

³³ On Blith, see Thirsk, 'Plough and Pen', 306–14. For the Blith family and friends, see the wills of Walter and Samuel, PROB 11/235, fo.142 and PROB 11/380, fo.67. On Lee and

these gentlemen's handling of their own lands and tenantry is waiting to be brought to light by local historians. Meanwhile, it is tempting to regard one enclosure agreement at Clifton upon Dunsmore, near Rugby, which was arrived at between 1648 and 1654, as a mirror of the influence of this gentry circle of land improvers; was it perhaps a test case, demonstrating an enclosure that carefully provided for the compensation of cottagers and commoners?³⁴ If so, then it may be possible to enlarge this group of likeminded gentry to include Sir Richard Lucy and Sir Robert Whitney, who were the owners of the manor, and, among the freeholders, St John Cave, esquire, Edward Boughton, esquire, and Thomas Hulme, gentleman.

The improvement of agriculture was not the only common interest that drew gentlemen of Warwickshire and Leicestershire together; so did an enthusiasm for antiquities and local history. Was this concern perhaps reinforced by the fact that they were so vigorously changing the landscape, just as we see local history thriving today while our environment is being transformed out of recognition? William Dugdale was compiling his *Antiquities of Warwickshire*; so was Sir Symon Archer of Umberslade, near Tamworth. Elias Ashmole, antiquarian and botanist, must have shared their discussions for he married Dugdale's daughter, and wrote his own *Antiquities of Berkshire*. Finally, Dugdale was in correspondence with William Burton, the local historian of Leicestershire. Here was a circle of enclosers and farming improvers, living in an eminently improvable area, and bound together by a strong pride in the history of their patch of the Midlands.³⁵

In the second half of the seventeenth century two more circles of gentry in the West Midlands come to notice. Of one of these circles Andrew Yarranton was a prominent, and informative, member, because he wrote books about his aspirations. He himself was a heroic projector with a finger in many pies. He became a consultant to many gentry and nobility, on river improvements and industrial schemes generally. But his writings and his papers show that he had strong local loyalties, being a member of a circle of West Midlands gentry, living in a clearly defined rectangle of country between Stourbridge and Ombersley, Bewdley and Bromsgrove. Significantly, perhaps, it was on the fringes of Wyre and Feckenham forests, another improving district.³⁶

Whalley, see *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, V.ii, 319–21. On the Fisher family, see V. Skipp, *Crisis and Development: An Ecological Case Study of the Forest of Arden, 1570–1674* (Cambridge: University Press, 1978), 8, 45, 46.

³⁴ A. Gooder, *Plague and Enclosure: A Warwickshire Village in the Seventeenth Century (Clifton upon Dunsmore)* (Coventry and N. Warws. History Society, Pamphlets, no.2, 1965), 8–9, 13–20.

³⁵ DNB, *sub nominibus*.

³⁶ Andrew Yarranton, *England's Improvement by Sea and Land* (London: printed by R. Everingham for the Author, 1677).

Yarranton was born at Astley, near Kidderminster, of yeoman stock. In 1621 when the subsidy list had become a brief enumeration of the better-off residents, four out of seventeen taxpayers were Yarrantons, but none was credited with property worth more than £3 per annum.³⁷ Yarranton rose in the world through service in the Parliamentary army during the Civil War, and became a captain. He was already busy with river improvements in 1652, and, as he himself explained, six gentlemen after the Restoration paid for him to go with an interpreter to Saxony and Bohemia to study tinplate manufacture. *En route* he paused to investigate flax spinning in Germany and fine linen weaving in Holland and Flanders. He gives us the names of his circle of likeminded gentlemen, which included Thomas Lord Windsor who had an estate at neighbouring Tardebigg, Walter Blount whose family was based in Astley, Yarranton's own parish, Thomas Foley and his son, Philip, of Stourbridge and Old Swinford, famous names in the history of iron manufacture, Sir Samuel and Sir Timothy Baldwin of Bewdley, where a central warehouse for bar iron and a collecting centre for locally made scythes were situated, and five persons whose identity has proved elusive, perhaps because they were parish gentry – John Finch of Dudley, a little further north of Stourbridge, and Nicholas Baker, Nicholas Harrison, Joseph Newbrook, and Samuel Whyte.³⁸

Business documents show that Yarranton was not only writing, but doing. He was engaged in negotiations with Samuel Baldwyn to improve the river Stour, and set up tin manufacture in the Stourbridge area, using local coal, iron from the Forest of Dean, and Cornish tin. The plan was to employ workers from Stourbridge where the existing iron industry was threatened with decay. Yarranton also was involved in publicizing the growing of clover; here again he offered advice that was sternly practical. It was strictly concerned with the gravelly ryelands of that particular area, not with clover growing everywhere. The ryelands were limesick, having been limed for many decades because lime was cheap. The free drainage of these soils caused the grass to dry out and burn up in a hot summer, and the land was having to be abandoned. Clover was the answer, if the correct procedures were adopted in sowing at the right density, and correct depth, and not grazing too soon. The spread of clover in the 1660s–1680s in this area of the West Midlands was undoubtedly associated with the efforts of gentry in making the seed and the methods of cultivation available, while Dr Marie Rowlands, in her careful study of the metalware trades in the eighteenth century, has acknowledged the efforts of these first pioneers in paving the way for later success.³⁹

³⁷ PRO, E179/201/292.

³⁸ *DNB*, *sub nomine*; Yarranton's *England's Improvement*, Dedication, 44–6, 54, 56, 151–2; P. E. Dove, *Account of Andrew Yarranton, the Founder of English Political Economy* (Edinburgh, 854), 9.

³⁹ Staffs. RO, Baldwyn MSS in Aqualate Collection, D (W) 1788, Parcel 61, Bundles 5, 7;

Yet another circle of gentry can be identified in Herefordshire. Its nucleus was formed in the Elizabethan period. Then the heirs and successors of the first generation upheld the tradition and expanded their horizons, until substantial achievements could be seen in the later seventeenth century. Apple growing and cider drinking in Herefordshire went back into the Middle Ages, but the Scudamore family of Holm Lacy with their close friends, the Beale family, responding, we must assume, to the fashionable interest in fruit and vegetables among the gentry class in the sixteenth century, selected the redstreak apple for special attention, to be grafted on to wild crab stocks, and used more plentifully to improve the local cider. In the next generation, Sir John Scudamore, a bookish gentlemen who was the patron of Thomas Bodley, and John Beale, a Cambridge academic and parson, both of whom were educated outside Herefordshire, and lived for a spell in London, returned to their native county to become 'scholarly gentlemen farmers and zealous cultivators of orchards.' John Beale explained how his grandfather's interests had inspired his father's activities, which then kindled the spark in him. But it was a lucky accident that Beale attended Eton College, when the Provost was Sir Henry Wotton, a keen horticulturist and friend of the French botanist, Charles de l'Ecluse. Wotton helped Beale to focus his attention more deliberately on the full possibilities of developing Herefordshire's orchards. Finally, in 1657, Beale wrote a most informative book on the subject, in which he referred by initials to local gentlemen involved in agricultural improvement. These were the parish gentry, who did not seek publicity. In surviving letters, Beale gives us further glimpses of his local contacts.⁴⁰ By the end of the seventeenth century, Beale's circle of interested gentlemen had produced tangible results: Herefordshire's cider production for the market was conspicuous in farmers' probate inventories, where some of the valuations were high. Bottled cider was being sent to London, and cider was included with beer in regulations governing export from 1688 onwards. The Herefordshire gentry also joined the campaign to improve the river Wye so that farmers could sell their produce more easily. The gentry had made a constructive contribution that tied Herefordshire more effectively into the national market network.⁴¹

How does this notion of local networks of gentlemen with common interests fit into the arguments about the rise of the gentry? The title of

Andrew Yarranton, *The Improvement Improved: A Second Edition of the Great Improvement of Land by Clover* (London, 1663); Marie Rowlands, *Masters and Men in the West Midland Metalware Trades before the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester: University Press, 1975), 138.

⁴⁰ Mayling Stubbs, 'John Beale, Philosophical Gardener of Herefordshire, Part I, Prelude to the Royal Society (1608–1663)', *Annals of Science*, 39 (1982), 465–89; *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, V.ii, 345–6, 550.

⁴¹ *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, V.i, 160, 162.

this paper was deliberately chosen to catch echoes of Stephen Greenblatt's book on *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980). Dealing with courtly writers, namely, More, Tyndale, Wyatt, Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare, its starting point was the notion that 'in sixteenth-century England there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned'; or again, 'in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process'. The very verb 'to fashion', the author explains, came into modish use as a way of 'designating the forming of a self'.⁴² In an earlier book the same author concentrated on the writings of Sir Walter Raleigh,⁴³ for whom self-fashioning was to some extent a theatrical process. A certain theatricality might even be conceded in the writings of the six authors considered in the second book, *From More to Shakespeare*, for they were all public figures. But while students of literature concentrate their first attention on the content of imaginative writing, and only marginally consider alongside those resonant texts 'the material necessities and social pressures that men and women daily confronted', for the historian the practicalities come first. In the fashioning of the gentry, then, the historian must explore the conducive pressures of political, social, economic and religious change. Ideas pouring in upon gentlemen who read books in the sixteenth century were plainly one of their invigorating experiences, and must be strongly linked with changing fashions. But for many gentlemen, the process of fashioning was a deeper experience than that suggested by the artificiality, the posing, the theatricality, even the hypocrisy that obtrudes when one takes Raleigh as the first example of a Renaissance gentleman. The self-fashioning which country gentlemen underwent was an eminently serious process, whereby they found their role in life, adopted certain attitudes, and submitted to certain self-imposed duties in their local communities. Not all gentry underwent this training with the same earnestness, of course; there were pleasure-loving, lazy, and ineffectual gentlemen. But alongside them were many energetic, conscientious, public-spirited gentlemen. And they included not simply the prominent county figures, but some parish gentry and parsons who rarely come to our notice. Some of them may well be rescued from obscurity when once we identify the circles of which they were the more modest members, identify the objectives which they sought, and so adjust our vision to see their achievements. The enclosure agreement of Clifton on Dunsmore has been suggested as a contrived lesson in pacification, carried out in a countryside that badly needed such an example to be set. Its participants deserve closer scrutiny, for

⁴² Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University Press, 1980), 1-2.

⁴³ *Sir Walter Raleigh: The Renaissance Man and his Roles*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

some of them might well prove to be decisive men of principle, not to be dismissed as obscure, ineffectual parish gentry.

But why, one may still ask, should one differentiate small circles of gentry? Historians have already differentiated the courtly from the country gentry and thereby helped to explain some of the tensions in Tudor-Stuart society. Others have identified the county loyalties of the gentry that coloured their behaviour *vis-à-vis* government at Westminster. Should these refinements proceed any further? The answer must surely be in the affirmative, first, because the friendships, the connections, and the practical achievements of smaller clusters of gentry are sometimes more easily recognized and documented than the actions of one individual. A limited tract of country often possessed a certain unity; within it, all the gentry were likely to find themselves in similar circumstances, facing similar problems, whether colonizing a wilderness, making a living for themselves from the same kind of land, or exploiting the same local resources. They worked upon a common stock, even when discussing the antiquities, charters and pedigrees of their past. Secondly, identifying the clusters can help towards larger explanations of economic progress and social change. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries industrial and agricultural improvement proceeded patchily. It carried areas of the West Midlands like the Arden forest into the strongly flowing main currents of industrial development, while leaving, for instance, the central Weald of Kent unaffected. The presence or absence of an active circle of gentlemen was an important factor in urging things forward; clusters of likeminded people could make a considerable impact. If we identify the clusters, therefore, we better understand some of the active impulses behind change, and its irregular pattern of progress between one region and the next.

This is not to deny the strength of the universal currents, spreading ideas on many different topics, and thus promoting change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The impact, for example, of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism is not to be gainsaid. But in particularizing we get below the level of the whole nation, even below the level of whole counties, to smaller tracts of territory with their own identity, sometimes undergoing sharp reassessment at this time. Here is the chance to distinguish collaborators, and grasp the bundle of ideas and family connections that bound this group together, which were peculiar to their circle, and not effective outside it. By thus drawing attention to networks of people with likeminded concerns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we are not surveying an altogether unfamiliar scene. Such networks are not much different from those that exist, and can be identified, in the contemporary world. Nowadays, it is fair to say that the middle class has taken over the leadership of local communities, showing the same drive and initiative formerly exerted by the gentry. We can all point to tracts of country in the United Kingdom which are being colonized by

them at this very moment. In small neighbourhoods the interconnections between individuals and the clustering of common interests are exerting a strong influence on the pattern of local development. Indeed, the results of some of their missionary pursuits have already resulted in the consolidation of strong, loudly-voiced public opinion. The middle class works through pressure groups, whether to oppose the use of nuclear energy, conserve the environment, resist the building of a motorway or airport, improve education, ensure a supply of real ale or pure food without additives. The members of the middle class have been fashioned by their education, the books they have read, and their experiences abroad; and they are energetically changing the world around them. These observations may help us to look again at, and better understand, the fashioning of the Tudor-Stuart gentry. They may even allow us once more to speak with assurance, though with a slightly different emphasis than hitherto, of the rise of the gentry.

