THE GENTRY IN ENGLAND AND
WALES, 1500–1700

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**Felicity Heal
and
Clive Holmes**

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For Bridget, Mike and Phil

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This is a volume about the experience of being a gentleman or gentlewoman in early modern England and Wales. It is concerned with mental worlds and expressive gestures; with authority and claims to rulership; and with the ways in which power was employed in this culture. It traces changes of attitude, values and behaviour over a critical period of political and ideological upheaval, when the centralising Tudor monarchy, the Reformation and the débâcle of the Civil War forced the landed élite to engagement and action. In these profound changes the gentry were both agents and victims: they responded to initiative from the political centre, but also held sufficient power to influence and manipulate outcomes.

Studies of the Stuart gentry, in particular, have been overwhelmingly influenced by the desire to locate this key social grouping within the matrix of 'the causes of the Civil War'. The great debate upon the 'rise of the gentry', though largely dormant since the early 1970s, continues to remind historians of the seductive attractions of an interpretation, first mooted by James Harington in the 1650s, that emphasises that social and political aspirations destabilised the English polity and that the gentry in the House of Commons were the prime culprits. Rather more recent studies of the county communities 'in peace and war' also explicitly focus on the power of the gentry, though here historiographical opinion is divided between those who see ideological fractionalism as providing some of the key momentum for war, and those who believe that most communities were bent on isolationist localism. These debates will inevitably play some part in the chapters that follow. It is, however, important to emphasise at the outset that we are not preoccupied with offering yet another explanation for why the Civil War was fought (or why it should not have been contested). Our choice of periodisation is here intended to be significant. Century dates are, of course, a mere convenience, but they can subvert the early modernist's instinct to analyse the long century from 1530 to

1660: from Reformation to Revolution, as one of the county studies puts it. Instead we hope to offer an analysis which links the world of clientage and lordship of late fifteenth-century England to that of the Tudors, and to conclude chronologically in an environment that had ceased to be dominated by the experience of Civil War.

The historian of the sixteenth-century gentry now has the benefit of a decade of impressive publication on the landed élite of the late medieval period. Lordship, patronage and service have been scrutinised at the county and regional level by a generation of historians inspired by the example of Bruce McFarlane. Few comparable studies exist for the Tudor decades: indeed the first half of the sixteenth century might now be designated as the 'dark age' of gentry scholarship, despite the work of Smith on Yorkshire and MacCulloch on Suffolk. Nevertheless, the artificiality, for many purposes, of the late medieval/early modern divide means that it is possible to draw upon the earlier local studies for these decades as well. Thereafter the density of material, both primary and secondary, increases in a remarkable manner, and the rich regional historiography for the early Stuart years offers the possibility of effective synthetic interpretation. Post-Restoration studies have developed in a rather different direction, concentrating upon broad investigations of the whole aristocracy over some *longue durée*, though regional examples remain represented in works such as that of Jenkins on Glamorgan.

Our emphasis on regional studies is very deliberate. Only through an understanding of the gentry in their own *pays*, in the environment in which they logically exercised authority, can we approach a broader interpretation of their social and political significance. But, as one of us has already argued in print, gentry identity transcended the localities. A major part of the story of the English and Welsh élite in these two centuries is that of growing integration into a national culture. Through education, increased mobility and urbanisation, and especially through the intensified attraction of London, gentlemen were reconstructed in ways that distinguished them sharply from their late medieval predecessors. And new political identities demanded engagement in national decision-making, even if loyalties continued to be constructed partially from localist concerns.

We have benefited from discussions with a number of colleagues during the evolution of this volume. Particular thanks are due to members of the Institute of Historical Research's early modern

seminar, which has heard both of us on different aspects of this text, and offered valuable ideas and comment. A number of our theories have been tried out on successive generations of undergraduates working on the Oxford optional subject, Nobility and Gentry in England, 1560 to 1680. Both they and colleagues teaching the course have helped to shape our argument. Richard Cust, John Ferris, Perry Gauci, Christopher Haigh, Ann Hughes, Paul Hunneyball, Vivienne Larminie, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Robin Priestley and Alison Wall have offered valuable suggestions at various points in the production of this text. John Morrill read the entire text and provided an extremely helpful commentary. But our greatest debt, which will be very apparent in our citations, is to those writers of books, theses and articles on gentry history, especially on the history of particular counties, without which a work of synthesis of this kind would not be possible. Both of us have had the advantage of sabbatical leave from our college and university posts to complete the volume, and of research grants which have greatly facilitated archival work.

We have received every assistance from many libraries, local history societies, and archives. We would like to acknowledge the help of the following repositories, where we have used books and manuscripts extensively: the Public Record Office; the British Library; the National Library of Wales; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; Cambridge University Library; Nottingham University Library; the Record Offices of Cornwall, Dorset, the Isle of Wight, Kent, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Somerset, Staffordshire, and the West Riding of Yorkshire; and the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Leeds. Dr J. E. J. Altham kindly arranged for us to see the Altham papers, now in private hands.

Photographs are an integral part of the text: images as well as words were a major part of the self-expression of the gentry and we have endeavoured to use them as an alternative means to communicate their values. We are grateful for help in providing them, especially to Mr A. F. Kersting, on whose architectural photographs we have drawn extensively, and to Mr Edward Johnson, who accompanied us around a number of churches to take those not otherwise available. This would not have been possible if a variety of incumbents and churchwardens had not been helpful in making access easy: since churches now almost invariably have to be locked for security reasons, this can no longer be taken for granted. Bridget Heal and Alison Eastwood provided valuable research assistance.

One of the most satisfying and exciting aspects of this project has been its status as a joint venture. The discerning reader may find within the text slight inconsistencies that indicate areas where we are still not wholly agreed on matters of interpretation. But in general we have hammered out a mutually acceptable and, we hope, a lively and coherent approach. We have dedicated this book to our children who have been audience to, participants in, and arbiters of, many of the dinner-table discussions that have formed the work.

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CLIVE HOLMES

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