

LANDLORD CONTROL AND MOTIVATION IN THE PARLIAMENTARY ENCLOSURE OF ST. MARY'S-ON-THE-HILL PARISH, CHESTER

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The Chester St. Mary's enclosure of 1805-7 well exemplifies that extreme of what Turner called the 'ownership spectrum' at which a single proprietor possessing most of the affected land was able to 'decide upon the enclosure of a parish'.¹ Not only did the Grosvenors by 1805 represent as proprietors or lessees of the Crown a weighty 'majority in value' of the unenclosed land in St. Mary's-on-the-Hill parish (located partly in Handbridge ward within the liberties of Chester, partly in Claverton township beyond), they also at the time wielded as will be seen a preponderant influence over the corporation and two-member constituency of Chester. It is therefore possible in this case, supplementing the evidence of the act and award with that (most notably) of the extensive Grosvenor muniments, including relevant correspondence, estate maps, rentals and accounts, deeds and abstracts of title, to study in detail the manner in which a great landed family activated and controlled the mechanisms of parliamentary enclosure.² It is also possible, in addition to discovering how and through whom the enclosure was brought about, to penetrate beyond the motive of agricultural improvement professed in its act to a related rise in rents and (most interesting) its intimate link with the creation of a new landscape environment for an expanding country seat. The orchestration and motivation of the enclosure will now be considered in turn.

I

The Chester St. Mary's enclosure acquired its parlia-

mentary authorization between February and June 1805, and was implemented by its commissioners and others concerned between August 1805 and October 1807. It will be the object of this section to determine who initiated, masterminded and implemented the enclosure, concentrating on the procurement of authorizing legislation, on the texts of the bill, act and award, and on other relevant evidence.

When the 'Saint Mary's Chester Inclosure Petition' was presented to the Commons on 28 February, 1805, three local M.Ps. were instructed to prepare the bill.³ They were William Egerton of Tatton, a member for Cheshire, and the two then members for Chester itself, Drax Grosvenor and Thomas Grosvenor. The two Grosvenor M.Ps. were brothers, and were first cousins to the then Earl Grosvenor. Richard Erle Drax Grosvenor (to give him his full name) had replaced his cousin Robert as a Chester M.P. when the latter succeeded as second Earl Grosvenor in August 1802; General Thomas Grosvenor was a Chester member of longer standing, having in 1795 replaced his father, Thomas Grosvenor of Swell Court, a younger brother of the first earl. At the time when the St. Mary's enclosure was proposed the Grosvenors enjoyed, and at great expense jealously guarded, a monopoly of political power in the two-member constituency of Chester; and that the second earl kept an eagle eye on his cousins in the Commons would be evident when in 1807 he forced Drax to resign (and incidentally lost one of those two cherished seats) owing to the latter's 'refractory' conduct in opposing Catholic emancipation.⁴ With little doubt the Grosvenor M.Ps. were expected to serve the interests of their house as the earl perceived them and for that reason were involved in the preparation of the St. Mary's enclosure bill which was presented to the Commons by Egerton the following May.

This bill contains, in an annexed schedule recording the quantities of affected land belonging to each of the proprietors, clear evidence that Earl Grosvenor was by far the most extensively interested party. Of just under 126 acres affected, Grosvenor either as a freeholder or as a lessee of the Crown accounted for no less than 81 acres.⁵ It may or may not be significant that with the two next most substantial proprietors, Harriet Cowper and John Cotgreave, Grosvenor and the Crown accounted for that four-fifths of the property whose owners' concurrence (H.S. Homer had asserted in 1766) was deemed to warrant 'an application to

the legislature to inclose by Act of Parliament'.⁶ Had Grosvenor, one wonders, made sure at an early stage that the other three of those top four proprietors concurred with his intentions?

It is evident that the Crown had already been approached and had proved more than amenable, for a paragraph on page ten of the bill empowers Grosvenor to make therewith extensive exchanges of land and incorporate these in the award. Harriet Cowper, widow of Thomas Cowper of Overleigh who represented a well-established family of Cestrian gentry, was aunt by marriage to Thomas's nephew and heir, Charles Cholmondeley, a younger son of the Cholmondeleys of Vale Royal and a staunch political ally of Earl Grosvenor.⁷ The alacrity with which Harriet and Charles co-operated in selling all her affected property to Grosvenor once the bill became law suggests that they too had concurred with the project at an early stage. It would seem likely that support had also been received from John Cotgreave, representative of another well-established family of Chester gentry, already a councilman and destined to achieve greater prominence in the corporation, for he would soon show such delight in his compact cluster of enclosure allotments on the old 'Cross Flatts' as to build there the stylish Netherleigh House, and he would co-operate with Grosvenor more than once in mutually acceptable exchanges of land.⁸

The social character of the other claimants listed in the schedule would not have made Grosvenor apprehensive of much opposition, on agricultural grounds at least. There were civic figures like Councilman William Newell (a future alderman and mayor) or the immensely affluent Councilman Samuel Brodhurst. There were other well-heeled gentlemen almost in Brodhurst's league like Robert Baxter and George Bushell. There was an attorney-at-law, Joseph Bozley; a surgeon and apothecary, William Connah – both comfortably off. Leivesley Oldham, gentleman, was important mainly as heir-at-law of Thomas Doe, Esquire, whose will favouring his wife and her connections had been the subject of litigation and, so far as it applied to land within the city limits (i.e. in Handbridge) had been discredited leaving Oldham in possession. Mary Connah, the only person not in the schedule who subsequently presented a formal claim to the commissioners, represented a family of bakers. William Brown, though apparently of old Handbridge yeoman stock, was an innkeeper with only half an

acre of affected territory. There were in effect only three claimants accorded the title of 'yeoman' in the award, of whom two at least (William Higgins and John Evans) were at the time of the enclosure Grosvenor tenants of much more land than they actually owned in the open arable area, while the third (Henry Burgess), although basically it seems in 1805 an owner-occupier of open land, had four small strips scattered all over Handbridge and Claverton. It is not surprising that all the listed proprietors (with the exception of two Liverpool gentlemen, Messrs. Brown and Blackstock, who were interested only as trustees of a will) presently signed the bill signifying their assent.⁹

The enclosure bill introduced into the Commons on 16 May also named the commissioners who were to mastermind the award: they were Josiah Potts, of Ollerton in North Cheshire, who was to act on behalf of the Crown, and Timothy Whitby of Eccleston who was to act for Earl Grosvenor 'and the several other proprietors'. It is appropriate to enquire into the connections of these men if we are to trace the St. Mary's enclosure to source.

Josiah Potts of Ollerton, near Knutsford, gentleman, was younger brother of the immensely wealthy attorney-at-law Charles Potts, Esquire, of Northgate Street, Chester. Josiah resided on, and apparently managed, the moderately-sized estate which their father, also Charles, had accumulated by marriage and purchase in North Cheshire. He seems to have interested himself in agricultural improvements, rather than in the family's legal practice, and to have done so with some success since he later bequeathed to his nephew 'my silver cup which I obtained as a prize from the Agriculture Society'.¹⁰ Letters to his brother Charles, with respect to whom he appears to have occupied the station of a comparatively poor relation and unofficial land agent, show some heartfelt concern for unfortunate cases among the family's tenants, and he can on occasion be found seeking to dissuade his brother from courses injurious to those in their control.¹¹ He would have been an obvious choice for Crown commissioner in the event of his brother being approached, and he seems to have served the Crown's interests effectively at St. Mary's, laying together its allocation of allotments in a compact unit on what remained of the old 'townfield' (i.e. open field) area in Claverton.

The identity of the other commissioner, Timothy Whitby of Eccleston, is altogether more revealing for he was none other than the land steward of Earl Grosvenor, holding that

post from 1798 until his death in 1812, and resident at Eccleston because during that period he occupied the sizeable house there that went with his job. He was obviously the man with most knowledge of the property to be redistributed, but it seems rather audacious of Grosvenor to have appointed him after the Commons' standing orders on enclosure bills had been amended in 1801 to prevent anyone being named a commissioner who was 'interested in the inclosure . . . or the agent ordinarily entrusted with the care, superintendence, or management of the estate of any person interested'. Whitby himself appears to have been conscious that a wind of change was blowing in these matters, for in July 1803 he had written to Grosvenor, of the Aldford Heath enclosure: 'It had been in former instances the rule for your Lordship's agent to be one of the Commissioners, but I waived this claim as my employer was materially interested in the Inclosure'.¹² But Grosvenor permitted no such coyness to remove Whitby from the driving seat when the St. Mary's enclosure was contemplated, and his name was written firmly into the bill as, without any doubt, the more powerful of its two commissioners.

Whitby would presently fall foul of Grosvenor in January 1806, but ironically at the very moment when the latter's principal agent and auditor, Abraham Moore, barrister-at-law, had described him as 'a good steward and a very honest man'; and, although flexibly deferring to his master's wrath, Moore continued to praise Whitby's virtues at least 'in the distribution of the estates, and in his attention to the manner in which they were managed by the tenants'.¹³ Moore would continue to praise Whitby's practical flair: after going 'to see the townfields and lands inclosed under the act', he would report to Grosvenor early in 1806 that 'they appear to be very well arranged'; while after the steward's death in 1812 he commented that 'Poor Whitby always professed to let on moderate terms; but I always understood that he was a judge of the value of land'.¹⁴ The last statement would appear to be corroborated by the fact that (by Moore's account) Whitby in the summer of 1806, contemporary with his implementation of the enclosure, revalued all Grosvenor's property in Chester, Handbridge and Claverton, increasing the rents by 'nearly £900', or on average about 50.5%!¹⁵ Whitby was with little doubt an efficient if none too gentle land steward. His correspondence with Grosvenor about particular tenants seems at times harder in tone than that of Potts with his brother, but

he can at times be found steering Grosvenor away from tactlessly provocative courses.¹⁶ Although the attendant spate of rent increases cannot have been welcome to tenants, he would appear to have served his master diligently and effectively when the complicated transactions of the St. Mary's enclosure were in hand.

The complicated nature of the bill stemmed from the clause, already briefly noted, granting Grosvenor special permission, as lessee of the King, and with the written permission of the surveyor general of His Majesty's land revenue, to exchange parts of the 'townfields and inter-mixed lands' with other parts of the same, or with any other lands either within St. Mary's parish or in any adjoining one. This clause was clearly carefully tailored to enable Grosvenor by adroit exchanges to remove all Crown proprietorship from Eccleston parish, so uncomfortably close to his seat at Eaton Hall, and concentrate it at a more acceptable distance along the northerly edge of Claverton. The rearrangement shows up well on the pre- and post-enclosure maps accompanying the award, even though these do not include Eccleston land. (See Maps 1 and 2.)

In addition to the text of the bill, its progress through the legislative process yields further evidence linking it with Earl Grosvenor. It may or may not be significant that after its second reading in the Commons on 20 May, 1805, it was committed (along with William Egerton of Tatton who mainly piloted it with minor amendment through the Commons) to the Cheshire M.P. Thomas Cholmondeley of Vale Royal (later created Baron Delamere of Vale Royal) who was the eldest brother of Grosvenor's ally, Charles Cholmondeley, already noted. It is highly significant that when it came before the Lords' private bill committee on 8 June, the witness brought in to prove the allegations in the preamble, the property details in the schedule, and the consent of the parties, was Mr William Richards.¹⁷ For Richards, apart from being town clerk of Chester at this time, was Earl Grosvenor's personal solicitor and was destined to serve as clerk and treasurer to the St. Mary's enclosure commissioners. Just as the legal and financial business associated with the enclosure was approaching its conclusion in September 1807, moreover, he would be invited to become Grosvenor's political agent at Chester, and agree to serve him in this capacity also.¹⁸ With such an accumulation of evidence pointing towards Earl Grosvenor as the source of the bill, it would have been surprising had

he not been present in person at this committee to signify his own assent thereto, and indeed he was! Two days later the King himself consented to it as an interested party, after which it passed the Lords and received the royal assent on 27 June as 'An Act for inclosing Lands in the Parish of Saint Mary on the Hill, in the City and County Palatine of Chester'.¹⁹

Evidence that Grosvenor dominated the St. Mary's enclosure can also be found in the award itself and related documents. The award mentions that he had bought out Harriet Cowper (as noted earlier), and the relevant deeds record that this transaction was completed on 22 October, 1805, and added some $8\frac{1}{4}$ acres (slightly more than the original estimate in the schedule) to Grosvenor's share of the affected land in Handbridge and Claverton.²⁰ It is also interesting to see how Grosvenor money was used to control the destiny of the land sold to defray the enclosure expenses. The award records that on 25 November, 1805, two plots of land totalling $5\frac{5}{8}$ acres, 'part of the Far Townfield in Claverton', were auctioned for this purpose for a total of £705. What the award does not mention is that soon afterwards, on 14 April, 1806, these were acquired by Grosvenor himself by a part-exchange which left Barker the landlord of three tenements (totalling $4\frac{1}{2}$ acres) at Allington, well away from the affected area, and with a generous balance of £300 on the deal.²¹ That year the already noted 'yeoman', John Evans, who had been listed in the schedule as owner of a mere perch of affected land, became Earl Grosvenor's tenant 'for two Inclosures Bought of the Commissioners 5·2·20 to Defray the expenses in the Town Fields in Handbridge &ca'.²² That expression 'bought of the commissioners' ignores Barker altogether, and indeed it looks as if he were mere camouflage for Grosvenor's proprietary intentions. Grosvenor money again exerted its influence when it was discovered that two small 'quilllets' of land in Ley Hays, Handbridge, belonging to Peter Snow of Lache Hall, had been left out of the enclosure bill 'by mistake'. Whitby advised Grosvenor to purchase them, which he did in June 1806, and they were included in one of the allotments (B2) which he received under the award.²³ (Map 1) Snow's quilllets are drawn in on the initial survey of the award, while in the account of a proportionate assessment to cover remaining expenses with which the award concludes 'The said Peter Snow Esq. by Earl Grosvenor' makes a small contribution.

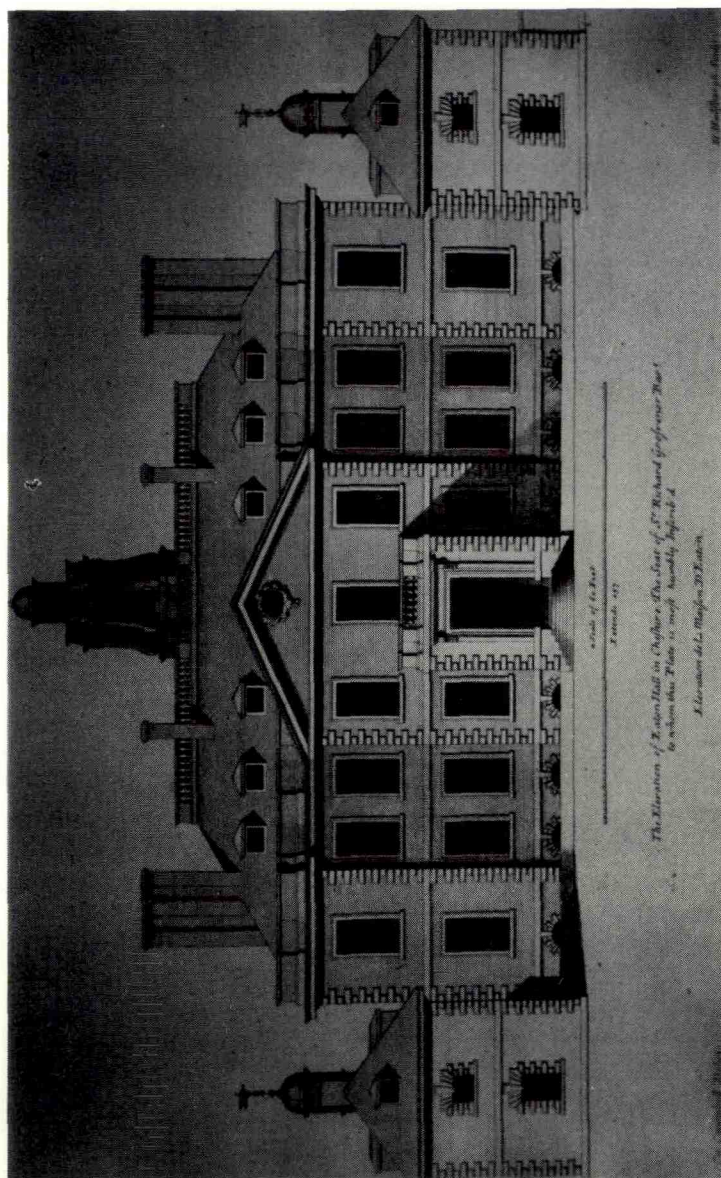


Plate I: Eaton Hall before alterations and enlargements by 2nd Earl Grosvenor. Photograph T.E. Ward.



Plate II: Porden's neo-Gothic version of Eaton Hall begun for 2nd Earl Grosvenor in 1803. Photograph T.E. Ward.

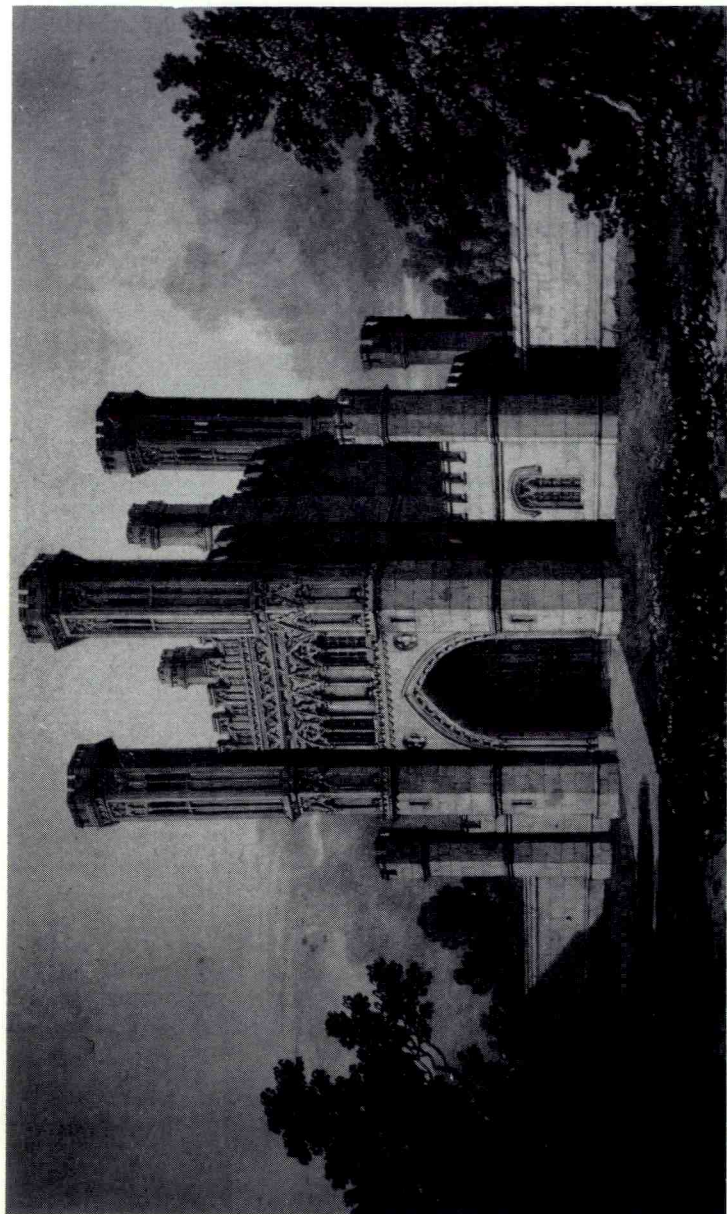


Plate III: Lodge added at the junction of 'Chester Approach' with the new Grosvenor Road and Bridge in 1830s. Photograph T.E. Ward.

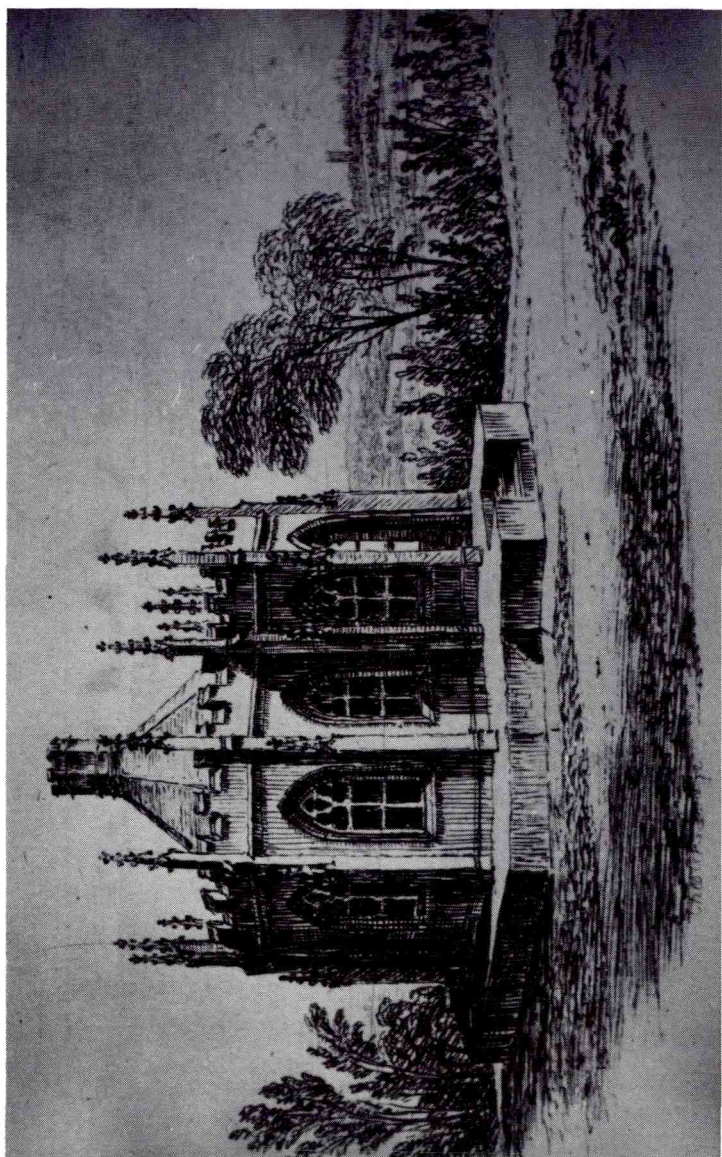
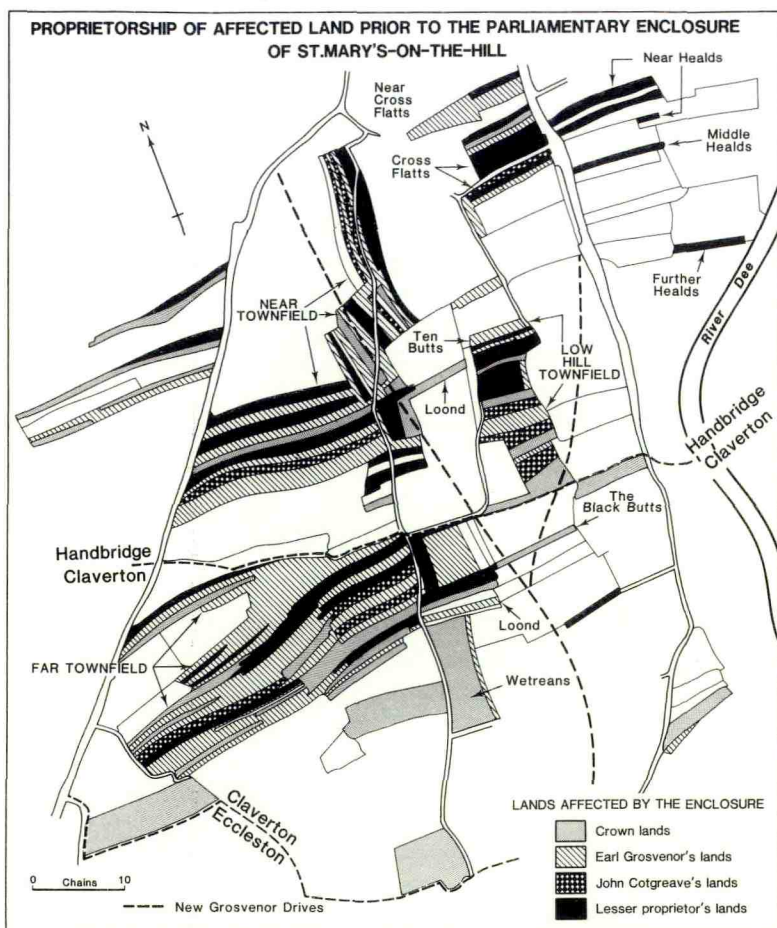


Plate IV: Lodge built at the entrance to the secondary drive in Eccleston Lane (now Eaton Road). Photograph T.E. Ward.



Map 1

Grosvenor control and appropriation are, in short, writ as large in the award as in its legislative preliminaries. Grosvenor predominance is manifest there, whether one explores the list of twenty-six allotments (amounting to nearly $52\frac{1}{2}$ acres) made initially to Grosvenor, or the details of the complicated exchanges with the Crown and others which followed and (according to Moore) substantially increased Grosvenor's share,²⁴ or Grosvenor's proportionate contributions – as lessee of the King, in his own right, and as a purchaser from Harriet Cowper – to the final

assessment, which together account for 63·44% of total proprietorship. And, apart from Grosvenor's territorial predominance on the site, it was obviously his wealth and status and influence, his ability to secure able and willing instruments in Chester and the capital, that placed him in a unique position to fashion a parliamentary enclosure according to his desire and design.

II

But why did he do it? The act gives a conventionally agricultural explanation. As the parish of St. Mary-on-the-Hill contains 'certain Open Fields called *The Townfields*, and certain Quillets or Parcels of intermixed Land', and as

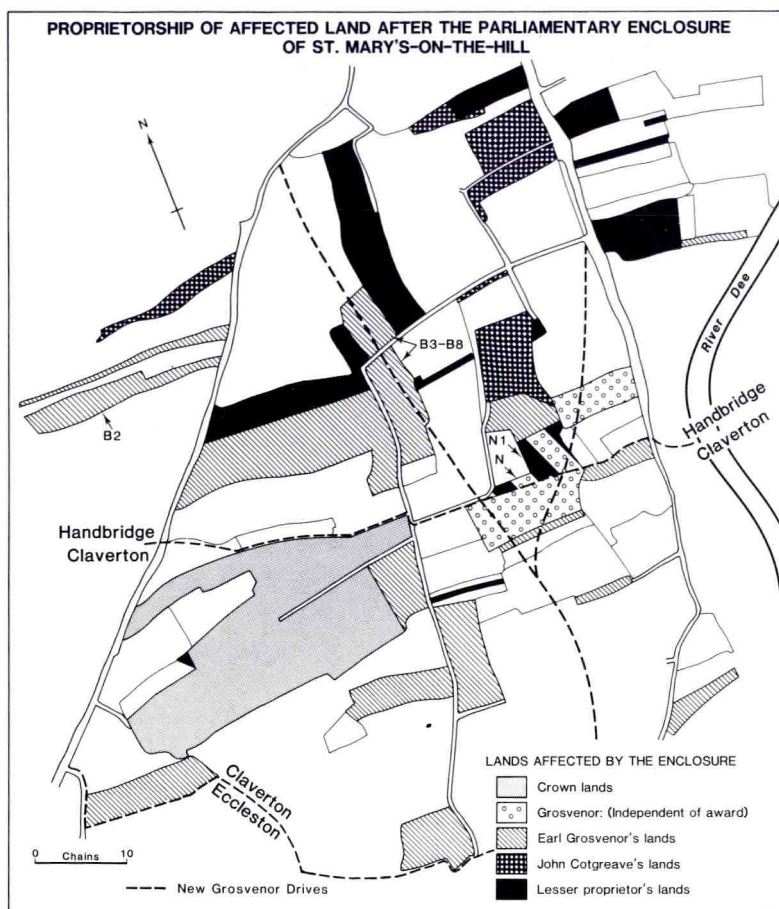
the Lands of each of the several Proprietors therein are intermixed and lie dispersed in small detached Pieces, and are very inconveniently situated for the Occupation and Cultivation thereof, . . . it would be highly advantageous and convenient for the Cultivation of the said Lands, and beneficial to the said Proprietors and all other Persons interested therein, if the same were divided, and the Share or Shares of each Proprietor laid together in separate Closes or Parcels, and inclosed.

Certainly agricultural convenience was a factor. There was much careful laying together of land by the commissioners for the convenience of the Crown, Grosvenor, Cotgreave and others. Again, it was probably no accident that the enclosure was made the occasion for a general revaluation of Grosvenor and Crown property in Chester, Handbridge and Claverton. The great majority of tenants, whether of Grosvenor or Crown land or both, were affected – some suffering rises above, some below, the average of 50·5% indicated by Moore's report to Grosvenor. Doubtless in the upper ranges of increase, if we could identify them all, would be the tenants of land affected by the St. Mary's enclosure. John Evans certainly was, his total Crown and Grosvenor rent rising from £37 6s. 0d. to £67 10s. 0d., or by nearly 81%. The widow of William Higgins, who died in 1806, suffered an even sharper rise in her combined Crown and Grosvenor rent, from £54 13s. 0d. to £100, or nearly 85·5%. Other local farmers, like Joseph Jones and William Kendrick, were less roughly handled, perhaps because less involved with newly enclosed land, facing rises in total rent of 58·3% and 54·2% respectively.²⁵ The rent increase was the more probably a

factor motivating enclosure since Moore reported its total yield to Grosvenor when also noting Whitby's territorially beneficial 'arrangement and exchanges under the act'.²⁶ To probe deeper for the motivation behind a blanket rent increase affecting non-agricultural as well as agricultural premises is more speculative: the inflationary effect of the Napoleonic Wars on the price of agricultural products, and the vaunted superior efficiency of enclosed allotments must compete for historicity here with the desire (which R.C. Allen found potent among enclosers) 'to redistribute income to already rich landowners'.²⁷

But agricultural convenience and higher rents are by no means the whole story. Examination of the plan of the enclosure apportionment annexed to the award (Map 2) reveals that a number of Earl Grosvenor's allotments (B3-B8) had been arranged in such a way as to form a continuous north-south passage some four chains broad, leading from the Wrexham road near Handbridge village down towards the border with Claverton. This passage was flanked by allotments to lesser proprietors which had very evidently been tucked away to one side or the other. Practically all the lesser proprietors had in fact been assigned land either flanking this passage, or in a fairly peripheral situation further east beyond Cotgreave's allotments. The only substantial exception to this pattern was a pair of contiguous allotments (N and N1) lying along the Handbridge side of the border with Claverton, which had been granted to Leivesley Oldham as heir-at-law of the late Thomas Doe. These allotments had obviously been planned by the commissioners so as to adjoin an old close known as the Doe's Hey which commanded the same part of the border but on the Claverton side, and this had been done even though (as the enclosure maps both aver) that close then lay under the distinct proprietorship of a certain Ackerley. Why was this done, and that long avenue cleared for Grosvenor use so effectively blocked where it approached the border with Claverton?

The answer is that both the close in Claverton and some unenclosed Handbridge land possessed in 1805 by Oldham had formed part of a single inheritance, that of Thomas Doe, Esq. (d. 1785), but had since 1787 been in recurrent dispute between Doe's heirs-at-law and his widow who had in 1786 proved a will bearing his signature but extensively favouring her and her connections through a swift remarriage, namely the Ackerleys. Litigation had ensued produc-



Map 2

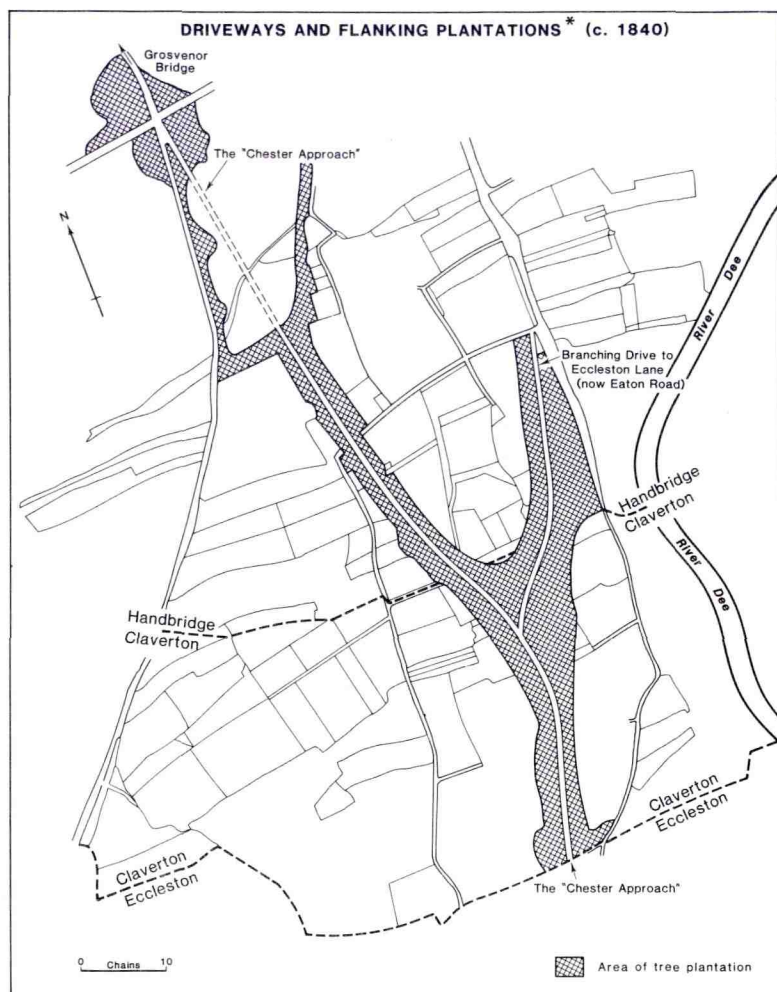
ing the absurd anomaly that, with respect to the land in Handbridge in the liberties of Chester, the city's portmote court had rejected the will and pronounced in favour of the heirs-at-law, but with respect to the close in Claverton the county assizes had upheld the will and favoured the widow and the Ackerleys! In these circumstances a degree of doubt lay over the proprietorship of both the Handbridge and Claverton parts of the Doe inheritance, and the titles would remain in doubt until a solution to the anomaly was devised which was acceptable to both contenders. Embattled enemies are not readily reconciled, and the best that

Whitby was able to do as commissioner was to lay the Handbridge part of the inheritance together with the Claverton one, in the hope (presumably) that these would eventually form a single unit whose proprietorship was no longer disputed and could thus legally be transferred by purchase to the Grosvenors. This was eventually done, the Oldhams buying out the Ackerleys for an enormous sum (Grosvenor money, perhaps?), after which for a still larger sum Earl Grosvenor bought out the Oldhams.²⁸

The fact, then, that Grosvenor did not at the time of the enclosure appropriate an even longer avenue of land reaching into Claverton was because, even for one with his power, it simply could not be done until a long-standing acrimonious and complicated dispute could be brought to an end. There is evidence that, while he waited for that happy consummation, he was intent on appropriating other territory in the vicinity of the immovable obstruction. The allotment plan itself records that a small field called Ironbridge Croft of just over $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres, lying along the Claverton side of the border with Handbridge, had become his presumably in 1807 through one of the several exchanges for Crown land in Claverton or Eccleston which are recorded at the end of the award. Presently, too, he made purchases in that quarter of land which had not been involved in the enclosure. Thus in May 1811 he bought from John Edgeworth and Robert Britain the Iron Bridge Field near Eccleston Lane (now Eaton Road) in Handbridge; and in April 1815 he acquired by exchange from John Cotgreave the sizeable 'Ironbridge Croft' in Handbridge, not to be confused with its more southerly namesake in Claverton.²⁹

The mystery of those curiously aligned Grosvenor allotments combined with subsequent appropriations by exchange or purchase near Eccleston Lane and the Handbridge-Claverton border becomes instantly amenable to solution if one turns for enlightenment from the enclosure award maps to the available Grosvenor estate maps and to the tithe maps for Handbridge and Claverton.

Most illuminating is a map in the Grosvenor collection entitled 'Estates in Chester, Handbridge and Claverton' which can be dated probably to about 1807 since it shows the allocations of land which the award had by that year achieved.³⁰ (Map 3) On it has been sketched, in the same ink as the field names and acreages and thus doubtless at about the same time as the map was drawn, what is evidently the contemplated course of the impressive drive



Map 3

known as the 'Chester Approach' intended to conduct the visitor through nothing but Grosvenor property from a point on the Wrexham road near Handbridge village all the way to Eaton Hall itself. The lesser drive which, starting from Eccleston Lane well within Handbridge, was to join the main approach south of the border with Claverton, is also sketched onto the map, so too are the many acres of trees

intended to flank and screen these drives. There is no doubt about the fact that the intended main approach with its flanking woodland runs directly through Grosvenor's deliberately aligned allotments B3-B8.

When one looks at the altered landscape not in contemplation but in completion, with the drives and trees portrayed as they actually existed, using the beautifully drawn tithe maps for St. Mary's parish within Chester and for Claverton township without, the impression is if anything more forceful, for the outer edges of that line of Grosvenor allotments have become the outer edges of new dense screens of flanking trees. Again, confronted with the exact dimensions of the secondary drive with its attendant woodland reaching to Eccleston Lane, one readily perceives why Grosvenor had acquired Ironbridge Field and the two Ironbridge Crofts.³¹ (See Map 3, where the drives and flanking plantations shown in the tithe awards have been superimposed on the enclosure allotment plan.) Still more striking, because it not only includes in one map all the land involved in the enclosure but sets this in the total context of local Grosvenor proprietorship and expansion, is the 'Bird-Eye View of the Eaton Hall Estate' drawn shortly afterwards for the Grosvenors in December 1842.³²

This map bears eloquent testimony to a sustained intention to expand the Eaton estate in all directions, buying up and landscaping territory within the vicinity of the hall and the various 'approaches' thereto. As an integral part of this co-ordinated policy, it portrays a steady mopping-up operation thrusting northward into Claverton and Handbridge from Eaton and Eccleston. Advances then recently effected and advances made subsequently are all recorded on it, with the name of the ousted proprietor and the acreage acquired. There one can see the last step in the conversion of Claverton (in succession to Eccleston) into an all-Grosvenor township: the purchase in 1850 from John Edwards, Esq., of all the former Crown allotments in what the award had called the 'Far Townfield' area, amounting with other territory to nearly 50 acres. As for the rival proprietors in Handbridge like the Cotgreaves, bought out later in the century, they by this time were rapidly assuming the character of islands in a relentlessly expanding Grosvenor sea.

Any hesitancy in accepting that the landscape scheme there shown approaching its maturity had actually antedated the St. Mary's enclosure of 1805-7 rapidly disappears when one examines the relevant Grosvenor correspondence,

for as early as 1 May, 1804, one finds the fashionable landscape architect, Webb, acquainting Grosvenor of his 'Plan respecting the Chester Approach Road'.³³ On 7 August, 1805, Webb was already sighing over the difficulty of procuring trees for the plantations and the danger that the resulting 'extraordinary' demand might 'advance the price'! For a truly immense scheme was in hand by that time involving the creation of tree-flanked 'approaches' to the hall from various directions, and the acquisition and landscaping of territory in its vicinity. This landscape revolution, one should moreover realize, was a logical accompaniment of the architectural revolution which the second Earl Grosvenor inaugurated at Eaton within months of his succession to the peerage on 5 August, 1802. Perhaps he believed that the 'large plain brick mansion' (Plate I) which had served Grosvenor baronets well enough was now scarcely adequate in view of the dynasty's recent ascent to earldom. William Porden, surveyor of the Grosvenors' London estates, had by January 1803 entered enthusiastically into the scheme for an altogether grander Eaton Hall (Plate II), and was busy persuading Grosvenor to adopt the Gothic style for his new creation: 'Externally considered its picturesque beauties are supereminent, and enrich the appearance of a County far beyond the Grecian'.³⁴ When Grosvenor engaged Webb to redesign the surrounding landscape in accordance with his ambitious architectural project, it would doubtless seem appropriate to give expression to the immense influence which the House of Eaton then exercised over a neighbouring cathedral city by making the 'Chester approach' the most elegant and impressive of them all.

It is intriguing, one may add in parenthesis, to see how Grosvenor's neighbour John Cotgreave, who was himself continuing a proud family association with Chester corporation, and would be elected mayor in 1815 as Grosvenor was in 1807, chose after rounding out (thanks to the enclosure) his own much less extensive estate to the west of Eccleston Lane, to create for himself (circa 1813) in a not dissimilar way if on a much humbler scale the charming Netherleigh House with its elegant frontage and driveway also pointing towards Chester.³⁵

The second Earl Grosvenor's life, however, would prove him a peer given to very grand designs transforming the environment on a scale which dwarfed the efforts of John Cotgreave. No sooner would his alterations to the south of

Chester be crowned by the publication in 1826 of a lavish album of *Views of Eaton Hall in Cheshire*³⁶ than we find him planning changes as dramatic in an urban setting as those he had just effected in a rural one. And, once again, those changes would be prefaced by some facilitating legislation. Indeed, it is probably not too fanciful to see in the St. Mary's enclosure act of 1805, which freed Grosvenor's hand to create a new landscape and approaches to the north of Eaton Hall, a precursor and rustic cousin to the act of parliament by which in 1826 he obtained special powers before laying out in roads, streets and squares that part of his London estate now called Belgravia.

III

To recapitulate, the parliamentary enclosure of lands in St. Mary's parish, Chester, derived from the initiative of Robert, second Earl Grosvenor. Immensely affluent mainly through their property in London, newly graduated to the peerage, politically supreme at Chester, the Grosvenors were intent on enhancing their position as rentiers in the area and at the same time furnishing themselves with a country seat and surrounding parkland worthy of their enhanced status. The second earl was a man of undoubted vision who redesigned first his estates in Cheshire and subsequently those in London, and the essential purpose of the St. Mary's enclosure was to assist with the first of these transformations, particularly with regard to creating an impressive 'Chester approach' to an enlarged Eaton Hall, to reconstructing for efficiency and profit the area in tenement that remained, and enabling Grosvenor appropriation of more territory and tenants in Claverton and Handbridge to proceed apace.

Earl Grosvenor was able to procure and carry through the enclosure bill on account of his strength as a freeholder in the affected area, and as lessee of the Crown land there (pertaining to the old royal manor of Handbridge) in succession to his father. The co-operation of the Crown, together apparently with that of Mrs. Cowper of Overleigh and John Cotgreave, Esq., created a landowner preponderance favourable to the project which would have been sufficient to prevail even had opposition to it existed. Apparently it did not. All the lesser proprietors assented also, most of them in fact not working farmers, and their

minute individual shares of the total 126 or so affected acres did not, anyway, represent viable farming units. This was doubly the case, one may add, as the open arable ground of Handbridge and Claverton had been bereft of permanent pasture by the parliamentary enclosure of Saltney Marsh effective from 1781.³⁷ The landlord strength of Grosvenor and his coadjutors confronted the probable decay after 1781 of what remained of corporate agriculture in an eroded open-field area which even in its heyday had obviously been of somewhat diminutive proportions.³⁸ (See Map 1)

That Earl Grosvenor gave such blatant expression to his territorial ascendancy by appointing his own land steward as a commissioner in defiance of the Commons' standing orders of 1801 may have been because his tentacular influence also reached deep into the municipality and constituency of Chester and into the House of Commons itself where, as only the most obvious symptom of Grosvenor power, his first cousins Thomas and Drax both represented the city at Eaton's gates. The involvement of the ubiquitous Richards – town clerk, Grosvenor solicitor, latterly Grosvenor political agent – as clerk and treasurer to the enclosure commissioners constitutes another artery of Grosvenor influence. This influence, which would look supreme and unchallenged until the bungling in 1807 of Drax's replacement by an alternative Grosvenor agent as M.P., accounts also for the newly succeeded second Earl's contemplation of an impressive new 'Chester approach' to his impressive new domestic cathedral at Eaton.

There was of course the usual talk (in act and award) of agricultural efficiency, but private correspondence tells a different story. Moreover the award maps demonstrate an already lively intention to thrust alien landownership away from Eaton and its approaches, an intention which would be doggedly pursued in the course of the nineteenth century until, first, all Claverton (by 1850) and gradually most of Handbridge entered Grosvenor hands. The example of St. Mary's, despite its distinctive emparking ingredient, is not inconsistent with Sir Gilbert Slater's assertion that parliamentary enclosure was 'essentially a policy directed towards the enhancement of agricultural rents, the building up of large and compact landed estates'.³⁹

NOTES

- 1 M.E. Turner, *English Parliamentary Enclosures* (Folkestone, 1980), p. 152.
- 2 Grosvenor of Eaton MSS, at the Eaton Estate Office, Eccleston, near Chester. Indices are available at the City and County Record Offices, Chester, where documents can be ordered for consultation.
- 3 *Commons Journals*, vol. 60 (1805-6), p. 101. The full text of the petition is apparently lost, but the gist given in the *Journals* was that 'certain Open Town Fields and Quillets or Parcels of Land . . . if the same were divided and inclosed . . . would be very beneficial to the Persons interested therein'.
- 4 *The Victoria History of the County of Cheshire*, ed. B.E. Harris, II (Oxford, 1979), p. 137; J. Hemingway, *History of the City of Chester*, II (Chester, 1831), p. 406.
- 5 The schedule was probably inaccurate in assigning as much as 59 acres to Grosvenor and as little as 22 acres to the Crown, for the pre-enclosure survey assigned 53a. 3r. 7p. to Grosvenor and 28a. 0r. 25p. to the Crown, figures that correspond much more closely to the eventual allotment totals of 52a. 1r. 31p. and 29a. 2r. 13p. respectively. The schedule total of 81 acres for the two combined was fairly accurate, however, corresponding with 81a. 3r. 32p. from the survey and 82a. 0r. 4p. from the allotments.
- 6 H.S. Homer, *An Essay on the Nature and Method of Ascertaining the Specific Shares of Proprietors upon the Inclosure of Common Fields* (Oxford, 1766), p. 42.
- 7 See Cholmondeley's letters to Grosvenor, G. of E. MSS, Vol. V (Personal Papers), corresp. of 1st Marquis of Westminster. See also G. of E. MSS, Box F2 bundle 1; C(heshire) R(ecord) O(ffice), DCC 31/40 (pedigree of Cowper); will of Harriet Cowper of Overleigh, pr. Chester 1811.
- 8 Chester City Library, Local Collection H92 COT Pamphlet, 1959 (lineage of Cotgreave of Netherleigh); C.R.O., will of Sir John Cotgreave, pr. Chester 1836.
- 9 H(ouse of) L(ords) R(ecord) O(ffice), Committee Book, HL, 8 June 1805; C.R.O., wills pr. at Chester of Robert Baxter (1848), Joseph Bozley (1819), James & Sam. Brodhurst (1798 & 1809), George Bushell (1818), John Evans (1813), Wm. Higgins (1807), Wm. Newell, ald. & brewer (1831), Leivesley Oldham (1815), & Mary Porter of Handbridge (1805); Lancashire Rec. Off., Preston, wills pr. Chester of Edw. Blackstock of L'pool (1830 & 1860) & Henry Brown of Edge Hill, L'pool (1822); G. of E. MSS, Boxes C3 bundle 6, T/13 & 16, V/1, 4, 5, 12, 13, W/3, 4, 13, 14, X/2 (which includes a copy of surgeon Connah's will, pr. London 1809), & 10.
- 10 C.R.O., will dat. 19 Sep. 1817, pr. Chester 2 July, 1818. He died 23 May, 1818.
- 11 C.R.O., DPB/102/7.
- 12 Whitby to Grosvenor, 29 July, 1803 (G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/7).
- 13 Moore to Grosvenor, 10 & 17 Jan. 1806, & Grosvenor's memorandum, 10 Jan. 1806 (G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/6 & 7).
- 14 Moore to Grosvenor, 3 Oct. 1806 & 15 Nov. 1812 (G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/6).
- 15 Moore to Grosvenor, 23 July & 3 Oct. 1806 (*Ibid.*). In the second letter he noted the former and forthcoming totals, £1731 2s. 10d. & £2605 1s. 2d.

- 16 See, e.g., his letter of 2 Aug. 1806 about how to handle the tenants in relation to his revaluation (G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/7). Whitby's career also had a civic dimension: he became a Chester councilman in July 1806 and that October (as Moore put it) he 'achieved the shrievalty'. (Chester City Record Office, AB/5/f.118v.; G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/6: Moore to Grosvenor, 28 Oct. 1806.)
- 17 H.L.R.O., Committee Book, HL, 8 June, 1805.
- 18 See Moore's correspondence with Grosvenor, 26 Dec. 1808 & passim (G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/6). It is interesting that, soon after Richards had accepted the political agency, Moore wrote to Grosvenor (7 Oct. 1807) that the extent of Whitby's own political activity would have to be 'adjusted'. Richards remained Grosvenor's solicitor and political agent until a serious disagreement between them produced a total rupture in Jan. 1814.
- 19 *Lords Journals*, vol. 45 (1805-1806), pp. 241, 244, 251, 301; *Commons Journals*, vol. 60 (1805-1806), pp. 363, 430, 432.
- 20 G. of E. MSS, Box T/9. There was a little under 4 acres in Handbridge (price £538 10s.) and a little over 4 acres in Claverton (price £394 10s.). Whitby's accounts record payment on 16 Nov. (G. of E. MSS, Vol. II, 410).
- 21 G. of E. MSS, Box T/10, and Vol. III, 411 (Whitby's account books, 1806-9, *s.v.* payments, 14 Oct. 1806).
- 22 G. of E. MSS, Vol. III, 104, 105 (Grosvenor rentals for 1806). The rent was £25 17s. 0d.
- 23 G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/7; Box U/12. The quilllets only amounted to 32 perches and became Grosvenor's for £31 10s.
- 24 Moore told Grosvenor on 3 Oct. 1806 that 'By Mr. Whitby's arrangement and exchanges under the act 19 Acres 3R. 34P. of ground will be gained' (G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/6).
- 25 G. of E. MSS, III, 104-107. Crown & Grosvenor tenants are separated in the 1806 rental but not in 1807; C.R.O., QDE 2/13; G. of E. MSS, Vol. III, 102, 103; Vol. IV, 26.
- 26 Letter of 3 Oct. 1806 (G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, Box 42/6).
- 27 R.C. Allen, 'The Efficiency and Distributional Consequences of Eighteenth Century Enclosures', *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 92 (1982), p. 951.
- 28 See the deeds and abstract of title relating to these lands, G. of E. MSS, Box T/13. For the litigation see *The Whole Proceedings in the Trial of an Ejectment . . . against David Ackerley, Gentleman; at the Portmote Court of the City of Chester . . .* (Chester, 1788).
- 29 G. of E. MSS, Box V/2 & 10.
- 30 G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV (Maps & Plans), 26; copy, C.R.O., DDX/407/1.
- 31 C.R.O., EDT/96 & 115.
- 32 G. of E. MSS, Vol. IV, 30.
- 33 G. of E. MSS, Vol. V (personal papers): corresp. of 1st Marquis of Westminster.
- 34 G. of E. MSS, Box 42 bundle 6/1 (Letters of Wm. Porden, 1802-1821.)
- 35 See Hemingway, *Hist. of Chester*, II, pp. 230-31, 352.
- 36 J. & J.C. Buckler, *Views of Eaton Hall in Cheshire the Seat of the Right Honorable Earl Grosvenor* (1826). The imposing lodge intended for the entrance to the 'Chester Approach' (Pl. III) appears in this publication, although not erected until the 1830s when the new Grosvenor Bridge and Road had linked the entrance much more directly with Chester. The lodge at the entrance to the secondary drive (Pl. IV) in Eccleston Lane (now Eaton Road) was in position earlier.

- 37 Clwyd Record Office, Hawarden, QS/DE/3. For evidence of their rights of common on Saltney Marsh see, for example, Public Record Office, London, Parliamentary Surveys, E.317 Chester 13A; G. of E. MSS, Box W, bundle 8: copy leases 1692, 1719 and 1720; Box V, bundle 1: copy of lease 1750.
- 38 The author hopes to present a further paper locally on the evidence of open-field farming in Handbridge and Claverton in the two centuries preceding 1805.
- 39 G. Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields* (1907), p. vi.

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