

THE LANDED ELITE, 1300-1500

Peter Fleming

The Ranks of the Landowning Elite

County society, administration and politics were dominated by the landowning elite. Whilst the tenure of land in freehold – the nearest medieval equivalent of the modern concept of ‘ownership’ - was not confined to these ranks, it was overwhelmingly the nobility and the gentry who were the greatest private landowners. At the beginning of the fourteenth century there were few titular distinctions within this elite: earls and barons, whose titles passed down by inheritance, constituted the nobility, and below them were the knights.¹ In 1293 twelve Kentish knights answered the summons to the marriage of Edward I’s daughter Eleanor.² Nineteen Kentish landowners answered Edward II’s summons to do service against the Scots in 1322, but only three of these were knights (Sir Walter de Shorne, Sir John de Malmayns and Sir Henry de Elham); the sixteen others were not given titles, but many of them came from families which in succeeding generations would form Kent’s ‘squirearchy’.³

During the fourteenth century there was a growth in titles and distinctions within the ranks of the gentle classes. By the early fifteenth century, it was generally accepted that the nobility were identical with the lay parliamentary peerage, receiving a personal summons to sit as lords in parliament. The gentry were now composed of three ranks: in descending order of precedence, knights, esquires and gentlemen. In later medieval England £40 in annual landed income was deemed sufficient to maintain the costs and life style of knighthood, and periodically those landowners who were not knights but were thought to financially qualified were forced by the king either to take up knighthood or to pay a fine.⁴ This process – ‘distrainment of knighthood’ – continued into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, lists of Kentish landowners liable for knighthood compiled in the first five years of the sixteenth century reveal eighteen gentlemen and esquires above the £40 limit, including three esquires, Thomas Haute, Thomas Kempe and John Moyle, who were judged to have enjoyed annual landed incomes of £120 or

more.⁵ In addition, contemporaries regarded £20 as the minimum annual landed income required to support the rank of esquire, and £10 as the equivalent figure for gentlemen.⁶

Wealth

Assessing Kentish landowners' actual wealth with any degree of certainty is extremely difficult. Before experiments on taxing land, such as the subsidies of 1412, 1431 and 1450, and the 'Tudor subsidies' levied from 1513, our main evidence for assessing wealth are the subsidies on moveable property, usually levied at the rate of one-fifteenth of taxable property in the countryside and one-tenth in towns.⁷ Since the bulk of gentry and noble wealth was held as land, this tax on moveables seriously under-assessed their income. The tax was originally assessed on individuals, but after 1334 it was frozen and collected communally, except in Kent. Here, the inhabitants of the Cinque Ports and the moneyers of Canterbury's immunity to county taxation necessitated continued individual assessment, thus providing a unique record of long-term economic trends. The subsidy of 1334/5 has been published, and this can be supplemented by the assessment made in 1346/7 for the aid for the knighting of the Black Prince, levied on the basis of £2 for every knight's fee or any fraction thereof on a pro rata basis.⁹ This covered all but four of Kent's hundreds. While it assessed only 367 individuals, as against the 11,016 names in the 1334/5 assessment (which itself does not represent the total population), and only counted knight's fees (the property deemed necessary to maintain and equip one knight), it probably includes most of the landed lay elite of the county (ecclesiastical property is seriously under assessed).¹⁰

These assessments reveal the scale of the landed elite's wealth relative to the rest of the county's population. The wealthiest among those described in 1334/5 as knights, nobles or ladies (presumably the widows of knights or noblemen) were Sir Giles de Badlesmere (son of Sir Bartholomew), assessed at £5 16s 1.75d, Sir Henry de Cobham (£4 1s 10.5d), Sir Stephen de Cobham (£3 6s), and Sir Roger de Hegham (£5 10s 3.75d). Most gentry and nobles were assessed at under one pound, considerably less than the £3 14s 5d for which Roger Lapinus, 'moneyer', was assessed, or two Cinque Ports men, John Bouton, assessed at £3 3s 4d and William de Eghethorne, at £4 16s 1d. However, these sums represent a far higher proportion of the total wealth of individuals in this latter

group than was the case for the landed gentry and nobility. The true relationship between landed and non-landed wealth is suggested by a comparison with the 1346/7 returns. The average figure for the twenty highest assessments of knightly or noble individuals in 1334/5 was £2 2s; the equivalent figure for the twenty highest assessments in 1346/7 was £8, a ratio of one to four.¹¹ Therefore, the 1334/5 figures given for the gentry and nobility, whose wealth was vested largely in land, could be multiplied by four to give a figure that may come close to representing their true wealth. Accordingly, had the 1334/5 subsidy been based on the total wealth of Badlesmere, Sir Henry and Sir Stephen Cobham and Hingham it might have yielded sums in the region of, respectively, £23, £16, £12 and £15. The assessments made on the moveables of moneyers and merchants should be multiplied by a far smaller factor to represent the lesser proportion of landed property they probably held. This figure can only be guessed at, but it could not be sufficient to put their total wealth at anything like the scale of the wealthiest landed individuals.¹² Even more striking is the immense gap between the wealth of the landed elite and that of the bulk of the county's population. The average assessment for the 1334/5 subsidy as a whole was around 3s 6d; as we have seen, the average for the twenty highest assessments of knightly or noble individuals was ten times this figure, but even this does not take into account the higher proportion of gentle wealth held as land, nor the fact that the assessors excluded the poorest from their lists.

Disparities in wealth were also considerable within the landed elite. Of the 367 individuals assessed in 1346/7, 89 held the equivalent of one or more knight's fees, making 24% of the total number assessed, but between them they had a total assessment of £336 17s, or 63% of the assessor's figure for the whole county of £532 17s 1d. Only 25 were ecclesiastics (a major underestimate), whose aggregate assessment of £59 13s 4d amounts to only 11.18% of the total assessment of the county as given by the assessors. Most of the rest, as holders of fractions of knight's fees, were probably lesser gentry: a century later they would have been described as esquires or gentlemen. Their average assessment of around 14s is dwarfed by the top 89's average of £3 15s 8d.

A similar picture is revealed by the fifteenth-century subsidy assessments. The 1412 subsidy on those holding land to the annual value of £20 or more provides the names of 174 Kentish landowners, of whom 20 were ecclesiastics, holding almost 14 per

cent of the assessed landed wealth: again, the wealth of the Church is seriously underestimated.¹³ The nobility held eleven per cent. The remaining 75 per cent of landed wealth was held by 141 individuals, most of whom were gentry. As in 1346/7, a steep wealth gradient is evident: 88 held lands assessed at between £20 and £39; among the remaining 53 are individuals whose wealth was considerably greater than the average, such as John Ovedale, assessed at £66 13s 4d, Arnold Savage, assessed at £70, Sir Nicholas Haute, assessed at £122 6s 8d, and John Culpeper, assessed at £132.

The subsidy on land of 1450 reveals a similar pattern.¹⁴ The extant Kentish returns cover Canterbury and 37 out of the county's 66 hundreds. The lower limit for assessment was set at an annual income of £1, and this included a greater range of sources of income than previously, thereby embracing a wider cross section of society. Of the 88 individuals assessed at £10 or more, 64 can be identified as Kentish gentry. Of the 24 who were not, most were assessed at below £15, but a few were assessed at relatively high levels, such as the draper, William Benet (£31) and the yeoman, Richard Knight (£20), and by contrast eight gentlemen were assessed at only £10. However, the 21 most highly assessed were all of gentle rank, and included all four of the assessed knights: Sir Thomas Brown, Sir Gervase Clifton, Sir John Scott, and Sir John Cheyne. The highest gentry assessment was that of Sir Thomas Brown, whose £200 was twice that of the next highest assessments, of Sir Gervase Clifton, Alexander Iden esquire, William Keen esquire and Sir John Scott, all at £100. There follows a gradual descent through the next 25 individuals, assessed at between £80 and £22, until the assessments plateau at £20 for the next 16, with another gradual descent to the final 14, assessed at £10.¹⁵

Inquisitions post mortem, taken on the property of deceased individuals thought to be tenants in chief of the Crown, supplement this picture. Between 1399 and 1413 inquisitions are extant for 50 Kentish property-holders. Of these, only the inquisitions for the duchess of Gloucester and her two daughters do not give valuations, and the rest give some sense of the relative value of their subjects' Kentish holdings.¹⁶ The most valuable Kentish property was held by an outsider, William Heron, Lord Say, Henry IV's steward of the Household, valued at over £91. Next comes the property of Sir John (d. 1399) and Sir Reynold (d. 1403) Cobham, valued at nearly £80 and over £61 respectively, and Sir Arnold Savage (d 1410), valued at £62. The next most valuable properties were held by

non-resident nobility: Edmund, earl of Stafford and Maud, dowager countess of Oxford. Other non-resident noble property holders were the Scropes of Masham, Philippa, widow of John, Lord Hastings, Alice, widow of Aubrey de Vere, earl of Oxford, and Joan, widow of Lord FitzWalter.¹⁷ In addition, Edward, Lord Clinton (d 1400) had Kentish property assessed at just over £12. The significant presence of non-resident magnates did not eclipse the landed wealth of the resident gentry: the latter accounted for 14 of the top 20 valuations. Property held by outsiders tended to be in numerous, relatively small parcels. The total value of Kentish property held by the subjects of inquisitions was about £906 (again, not counting the Gloucester estates). Of this, at least £384 (over 42%) was held by those with the most valuable part of their total landed estate located outside Kent, and therefore classified as non-resident. Another group held property elsewhere but had the majority of their landed wealth in Kent, where they held property to the total value of about £181 (20%). The total value of property held by those without landed interests outside the county amounted to about £341 (37%). So, in this period over one third of Kentish property held in chief was held by outsiders, and only a minority of tenants in chief held solely Kentish property. Of those tenants in chief resident in Kent, just over a third held property elsewhere. Of the 26 Kentish gentry whose inquisitions are extant from the reign of Henry VII (1485-1509), six held property outside the county. The total value of the Kentish property is about £1,118. The total value of the non-Kentish property is about £112, or 10 per cent of the Kentish total.¹⁸ In both samples, the proportion of property held outside the county increased with the overall wealth of the proprietor, suggesting the wider horizons of the wealthier gentry.

So, landed society in Kent was dominated by its gentry, albeit with important absentee magnate landlords, and within the gentry there was a steep hierarchy of wealth. However, while the leading gentry might occasionally have been able to lord it over their neighbours, few were as wealthy as even the minor nobility. The estimated average baronial income in 1436 was £865, four times greater than the highest assessment made in 1450 on a member of the Kentish gentry, Sir Thomas Brown.¹⁹ While particular individuals or families were at times able to exert considerable influence within Kent, none of the resident dynasties had the necessary landed resources to dominate the whole county over long periods.

The Nobility

While Kent was not dominated by resident magnate families, there were important seigneurial interests. The most substantial single landowner was the archbishop of Canterbury, the bulk of whose landed income was derived from his Kentish manors. The most significant secular lordship was that of the Lowy of Tonbridge, itself held from the archbishop. This was held by the Clares until their failure in the male line in 1314, when it passed by marriage to Hugh Audley, earl of Gloucester, and at his death in 1347, it passed, again by marriage, to Ralph de Stafford, created earl of Stafford four years later. Earl Ralph was buried at Tonbridge in 1372. The Lowy of Tonbridge comprised five manors and other lands centred on Tonbridge castle, augmented in 1447 when the king granted Penshurst manor to Humphrey Stafford, duke of Buckingham.²⁰ However, the main interests of the Clares and the Staffords lay elsewhere, and for most of the later Middle Ages they were an influential, but not dominating, presence in the county. They were joined by several other magnates with Kentish lands. In the mid-fourteenth century these included David Strathbogie, earl of Athol, William de Bohun, earl of Northampton, John Hastings and Aymer de Valence, earls of Pembroke, Robert Ufford, earl of Suffolk and the de Vere earls of Oxford.²¹ The Staffords and de Veres appeared in the Kentish assessment for the subsidy on land of 1412, as did other noble families: the Fitzalans, Greys of Codnor, Hollands, Mortimers, Rooses and la Zouches.²² Later in the century magnates with landed interests in the county included the dukes of Buckingham, John, duke of Bedford, Edmund, earl of March, Richard, duke of York, Ralph, Lord Cromwell, and Humphrey, duke of Gloucester.²³

Resident Kentish nobility were few and usually of minor national importance, but locally they could be significant. At the beginning of the fourteenth century they included William, Lord Leybourne (d. 1310) and John, Lord Northwood (d. 1319). Leybourne's heir was his grand-daughter, but Northwood founded a baronial family in Kent that lasted until 1379, when it descended into the ranks of the gentry, and then, in 1416, died out in the male line.²⁴ Geoffrey, Lord Saye (d. 1322), founded a minor noble family seated at Codham and Birling, but his line became extinct when his grandson William died without surviving heirs in 1375. The title passed to John, Lord Clinton (d. 1399) through his

marriage to Lord Saye's sister. Leading the Kentish list of those contributing towards the knighting of the Black Prince in 1346/7 was William de Clinton, earl of Huntingdon, with an assessment of over £21 8s 4d.²⁵ The younger son of Lord Clinton of Warwickshire, he acquired his Kentish properties through marriage to Juliana, the twice-widowed granddaughter and heir of Lord Leybourne. He was constable of Dover castle and warden of the Cinque Ports from 1330 to 1343, and was created earl of Huntingdon in 1337. He died in 1354.²⁶ The interests of his descendants became increasingly focused on Kent as their fortunes steadily declined. The fifteenth-century history of the family is in stark contrast to the glory days of the earl. In 1436 Lord John and Lady Clinton were assessed at a mere £112, making theirs among the poorest of noble families. Disaster struck in 1441 when Clinton was captured in France. His ransom of 6000 marks was crippling, and for much of his life he was too poor to be summoned to the Lords. In 1448 he was persuaded to renounce his right to the Saye title by the recently ennobled and ambitious James Fiennes, henceforth Lord Saye and Sele. In 1457/8 Lord Clinton had still not been knighted, suggesting that he had been unable to bear the attendant costs.²⁷ Of comparable national importance in the fourteenth century, but like the Clintons eclipsed by the fifteenth, were the Cobhams. There were three branches of the family among the fourteenth-century nobility, descended from John Cobham (d. c. 1251). The Lords Cobham of Cobham became extinct in the male line with the death of John in 1407, leaving only a daughter, through whom the title passed to the Brookes of Somerset and Devon. The Cobhams of Rundale and Allington were not summoned as peers after 1332, and hence took their place among the gentry; they died out in the male line by 1429. The third branch were not Kentish, being of Sterborough in Surrey, and they ceased to be summoned as peers after 1372.²⁸ The lords Poynings were essentially a Sussex family, but failure in the male line thrust one branch into the Kentish gentry. When Robert, Lord Poynings died in 1446, his heir by common law and entail was his grand-daughter Eleanor, the wife of Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland. Lord Poynings's eldest son, Sir Richard, had died in 1429, leaving Eleanor as his sole heir. However, Sir Richard's two brothers, Robert and Edward, pressed their claim as heirs by gavelkind, in which tenure several of the Kentish estates were held. They were unsuccessful, and together with the two generations that followed, remained mere gentry of Kent and Sussex.²⁹ In

the second half of the fifteenth century the Neville Lords Bergavenny were prominent in Kent, with their seat at Birling. While holding a Welsh title (from Abergavenny), their land came from the Hastings earls of Pembroke. George, third Lord Bergavenny (d. 1535) married as his second wife Margaret, daughter of the Kentish Brent family, who at this time were of merely gentlemanly rank, suggesting that this may have been a love match.³⁰

County Administration

While the nobility may have been at the pinnacle of county society, and occasionally major players in its politics, the machinery of Kent's county administration and law enforcement was largely in the hands of its gentry.³¹ In the Anglo-Norman period the most important of the county officers had been the sheriff, almost autonomous within his shire as the Crown's representative. During the course of the fourteenth century he faced competition from visiting royal and local justices operating with the authority of royal commissions. Under Edward III (1327-77) experiments in the organisation of county justice and administration resulted in the appearance of the county bench of justices of the peace (JPs). During the succeeding century the power of the JPs eclipsed that of the sheriff, taking over most of his judicial and policing roles. The third leg of county administration was the escheator, responsible for protecting the king's feudal rights. Kent shared its escheator with Middlesex. The presence of the Cinque Ports liberty, in Kent covering New Romney, Hythe, Dover and Sandwich, complicated matters since it had its own mechanisms for the enforcement of royal justice and governance, overseen by the Warden, and county officials had no authority within its bounds.

Bruce Webster has analysed Kent's county office holding under Richard II (1377-1399).³² He found that a group of 25 men dominated the shrievalty, bench of JPs and the county's parliamentary representation, each holding at least two of these positions, while twelve of them held all three. While these tended to come from the more substantial gentry families, and to have been knights or esquires, there is no exact correlation between wealth and office holding: the most prestigious county offices did not simply go to the richest men. Royal favour played a part, but doubtless so did personal inclination and ability. Royal influence did not extend to forcing unsuitable or unqualified men on

the county. Even through the crises of Richard's reign, including his usurpation, the impact of national politics on the personnel of local government was minimal. The stability of the administrative elite is noteworthy. Webster's conclusions are generally borne out by an analysis of county office holders from 1422 to 1509. Since the fourteenth century, sheriffs were supposed to be worth at least £20 per annum in landed income – the assumption therefore being that they should be of knightly or esqirual rank - and to be resident in their shire. Of the 69 men who held this office in Kent in this period, all but one were knights or esquires. The one exception, Henry Fane, a gentleman of Hadlow, sheriff in 1508 and 1525, probably owed his appointments to his position as gentleman usher of the Chamber.³³ Most sheriffs had long been resident, and exceptions can again be accounted for by royal influence: Sir Robert Brackenbury, for example, appointed by Richard III in 1485, was among those northern favourites implanted in the south; under Richard he also sat on the Kentish bench and was the archbishop's steward.³⁴ Most of the sheriffs, then, were substantial local gentry; as royal appointees, they were also people in whom the Crown reposed trust. They tended to be drawn from a small group of families: just fourteen supplied half of Kent's sheriffs in the period. The Browns, Cheynes, Cliffords, Guildfords, Pecches and Scotts each provided three sheriffs, while four Culpepers filled the office; one of them, Alexander, did so twice.³⁵

The commissions to the county bench were headed by a small number of magnates - usually including the warden of the Cinque Ports – and included a stiffening of circuit judges. Political influence is naturally apparent in some of these appointments, but with the exception of the judges and, possibly, the warden, the extent to which these great men actually participated in county administration was usually very limited. Excluding these gives us 126 Kentish JPs appointed between 1422 and 1509. They were all Kentish gentry, and while nearly a quarter of them were gentlemen, the bench was still dominated by knights and esquires; indeed, probably every Kentish knight sat at least once on the county bench. As with Richard II's JPs, there is little evidence of political manipulation, with the exception of a purge of the bench after the 1483 rebellion.³⁶ Of considerably less importance were the escheators, and this is reflected in the social composition of those for Kent and Middlesex in this period. There were no knights, less than half were esquires and the rest were gentlemen and four men of non-gentle rank. The

residence requirement was not so closely observed, and Surrey and Essex each provided two escheators, while one other came from Northamptonshire.³⁷

The county was represented in parliament by two MPs. Between 1422 and 1509 37 men are known to have sat for Kent. While nearly half of these were esquires, fourteen (37.8%) were knights.³⁸ The lone gentleman was John Bamburgh, MP in 1427 and 1431, who was also a JP. He probably owed his election in part to his Stafford connection: he had been a Stafford annuitant since at least 1428, and was steward of the family's Kentish lands in the 1440s.³⁹ As this case illustrates, magnate influence could help decide the county's representation. Indeed, it was probably accepted practice that the warden of the Cinque Ports and, occasionally, the archbishop, would promote his own candidate, but promotion did not inevitably lead to election, and this was not systematic manipulation of parliamentary representation. At least 14 MPs had connections with the Crown, as members of the royal affinity, court or household, but it is again doubtful if this amounts to the control of elections: none of these appear to have been unsuitable candidates, and it would be reasonable for a man who had made his mark in county society to find himself a niche at court. At the same time, it would be a foolish electorate that returned a man known to be out of royal favour.⁴⁰

The Gentry Community

Over the period from 1422 to 1509 272 families have been identified of which at least one member bore the title of knight, esquire or gentleman and had his principle residence in Kent.⁴¹ Of these, calculated according to the highest rank attained by a family member during this period, 62.8 per cent were gentlemen, 26.8 per cent esquires and 10.2 per cent knights. The profile of the gentry in terms of titular rank would thus appear as a broadly based but sharply pointed pyramid. These 272 families can be divided into four groups in terms of their tenure of public or seigneurial office. The first is made up of twenty families supplying at least two members as both sheriffs and JPs; second come those 75 families which also supplied members to at least one of these offices; third are the 46 families which supplied only lesser offices, such as escheators; and the final group, of 131, held none of these offices. The following table relates these groups to the highest

titular rank attained by a family member in the period, and to the average wealth of these families, as derived from the 1450 subsidy assessment and inquisitions post mortem.

Group	Knights No. (%*)	Esquires No. (%*)	Gentlemen No. (%*)	Av. annual landed income (£)
1	11 (55)	9 (45)	0 (0)	74
2	17 (22.6)	33 (44)	25 (33.3)	47
<i>1 + 2</i>	<i>28 (29.4)</i>	<i>42 (44.2)</i>	<i>25 (26.3)</i>	<i>60</i>
3	0 (0)	9 (19.5)	37 (80.4)	20
4	0 (0)	22 (16.7)	109 (83.2)	19
<i>3+4</i>	<i>0 (0)</i>	<i>31 (17.5)</i>	<i>146 (82.4)</i>	<i>19.5</i>
Total	28 (10.2)	73 (26.8)	171 (62.8)	

* percentage of group totals or, for final row, of the total number of 272 families.

There is a broad, not exact, correlation between rank, office-holding and wealth. The groups determined by office-holding do not match neatly with the three titular gentry ranks, nor do the wealth levels have much correspondence with the theoretical thresholds for knights, esquires and gentlemen of £40, £20 and £10 respectively. However, there was clearly a significant division between groups 1 and 2 on the one hand and groups 3 and 4 on the other. The groups either side of this division may appropriately be called the county gentry and the parish gentry. The former contained all of the knights, over half of the esquires but fewer than 15 per cent of the gentlemen; its 95 member families dominated the more prestigious county offices, and enjoyed average annual incomes about three times greater than those of the parish gentry, of whom the majority were gentlemen who never held important county office. This group of 177 parish gentry families constituted 65 per cent of the total number of gentry families in the period. The political history of later medieval Kent inevitably focuses on the minority of county gentry, but the majority were only marginally involved in politics and their county's governance.

A County Community?

Clearly, there was not one undifferentiated class of landowners in Kent: the greater gentry had more in common with the minor titled nobility than with the mere gentlemen, who in turn led lives not very different from the non-gentle yeomen immediately beneath them. Nor should one assume that all of these felt part of one county community.⁴²

Differentiated vertically, there may also have been important horizontal distinctions:

Kent may not have been one county community, but a county of regional sub-communities. The areas of highest concentration of gentry residences were the environs of London and in the Stour Valley; next came the Medway Valley, followed by the central and eastern parts of north Kent. The areas of lower density were Romney Marsh and the Vale of Kent, while the Downs and the high Weald were the most sparsely populated by the gentry. Within this broad pattern are variations dependent on rank. There was a greater preponderance of county gentry seats in the fertile arable lands of east Kent, particularly the Stour valley and the northern lowlands. Here were also concentrated the great ecclesiastical estates, in which a number of the gentry found employment and patronage, and here too were many of the landed investments of the moneyers of Canterbury and the merchants of the Cinque Ports. The area around London had a large number of lesser gentry, many of them with London connections, either as scions of metropolitan families or through employment or business interests. The high Weald was largely the preserve of lesser gentlemen, but to the west the archiepiscopal and Stafford lordships seem to have encouraged settlement of some of the greater gentry, such as the Culpepers and Pympe. The London fringe and high Weald appear to have constitute sub-communities, whose inhabitants had relatively fewer contacts with the rest of the county's gentry, and relatively more contact with outsiders, respectively, Londoners and other Wealden folk, either Sussex gentry or those of non-gentle status in both counties.⁴³

There is a correlation between socio-economic rank and the geographical spread of connections and interests. The greater gentry had more extensive business interests (buying or selling property or acting as feoffees) and family connections outside the county, and outside the South East, than their lesser cousins. For example, during the period 1422 to 1509, the Scotts, Hautes and Culpepers were between them involved with

the residents of 25 counties, ranging from Northumberland to Cornwall to Calais, either in business deals or in marriage.⁴⁴ By contrast, lesser families like the Alfeghs, Hexstalls, Ellises and Brents had only a handful of business contacts outside the South East, and only the Brents held property outside this area.⁴⁵ While the greater gentry might have identified more readily with their county as a whole, particularly since they were most heavily involved in its governance and representation, their mental horizons would also have extended far beyond its borders, perhaps diluting any exclusive county loyalty. The parish gentry would have ventured much less frequently beyond their locality (and for those living near the border this would necessarily have extended into other counties or into London) and so their sense of 'Kent' as a whole, as a focus for loyalty and sentiment, is again debatable. Nevertheless, there was a sense of Kentish solidarity among some of the gentry, as is demonstrated by Sir John Fogge's foundation of a chantry in 1462 for the souls of Kentishmen who had died fighting for Edward IV.⁴⁶

To address the temporal dimension, we may ask to what extent this was a stable community over time: how deep-rooted were these gentry families? The rates of depletion and recruitment into the gentry can be assessed by sampling two generations. Each sample is made up of resident families of gentry rank (classed according to the highest rank attained within the period by a family member): the first comprises 177 families present from 1422 to 1437; the second comprises 190 families from 1494 to 1509, about two generations later. Of the first, 83 per cent were still represented in the second group, so displaying a very respectable level of survival for this period.⁴⁷ Many of Kent's fifteenth-century gentry were of long-standing. Kent had been home to the Freninghams, Peckhams, and Savages since the twelfth century.⁴⁸ The Appulderfields, Cheynes, Northwoods, Hautes and Kyriels had been among the county's gentry in the 1290s.⁴⁹ The Auger, Cobham, Culpeper and Septvans families could traced their Kentish roots to at least the reign of Edward II.⁵⁰ Only slightly less impressive, fifteenth-century members of the Pympe, Malmayns and Seynt Nicholas families could claim Kentish ancestors in the male line from at least the reign of Edward III.⁵¹

External Influences

Writing in 1570, the former Londoner William Lambarde observed of his adopted county:

The gentlemen be not here (throughout) of so auncient stockes as elsewhere, especially in the partes nearer to London, from whiche citee (as it were from a certeine riche and wealthy seed plot) courtiers, lawyers, and marchants be continually translated, and do become new plants amongst them.⁵²

While not of general applicability, in the later medieval period Lambard's impressions would have been accurate for the region he knew best, the London environs. The property market in this area was unusually active. The availability of many small properties provided a relatively easy toe-hold for outsiders, particularly Londoners.⁵³ These probably made up the largest single group of outsiders with whom the Kentish gentry were involved in property transactions.⁵⁴ As the most populous city in England, the country's most important trading centre, and increasingly the focus of the court and royal household, government and the law, London inevitably exerted a major influence throughout the county, not just in north-west Kent. Of two hundred pardons taken out between 1437 and 1494 by individuals describing themselves as of gentle rank and resident – though not necessarily exclusively resident – in Kent, nineteen (9.5%) described themselves as 'late of London', as against only seven (3.5%) who described themselves as formerly of another county.⁵⁵ Londoners, or those whose careers brought them to London, provided many new recruits into the Kentish gentry.

Prominent courtiers sometimes found the county a convenient place to settle. The Yorkshireman, Sir Henry Wyatt, was treasurer of the Chamber and councillor to Henry VII, and these offices made residence near London a necessity. Accordingly, in 1492 he purchased Allington castle, near Maidstone. Sir Henry subsequently made other purchases around Allington. He worked his way firmly into Kentish society, and was associated with the Cheyne, Scott and Crowmer families.⁵⁶ The royal household provided careers for a number of Kentish gentry, and in turn the Crown was able to use them to extend its influence into the county. Of many possible examples, two are provided by the

Savages and the Cobhams. Sir Arnold Savage (d. 1375) was a member of the Black Prince's household, and his wife, Eleanor, was nurse to the future Richard II; their son, Sir Arnold (d. 1410), was a member of Richard II's household and retained royal favour under Henry IV.⁵⁷ John de Cobham (d. 1399) had links with the earl of Devon's brother which by 1388 probably led to him becoming a king's esquire.⁵⁸

Personnel of the royal administration occasionally settled in Kent. Nicholas Lathel was clerk of the Exchequer from at least 1469/70, and baron from at least 1489. From the 1460s he resided and bought land in the Orpington, Chelsfield and St Mary's Cray area, by which time he was describing himself as a gentleman of Kent. Despite this, most of his associates appear to have been Londoners or Kentish yeomen, rather than his fellow gentry.⁵⁹ The Westminster law courts provided further recruits. Sir Robert Rede, chief justice of common pleas from 1506 until his death in 1518/9, came from a Norfolk and Lincolnshire mercantile family. By 1476 he had married Margaret, the daughter of John Alfegh of Chiddingstone, which probably brought him into the county: in a pardon of 1482 he described himself as a gentleman of Chiddingstone, late of London. In addition to land at Chiddingstone and Hever, acquired after his father-in-law's death in 1488, Rede, like Lathel, purchased land in the Orpington area. Unlike Lathel, Rede was deeply immersed in the affairs of his gentry neighbours: perhaps a rising lawyer and future chief justice was a more useful person to cultivate than a mere clerk and future baron of the Exchequer.⁶¹ Sir William Rickhill (d. 1407), justice of common pleas, acquired property in Kent, among several other counties, and seems to have fallen out with his eldest son and name-sake: Sir William settled most of his property on others, leaving William junior with just two Kentish manors. On the basis of these he nevertheless integrated successfully into the county gentry, representing Kent in the 1420 parliament, while maintaining his metropolitan links.⁶² Sir Robert Bealknap (d. 1401), chief justice of common pleas, although apparently of Sussex origins, also founded a Kentish gentry family.⁶³

Kent was fertile soil for mercantile social climbers. William Whetnall, the son of a London grocer and alderman, married Margaret, the daughter of William Hexstall esquire, in or shortly before 1457. Their son, William junior, inherited the extensive Hexstall property around Tonbridge, and in 1501/2 enjoyed an annual landed income of

100 marks. He seems to have fitted well into gentry society, marrying Jane, the daughter of Sir William Crowmer.⁶⁴ Crowmer's own forebears were Londoners. His namesake, a draper, alderman and several times mayor of London, purchased several manors and properties in Kent in the first half of the fifteenth century.⁶⁵ Likewise, Richard Lovelace (d 1466), citizen and mercer of London, acquired three Kentish manors and established his children as gentry.⁶⁶ The son and grandson of the London alderman Sir Richard Lee (d 1472), both named Richard, established themselves as Kentish esquires, but both chose to be buried with Sir Richard in London.⁶⁷

The standing of another London merchant family – the Boleyns – rose spectacularly after they had made the transition. Geoffrey Boleyn, a mercer and alderman of London, already had some Kentish property by the time of his death in 1463, but it was his son and grandson who established the family as resident county gentry. Geoffrey's son, Sir William, claimed the Hoo estates through his mother, daughter of Thomas, Lord Hoo and Hastings, and this inheritance provided him with a substantial stake in the county. He died in 1490 leaving two sons. The younger, Sir William II, sat on the Kentish bench between 1502 and 1505, but it was the elder who made the biggest impression. This was Thomas, earl of Wiltshire and Ormond (d. 1538), Henry VIII's father-in-law. In four generations his family had climbed each rung of the social ladder from mere merchant to the second highest in the land.⁶⁸

The nexus of court and commerce is also apparent in the cases of Nicholas Potyn (d. 1398) and John Pecche (d. 1380). Potyn was born in Rochester but made his early career as a London draper, and was closely connected with the court circle of Alice Perrers. In the 1370s Potyn and his daughter married into the Kentish gentry and thereby he acquired three manors and an interest in a third, which he supplemented with purchased property. While three times a county MP, he never sundered his London connections.⁶⁹ John Pecche, London fishmonger, mayor and MP, had connections with the same courtly circle as Potyn, which led to his impeachment before the Good Parliament of 1376. He was also connected with John of Gaunt. Like Potyn he acquired Kentish estates, but these were just one part of a property portfolio covering half a dozen counties. His son, Sir William Pecche, inherited the Kentish properties and settled at Lullingstone, but, like Potyn, Lathel, and the Lovelaces, the Pecches never completely

severed their metropolitan links.⁷⁰ Potyn was certainly not the only Kentishman to seek his fortune in London. Edward, son and heir of Richard Haute and Elizabeth Tyrell, established himself as a London mercer, but he did not have Potyn's head for business, and by his death in 1530 he had been forced to sell off his landed property to pay his debts.⁷¹

The other end of the county looked towards mainland Europe, and particularly, after its conquest in 1347, Calais. A number of the Kentish gentry served here. Sir William Pecche died there in 1399, perhaps while on military service, while Thomas Brockhill (d. 1411) was captain of Marck castle.⁷² Richard Clitheroe (d.1420) held office and property there from the early 1390s, and was particularly associated with the Calais mint.⁷³ Sir Gervase Clifton was treasurer, and Sir John Cheyne victualler, of Calais in the 1450s.⁷⁴ William Haute (d. 1462) served in the retinue of Sir John Stuard, captain of Rysbank, and it was in Calais in 1429 that he married Joan, daughter of Richard Woodville of Northamptonshire and Maidstone.⁷⁵

On the Kentish side of the Channel, the Cinque Ports brought recruits into the ranks of the gentry. During the later fourteenth century John Monyn of Dover acquired substantial property in the area and in Canterbury and, most importantly, a landed estate in Buckland. By the time of his death, sometime after 1417, he had been known as an esquire for many years.⁷⁶ John Adam of New Romney (d.1440) had acquired land in Marden, Newchurch and in Sussex by 1412, and within seven years he had married Eleanor, grand-daughter and coheir of John, Lord Northwode, which brought him further lands and the status of esquire.⁷⁷ Thomas Loveryk of Sandwich accumulated lands in Thanet and elsewhere, and by 1427 was being described as a gentleman.⁷⁸

Service in the Cinque Ports administration brought newcomers into the county. Geoffrey Louther, the younger son of a Cumberland gentry family, came to Kent as lieutenant to Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, warden of the Cinque Ports.⁷⁹ Opportunities at Dover Castle also opened up for local landowners, the most prominent example – and also one of the most short-lived – being James Fiennes, Lord Saye and Sele, appointed constable of Dover castle and warden of the Cinque Ports in 1447, three years before his execution by the Cade rebels. His lieutenant was the Nottinghamshire-born Sir Gervase Clifton.⁸⁰ From 1450 the wardenship was held by the duke of Buckingham, who utilized

his Kentish connection to fill posts in the Dover administration. Among them was Thomas Hexstall. Originally from Staffordshire, he had followed his brother William south in Stafford service. By 1454 he had been appointed Buckingham's receiver at Dover, where he established himself as a prominent gentleman-merchant. Both Thomas and his son Edward served as mayor. Hexstall's superior as receiver was Sir Thomas Kyriel, Buckingham's lieutenant of Dover.⁸¹

Lordship

Kent was not impervious to the influence of magnate patronage, affinities and retaining, the so-called 'bastard feudalism' characteristic of later medieval English society. Like Louthur, Thomas Town of Throwley, MP for Kent in 1420, belonged to the duke of Gloucester's affinity.⁸² In the later fourteenth century both John of Gaunt and the Black Prince had Kentish followers: Sir John Culpeper was one of Gaunt's retainers, while Sir Arnold Savage (d. 1375) was a member of the Black Prince's household, and died at the Prince's manor of Wallingford.⁸³ Nicholas Potyn (d. 1398), was closely connected with John, Lord Devereux, warden of the Cinque Ports in the 1390s, but their acquaintance seems to have brought him little preferment, and may have been an instance of friendship, rather than a patron-client relationship.⁸⁴ Friendship and patronage appear to have co-existed in the case of John Freningham (d. 1410) and Hugh, earl of Stafford. He was appointed as Stafford's attorney, executor and guardian of his property before the earl departed on pilgrimage in 1386, and the connection continued under his successor. Freningham was also a client of Archbishop Courtenay and had close links with John, Lord Cobham, which may have persuaded him to join Bolingbroke in 1399.⁸⁵ His brother, Sir Ralph Freningham, married his daughter to his neighbour Reynold Pympe, who was a tenant and had probably been a ward of Earl Hugh.⁸⁶ William, brother of Thomas Hexstall, was the duke of Buckingham's receiver for his Kent and Surrey estates by 1438.⁸⁷ A decade earlier, the connection of Richard Woodville of the Mote, near Maidstone, with the duke of Bedford would have far-reaching consequences for his family and, ultimately, for England.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, the Pympes had fostered links with the Beauforts, and later in the century Richard Guildford's marriage to Anne, daughter of

John Pympe, would bring him into the Beaufort circle, and help to determine his political orientation under Richard III and Henry VII.⁸⁹

Prelates also retained members of the gentry. Richard Waller was a retainer of Cardinal Beaufort, and by 1439 had become master of his household, later becoming steward for life of the episcopal lands and executor of Beaufort's will.⁹⁰ However, the major ecclesiastical presence in the county was the archbishop, and a substantial number of the gentry were archiepiscopal clients, many finding preferment in the administration of the temporalities. The most important office was that of steward of the lands. In the fifteenth century this was filled by, among others, John Darell (1423-1437), James Fiennes, later Lord Saye and Sele (1443-1450) and Sir Robert Brackenbury (1484-1485).⁹¹ One characteristic linking all four is their connection, either with the warden of the Cinque Ports (in Darell's case), or with the royal household: it was deliberate policy to appoint to this post men who would have influence with the powerful. There were ample opportunities for less well connected men among the Kentish gentry. John Freningham was a client of Archbishop Courtenay, and John Butler probably came to Kent as an esquire in Courtenay's household: he sat as a county MP in 1413.⁹² Sir Nicholas Haute was Archbishop Arundel's reeve of Reculver in 1396/7; this, and his acquaintance with John, Lord Cobham, may have rendered him suspect in the later 1390s, since after his shrievalty in 1396/7 he was not again given official employment under Richard II.⁹³ Roger Honyton probably came to Kent from Devon in Archbishop Arundel's service, for whom he became constable of Saltwood and Queenborough castles, parker of Saltwood and bailiff of Hythe; he continued to be retained by Archbishop Chichele, and it was primarily archiepiscopal service that gave him a place among the county's gentry, since he was not a landowner of much consequence.⁹⁴ Stephen Bettenham (d. 1415) of Cranbrook was Chichele's bailiff of Maidstone.⁹⁵ Roger Rye of Canterbury and Eythorne was Archbishop Chichele's bailiff of Wingham and steward of the archiepiscopal liberty, and acted as one of his feoffees. This connection probably promoted him into county office: he was MP for Kent in 1417, three years after he first appears as the archbishop's servant.⁹⁶ Rye's position as MP is somewhat unusual for a steward of the liberty. Lesser men tended to be employed in this post, since it was probably expected that it be discharged in person, whereas the steward of the lands

generally appointed a deputy. Stewards of the liberty may often have been professional administrators. Thus, Richard Bruyn, steward of the liberty in 1442, was variously described as gentleman or esquire, and never appeared among the gentry elite. He was from Staffordshire, and like the Hexstalls came south in Stafford service, being employed as the duke of Buckingham's steward of Kent.⁹⁷ Of slightly less significance than the stewards were the receivers. Men who filled these posts in the fifteenth century included William Palmer, receiver of Maidstone in the 1430s, Robert Est (a *bête noire* of the Cade rebels, who held office while Sir James Fiennes, later Lord Saye and Sele, held the stewardship), Robert Tottisherst, receiver of Otford in the 1480s, and Roger Shelley, receiver-general from 1489 to 1490. All were gentlemen.⁹⁸ Chichele made particular use of family connections among the Kentish gentry. His steward of the lands, John Darell, was married to a daughter of his brother, William Chichele. In 1432 John Tattershal of Woolwich, the son of a London draper, married Agnes, the fourteen-year-old daughter of John Chichele and thus a kinswoman of the archbishop; either by the time of his marriage or shortly after he was the steward of the archiepiscopal liberties.⁹⁹

Assimilation

Newcomers sometimes found it hard to win acceptance from longer established gentry families. The Hexstall brothers had many associates from outside the Kentish gentry, particularly Londoners and Kentish yeomen and merchants, but their links with their fellow gentry were few. Their status as new arrivals, and their urban and mercantile interests, may have counted against them.¹⁰⁰ The same seems to have held true for the Lovelace family, of London origins, who settled in Kent in the 1460s.¹⁰¹ Such was not the experience of all new arrivals. Sir Thomas Fogge seems to have been the first member of his family to settle in Kent, brought there by his marriage to Joan, daughter of Sir Stephen de Valoignes; his standing owed much to his successful war service in the retinue of Henry of Lancaster, and he went on to represent his adopted county in parliament throughout much of the 1370s and '80s.¹⁰² Sir Reginald Braybrooke (d. 1405) came from a major Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire family; his first connection with Kent probably came with his marriage to a grand-daughter of Lord Cobham. This rather tenuous link was considerably strengthened in 1398, when Braybrook was granted

custody of the forfeited Kentish estates of the banished Cobham. He seems to have found Kent to his liking, and continued to reside there after Cobham's restoration in 1399.¹⁰³

Those who had successfully established themselves did not necessarily forget their origins. William Keen was a West-country man who was brought to Kent through his marriage to Agnes, the daughter of John Chichele. The couple settled in Woolwich. William went on to serve as sheriff, and from 1456 to 1460 he sat on the county bench and on various commissions. He died in 1467, and in his will he left bequests not only to Woolwich and Eltham churches, but also to churches in Somerset and Dorset.¹⁰⁴ Also of West country origin was the judge, Sir Walter Moyle, the third son of Thomas Moyle of Bodmin in Cornwall. By 1454 he had settled at Eastwell in Kent. In that same year he was appointed justice of King's Bench. He was knighted in 1465. His son, John, built on these foundations, and his inquisition post mortem of 1501 shows him to have been one of the wealthiest of the county's gentry. While his feet were firmly planted in Eastwell, John maintained links with his ancestral home, and sat for Bodmin in the 1467/8 parliament.¹⁰⁵

The examples given so far of newcomers could be repeated several times over, and they reveal varying degrees of success in assimilating. Kinship often played a crucial part in this process. Rede, Whetnall and Keen married their way into the gentry, and all three of these families, including the relatively humble Whetnalls, came to be accepted by the Kentish elite. Although the Boleyns made their first foray into Kent by purchasing land, it was through kinship, in the shape of the Hoo inheritance, that they became established. Moyle and Wyatt appear to have bought themselves in without relying on marriage alliances, but they were already of gentle birth and substantial means before they moved. By contrast, lesser men like Lathel, the Lovelaces and Ford may have met resistance. Londoners of aldermanic rank found ready acceptance, but perhaps it was a different story for less substantial city immigrants. While Lathel and Ford may have simply been seeking a 'weekend cottage' in the country, it is equally possible that they wished to found gentry families and were discouraged from doing so. On the other hand, continued contact with London does not necessarily imply a lack of successful integration with landed society: the Pecches of Lullingstone maintained their membership of London companies throughout the fifteenth century.¹⁰⁶ Not surprisingly then, pre-existing wealth and status helped ease the passage into Kentish gentry society.

The network of Clitheroe, Darell, Louthier and Clifford shows how successfully even migrants from the far north of England could forge careers in Kent. Richard Clitheroe (d.1420) was probably the younger son of a Lancashire gentry family who made his fortune in London and then moved out to Kent. He rendered valuable service to Richard II and Gaunt as an expert in military logistics and, as we have seen, also held office in Calais. In 1412 his Kentish property was valued at £141 13s 4d, amassed largely through purchase with the profits of royal service. Kent would have provided a convenient base for his interests in London and Calais. His success encouraged other members of his family to settle in Kent: Richard Clitheroe II and William Clitheroe, both became prominent burgesses of New Romney.¹⁰⁷ John Darell was the younger son of a Yorkshire gentry family. He came south and married into the Kentish family of Baret when his elder brother inherited. He supplemented his wife's property through purchase, and by 1412 was assessed at £50 in Kent, and his second marriage around 1418 to Florence, the niece of Archbishop Chichele, brought him Scotney Castle. By the time of his second marriage he had already been associated with the archbishop for at least two years and he was also in the circle of Ralph Neville, earl of Westmoreland and his brother, Lord Furnivall. John's brother, William Darell, also came south, and was sheriff of Kent in 1416/7.¹⁰⁸ Geoffrey Louthier of Cumberland, who arrived in Gloucester's service, became a central figure in the county as a JP and MP, and held property in and around Canterbury.¹⁰⁹ Robert Clifford's brother, Richard, bishop of London, was probably instrumental in bringing him south from their family home in Northumberland. By 1399 he had established himself in Kent, and by 1412 his lands in the county, largely acquired through purchase, were valued at £54 6s 8d. He sat as one of the county MPs in the 1406 parliament, but also acted as proxy to the other Kent MP, his fellow northerner Richard Clitheroe, absent as admiral of the fleet; Clifford later acted as Clitheroe's feoffee.¹¹⁰ This group demonstrates the importance of family links in introducing newcomers into the county, but its members also associated with each other in business and in their public lives. This network of readily identifiable – and perhaps self identifying – northerners in early fifteenth-century Kent can be compared with that other group of northerners settled in Kent under Richard III: the former's acceptance, while

perhaps maintaining a separate identity, contrasts markedly with the hostility aroused by the latter.¹¹¹

There was some movement into the gentry from below. Richard Champney provides an intriguing case. In an heraldic visitation of Kent probably made soon after 1499 he is described as a herald, Gloucester King of Arms, but in a pardon he described himself as a gentleman of Selling, alias a franklin of Kent, alias late a yeoman, alias late a gentleman of London.¹¹² The use of the term 'franklin' is unusual by the early Tudor period, and may indicate a herald's interest in matters antiquarian, but seems to be in line with Champney's description of himself as once of yeoman status, and indicates that he was of non-gentle origins. He was nevertheless still of sufficient rank to marry into the Kentish gentry family of Dreyland.¹¹³ A less secure entrant into gentry society was John Sharp. In his pardon of 1470 he described himself as a gentleman of Benenden, late a yeoman, and lately undersheriff to Sir John Culpeper (sheriff in 1466/7). His association with the Culpepers predated his appointment: in 1458 he was a feoffee of Walter Culpeper esquire, and in 1463 John Sharp, 'yeoman', was a feoffee of Nicholas Culpeper. The John Sharp who was escheator in 1500 may well have been the son of the undersheriff, in which case neatly indicating, through his tenure of a more prestigious office than that of his father, their family's rising status.¹¹⁴ Others near the lower edge of gentry society included John Roberts, who in his pardon of 1458 described himself as a gentleman of Cranbrook, alias yeoman, alias draper.¹¹⁵ Such descriptions do not indicate if the subject was upwardly or downwardly mobile, or even just in a long-term marginal state. In the case of John Aldy, the direction of movement was unmistakeably upward. In his pardon of 1470 he described himself as a Sandwich merchant and one-time London grocer; by 1483 that description had changed to gentleman of Ash-next-Sandwich, alias merchant, and lately mayor of Sandwich. In addition to the mayoralty, which he held in 1468 and 1476, he was also victualler of the Cinque Ports' fleet from 1461 to 1463, and MP for Sandwich from 1463 to 1465 and from 1472 to 1475. Thomas Aldy, parliamentary burgess for Sandwich in 1504, and probably John's grandson, described himself, unequivocally, as a gentleman in his will of 1534.¹¹⁶

Clearly, the barrier between gentle and non-gentle was permeable. Lambarde's account of the relations between gentry and yeomanry, though written much later and

doubtless idealised, does seem to reflect something of the social realities of later medieval Kent.

A man may find sundry yeomen (although otherwise for wealth comparable with many of the gentle sort) that will not yet for all that change their condition, nor desire to be apparailled with the titles of gentrie.

Neither is this any cause of disdain, or of alienation of the good minds of the one sort from the other: for no where else in all this realme, is the common people more willingly governed.¹¹⁷

The general prosperity of much of the region, the comparative personal freedom of the non-gentle population, gavelkind and the freedom to buy and sell all combined to produce a yeomanry that – while doubtless deferential to its social superiors – was in no way servile.¹¹⁸ The gentry regularly did business with those below them. Around a third of fifteenth-century gentry partners in property transactions were yeomen.¹¹⁹ While their supervisors and most of their executors were of gentry or noble rank, many feoffees and executors of gentry wills were drawn from their lesser, non-gentle neighbours.¹²⁰

Family Structure

Social permeability may have been further facilitated by the structure of many Kentish gentry families. Later medieval Kent seems to demonstrate an unusual number of families whose several branches spanned the strata of the ranks of gentility and, sometimes, beyond. The clan-like nature of many of these families was not peculiar to later medieval Kent. A mid-seventeenth-century writer on Cheshire gave this account of the clan families in that county:

In no county of England the gentlemen are more ancient and of longer continuance than in this county ... So you shall have in this county, six men of one surname (and peradventure of one house) whereof the first shall be called a Knight, the second an Esquire, the third a Gentleman, the fourth a Freeholder, the fifth

While clearly not unique in this respect, Kent was unusual in the degree to which this phenomenon can be observed. The family of Bettenham included esquires, gentlemen and at least one yeoman. They took their name from the village of Bettenham, near Cranbrook, where they had been resident since at least the mid-fourteenth century. The most prominent Bettenham was Stephen, an esquire and lord of the manors of Throwley and Sheerland in Pluckley and a county JP from 1389 to 1414, the year before he died. The other fifteenth-century male Bettenhams appear to have been gentlemen, with one exception, another Stephen, but a yeoman; in the 1480s he, and his gentlemanly namesake (Stephen the JP's grandson), were both tenants of the Roberts' manor of Glassenbury, near Cranbrook.¹²² The Martyns of Graveney, near Faversham, could boast a justice of Common Pleas in the person of John Martyn esquire (d. 1436). His son and grandson who were both called Richard and both esquires. There were other Martyns in later medieval Kent, however, of whom some were merchants, some yeomen, and some ranking as low as husbandman and labourer.¹²³ Perhaps even knightly families might have had non-gentle relations. The rebel leader executed for treason in February 1450 was known variously as the King of the Fairies or Bluebeard, but his real name was Thomas Cheyney, a Kentish fuller. Other bearers of the Cheyne name, or close variants, included George Cheynewe of Leigh, near Tonbridge, who was a yeoman usher to Edward IV, James Cheyun, a mid-fifteenth-century gentleman of Romney, and the two James Chenews who represented New Romney in fifteenth-century parliaments. The similarities between their family names and that of the prominent knightly family of the Cheynes of Shurland in Sheppey is obvious; less so is the nature, if any, of their relationship. One is reminded of Thomas Hardy's Jack Durbeyfield, the peasant who believed himself a descendant of the knightly d'Urbervilles, which family, though long extinct in the male line, 'consisted of many branches', several of which were thought to continue in circumstances equally as humble as Jack's. Before jumping to conclusions, however, we should remember that, despite the similarity in name, Jack was tragically mistaken in this belief.¹²⁴ Less ambiguous examples of landowning families of several branches are provided by the Cobhams and the Culpepers, although neither seems to have

had roots below the level of the gentry.¹²⁵ The Bayhall and Preston Culpepers divided in the reign of Edward II, and by the early sixteenth century it was possible for two Culpeper branches to be allied by marriage without falling within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity.¹²⁶

Kinship networks may have been more tightly woven in Kent than in many other counties, and it was fairly common for two families to be related several times over by marriages contracted within the space of two or three generations. In addition to the Culpepers, the marriages of the Guildfords of Tenterden and Rolvenden in the Weald provide further examples. They married twice into the the Pympe of Nettlestead, near Maidstone, and three times into the Hautes of Bishopsbourne in the Stour valley. Likewise, the Martyns of Graveney and the Appletons of Dartford were twice related by marriage.¹²⁷

Gavelkind tenure may have contributed towards family longevity, social fluidity, clan families and dense kinship networks. While the freedom to buy and sell land probably meant that repeated sub-division of estates was avoided, the compensation given to younger brothers and other co-parceners may have allowed them to found families close to the patrimonial holding.¹²⁸ Naturally, the extent to which such factors operated among the gentry is debatable. By the later middle ages the distinction between gavelkind as the tenure of the lower orders, with the gentry holding by the military tenures, was fast disappearing. Of the 52 individuals who held land in Kent and who were the subjects of inquisitions post mortem between 1399 and 1413, sixteen held land by gavelkind; of these, Sir Reynold Cobham, who died in 1403, probably held the largest proportion of his lands by this tenure, with most of his Kentish property held in gavelkind.¹²⁹ In 1431, in the areas for which subsidy returns survive, 39 gavelkind properties were held by a total of twelve gentlemen and eleven esquires. While sometimes sizeable, the average value of these gentry-held gavelkind properties was less than half that of the average for the gentry's total assessed holdings (£3 19s. 6d. as against £8).¹³⁰ The influence of gavelkind tenure on the property holding patterns of the gentry should not be overestimated, since this was being negated by two factors. The later Middle Ages saw the widespread employment of the use and other legal measures designed to give the landowner freedom to dispose of his property as he wished,

regardless of the formal constraints implicit in its tenure. Secondly, a small number of prominent early Tudor landowners began to secure private acts of parliament to disgavel their properties.¹³¹ Even so, gavelkind may have played some part in the development of characteristically Kentish family structures among the gentry.