Accumulation and Aspirations among the ‘Parish Gentry’: Economic Strategies and Social Identity in a Pennine Family, 1650–1780

H. R. French

I

It is more than thirty years since Alan Everitt introduced the ‘parish gentry’ into the historical lexicon of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Subsequent studies have acknowledged the presence of this group in local society, but have rarely explored it in detail. The evolving ‘county society’ of larger estate owners has been the subject of exhaustive and systematic research, but the smaller ‘rentier’

1 This research was part of a project on rural society and estate accumulation in the western Pennines, 1520–1780, funded by the University of Central Lancashire.


landowners remain isolated within individual parish studies, instead of being set in the context of a wider social group. This neglect is explained by the thumbnail definition of the group offered by Lawrence Stone:

the ‘parish gentry’ were men whose interest and powers were limited to the boundaries of one or at most two villages, most of whom had had no education beyond that at the local grammar school, and who were rarely eligible for any administrative post above that of JP.

Such individuals lacked political power and influence in national politics, even if they were influential as administrators and officers in their own parishes. Since their activities were restricted to this parochial sphere, they have been accorded less historical importance than the efforts of those possessed of more extensive authority. As a consequence, historians have failed to investigate the underlying status and wealth of these ‘parish gentry’.

The group has also been overlooked for more practical reasons. The family papers of the parish gentry have not survived in the same profusion as those of the county magnates. Their houses were smaller, and rarely possessed sufficient storage space for everything to be retained. In the long term such estates were also more vulnerable to sale or absorption into larger holdings, at which point personal memoranda and accounts were frequently destroyed. The surviving residues are often just parcels of deeds, retained as evidence of title. The archives of such families tend to survive only


4 The best general survey of the lesser gentry remains G. E. Mingay, English landed society in the eighteenth century (London, 1963). The best recent studies have been of the group in Wales, particularly P. Jenkins, The making of a ruling class: the Glamorgan gentry, 1640–1790 (Cambridge, 1983), and D. Howell, Patriarchs and parasites: the gentry of south west Wales in the eighteenth century (Cardiff, 1986).


where they descended into more durable county families, which was a relatively rare occurrence.

While the role of the lesser gentry may be of limited importance to the political historian, this group is historically significant in two respects. Firstly, it had an important role in the disappearance or transformation of the ‘yeoman-peasant’, particularly in the upland north and west. Secondly, it participated in the ‘world of social competition’, material culture, and changing self-perceptions generally associated with the urban ‘middle sort’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Both these roles deserve greater attention than they have so far received.

The role of the lesser gentry in the decline of the ‘peasant’ landowner has often been diminished by the concentration of scholarly attention on the consequences of land accumulation by large estates during the ‘long’ eighteenth century. Sir John Habbakuk remarked that although it was still possible in the century after the Restoration for the local man of the yeoman class to build up an estate by gradual purchase of small properties, mainly from owner-cultivators... most peasant properties that were converted to gentry-land went to augment existing estates, not to create new ones. Habbakuk does acknowledge that such accumulation was possible by the minor gentleman, ‘if he had a source of income besides rents, and lived in a part of the country where many small properties were for sale’. However, the concentration of great estates has left the estate-building activities of the lesser gentry largely uncharted. The view that estate building was only significant when done on a grand scale has also diminished the motivational significance of notions of parochial gentility. Yet a series of individual parish studies has illustrated how engrossment frequently turned the larger yeomen farmers into small-scale rentier landholders, and also transformed their social identity and aspirations. This was illustrated first in Hoskins’s work on Wigston Magna, where ‘by the end of the seventeenth century there were about half a
dozen . . . "peasant-gentry" . . . who lived in the largest houses, cultivated the largest farms, and were slowly beginning to spread into the professions'. These 'peasant-gentry' rejected 'the homely rural culture' of self-sufficiency and vernacular styles, in favour of 'a wider more sophisticated urban culture', which carried implications of leisure, fashion, and dependence on an unearned income. The larger yeomen farmers were transformed into petty gentry by the acquisition of land and by new social aspirations and determinants.

In the general literature on agricultural change this shift has not been regarded as 'a significant factor in the evolution of landed society during this time', for two reasons. Firstly, it is often dismissed as merely a transitory phase between the fixed (and opposing) poles of the 'yeoman-peasant' and the great estate, a phase which was much rarer 'between 1640 and 1750 than it had been in the preceding period'. Secondly, in this later period, it is often regarded as having been confined to 'the far north-west, the far south-west, parts of the Welsh border counties, and perhaps a few limited districts elsewhere'. While large tracts of lowland England had fallen into the hands of large estates by the mid-seventeenth century, there is also a degree of circularity in such arguments. Most studies of landed income, investment, accumulation, and inheritance have been of the greater gentry. Not surprisingly, these have shown that the greater gentry were active purchasers and inheritors, and that their estates were becoming dominant in their surrounding localities. So far, few studies have set their accumulation in the context of wider local or regional land markets, quantified the importance of this activity, or investigated the many areas outside their immediate influence.


11 Overton's recent synthesis of these debates demonstrates that in England as a whole average farm sizes were rising in the period 1660–1750, largely at the expense
Holderness's study of the Lincolnshire land market remains one of the few to have attempted to place this activity in context.\textsuperscript{12} Lincolnshire had its peculiarities. It had relatively few resident gentry, or gentry residences. Estates tended to be owned by absenteeees, with an increasing number of London merchants buying for investment purposes. Yet, even within this competitive market, the growing wealth of the middle strata of rural society, the great expansion of professional and commercial services, and the rising social and economic expectations of a sizeable wedge of rural society seem, far more than has been suggested by many writers, to have found expression in the desire for landed security and its consequent social prestige.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite the growing competition from metropolitan investors, for this rural 'middle strata', 'opportunities seem never to have been so restricted as to prevent the determined from making adequate headway'.\textsuperscript{14} In Lincolnshire, at least, minor gentry estates continued to be formed in the eighteenth century. Sometimes they were the result of territorial and social engrossment by yeomen families. More frequently, however, these estates were created as the county's 'new rich' took advantage of high rates of turnover in ownership of, and consequent fragmentation among, the larger estates. In other counties, the 'estates system' was more settled, ownership more stable, and opportunities more rarely available to lesser families.

The Lancashire and Yorkshire Pennines were another area where the activities of large estates were muted. The greater gentry, such as the Sherburns of Stonyhurst and the Parkers of Browsholme and Alkincoats (in Colne) held land in many manors, but were rarely the dominant landowners in a single location. Such dispersed ownership and fragmented power was not the prevailing characteristic of landholding in Yorkshire or Lancashire,\textsuperscript{15} or elsewhere, but most of smaller cultivators. However, none of the studies he cites distinguishes between the activities of large and small estates. Similarly, the bulk of this evidence is drawn largely from lowland England: M. Overton, \textit{Agricultural revolution in England: the transformation of the agrarian economy, 1500–1850} (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 168–78.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 574.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 575.

\textsuperscript{15} In Lancashire, large freehold estates dominated the lowlands in the southern half of the county, between Preston and Liverpool, and Liverpool and Warrington. The Pennine belt and the centre of the county contained some large but scattered
counties contained significant areas of differentiated land ownership into the mid-eighteenth century. In the absence of great estates, small-scale estate formation by the parish gentry did have a role to play in the extinction, or transformation, of the owner-occupier. Detailed analysis of landholding patterns in such areas, of the sort in progress on Earls Colne (Essex) and Slaidburn (Yorks.), has revealed that these lesser gentry could bring about increases in average farm size, and the introduction of profit-oriented agriculture, without the 'necessary' resources or the economies of scale of the large landowner.  

If the literature on estate formation is largely silent about the parish gentry, it also gives few insights into the means by which these small estates were created, sustained, and augmented. We are left to infer that the same processes of dynastic marriage, strict settlement, inheritance, and occasional purchase applied to small landlords as well as to large ones. There are few case studies of small landowners' estates, and even fewer of their aspirations or intentions. Vickery's recent work suggests that at the margins of gentility, as rental income from land became inadequate as the sole means of subsistence, the parish gentry turned to a range of trades, occupations, and professions to augment their income without any social stigma. This adds another dimension to the process of estate maintenance and accumulation, alien to the literature on the great estates. Similarly, the fact that it was possible to pursue an occupation as a means of augmenting landed income suggests that notions of status were different at the foot of the gentry hierarchy. Some of these determinants and notions of status have been explored by historians of the 'middle sort' for the period under estates, predominantly of copyhold land, interspersed with smaller holdings: J. Porter, *The making of the central Pennines* (Ashbourne, 1980), pp. 29–35. In Yorkshire, the East Riding and the Vale of York were dominated by large estates, while upland parishes of the West Riding mirrored their Lancashire counterparts: B. English, *Great Landowners of East Yorkshire, 1530–1910* (Hemel Hempstead, 1990), pp. 70–3. However, English estimates that 'there is no evidence to suggest that the monopoly [of the greater landowners] was ever greater than a quarter' (p. 73).


consideration by this paper. They have built on the work of Everitt, in distinguishing a growing body of ‘pseudo-gentry’, who combined the modes, manners, and possessions of the gentry (or at least of the metropolitan elites) with income derived from trades or occupations. There has been an unacknowledged debate about whether mercantile and professional elites, or less prosperous, less ambitious tradesmen are the best representatives of the ‘middle sort’ in the eighteenth century. However, most studies agree that pseudo-gentility was an urban phenomenon, a product of the crucible of social competition found in towns. As Peter Borsay has remarked, however fine a man’s mind and clothes, they are of little use in the pursuit of status unless displayed amongst those people willing and able to compete with him. The village could hardly provide this competition; the town could.

This consensus has meant that the parish elites of rural England have, once more, been overlooked. Historians have simply assumed that their attitudes to status, and the ways in which these were manifested, were a pale imitation of those of the greater gentry. Few attempts have been made to establish whether the lesser gentry of the countryside were engaged in the negotiation or reinterpretation of notions of gentility, or to establish the forms taken by these efforts. Yet, parish studies such as Hoskins’s suggest that in the course of the seventeenth century they were able to superimpose the tokens of this new gentility on to existing sources of wealth and


20 For one recent attempt at this see H. R. French, ‘“Ingenious & learned gentlemen”: social perceptions and self-fashioning among parish elites in Essex, 1680–1740’, *Social History, XXV* (2000), pp. 44–66.
older understandings of status. Similarly, there has been no attempt to establish whether this evolving notion of gentility was part of the same of process of social change that led to the creation of the urban ‘pseudo-gentry’, or Defoe’s ‘land-water thing, the gentleman-tradesman’. If this is established we may be forced to accept the heretical idea that ‘the world of social competition’ operated among rural and urban elites alike.

In particular, two aspects of the social and economic role of the lesser gentry deserve attention. The first is the investigation of the economic strategies by which their status was maintained and augmented. We need to understand the extent to which their incomes (from rents and other sources) were manipulated to keep pace with the steady inflation in the entry requirements for gentility and in the accompanying social aspirations. The second aspect is the expansion of these social aspirations, and the ways in which developments in leisure, service, and luxury provision were woven together to alter notions of local status among parish elites. In view of these aspirations, it is important to illustrate the constant process of negotiation between concepts of gentility, economic constraints, and non-landed sources of income through the period, that is, the perpetual struggle between income and expenditure.

This paper represents a preliminary attempt to explore these two aspects, by concentrating on the experience of one family, the Barcrofts of Foulridge, near Colne in Lancashire. Such a concentration on a single family carries the obvious risk of focusing on a potentially unrepresentative example. This is balanced by the scarcity of comparable sources, and by the fact that the Barcrofts were true examples of parish gentry, conforming to every point of Stone’s brief definition. They were (by their own estimation, at


22 M. Mascuch’s work suggests that capital accumulation among these groups indicates ‘a strategy of family sustenance, rather than a desire for personal profit’, and that upward social mobility was a dynastic, rather than a personal or individualistic endeavour: ‘Social mobility and middling self-identity: the ethos of British autobiographers, 1600–1750’, *Social History*, XX (1995), pp. 55, 60; see also idem, ‘Continuity and change in a patronage society: the social mobility of British autobiographers, 1600–1750’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, VII (1994), pp. 177–97.
least) the wealthiest landholders in their township of Foulridge; their power was restricted to their locality; their education was often at Colne grammar school; and they never quite reached the quarter sessions bench. In five generations between 1650 and 1780, this family moved slowly from being ‘chief’ among the yeomen-clothiers of their settlement, to office-holding petty gentry, to small-scale absentee landlords. They appear distinguished from their peers only because we can discover something about their opinions, attitudes, and income in this period.

We learn about them from a small family archive, which includes a series of approximately thirty letters kept by the family from the 1650s to the 1780s. In the eighteenth century, this series is augmented by a desultory and slightly fractious correspondence between two brothers on either side of the Atlantic. Through these it is possible to gain insights into the aspirations of the family, and the effects of the diverging fortunes of its branches. Other materials are less illuminating. No probate inventories survive for the family, making it difficult to chart how the material aspirations of the family were manifested in their patterns of consumption. Similarly, the surviving account books are very patchy, giving a revealing but incomplete picture of the family’s fortunes in the later seventeenth century. Since the family managed their own affairs, and had no estate steward, estate office, or systematic methods of administration, this is an inevitable consequence of their lesser-gentry status.

II

One of the central foundations of the family’s prosperity, and the feature that allowed them to consolidate it, was demographic good fortune. For six generations from the establishment of the family in Foulridge in the late sixteenth century, all the main heirs of the family reached their majorities with their fathers still living. Indeed, most of these fathers survived into their eldest sons’ early middle age (Fig. 2). Thomas died in May 1609, living to see his eldest son Ambrose (I) reach thirty-five, and the birth of his grandson Thomas (I) in 1607. Ambrose (I) made his will in 1641, by which time his eldest son was thirty-four and his grandson Ambrose (II) twelve. Thomas (I) lived until 1680, when his eldest son was fifty-one and his grandson Thomas (II) twenty-eight and already married. Similarly,
William Barcroft
of Barcroft
buys Noyna 1575

Thomas  Henry
d. 1609 d. c. 1596

Ambrose (I)
bapt. 1574, d. c. 1642

Thomas (I)       William       six other children
bapt. 1607, d. 1680 of Balylakine, King's Co. (Irish Barcrofts)

Ambrose (II)     four other children
bapt. 1629, d. 1694

Thomas (II)     bapt. 1654, d. 1732

Ambrose (III)     four other children
bapt. 1681
(drowned 1724)
(Pennsylvania)

William       Ambrose (IV)       John
bapt. 1702 d. 1754
bapt. 1704 d. c. 1784 (Pennsylvania)

John senior    William
bapt. 1683 d. 1742
bapt. 1689 d. c. 1760 (Virginia)

James       John junior
bapt. 1724 d. 1749 (clerk)
bapt. 1727 d. 1783

Elizabeth       two sisters
bapt. 1731, d. c. 1770
(m. 1756, John Barcroft junior)

Ambrose William       six other children
bapt. 1759, drowned 1795

Ellen
bapt. 1793, d. 1865
(m. Edward Parker 1816)

Figure 2 Simplified Barcroft family tree
Thomas (II) lived until he was seventy-eight, by which time his grandson William was thirty. This demographic stability allowed the family to secure a second income stream, through the creation of a new enterprise for the eldest son. At the same time, it allowed many of the other children’s legacies to be charged on the father’s estate during his lifetime. When the father died, the depleted, but generally unencumbered, paternal estate could be merged with the son’s holdings, increasing the overall size of the core estate.

The pattern was initiated at the foundation of the family in Foulridge in the sixteenth century. The Barcrofts were a long-established family of parish gentry resident at Barcroft near Haworth in the West Riding of Yorkshire, where their stone-built hall house survives as a mark of their prosperity in the period. In 1575 William Barcroft of Barcroft bought a fifth part of the manor of Foulridge, immediately north of the township of Colne in Lancashire, which was being split up and sold by the Crown. William bought 75 acres and a messuage called Noyna for his two younger sons, Thomas and Henry. Henry died without heirs, and the property, as well as a fifth of the rights of mill socage, passed to his brother.

In the first instance, the additional streams of income came not from purchases of land, but by direct involvement in wool trading. Involvement in branches of the cloth industry was widespread among yeomen in the hinterland of Colne by the early seventeenth century. Wool trading was an important economic activity for Ambrose (I) and his son Thomas (I) at this time. In fact, so significant had this activity become to the family’s finances that Thomas’s son, Ambrose (II), was apprenticed to his uncle Paul in York to learn the trade of
wool merchant. The rewards for this activity may be evident in the will of Ambrose (I), in which he left legacies to his children of £440. This is suggestive of business activities that were largely credit-based, such as the cloth or wool trades.

In the 1650s Ambrose (II) was engaged in wool dealing with London merchants. He and his father had separate trading accounts with one Lawrence Smith of London. These activities consolidated the family’s wealth. The Hearth Tax suggests that Thomas (I) continued to occupy the patrilineal estate at Noyna, paying on six hearths in 1662 and 1673, when his son paid on only three hearths. Only five of the sixty-three other residents of Foulridge paid on more than three hearths, with only one having a higher assessment than the Barcroft family, on ten hearths.

It was at this time that the family made the most decisive purchases of land in the period under scrutiny (Table 1). These were made by Thomas’s son, Ambrose (II), reflecting both his own prosperity, generated by wholehearted involvement in trading activities, and the desire to establish a separate enterprise for his son, Thomas (II). In the 1670s Ambrose (II) bought on a large scale, despite the fact that this was a time when his children were reaching maturity, that is, the most draining point in his financial life-cycle. In 1677 he bought the farm called Carry Heys, south of Colne, and in 1679 the property called Foulridge Hall, the latter costing £300.


29 Lancs. R.O., DDB 62/147.

30 In 1627 Ambrose (I) was described as a ‘yeoman’, implying that agriculture was his main occupation: Lancs. R.O., QSB 1/35/39 (‘examination taken at Castleton . . . before Robert Holt [J.P.]’, 18 Oct. 1627).


34 On 4 Oct. 1679, two days after making the purchase, Ambrose had to engage to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchaser</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Customary acreage</th>
<th>Cumulative acreage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>1575</td>
<td>Foulridge</td>
<td>75a. 3r. 11p.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas (I)</td>
<td>1648</td>
<td>Foulridge</td>
<td>8a.</td>
<td>82a. 3r. 11p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambrose (II)</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>Trawden</td>
<td>29a. 2r. 28p.</td>
<td>112a. 1r. 39p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambrose (II)</td>
<td>1679</td>
<td>Foulridge</td>
<td>54a. 2r. 15p.</td>
<td>167a. or. 12p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambrose (II)</td>
<td>1680</td>
<td>Foulridge</td>
<td>9a.</td>
<td>176a. or. 12p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas (II)</td>
<td>1682</td>
<td>Little Marsden</td>
<td>22a. 2r.</td>
<td>199a. 2r. 12p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas (II)</td>
<td>1692/3</td>
<td>Trawden</td>
<td>18a. or. 28p.</td>
<td>217a. 3r.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambrose (III)</td>
<td>1703</td>
<td>Foulridge?</td>
<td>1a.</td>
<td>218a. 3r.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas (II)</td>
<td>1703</td>
<td>Winewall</td>
<td>60a. or. 34p.</td>
<td>278a. 3r. 24p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas (II)</td>
<td>1712</td>
<td>Trawden</td>
<td>21a. 2r. 29p.</td>
<td>300a. 2r. 23p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas (II)</td>
<td>1719</td>
<td>Winewall</td>
<td>24a. 3r. 9p.</td>
<td>325a. 1r. 32p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas (II)</td>
<td>1722</td>
<td>Foulridge</td>
<td>26a. 3r. 33p.</td>
<td>352a. or. 35p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>1736</td>
<td>Winewall?</td>
<td>10a. 2r. 25p.</td>
<td>362a. 3r. 20p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>1740</td>
<td>Foulridge</td>
<td>28a. 3r. 4p.</td>
<td>391a. 2r. 24p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John junior</td>
<td>1753</td>
<td>Colne</td>
<td>14a. 2r. 31p.</td>
<td>406a. 1r. 15p.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John junior</td>
<td>1760</td>
<td>Foulridge</td>
<td>16a. or. 27p.</td>
<td>422a. 2r. 2p.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Acquisition by marriage rather than purchase.

b With infant grandson William Barcroft.

These purchases added approximately 85 acres to the family’s estate, doubling its total size. It is significant that the family's largest single purchases of land between 1677 and 1722 came in the period when their involvement in wool dealing was at its greatest. In this respect, they seem to have conformed to Holderness's dictum that 'seldom, apparently, were the profits from agriculture alone sufficient to finance a major investment in land'. Investment of these mercantile profits was as much the foundation of the family's social and material ambitions as was its existing landholding.

These purchases also had an obvious impact on rental income. The first year of the surviving rental account (1679–80) provides the most easily comprehensible figures, since all payments are inserted afresh from a base date. In that year the total annual rental from the entire estate and its eleven tenants was £69 95. 2 l/2d. If the new purchases are excluded, the figure was only £43; the new purchases had added only £26 per annum, but this was repay £260 of this purchase money to John Wilson of Barrowford. He had repaid it in four portions by 23 Feb. 1680: Lancs. R.O., DDB 62/100–5.

35 Holderness, 'English land market', p. 572.
before their rental value had been 'improved' under new management.

Land rents were, of course, only part of the family's income. By the 1690s Ambrose (II)'s wool dealing was included in his general accounts. In 1691 he dispatched £220 with his agent Richard Boothman for the purchase of wool in Lincolnshire, receiving at least fifty-three packs of wool (between 3,710 and 5,300 lbs). Presumably, this wool was sold to clothiers and weavers in the Colne area, although the accounts make no mention of sales. The accounts suggest that Ambrose (II) had only minimal direct involvement in cloth production, since he put out only 30 lbs of wool to be spun in the first six months of 1691.

The potential returns from this trade are uncertain, not only because Ambrose (II)'s accounts do not give sale prices for wool, but also because this price varied according to the quality of the wool and its condition. Wadsworth and Mann's figures suggest that prices at this time varied between £6 and £11 per pack. If Ambrose (II) paid £220 for fifty-three packs of wool in 1691, he bought them at approximately £4 25. per pack. If he sold them in London at £6 per pack, an average price for unwashed wool, he would have yielded a gross profit of £98, or more than his total rental income from land. This is speculation, but the scale of the potential return illustrates the importance of this activity as a source of income for the family. An accumulation of profits on this scale would also help to explain Ambrose (II)'s ability to double the acreage held by his family in the period when his children were incurring the greatest expense.

This second income stream may have allowed Ambrose (II) to establish himself as a landowner on a similar scale to his father, while his father was still alive. Doubtless, he received considerable financial assistance from both his own father and his well connected father-in-law. Even so, by creating a separate estate, Ambrose was

36 Wool packs weighed between 70 and 100 lbs each in a series of Essex clothiers' probate inventories: P.R.O., PROB 5/480 (Robert Fuller of Colchester, baymaker, 16 Oct. 1690); PROB 4/8752 (William Cox senior of Coggeshall, clothier, 11 June 1675). Such clothiers also bought their wool from Lincolnshire.
38 In 1653 Ambrose (II) married the daughter of a wealthy York merchant, Sir Henry Thompson: Lancs. R.O., DDB 61/9 (correspondence between Ambrose (II) and Thompson, 27 May 1670).
able to double the land held by the family, and perhaps also to move from the ranks of the substantial yeomanry to the parish gentry.

How did the family regard their status at this time? In 1680, as high constable of Blackburn hundred, Ambrose (II) drew up a hundredal rate. He based it on estimates of the yearly rental income from the land of all those assessed. These estates were, at best, approximate, and are best regarded as a guide to his perceptions of relative wealth in the area. For instance, he assessed himself at £40 per annum, with his son Thomas adding a further £10, almost £20 per annum less than the figure in his accounts for the previous year. Significantly, in the township of Foulridge, none of his neighbours matched his assessment of himself. Of the fourteen other landowners assessed there, only one breached £30 per annum, with all others being assessed at less than £10. Few individuals in the rest of the hundred exceeded an annual assessment of £40 from land.

Yet Ambrose was careful to temper this pride in his prosperity. He was not tempted to add the title ‘gent.’ after his name in the assessment, instead retaining the description of ‘yeoman’ for himself (even if he was equally careful not to describe anyone else in his township as a ‘gent.’). Similarly, he was cautious in his use of the powers of ‘brokerage’ that accompanied his wealth and his extended geographical and business connections. His business competence and knowledge were recognized when he was chosen as a trustee by his family and his neighbours. His social credit and influence, embodied in his role as high constable, were acknowledged by a relative who sought his support for her son’s bid to become county clerk to the new undersheriff. However, he was aware that his

39 Lancs. R.O., DDB 64/3 (memorandum book of Ambrose Barcroft as high constable of Blackburn hundred, 1680–1).
40 In a copyhold land surrender in the forest of Trawden manor court in 1684, Ambrose (II) was described as ‘gent’, when appointed as a trustee: Lancs. R.O., DDHCI (honour of Clitheroe court roll 3/217, Easter 1684), surrender dated 9 Apr. 1684 between Roger Hartley of Redimore, and Nicholas Cunliffe of Wycoller and Ambrose Barcroft of Noyna, gents., feoffees to uses.
41 P.R.O., PL 6/27, fol. 101 (29 June 1669); PL 6/32, fol. 11 (11 Oct. 1676), naming Ambrose Barcroft (II) as one of the trustees to Thomas Barcroft of Barcroft (a distant cousin, and head of the main Barcroft family); PL 6/35 fol. 39 (28 Dec. 1681), naming Ambrose as trustee for the estate of Christopher Trueman of Alkincoats, Colne; PL 6/34, fol. 131 (19 May 1685), naming Ambrose as trustee to his brother-in-law Robert Bulcock of Ravensholme, Lancs., yeoman.
power was limited. In 1691 a neighbour requested his assistance in securing a clerical living from the archbishop of Canterbury, on the basis that Ambrose knew the archbishop, having been at Colne grammar school with him more than fifty years before. Ambrose agreed, but ‘much against my minde in regard it is unfit (I conceive) for me to write to so great a person, tho’ my ancient acquaintance and lesson-fellow at Colne School’. He knew he possessed sufficient power and repute to influence the opinion of a local justice who lived five miles away, but not the ability to persuade an archbishop at a distance of 250 miles (and fifty years).

III

If Ambrose (II) laid most of the economic and some of the social foundations for his family’s migration to the ranks of the petty gentry, it appears that he focused his attentions on fashioning his grandson and namesake Ambrose (III) into a fully-fledged gentleman. In his will, he set aside lands to pay for his grandson’s education and upbringing until his majority, the accounts for which survive. This was another instance of the financial stability that could be achieved by longevity. Ambrose (II) had already established his eldest son Thomas (II) with a portion of his lands, and may have helped him secure an advantageous marriage. Thomas also augmented the holdings given to him by his father, adding another 30 acres to the east of Colne, bringing the family’s holdings in 1700 to approximately 220 acres, an increase of 138 acres in thirty years.

Ambrose (II) devised lands with an annual rental value of £35 16s. 8d. towards the maintenance of his grandson. This money was spent to equip Ambrose (III) with different knowledge and skills from those acquired by his grandfather. Where Ambrose (II) had been apprenticed to learn a trade, albeit a prosperous, higher-status distributive one, his grandson was taught to behave like a

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43 Lancs. R.O., DDB 65/2 (Barcroft memoranda and accounts, 1689–1732), 19 June 1691.
44 P.R.O., PL 6/45, fol. 113 (4 Apr. 1699). Thomas (II) and his son Ambrose (III) sued the surviving trustee, Henry Walton, for detaining the profits of these lands. Presumably Thomas’s detailed accounts were evidence of the costs of maintaining his son.
gentleman. Ambrose (III) was sent to school in Skipton. At the age of fifteen, in 1696, he was evincing signs of a classical education, necessitating the purchase of Tully’s *Offices*, Virgil, and a Greek grammar. He left school at Easter 1698 and was promptly dispatched to York to acquire some social graces. There followed payments to a writing master, for fencing shoes, and for dancing lessons. By January the following year, Ambrose (III) had also acquired a wig, cane, and gloves. In 1699 and 1700, instead of being sent to university or an inn of court, he resided at home. There, his father sedulously recorded the purchase of rape seed for fighting cocks and linnets, the payment of 15s. in wagers at two cockfights, and money spent on gunpowder and shot, a horse, saddle, and bridle, and incessant additions and modifications to his clothes.

Although Ambrose (III) was appointed a Land Tax assessor in 1700, at the advanced age of nineteen, he appears to have held no other office, nor to have been given any vocational training between leaving school at eighteen and marrying at twenty-one. Clearly, though, he was being fashioned into a gentleman. His grandfather and father had amassed a sufficient estate for them to be considered (at least by themselves) the leaders of their township. Now Ambrose (III) was being shaped to realize and consolidate this social position, and to associate freely with those who lived solely on an unearned income. In this period, the house contained thirty books devoted either to Latin or Greek, and to Roman history, as well as to ‘self-improvement’, such as the *Gentleman’s calling*. In this sense,
Ambrose was becoming the most visible example of the family’s involvement in what James Rosenheim has termed the ‘cultural separation’ of the elite from the ‘customary practices and pastimes of the countryside’. For the Barcrofts, this was only ever a separation, never a divorce. They remained rooted in the social, administrative, and cultural structure of their locality, as owner-cultivators, wool traders, parish officers, and frequenters of the cockpit. Yet they were also branching out into the social and cultural spheres of ‘wig and sword’ in which full acceptance was based on estate and education.

If Ambrose (III) was expected to act like a gentleman, his younger brothers were set on a different course. Thomas was apprenticed as a tanner in Bradford, John may have learnt the wool trade, and William seems to have acquired the skills of a legal clerk. Although these trades were not poor, it appears that the family eschewed the professions of law, medicine, and even estate management. This may indicate either that they had no connections within such occupations, or that they could not afford to support three sons while they pursued them. These differentials in ‘life-chances’ may support Habbakuk’s view that social mobility into the gentry ‘involved a change in way of life’, specifically the ‘decision to “make an eldest son” and adopt primogeniture and the strict settlement’. However, the difference in opportunities between Ambrose and his siblings was really one of degree, rather than an absolute change in testamentary behaviour. The family had always held some land and had always practised primogeniture. The eldest son had always secured the bulk of that land. Now, there was simply more land, and it came freighted with a heavier burden of social aspirations. Even so, these facets illustrate the Barcrofts’ shallow roots among the petty, professional, or ‘pseudo-’ gentry. There were only sufficient resources for the one son, the eldest, to be a ‘gentleman’.

IV

Ambrose (III)’s life was, in many ways, a litmus test for the gentility of his family. It also tested the strategies that had enabled his grandfather and father to project their social ambitions through

48 Rosenheim, Ruling order, p. 174.
49 Habbakuk, Estates system, p. 544.
him. In fact, his misfortunes disrupted the trends of incremental, inter-generational accumulation, and introduced divergent social mobility into the family and divergent social attitudes among his heirs. Ultimately, Ambrose (III) failed to contribute a second enterprise or income stream to the reservoir of family resources, although he died in the attempt.

Although there are no sources to explain it, Ambrose (III)'s behaviour suggests that he found it impossible to live at Foulridge as the junior partner to his father. He married in 1702, and two sons were born before his first wife's death in 1705. Until April 1710 he was described as 'of Foulridge Hall' in the Colne manor court rolls, when his father was 'of Noyna', the longest-held, main family residence. In June 1711 he was described as 'of Deptford, Kent', in July 1713 as 'of Canterbury', and in December 1714 he was appointed a 'surveyor & gauger' of the Excise, presumably still in Kent. He may have been contemplating foreign travel. In a list of books made by his father in 1712, seven concerned the Netherlands and the Dutch language. Significantly, there was also a volume entitled the State of America. This activity implies dissatisfaction with his position in Foulridge, since by a settlement made in 1683 he stood to inherit the whole estate after his father's life-interest, and could not easily be disinherited.

His father made only one very oblique reference to trouble within the family. In May 1715 Thomas Barcroft (II) wrote to the manorial steward, 'Esq. Drummer', claiming that a hoard of money found hidden on his property at Noyna was not treasure trove. He claimed that he had buried the money, £250 175. 3d., after suffering previous thefts 'by some of my owne family as I had too much reason to beleive'. The outcome of this incident is not known, and Thomas (II)'s assertion about some of his own family does not necessarily

50 Runk, Barcroft family, p. 157.
52 Lancs. R.O., DDB 64/17. The list also included England's treasure by foreign trade, England's improvement, Observations oeconomical, Jamaica viewed, and a Survey of the West Indies, which reveal a similar preoccupation.
53 Lancs. R.O., DDB 62/148 and 150 (deeds of settlement of Foulridge and Noyna estates for the life of Ambrose Barcroft (II), then to his son Thomas (II) for life, then to his grandson Ambrose (III), 29 Jan. 1683).
54 Lancs. R.O., DDB 61/19 (Thomas Barcroft of Noyna to Esq. Drummer, 8 May 1715).
point to his eldest son. Yet, at this date Ambrose (III) was the only member of that family to live permanently at a considerable distance from his father, and from his own children, who were brought up by their grandfather at Noyna.

In the absence of his eldest son, Thomas (II) continued to add to his estate (Table 1). At the time of his father's death, he had bought 18 acres at Winewall, east of Colne. In 1703 he purchased a much larger estate of 60 acres in the same hamlet. This was bought with, and on behalf of, his infant grandson William. In 1722 Thomas bought a further 25 acres in Foulridge, having also added another 46 acres in Winewall and Trawden, east of Colne. By these purchases, he added another 150 acres, bringing the total estate to approximately 350 acres at his death, or more than four times larger than his grandfather's holdings. It is not clear how he afforded this expansion. His accounts show no evidence that he continued his father's involvement in wool dealing, and his father never recorded any joint trading with him. Although his claim to the buried hoard of money may have been specious, the presence of a large amount of specie could be taken as evidence of business ventures generating cash income. His father's wool dealing had been conducted in cash, not by notes of credit, and this money may either have been evidence of further such transactions or the residue of his father's activities.

Against this background of steady, if unspectacular accumulation, it appears that Ambrose (III) made a last-ditch attempt to establish his own financial independence and to make a fresh start. In 1722 he left for Pennsylvania, after receiving some monetary support from his father. Once more, the fact that he would have inherited the family estate had he remained in England implies that his motive for emigrating must have been strong. In March 1723, once he had established himself in Solebury, Pennsylvania, Ambrose wrote to his father to describe his situation and to emphasize its advantages. He

55 This included James Hartley's tenement of 40 statute acres, mortgaged (and eventually forfeited) to Thomas in 1711 for £140. In this instance, the witness to the surrender (Ambrose Barcroft) was described as either dead or gone to remote parts. See P.R.O., PL 6/56, fol. 46 (26 Apr. 1714).
56 Lancs. R.O., DDB 65/2, entry dated 15 July 1691: 'sent by Richard Boothman to pay for wooll bought for me in Lincolnshire £70 viz. 22 guineas & a half guinea is £24 3s. 9d. & in silver money £45 16s. 3d.'
had bought a tract of at least 450 acres, more than he had anticipated, 'which oblig'd me to pay a greater sum then I were to do by first contract'. At a stroke, he had become a bigger landowner than his father, even if their circumstances were radically different.

Ambrose (III) described his living conditions, for which his education had hardly prepared him. Despite his broad acres, he was a subsistence farmer, having sown a couple of acres of wheat and bought a stock of pigs for meat. He was also living in a log cabin, about which he remarked, ‘tho’ such a house be not handsome, ’tis very warm, and that is enough for the present’. While such conditions were reasonably good by local standards, and Ambrose’s landholding was quite large, his father must have wondered at his choice of situation, given the resources and education provided for him at home. In setting himself up in Pennsylvania, Ambrose (III) had also called on his father's resources through bills remitted from England, through help in finding and dispatching indentured servants, and in buying and sending goods for him to trade in the colony. Ambrose (III)’s brother William had also emigrated, but under something of a cloud. After fathering an illegitimate child, he had left for Virginia, as a clerk to the court of Colliton county, a post that his brother described as potentially profitable, but of doubtful value, ‘because the Court was but settled the last year’.

This eighteenth-century emigration marked a watershed in the family’s history, and also divided it. While Ambrose (III)’s eldest son William remained in England, and became his grandfather's main heir, his youngest son and namesake, Ambrose (IV), joined his father in America in 1724. Clearly, this indicated an attempt to found an economically independent second family. This attempt followed the same pattern as before. While Thomas (II) would oversee the activities of his adult grandson in England, in loco parentis, Ambrose (III) would found his own estate with the help of his nineteen-year-old younger son, having (effectively) ceded his rights to the paternal estate. In this sense, it echoed the original

58 Lancs. R.O., DDB 58/12 (acquittance for £6 6s. from Thomas Lee to William Barcroft ‘for goods adventured with Mr. Ambrose Barcroft unto Pennselfvenie’, 15 Dec. 1725). Ambrose noted in his letter that his father had also remitted him a bill of £52 10s.

59 Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, will of Thomas Barcroft, Sept. 1732. Thomas undertook to make provision for Mary Bolton and her child by his son William.
foundation of the family at Foulridge in 1575 on a large, new (and probably inexpensive) holding. Significantly, by the eighteenth century such 'new' land was to be found in America, rather than in royal disafforestation and upland enclosures in the Pennines.

However, the American venture was blighted when Ambrose (III) drowned in the Delaware river in December 1724, possibly while on duties as a newly-appointed colonial J.P. This sudden death, before he had begun to improve his land or recoup his initial investment, may have caused irreparable damage to his son’s chances of exploiting this estate. Thereafter, he seems to have lived a precarious existence, becoming increasingly dependent on the annuity paid to him under his grandfather’s will. His uncle William, now of Nansemond, Virginia, also appears to have relied on the payment of an annuity of £8 out of his father’s estate.

V

This apparent failure to achieve an independent prosperity, and continued dependence on the Lancashire estate, produced a transatlantic correspondence that continued sporadically for fifty years, and which was tempered by mistrust, suspicion, and irritation. In part, this was because of the growing disparity of fortune between the two branches. Where Ambrose (IV) struggled financially, his elder brother benefited from their grandfather’s estate, and appears to have lived on his rents, without secondary sources of income. William added to the family estate in the 1720s and 1730s, buying approximately 40 acres, and reaching a total of perhaps 390 acres. A survey of his 340-acre Foulridge estate in c. 1755, when his daughter inherited it, showed that it yielded an annual income of £330 12s. 5d., more than four times what his great-grandfather Ambrose (II) had enjoyed in 1680.

Yet, as Thomas (II)’s efforts to fashion his son into a gentleman were limited, so were William’s status and projection of himself. Although his grandfather appears to have rebuilt the house at Noyna in the 1680s, it was never remodelled in Palladian style. This was in

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60 Runk, Barcroft family, p. 158.
61 Pearson’s study suggests that in this area rebuilding and remodelling were much more common than new building of gentry houses in the eighteenth century: Pearson, Rural houses, p. 118.
marked contrast to the rebuilding efforts at this time of the greater gentry of the area, notably the Parkers of Browsholme and the Listers of Gisburn, and differed even from slightly less eminent local worthies, such as the Wiglesworths of Townhead in Slaidburn. This was due largely to the family’s lower level of income.

Like his great-grandfather, William had the opportunity to assess his wealth in comparison with that of his neighbours. Between 1748 and 1752 William helped draw up three wealth assessments of the township of Foulridge, in his capacity as a local ruler and churchwarden. In all three, William Barcroft ‘gentleman’ paid the highest individual assessment of any of the sixty-nine ratepayers. His local pre-eminence explains his willingness to describe himself as a gentleman, while denying that distinction to four others denoted on the list as ‘Mr.’

This prosperity, and this sense of his own gentility, allowed him to take a dim view of the fortunes of his American relations. In 1737 William Barcroft of Noyna responded to a letter from his uncle William in Nansemond, Virginia. William dismissed his uncle’s query about entitlement to his late mother’s dower rights in his father’s personal estate. William stated that any such claim, ‘would not only have proved vain, but very Rediculous’, adding that whatever her claim had been, her death meant that ‘there hath been a Decisive End, by a superior power’. William also noted that his brother Ambrose (IV) had written recently to announce his marriage, ‘without mentioning what fortune he gets’, the implication being that Ambrose (IV), like his father, ‘had no portion by whom he married’ in the colony.

Other letters from Ambrose (IV) suggest that the relationship between the brothers remained cool, largely due to the disparity in their fortunes. In November 1754 Ambrose (IV) wrote a letter to his brother that arrived after the latter’s death. He began by stating that he ‘had not received a letter since yours dated December the 13th 1750 which makes me afraid you are displeased with me’. He supposed this was because his half-brother John had written, giving

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63 Lancs. R.O., DDB 61/26 (Ambrose Barcroft, Solebury, Penn., to William Barcroft, Noyna, 16 Nov. 1754). William Barcroft’s will was proved on 13 July that year.
'a worse accompt of my circumstances than the[y] are'. Then he admitted 'its true that I am a little under my business which you’ll think is all together my fault', but blamed 'very Bad fortune for some years past', compounded by a series of unreliable servants. Now he anticipated that he would do better, expecting a good harvest, and claiming that 'if I cannot bring my circumsances to my mind I can bring my mind to my circumsance that you need not be afraid that I shall be troublesome to you for a maintenance'. He added that 'if my fortune have not been so good as you could wish for I hope you’ll not slight me so much as not to write to me'. This was the crux of the difficult relationship between the two brothers and the two branches of the family. The American branch had become burdensome poor relations to the parish gentry of Foulridge. Ambrose (IV)'s letter states that he thought his brother looked down on him for his lack of material success, and this attitude pervades the offhand letter that William wrote to his uncle in 1737.

William's death in 1754 broke the demographic stability enjoyed by the family since their arrival in Foulridge. He died aged fifty-two, leaving three adult daughters but no male heir whose separate enterprise could be merged into his father's estate. In fact, this strategy was perpetuated by the marriage of his second daughter, Elizabeth, to her second cousin John Barcroft (son of William's uncle John) in 1756. As a younger son of Thomas (II), John senior had not been able to move out of trade. He had inherited 22 acres in Little Marsden, near Colne, that had come from his mother's family, and used this to supplement the income he obtained from dealing in wool. John's accounts show how he required a second source of income to survive. The maternal estate which he inherited barely covered the costs of maintaining himself and educating his two sons at boarding school after the death of his wife in 1735. He managed to increase the rents from these lands from £40 to £50 per annum by his death in 1742, while in 1739 the total expenses of his dislocated household were £23 2s. This was a far cry from his nephew's income of £330 a year. Like his grandfather, John senior supplemented this meagre rental income by dealing in wool, borrowing heavily to...
finance this trade. In 1738–9 he borrowed £500, and the interest payment on this debt equalled his total household expenditure at £23, swallowing up the surplus from his land rents. However, even if he had only received a return of 10 per cent on the capital invested in this trade, he would have doubled his gross annual income.66

It is significant that his children did not follow him into the wool trade. He died in 1742, after his elder son James had matriculated at Magdalene College, Cambridge, with the intention of entering the church. This pleased his father, who noted that James had gone up in the same cohort as 'Mr. Robert Parker' of Alkincoats,67 allowing him to rub shoulders with the greater gentry of the area. James died young in 1749, and his brother John inherited his father's lands, promptly mortgaging them to his cousin William of Noyne, in order to study law at Furnivall's Inn. Priority now seems to have been given to securing entry to the 'professions' for minor heirs, rather than the higher-status trades. It would now have been socially unacceptable and possibly degrading for the eldest son of the family to be apprenticed to a trade as Ambrose (II) had been in 1647.

Despite this change in attitudes, and the acquisition of his cousin's 390 acres, John Barcroft repeated the long-established pattern of behaviour in the family, by making new purchases of land on his own account. He acquired 23 statute (14 customary) acres of land near Colne in 1753 for £250, boosting his personal income from rents to £71 per annum.68 After his marriage, he bought the Clough estate in Colne, a further 28 statute (16 customary) acres, in a complex deal amounting to £368 over six years to 1766.69 These purchases put him in possession of 422

66 Earle's study of business ventures in Augustan London suggests usual rates of return between 5 per cent and 25 per cent at this time: English middle class, pp. 137–42.
67 Robert Parker was husband of Elizabeth Parker, later Shackleton. When he married her in 1751, his 160-acre estate (yearly income £290) was less than the main branch of the Barcroft family at this time: Vickery, Gentleman's daughter, p. 20.
69 Lancs. R.O., DDB 62/135 ('Account of what Clough cost me, 3rd Nov. 1766', by John Barcroft). The sale included an annuity for life to the housekeeper of the former owner of the land, paid as interest on the purchase price of £285 until her death in Oct. 1766.
customary (693 statute) acres. This estate had been created by the addition of thirteen separate parcels, including eight previously independent farms, to the Noyna estate between 1648 and 1760. In 1784, the year after his death, the income from the estate was £494, a substantial increase over the income of his cousin William thirty years previously.

However, this new-found wealth was not enough to persuade him to give up his legal practice. Where this had functioned at first as a necessary and socially acceptable adjunct to his modest landed income, it now became the means by which he attained local status and interacted with the greater gentry.\textsuperscript{70} In 1770 John was appointed steward of the honour of Clitheroe, becoming responsible for the administration of the manorial courts and land transactions in the honour.\textsuperscript{71} By this time the family no longer resided at Noyna or Foulridge, which had become the preserve of their tenants. John and his wife had lived at Gisburn, and after his appointment as steward John moved to Clitheroe castle, living there until his death in 1783.

Although John had considerable dealings with the greater gentry of the area, and also socialized with them, he did so not as an equal, but rather as their principal agent. Amanda Vickery observes that although Elizabeth Shackleton invited John to dine at her house on many occasions while he acted as solicitor to her family in a land transaction, he did not merit an invitation on purely social grounds.\textsuperscript{72} John's position is best illustrated by his role in the contested election at Clitheroe in October 1780, when he acted as an agent for the Lister-Parker interest. In August 1780,\textsuperscript{73} he was admitted as an out-burgess of the borough, and in early October he

\textsuperscript{70} The account books of the Listers of Gisburn show that John acted for them in three cases between 1751 and 1760, earning £60 in one suit, and £88 8s. 6d. in total: West Yorkshire Record Office, MD 335/109/1 (Lister of Gisburn ledger, 1750–81), fol. 94. I am grateful to Prof. R. W. Hoyle for this reference.

\textsuperscript{71} Lancs. R.O., DDB 56/5 (appointment of John Barcroft to the stewardship of the honour of Clitheroe, 13 Nov. 1770).

\textsuperscript{72} Vickery, \textit{Gentleman's daughter}, p. 27. Yet, when John's eldest son Ambrose William came of age on 27 Feb. 1780, Elizabeth Shackleton wished him, 'his Father & all his sisters & Brothers long to live to see many of their days may they be Healthy & Happy to them all', suggesting that she held the family in some regard: Lancs. R.O., DDB 81/37 (diary of Elizabeth Shackleton, 1780), fol. 34.

\textsuperscript{73} Lancs. R.O., MBC 736 (call poll book for the borough of Clitheroe election, 31 Oct. 1780). This book records the date of admission for all burgesses.
was appointed as one of the borough's two bailiffs, ready for the important election at the end of the month.

His status can be seen in his position among the list of voters. His name occurred twenty-fourth among the thirty-nine out-burgesses. He was first of the fifteen 'gentlemen', but ranked beneath three clergymen, a doctor of divinity, nineteen esquires, and Lord Scarsdale. The esquires included representatives of the greater gentry families contesting the election, the Listers, the Parkers, and the Curzons. They also included James Wiglesworth of Townhead in Slaidburn. Wiglesworth had been an out-burgess since 1752. His 1,300 statute acres made him an esquire, where John Barcroft's 693 statute acres and stewardship of the honour (and, perhaps, his immediate usefulness to the cause) made him first among the gentlemen.

The status accorded John Barcroft is a measure of the position of the family after two centuries as yeomen and parish gentry. In the wider sphere of gentry politics and power, the Barcrofts possessed only a dependent position. He had an administrative authority, a professional competence, and (presumably) a web of contacts that gave him greater influence than he could have achieved on the basis of his landholding alone. However, this power depended upon his post, and he could not exercise it independently.

In all this, the American Barcrofts were left behind and forgotten. Ambrose Barcroft (IV) lived on into the early 1780s, and continued to receive the legacy from his grandfather's will of fifty years before. As he got older, his dependence on the annuity seems to have become complete. He wrote several letters to his niece, Elizabeth Barcroft, but it appears that although he was paid the annuity, no one bothered to reply. Sadly, he was still writing letters to his niece Elizabeth throughout the 1770s, even though she was long since dead and John had remarried in 1774. Clearly, Ambrose (IV) was reduced to a very marginal figure in the family, the poor

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74 Lancs. R.O., DDX 28/60 (borough of Clitheroe accounts of bailiffs, 1780–1). Bailiffs were appointed half-yearly, from Michaelmas to Lady Day. Given the proximity of Barcroft's appointment to the contested election, it seems clear that he was appointed to manage this event.

75 His will was proved in 1784: Runk, Barcroft family, p. 174.

76 John Barcroft remarried in May 1774 to Jane Tennant of Grassington, Yorks.: Lancs. R.O., DDB 62/211 (marriage settlement between John Barcroft and Jane Tennant, 7 May 1774).
relation whom John may never have met and whom he no longer acknowledged.

Ironically, as this division between the branches of the family was being emphasized, imperial politics drove another wedge between them. John’s son, Ambrose William, joined the 63rd Foot Regiment as a sixteen-year-old ensign in 1775, and was drafted to fight in the American War of Independence, in theory against his Barcroft cousins in Pennsylvania. In 1780 his father bought him a commission as a lieutenant, at the cost of £620. This was more than one year’s rental income from their estate, but it was a small price to pay for the social autonomy and undisputed gentility associated with the military officer-class. It allowed Ambrose William to acquire a social dignity in which the status of military officers as a group was able to mask the financial capacity of its members to support that dignity as individuals.

His choice of a military career may have been a simple personal preference. However, the fact that he was encouraged to pursue an ‘honourable profession’ suggests that he would otherwise have occupied the same equivocal social position as his father. Again this emphasizes the lack of depth of the family’s resources. This is further reinforced by the relatively meagre £1,000 that John Barcroft was able to leave among his six other children in 1783. Ambrose William received almost all the family assets and an income of almost £500 a year, while his five sisters were left with portions that condemned several of them to perpetual spinsterhood, as Vickery observes. The status of his siblings was sacrificed to ensure that at least one of the family could be indisputably not just a gentleman but also a member of the gentry, or could get as close to this goal as the sum total of his ancestors’ efforts would allow.

77 Lancs. R.O., DDB 56/6 (orders from Sir William Howe, commander-in-chief of colonial forces, America, to Ambrose William Barcroft, ensign in 63rd Regiment of Foot, 20 Apr. 1778).
78 Lancs. R.O., DDB 62/219 (bond for £620 0s. 4d. from Ambrose William Barcroft to his father John Barcroft, Clitheroe castle, 7 Mar. 1780).
79 John used his position as steward of the honour to gain further connections for his son. In Jan. 1778 he wrote to the lord of the honour, Lord Beaulieu, expressing his ‘sincere thanks for the civilities which your Lordship has been pleased to shew my son’ at Christmas: Lancs. R.O., DDHCl, box 105, letter book of John Barcroft as steward of the honour of Clitheroe, 1770–81.
80 Vickery, Gentleman’s daughter, pp. 21–2.
The story of the Barcroft family’s slow ascent of the social scale, and the accompanying rise in their social aspirations and self-identity provides a number of insights into the means by which parish gentility was attained and maintained. The first of these is that accumulation of land and wealth among this social segment did not necessarily mirror the processes by which it occurred among the greater gentry. Large acreages tended not to be acquired by marriage. The parental desire to secure parity of fortunes, and the tendency to bestow most of the land on the eldest son, meant that for the parish gentry marriage tended to bring money secured by land, rather than land itself.

Large acreages also tended not to be obtained by purchase out of the income from existing holdings. The rate of accumulation from the rents of relatively small estates was too low for purchases to have been made solely out of reserved surpluses. Accumulation seems to have required one of two situations to have applied: either the channelling of more than one individual’s purchases into a ‘family’ holding, or the presence of more than one source of income. In the late seventeenth century, at the time of the Barcrofts’ most rapid land accumulation, the family enjoyed both these advantages. Only after 1700, when they had transferred the bulk of their wealth into land, did they use landed income to purchase new holdings.

It was also rare for individuals possessed of relatively small estates to attempt to expand them dramatically by raising purchase money through mortgages. In this period such funds came from individuals rather than institutions. These individuals usually required repayment within seven or ten years, which consumed most of the land’s yield during that time. In practice, repayment was often financed by remortgaging, which increased the debt and the gearing of the asset. The result was often spectacular failure.

82 In 1730 in the manor of Slaidburn, Anthony Thornbar, a substantial yeoman, attempted to buy an estate of c. 250 acres of free and copyhold land by mortgaging his entire holding of 110 acres; he forfeited all the lands to his creditors twelve years later when at least £2,720 in debt: Lancs. R.O., DDHCl, manor of Slaidburn court roll, 3 Geo. II (Easter 1730), 23 Apr. 1730, surrender by James Haldane and others, Horrocksford, Lancs., to Anthony Thornbar, yeoman, West Bradford; ibid., 14 Geo. II (Michaelmas 1741), 13 Oct. 1741, and 15 Geo. II (Michaelmas 1742), 7 Oct.
accumulation, aided by demographic good fortune, appears to have provided the most solid foundation for the expansion of estates at this level. Those who failed to match income and expenditure with sufficient care, and became heavily indebted, were exposed to the possibility of having to sell.

Land accumulation produced an absolute change in the wealth of the Barcroft family by the end of the period under observation. This was accompanied by changes in the family's social identity and aspirations. In part, these merely reflected the wider changes in social perceptions among this stratum of parish elites, a process that Hoskins referred to as their entry into ‘a wider, more sophisticated urban culture’, characterized by ‘carpets and curtains, cushions and conversations’. Participation in this more general appropriation of the tokens of leisure and gentility was demonstrated by the education of Ambrose (III), and by the fact that these isolated Pennine villages could support peripatetic dancing masters and music teachers by the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The heads of households able to possess and display these tokens tended to express their status in their locality as ‘gentlemen’ rather than ‘yeomen’.

The career of Ambrose (III) emphasized the attractions and the disadvantages of seeking this new ‘genteel’ status. The main advantage was easier social interaction with the gentry elite, based on shared interests, sports, and pursuits. The crucial disadvantage for parish gentry such as the Barcrofts was that they could not afford to enter this greater-gentry world wholeheartedly. The preservation and improvement of their form of minor gentility continued to depend on diligent administration of their own interests. Through the eighteenth century the family came to see that this minor gentility really needed to be buttressed by a second income, or at least by the status of an ‘honourable profession’. In the case of John Barcroft this meant the law, which brought him income and administrative power but carried the penalty of a degree of clientage.


to the greater gentry. A career for his son as an army officer may have not have offered a large income or freedom from clientage to the greater gentry in general. However, it might have freed him from clientage to the greater gentry of the Pennines in particular, providing him with the social autonomy lacked by his father. This was the same hope that lay behind the education of Ambrose (III) eighty years before.

Such activities have wider historical implications. While aspirations to gentility could be combined with other sources of income, they could only be realized properly by investment in land. Therefore, parish gentility implied the accumulation of land, even on a small scale. These acquisitions were often made at the expense of smaller owner-occupiers, yeomen and husbandmen whose sole source of income came from their farms, and whose profits were often insufficient to expand, or even to provide for all their children. In this sense, aspirations to gentility were important as a motive force in the transformation of some owner-occupiers, and the disappearance of others, at least in areas such as the Pennines, where such owner-occupiers had survived into the seventeenth century.

Aspirations to gentility also entailed the modification of social identities by processes of education, assimilation, and reinterpretation. These are usually associated with the ‘pseudo-gentry’ and the ‘competitive’ arena of the eighteenth-century town. On closer examination, it appears that such social competition and self-fashioning was rife even in the remote countryside of the Lancashire Pennines. Profits from these second income streams were invested in, and masked by, the purchase of land. This investment was matched by repeated investment in the ‘social capital’ of the family’s main heirs, often at the expense of younger children, as Habbakuk suggests. Where demographic and financial fortune permitted, the lesser gentry’s efforts to accumulate economic and social resources could be as deliberate and sustained as those of any ‘gentleman-tradesman’.

While the parish gentry possessed limited political power and only exercised authority over truncated social hierarchies and restricted geographical areas, they are not insignificant or unimportant in historical terms. Rare survivals, such as the Barcroft materials, provide brief illustrations of the depth of involvement, and the importance of the participation, of the lesser gentry in these processes of social and economic change.