Rurality, Class, Aspiration and the Emergence of the New Squirearchy

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Abstract

Investigating the (possible) emergence of a ‘New Squirearchy’ in rural England, this research considers the extent of a practical appropriation of the discourse of the country gentleman within the milieu of a specific community in the South East. A process commonly attributed to the middle class, this study engages with those debates on class and class analysis which continue to play out as a key theme in rural studies, and argues for the incorporation of concepts of performance in providing more nuanced accounts of society in the countryside. Drawing on theories of embodiment as developed in the wider disciplines of sociology and geography, and considering them in direct relation to consumption and cultural capital, this research details the existence of the ‘New Squirearchy’ as a discernable community of practise at work in – and dependent upon – the routine operations of other collectives in rural space.

Mapping out the movements of those seeking to fulfil the roles and lifestyle historically accredited to the landed elite in detail, this empirically driven enquiry comes out of an intensive tract of in-situ ethnography. Centred on the act(s) of ‘gentryfication’ in the fabric of ‘village England’ and ‘Eamesworth’ more specifically, this story questions the apparent becoming of the ‘New Squirearchy’ through such institutions as the public house, the Parish Council and the village fete. In so doing, the suitability of this moniker is questioned, and the difficulties associated with delineating and ascribing specific identities are brought to the fore. Here it is argued that a changed political landscape dictates that acts of paternalism within the rural community have become unfeasible or impotent in a modern day scenario, and that the multiple identities which individuals assume and embody across space and time renders social interaction within such a setting as being increasingly fluid, reflexive and indistinct.
Sir Traffic’s name so well apply’d
Awakéd his brother merchant’s pride;
And Thrifty, who had all his life
Paid utmost deference to his wife
Confess’d her arguments had reason
And by th’approaching summer season
Draws a few hundreds from the stocks
And purchases his Country Box

Traditional verse
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‘They are shielded by a cocoon of aspiration. Still the first thing the ambitious industrialist does when he makes his fortune is to try to buy a country house. Lord of the Manor titles, which confer no land, wealth or real privilege, sell at auction for tens of thousands. Young couples bankrupt themselves to buy the sort of furniture which they think the nobility would have inherited. The ineffable superiority of parts of the landed classes, caught in aspirations of contempt such as ‘he’s the sort of shit that shoots on Saturday’ (i.e. has a proper job), inspires not derision but curiosity or envy.’ (Paxman 1990, 44).

1.1. The rebirth of rural Britain and the emergence of a New Squirearchy

On the 27th July 1997, the date identified as the first opportunity on which a private members bill to ban hunting could be presented to a newly elected parliament; over 120,000 people attended the first Countryside Rally in Hyde Park. Delivered to the capital by no less than 924 coaches and 12 chartered trains, the throng was addressed by an assortment of politicians, writers, celebrities and representatives of field sports organizations, and was followed by the presentation of a petition at the Prime Minister’s front door (see Woods 2005, 104). Dubbed the ‘day the countryside came to town’, the episode proved a remarkable success. Attracting one of the largest crowds of recent times, it achieved media saturation with over 300 television and radio interviews and provided the fodder for many column inches in national newspapers and magazines (George 1999). A ‘countryside’ protest - not just a pro-hunting protest - the political impact, notes Woods was two fold: it forced concessions from the government (not least by withholding government time in parliament from an anti hunting bill), and it placed rural issues at the heart of the political agenda – for the time being at least. With the momentum maintained by a second demonstration on March 1st the following year, a date corresponding with the report stage of Michael Foster’s
private member’s bill on hunting, the gripes of rural Britain were made clear on placards carried by participants, alluding not only to the chase, but to other issues including the agricultural recession, irresponsible housing development and the closure of rural services. Exhibiting those tensions that ran throughout the event as a desire to engage with a range of issues, those gathered were nonetheless uniform in defining their constituency in terms of a collective rural identity. While their understanding of that term varied considerably, three distinct strands have been identified by Woods; a **reactive ruralism**, involving the mobilization of some kind of ‘traditional’ rural population in defence of ‘purportedly historic, natural and agrarian-centred ‘rural ways of life’ in response to a perceived challenge from ‘ill informed’ urban intervention; a **progressive ruralism** involving action in opposition to modern farming practices and agricultural policy, and other activities that ‘conflict with a discourse of a simple, close to nature, localized and self sufficient rural society’; and an **aspirational ruralism**, involving the mobilization of in-migrants and like-minded actors to defend their fiscal and emotional investment in rural localities by seeking to promote the realization of an imagined ‘rural idyll’, and resisting developments that threaten or distract from this idyllic countryside.’ (Ibid, 111).

With reactive ruralism undeniably at the core of this social movement, the campaigning of such bodies as the Countryside Alliance have also enrolled individuals who would seek to identify with a progressive or aspirational ruralism. This was evident in the definition that the Countryside Alliance itself offered for the countryside it stands for; a vision not of space, landscape or physicality, but rather one of lifestyle and attitude:

‘The Countryside Alliance believes the countryside is best defined by its inhabitants. Families involved in traditional, conservation-minded farming and allied trades are part of the true rural population. So too are people
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who participate in country sports, and support an identifiable rural culture and rural system of values. This includes many recent settlers from towns, as well as many who, by circumstance, are forced to live in towns and cities for at least part of their lives.’

(Countryside Alliance website, quoted in Woods 2005, 111).

Promoting the countryside as being as much a ‘state of mind’ as an actual place, and rationalizing their goals as a David-versus-Goliath political struggle between the good, honest roots of a nation and its wayward, prevailing but long since detached municipal progeny, there can be little doubt that this crusade sparked – or at least amplified – a fashionable renaissance in all pertaining to be rural.

Yet, remarked Jonathon Clark in the *Times*, was this not a strange state of affairs? Never had town and country been so close in practical terms; although, in some ways the town had triumphed. Near universal car ownership has more or less abolished the ‘self-sufficient, inward looking world of the village shop and post office’, and everything from the town is now available in the country (2000, 17). But still the town dreams of a better life, and ‘we now see an important, perhaps final, phase of that aspiration’ (Ibid). As in the 1930s, when the bus and train allowed people to flee the urban-industrial, semi-detached complexes created at the turn of the twentieth century, a new image of the countryside has developed a new pattern of living, but also idealised and rationalised it:

‘Glossy magazines elaborate the theme of escape, but present an image of the country whose material circumstances are reassuringly familiar to townies. The practicalities of fox-hunting would leave most of them at sea, but paradoxically it has become a symbol of Old England at a time when the motorway and supermarket have quietly absorbed much of Old England into a profitable present.’ (Ibid).
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Seized as the symbolic practise that best distinguished the country (i.e. honour, bravery, adventure, independence, courtesy and the respect for creation) from the town (the opposite of all these), hunting became the ‘grain of sand around which a new outlook grew’. Hastily joined by an ever more diverse material repertoire in symbiosis with the rural idyll, the virtues of the countryside and the politics of symbolism were now played out in the media, public life and on the high street.

Thus, as the last of the demonstrators were set to wendle their way back to the sticks, those Barbour Jackets, flat caps, brown brogues and tweed hackers that had set apart these ‘rures in the urb’ were poised to colonize the shop windows of Bond Street and Saville Row, where the allure of the unsullied air, green fields and clean living they represented seemed that much greater:

‘Wellington boots continue to fly off the shelves of Paul Smith long after the floods have subsided; urban streets are gridlocked with rugged 4WDs; and the hippest way to soften up a minimal interior is with the addition of a rustic iron bedstead, heaped with patchwork counterpanes. Daks has staged a dramatic comeback, and Aquascutum looks set to be this years Burberry. For DIY rural style, dress your hat with a plume of grouse feathers (copy the Queen), fling a length of Harris Tweed over the shoulder (it’s the new pashmina) and top it all with a rosette you won in the pony club under 12s egg-and-spoon race.’ (Gilhooey 2001, 14).

With anecdotal accounts of ‘country chic’ featuring in the style sections and fashion pull-outs of such newspapers as the Sunday Times, more substantial indications of a sustained popular rebirth of profoundly blue-blooded rural aspirations have abounded in the bricks and mortar sections:
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‘The reality, in the countryside, is that a vigorous new class – a new squirearchy – is being born; scores of men and women who have made vast fortunes are joining the landed gentry by buying a country estate.’ (Mitchell 2004, 2).

A ‘swathe of the successful moneyed middle classes’ (Ibid), these individuals are typically identified as couples in their thirties and forties who have spent a decade or so in London making their money before the ‘pull of fresh air and endless views become to strong to resist’. Spurred on by the increasing efficiency of IT and the now-realistic prospect of teleworking, Gilhooey contends that the white heat of technology, traditionally believed to be the nemesis of country life, has played a ‘big part in enabling the townie set to get back to the soil’ (2001, 14). In past centuries, merchants might have dreamt of buying and estate and setting themselves up as country squires, but poor transport meant that this normally had to wait until their retirement. Now, states Clark, they need not. ‘Country cottages are wired for the internet; the town is filled with Range Rovers’ (2000, 17). Purchasing the ‘big’ houses of the village and those farmsteads that once served as its agricultural heart, evidence suggests that this trend has been both geographically uneven and London-centric1, but is now beginning to take on a national significance.

Considering farmsteads and other such ‘agricultural’ residences, quarterly figures published by the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) indicate that an increasing number are passing into the hands of what they refer to as ‘non-farmer individuals’, a transition that is particularly marked in the Home Counties (2004, 5). Moving upscale, the market for country estates, stately homes and other large

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1 Echoing those academic studies which have identified the rural South East as being as desirable place of residence and focus of migration (see Hoggart 1997; Murdoch and Marsden 1994; Phillips 1998a, 1998b).
country dwellings – so long in decline – has also received a massive boost. Elsewhere, in a survey by Country Life magazine, the editor of its Elite Property Index was led to comment that the “well off individuals wishing to join the squirearchy of England’s most popular rural counties now need longer arms and deeper pockets than ever before” (2004, 32). Surrey, maintains the web-based organization Find a Property is, on average, the ‘most expensive county to fulfil your double-barrelled Barbour jacket fantasies’, followed by Berkshire, Kent and Hertfordshire (2004, 6).

Faced with a chronic shortage of English country houses, buyers have also resorted to building their own. With so much apparent ‘wealth at the upper end of the market, and so few period gems to go round’, the Telegraph’s Caroline McGhie reported a record quantity of planning applications for large scale rural dwellings during 2004, with many put forward under the proviso of the controversial exception ‘PPG7’ (2004, 23). Created by John Gummer as Secretary of State for the Environment, this clause allowed the building of new country houses provided that they were “truly outstanding in terms of architecture and landscape design”, and that they paid respect to local building traditions. While local authorities have been cautious in their response, looking more favourably on proposals for affordable homes than so-called ‘Beckingham Palaces’ (after the England footballer and his wife, the model and former Spice Girl), many modernist mansions and neo-classical palaces have nevertheless passed through this gateway, reinventing a ‘400 year tradition killed off by post-war depression, inheritance tax and other problems.’ (Ibid, 26).

The question is, ‘so what’? The issue of the wealthy buying into the upper echelons of the rural property ladder is hardly a new one, having been a consistent point of observation in rural studies from Newby et al (1978) onwards. Clichés aside, if a ‘vigorous new class’ is being born then surely they must be
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differentiating themselves from that broad body of ex-urbanites living what Sinclair describes as a ‘fundamentally suburban, as opposed to rural, way of life’ (1990, 66). It must therefore be supposed that, like the vast majority of wealthy in-migrants, they continue to rely on the town for economic support, yet decline the anonymity often attributed to a significant proportion of middle-class in such a way that suggests the countryside has been landed with a new gentry: A case forcibly made by Clive Aslet, the deputy editor of Country Life, speaking to Derdre Fernand of the Sunday Times as long ago as 1991:

“Everyone wants to be a squire. At the beginning of the 1980s, people dreamed of owning a modern, suburban house near the golf course. But 10 years on, aspirations have changed. Now the ideal is a country rectory, preferably Georgian, with stabling, paddocks and pastures.” (p. 12).

Responding to Aslet’s assertions, James Gulliver, the former chairman of the Argyll Group and owner of Pitlochie, a 1000 acre estate in Fife, was perfectly happy to accept he was one of a growing band of “Identikit countrymen”, tending his cattle and barley fields, and pulling on one’s wax jacket to become the local laird: “I had always wanted to own some land”, he said, “there’s something compelling about having your own piece” (Ibid).

So compelling indeed, argued Fernand, that an entirely new landowning class was fast emerging in modern Britain whose money, earned in the City, in industry and in property development, goes to supporting a lifestyle that was once the exclusive province of the aristocracy. With a phrase for this passion for an upmarket rural existence; Brideshead Remarked², it is apparently of little

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² After Evelyn Waugh’s Brideshead Revisited. The story of a vanished generation of wealthy, largely care-free men and women of means clinging precariously to a way of life gravely eroded by the First World War, soon to be swept away almost altogether by another.
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wonder that such country living and decoration magazines as Homes & Gardens, House & Garden and the World of Interiors - to name but a few - have prospered. It is, stated Fernand, a curious fact of British life that ‘as soon as anyone notches up a few million, he or she is on the mobile phone dialling Jackson-Stops & Staff or Knight, Frank & Rutley to find the ultimate des res’ (Ibid, 13). And, while styles may have come, gone and returned once more, it seems that it was ever thus:

“The British have stronger feelings than other nations about the country house. It is a mixture of snobbery and romanticism. There is a feeling that that the country is better than the town, something enshrined in our literature. The French, by contrast, are just beginning to go in for weekends away and second houses.” (Girouard quoted in Fernand 1991, 13).

The author of Life in the English Country House (1978), as well as various other books on this particular subject, Girouard maintains that, as a nation we are in some ways “slaves to Arcadia” and that “much of our heart’s desire is to ape the gentry and recreate Camelot” (Ibid). More than a question of fashion and social mobility, this attraction rests on a distinctly British notion of success, fulfilment and the idyllic; and one that is intrinsically tied with particular practises, protocols and leisure pursuits.

1.2. Beyond the gravelled driveway

‘From our cradle there is a love of field sports handed down to us from Nimrod; and confirmed by the Norman Conquest, as a right of the gentry: Nor do I hope to live to see the San Culottes of this land laying all distinction waste – and in defiance of law, and submission proclaiming what they call the rights of man.’ (John Byng quoted in Mingay 1979, 181).
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Although it would be wrong to overemphasise the importance of sport in maintaining the fabric and vision of the landed gentry, Mingay reminds us that for a great many of their number over the ages it was something of an obsession, with characterisations of the red-coated gent taking a ditch on horseback or bagging a grouse with retriever-at-heel have becoming a – if not the – most enduring legacy of the country squire (1979, 178). Here, for example, we may look to such celebrated figures as Sir Tatton Sykes; the owner of 34,000 Yorkshire acres who, in a long life beginning in 1772, reputedly attended the St Leger seventy-four times and sold his brother’s priceless Elizabethan library, medals, coins and pictures to pay for his hounds; Grantley Berkeley, the second (legitimate) son of fifth Earl of Berkeley and ‘London buck’ who visited the great plains of North America to hunt buffalo and famously horse-whipped the editor of Fraser’s Magazine on account of an unfavourable review of his literary prowess, and; the legendary ‘Squire Osbaldeston’ or ‘Squire of all England’, who ‘excelled at every branch of sport’ and declined into relative penury through continual borrowing to satisfy his passion for the turf (Ibid, 179).

Albeit the occasion of debts, sometimes ruin, and often associated with a dissolute taste for excessive gambling and drinking, country sport was one of the main attractions keeping the gentry at home on the estates, and in some cases had direct effects on social relations in the rural community. Of the village pastimes cricket, bowling, and later rugby or possibly football, brought together all ranks of society, while shooting, hunting and equestrianism more generally set the squire and his grand friends apart (Ibid, 180). Historically restricted to the landowning fraternity by merit of cost and access, these pursuits have in recent times become party to a wider audience by way of economic necessity, the greater distribution of wealth, a gradual rise in free time and, perhaps, the attraction of rhetorical (if no longer financial) exclusivity.
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At the grandest scale, the British Association for Shooting & Conservation (BASC) is attracting new members at a record rate, with The Times recently placing participation in the sport at a higher level than that of athletics, hockey or rugby (Bawden 2004, 27). Reporting on the status of the sport in Wiltshire, for example, John Vidal of The Guardian detailed how demand ensured that every ‘live’ shoot in the county was full for the 1998 season at the greatly inflated cost of around £1000 per gun per day, a situation that he suggested was being echoed across the country. Querying the clientele, he referred to a local estate worker:

“Who goes? The odd 1970s rock star, but mostly marketing people impressing clients, and city types on huge bonuses kitted out with the regulation new guns, suits and socks … They’ll shoot anything that moves.”

For those less inclined to take aim on live quarry, clay target shooting is also currently undergoing a boom in popularity according to the organization set-up to endorse ‘National Shooting Week’, an event which will enjoy its second anniversary in May 2008. Spurred on by British successes in the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, and relatively inexpensive compared to game shooting, it is, intimates the BASC (2007), ‘particularly attractive to those who live in towns and are keen to get a taste for country sport’.

Elsewhere, the popularity of the hunt has also, according to some, rocketed, despite – or perhaps because of – the introduction of the Hunting Act in February 2005. Writing for the Daily Telegraph, Clive Aslet of Country Life reports that such packs as the Beaufort are being buoyed by record subscriptions and the support of a growing number of individuals not previously connected with this activity; whether on horseback or ‘via balls, darts competitions, skittle tournaments and other such fundraisers’ (2007). Quoting a member of one of Britain’s ‘premier
meets’, Clare Wall alleges that banning the blood sport has actually been something of a fillip:

“It has given hunting the best shot in the arm because it has encouraged people to come out and see what all the fuss is about, and if they enjoy it they can come back. It has put it in the public eye ... We had 63 horses take part on Boxing Day which, as far as I can remember, is the most we’ve ever had. And on New Years Day we had in excess of 50 horses.” (2007).

Connecting an upsurge in mounted participants to a renewed interest in rural pursuits more generally, the growing importance of equestrianism as a leisure activity in the UK has also been noted in academic circles, constituting the development of what Quetier and Gordon (2003) have labelled ‘horsiculture’.

The information available on horses and horse ownership is very patchy, although DEFRA’s last survey of the industry showed that in the UK in 1999, 2.4 million people enjoyed riding (4.5 per cent of the population), with half of all riders doing so at least once a week. Horse owners and riders were estimated to spend around £2.5 billion on horses and riding, including £150 million on buying the animals and £1200 million on their upkeep. With these figures set to ‘rise considerably’; substantiation of a continued growth has come from Horse & Hound (2007) who have of late on their website commented on ‘the terrific growth in the sector’ as demonstrated by the soaring membership of such organizations as the Pony Club, now totalling more than 23,000. Cashing in on this ‘craze’, the supermarket chain Tesco has launched a range of equipment for horse and rider, described by a spokesman as designed to “make a pastime that’s very popular more affordable ... and get bums on saddles”, while Horse & Country TV – a channel ‘dedicated to equestrianism and the countryside’ - was launched in September 2006.
Returning to the RICS rural land market survey mentioned previously, further evidence of a mounting interest in horsiculture comes in the form of data gathered on those non-farmer individuals purchasing agricultural land on the basis of ‘amenity demand’ (2004, 7). Here selected comments issued by prominent members of the institute are suggestive of a noteworthy, tangible investment in rural space by equestrians, and those ‘not looking to turn a working profit’ out of their holdings:

“The farmland market has seen an influx of non-farmers on the back of the housing market boom. Buying to support lifestyle, and interest from those seeking alternative investments to the equity market has also been strong. Since their low in 1993, farmland values have risen by 176%, which has outpaced that of equities which have risen only 75%.” (RICS spokesman).

“Lack of supply and pent-up demand still keeping prices of bare land high. Strong interest from amenity, equestrian and lifestyle buyers.”

(White & Sons, Dorking).

“We are currently selling almost entirely to equestrian people in small parcels 5-20 acres at a large premium over agricultural values.”

(Creasey, Biles & King, Newport).

Predominantly identified as an economic force in the South East and South West of England, being largely absent from East Anglia, the Midlands and the North, the greater proportion of these lifestyle buyers are generally acknowledged as being so-called ‘hobby farmers’ and, on a larger scale, ‘absent farmers’.

Cashing in on the worst crisis in the industry for 70 years, following BSE and a gradual rise in the value of sterling which has allowed cheaper food to flood in
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from abroad, the scale of investment is drawing parallels with economic upheavals of two centuries ago when mill owners and well-to-do merchants built up great estates (Mortished 2007, 59). Although, as Rundle argues, there is a principal difference:

‘[Then] it was commonplace for successful businessman to set themselves up as landowners, with the farming being carried on by the tenantry. This is leading to a complete role reversal, as farmers who used to be owner-occupiers start to rent the land the new squirearchy has acquired but does not have the expertise to farm.’ (2000, 12).

Estimating that some £5 billion of the £8 billion earned in City bonuses in 2007 was sunk into land, bricks and mortar, urban bankers, stockbrokers and traders are said to be ‘hoovering up’ those landholdings that ‘real farmers’ can no longer afford to keep up (Mortishead 2007, 59). Wanting not so much to take over mechanised commercial cultivation as a chance to pursue a romantic passion for wildlife, environmental protection, and perhaps organic farming on smaller and more manageable scale, they generally favouring smaller units of 40 acres or under; although there are those plumping for the ‘house and full 500 acres’. Either way, their potential long-term impact has brought about mixed reviews.

With sizeable, non-dependent funds, this new breed of idyll-seeker can afford to indulge their whim and, like their Victorian forebears, have much to offer beside wealth and employment prospects for the local community.

‘They may know little of the country life as yet, but they bring proven managerial expertise, creative flair and self-reliance from their careers, assets that will help them to introduce fresh thinking and imaginative solutions to the problems of a crisis-ridden farming sector. Their focus on a
small-is-beautiful farming, and their familiarity with the computerised communications that the Government wants to introduce into rural areas, could help tip the rural economy into recovery.’ (Ibid).

Bold claims, they have not been freely accepted by many within the industry, with criticism of this trend coming from numerous sources; including a number of public bodies. English Nature, for instance, have been outspoken about the impact of amateurs on what they refer to as the ‘fabric of the countryside’, while English Heritage have also complained of barns and out buildings being converted ‘in a way that is fundamentally unsympathetic to the buildings and very unsympathetic to the countryside’ (see Norwood 2007, 76).

More widespread, however, is the belief that hobby farmers of this ilk lack the dedication that can only come from the necessity of making an agrarian enterprise commercially viable. In the South West, for example, 70 to 80 per cent of all farms are currently being bought by those who do not intent to make a living off the land, and only derive around 4 per cent of their direct income from farm produce. Focusing on the woes of those forced to sell as opposed to the potential benefits their replacements will bring to the countryside as a whole, the National Farmers Union has been wary of this process, with officials reasoning that “these townies will find it hard to cope with the mucky reality of a lifestyle for which Islington has not prepared them” (Ibid). Seen as playing a game; it is an accusation that has also been levelled at the role of a wider band of in-migrants as regards to their involvement in rural affairs as a whole.

1.3. At play; beyond play?

‘Playing the countryman’, states Sinclair, is like spending weekends on a yacht in Southampton pretending to be old seadog’ (1990, 65). It is, he argues, little more
than a psychological need in English people and a glorious diversion from the outset:

‘Playing and pretending, in truth, is precisely what a great many of the new ruralists are doing, particularly in areas close to cities, and specifically London. The men most often have well paid jobs in the urban centres, so that they are home only in the evenings and at weekends, working off the frustrations arising from trains that do not run on time … or from overcrowded motorways and increasingly congested country roads.’ (Ibid).

Detailed as longstanding phenomenon, Sinclair’s use of the moniker ‘new gentry’ nevertheless hints at the existence of a distinct faction of wealthy ex-urbanites exploiting the potential of countryside in a squirearchal fashion; although this does not necessarily mean that that a squirearchy of the past is being either exhumed or replaced. Rather, certain elements of the old ruling class have retained a considerable amount of political influence both locally and nationally (see Paxman 1990), and, in the words of Peter Spence (2007), their resilience in ‘a world of computers, mobile phones, iPods, GPS, GM crops, Brussels and the whole environmental thing’ has been little short of astonishing.

Justifying its pre-fix through the undertaking of – or aspiring to fulfil – certain roles, positions and modes of behaviour within the milieu of everyday life, the ‘new’ gentry is characterized as existing alongside (or instead of) an old guard who largely differ in their historic and economic underpinnings; in short, a body who ‘have always been there’. But is this a correct assumption? It has long been said that ‘every Englishman loves a Lord’, and conscious emulation by moneyed ex-urbanites has always figured as a renovating force amongst the rural gentry, as the following passage clearly dictates:
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‘Once again, the question was whether the social order of the countryside would be capable of assimilating a new breed of capitalist landowners on any terms whatever short of its own fundamental transformation and subversion. For the squire type had grown up in the course of many generations, and its habits of mind were on the face of things utterly different from those engendered in the struggle for survival in the fields of commerce and industry. If anything like a majority of country estates had passed into this new type of plutocratic parvenu, it would have been all up with the squirearchy. Such men seemed as though they would be as much out of place on the land as a fish out of water. They understood farmers as little as they did farming and with an inevitable extension of the franchise they would, in time, have made the English squire as extinct an animal as the Anglo-Irish squireen. Yet, none of these consequences did actually follow.’ (Wingfield-Stratford 1956, 190-191).

The very word ‘squirearchy’, then, has always been in a state of becoming something of a linguistic anachronism. Successive generations of squires have, stipulates Mingay, always presented themselves ‘through a romantic mist as being of a wistfully conceived past’, paying the monetary cost and conforming to the ‘meticulous performance of things that are done by people who count’ (Ibid, 451). That said, those socio-economic forces that had moulded and regulated rural life in pre-industrial Britain were rapidly disintegrating by the mid 19th century, and the once-gentle rate of assimilation became decidedly rapid.

With the coming of the railways, and the substitution of the horse by the motorcar, the connection between the squirearchy and the soil quickly loosened, and the owner of the country house was no longer anchored to their district to the extent of their predecessors. In many cases this process of dislocation was accompanied by a total severance, and many old squires either chose – or were forced – to
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abandon ‘their’ communities; having fallen victim to the zeitgeist which favoured industry over tenanted agriculture, a trend of increasingly pernicious death duties initiated by a vindictive Liberal government, and the ‘super tax’ imposed by an incoming, urban and largely unsympathetic Labour party. Yet, while there are many high-profile examples of aristocratic dynasties crumbling in the face of financial adversity, to hold that vast swathes of the historic elite have been forced to abandon their acres *en masse* is something of a falsehood.

Aided by heritage schemes, tax breaks and farming subsides, they have been able to hold on to over 30 per cent of the national land mass and remain the single largest landowning body in the British Isles (see Paxman 1990). Nevertheless, the lifestyle has undoubtedly changed and the opulent existence of the past has most certainly given way to a more business-savvy, less community-orientated mode of asset management. To play on the words of Girouard, who points out that land was significant to the gentry ‘not for agricultural production, but for the tenants and rent that came with it’ (1978, 2), land remains significant to much (although not all) of the gentry not so much for the tenants that come with it, but rather the production and rent. Far less inclined toward formal politics, and those jobs and perquisites (once?) offered by central government in return for support, the established squire is now seldom found calling on lessee’s to vote for them – or their candidate – in local elections, or drawn to ‘keep up so handsome and impressive an establishment’ in order that the populous may feel that it is in their best interests to comply:

‘What were country houses for? They were not originally, whatever they may be now, just large houses in the country in which people lived. Essentially they were power houses – the houses of a ruling class. As such they could work at the local level of a manor house, the house of a squire who was like a little king in his village and ran the country in partnership
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with his fellow J.P.s at quarter sessions. They could work at a local and
nenational level as the seat of a landowner who was also a member of
parliament, or of a great magnate who was king in his own county but also
had his gang of tame M.P.s and spent more than half the year in London,
running the country in association with his fellow magnates. But basically
people did not live in country houses unless they either possessed power
or, by setting up in a country house, were making a bid to possess it’. (Ibid).

Detailing the declining role of those grand homes that had for centuries
symbolised power and authority, the early part of the twentieth century saw
numerous stately buildings demolished, sold, rented out or become nothing more
than a weekend retreat. During the interwar period, for example, no less than 130
substantial country homes were pulled down, whilst in Shropshire, of the county’s
173 principal seats, just under one third changed hands between 1922 and 1934
(Mowat 1955). The so-called *nouveaux riche*, many of those who came to purchase
or rent these edifices;

‘had not the least ambition to bury themselves, as they might have put it, in
the countryside, or to participate in its life, but regarded their new domains
frankly in the light of pleasure grounds, to which they imported large
house-parties of opulent and up-to-date friends of their own kidney for
weekends, or special occasions such as racing and shooting parties.’

(Wingfield-Stratford 1956, 413).

More than a passing fad, the popularity of the country house (or, for that matter,
any type of rural residence) has continued into the present day; with the economic
future of many areas of the British countryside, as the editor of *Country Life* has
recently speculated, being that of an “urban playground for pseudo toffs”.
Evidence suggests, however, that these pseudo toffs are interested only in the “big
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houses”, and not the land and civic compulsion that once went with them. They are, suggests Hutton-Squire, buying 100 acres for ‘a good view, sport and privacy … but with no intention of further involvement in the locality’:

‘When they find themselves occupying England’s finest manor houses, how do they compare to the country squire-types who lived there before. Do today’s villagers tug their forelocks as Gary Barlow strolls past, or do they cross themselves and bar the door when they hear that Noel Gallagher is riding out?’ (1993, 31).

‘They’, those ‘occupying England’s finest houses’ are the squires of showbiz, and in contemplating whether or not they ‘do their bit for the community’, Robert Hutton-Squire of the Sunday Times asks if this phenomenon incorporates performance as well as consumption. In the case of ‘Spice Girl’ Melanie Brown and ‘Take That’ frontman Gary Barlow, for example, their sense of duty is deemed to be decidedly lacklustre. Despite getting married in the church adjoining her 16th century rectory and being an occasional patron of the village pharmacy, Ms Browns’ failure to take up invitations to carol singing get-togethers and the primary school’s nativity has, apparently, been frowned upon. Likewise, Mr Barlow’s ‘first decision’ on moving into Delamere, an eight bedroom manor set in 60 acres of Cheshire countryside, was to ban the local fishing club from using the trout lake – a move that hardly endeared him to his new neighbours.

On the other hand, there are also members of the ‘celebrity gentry’ who are the subject of much praise. At the head of this is the pop singer Sting, who is said to play heavily on his ‘Lord of the Manor status’; with album sleeves that see him strolling through his vast estate with hounds at heel. Beyond such imagery, however, Sting is also known as a generous contributor to the upkeep of the local church where he and his wife baptised their children and had their marriage
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blessed. In addition to these largely symbolic commitments, a more directly paternalistic involvement in the social fabric of the community sets the couple apart from the likes of Barlow and Brown. This is well illustrated on Christmas Eve, when the villagers head over to Lake House for drinks and mince pies, while November 5th sees a bonfire and firework display laid on in the grounds of their 41 bedroom Tudor mansion. On a more mundane level, rock star Rod Stewart is noted as a generous supporter of local charities and an occasional face in the Half Moon public house, where he has been known to invite the regulars ‘back to the manor for a spot of football’ (Ibid).

Capturing the public imagination, these celebrities are but a small – albeit high profile – contingent of a much larger body of ‘faceless entrepreneurs, industrialists and city boys’ who engender talk of a new squirearchy at the grass roots level. Entirely different from what Mitchell has described as the ‘diffident toffs of old’, whose ‘training in money matters rarely went beyond totting up the bar bill in the officers’ mess’, many incumbents are nevertheless adopting the mantle of duty for whatever motive: People like Alistair Cooper, a former merchant banker who retired to a four-square haven of ‘vertiginous chalk downs and woodland’ at Sydling St Nicholas. Sandwiched between Sherborne and Dorchester the estate is cut through by a ‘gin-clear’ stream and is famous for its shoot, although he is cited as not being there “purely to swank about in tweeds” (Ibid). Focused on making his mark through investing a great deal of time and money in the running of his estate, and contributing much to the affairs of the locality; Cooper has elicited a favourable response from neighbouring landowners who are rather born into their acres. Distinguishing those making a declaration of wealth – the nouveau riche – from those willing to fully commit to their acquisition in a psychological as well as financial manner, in referring to ‘noblesse oblige’ such ‘worthy’ new squires are patently judged according to a discourse mobilized by their heritable counterparts and their spiritual forefathers. A benchmark otherwise known as that of the
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‘Country Gentleman’, it is a concept that implies the sustaining of a ‘natural order’ within both nature and human society through the management of both land and people (Woods 2005a, 27).

Drawing heavily on the philosophy of Hume and Locke in composing an ideology of property, this conceptualization justified a hierarchal social structure, with wealth and status accompanied by obligations and duties, and a responsibility to both past and future. These motifs are echoed in passage from Gaskell’s *Somersetshire Leaders: Social and Political* (1906), which is described by Woods as an epitome of this elite condition:

‘In the estimation of the majority of men there is no life that offers more solid attractions than that of a country gentleman. Far removed from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife’, he lives the pure natural life for which man was originally intended, and sits at the feet of the greatest of Gamaliels – Nature. Such a man is spared the bustle and turmoil of strenuous city life, with all its disappointments, its morbid restlessness and strifes. With him life pursues the even tenor of its way flowing with deep, silent stream, the converse of the career of a dweller in towns whose existence resembles rather a shallow, turbulent mountain torrent. But the life of the country gentleman does not lack responsibility, for he owes duties both to his own position and to his tenants and dependents.’ (No pagination).

The figure of the ‘country gentleman’, observes Woods, thus merged notions of rurality and a discourse of power in a manner that became expressed in a language of ‘duties’ and ‘responsibilities’, but which was ‘unquestionably about privilege’ (Ibid). Citing Newby, the gentlemanly ethic therefore existed as device for perpetuating distinctions of status, and as ‘an agency of social discipline ... Conferring legitimate authority on those who held power in rural society and
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defending the rituals of social intercourse which accompanied the exercise of power’ (1987, 69).

Accepted by workers, tenants and the wider rural population as the basis of a ‘legitimate right to rule’ (Ibid), the discourse of the country gentleman is identified by Woods as being multi-layered, with each layer establishing credentials for membership of the upper strata. Firstly, it was intrinsically patriarchal; inherited through the male line and with its basis in the quasi-mythological ideal of the medieval knight. Identified with chivalry, such that those born to gentility were supposed to be naturally gifted with the qualities of bravery, loyalty, fidelity, generosity and of sound judgement (Girouard 1981), this masculine construct excluded women from full participation: Whilst there are ‘numerous references to women’s charity work and their role as hostesses in contemporary accounts’, even aristocratic women lacked a political presence of their own.

Secondly, Woods observes that the discourse of the country gentleman was tied in with a belief in stewardship. Deprived of the military duties of the medieval man-at-arms, the gentlemanly ethic reinvented the role as one of guardian of the countryside (Ibid). A responsibility that could only be discharged through the ownership of land and the means to production, it embraced both the preservation and improvement of the physical environment, and the stewardship of rural society (Everett 1994). Recasting leadership activities not as dispensation, but as an inviolable charter, this fed into a third element of the discourse of the country gentleman; that of a ‘natural order’. Extending the ‘predatory order recognized in nature such that humans are represented to have supremacy over the natural world’ (Woods 2005a, 29); nature’s most ancient peerage is given pre-eminence over other rural dwellers. Positions of power, therefore, are ‘not offices to be competed for, but rather bestowed by birthright’ (Ibid).
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Finally, it is argued that the discourse promoted a ‘particular moral geography in which the nobility of the country gentry was portrayed as a reflection of the nobility of the countryside’ (Ibid). Here, notes Woods, resistance to an ‘evil’ urban influence as part of a defence of rustic purity, was ‘paralleled by the protection of the purity of the rural elite by the virtual exclusion of individuals whose wealth derived from commerce’. As discussed, this procedure had become practically untenable by the mid 19th century, although the rhetoric of bucolic virtue was one that would also be mustered by the agrarian and civic elites who gradually diluted - and eventually largely appropriated - squirearchal power in the socio-political upheavals of the 20th century. Nevertheless, for those landed families whose existence remains allied with their assets, ‘their’ landscape and ‘their’ communities, the assumed propriety of those historically deemed fit to govern rural affairs is still occasionally rallied as a rejoinder to the rise of a self-styled heir-apparent.

Remarking on this specified gulf, Mitchell writes that while ‘locals are mostly pleased when young owners arrive with the money to do up decrepit buildings and employ plenty of staff, it is the old-fashioned squires who can’t help a little jaundice creeping in’:

“On the whole these people are not good at lasting,” grumbles Francis Fulford, of Fulford, whose family has sat squarely on the same Devon acres for 800 years. “They buy because they are making a statement about how rich they are. The estate and house are no more than a luxury to them.”

(2004).

A matter of refined taste, manners and discretion, Mitchell goes on by recapping a conversation with a Gloucester agent, who recalls the day one of his more wealthy clients came to view a ‘delicious’ Georgian house with a small estate. An hour
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late, a scarlet Ferrari flew up the drive and skidded to a stop, leaving black ruts in the pale gravel:

“My client made no apology for being late, but the old couple selling the house were completely charming. It was when he drove back to London that the old boy turned to me and said: ‘We’re not selling our family home to that b******, whatever he offers.’ (Ibid).

There is a place for would-be squires who spin around in Ferraris and have ‘run out of things to spend their money on, observes Mitchell; ‘it is called Surrey’. Here traditional estates with cottages and farms still exist, but ‘they tend to come with a few extras, such as helicopter pads, security systems linked to mobile phones and grounds surreptitiously wired for sound’ (Ibid). A playground for those who have ‘done well for themselves’, they move in ‘entirely different circles’ to those of the old elite (although they are seen as ‘desperately trying to get in’) – yet form a distinctly vocal element of a middle class identified as dictating the nature and progress of rural change nationwide.

1.4. From squirearchy to New Squirearchy; a reflection of changing class politics

The end of the squirearchy’s dominance, observes Woods, ‘came not in any sudden revolution, but in a series of events that gradually chipped away at the three dimensions of the landed elite’s power’ (2005a, 31); i.e. those of; resource power, which is a fairly conventional understanding of power in the Weberian tradition, described as the control over, or access to, ‘specific resources enjoyed by an actor that enables that actor to do things others cannot’; associational power, understood as an ability to achieve goals from the ‘blending together of a range of resources through a network or coalition of actors’ (Ibid, 25), and; discursive power, referring to those circumstances in which a non-elite attributes power to an elite
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on the basis of popularly-diffused beliefs and prejudices, which define the power or influence that an elite might reasonably be expected to have (Woods 1997).

Already briefly mentioned, the first major challenge came from the Liberal government of 1906-1914 in the guise of land reforms which made it easier for tenants to purchase property, therefore eroding a degree of the squirearchy’s resource power. More importantly, the heavy loss of life on the battlefields of France in the First World War dealt a heavy blow to the landed gentry; who’s ‘young bucks’ upheld a strong military tradition and constituted the greater proportion of junior officers serving in the trenches. This death of a generation not only jeopardised the hereditary tradition, but brought with it considerable death duties. With the value of agricultural land rising sharply in the first few years subsequent to the armistice, selling off the family acres was often the least disruptive, and occasionally only, way of meeting these debts (Woods 2005a, 31).

Trimming down their holdings, and occasionally letting go of entire estates, the sale of land not only undermined the resource power of the squirearchy, but also their associational and discursive influence. There were now less landed families in the public eye, and ‘many members of those who had remained could no longer afford to live the lives of leisure mixed with public service, but were compelled to seek paid employment’ (Ibid, 32). Interfering with wining-and-dining, and hunting and shooting, many of those spaces and events through which the associational power of the county set was played out went into terminal decline. A situation documented by the sixth Duke of Portland in 1937, the sense of loss is palpable in this passage taken from his personal diary:

‘When I first lived at Welbeck the great neighbouring houses, such as Clumber, Thoresby and Rufford, were all inhabited by their owners, who employed large staffs. Now, not one of them is so occupied, except for a
very few days in the year, and the shooting attached to them is either let or abandoned. Whether this is for the general good I leave for others to judge. It is certainly the fact.’ (Quoted in Horn 1992, 182).

Perhaps most significantly, as land was sold or country houses stood empty, links with whole communities were broken; the sacrifice of social activities exposed the vulnerability of the gentry and made the discourse of the country gentleman unsustainable. ‘Rural Britain’, states Woods, ‘was in need of a new political settlement’ (1995a, 32).

This is not to suggest, however, that the squirearchy disappeared from local power structures overnight. Their membership continued to dominate the ancient offices of Lord Lieutenant, Deputy Lieutenant and High Sheriff, and was well represented on the magistrates’ bench. Moreover, a culture of deference persisted to the extent that those who wished to remain involved in local governance were still considered to be natural leaders. What the old elite could no longer do, however, was to rule in isolation. In order to sustain a semblance of influence it was led to reconstruct its associational power, and did so by opening up its networks to engage with (although not incorporate) members of two rising political forces; that of the farming community and the small town shopocracy (Elcock 1975).

A ‘startling social revolution in the countryside’, Thompson declared the transfer of property from aristocratic landlords to small and medium scale farmers to be the ‘creation of a new race of yeoman’ (1963, 333). Rarely more than minor figures in national terms, on a local scale they became in the words of Howkins ‘masters of the parishes where they lived, perhaps more surely than those who had owned the parish only as one of many hundreds’ (1991, 281). With the focus of power (and deference) gradually shifting to this body of men in the interwar years, their
colonization of rural government initially took place at the most local level. Thus farmers came to dominate the membership of parish councils, with Woods remarking it not uncommon for one of their number to hold the chair for several decades, in many cases handing over to their son on retirement (2005a, 33). Also commonly elected as parish representatives on district councils, he draws on Bracey (1959) in suggesting that farmers constituted over 50 per cent of members of rural district councils in the 1950s; with their position strengthened by the relative absence of the gentry.

Reflecting their growth in resource power as employers, an economic upturn in the agricultural sector spurred by the Great War, and the organizational capacity of the National Farmers Union (NFU) – which had been established as recently as 1918 – farmers were quick to step into the leadership vacuum left by an aristocratic retreat from public affairs. Appropriating of the ideology of stewardship in the literal sense of owning the landscape, they were also considered to be accessible, well known, and knowledgeable as regards to local needs and affairs; conditions of leadership which were shared by small town traders and businesspeople, whose significance in the governing of market towns also increased through the interwar period. Prompted by the growing remit of municipal councils, they too were quick to grasp the opportunity to play a greater role at county level as the influence of the gentry waned (Ibid, 35).

Associated through tightly-knit networks circulating around political associations, churches, sports clubs and, more explicitly, organizations such as the Chamber of Trade, Rotary Club and the Freemasons, members of the small town business elite also participated in wider social networks that connected them with the agrarian and landed elites. Contributing to the production of the ‘associational power that underpinned a new rural political settlement’, they shared a broadly conservative ideology and a ‘vested interest in the maintenance of property rights and of
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capitalism, and in resistance to any broadening of political participation that would disturb the entrenched class system’ (Ibid, 37). Influenced by new discourses of rurality, they took much inspiration from the ‘back to the land’ movement which called for the preservation of tradition in the countryside (see Matless 1994), although remained primarily concerned with the agricultural depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Placing farming at the heart of their agenda, this resulted in a firm commitment to improving the national infrastructure; a drive which was matched by the civic elite’s own commitment to enhancing public utilities.

Coming together in promoting the discourse of the organic agricultural community, the coalition of farmers, remaining landed gentry and small town businesspeople persisted in recognizable form well into the latter part of the 20th century. In the years after the Second World War, however, a number of processes began to loosen the stranglehold of this agrarian-business hegemony, identified by Woods as follows. Firstly, the scope and responsibilities of local government expanded significantly - in part due to the establishment of the ‘welfare state’ and ‘as the management of local government became more complex, so more power and influence passed from the councillors themselves to the growing professional cadre of local government officers’ (Ibid, 41). Secondly, the aftermath of conflict saw an expansion of the leadership group at the hands of ex-military officers. Fitting the traditional leadership profile, many retired into rural areas and brought with them expertise to those councils and other bodies which they joined as a matter of public service.

Thirdly, the impetus for agricultural modernization gradually undermined elements of the farmers’ resource power. Here mechanization and the introduction of biotechnologies reduced the agricultural labour force ‘such that the position of farmers as major employers in small rural communities was
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diminished’ (Ibid, 42). Finally, the trend for counterurbanization from the late 1960s onwards ‘provided perhaps the greatest challenge to the rural political order by bringing into the countryside large numbers of in-migrants who had not been raised with the discursive conventions of rural society’ (Ibid). With few connections to agriculture or country pursuits, but with the inclination and wherewithal to seek out a role in local affairs, they were drawn from the more affluent reaches of the middle class; thus sharing a typically conservative outlook with the existing elite and presenting little threat. As the rate urban to rural migration intensified in the late 1970s and ‘the social status of in-migration became much more inclusive’ (Ibid), the potential for conflict increased and a far more complex and fractious situation ensued.

By 1990, Cloke reported that the in-migrant middle classes had become a discernable force in rural politics, and that they were very often contesting the authority of the agricultural elites. Revealing a change in the nature of counterurbanization, the process had gradually become more inclusive and now incorporated a growing number of the lower middle classes whose socio-economic background rendered them less obvious allies of the traditional rural leadership. Furthermore, as a growing number of purpose built housing estates sprang up around the countryside, many newcomers were physically separated from the fabric of the ‘old’ rural community and did not integrate accordingly. More pertinently, Cloke’s report was also symptomatic of a change in the way in which academics approached the concept of rural class.

Critiquing the accepted model of class relations as an expression of property ownership (e.g. Newby et al 1978; Buttel and Newby 1980), occupational traits and lifestyle choices were now deemed equally important; giving rise to what is oft referred to as the ‘restructuring approach’ (see Marsden et al. 1993). Identifying the importance of cultural representations and conflict in connecting social
relations with cycles of economic transformations, rural change was now conceived of as tied up with a broader shift from a manufacturing-based economy to service-based economy (Goodwin et al 1995). With the rate and temperament of this process being variable (across both space and time), it has been seen to have a pronounced effect on the character and composition of the British countryside; resulting not in a classless society as some have been led to suggest, but rather a transition to a new class structure where the middle class has taken centre stage.

Following Gardner, power has been attributed to the middle class on three grounds (2004, 63). In the first instance, their numerical presence in local political, quasi political and amenity organisations has resulted in the over representation of their interests in many areas. Secondly, their relative capacity for collective action has enabled them to the social, economic and ideological characteristics of rural space into a form that suits their visual sensibilities. Lastly, their enhanced educational, social and financial assets vis-à-vis other class fractions has enabled the middle class to distinguish themselves and exclude others from the realities (Murdoch and Marsden 1995) and representations (Thrift 1989) of rural space, and establish them as dominant discourse(s). Ultimately, it is argued, these expressions of middle class power result from a command over three key resources; those of money, skills and cultural competence.

Firstly, the middle class have the economic capital to buy into the rural housing market, and purchase those ‘cultural assets which denote social position’. Secondly, they boast the skills, qualifications and ‘expert knowledges that enable them to mobilize around sites of socio-political influence’. Thirdly, they display ‘cultural competence’; that is, the ‘ability to communicate the possession of good taste to appropriate individuals and social groups and maintain symbolic boundaries against others’ (Gardner 2004, 64). Incorporating in-migration, expertise and identity in good taste, this account of the rise of the middle class in
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rural Britain clearly entertains the prospect of a New Squirearchy within their midst, although the usefulness of such a model in adequately delineating the parameters of their possible existence should be questioned.

If transcending a traditional reliance on occupation and income has certainly made for a more rounded ascription, the variable nature of capital, skill and cultural aptitude in the modern world – in both form and application – is such that the term ‘middle class’ has come to encompass such a diverse range of situations that it is difficult to attribute them with any common set of values or interests. For Buller et al, the ‘ubiquity and ineluctability of what others have labelled as the middle class take-over of the countryside’ (2003, 28) lacks analytical sharpness, whilst Cloke and Thrift (1987) have challenged those often uncritical assumptions of class cohesion. As a result of such denunciations, the middle class is now viewed not as a ‘coherent, unified agent acting to reshape rural communities’, but rather as a composite of ‘many different fractions between which tensions and conflicts can arise, becoming dynamics that may drive local-level change in rural areas’ (Woods 2005b, 85).

It followed that the identification of such ‘fractions’ would become a prominent feature within the disciplinary agenda but, as yet, rural researchers have come to focus almost exclusively upon a collective known as the ‘service class’. A band of professional, managerial and administrative workers, the process of recognition and classification has remained to a large extent occupationally driven, yet an attention to ‘rural aspirations’ and lifestyle issues holds promise as far as investigating what Urry (1995) has referred to as ‘new socializations’. The result of a partial breakdown/reconstruction of established lines of social interaction (termed ‘detraditionalization’), these ‘new socializations’ constitute ‘communities of interest’ formed primarily through choice as much as factors of birth, employment and residence. Raising significant questions for, amongst other
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things, rural class analysis, they suggest that ‘not only is a person’s self consciousness of their identity not tied exclusively or necessarily to lines of class, but also that people may act in non-class-centred social groups’ (Phillips 1998a, 45).

1.5. Research goals

Does the New Squirearchy, then, constitute one of Urry’s ‘new socializations’, or does it rather represent an identity which (remains) firmly tied into class relations as they might traditionally be understood? Addressing this broad question that frames this study involves the pursuit of six more specific concerns, which explore both the imagination and the performance of a supposed ‘New Squirearchy’. As a media phenomenon, the (apparently) rigorous process of gentrification we are witnessing at present is resolutely allied with a particular ‘style’ of (new) middle class presence, and to this end this research is designed to; 1) consider evidence for the existence of the New Squirearchy as a tangible presence in that area of the British countryside they have been most strongly associated with (i.e. the South East) and; 2) trace the basis, form and function of their middle class credentials in this context. Questioning whether or not the actions of such a collective are operating coherently and in accordance with the discourse of the country gentleman – and noting the extent to which these characteristics have always been associated with rural social mobility – this thesis looks to the manner of involvement of the new gentry in local cultural and political institutions, and considers the extent to which this involvement; 3) justifies the moniker ‘New Squirearchy’, and; 4) sets apart this cohort as a functioning contingent of the middle class.

Positioning the process of gentrification within recent literatures concerning the form and function of (rural) class analysis, this work rests upon a wider
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engagement with key debates circulating within the discipline of rural geography. Rejecting the writing-off as class as being inappropriate and/or premature while also undermining a belief in its ‘automatic’ significance (cf. Miller 1996), chapter two draws on arguments developed by Cloke et al. (1995), Savage and Butler (1995) and Phillips (1998a; 1998b; 1998c) and suggests that the New Squirearchy represents a particular clique operating in and around alternative (rural) identities including those of class, but also gender, sexuality, race etc. Neither uniform nor prescriptive, these identities must be understood as composite, often simultaneous and in the process of being constantly replicated and refashioned.

Identifying the New Squirearchy in the fashion of what Phillips (1998b) refers to as an ‘interpretative approach’, with acute sensitivity to the reciprocal emergence of class in tandem with other lines of social fracture such as gender, age and ethnicity, a fifth concern of this study is to develop this theme and construct a theoretical bridge between (rural) class analysis and concepts of performance and performativity. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Lamont, it will be argued in the latter part of the second chapter that those moral, cultural and socio-economic boundaries which characterize different elements of the (rural) community are constantly in the making, and are being affirmed, challenged and refashioned incessantly.

With the understanding that rural space is relentlessly created by the conscious and unconscious actions of such groups as farmers, commuters, the landed gentry and, perhaps, the New Squirearchy, those processes of boundary creation and maintenance allied to the operation of these enclaves are theorized as the upshot of particular practices and routines. Extending those discussions sparked by Little and Leyshon (2003) and Edensor (1994), among others, chapter two advocates the conceptualization and analysis of such collectives within a practise-orientated approach; one that recognizes its (possible) existence in terms of prescriptive,
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reflexive actions and embodied everyday rural competencies. Championing a consideration of the affective context for tracking place ballets, this conceptual basis for research is, it is argued, particularly appropriate when seeking to account for that emotional investment in the countryside attributed to the New Squirearchy and the middle class more generally. An emotional investment that serves to normalize behaviour for its constituents, it also informs judgements of – and conduct towards – other factions within the rural social milieu.

With the aim of uncovering and detailing those performances and investments (emotional or otherwise) which characterise the (possible) presence of such groups as the New Squirearchy within the British countryside, there are few practical guides for such explorations. A case of theoretical developments not being matched by methodological increments, the sixth aim of this thesis is to contribute to a template for practise-orientated research within specific territories. The subject of chapter 3, a ‘collaborative ethnography’ is encouraged; one where the researcher places themselves in the midst of those spaces where their subjects operate, and one where respondents knowingly contribute to the direction of the study and the form of the final product.

Drawing extensively on the community studies of Bell (1992; 1994) and Rapport (1993), and taking advantage of personal, longstanding connections to the village around which the research has taken place, I have immersed myself in those scenarios where I believed the New Squirearchy may operate and become. Gauging the movements of those seen to ‘fit the bill’ in comparison to those movements which have historically characterized the landed gentry and the discourse of the country squire, both as part of the wider rural community and as a closed elite. Beginning this journey in the village pub in chapter four, chapter five subsequently considers the role of property and the manner in which the gentry-apparent are engaging with agricultural spaces, while chapter six
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contemplates incidences of patronage and leadership. Having focused on levels of involvement in cultural, spiritual and political institutions, both in contrast to the Squirearchy-proper and common assumptions regarding the (new) middle class, the penultimate chapter will consider the uptake of ‘exclusive’ recreational pastimes in accord with equivalent benchmarks.

Interrogating the existence of a New Squirearchy in these terms, I hope to give a thorough account of this cohort; articulating their means and motives, and assess the suitability of that tag which has been conferred on a specific group of rural immigrants by the media (and the public imagination). Focusing on lifestyles, habits and actions, the role of the New Squirearchy as a force for rural restructuring in both the present and future will be evaluated and set forth, as will its relationship with other forms of identity. Returning to the issue of class in this context, the relationship between gentryification, aspiration and self-fulfilment will be appraised; as will the effectiveness of assimilating (rural) class analysis with concepts of performance for the purpose creating more nuanced accounts of social change in the countryside. Currently existing as two separate strands of enquiry within rural geography, the development of these themes within the discipline and the grounds for integration will be discussed directly.
2. Class, identity and gentryfication

“You notice the difference in a village like this between the rich and the poor ... Some people say that there is no such thing anymore. But they don’t know. They’re just from down in the towns. But up here it is. Down there the people are all the same, and you don’t notice it. Here you’re living right next to them ... You move out here, and you see the money they spend on their children, for education and things, when you can’t even afford a pair of shoes for your kids to go to school in!”

(Quoted in Childerley. Bell 1994, 35).

2.1. The New Squirearchy and the new middle class

Neither owners of capital nor exploited workers, the service class or ‘new middle class’ are so-called because they serve the interests of capital through the provision of specialist skills and managerial abilities. Found in both the public (e.g. teachers, doctors) and private (e.g. accounts, lawyers) sectors, this body incorporates those financiers, bankers and city high fliers identified as the back bone of a new gentry; being characterised by a rapid level of numerical growth, high levels of education, reasonably high levels of income, a considerable degree of autonomy and discretion at work, good promotional prospects (both vertically and horizontally), and relative residential freedom (Urry 1995b, 209). These last two credentials, it is supposed, have enabled the service class to become a key component of rural to urban migration.

The significance of the service class to rural restructuring, argues Woods, is derived from five primary factors (2005b, 85-86). Firstly, the urban to rural shift in manufacturing functions, coupled with a general shift away from heavy industry to technological production in many areas, has created many managerial and technical jobs in rural localities. Secondly, the relocation of corporate administrative operations into rural areas has resulted in job related in-migration
and new employment opportunities for re-located residents. Augmented by major improvements in information technologies and communications over the past 15 years, this has made remote working an increasingly viable proposition. Thirdly, the ongoing expansion of public service infrastructure and outsourcing of many practical and administrative functions has led to the creation of many more service class positions. Fourthly, this relative superfluity in employment prospects has translated into a comparatively high level of residential freedom; leaving the service class well able to pursue the ‘quality of life’ motivation that is living in the countryside. Closely connected is the fifth factor, which sees the service class as having a high level of emotional involvement with the ‘rural idyll’.

Recognising that buying into the rural idyll has become a major element in the residential and lifestyle trajectories of certain elements of the new middle class (Buller et al 2003, 28); the work of Thrift gained initial prominence. Characterizing membership as having a particularly ‘strong predilection for the rural ideal/idyll’, they, unlike many other (would-be) rural dwellers, are described as having a ‘greater capacity to do something about this predilection’ (1987, 78). This process operates across a multitude of scales, from the personal to the national (Marsden et al 1993, 177), and variably takes on material, cultural and political manifestations. It can, for example, involve the hanging of ‘Laura Ashley’ prints on cottage walls, investing in stripped pine furniture and excluding developments that do not adhere to their tastes on the grounds of conservation (Thrift 1987, 79). Furthermore, the new middle class are also deemed capable of colonizing areas ‘not previously noted for their service class composition’ and moulding them in accordance with their particular wants and desires; a process we may well attribute to the New Squirearchy - although not without qualification.

Just as the concept of a collectively identifiable middle class has been destabilized, so too has the notion of a broadly cohesive service class. To a greater or lesser
extent, the terms ‘service’ and ‘middle’ class have seemingly become undifferentiated in their application, whereby one has simply replaced the other as an explanation of socio-political dominance. Hoggart et al (1995), for example, highlight an evident uncertainty within the literature as to what the service class actually is, arguing that the vast range of situations and lifestyle choices adopted by such individuals makes it perhaps ‘inappropriate to talk of a service class at all’. Accepting that members of the service class - including many of those living in urban areas - have a tendency toward rural consumption, Hoggart, for one, is distinctly uncomfortable with a widespread acceptance that the ‘service class refers to fractions of that social category with a predilection for the countryside’ (1997, 263).

Far from having a solid basis in research, Savage et al (1992) suggest that claims regarding the new middle class’ attachment to the ‘chocolate box’ countryside are based not upon informed survey work, but rather upon loosely collected impressions. An opinion shared by Phillips (1998a), it is certainly true that the popularity of naturalist, idyllic notions of rurality are constantly being represented and re-dispersed by such organizations as the National Trust – whose membership has been described as predominantly being new middle class – yet, asks Hoggart, ‘can we really be comfortable with the assumption that the service classes lie behind the cultural significance of the countryside?’ (1997, 261). In short, no. As the Howkins (1986) demonstrates, the concept of the rural idyll predates the popular emergence of the service class by some considerable margin, immortalized in the fabricated landscapes of the aristocracy and mobilized in opposition to the urban squalor of the industrial revolution. Finding favour across society as a whole, it has become the dominant discourse of rurality and, as such, cannot be seen as the ideological preserve of any one group or class.
This leads into the question of control, and here Hoggart (1997) dictates that it is not necessary to have an initial ethos or executive form in order to determine social change; and, while this process should not be considered divorced from the production of rural discourses and their capacity to influence, it remains distanced from the steadfastly ideological via an acceptance of compromise. The example cited is that of house prices, where the strength of certain rural mythologies helps to sustain a high level of demand. To this end, it is generally assumed that the new middle classes serve their own cultural and economic interests through their involvement in rural planning agencies, the media and environmental pressure groups (Murdoch and Marsden 1994). Nevertheless, the identification of the service class as providing a significant proportion of members in such bodies has, perhaps, wrongfully led to the assumption that they perennially act in unison toward particular goals.

In many instances, the full spectrum of socio-political bodies acting on rural space contain elements of the service class(es), all competing for domination within particular decision-making spheres, and all having very different relationships with the wider rural community:

‘In reality, the numerical strength of the service classes has grown at the same time as (some) commentators report their increased fragmentation, so commonality of actions and values has lessened. Quite apart from personal or family interests, considerations of an organizational, community and friendship kind detract from a direct relationship. Organizationally we see this in competition between institutions, in conflicting goals for decision spheres and in the priorities of those with a dissimilar embeddedness in a locality. This makes for a complexity that militates against unified assumptions over who controls countryside change.’ (Hoggart 1997, 258).
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The sheer number of ‘disparate and internally complex agencies’ working towards countryside change, then, makes it rather injudicious to consider a service class dominant at the local level, and this is surely the case in regard to those broader structures that channel rural change (Ibid). Raising significant questions for rural class analysis, there is now an appreciation of other social relations such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity as being of equal or greater significance in certain instances, and how it may even be that ‘the determinants of class may have changed to such a degree that we no longer recognise them’ (Cloke et al 1995, 222).

Where, then, do concerns of class end, and those of group/collective/cohort begin? Herein lays a notable, and somewhat befuddled, disparity within contemporary class analyses. On the one hand, there are the likes of Buller et al, and Cloke and Thrift, whose output implies a very definite distinction. The former, for example, have stated that within current research ‘local contingencies and cultural principles are considered as important, if not more important, in influencing social relations and agencies than class’ (2003, 36), whilst the latter have claimed that society finds itself increasingly fractured by non-class relations such as those of gender, consumption and lifestyle (1990). On the other hand, there are those writers who have expanded the gamut of analysis to incorporate a range of processes often overlooked in traditional Marxist accounts. A position adopted by Murdoch (1995) and Marsden (with Murdoch 1994), rural class analysis has arguably gained a greater degree of investigative complexity within, beyond - and as an extension of - an ‘interpretative analysis’ which recognizes ‘ambiguities of class, the difficulty of locating it in only one dimension, and the “messiness” of its connections with other social phenomena’ (Savage and Butler 1995, 346).

Responsive to a poststructural ‘turn’, an increasing number of geographers have seen these phenomena as being, in many ways, culturally created, and have

1 Italics added.
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sought to examine the processes by which these identities are fashioned and embedded within rural society and discourses of rurality. As well as prompting new research foci within the discipline, particularly those of gender identities and relations (e.g. Little and Austin 1996), the entrance of poststructural ideas has also impacted on the study of some rather longer-recognized aspects of social geography. Questioning, for example, the degree to which concepts such as counterurbanization and gentrification refer to unitary incidences (see Phillips 1993), they have also prompted a re-examination of rural recreation (e.g. McNaghton 1995) and resource conflict (e.g. Harrison and Burgess 1994) using notions of discourse and multiple, fragmented and neglected subjects (Phillips 1998a, 46).

Far from undermining the importance of class in conditioning rural change, placing it alongside, and in relation to, other social phenomena rather offers the possibility of generating more nuanced understandings of those forces at work in the countryside; including, perhaps that of the New Squirearchy. Apparently assuming, replicating and encroaching upon those spaces of residence, recreation and control historically associated with the landed elite, their varied engagement with the rural community on these grounds undoubtedly rests on those competencies accredited to a wider service class; a service class whose success in fashioning change is not simply a question of numeric strength, but also one of proactive involvement in local socio-political organizations. With money, motivation and much organizational potential, they are portrayed as well equipped to defend their investment, using their power to pursue interests tied to very particular ideologies regarding the countryside (Woods 2005b); one of which is conceivably that of the country squire; and one that both draws on and informs ‘other’ complementary identities such as those of masculinity and ethnicity.
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2.2. A third way; through cultural capital to performing identity

Seeking an alternative to what he refers to as a ‘postmodern non-class analysis’, Phillips (1998b; 1998c) has been at the forefront of a search for a ‘third way’ which combines an understanding of the relevance of class as an expression of exploitation in society with issues of recognition, identity and cultural difference. Identifying the work of Bourdieu (1984) and his concepts of ‘cultural capital’ and ‘class habitus’ as figuring most highly within human geography on this front, Phillips, like Cloke and Thrift before, considers these models as being of only limited use. Although we must recognize the debt owed by human geographers to Bourdieu in terms of sparking key debates concerning space and place (for example, Harvey 1989; Hillier and Rooksby 2002; Painter 2000), Phillips considers the notion of cultural capital as link between class and culture as being ‘something of a false turn’ (1995, 223). Instead, they draw more explicitly on the work of Michele Lamont – itself a largely sympathetic critique of Bourdieu’s output – and her various claims as regards to the relationship between self-identity and class relations.

The first and foremost assertion made by Lamont and Fournier (1992) is that there is a distinct need to actively connect the issue of self-identity with the formation of social classes. In doing so, she pays particular attention to both symbolic boundaries – the types of lines people draw when they categorise people’ – and high status symbols – the markers people use in their social evaluations. Here, for example, she pays considerable attention to those status signals which are seen as intimately related to progress upon the career ladder, pointing to research that shows that managers favour employees who resemble them culturally. The second of Lamont and Fournier’s contentions which Phillips (1998b) highlights is that the connection between self identity and class formation is neither straightforward nor automatic, but rather frequent and often unintentional.
The culture that a person ‘holds’, then, is more than a product of interests, resources and group structure, but also an expression of those boundary-determining ‘cultural resources’ that are made available to them (Ibid, 421). These resources – which take the form of collective values, identities and knowledges – are the result of experience, life history and interest played out, manipulated and passed on within the everyday social environment. Criticizing Bourdieu for ignoring the effect of ‘broader, remoter, national, cultural repertoires which people draw on their construction of self identities’, Lamont differentiates between such ‘remote factors’ and those ‘proximate’ factors which form the principal basis for his notion of habitus (Ibid). As such, she emphasizes the important role that historical and contemporary ‘national repertoires’ play in ‘diffusing messages over society at large’ (Lamont 1991, 139). Here we need only look at that repertoire which associates the assumption of a rural, gentrified existence with accomplishment, comfort and – as a reflection of the nobility of countryside – a kind of moral ascension.

Disparaging of sociologists’ tendency to over-emphasise the importance of socio-economic factors in relation to such ‘moral signals’, Lamont tenders a three-tiered ‘boundary approach’ to issues of difference. Differentiating between (i) moral boundaries concerning such characteristics as honesty, work ethic and integrity; (ii) socio-economic boundaries centred on indicators of wealth, power and professional success; and (iii) cultural boundaries drawn on the basis of education, intelligence, tastes and command of culture, she maintains that for many people, on many occasions, the importance of moral and cultural values far outweighs that of economic status symbols. Here, for example, we may consider those comments made by Francis Fulford in the previous chapter, which set apart the ancient regime from the nouveau riche according to such principles; principles that constitute the crux of that rhetoric employed in the defence of the countryside from a disruptive
influence brought forth by a financially strong, but culturally barren, group of ex-urban incomers. The belief that the New Squirearchy is nothing more than an expression of success, however, is something that should not be readily assumed.

Drawing on critiques of Bourdieu’s work as made by Cloke et al (1995) and Dreyfus and Rabinow (1993), Phillips stresses the crudity of an implicit assumption that the pursuit of anything in life – whether this be socio-economic, moral or cultural – is done for some kind of symbolic advantage (1993b, 233). As is made clear, this is a distinctly tautological statement; i.e. the presumption that all human activity revolves around the pursuit of social profit tells us very little if such profit is defined as whatever people pursue. It follows that symbolic realization exists as a non-essential offshoot of boundary formation, and that different forms of symbolic capital are neither universally recognisable nor equalled valued across society. More directly, the concept of ‘positional consumption’ as a motivational force behind such actions as purchasing and decorating a country home, taking part in rural recreational activities or even dressing in a given style should be considered largely in terms of aspiration, fulfilment and boundary construction as the upshot of lifestyle-specific performances.

In a culturally informed, ‘performative’ view of group formation, the new gentry – like a broader service class - becomes a ‘context within which collective actions occur’ (Murdoch 1995, 1219); a shared comprehension of how resources, attributes and attitudes are dispersed and used as the basis of action. A re-think in the way in which we approach rural restructuring, it reflects a recent trend within rural studies whereby researchers have started to move beyond perceptions and representations of the countryside, and are attempting to grasp the ways in which the rural is performed and dynamically constituted. Taking impetus from wider trends within human geography, there is a ‘move away from thinking of the rural
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as a spatially fixed entity ... and a focus on the way in which rurality (or particularly ways of being rural) is embedded in social practises and lifestyles’ (Woods 2005b, 302). As of yet, however, only a limited amount of work has emerged in this vein, especially in terms of the (new) middle class and rural gentrification; although the work of Willis and Campbell (2004), and Gosnell and Haggerty (2007), provide notable exceptions.

Considering the Chesnut Economy of Rural France, Willis and Campbell illustrate how this space - interpreted as a ‘cold spot’ standing aside the formal agrarian economy - is inhabited by participants who are drawn into a set of practises that have a distinctly contingent quality (2004, 319). Determining a ‘spatially located praxis’ as being the most powerful reason for the emergence of this economy, they account for its reciprocation in terms of the ‘alternative lifestyle’ lived by a collective referred to as the ‘Néo’s’:

‘It is their day to day activities that anchor them, that sustain them, and that significantly determines the social meaning of the landscape. The Néo’s have become the key producers of patrimoine. They are the ones who rebuild ruined farmhouses in an authentic fashion, and they are the ones who carry the vision of patrimoine …’ (Ibid, 327).

As the principal manufacturers of ‘patrimoine’, the Néo’s are herein identified as being at the forefront of the ‘return to the earth’ movement in France from the 1970s onwards; a phenomenon which does not exist outside of complex processes of designation and appropriation.

Involving the transformation of objects, spaces, practises and products into ‘more than the sum of their parts’, patrimonialisation involves the mobilization of historical and symbolic traits to give specific and authentic meaning, whether that
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be in terms of production or collective identity. Centred on small-scale farm production, an informal local market and economy, deployment of artisan skills and the creative manipulation of available subsides and benefits, all of these flourish ‘as did the peasantry for centuries, under the canopy of chestnut trees, using chestnuts as food, or building with chestnut timber’ (Ibid, 321). Of specific importance in and for rural areas, inscribing desirable qualities in ‘craft produce’ and through ‘re-inscribing rural space with a whole new set of (old) meanings’ (Ibid, 320), there are clear parallels with the apparent rebirth of the discourse of the country squire across the Channel - albeit at an alternative end of the social spectrum.

Of more relevance in terms of the buoyant socio-economic circumstances enjoyed by the New Squirearchy, Gosnell and Haggerty’s (2007) study of ranch landscapes in the American West also deals with the emergence of new (elite) communities in rural space, and those geographies of conflict and co-operation that ensue. Drawing on datasets regarding the sale of large ranches in Michigan and Wyoming, they indicate that an increasing percentage of those over 400 acres in size are being purchased by amenity buyers. Funded by ‘city money’, and more concerned with ‘getting back to nature’ and ‘living the cowboy dream’ than drawing a profit from these spaces, their contrast with traditional ranchers is identified as one of a ‘post-productivist vs. production-orientated self identity’; a condition that is also evident in discussions of the New Squirearchy’s relationship with the traditional agricultural community.

Greatly concerned with ecological sustainability, these ‘new ranchers’ are shown as taking a varied line between privacy and an active interest in the rural community. While some are reclusive, the greater proportion is accredited with the managerial expertise to ‘rally round’ and gather local support for wildlife preservation schemes, anti-development programmes and agri-environmental
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alliances through trust-building, transparency and co-operative learning. Mixing financial, social and intellectual capital, the mid West’s new ranchers – like England’s New Squires – are identified as an increasingly important political force in the increasingly multifunctional (and multicultural) rural landscape. Nevertheless, Gosnell and Haggerty’s work is, as of yet, in its infancy, and, like Willis and Campbell, they maintain that more research is required on the ‘everyday contingencies, shifting power relations and social outcomes’ becoming of the influx of these – and other – gentrifiers in the countryside, both practically and theoretically; echoing Little and Leyshon’s initial call for a more developed research agenda for embodied rural geographies.

2.3. Embodied rural geographies

Responding to the scarcity of work on rural embodiment, Little and Leyshon’s (2003) contribution to Progress in Human Geography constituted the first comprehensive case for a consideration of ‘the body’ as a platform for better understanding rural social relations and communities. Focusing on the relationship between changing femininities, masculinities and the performance of sexuality in rural areas, they argue that a deeper and more nuanced exploration of embodiment in a rural context provides a vital avenue through which to address the construction and reproduction of identity, and thus inform ‘key debates on social exclusion, marginalization and, indeed, the cultural construction of rurality’ (Ibid, 269). For them, the relationship between the rural body and the acceptance of certain dominant and traditional forms of rural behaviour implies a power relation; one where certain performances are valued and deemed – thus rendered – capable of directing elements of rurality and rural change.

In many respects an equivalent of Mona Domosh’s earlier work on embodied sexual identities in the city, Little and Leyshon’s Embodied rural geographies forms
part of that stream of work grounded in performance theory. Far from uniform its philosophical points of reference are diffuse, but one where Deleuze, Spinoza, Bergson, Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty come to the fore (see Lorimer 2007). It is not my intention to provide a comparative review of these theorists, nor elucidate upon what they bring to bear on the social sciences as a whole; instead I will focus upon how the ideas of these geo-philosophers have compounded upon the form and practise of rural geography; primarily through the conduit of human geography and cultural studies as a wider disciplinary arena.

Engaging with current debates about performance within geography, Little and Leyshon are highly interested in action as way of exploring the relationship between subjectivity, identity and agency in the formation of everyday social practises. Drawing on, among others, the work of Dewsbury (2000) and Gregson and Rose (2000), they aver the relevance of space to performativity as both brought into being through performances, and as an articulation of power. Focusing more specifically on the latter, they illustrate ‘the centrality of the space of the rural (and the meanings and values associated with such spaces) to bodily performance’, whilst also acknowledging ‘that the material practices of the body are also important in the creation of rural space itself’ (Ibid, 258). Addressing these themes, they draw together the (then, and still) limited references to the role of the body in the context of the rural landscape

Starting with the question of ‘what is meant by the body?’, Little and Leyshon note that, despite figuring at the heart of a number of theoretical debates (particularly those of feminism) the body presents ‘serious definitional and conceptual difficulties’. Nevertheless, they propose that theoretical approaches can be divided into two broad categories; those of ‘essentialist’ and ‘constructionalist’ dispositions (see McDowell 1999 and Pratt 1994 for a more developed appraisal of this differentiation). Referring to a basic belief that people and/ or phenomenon
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have an underlying and largely unchanging ‘essence’, essentialists count the use of biological, physiological and genetic causes as explanations for social behaviour. Developed by early feminists, who have subsequently celebrated alternative reproductive functions, this perspective has been criticized in recent times for maintaining ‘a single fixed and basically passive interpretation of the body, and one that lends itself for the perpetuation of a mind-body dualism’ (Ibid, 259).

Constructionist approaches, on the other hand, argue that the body is discursively produced; i.e. they are containers and surfaces for the inscription of society’s values, laws and mores. Initially following a rather consistent course, seeing bodies as being submissive carriers of cultural imprints (cf. Connell 2000, 58), constructionalists have of late come to regard the body not as an ‘blank page’ awaiting genderization, but rather as part of the production and performance of gendered subjectivities. Emphasizing the agency of the body in social practise Little and Leyshon argue that writing on gender and sexuality in particular has demonstrated how the ‘materiality of the body’ reproduces, sustains and contests social assumptions and expectations, but also fashions these expectations (2003, 260). Drawing on the work of Brook (1999), gender – as with class, ethnicity, age, or race – thus becomes a continuing, interlocking series of performances between bodies and (perpetuated) discourses.

Intrinsically tied up with space, Nast and Pile (1998) have observed that discursive practises and materiality are ‘filtered’ through bodies which are both relational and territorialized. Our understanding of spaces and places must, argue Little and Leyshon, therefore ‘incorporate the ways in which bodies are constituted and acknowledge their challenge to conventional boundaries’ (2003, 260). It follows that the body is more than a site for the study of social practises, but must be seen ‘as part of the mutual constitution of place’. Developing this line of enquiry, there has been an ‘enculturing’ of geography more generally, which has been
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particularly evident in those debates surrounding relations of marginality, inequality and exclusion. For example, notions of the body have been addressed in appraisals of ‘food to fashion’, and incorporated into economy studies; ‘both in terms of the influences on production and consumption of goods but also in the growing emphasis on the service sector and on the use of the body and performance in the selling of a whole range of services from finance to entertainment’ (Ibid, 261).

Taking these ideas into the realm of rural studies, the area where greatest attention has been paid to embodiment has been the examination of its relationship with nature. Here, for example, Little and Leyshon look to work on the association of nature and rurality and the fit and healthy body (e.g. Edensor 2001; Mcnaghten and Urry 2001), which has also been developed in regard to more specialist forms of rural recreation such as extreme sports and adventure tourism (e.g. Cater and Smith 2003; Lewis 2001). Extending these ideas in considerations of the body amid in different areas of the countryside such as forests and woodlands, and also the place of technology in mediating such interactions, this research has been important in examining different bodily practises in a rural context; but has largely failed in not focusing on the body itself and its relationship with different views and experiences of the countryside.

The embodied countryside has also been examined in the context of rural gendered and sexual identities. A more popular avenue of investigation, Little and Leyshon point to work on women’s imminence with nature in terms of conceptions of fertility and the productive cycle (e.g. Saugeres 2002), and considerations of masculinity and farming which have highlighted the importance of the stereotype of the ‘powerful body’ as a basis for good and worthy practise (e.g. Liepins 2000; Peter et al 2000). Similar themes have also featured in studies of male identity and the wilderness. An expression of the conventional heterosexual
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body, both Phillips (1995) and Woodward (1998) have looked at that relationship between masculinity and the ‘taming’ of nature through physical and psychological strength. Emerging from these discussions, Bell (2003) has also looked at performances of homosexuality in the countryside, and how symbolic and material experiences of gay men are entwined.

Up to a point, however, the majority of this work has been primarily concerned with the rural body in its relationship with nature and the physical rural landscape, and many regions remain largely untouched:

‘What has been especially lacking is any consideration of the body within the everyday social spaces of the village. We argue … that a consideration of the body in the context of the construction and performance of rural social relations can contribute significantly to an understanding of rural society and the operation of rural communities.

(Little and Leyshon 2003, 265).

A requirement also laid out by Woods, who maintains that more research is needed on how the rural community is performed quite literally ‘through fairs, fetes and other such community events; but also through those more mundane, everyday movements’ (2005b, 302), attitudes towards the body reflect, and are part of the production of, circulated meanings and beliefs about how gender, sexuality, race, class etc. works in rural society. Embodiment is thus essential to an understanding how such relations are played out in rural space and the rural community; and the ways in which its materialities and meanings are reproduced, consolidated and contested, along with the identities of those who operate within them.
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Incorporating an interest in how spaces are ‘staged’ so as to accommodate particular enactions, a prime example of this research tack is Stanley Waterman’s (1998) work on carnivals and the cultural politics of arts festivals. Focusing on the manner in which these events act as a setting for the production, processing and consumption of culture, Waterman describes their use by elites in establishing a social distance between them and others, and how marketing agencies and managers are transforming arts and culture into industries through the promotion of ‘safe’, generic art forms and practises in realms of display. Foregrounding identities of people and spaces as continually in process as actors rehearse and repeat conventions in specific settings, Edensor has developed these ideas in a rural context. Positing the countryside as an assemblage of differently connected and constituted spaces, he suggests that ‘attempts to fix the identity of space, place and rural subjectivities through performance by different groups testify to the desire for fixity and certitude in conditions of continual social and cultural flux’ (2004, 1). Exploring particular kinds of scripts, roles, stage-managements, choreographies, improvisations and reflexivity, Edensor investigates a variety of rural performances, enacted on different stages by different actors at different times. Determining the coherence of performances as dependent upon recognisable environments and their varied props and actors, he argues that ‘natural’ stages affect - and are effects of - active participation, and are socially regulated to some extent.

While some performances are carefully managed, tightly arranged, and vigilantly scrutinized by fellow performers; others are more spontaneous, played out amid different players and occupy indistinct arenas; or are acted out by competing bodies on the same stage. For instance, competition between ramblers, farmers, hunters and environmentalists has been well documented, with each group possessing inconsistent notions as to what activities are acceptable to rural space (see Woods 2003 and Macnaghten and Urry 1998). Implicit in much of these
enactions and stage managements, notes Edensor, are assumptions and conjecture regarding those who ‘properly belong’ and those who lack performative competence:

‘In a rather clichéd account, townies are accused of being insufficiently aware of ‘country ways’ and ‘nature’, in their sentimentalized, effete views about farming and conservation. On the other hand, country folk may be derided as rural throwbacks who cannot competently perform according to ‘modern’ norms, norms that middle class ‘incomers’ to rural places competently wield as cultural capital in political struggles against ‘development’, commonly supported by their adversaries, these long standing residents.’ (2004, 2).

Symptomatic of the ‘re-opening’ of those debates of geographic theorizations and conceptualizations of social capital, these waters have more recently been navigated by Louise Holt.

Believing that human geographers have tended to underplay the analytic value of social capital, Holt (2008) argues for a fuller connection between embodiment and broader socio-economic processes. Synthesizing Bourdieu’s capitals and performative notions of identity, she maintains that such a path can trace the endurance of enacted inequalities and the potential for social transformation, and also that;

‘… embodied social capital can advance social science conceptualizations of the spatiality of social capital, by illuminating the importance of broader socio-spatial contexts and relations to the embodiment of social capital within individuals.’ (Ibid, 227).
With the potential to situate the presence of such new socializations as the New Squirearchy within and beyond the countryside - particularly in respect to those ‘country ways’ and sentimentalized perspectives on land (and community) management of which they are said to hold dear - the manner in which these performances are theoretically contextualized warrants further consideration.

In the vein of Judith Butler (1993), Edensor differentiates between performance – characterized as self-conscious and deliberate – and performativity – understood as reiterative and unreflexive, but considers this a dualism which ‘neglects the blurred boundaries between purposive and unreflexive actions’ (Ibid); i.e. reflexive actions often become ‘second nature’, and unfamiliar surroundings often prompt a heightened sense of self-awareness and mindful self-management. Drawn on by many geographers who have considered its ‘ramifications for understanding the sexed body as it is lived and spatially constituted’ (Mahtani 2004, 67), this engagement with Butler signifies that, in the words of Callard, ‘we are now taking the problematic of corporeality seriously’ (1998, 387). Employed in considerations of gender in body building (Cream 1995), the workplace (Crang 1994), and, most importantly, the sexualization of space (e.g. Bell et al. 1994; Lewis and Pile 1996), the use of Butler’s theorization of performativity has engendered controversy on the grounds of choice and intentionality.

Although Butler has denied that there is a ‘doer behind the deed’ (see Nelson 1999, 324), the rhetoric of intent which has crept into, for example, Bell et al’s (1994) description of lipstick lesbian and gay skinhead identities has precipitated a tangible division between those who would argue that such accounts fail to fully account ‘for how people are compelled and constrained by the very regulatory norms of gender identity that are the condition of our resistance’ (Walker 1995, 76), and those who prioritize self-conscious roles in their descriptions (see Mahtani 2004, 68). With many of those in the former camp linking performativity with
non-representational theory (a premise that will be considered in due course), the latter category has inspired something of a renaissance in the work of Erving Goffman (1959). With its conception of life as inherently dramatic, and a belief in humanity as perpetually in a state of role-play enacted in so-called ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ situations, self-management is herein considered strategic insofar as certain performances enable us to achieve certain goals in life.

It would be, however, inappropriate to insist on the instrumentality of role playing as the individual is not constantly in the process of communicating values to an audience; but also acts in unreflexive, routine ways. Instead - and in a similar vein to Lorimer (2005) and Pile (1993) - Edensor suggests performance should instead be ‘grasped as an interweaving of conscious and unaware modalities’ (2004, 2), and understood as both deliberately devised and habitual (see also Lorimer 2005, and Pile 1993). Looking to the work of Merleau-Ponty, who argues that self conscious thought is rooted in practical and pre-reflective habits and skills (see also Agnew et al 1996; Casey 2001; Spagnolli and Gamberini 2005), action is ‘largely engaged as opposed to being primarily introspective’ (Crossley 2001, 62).

Using the metaphor of football, the game is dependent upon a relative logic incorporating the skills and fluency needed to play and ‘read’ the match within the relational space of other participants and their understandings. Hence, a purely self-aware consciousness would minimise effectiveness, but players’ shared assumptions, skill and use of space epitomizes a practical reflexivity’ – a capacity for ‘playing the game’ Edensor sees in many rural performances;

‘whether they use rural stages only periodically, even when they have clearly been devised to stage the rural as a commodity, but especially when they are the everyday performances of country-dwellers. All are shaped by
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forms of ‘second nature’ although such dispositions may be incomprehensible to outsiders who cannot immediately immerse themselves in an unfamiliar field.’ (2004, 3).

Attempting to distinguish the kinds of performance which express and transmit various rural identifies in terms of specific spaces, parameters and reflexivity, Edensor explores a number of alternative stagings; a number of which relate specifically to the supposed realm of New Squiredom. Here, for example, he observes the dramatized rituals of grouse and pheasant shoots, the hunt and, at a greater length, the enactions of ‘leisure seeking city dwellers’, the increasingly ‘imaginary’, ‘touristic’ staging of the rural, and the everyday performances of ‘country folk’.

Mobilizing performative techniques and assorted technologies, city-dwellers and ex-urbanites enter particular rural arenas, they are ‘usually informed by pre-existing discursive, practical, embodied norms which help to guide their performative orientations’ (Ibid). These collective norms amount to what Carlson refers to as a ‘discrete concretization of cultural assumptions’ (1996, 16), and elements of rural space are consequently (re)created in line with symbolic and practical principles carried out by those actors dramatizing their particular allegiances. Encompassing both individual and group identities operating according to the needs and wants of varying ideologies, we can look to, for example, walkers and the terrain they value as spaces of recreation, farmers and their functioning as stewards of the landscape and, perhaps, the New Squirearchy and the reformation of the discourse of the country gentleman.

Organised around specific types of movement, modes of communication and patterns of shared experience, enactions are learnt under the watchful gaze of co-conspirators and onlookers in order that important competencies are acquired by
would be players, and access to the fold assured (or not, as the case may be). Gradually self-consciousness and self-monitoring give way to ‘natural’ behaviour and the impulsive capability to hold and raise certain opinions, participate in particular pastimes, and generally look and behave in a certain fashion. The consolidation of embodied practical norms is thus ‘forged through internalizing performative norms, being subject to external surveillance and the re-iteration of such enactions’ (Ibid, 5). Conventions are hereby continually adhered to, becoming ‘second nature’ and rational to participants who only question them in the face of alternative practices and transgressions.

Engulfing actors into specific pursuits and lifestyle courses, an abundance of technologies mediate the experiences of those on (the rural) stage through their ‘appropriate’ usage and application, at once curbing and extending their margin of experience and capacity. Identifying those guided tours, maps, boots, walking poles, rucksacks, clothing, binoculars and identification booklets that make rambling and bird watching possible, Edensor stipulates that these techniques and technologies enable the furtherance of these activities but necessarily restrict other ‘performative modalities that are possible’. Thus, he argues, a habitual reliance on binoculars in effect restricts awareness of other features in the landscape, ‘foregrounding as it often does the centrality of the rare’ (Ibid). Nonetheless, a shared code ensures this is rarely questioned by participants, and the tools of their trade tie them into normative behaviours.

How, then, do such publications as Country Life dictate the performances of the New Squirearchy in the vein of guide books or instruction manuals?; how does the ownership of farmsteads, manor houses and land engender specific understandings of rurality and its ‘purpose’?; and how does the saddle, the front seat of a four wheel drive vehicle, or the ‘line of site’ on a pheasant shoot entail specific engagements with the countryside? Equally, who are those directors and
choreographers, well rehearsed in those knowledges governing the use of these technologies, masterful of those skills becoming of the gentryfied rural and thus exemplary performers? Are they, perhaps, ‘genuine’ blue blooded members of the old order, or rather more established, ex-urban members of an aspirational network leading by example and monitoring the performances of others in their ‘orbit of influence’? In short, which individuals are primarily responsible for transforming the discursive context of the landed gentry into an authoritative regime, stabilising the relationships between equipment and clothing, manoeuvres and collective enactions that constitute the New Squirearchy?

Permeated with discursive, experimental, technical and moral rules governing appropriate conduct, the condition of the New Squirearchy is but one specific range of (middle class) enactions in the ‘postmodern countryside’. A vista containing an assortment of activities, with their proponents wielding distinct cultural ‘values variously based around notions of conservation, land use, productivity, beauty, individuality and stewardship’, contestation about preferred performative norms exists between the adherents of different pursuits, but also occurs within particular spheres of activity (Ibid, 6). For example, it may be argued that devotees of different shooting styles express their own values whilst impugning those of other ‘guns’. Typically, such contests concern whether or not recreational shooting should be conceived of as a sport or simply a pleasure, whether it should incorporate live quarry or artificial targets, or whether it should take place in a ‘rough’ or highly organized setting.

Despite Edensor’s insistence upon the ‘prevalence of (proliferating) performative conventions for urbanites seeking an ‘authentic’ self in the ‘authentic’ realm of the rural’ (Ibid), it is important to note that performance is not seen as static; no matter how meticulously a space is regulated. Hence, the ‘brute force of incidental and institutionalized qualities can interrupt any progress … and a host of unexpected
effects are apt to impact upon the body so as to jar it from its performative normalcy’. The material qualities of rural space, therefore, are far from being visual yet passive, and draw the individual into a diverse sensual experience of tactile, auditory and olfactory senses. Particularly evident in those tourist zones which are stage-managed to produce affective, ‘mediatised’, experiences in the format of ‘edutainment’, the extension of these themed spaces into the countryside include ‘rustic’ pubs, farm centres and village recreations, and spaces of the gentry in the form of manor houses, mansions and banquet-halls playing host to medieval feasts and music.

Produced in traditional, native or folkloric customs, rural identity and local distinctiveness are ‘collected’ by the visitor through their participation within the theatrical context. This is also true of the literary and cinematic portrayal of the rural (see Mirman 1999), where the entwining of drama and tourism reinforces a network that constitutes thoroughly distinctive landscapes. Involving the citation of a stock of rural characters and settings that can be mobilised in the imagining of multiple ruralities, it has, for example, played out of and into the huge popularity of televised period dramas and so-called ‘bodice rippers’. This is a theme picked up by Martin Phillips in his discussion of the countryside as a hyperreality, where representations of rurality, even those accepted as being in important senses fictitious, actively come to structure rural space (1998a, 44). The use of Lyme Hall in Cheshire to portray Pemberley in an adaptation of Pride and Prejudice, for instance, reportedly led to a surge of visitors from some 800 people per week to over 5500 in a two day period (see Ward 1995).

Alternatively, the profusion of staged and performed rural spaces may get so that the diversity of themes can become practically incomprehensible. Featuring ‘a cast of thousands’, Edensor looks to county shows in which literally hundreds of stages (stalls, displays, arenas, demonstration areas, tents and so forth) vie with
each other for the attention of vast crowds. Citing a changing emphasis from livestock and farming techniques and apparatus to a more post-productivist inclination toward leisure, commodification and craft products that imply and imagined country lifestyle, this is closely allied to media publications which ‘feature and blur the boundaries between rural and suburban’. Here, for example, he identifies clothes shops peddling ‘not the high fashions and fripperies of the high street but sturdy, sensible and practical wear – the boots, the Barbour’s and the tweeds which appropriately clothe the ‘traditional’ rural body and imply distinct leisure and practical activities’ (Ibid, 10). Elsewhere, he notes that a rather different ethos and aesthetic is brought forth in displays of historical machines and animal husbandry, casting the rural as space of skilled work and case-hardened attitudes towards livestock rearing and cultivation.

2.4. Everyday performances and rural competencies

Over the past few years, notes Veronica della Dorra, the ‘relationship between the landscape and the body as two physical entities mutually informed through performance’ has been greatly interrogated by cultural geographers (2008, 217). Charting the development of similar themes of memory, embodiment and performativity as within the social sciences more generally, she argues that more often than not the material specificities of place and landscape have been obliterated. Calling for a reconsideration of the (local) landscape in terms of embodied, visual and spatial practise, rather than as a ‘contested cultural politics of heritage identity’ as it has been understood’ (Ibid), della Dorra insists that the most grounded, situational connection between people and space occurs within the humdrum sphere of the everyday and should be accounted for in this fashion. Accordingly, ways of dwelling, working and socializing are often tied to familiar spaces and are, as such, often unreflexive in their production of familiar sensations and routines.
2. Class, identity and gentryfication

Drawing extensively on what Nigel Thrift (1997) describes as a ‘non-representational theory’ or ‘the theory of practises’, itself born of Foucault’s attention to the technologies of being and Deleuze and Guattari’s emphasis on non-human agency, heterogeneous flows and relational networks, this relates to those motions through which we become subjects decentred, affective, but expressive and involved with others and objects ‘in a world continually in process’ (Nash 2000, 655): More specifically, it centres on ‘the body-subject, not the body, engaged in joint body-practises of becoming’ (Thrift 1997, 142). Concerned with ‘practical intelligibility’ of an ‘unformulated practical grasp of the world’ (Nash 2000, 655), the politics of inarticulate understanding are of appreciating, and valorising, the skills and knowledges (see McCormack 2005) ordinary people get from being embodied beings; ‘skills and knowledges which have been so consistently devalorized by contemplative forms of life’ (Thrift 1997, 126). Drawn out over time and ‘in consistently traversed and inhabited space’ (Edensor 2004, 11), an ‘unnoticed framework of practises and concerns’ comes together as everyday spaces of domesticity, work and leisure identified as ‘taskscapes’ by Ingold and Kurttila (2000, 91). Including, for example, cooking, cleaning, dancing, horse riding and animal care (see Thrift 1997), these quotidian enactions are both constrained and enabled by the materialities of space as a ‘concrete and sensuous concatenation of material forces’ which embed bodily practises over days, months and years (Wylie 2002, 51).

Complemented by a ‘sensual apprehension of the textures of turf, hay and soil, the smells of beasts and vegetation, and the sounds of animals and machinery’, Edensor (2004, 11) highlights the role of surfaces, textures, contours, gradients and pathways when encouraging humans to take particular courses of action. Given the limitations and advantages of their normative physical abilities, which contribute towards everyday practical orientations, particular rural environments engender particular habitual performances, and agriculture is a clear case in point.
Governed by seasonal patterns of sowing, reaping and birthing, farming life is portrayed as a series of practical considerations and projections that generates a temperament shaped by economic uncertainty. Incorporating an array of techniques and know-how, there is a habitual practical correlation with a network of experts and recourse to local lore – ‘an intersubjectively constituted form of common sense’ (Ibid, 12).

Farming requires a ‘second nature’ and intimate geographical knowledge which informs ‘where, when and how’ certain tasks are completed with the minimum of fuss; practises identified as rural competencies. With none or little of the ‘romantic performances of leisure seeking urbanites and little recourse to lyrical rural depictions’ – aesthetic reasoning being reserved for beasts and machines (Ibid), these enactions help to constitute a particular sense of belonging. The extent to which this might be grounded in the rural, suggests Edensor, might be evident when country folk migrate to urban landscapes and have need of an altogether different set of practical resources to accomplish everyday tasks and visa-versa. Quoting Raymond Williams, we may identify ‘small differences in style, of speech or behaviour, of someone who has learned our ways but was not bred in them’ (1961, 42); and, as elsewhere, in ‘the rural sphere there is normative etiquette which instantiates which forms of conduct are apposite in particular contexts, and embodied habits which constitute shared worlds of meaning and doing.’

Emphasizing the importance of emotional attachments within this schema - and in contrast to Edensor’s comments regarding the unsentimental form of the agricultural psyche - Convery et al (2001) have used the concept of lifescape when articulating the complexity of the spatial, emotional and ethical dimensions of the relationship between landscape, livestock, farming and the rural community. Introduced by Nazarea (1995; 1999), an anthropologist working in the Philippines, and later developed by Somé and McSweeney (1996) as a means of framing the
social, cultural and economic interactions that occur for people across the landscape, Convery et al highlight the dynamic nature of ‘lifescapes’ in creating places that offer livelihoods and life-opportunities (2005, 101). A work in progress, they envisage a mutually constitutive interrelationship between people and the environment, and one where the relations between people, place and production are complex and multi-scalar.

Attentive of, and contributing to, that large body of work on emotional geographies emerging in the late 1990s (see Anderson and Smith 2001), this concern with lifescape looked to the boundaries between persons and things as osmotic and creative of one another, and paints people, places and spaces as being intimately linked and tied up by peculiar ideals (see Bender 2001). Wilson (2003), for example, has examined the importance of non-physical dimensions of place in this vein, particularly those which ‘do not exist solely on the ground, but are embedded within the belief and value systems of different cultural groups, placing emphasis on the social and spiritual aspects of place’ (Convery et al 2005, 101). Elucidating the heterogeneity of rural emotional landscapes, the emotional geographies of farming, for example, are entangled with human constructions of nature, and with ‘human and non-human identities constructed through ideas and practises played out in different contexts at different times and places’ (Ibid).

Space-making practises, then, depend on collective rituals, and for Edensor simultaneous quotidian performances in the ‘pursuit of work, leisure and reproduction compose distinct kinds of cultural rythmicity or social pulse ... which consolidates time-geographies which shape the ways in which people’s

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2 Theoretically, the concept of ‘lifescape’ has a strong degree of resonance with the ‘phenomenology of perception’ as discussed by Merleau-Ponty. Within geography, the notion of ‘lifeworld’ was brought forth by Buttimer (1976) as a means of ‘drawing together the phenomenological with existential to bring new meaning to emerging concepts of humanistic geography’ (Convery et al 2005, 101).
trajectories separate and intersect in different ways’ (2004, 13). Set about such rural stages as the pub, church, village shop and hall, which provide enduring sites around which routines are communally co-ordinated and engaged as ‘place ballets’ (see also Seamon 1979), varying rural dispositions within their midst are cross cut by class, ethnicity and gendered forms of habitus. Here Edensor suggests that there are, for instance, distinctive forms of playing, socializing and interacting with nature that do not feature in the farmers’ accounts, pointing to the lives of farmers’ wives, labourers and gamekeepers who would, perhaps, articulate a different range of routines, practicalities and sensations.

To cast a New Squirearchy in this vein - as with any other emergent, predominantly ex-urban collective – is more problematic in that they are widely regarded as fundamentally non-rural in the sense of being a pastiche. Contravening a working consensus drawn up by (more) established miscellany of rural groups who embody conventions about broadly ‘appropriate’ ways of inhabiting the countryside; these unreflexive ‘good’ habits mean that it is difficult for so-called ‘townies’ to pass as rural – especially those who maybe trying to re-invent or re-establish taskscapes and emotional lifescapes to which they have little or no realistic claim. This does not, however, void the possibility of (re)establishing gentryfied codes of conduct and ways of being within the rural landscape, nor the coming-together of a ‘cultural community tackling the rural world with familiar ‘landed’ manoeuvres (see Frykman and Löfgren 1996). As Edensor reminds us, the countryside is far from exceptional in playing host to/being constituted by an increasingly diverse array of performances which spark competing notions about what actions are ‘appropriate’, ‘competent’ and ‘normal’, and may ‘produce a reflexive awareness of the habitual performances which are so integral to individual and group identities’ (2004, 14).
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Emerging out of a proliferation of multiple, coincident enactions on rural stages – but also others such as those of ‘business’ and those of the entrepreneur – the New Squirearchy conceivably forms but one pattern of existence which is forcing people to ‘confront other actors and practises which contradict and challenge cherished, embodied and habitual ways of doing things’ (Ibid). In posing a challenge to, for example, those landed dynasties and farmers who have for so long enjoyed a monopoly as far as (being seen as) the primary managers of the rural landscape and the rural community, the previous chapter demonstrates how they have been forced to reappraise, reassert and reconfigure their own roles and relationships within the countryside; utilising a range of cultural resources which mobilize ‘local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on the ... media, symbols and languages’ (Clifford 1988, 15). This, then, leads us to consider how such actions may be traced and accounted for.

2.5. Tracking rural identity and accounting for experience

Against the backdrop of the Foot and Mouth Crisis of 2001, a palpable sense of isolation among livestock farmers called into question a ‘whole way of life and social identity’. Focusing on this issue, Convery et al posited an ‘action-orientated approach’ as being the most appropriate framework through which to illustrate the ‘complex socio-spatial dynamics of being someone in this world’ (2005, 101). Advocating research with people and communities, rather than on them, they look to an applied engagement between researchers and researched and emphasize what Reason and Bradbury (2001) term ‘practical knowing’. Embroiled in the consideration of power, identity, and the construction of social boundaries, it is centred on personal engagement and what Phillips (1998b; 1998c) calls an ‘interpretive approach to difference’. As is evident in Michael Bell’s (1992; 1994) studies of Childerley, this body of work is of particular relevance to the emergence
of a New Squirearchy in that it deals with the influx of ‘moneyed’, middle class residents into a specific rural community.

Criticizing the notion that such ‘positional goods’ as cars, clothes, pastimes and properties are unswervingly and unilaterally appreciated, Bell challenges the assumption that cultural capital is universally granted and acknowledged. This resource, he suggests, is not merely conferred upon those residents who are perceived to have money - not least by those ‘ordinary’ villagers who marshal an alternative country identity when competing with these individuals over housing:

‘... by bringing out into the open the issue of the positional benefits of country living for new moneyed residents, and by questioning their countryism and communalism, accepted country people selectively devalue the cultural capital claimed by residents who they do not accept as real country people.’ (Bell 1992, 75).

For Bell these ‘real country people’ of Childerley apply four general ‘rules’ when considering their number, those of: (i) localism, which refers to long term residence in the village – especially in the case of birth or having ‘pre-World War II family roots’; (ii) ruralism, concerning the period of time individuals have lived in the countryside and held such ‘country’ occupations as farmer, farmhand or agricultural consultant; (iii) countryism, appertaining to ‘participation in, and knowledge of, country ways and activities, such as farming, gardening, pet raising and pet care, botany, riding, hunting, walking, local history and authentic remodelling’; and (iv) communalism, encompassing such activities as ‘participation in informal inter-household exchanges and in community activities like church committees, the darts and cricket teams, the Parish Council, use of the village shop, the Women’s Institute, the annual village fete and harvest festival, and tending the village green’ (Ibid, 74).
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Far from being deployed in a unanimous fashion, Bell shows the inhabitants of Childerley as using these rules as an alternative language for the discussion of lifestyle, class tensions and class identity. Here the ‘ordinary working class villagers’ stress those forms of localism which are generally (if not totally) unavailable to the ‘moneyed’; and the moneyed, while ‘continuing to grant the authority of localism to those who claim it’, stress other rules rather more – particularly those of communalism and countryism (Ibid). In addition, Bell also cites ‘class differences’ with respect to what best indicates these forms of identity:

‘working class villagers routinely criticized authentic remodelling, participation in the hunt, and keeping horses or non-commercial sheep as displays of wealth, not countryism … The working class sees the formal communalism of civic duty promoted by the moneyed people as taking over the village … In contrast, ordinary villagers advocate an informal kind of communalism based on child care exchange, assistance in car repair, nights out drinking with the lads, and the proverbial cup of borrowed sugar.’ (Ibid, 74-75).

Concerned with gentrification and class as a relentless reproduction of rural materiality, Bell’s work is centred on human experience. The text affects the creation, formation and the realisation of identity, elucidation and boundary construction. Although ultimately ‘imposing’ explanation in what John Stuart Mill called an “external criterion” for moral value, and resorting to an overly generalized vocabulary of nature, society, politics and gender which failed to adequately extend out of fieldwork tracings, in drawing attention to the varied practicalities and interactions of ‘fields, hedges, copses, cattle, houses, cars and burglar alarms’ Bell’s work is nevertheless attentive to the implications of even the most mundane of elements as constituents of life.
2. Class, identity and gentryfication

Identifying assemblages of class and lifestyle as continually evolving to encompass new material circumstance and adopting new guises (such as those of ‘Yuppies’, ‘Dinkies’ and, perhaps, a ‘New Squirearchy’), their presence is variously felt as part of the milieu of everyday life. Such manifestations, for example, are evident in Bell’s discussion of village pubs:

‘Outside the Fox one seldom sees the Volvos or Land Rovers that pull up to the Horse and Hound; most of the vehicles are Fords, Morris, delivery vans, and sometimes a tractor. Inside, there is nothing remarkable about the place, despite its age. It’s dark, a bit spare, and the tables, chairs, and bar are all new. The food is hearty, but hardly haute cuisine, even for a pub. There is a coin-operated pool table, a much pricked darts board, and a juke box. This is not a sit down place, and it’s usually noisy.’ (Ibid. 28).

Bell continues …

‘The two pubs cater to opposite ends of this social axis that runs through the midst of the village, the axis of class. The Horse and Hound is where the “middle bit,” the “moneyed people”, and the “haves” go. The Fox is for the “ordinary people,” the “working man,” the have nots” and few remaining “old boys” sometimes hold forth. The same divisions largely dictate who goes to whose house for a coffee or a meal, who goes shopping with whom in the town, and who walks together in the village.’ (Ibid. 28).

Taking note of, for example, décor (e.g. pool table), music (juke box), drinking (e.g. coffee) and agricultural affiliation (tractor), the presence (and non-presence) of certain objects and people at specific times and places, Bell allows his ‘subjects’ to indicate the ideological importance of materiality in sorting and situating their existence (e.g. money and having it).
2. Class, identity and gentryfication

Undermining the belief that a significant proportion of the population fail to identify with class, Bell’s intensely research-grounded appraisal of collective consciousness _within_ – as opposed to _of_ – a rural community highlights the importance of factors which have not hitherto featured as part of mainstream academic accounts:

‘Childerleyans combine as best they can what they know of all the forms of social power at a person’s command …Among the indicators Childerleyans consider (when known) are income, occupation, family background, the home a person lives in, the car a person drives, lifestyle (dress, favoured activities, choice of pub), education, the amount of property a person owns, and who talks with whom.’ (Bell 1994, 44).

Obliged to consider the apparently innocent practise of frequenting a public house or shop, such findings hint at the variable nature of collective identifiers, and the need for local knowledge when discussing identity and belonging in a local context. Informed by human interaction and appreciation of personal relationships with human and non-human actors, Bell hints at those complex, variably hierarchal interplays between class, gender, ethnicity, politics and religion.

Paying close attention to those habitual and reflexive practices and performances which constitute varying identities and communal dwellings, a case in point is the story of Lucy Pearce. Here, in ‘her attempt to accept the guidance of her natural conscience’, she risked disparagement as a result of transgressing traditional class-gender employment boundaries. Taking a job at the ‘big house’ in order to become more involved in local affairs, she became mindful of being identified as a ‘lesser person’ than her role as middle class housewife would otherwise entitle her to be in the collective conscious, and promptly resigned:
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‘Lucy’s social standing, as much as she might prefer it to be otherwise, does have an important influence on her life. Even though her family relies on her husband’s work for the bulk of their income, his chances for advancement or even keeping his job, should his firm decide to cut back, could well be materially affected by having a wife who is seen as ‘the cleaner’. Status and class in the Weberian sense – that is, social honour and economic power – are indeed closely connected... These matters villagers must handle with care.’ (Ibid, 156).

There is, then, often a tension between individuals’ differing identities and associated roles, an issue that has also been discussed by Nigel Rapport in his study of \textit{Wanet}. Having different parts to play before the same audience, and in occupying different regions of a broader network, there is, he suggests, often a ‘built-in conflict of expectations concerning the behaviour appropriate to each role’ and a ‘plurality and competitiveness of normative concepts’ (1993, 194).

Recording the shifting alliances of the human and non-human as expressions of identity, \textit{Wanet}, like \textit{Childerley}, is attentive to those practises carried out by differing alignments of those elements within, through and beyond the English countryside. Although conscientious toward the rhetoric and ideology of ‘country life’ and an hierarchal sociality within, Rapport constructs the gentry, the \textit{nouveaux riche} and the ‘common man’ out of – as opposed to \textit{into} - the connections between, for example, doors, plants and church pews. In concert similarly and variously, enrolling and enrolled by alternate (and accordingly differentiated) elements of the human audience, they are shown to occupy different regions of the communal network. Often embodying a ‘built in conflict of expectations concerning the behaviour appropriate to each role’, \textit{Wanet} avidly describes the ‘plurality and competitiveness of normative concepts’ which are at once shaped and shaping rural space.
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Concepts such as ‘middle class’, ‘women’, ‘farmer’, ‘incomer’ - and, possibly, ‘New Squire’ - which people use to express themselves and the lives of others are not, therefore, necessarily consistent, nor must they be internally or externally coherent. Instead, they are often ambiguous and occasionally absurd:

‘They [societal concepts] might give the impression of possessing consistency, but might instead be taking on different meanings per context or else lacking in meaning completely. Moreover, these qualities may be socially functional, indeed essential for the functioning of the social system and for endowing the vagaries of societal need with the appearance of a given and authoritative reality. Hence we see in ... diverse behaviour is the play of concepts: multiple, malleable and manipulated per social context according to social function.’ (Rapport 1993, 94).

Living, working and playing in the village over an extended period of time, dutifully absorbing those various accounts of those people, objects and practises unfolding in his midst (verbal and otherwise), Rapport demonstrates how such concepts as class, aristocracy and the common man are neither consistent nor coherent. Instead, they are depicted as ambiguous and often absurd:

‘They [societal concepts] might give the impression of possessing consistently but instead be taking on different meanings per context or else lacking in meaning completely. Moreover, these qualities may be socially functional, indeed essential for the functioning of the social system and for endowing the vagaries of societal need with the appearance of external, given and authoritative reality. ³ Hence what we see in ... diverse behaviour is the play of concepts: multiple, malleable and manipulated ... according to context and function.’ (1993, 194).

³ Italics added
2. Class, identity and gentryfication

Emphasizing the lack of totalizing form, and the manipulation, malleability and multiplicity of those concepts becoming of material connections, demeanour is taken as governed by a collectively unstable conscience; a highly personal conscience that emerges through heterogeneity. Here the church, pub and school etc. serve as hubs through which certain types of information is constituted (re)established, (re)interpreted and (re)conveyed; and the character of such institutions is itself a product and expression of alternate ontological appreciation. Here village institutions such as the church, pub, school and manor house serve as communication hubs through which information is established, challenged and conveyed; and the character of these institutions is both a product and an expression of collective understandings of difference.

Having situated the (possible) ‘becoming’ of the New Squirearchy within current, ongoing debates on rural restructuring, class and its relationship with, alongside and in contribution to, other forms and notions of collective belonging, this chapter has argued that such forms of identity are constantly in the process of being made, replicated and reformed. Both evident and realised in those boundaries, symbols and activities which at once reproduce, surround and counterpoise their ‘being’, the projected existence of a New Squirearchy has being discussed in relation to work on the Chestnut Economy in rural France by Willis and Campbell (2004), and Gosnell and Haggerty’s (2007) study of ‘new ranchers’ in the American Midwest. Light on theoretical grounding, this is provided by Little and Leyshon (2003) and Edensor (2004) whose consideration of embodied rural geographies reflects the growing interest in performance and performativity within geography more generally. Identifying the centrality of practical ebbs and flows in information exchange, the study of identity therefore requires a practical engagement in a manner akin to that employed by Michael Bell (1994) and Nigel Rapport (1993). Proponents of the situated ethnography, a form of investigation which has long been employed by rural geographers and anthropologists, the
2. Class, identity and gentryfication

implementation of this approach when addressing the existence of the New Squirearchy will be discussed at length in chapter three.
3. As I rode out …

The essential vocation of the interpretative anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what has been said.’ (Geertz 1973, 80).

Ethnographic research, as Hughes et al (2000) point out, has a long and distinguished history within academic circles. Particularly evident in anthropology, the image of the intrepid fieldworker embarking on long, perilous journeys into the unknown in order to study the customs and habits of ‘other’ societies is firmly established in the public psyche. In more recent times, however, ethnography has ‘come home’ (Jackson 1987), and social scientists are increasingly employing ethnographic research techniques in their own back-yard. Stimulated by both contextual considerations and epistemological reflections, the dissolution of ‘older’ lines of social inequality into the new diversity of milieus, subcultures, lifestyles and ways of living, has, in the first instance, fashioned the requirement for new empirical sensitivity (Flick 1998). Secondly, current theoretical concerns with inter-textuality and the subjectivity of knowledge have prompted a tangible movement away from quantitative data collection strategies toward more in-depth qualitative techniques. Following and fashioning this trend, mainstream geographers have been keen to take advantage of these newer ethnographic techniques, and the last few years have witnessed a substantial growth of interest in such methodologies within urban and - somewhat belatedly - rural studies.

3.1. Ethnography and rural geography

A complex term encompassing different, occasionally paradoxical meanings, debates centre around three main aspects of ‘ethnography’. Identified by Hughes et al, in the first of these ethnography is understood on the one hand as a particular set of research techniques including, for example, participant observation and
3. As I rode out …

‘deep’ interviews, and on the other as an approach in and of itself (2000, 2). In the second debate, a view of ethnography as dependent upon an extended period of first-hand involvement with a host community is countered with a belief in the validity of results derived from qualitative methods (such as interviews and focus groups) conducted over a shorter term. In the third instance, there is ongoing deliberation regarding the merits of ‘old’ ethnography in the positivist tradition, where a ‘narrow, technique-based definition is favoured’, and an emergent ‘new’ ethnography informed by a range of contemporary critical theories (Ibid. 3).

Acknowledging the researcher’s subjectivity as an explicit part of knowledge production, and the role of their reflections, ideas, thoughts and feelings in the act of interpretation, proponents of new ethnography explicitly address their interconnection with the investigational context. Reflecting the growing influence of neo-Marxist and post-structural thinking, the ‘crisis’ of objectivity and the rejection of universal met-theories is very much in evidence. Recognising authorial power and control, contemporary critiques have come to valorise heterogeneity and difference, and espouse the need to take into account the varying forms of exploitation and subjugation which serve to silence and marginalise. Hinging the choice of research practices on the manner in which these processes are seen as operating (Nelson et al 1992), conclusions are grounded in the life-worlds and experiences of those involved, with the understanding that viewpoints are negotiated through, and shaped by, a kaleidoscope of social and cultural practices (Hughes et al 2000, 4).

Permeating rural geography, these ideas have driven explorations of variable interpretations of the countryside and their embeddedness in particular local contexts. Coming to accept the presence of ‘multiple ruralities’, many geographers operating in this realm now concede that ‘rural societies are, and probably always have been, far more diverse, divided and fragmented than
their/our writings have portrayed’ (Ibid. 5). Manifested in changing methodological practises, ethnography has enjoyed a renaissance in rural research from the mid 1990’s onwards; although it is important to recognize its extended pedigree within the discipline. Most notably, we may look to those groundbreaking community studies undertaken throughout the 1950s and 1960s by Frankenburg (1957), Littlejohn (1963) and Rees (1950), among others.

With significantly different philosophical underpinnings than more recent ethnographic efforts, it is, argue Hughes et al, far too easy to dismiss these studies as mere descriptions of times past, and much can be learned from this literary genre. Videch et al (1971), for example, paid much attention to the impact of research on both the hosts and the inquisitor, while Bell and Newby (1971) fully considered the need for good procedure in obtaining ‘good’ fieldwork data. Perhaps the most impressive feature of these studies, however, was their meticulous detail. Successfully capturing complexity and with a tendency to guard against over-generalised, sterile accounts of everyday life, ‘nothing in the tradition of community studies’, stated Bell and Newby, pointed ‘in the direction of a general theory of society … [but rather] mitigat[d] against a grand scheme’ (1971, vii in Hughes et al 2000, 7).

Taking much from such discussions as those featured in Bell and Newby’s Community Studies: An introduction to the Sociology of the Local Community, the (re)turn to what might usefully be referred to as ‘dense’ ethnography by Bell (1994) and Rapport (1993) is arguably a return to a form of research employed by their forbears. This should not, however, blind us to the highly critical (re)acceptance of ethnography; the recognition of the limitations of ethnographic research, and; an evident awareness of a complete methodological swing to ethnographic approaches (see Cloke 1997). Here Martin Phillips (2000) dictates that ethnography is only one of a number of ‘travelling’ concepts flowing out of
anthropology, and, drawing on comments by Marcus Doel (1994), the circulation of terms across differing theoretical practises is a matter of some consequence.

With differing theoretical-practises interpreting various terms in accordance with their own peculiar knowledges, there is, notes Phillips, a discernable ‘fractionalisation of meanings’ signified by certain terms and, in many instances, a series of ‘property disputes and conflicts’ over their varied application have come into being (2000, 28). They have, therefore, often become sealed in what Doel has characterized as a ‘hermeneutic quarantine’ of quotation marks, indicating their contested, indefinite and contradictory existence. Often found within inverted commas, as an umbrella term sheltering a range of distinct, often ambiguous, elements, ‘ethnography’ undoubtedly operates as a circulating concept, and is clearly subject to mottled interpretations and usages. For example, one of the most frequent uses of the term in human geography, and in rural geography more specifically, has been as referent to a range of predominantly field based-techniques. A case in point is Jackson’s entry in the *Dictionary of Human Geography*, identifying ethnography as ‘based on first-hand observation … employing ‘participant observation of other qualitative methods to convey the inner life and texture of a particular social group or neighbourhood’ (1994, 174). A number of other researchers have, however, also suggested that ethnography is party to much more than a set of investigative procedures, and is often as concerned with the researcher as the researched in context.

Interpreting the term ethnography as encompassing the processes of writing and reflecting on the varied position of the explorer, Phillips underscores the value of studies Paul Cloke (1994) and Michael Bell (1994). With a commitment to self-consciousness which extends beyond a commonplace, largely tokenistic reference to partiality on account of being a ‘white, middle-class male’, their collective output makes little claim to any kind of descriptive authority. Rejecting control
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and explanation ‘in favour of supplication, collaboration and empathy’ they
follow a perceptively post-structural tack, establishing few stable coherences and
situating life as played out in ebbs and flows (Phillips 2000, 31). Raising the issue
of how research is connected into relations with others, they also raise questions
such as ‘is it possible to have non-hierarchal relations with others?’, and, ‘to what
extent is research simply about and collecting new experiences with which to
make ourselves?’ (Ibid. 32).

Pivotal in Childerley, these matters are evident throughout the narrative.
Accepting that ethnographers’ own politics, interests and personalities
unavoidably creep into the mix, Bell also recognized that researchers – by their
very presence in the field – are immersed within the social context of the study
itself:

‘I encourage readers to be as critical of what I have written as they are of
anything else they may read … it is important to consider how I must have
looked to Childerleyans [and] I encourage readers to keep this in mind in
evaluating my report of how they looked to me … I think most villagers
saw me as in part an outsider and in part an insider, both a Stranger and an
Us. I saw them much the same way.’ (Bell 1994, 243-244).

Talking of churches, synagogues, plane flights, and even the importance of the
train in facilitating his wife’s daily commute to the city, Bell places himself (and
his partner) both within and beyond the living, ever-changing fabric of the village.
Standing at the margins, seeing life in part through the eyes of a Childerleyan, and
in part through the eyes of one not fully enrolled, he felt well placed to trace the
complex assemblages that constituted this space: And yet, in line with Latourian
notions, life in the ‘littoral zone’ could not furnish anything more than a littoral truth\(^1\), and we should not aim to come any closer.

Tackling these issues ‘in situ’, the following section will introduce the realm in which I have sought to identify, query and clarify the existence of a New Squirearchy. In and around the village of Eamesworth, its form, character and history will be discussed at some length, particularly in relation to its rise as an affluent commuter territory and as a likely candidate for gentrification. Within this review, much attention will be paid to my own background, position and roles within this community; before, during and after the period of study. Here it is argued that such credentials have made me inimitably placed to unpack the possible existence of a New Squirearchy within this space but, by the same token, unable to lucratively investigate their presence amid alternative rural settlements. At once a catalyst and impediment to the research, these unique conditions will be outlined and – where possible – addressed, as well as those processes through which data was collected, formulated and brought forth for analysis.

### 3.2. Eamesworth and the irony of a New Squirearchy

A plain, rather unremarkable village, Eamesworth is tucked away in the south-west corner of the county of Bedfordshire, some 3 miles east-by-south of Leighton Buzzard, about 6 miles north-west of Luton. In the shadow of the Dunstable Downs, the soil is mainly of clay, and crops of wheat, barley, beans and peas have been raised alongside cattle and sheep since Saxon times. As with any other rural community in this part of the world, agriculture has been of declining importance as an employer of local people, but the aesthetics of the landscape remain very much tied to the annual cycle of sowing, reaping and ploughing, giving little

\(^1\) The ‘littoral zone’ is a designation used by ecologists referring to the waters edge of lakes and other significant bodies of fresh water.
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quarter to those vast suburban housing developments which edge ever closer with the passing of each year. Eamesworth also differs from many of its local counterparts in another respect; one that makes any talk of the rural upper class and of a New Squirearchy in the context of this community ironic and perhaps misplaced in any ‘authentic’ sense; an authenticity detailed in the following passage.

‘The route of the writer and his horse lay now along ancient droves which kept to the hills, now down valley lanes leading past lovely manors. These gracious homes studding the valley lands were either quite still and empty, or they were raucous with unaccustomed noise: for some were shut up or actually vacant … Nowhere did they seem what they originally intended to be, the active nodes of rural industry… For centuries now these manors, or their pre-enclosure forbears, had been the centres of country government. To them the villages had looked for example, guidance and protection. The life that went on in them was concerned not only with the ruling of the surrounding land, it was linked with the “larger life” beyond the village, with London, with lands overseas, with the world… But even after the squires became County Councillors and agriculture had become ancillary to sporting interests, these houses retained something of their old magnetic force; the habit of responsibility persisted in a somewhat effete or ghostly form.’ (Gardiner 1941, 91-92).

Should Gardiner² have visited Eamesworth in 1941, he would have undoubtedly found it much different from that archetypal place he envisioned as the English village community. Here the valley lanes do not wind their way past resplendent manor houses, nor have they ever done, and the ruling of the land does not ark

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² For more on Rolf Gardiner and his role in the ‘organic nationalism’ movement see Matless’s *Landscape and Englishness* (1998).
out from such edifices as it does in many other places. There are, of course, several large farmhouses, and even a ‘big house’ with a moat and tower – but this is little in comparison to those monuments to wealth that stand guard over vast tracts of the surrounding countryside. To the north-east, for example, lay Woburn Abbey and the Duke of Bedford’s estate, which was, at the time, the largest in the county; and to the south-east stood Ashridge House and the remnants of the Brownlow estate, recently broken up following the death of the Third Earl 1921.

Completing the circle on the Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire border were those stately residencies belonging to various members of the Rothschild dynasty; Ascott House, Aston Clinton House, Eythrope, Halton House, Waddesdon Manor and Mentmore Towers, itself a mere 5 miles to the south-west; but none have ever held sway over the goings-on at Eamesworth. Even in the mid thirteenth century, when manorial organisation was at its peak in Bedfordshire, the village had a disproportionately high number of free tenants, owning their own land and farming it according to their own wishes, not those of some feudal lord (see Godber 1969, 92). Eamesworthians, it would seem, have always been a rather independent lot, and the parish has forever been what is often referred to as ‘open’; having a dispersed land ownership, numerous small holdings and a well developed range of trades and crafts being represented (Mills 1972). In fact, you could say that little has changed to this day.

Despite the absence of any major landowners and a gentry-proper, when looking back to their youth some of the older residents can, nevertheless, remember various local characters who, at one time or another, adopted an elite persona. Consequently, there are mixed feelings as to whether Eamesworth has, in living

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3 Although large areas of this estate (and the Bedford’s estate in Devon) were set to be sold-off following the death of Herbrand, the Eleventh Duke, in 1940.
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memory, ever had a ‘proper squire’; something Jim Eames – a “local in every sense of the word” – is not entirely sure about:

“Well, yes and no. We had, I suppose, when I was a boy, but they weren’t rich landowners like these you see on television … Not the real aristocracy. We had Colonel Fenwick. He lived in the vicarage, although he shot himself and his daughter as I recall. It was around the time I started work, so I would have been 14 or 15. About 1935 I suppose. Old Fenwick was a big noise; at least he thought he was! He used to ride around the village in a horse and trap… And then there was Parson Green, and he used to like to give the impression he ran the village. He was an important figure I suppose … but not like the Duke of Bedford or someone like that. I mean, you’d hear of him [the Duke of Bedford] going around Woburn and that and everything coming to a standstill. I mean, he employed everybody in one way or another. But nothing like that would ever happen here. We had no one like that, thank god!” (Jim Eames).

Eamesworth, then, has never really had a ‘Zeus of the neighbourhood’ like Blythe’s Akenfield, and the aged people of the village do not hold a ‘note of awe and wonder’ in their voice when they ‘describe the particular menace and unpredictability of certain landowners and their wives’ (1967, 116). Without doubt, there have been those – like Colonel Fenwick – who have been “meaner, odder and richer” than others in the locality, but they have never been unerringly accepted as ‘the squire’: No one family name looms-large over village history, no coat of arms emblazons cottage walls.
3.3. The coming of the commuter

When Jim took up work, it was as an apprentice carpenter for firm in the next village, and his first job “of any note” involved producing two bible-cases for a local church – paid for by the diocese and “not some wealthy benefactor”. With only vague memories of the straw-plaiting industry which was once a mainstay of local employment, many of Jims’ contemporaries went on to secure semi-skilled jobs in the nearby manufacturing centres of Dunstable and Luton. By the mid 1950’s an ever-growing number of villagers (Jims’ late wife included) were boarding early morning buses to those vehicle assembly plants belonging to Vauxhall Motors, Bedford Trucks and Commer as well as the Waterlowes print works and AC Delco motor-parts factory, returning on a Friday night with pay packets that were far in excess of those enjoyed by the few still in agricultural employment. A cliquish affair, many of these jobs were obtained through word of mouth as opposed to more formal recruitment procedures, and when Jim’s son left school, his aunt was instrumental in getting the boy an apprenticeship in the same business that herself and several other local characters worked.

Come the late 1980s, the economic landscape had changed significantly, and Eamesworth had changed with it. Recession, corporate miss-management and an influx of foreign imports forced General Motors to sell off its’ Bedford truck plant and outsource the production of many Vauxhall models, and, as a direct consequence, nearby associated component producers such as AC Delco were also forced to lay off much of their workforce or close altogether. An increasingly competitive market place had also prompted Waterlowes to cease trading, and on completing his apprenticeship Jims’ son, John, like several of his younger colleagues, found work in some of the larger London print factories belonging to
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HMSO\textsuperscript{4}. Only a short drive from a number of stations on the Euston mainline, and consequently a mere 40 minute train journey to the Capital, Eamesworth was now becoming increasingly attractive to those holding more senior positions in city firms to the north of the river Thames. Being at the start of his career, however, and now with a wife and young daughter to support, John could not match the competition and afford a house in Eamesworth, and so instead purchased a modest property in the town of Tring. It was not for a good 20 years, several steps up the promotional ladder and a substantial amount of savings that he was finally able to move his family back into the village where he was born, but many of his childhood friends have never been in a position to take this step – that is, of course, supposing they wish to do so.

Like so many other rural communities in the south east, it would seem that Eamesworth has become a destination of choice for two principal groups of consumers; the upwardly mobile commuter and his family, and the retired: A village where;

‘…people sleep, wake, drive, work, drive, eat, relax and sleep. Place fosters ease on summer evenings and weekends. Winter brings reports of stifling domesticity. One car per adult becomes the norm. Amateur dramatics and local history take wing. The ardent cultivation of social scene may exclude those engaged in cultivation for a living … Class, land, ancestral demographics are all in there somewhere. Buses are rare. By day one walks in whole deserted streets.’ (Matless 2004, 162).

As if reciting from a script, many of Eamesworth’s residents will reel off a range of characteristics quite indifferent from those of Matless’s archetypal vision when

\textsuperscript{4} The common abbreviation for Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, the organisation primarily responsible for Governmental publications.
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describing their surroundings, and there is little to suggest they are uniformly misguided. There exists no amateur dramatics society, but the social scene is certainly lacking in any number of individuals holding agricultural occupations; in fact, the 2001 census reported a mere 1% of the wards’ 1,693 inhabitants as working in this sector (ONS, 2006). Instead, approximately 1 in 5 residents were identified as having managerial or professional positions at work, compared to an average of 1 in 7 for the South Bedfordshire district and the East of England as a whole.

Levels of car ownership are also high, with 43% of households having two vehicles - a figure 11% higher than the South Bedfordshire average - and only 8% of households having no vehicle at all - a figure half of that pertaining to the district as a whole. This should not, however, be taken as an indictment of the local bus service: On the contrary, situated directly along the route between Aylesbury, Leighton Buzzard and Luton Airport, the ‘number 31’ passes through the village seven days a week and with great regularity, providing dependable access to a vast range of services and amenities for those lacking private transport. Judging from those congregations which spring up outside the bus shelter on Monday and Friday mornings, a great many of these individuals are retired and taking advantage of subsidised fares, but this is not to suggest that Eamesworth is marked as a point of destination for those enjoying their ‘golden years’. According to the last census, a little under 15% of the local population were retired, and while this is some 2% greater than the South Bedfordshire average, it is only marginally greater than that of the region and nation.

As may be expected in an area populated by a large number of managerial and professional commuters, house prices in Eamesworth are much greater than those of South Bedfordshire and the East of England for all types of residence. Using current council tax evaluations as a rough indicator, of those 933 dwellings that
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constitute the village, over 52% fall into bands E, F, G, and H, a figure considerably larger than South Bedfordshire’s 20% total. Purchasing a home in the village is therefore a considerable financial undertaking, especially in those instances where the property comes with a quantity of land or has any ‘period qualities’. Although the vast majority of the housing stock is relatively modern, being built in past 150 years or so, no less than 14 private residencies in Eamesworth are officially ‘listed’ as grade II buildings, requiring permission from the council prior to any structural alterations or extensions. Including one converted windmill, five 17th century cottages, a number of 17th and 18th century farmhouses, and the 15th century manor house, they command a considerable premium, and in being put on the market in recent years several have appeared on the books of those more ‘exclusive’ rural sales agents.

Despite its proximity to London, and most areas being within easy reach of good road and rail links, Bedfordshire has been little explored by the buyers of those ‘more exclusive’ rural properties, who have historically opted for areas of Berkshire, Essex, Hampshire, Hertfordshire and Kent to the south, and Cheshire and Derbyshire to the north. Not noted for its landscapes, although with plenty of attractive countryside, Country Life has determined the county as representing good value for those would-be squires who cannot compete in those more established regions, boasting access to seven established public schools, five internationally renown golf courses, half a dozen ‘top shoots’, and the Oakley Hunt (Country Life Property Guide, 2006). Value, of course, is always relative, and according to its own Elite Property Index, which tracks the price of properties advertised in the magazine over the past decade, the cost of any substantial country home in south Bedfordshire has rocketed in the past four years. It therefore came as no surprise when ‘the Manor’ became the object of a bidding war in the summer of 2005, eventually being purchased by an automotive entrepreneur for considerably more than it’s guide price, and the largest of
Eamesworth’s grade II farmsteads, with two barn conversions, paddocks and stabling, was sold to a wealthy industrialist for well over its £1.9 million valuation in the last quarter of 2004.

Like John, my father was brought up in Eamesworth, moving to Leighton Buzzard having found a job in London as a print estimator, also for HMSO. Having spent the best part of 15 years getting up at half-past five in the morning for the daily hour-and-a-half commute to Southwark, and returning home at seven-thirty in the evening, he resigned not long after I had reached school age, taking up the position of production controller at a press in nearby Milton Keynes. With the mortgage paid off, and having the extra income that my mother was now generating as the manager of an elderly day care centre, my parents now had the financial wherewithal to relocate in the surrounding countryside. At the request of my grandparents, who were now finding the pressures of owning a formidable 1930s property a little more than they were willing to bear, we eventually moved into the bungalow built in Eamesworth by my paternal great-grandmother, while my grandfather and grandmother moved into an annexe constructed at the rear. It was the summer of 1990, I was eleven years old, and I was due to make the step-up from primary to secondary school. And so, at the start of the new term I duly loitered at the designated bus-stop to the front of the post-office, waiting with the other kids for the double-decked relic that would take us to and from ‘middle school’ everyday.

3.4. On being a local lad

Having not attended Eamesworth Lower School like the majority of children in the village, it was inevitable that I would not fit in straight away; I had, after all, an alternative set of friends and shared different recollections of sadistic teachers, playground fights and classroom shenanigans – although I am sure the central
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tenets of these memories are not dissimilar. For the next seven years I shared a bus and classroom with these people, and have remained firm friends with a good many of them to this day. We kicked a football about on the village green, played video-games at each others houses, drank our first cans of beer together and shared a sly cigarette in the playground behind the church; doing those things teenagers everywhere have always done and always will do. But while the sharing of such experiences brought me much closer to these people, I have never once felt as part their number. I was not, and am not, a local lad in the truest sense of the term, but this has not prevented my being regarded as such by many of those who feature in this study, and this identity has consequently played a large part in the research process.

With family name that has been present in Eamesworth since the mid 17th century at least, and having a line of direct paternal descendents living here for as long as popular memory allows, it seems to matter little to many of the older residents that my formative years were spent away from the village. With a local pedigree that is beyond refute, and where those that remain from my school days are few and relatively unseen, I have always maintained some degree of visibility within the community. The awareness of relatives’ aside, those school holidays between the age of 7 and 11 were spent in the care of my grandparents, and having embarked on a university career in mid-Wales, I returned out of term time and earned some extra income as a barman in the village pub. As a pint-puller in the Six Tuns, I found myself ensconced in – and became aware of – many networks being played out as part of this space; that of the New Squirearchy included. Here they revealed themselves, partly through the observations of customers and co-workers, as a confident, occasionally dominant population making a highly
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contentious claim to a particular form of rural belonging\(^5\) in the midst of other pub-goers. In developing various relationships with members of this clique, and in becoming increasingly aware of their lives and lifestyles - of those boundaries, symbolic border guards (language, dress, drink etc.) and discursive practises that perpetuate this community (Hutchinson and Smith 1996) - I was effectively setting out on that participatory, observational journey that results in this thesis, making contacts that would later prove invaluable to the investigation.

Quite unlike a great many of those who undertake in-situ studies dealing with experiences and constructions of rurality and rural belonging, I did not feel as though I was a ‘stranger asking strange questions’. My autobiography had already ‘bled’ into the fieldwork setting prior to the formal data collection process and recorded dialogical interactions (see Neal and Walters 2006, 178). I was already known, and had already bonded with certain members of the New Squirearchy at the bar of the Six Tuns; pouring their drinks, serving them meals, and participating in wide-ranging discussions regarding life, love and the pursuit of happiness in those instances when their associates were either absent or delayed. As we are reminded, research of this nature does, to a large extent, ‘depend upon the goodwill of people to become participation’ (Ibid, 180), and in becoming a familiar face I had, as I would later come to realise, made an essential provision for the arranging of formal interviews:

“I have to be honest … if I didn’t know you from working in the pub, and through friends … If you had just turned up out of the blue and asked to interview me about living in the village … and especially about my life, business, and family and friends I would have told you to bugger off. Well,

\(^5\) Like Neal and Walters (2006, 178), I follow Probyn in adopting belonging over identity in this instance, as the former term more accurately catching ‘the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places or modes of being’ (1996, 19).
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not bugger off, but you know what I mean. I would imagine the same goes for a lot of the people you are interested in, and I know that is the case for some of the other chaps I go about with who have spoken to you … I suppose it’s because we are quite … we are a cliquey bunch. And, of course, most of us … well, all of us I suppose … are quite busy running businesses and haven’t got much time for what … well interviews about … whatever you seem to be doing.” (Mark Price).

With an undercurrent of suspicion and sensitive to the busy schedules of close acquaintances, a number of comments such as that of Mark Price - who assumed an invaluable role making introductions to numerous participants – quickly made it very apparent that, in researching the possible existence of a New Squirearchy in the vicinity of Eamesworth I was in a privileged position. Coupled with that intensely descriptive investigational process required of an authoritative account of any network, the possibility of initialising fieldwork within, and ‘out of’, a number of alternate rural communities was firmly rejected; although I would be tracing connections into numerous other local spaces (and villages).

3.5. Gathering and interpreting evidence

As detailed in Neal and Walters’ methodological narrative concerning research on belonging and identity in the English rural community, the academic is rarely – if ever – completely unfamiliar to the respondent; but they are seldom utterly recognisable either. In the field my presence as a white, British and ostensibly middle class male rendered me as (seemingly) immediately knowable on these grounds to the overwhelming majority of those I was pursuing, and through articulating similar personal relationships and understandings of the (surrounding) countryside I did much to situate myself within the research environment (2006, 181); although here there was a considerable deviation from
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the norm. Without exception, I have been present in the local milieu for a great deal longer than those I have taken an explicit interest in, and here the acknowledgement of sameness on these grounds has been played out in a rather unusual fashion, greatly effecting received narratives of, and from, New Squiredom.

In this particular research site my presence as an ‘insider’ was conspicuous, and where I was required to justify a scholarly interest in the lifestyle of a particular group of individuals, many of these individuals took it upon themselves to justify their presence in this space on being approached in the course of the study. Stressing their own local connections and mutual acquaintances, and in accentuating a deep-seated emotional investment in the locality, there was a strong ‘Goffman-esque’ sense of impression–management in these performances, one which expressed a dominant narrative regarding the potentially disruptive presence of middle class ex-urbanites in villages such as Eamesworth. In accord with Neal and Walters’ own observations, this impression management was not pre-organised or even explicit but, rather, it was conceivably a ‘product of the collective social exchange between those known to each other’ and the presence of an ‘other’ asking ‘questions about the(ir) countryside and senses of belonging’ (Ibid, 186).

This is not to deny the existence of tensions in the interactive, endangered gemeinschaft presentation, but rather note the extent to which this narrative of pastoral life was privileged by respondents both collectively and privately, and how it dominated that which they selected to tell me as a known professional other (Ibid). As with any collective, there were those within and without variously defining who and what the New Squirearchy are, what they had been, invoking precedents and measuring definitions up against others, making me increasingly attentive to Latour’s assertion that groups are not silent things; ‘rather the
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provisional product of a constant uproar made by contradictory voices about what
is a group and who pertains to what’ (2005, 31).

In tracing the boundaries of a New Squirearchy I was also struck by the manner in
their apparent ties were stressed in comparison with other, competing ties – but
this was not necessarily symmetrical. Many pub-going ‘locals’, for example,
clearly defined themselves in opposition to the ‘fake gentry’ and ‘wanabee lords-
of-the-manor’; as not being ‘avaricious’, ‘shallow’ or ‘new money’. Conversely,
designated members of the New Squirearchy did not habitually delineate their
circle as ex-urban, non-local and of middling-income. They did, however,
emphasise their accomplishments as self-made, hard-working risk-takers who -
unlike the ‘eternal student’ I was occasionally referred to as - have gone out in the
world and staked a claim, earning the right to partake in costly rural pursuits and
purchase those relevant trinkets others often sneer at.

Despite my ‘otherness’ in the sense of having stronger local credentials, and in
being an ‘other’, as I would find out, in existing outside those spaces characterised
by ‘business’, finance, entrepreneurialism, parental responsibility, public-school
education etc., and devoid of particular symbols associated with broader middle
class prosperity and rural aristocratic wealth, there was a surprising degree of
openness on the part of my respondents. Although a personal stake in the subject
matter was clearly acknowledged, in adopting the persona of objective, detached
observer I also occupied a more remote, dispassionate identity, receiving
confidences in a manner which occasionally had the character of an unprejudiced
confessional (Ritzer 2002, 405). Akin to Neal and Walters, I found myself
inhabiting one or the other position in quick succession (2006, 187); either as a
result of self-assignment, the designation of those I was in the company of, or
both. Like them, my own diverse relationships with the Eamesworth-rural
provided a number of ‘semi-marked footpaths into the research site’, assisting the
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negotiation of access, feeding into conversations, and influencing my ‘hearing of
those narratives at the time of the interviews’ (Ibid, 188). But this did not
necessarily render the acquisition of meaning any easier. Did I hear accounts of
problematic wealthy, largely ex-urban incomers ‘more’ because it is one that jars
with personal knowledges and experiences? This is perhaps so, and I too
experienced ‘anxiety and guardedness, as well as revelation and intimacy’ in the
quest for information.

3.6. The mechanics of data collection

Having undertaken an 8 week pilot study in the summer months of 2005, I
subsequently reflected upon the applicability, feasibility and requirements of
detailed study of a New Squirearchy in the vicinity of Eamesworth. Having
identified certain key community gatherings around which a New Squirearchy
could possibly mobilise, I returned to the village on no less than 6 separate
occasions during the following year, and undertook extended periods of
engagement in time with these events. Although I had permanent access to
accommodation in the area, the extent of these stays was no greater than 8 weeks
at any one time, enabling me to (re)establish some kind of objective distance,
consult with supervisors and colleagues, properly collate received data, and
develop interim conclusions with which to inform the future direction of the
study.

In all, I have conducted purposeful conversations with 71 adults, repeated in-
depth interviews with 10 more, and have drawn on data provided by in excess of
120 individuals in the course of the study. Reminiscent of Bell’s own experiences,
invitations to dinner parties, lunch, evenings in the pub, idle kitchen chat and the
like came in time, and these causal interactions provided a valuable context for
interpreting the content of those more formal exchanges. In practise, on initially
finding these exchanges to be more revealing, I found myself like Bell, abandoning
the use of an interview schedule where the obvious presence of papers in my
hands made the person ill-at ease (1994, 247). Many villagers, it seemed, were
more expectant of a social call by an interested villager than a rigorous
consultation, and for them it was deemed inappropriate to produce a schedule at
all. Following Bell’s example, I nevertheless ‘tried to ensure that the same ground
was covered … however various the social situation and the order of the topics,
while at the same time providing space for other conversational ground that the
residents thought significant’ (Ibid). On those occasions when the respondent
appeared comfortable with taping, I did so. For others I jotted down brief notes
and expanded upon them that evening.

In regard to those fleeting chats and observations, I never hid the fact that I was
undertaking research in the locale, and like Bell I found that people where
generally pleased to pass on their impressions as they do ‘virtually everyday
among themselves’, often saying things intended for the mental dictaphone ‘when
the mechanical one was off or at home’ (Ibid, 248). Sometimes I was instead able
to make use of the voice recording facility on my mobile phone, but in the main
those shorter quotations gathered in spaces such as that of the pub or fete have
been put together later that day from my memory of key phrases and passages.
Where longer spoken passages have been included in the text, the overwhelming
majority have been lifted directly from tape, although some have been replicated
from jottings taken down on the spur of the moment. Distinguished within the
thesis by alternative presentation, those quotes brought out of ‘informal’
conversations and either quickly jotted down or recorded at a later date are
attributed to the individual by the use of their (pseudonymous) first name alone,
while those that are sourced from scheduled interviews and discussions are
accredited to the author in full (i.e. both pseudonymous first name and surname).
3. As I rode out …

In total, the research notes amounted to some 300 pages (approximately 900,000 words) of transcribed recordings and amended writings, and several additional field diaries; all of which have been thematically coded and categorised. The analysis of data took place throughout the length of the project. Here the process of regularly reading through notes, transcripts and other such ‘site documents’ allowed for the identification of patterns, connections, similarities or contrastive points in the data, refining my ideas and clarifying the existence and operation of a New Squirearchy within and beyond Eamesworth. Looking for ‘local categories of meaning’ (see Hammersly and Atkinson 1995) and points of interest, pre-conceived categories of exploration (such as occupation, leisure pursuits and attire) were developed and augmented by emergent themes; resulting in a coding framework comprised of 25 principle themes and 226 sub-categories.

Triangulating these written records with other forms of data, including those largely anecdotal reports found in the introduction, ‘respondent validation’ (Ibid) was also undertaken where appropriate. Involving the explanation of interim conclusions to those informants perceived to be in a position to elaborate, confirm or complicate these assertions, it ‘played off’ of those various positions informants occupied in a purposely non-competitive fashion. Adding depth to the study in terms of their analysis, which often reflected their position within or beyond gentryfied networks; it is a course of action that is both instructive and potentially problematic. Involving formal and informal substantiation (‘fishing’ for corroboration), this - like ethnography more generally – necessitates a strong ethical basis; not only as regards to the collection of information and its use in the field, but also in relaying it to a wider audience.

In attempting to following those networks that may, or may not, constitute a New Squirearchy, participant engagement has been identified as the most appropriate form of investigation, enabling the researcher to gain a perspective on their
various practises and behaviours whilst also acknowledging the academics’ presence as impacting on the exact nature of these performances. Placing myself more fully into those spaces of the New Squirearchy, and recording their movements, similarities and divergences accordingly, it did not, however, feel so much a *bona fide* scientific appraisal as ‘that children’s game where you try to pat your head and rub tummy at the same time’ (Fox 2004, 3). At many times during the study, for example, I became conscious of – or rather paranoid about – the possibility of ‘field blindness’; that I was becoming so enmeshed in Eamesworth life that I could not even see my nose, let alone follow it. As a result, my discourse is peppered with personal conflicts between my role as ‘tribal member’ and quasi-anthropologist, and for this I give no apology nor see any viable alternative course of action.

3.7. The ethics of squire chasing

At this juncture in the thesis it is usual, or at least currently fashionable, to devote an extensive section to a tortured, self-flagellating disquisition on the ethical difficulties of participatory research. Although the whole point of being a participant is to gain a ‘native’ perspective, Fox notes that we are presently obliged to spend ‘a good three pages explaining that your unconscious ethnocentric prejudices, and various other cultural barriers ... which probably makes this impossible’ (2004, 4). Detailed self-analysis aside, it is then ‘customary to question the entire moral basis of the observation element, and, ideally, to express grave reservations about the validity of modern Western ‘science’ as a means of understanding anything at all’ (Ibid).

Having briefly touched on my background, it is evident that I should now consider those issues which serve to make research of this nature something of an ethical minefield. Indeed, the grave moral reservations attached to this kind of
fieldwork by many social scientists leads us to question whether or not it is appropriate under *any* circumstances – an issue Fox has a rather unique take on:

‘I wondered this myself, until I realised that these doleful recitations of the dangers and evils of participant observation are a form of protective mantra, a ritual chant similar to the rather charming practise of some Native American tribes who, before setting out on the hunt or chopping down a tree, would sing apologetic laments to appease the spirits of the animals they were about to kill or the tree they were about to fell. A less charitable interpretation would see anthropologists’ ritual self-abasements as a disingenuous attempt to deflect criticism by pre-emptive confession of their failings … relying on our belief that such awareness and candid acknowledgment of a fault is almost as virtuous as not having it.’ (Ibid).

Taking this line of argument further still, the ritualistic chapter agonising over the role of the participant academic is described as having a tendency to be mind-numbingly boring, and could often be suitably reduced to a declaration that, while recognising this mode of research as having its limitations, identifies the ‘uneasy combination of involvement and detachment’ as still being the best method we have for exploring social complexity (Ibid). This does not, however, excuse a concern with ethics where necessary, and whilst I accept that some individuals undertaking research of this nature might well produce a moral exposition that is more an effort to ‘cover their own backs’ than express any deep-rooted moral concerns they might have, a prolonged engagement with the New Squirearchy of Eamesworth certainly forced this author to consider what courses of action were, and were not, appropriate in the quest for information; information that was, on occasion, of a highly personal nature.
3. As I rode out …

As is the usual practise in ethnography, Eamesworth is a pseudonym, but it is a specific place, making it almost inevitable that its’ ‘true’ identity will, at some points in the text, shine through subject to effective description. This recognition is, of course, doubly likely for those familiar with my own history, and this constitutes a primary drawback of undertaking research in one’s own backyard; especially in terms of that over-riding consideration – the need to guard the confidentially of the residents who speak in these pages. Like Childerley, it is a small place, and simply changing the names of the individuals – as I have done – is simply not enough; so, in addition to using aliases throughout, I have faintly altered some physical aspects of the village, and, like Bell, ‘changed a few characteristics of individual villagers in cases where I thought it prudent to give them a little anonymity from each other’ (Ibid). Moreover, in instances where local debates are particularly heated, and where comments are potentially inflammatory or offensive, they have been omitted completely - no matter how appropriate they may be to the study. As Punch’s (1989) experience with the Amsterdam police following overt research on corruption shows us, informed consent does not necessarily prevent informants feeling angry once results are published (in Brewer 2000, 101).

To quote Alexis de Tocqueville, “I would rather let my comments suffer than add my name to the list of those travellers who repay generous hospitality with worries and embarrassments” (quoted in Bell 1994, 245). The academics’ role should never be that the proverbial ‘wooden spoon’, and this is especially the case when they are not ‘just passing through’, having more at stake than a revelatory thesis and the prospect of a good yarn. In this instance, there could be no clean-cut exit strategy; I cannot simply walk away. Just as I possessed strong physical and emotional ties with the community prior to the research, they would remain subsequent to its conclusion, and I have no wish to sully my own doorstep. There was always the sense that I could not ‘go back’ to the village as I once had, and
that I would lose a measure of innocence in becoming ‘that boy that did that study’, but I am not prepared to lose communal (and personal) respect through the causing of distress.

Throughout the study confidentiality has been assured, and I have no intention of betraying trust. But is this enough? Have I stuck to a stringent ethical code and persistently erred on the side of caution when chasing data? In the main, I believe I have, but I cannot, in all honesty, say that my methods have been consistent. Like Rapport, the explanation for my presence in Eamesworth gradually changed, and with it the aims of the research perhaps became cloudier for those I professed to be studying. In being a ‘native’, I did not start out from a position of anomaly; I was not an outsider. I was therefore able to go to the pub, the church, parish council meetings, village fetes etc. without putting people on their guard and being treated with undue suspicion, but I could not make myself believe that such covert observation would be entirely honest.

Thankfully, I was not forced to reveal myself as some manner of spy in a moment of truth, and my atypical movements in the village were quickly noted no sooner than a pilot study had begun. Here being asked why I was ‘not back at university’ by local friends and acquaintances provided the ideal opportunity for to tell these people about the exact nature of my research; which was consistently met with an enthusiastic response and a willingness to ‘go on the record’. What is more, as word spread, a number of Eamesworthians approached me directly in order to offer their own opinions and, like Bell, I began to feel that there was even a degree of competitiveness about playing a part in the narrative (1994, 247). I was, however, aware that such contributions were liable to distort any commonplace sentiments and understandings of a New Squirearchy, as they were often presented by those with a distinct ill-feeling towards this group as they saw it.
3. As I rode out …

Though generally more severe, those criticisms which surfaced in these meetings underscored a general air of contempt held by persons extraneous to this network.

Open to the possibility that members of a New Squirearchy were sensitive to the derisory manner in which such tags are being employed by others in the community, I was careful not to use this terminology when approaching those individuals who seemed to fit the bill, only raising it as a point of discussion after contact had been firmly established. Instead I found myself following the same tack as Rapport, dropping the persona of hard-nosed social critic that had, I thought, impressed the importance of my work on my past acquaintances, and adopted the much less threatening role of local historian when explaining my interests and activities in the village. Happy to discuss such issues as the declining importance of agricultural employment, the influx of a middle class and the associated rise in local housing costs, my exploratory conversations and interviews began on a safe note, where respondents could be secure in the knowledge that they were expressing commonly-held views on universally recognised problems.

Only when a rapport had been firmly established on these grounds did I raise the thorny, and by no means unrelated, prospect of a New Squirearchy. Reminiscent of Dumont (1978), who treated the subjects of his doctoral thesis with ‘a paradoxical blend of absolute good and bad faith’, I have told myself that I am ‘not in the business of doing them harm’ and that this is a justifiable basis of my presence (cited in Rapport 1993, 69). After all, ethical and intellectual compromises are intrinsic characteristics of the research process, and we may be assured that ‘the competent fieldworker is he or she who learns to live with an uneasy conscience but continues to be worried about it’ (Ibid, 74). But this still cannot wholly validate research; there must be accountability.
As I rode out …

Proprietors of successful businesses, entrepreneurs and financial hot-shots, members of Eamesworth’s New Squirearchy can hardly be conceived of as societies’ victims, and I took a great deal of reassurance from this fact. I was not delving into the psyche of the poor and beaten down, putting their appalling emotions on general display, and I find it hard to believe that these rural elite would care much about a negative portrayal in a thesis that is destined to lay unread, gathering dust on a bookshelf who-knows-where. As Hugh Campbell has found in his studies of masculinity in rural New Zealand (2000; 2006), I felt that the presence of a functioning academic was not of any great importance for many of these people, and that my influence in attendance and output has been of minimal consequence. But this is not the point, and some thought must be paid to appropriate written conduct – for the sake of both researcher and researched. Casting aside the naïve belief that the ethnographer can ever ‘tell it like it really is’, I have therefore sought to offer a vaguely collaborative text, as part of which respondents have been given the opportunity to qualify their opinions and question those judgements I have made. The main thrust of this exercise has been to offer a copy of interview transcripts ‘back’ in order that a red line may be passed through those passages which, in retrospect, they are not happy for me to include in any written work. In the majority of cases, however, respondents have wavered this opportunity and placed the editorial burden firmly on my shoulders.

Where more informal, observational data has been gathered in the course of conversations, passing comments and other such instances of interaction, this task is clearly much trickier and cannot be done lightly. Here, notes Bell, ‘the ethical boundary between friend6 and ethnographer is a very real one’; for ‘friends hear things and give their advice on things that ethnographers do not and should not’ (1994, 248). While every attempt has been made to (re)approach the individual(s) in question and obtain qualification, this is not always possible or appropriate –

6 As I hope I am to many villagers, and that they (continue to) regard me as such.
especially at those times where social boundaries are being called into question, and networks are subject to rapid change. At no time was this more evident than at the public house, where a concern with appropriate conduct in ethnographic studies is of even greater significance. Although word-of-mouth seemed effective insofar as it quickly became apparent that the majority of Six Tuns’ ‘regulars’ had a degree of understanding about my activities, this is by no means suggestive that simply being honest about the research is the right way to go about it. When considering the presence of alcohol, the issue of consent becomes – quite literally – blurred, causing many to question the value, validity and suitable inclusion of any data gathered in this realm. There does exist, however, an alternative perspective which is that pub behaviour is literally ‘public’ behaviour, and therefore not subject to exactly the same level of personal sanctioning as required when investigating private lives (see Strand and Weiss 2005).

In finding the public house as forming a vital element in the formation of the New Squirearchy, and identifying this New Squirearchy as being a foremost part of the Six Tuns at certain points in time, to judge that information gathered in this space as inadmissible would leave a gaping hole in the study, and render the story fundamentally incomplete. On the other hand, to include the rants, insults and ill-informed hearsay of those the worse for drink, or snippets of undoubtedly private conversations, is to produce a document that is insensitive, indecent and conceivably unwarranted. Seeking credibility, but not at the cost of infamy, a balance must be achieved; one where the researcher relies on personal discretion in omitting data that may prove misguided or unintentionally slanderous, but is inclusive of those apparently offensive, openly broadcast statements which are appropriate to the study.

It is, therefore, essential to fully consider the context in which contentious edicts are made when making evaluations, and where individuals have granted the
3. As I rode out ...

replication of certain comments and circumstances, this does not necessarily mean that the researcher’s reading of the situation will be in accord with their own. This is not to suggest that quotes are deliberately skewed to suit a particular line of argument, but the possibility remains. The a fitting response is to therefore give respondents an interim draft of any scripts in which they play a part so that rectification may take place, but this course of action is untenable when there are hundreds of roles. Consequently, I have instead placed a deal of faith in my ability to interpret data in a fashion that represents the phenomena of a New Squirearchy accurately, and with sufficient evidence to allow others to assess this representation accordingly (Brewer 2000, 142).
4. Out of the Alehouse

‘Champagne certainly gives one werry gentlemanly ideas, but for a continuance, I don’t know but I should prefer a mild hale.’

(Jorrock’s Jaunts and Jollities, R.S. Surtees).

An, if not the, institution at the heart of the community as an imagined space and practical milieu, the village inn represented the most suitable – and most vital – arena through which to gauge (the possible) existence of a New Squirearchy within Eamesworth and the surrounding countryside. The location where I was first alerted to the prospect of a ‘nouveau gentry’ akin to that featured in those newspaper clippings and magazine articles discussed, it seemed highly appropriate in light of the public house’s elevated status within the concept of the ‘rural idyll’, and equally so in regard to its historic role as both a facilitator of communal interaction and an expression of social hierarchy. With initial reference to the work of Hugh Campbell, the nature of pubs and pub culture will be discussed prior to the introduction of Eamesworth’s ‘Six Tuns’ as fractured drinking space characterized by, and becoming of, the varied regions and practises of Squires, locals, villagers and New Squires, among others. Taking this further, and considering the explicit role of alcohol within this schema, the symbolic and material subtexts featuring as part of this scenario will be considered in relation to scripts of masculinity and the middle class as discussed by Hunt and Satterlee in particular.

4.1. The pub, the squirearchy and the rural idyll

Rarely, argues Campbell, has any setting been mythologized to the same extent as that of the country pub. From the ‘last-chance saloon’ of the American wild-west, to the ‘crocodile wrestling mateship of a corrugated iron shed’ in the Australian outback, to the tranquil English tavern, ‘rural drinking sites have been ascribed by
both the popular imagination and academic analysis with pronounced mythic properties’ (2000, 562). Such visions, he suggests, place the country pub squarely within the nostalgic fiction of a provincial bygone age commonly referred to as the “rural idyll”: As part of a ‘retreat from the brutalities of urban living, where people live closer to nature in simpler and (by implication) happier lives’ (Ibid). Influencing, and informed by, those lay, media and academic discourses which seek to define that which is ‘rural’ and that which is not (Jones 1995), films, television programmes and advertisements have tended to endorse this idyllic tradition, portraying the village pub as an arena which reflects the ‘idea of being “closer to nature” and, by that fact, a more “natural” social world’ (Campbell 2000, 563).

Too many, the pub is seen as one of the few remaining institutions within village life which can operate as a unifying social centre. A place where people of diverse backgrounds can freely enter and socialise at will. But, as Hunt and Satterlee demonstrate, the country tavern, in addition to operating in a cohesive manner, is also used to establish and consolidate separate group identities and maintain social boundaries (1986, 522). More than simple articulations of the local-newcomer divide we have (apparently) come to expect, exclusivity within the drinking establishments of their case-study community was acknowledged as the ‘result of both the social position of their members and the culture generated by the groups themselves’ (Ibid, 534). Realised and sustained through an elaborate set of practises and understandings, distinct presences were derived, to a greater or lesser extent, from a wider network of overlapping ties existing beyond the bar. Conceived of as ‘structural features’, the sharing of kin, neighbourhood, and occupational status is identified as a basis for (non) assembly within the confines of the public house. Instead of helping to dissolve any social barriers that might
exist, rural drinking establishments may, in fact, have a tendency to consolidate them.

With attendance delineated according to lifestyle and a shared ‘sense of social class culture’, the village inn as identified by Hunt and Satterlee is quite different from that egalitarian vision held within the popular imagination and described by many earlier academics (e.g. Waddell 1975; Douglas and Isherwood 1980). But this does not, however, necessarily situate their findings as contrary to historically dominant discourses of rural belonging. Presenting the village as indelibly linked to the annual cycle of birth, life and death within their immediate environment, and, as a consequence, a more profound expression of some kind of ‘natural order of things’, representations of this space have traditionally been inclined to reiterate that ideology which placed a god-given aristocracy at the head of a highly stratified country community, and all that this encompasses (Everett 1994). Central to this construction as a place of association, recuperation, and celebration, the local pub is no exception.

4.2. The Six Tuns

‘The active social life of the villagers still centres on its ancient home, the inn. The old-time social distinctions have not yet vanished, and the humblest village tavern may have its “private” and “public” bars, in theory catering for “gentry” and “commoners”. There may, however, be little difference between the two – indeed folk of all classes often prefer the public bar because the company is more interesting.’ (Evans c.a. 1954, pp.188-189).
4. Out of the Alehouse

With a variety of real ales ‘off the wood’ alongside well-stocked wine fridges, personalised tankards flanking a chromed Italian coffee machine, and a battered cribbage board sat astride a touch-screen electronic till, the Six Tuns of Eamesworth blends the old ways with the modern in much the same fashion as Evans’ vernacular description, written some fifty years ago. Of the four alehouses that have existed in the village at one time or another, only the Six Tuns remains in business, existing as the de-facto gathering place for Eamesworth’s various clubs, societies and friendship groups. It hosts the annual fireworks display, children’s carol singing service and charity fundraiser, and is the venue for a weekly dominoes match, portraying the ‘traditional’ image of reliance on local clientele and the selling of beer and spirits; despite being closer in character to that which Maye et al. refer to as a ‘reconstructed’ rural pub (2005, 838).

Trading on the folkloric status afforded to a 17th century with whitewashed walls, exposed beams and a polished, rug-strewn floor, the Six Tuns is now equally dependent on the custom of ‘outsiders’, appealing to a sense of ‘authenticity through diversity and differentiation’ via the sale of regional beers, ciders and locally-sourced, high quality foodstuffs (Ibid). A successful enterprise, Friday and Saturday nights see the lounge bristling with a regular crop of drinkers and diners from both sides of the parish boundary, but there also exists a more secluded area of the tavern known as the ‘Office’ where visitors seldom dwell. Here stand the local farmers and the ‘old faces’ of the village, supping their ale alongside another collective, one that is seemingly aware of those historic roles, rules and meanings associated with those apparently exclusive zones of rural pubs. At least, this was the impression I took from a number of customers during my stint behind the bar; customers like Craig Burrett, a forty-something company director who frequented the ‘Tuns’ on a daily basis:
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“They’re in tonight [mentioning towards a group of men in the Office]. I don’t know why I come in here on Wednesdays … I should know that they are always going to be in. They all sit round a table; one dips his hat and the rest all giggle! ‘What, what’! [putting on a high pitched, upper crust accent]. It’s like a role playing game to them, the pretentious bastards. They’ve been watching Jeeves and Wooster and don’t see the piss take.”

(Craig Burrett).

Eamesworth, as a number of elderly residents led me to believe, had not played host to the gentry within living memory, and this tallied with those more formal accounts of the local area as being historically ‘open’. When considering the possibility of ‘gentryfication’, therefore, it was duly expected that the New Squirearchy would exist within the community as a form of re-invention as opposed to interactive emulation. The following conversation I had in the Six Tuns one evening with Michael Marriot, a stock-broker, farmhouse owner and resident of 11 years, therefore came as something of a surprise:

“Eamesworth was supposed to be ruled by the ABC’s, at least that is what I’ve been told. That’s the Aldertons, the Beesleys and the Coughlins. I know Bill [Beesley] … I went to Royal Ascot with him and a couple of the boys last year and very often have a few pints in the Office with him on a Friday night. And of course, I have been introduced to Jack Coughlin … well; he introduced himself to me as a matter of fact. He came over to me when I was in here not long after I bought the farm … but I don’t know the Aldertons … don’t even know where their farm is or was.” (Michael).

Jarring with my own understanding of the ABC’s as working farmers, and the village as lacking a strong feudal legacy, I pushed Michael on this subject:
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“Well, Bill and Jack are like the old squires aren’t they. They’re a bit special. They own a lot of land, figure in local council meetings and whatnot and their families have got big gravestones in the church. Plus, they drink in here ... in the Office ... and everybody seems to know who they are.” (Michael).

Amongst the individuals described by Craig as “pretentious bastards”, many held similar sentiments with regard to those farmers who stood beside them in the Office on Wednesday and Friday evenings. I put this to Jack Coughlin one afternoon while sharing a cup of tea in the kitchen of his extensive Georgian farmhouse:

“Michael’s a bit special [laughing]. I’m not a bloody squire, just a poor old farmer ... neither is Bill, though he acts a bit that way at times. I don’t understand why some think like that. Perhaps it’s just because I am the closest thing to it, and they do have these ideas about old village life don’t they? To be truthful, it’s the likes of Michael that act as though they were the landed gentry. Flashing their fifty-quid notes at the bar, always filling up the Office, going off to these here horse races in tweed suits, shooting at clay pigeons ... dressing up like penguins to go and lord it about at charity dinners.” (Jack Coughlin).

4.3. Office politics

As an environment historically associated (whether rightly of wrongly) with ‘squiredom’, the Six Tuns had allowed for gentrification, composed of props around which a sense of belonging could be sustained. Sharing a counter with Jack Coughlin and Bill Beesley, and adopting their terminology as apparent bona
4. Out of the Alehouse

*fide* country gentlemen, Michael and a dozen or so of his associates revel in that knowledge and sense of shared experience that is drinking in the ‘private’ bar as a proclamation of ‘countryism’, and drinking in this ‘Office’ as an assertion of their ‘localism’ (Bell 1994); but this has not served to assimilate an older authority with a newer equivalent. Although on amicable terms with their peers, Michael *et al* have not inherited a space at the bar, and have no personal stake in the myths and legends that have built up around the pub in time. Nor do they seem overly interested. If the Tuns represents an essential part of their ‘village in the mind’ (Pahl 1970, 30), and one populated with ‘friendly, smiling merrie rustics’ (Hunt and Satterlee 1986, 523), they are none too keen to be regaled with tales of traditional village life. Universally unacquainted with the origins of the ‘Office’, it amuses Jack that these people have picked up on this turn of phrase without any real understanding of where it came from. He, on the other hand, remembers a time when the ABC’s, his father among them, gathered here and agreed bidding prices on various beasts prior to auction; an activity that was never strictly above board but business all the same. It was a *real* office then, unlike now, with what Jack refers to as “pretenders” arriving on the scene to discuss shooting, dining and “the cost of their daughter’s horse”.

To lack an ancestral connection with the Tuns is not to deny the possibility of becoming ‘a local’ (although it certainly helps), and regular attendance at the pub usually guarantees acceptance for those who are both ‘genuine’ and aware of their status as ‘foreigners’. This came to light when I spoke to Robert Forrester, a retired factory foreman and Eamesworth resident of 15 years:

“Well, I have been drinking in this pub ever since I moved into the village. It wasn’t like it is now, I mean the restaurant was more important back then – than the bar that is - and very few of us came into drink on a regular
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basis. Maybe half a dozen of us, that’s all. Anyway, you knew that Jack ... and Bill Faucet and that lot were proper locals. You knew they’ve always been around. I’m not saying I didn’t ... don’t get on with them. I do. I mean, I am what I am – I am not a flash bastard ... all talk, like you-know-who. And I daresay they appreciate that. But I can’t be a real local, if you see what I mean. I haven’t lived here all my life. They will say I am, and I daresay most people who come in here assume I am, but I am ... a regular who lives locally ... but not a local.” (Robert Forrester).

Knowing ‘your place’ within the pub, or rather the feeling that others most certainly did not, became a central theme in my conversions with various members of the Six Tuns’ community; as it was in those discussions that regularly took place at the bar. Here the ‘you-know-who’, ‘faux riche’, ‘nouveau riche’, ‘green welly brigade’, ‘plastic farmers’, ‘Hooray Henrys’, ‘fake gentry’, ‘wanabee gentry’, ‘wanabee-lords-of-the-manor’ and - on hearing the title of the research project - ‘New Squirearchy’, were regularly singled out as disingenuous and ridiculed by the likes of Alastair Gilling and his wife, Samantha. A skilled welder and engineer, his job took the couple all over the British Isles before they finally and settled down and started their own business on the outskirts of Eamesworth. Always keen to discuss their travels and experiences, Alastair was adamant that “them that want to be lord of the manor” could be found at the bar of every country pub in the land:

“It doesn’t matter where you are; there are people like them in every pub in every village in the country. I remember when we used to live in Norfolk, and we used to drink in a pub near Holkham Hall and the Earl used to drink in there too. All the locals knew who he was ... we didn’t make anything of it ... nor does he. Anyhow, we had this ex-London business-
type who started to come in, and as soon as he found out who the Earl was he wouldn’t leave him alone. Talked about his properties and tried to get all chummy. Anyhow, one night he asked the Earl about his shares and what did he think about the market … Anyway, the Earl - who clearly didn’t want to be talking about this crap in the pub - said “I don’t know anything about these sort of things, I have a man who takes care of it all for me”. That put the bastard in his place, I can tell you!” (Alastair).

“We have an aristocracy but you can’t buy into that just by having a flash mansion or what-have-you. Some of the business types that come in here [gestured toward the Office], to villages like this and lord it about in the pub, think they are something they are not … Newcomers and bloody pretenders. They are flash bastards. Fake.” (Alastair).

With a strength of opinion common among many regular pub-dwellers, there was much to suggest the New Squirearchy were present as part of this space. On further consideration, however, there seemed little to characterise this body of drinkers as employing practises dissimilar to those elsewhere attributed to an overwhelmingly masculine, but also middle class, presence in rural pubs.

4.4.  Pass the port; the role of alcohol

Just as alcohol in itself can be fundamentally important in producing and maintaining cohesion within part of a community (Waddell 1975), it may also be used in a manner that begets discrimination and division. It is, moreover, not only the act of drinking which can produce a sense of separateness but also the styles, rituals and meanings which are associated with the consumption of alcohol. These tendencies, argue Hunt and Satterlee, become more intense when drinking
occurs within a bounded space or place – what they refer to as a ‘drinking arena’ (1986, 524). Following Harris and Lipman, these boundaries are attributed with symbolic and material subtexts, and conceived of as serving dual purposes. As barriers, they operate to ‘constrain access and contacts between those who occupy the spaces’; as borders they represent the ‘notional edges of adjoining spaces and signify the presence of rules that also constrain access and contacts’ (1980, 419). Using this distinction between borders and barriers, Hunt and Satterlee set apart the drinking space, which can be created instantaneously and practically anywhere, from the drinking place, which possesses a ‘more elaborate material structure’ and physically separates the consumption of alcohol from outside activities (1986, 524).

With regulations concerning, for example, the appropriate time to consume alcohol and, more importantly, which individuals constitute acceptable participants, the public house is the archetypal drinking place – one that ‘may enhance even further the twin aspects of cohesion and division’ (ibid). Segregation, however, often extends beyond the pub door. While Hunt and Satterlee identified different establishments as catering for alternate, largely cohesive groups of pub-goers, the Six Tuns is itself characterised by various drinking places within; places that come into being at various times, and that are characterised by the presence of differing, but by no means stable or mutually exclusive, associations: Most notably those of ‘real locals’, ‘regulars’, ‘farmers’ and that wealthy band of ‘incomers’ who inhabit the Office on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings, and for a few hours on a Sunday afternoon. Beyond their penchant for ‘rustic fashions’, however, and a preference for drinking in that area commonly associated with the gentry, there little else apparent by which to differentiate the New Squirearchy as something ‘more’ than a well-defined, male-orientated, middle class presence.
4. Out of the Alehouse

4.5. Masculinity

Emphasising protection and provision, and the division of labour according to a ‘natural order of things’, the discourse of the country gentleman is highly masculine, but we should be wary when considering pub drinking practices as a persistent, nostalgic memorial to a patriarchal rural past. As Campbell reminds us, these acts may continue to legitimise male dominance within rural community life, imagined or not; and that rural pubs can actually operate as a key site where hegemonic forms of masculinity are constructed, reproduced, and secured;

‘Consequently, by seeking to move beyond the rural idyll, or functionalist analysis, we must re-establish the relevance of the rural pub to the wider concerns of rural sociology. We must examine the various ways in which pubs operate as a social site, where male power is constructed in rural communities, and also the way in which symbolic notions of rurality are integral to the construction of gendered power in rural space.’ (2000, 563).

Challenging the notion of manliness as a static structure or set of ideas, Campbell identifies gender as constituted performatively; that is, discursive constructions of gender are continually enacted in a fashion that ‘conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition’ (Butler 1993, 13). Recognising public performance as only one aspect of performative gender, Campbell employs the term ‘pub(lie) masculinity’ to recognise ‘not only the specificities of this performance as it relates to pub drinking, but also the way in which such practice is intrinsically display orientated and under constant public observation’ (2000, 565). With overtly theatrical elements, they form a basis through which legitimacy and hierarchy are evaluated.
4. Out of the Alehouse

Literally a world apart from the two small town New Zealand pubs in which Campbell undertook his ethnographic fieldwork, one would assume that there is much to separate the English village pub from its antipodean counterpart - especially in regard to an upwardly mobile echelon of the middle class. In several respects, however, the New Squirearchy bore closer resemblance to the subjects of Campbell’s study than those locals and regulars who frequented the Six Tuns. This was particularly evident in their attitudes concerning the role of women as part (or rather non-part) of this environment. On a Wednesday and Saturday evening, wives and girlfriends attended the pub with the understanding that they share a bottle of wine or two in the main bar, and with the mind not to impose themselves on the Office for much longer than the time it takes for a brief “hello and how are you” with the menfolk. During the after-work drinking session on Friday night, and at the post-shoot Sunday get-together, however, it was tacitly understood that a women’s presence is not permitted. For them, to arrive on the scene on these occasions was to risk exclusion, and, on occasion, be subjected to what Thomas (1978) has referred to as ‘freezing techniques’, which include being given a drink and largely ignored, made party to embarrassing sexist comments, and receiving conspicuous, questioning glances from those assembled at the bar. This was made clear by Tanya Parkinson, the wife of a New Squire and regular Office-dweller, on three separate occasions:

“When the wives go to the pub on Wednesday and Saturday nights, we tend to have a drink and a natter on a table away from the blokes. They tend to stand at the bar going on about their work and their new cars and all that crap. But we don’t go in on a Friday evening or Sunday lunchtimes … I mean I occasionally go and pick [husband] up on Wednesday, but I don’t like going in …” (Tanya Parkinson).
4. Out of the Alehouse

“[On a Wednesday evening] I drop [husband] off and pick him up, and occasionally go in for one … if I’m in the right frame of mind … and talk to some of them … because it’s so false. I won’t name people, but there are three in there that talk to me because I am [husband]’s wife… it really bugs me. And saying that, I will now only talk to them thinking ‘I don’t like you much either’ …” (Tanya Parkinson).

“On Wednesday and Friday nights, you can go in there and they … well, look at you as if to say ‘what are you doing here’, you know? They are like a bunch of teenage boys … well some of them. Its like they are coming out with these crude remarks and jokes and whatever because they know it upsets me … well, most women I should imagine…” (Tanya Parkinson).

For the male contingent of the New Squirearchy – and within the Six Tuns it was overwhelmingly male – Wednesday and Friday nights are a time for, as Mark Price put it, “a time for having a pint and a laugh out of earshot”, but also for discussing and extending their business and financial interests:

“Business happens to lend itself [to the pub] … as a product of being in there. There are people like Stephen Irving. He was saying to me the other day how he used the pub and the social side of things as a great vehicle for his business. I don’t actually think we go about it cynically, but looking back on various contracts he has got over the years, a lot have come entirely through the rugby club or through the pub. I suppose this ties into what you’re doing. Once you get a cross section of people in the pub there’ll be a lot with similar backgrounds. People who’ll be in the pub and be quite happy to talk about business.” (Mark Price).
4. Out of the Alehouse

“... So, using Stephen as an example, there’s a chap he now knows who, just by chance happened to drink in the pub who happens to be the managing director of a local publishing company. And, you know, publishing companies and computers go hand in hand. So, 50 computer systems turn up at the publishing house along with a few freebies. I mean, I’ll meet people in the pub and we’ll talk about business and the next day I’ll get a phone call. If nothing else, if you are talking to friends in business, it helps when you bounce ideas off of each other. People who aren’t directly involved in your business, will say ‘what about doing this’, or ‘what about doing that’. So it’s a good thing. A brainstorming session or whatever you say now.” (Mark Price).

A common thread, the majority of the group head their own company or, at the very least, occupy a senior position in the financial sector; with several members having initially crossed paths in ‘the City’ during the mid-1980s boom. For the most part ladies of leisure, the ‘women’ or ‘girls’ are not considered as part of this world; an oddly romanticised world in which highly stressful, snap-shot judgments sit hand in hand with conspicuous materialism and the (often excessive) consumption of alcohol (see McDowell 1994). An important part of the decision-making process, and because wives and partners are generally excluded from these activities, the need for women to drink is, apparently, greatly reduced. Hardly unique, such a mindset is identified by Ardener (1981) as defining the act of drinking, and in turn the public house, as a symbol of male ascendancy and that, while producing solidarity amongst the male contingent of the New Squirearchy (if, indeed there was to be any other part of the delegation), it reinforced gendered division.
4. Out of the Alehouse

4.6. *New Squires; or archetypal middle class pub dwellers?*

Identifying class as a distinguishing characteristic of pub-going groups within their case-study community, Hunt and Satterlee take their interest beyond differences of occupation and income. More importantly, their observations place a greater emphasis on the ways in which members of two distinct groups translate their class positions into differing practises and behaviours. Citing ‘different cultural spheres’ as a basis for alternate drinking practises and associative meanings their research highlights contrasting patterns of round-buying as a tendency of middle class and working class pub-goers; patterns that also constitute a fundamental difference between the New Squirearchy and other Six Tuns regulars – although the term ‘working class’ was found to be generally inappropriate when considering the later.

As with any assemblage, prolonged observation brought to light a number practises or ‘unwritten codes’ which members of the New Squirearchy uniformly adhered to, and to become a New Squire as part of the Six Tuns clearly depended upon a degree of contextual awareness incorporating the know-how to play the game. Some acts appeared obvious and non-reflexive, while others were evidently more reflexive and oblique in nature. In first instance, ‘getting one in’ was universally acknowledged and held as sacrosanct. With an implicit sense of trust operating at all times, it was broadly understood that every member of the group was expected to purchase a round in turn, and, on those occasions when women were present, their ‘go’ was the responsibility of spouse or boyfriend. In contrast to Hunt and Satterlee’s own findings, however, reciprocity could not occur on a subsequent session, and the generosity of others could not be returned at a later date without risk of recrimination. Instead, on those occasions when a member of the group departed prior to the end of the gathering, it was common practise to
either buy a round out of turn, or else leave a corresponding sum of money on the counter. To exit a session early was, therefore, to surrender any ‘stored credit’ in the form of drinks owed, and, in effect, burden a relative cost of absence.

Through involving themselves in a constant, reciprocal relationship, the New Squires invested time, energy and money in the group; in return they expected equivalent reparation and confirmation of clan membership. Like Hunt and Satterlee’s middle class pub-goers, it ‘was not only necessary for the members to possess an appropriately high income to share in the life-style of the group’; but also ‘necessary for them to be prepared to dispose of part of this income through round buying to maintain their membership – that of the sociable person’ (1986, 530). On occasion, when the New Squirearchy were out in force, the cost of a round often exceeded forty pounds, and on being asked for payment, those whose ‘go’ it was were sporadically known to baulk at the cost and quiz the bar-staff as to the cost and destination of each drink. Such questioning, however, was usually assumed away from the main body of the group, as it was generally deemed improper to quibble over the odd pound or two on a bar or restaurant bill. To haggle openly was to be labelled as ‘tight’, often leading to clandestine conversations regarding the guilty party’s character and financial well being. Likewise, if an individual broke the rules by either not endeavouring to buy a round, or consistently (and therefore deliberately) ‘stepping up’ when only a small number were present, then said person ‘stood to jeopardise not only his group position, but also his relationship with other individual members in the group’ (Ibid, 531).

Within the ranks of the New Squirearchy, failing to adhere to the rules of reciprocity within the Six Tuns could lead to exclusion from communal buying, and even from the social life of the group as a whole. This became clear one
4. Out of the Alehouse

Sunday when an occasional member of the group was openly accused of being a ‘ponce’, and suffered an afternoon of ridicule as a result. This, of course, led to acute embarrassment on his part, and it was many weeks before he once again stepped over the threshold of the Six Tuns. Passing comment on his temporary absence from the Office, I was later given an account of his indiscretion by one of those who had levelled the accusation in the first instance:

“Well, its not that we don’t like the bloke. He’s alright as it goes. Pleasant enough. But I … well we … you start to notice when someone isn’t putting up as far as getting a beer in. But Richard was constantly not getting a round in. He would come in, usually when most of us were already there … get himself a drink at the other end of the bar and then come and stand with us. He would then be bought drinks all night and … well he would seem to just disappear about the time it was his turn to get his wallet out. It seemed more than coincidence, and week in and week out … you get to the point when you have to say something. It’s not about the money, just … decency I suppose.” (Christopher Passant).

In much the same fashion as that relative newcomer who, in the course of Hunt and Satterlee’s study, was excluded from the middle class groups’ round buying as a consequence of not ‘pulling his weight’, Richard – the owner of a decorating firm - endeavoured to change their behaviour, and on returning to the Office began to ‘put up’ in a rather flamboyant fashion. As a result he was quickly forgiven and reinstated into the round buying practise, although he was now earmarked for sporadic jibes about free-loading and scrounging. Others, however, could not re-ingratiate themselves so easily, and having parted ways with the group on similar grounds, were unable to return to the fold as before.
A ritual which continually served to affirm status within the group, round buying also performed a vital function as an indicator of disposal income. Universally well-paid, New Squires were characterised by their considerable spending power, enabling them to pursue a more exclusive lifestyle within and beyond the rural. As long as an individual possessed a high degree of monetary flexibility, shared similar aspirations, and were willing to participate fully in proceedings, then they seemed to have a good chance of attaining full group membership; but this had to be maintained. More than desire and a willingness to behave in a certain fashion, New Squiredom was firmly grounded in economic success, a situation that became painfully obvious during the course of the study. Financial stability when owning and operating a small to medium scale company is often a precarious thing at best, and, as such, I was made aware of a number of individuals who, as a result of a downturn in their respective businesses, were ‘feeling the pinch’. A sensitive issue, it was not something to be discussed openly, nor actively pursued. Nevertheless, it apparently accounted for the disappearance of a number of New Squires from the Six Tuns on a permanent and semi-permanent basis, and the plight of one particular individual was conveyed by Tanya:

“...It’s not that I particularly like Andrew, I don’t. But I do feel sorry for him ... It’s because he’s come literally from nothing, hasn’t he, apparently. And he’s worked his way up which is very admirable ... and he likes everyone with money ... His business is going down the pan, and it must be hard. But he isn’t going out with the boys and drinking and all that. Mark Price says he can’t afford it, probably. He won’t be going on the bloke’s holidays either. Mark reckons it could be because he is embarrassed about the business going wrong. I mean, he hasn’t said anything about it, but everyone knows. And he knows everyone knows. He used to come down the pub and play the big man ... going on about what he was doing with
4. Out of the Alehouse

his business and what he had bought … but its all gone wrong and he wont come out …” (Tanya Parkinson).

A self-imposed exile, the downturn in Andrew’s commercial interests as the proprietor of a courier firm had evidently bought about his absence from the group. Perhaps unable to pay his way, or perhaps because his perceived corporate failings had, in his mind, rendered him less able to shoulder the expenses of New Squiredom in the eyes of his piers, Andrew had, by all accounts, lost face:

“His business is going through hard times, and naturally, he hasn’t come out for a drink as usual. I suppose it could be the case that he is a bit … well, possibly embarrassed about it. He never said his company had fallen on hard times, and we often talk about business. It might well be the case that he doesn’t have the cash as such at the moment. Its not that you necessarily haven’t got the money … but if your business is having problems you don’t go out flashing the cash, going on expensive holidays … buying new cars. I wouldn’t, and I expect that he is the same. He is not necessarily a good friend of mine. He has always seemed to have a thing about money and how much he has made and all that. A few of the blokes have … but he … well …” (Mark Price).

This view was shared by Marcus Wynne, a farmer and sometime machinery dealer who, in being a neighbour of Mark, occasionally shared a drink and chat at the bar. A dyed-in-wool local in the sense of local lineage and nightly drinking, Marcus was quick to point out the fair-weather friendship he saw as endemic in Mark’s circle:
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“It’s like all of them. They will never tell you what they are really thinking about any of their so-called friends. It’s all about flashing the cash … They won’t say … admit, even, that things aren’t going so well until their business goes tits up and they disappear from the crowd. It is like they never existed. Look at Andrew, you don’t see him amongst them anymore do you?”

4.7. (New) money and squirely props

For the majority of those who frequented the Six Tuns on a regular basis, round buying as a group affirming ritual was outwardly unnecessary, and generally confined to smaller clusters of close friends on an intermittent basis. Amongst these regulars, there was a general feeling that this trait as practised on by the New Squires was an indication of broader pretension, profligacy and perhaps even insecurity. This was put to me by Robert Forrester and Craig Burrett having witnessed one such Office dweller very publicly purchase a consignment of drinks with a fifty pound note:

“Do you know what that silly prat Andrew came out with? [Aping subject] ‘You know that ‘effin Chancellor hit the interest rate for another half percent’, and all that lot all nodded in agreement. The whole pub looked at him in total bemusement. Didn’t know what to make of him. He may own [company], but to hear that prat harping on like that you would think he owns Coca Cola. It certainly doesn’t impress me, and certainly not the people with real money.” (Craig).

“Yes … There are those that have a bit of money, and those who are trying to keep up. They gamble at each others houses, shoot, go on expensive
holidays, and some of them can’t afford it. Some of them haven’t got a pot to piss in. Like Andrew, I haven’t seen him in the pub for a while … It’s funny, he had a nice house in Lintsworth [nearby village], but had to move into a farmhouse in Eamesworth for appearances. I’d sooner have kept the old house and had a bit of cash in my back pocket, instead of getting up to the hilt in order to have however many bedrooms and flash car.”

(Robert Forrester).

Hearsay and idle chit-chat aside, just how Craig and Robert could be quite so sure of Andrew’s ailing finances would remain a mystery. Tinged, perhaps, with the slightest trace of envy, their apparent animosity toward ‘that lot’ on the grounds of brash, insensitive behaviour was shared a long standing bar attendant, whose own thoughts on this subject were, in fact, largely accepted by several members of the offending party.

“They choose their path in life and make their money, but they don’t respect anyone doing menial stuff. Be we … the staff and that … work every bit as hard as them. They don’t ask us to pour them a drink, they summon us like we’re the servants. The peasantry. They seem to have the idea that we are beneath them … They are all in competition. Who has the biggest wad of cash in their pocket, the best car, the biggest house, the largest business. They like to show of their money.” (Bar attendant).

“Well, yes. What you normally find, because I do know them quite well, some as clients, is that they don’t actually mean anything by it. But I understand how their attitude can come across as arrogant, condescending and um, rude at the very least.” (Luke Murcott).
“Yes. But I think a lot of the guys are aware of that, and what’s more to the point is … for the purposes of the tape … they don’t give a flying fuck what someone else thinks about it … And they talk loudly and knowingly of property and what-have-you in the pub … And there is that feeling that it is just a little brash sometimes …Some of it is self centred arrogance really. I suppose saying this sort of thing has wandered off the topic, but I think there are a lot of people who do strive for all of these … we could almost call them these boxes which prove that you’re a successful person and you’re better than someone else, rather than purely for their own benefit and nothing else … I mean, when it comes to those trappings of country life, and whether they might be sought as status symbols, at least one of our member, if you like, does everything for effect. Everything he does, it seems, is for effect.” (Christopher Passant).

Such criticism as that levelled by Christopher was not uncommon in that it extended beyond a concern with money in the literal sense, and more often dwelt on “little boxes” or assets; particularly those assets conceived of as indicative of ‘rural’ wealth. Something of a hobby, regulars like Craig and Robert would often wile away the hours debating the truthfulness of rumours as to what members of the New Squirearchy had been buying, selling and spending, eventually settling upon a finite version of events seldom corroborated by the subjects of their interest. One thing they could be sure about, however, were those trappings on display within the pub and – even more importantly – the car park.

If there was little to differentiate their pub-based behaviour as something more than male and ‘middle class’, those ‘technologies’ which played as part of their act most certainly set apart the New Squirearchy. As with any performance, this state of being incorporated certain material and non-material ‘props’, including
4. Out of the Alehouse

phrases, clothing, trinkets and appliances, all of which portrayed certain - although not necessarily uniform – sentiments for those within the group, and those outside of the group. Linguistically, the conversation is peppered with both business-orientated slang and rural referents, including that of a “dodgy octopus” (as in owing ‘sick squid’), “tapping up” (informal business practises), “tupping up” (getting ‘one over’ on someone; metaphor relating to an animal being inseminated), “cup-shot” (inebriated) and even “townies” (urban dwellers). Aesthetically, the uniform on a weekend consisted of branded jeans, checked shirts and either brogues or ankle-high dealer boots, and, when raining, wax jackets were sure to put in an appearance. If the weather was particularly inhospitable, some of their number would also intermittently don ‘hunter’ wellingtons, replete with side fasteners and a feathered insole, although this was seen as a step too far by many of their colleagues, who could not resist a sly poke about their attire.

If wearing of three-quarter length trousers in the Six Tuns resulted in the odd snigger, especially amongst other regulars, it was not something that characterised the New Squirearchy as a whole and could not really be employed as such. Instead, it was the ownership of ‘Chelsea Tractors’ that took on a heady symbolism for those keen to denigrate the green welly brigade. Something that could not be missed by those sat at any of the front windows, a fleet of luxury four-wheel-drives – more specifically Range Rovers – rolling up the short driveway would herald the arrival of the New Squirearchy at the Six Tuns. Coming to rest side-by-side adjacent to the front porch, rather than on the extensive car park to the rear of the building, it was a spectacle that could not be missed by anyone passing through the main entrance. Never more than a year old or without a recent coat of polish, they were all decked out with personalised number plates and furnished with every possible accessory.
4. Out of the Alehouse

An object of considerable pride among their incumbents, the pleasures and woes of Range Rover ownership was a reoccurring topic in the Office when gazing out on a fleet of vehicles that often went into double figures. Even the choice of colour was uniform; being that of blue or silver, and nothing less than the flagship ‘Vogue’ model was ever on display. For other regulars, therefore, Range Rovers came to represent the New Squirearchy as shorthand, as a focus for derision, and as the crass mark of otherness. This was something Thomas Baster, an operations director and Eamesworth resident of 15 years standing, had strong feelings about.

“As a local, I’d say that there is a certain group where you need a Range Rover and a big country house or you are not in the gang. As far as they behave, I think they probably feel that they are part of, um, a different set because of it. Because they have enough money. What I am trying to say is that they are trying to make themselves kingpins, appear classy … but you can still be an oik in a Range Rover, or a Jag, or mansion.” (Thomas Baster).

With an underlying cynicism, Thomas’ remarks were slightly more diplomatic than those of Amy Grainger who, on being asked if membership of the New Squirearchy was premised on apparent wealth, proceeded to compare this clique with what she referred to as the “real deal”.

“Yes, it so is. They are all in competition. Who has the biggest wad of cash in their pocket, the best car, the biggest house, the largest business. They like to show off their money. But they haven’t. Not really. They ones I respect … like David Cornwell [the owner of a significant car parts manufacturer], they have way more money, but they just get on with it. He sits down with you and talks to you like a person … Just ‘cos they [New Squirearchy] have a Range Rover, he has a chauffeur…” (Amy).
4. Out of the Alehouse

Jokingly, I asked Amy if the acquisition of Range Rover was the sole prerequisite for a spot in the group:

“Yeah. They’d be like ‘he’s got money, he’s one of us. That’s it, isn’t it? Proper locals take the piss out of them because of it. They don’t like the fact that they [New Squirearchy] take over the pub on Wednesdays and Fridays. They nod at each other, but you can tell the locals and the money crowd don’t really like or respect each other.” (Amy).

If anything, the non-ownership of a Range Rover seemed more important to the local - regulars than the ownership of a Range Rover amidst the New Squirearchy. Not simply the ‘hapless bearer of symbolic projection’ (Latour 1999, 10), it acted within the scene; it effected in a very real sense. No less indispensable for assuring a New Squirearchy as part of the Six Tuns as Andrew, Stephen, or David Cornwell, it had the ability to part-dictate the unfolding of events. For some, the presence of these vehicles on the pub forecourt was in itself enough to curtail a planned foray to the bar, while others were sure to pass ready-made comments pertaining to ‘curb-climbers’ on passing through the porch - comments that were sure to be heard by New Squires and Non-New-Squires as a confirmation of their basis of belonging.

Such was the strength of ill-feeling among regular locals regarding the presence of Range Rovers at the Six Tuns as a perceived statement of wealth and superiority that, by the last quarter of the study, at least one member of the New Squirearchy had elected to purchase an alternative means of transport in an attempt to distance himself from the “kudos hunting” he saw as increasingly endemic within the group:
“Going back ten years ago or so, we [himself and partner] owned two Range Rovers back to back … We’d both quite liked the idea of it. We both liked the driving position, and thought ‘oh sod it, we’ll buy one’. And then we bought another one before we moved. There was a hell of a lot of work that needed doing on the house, and so we got rid of it. We cashed the money in … The new [model] Range Rover, when looking at it purely objectively, I think they are quite a nice car. I must say going back a year or so when I was getting rid of my Porsche … there was a feeling that ‘I could get a Range Rover’, which would have lost me just as much. The reason that I didn’t, and I feel that this is something you would be aware of … Typically on a Wednesday afternoon, you would go down to the Six Tuns and it was a bit like a Land Rover showroom. Or, to be a little more precise about that, a Range Rover showroom.” (Mark Price).

Following a long pause, in which Mark appeared to be more carefully considering their thoughts, he continued with considerable trepidation, evidently conscious of casting aspersions in the direction of his drinking partners.

“I’m sort of reasonably friendly with a lot of guys in there who are all self employed people. A lot of them I get on with pretty well, though I can quite understand a lot of people who … there is an aspect in me that struggles with a lot of them … because there’s a lot of people who would just turn around and say it’s a loadsa money culture. And it doesn’t sit very comfortably with me. And that thing they have for Range Rovers, I just thought ‘oh god, no’. It really would make me seem like all of them. And, you know, it’s a shame in a way because I think it is a nice car and I like it … Saying about not doing things for status, that’s almost an anti-
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statement, because it would actually stop me from getting one. I … we have actually got a Land Rover Discovery.” (Mark Price).

As if caught off-guard, mindful that the ownership of any four-wheel drive without due need could lead to unwarranted accusations of his being embroiled in the ‘loadsa money culture’, Mark was quick to qualify his need for a vehicle of this type:

“But in fairness, it has got a tow bar on the back. We own a horsebox that it tows beautifully, and we have 4 dogs which rarely nowadays ever go in there. It is very much a utility car and it has, on occasions, been put in 4 wheel drive and gone around in the snow and across ploughed fields. I do feel that it is a genuinely used car.” (Mark Price).

4.8. Acknowledgement

As a predominantly male band of drinkers who had come to my attention as an object of ridicule, curiosity and even abhorrence amongst other regular, ‘local’ pub-goers, I had been fairly confident that those individuals portrayed as impostors to the role of the rural gentry would not see themselves in this light. If this was found to be the case, however, and such an identity had been purposely sought or otherwise realised, I was sure that these individuals would not, on being challenged, actually profess the suitability of tags like ‘fake gentry’ and ‘New Squirearchy’ when asked to characterise their social circle. It therefore came as something of a surprise when, for most part, those branded as such were only too keen to tow this line when talking of their associates – if not themselves:
4. Out of the Alehouse

“I think there is [a New Squirearchy]. If you look at that crowd, the crowd that goes to the pub. The people I associate with. What do they all turn up in? They wear the checked shirts … buy the big rounds. And they’ve all bought Range Rovers. I think that from an outside perception … I think it could be spot on. But I’ve ended up driving to the pub in my Range Rover as well. But I do have a dog”. (Michael Marriot).

Pausing to sip his coffee, Michael proceeded to clarify his position further:

I have a wax jacket and I do have the green wellies … And going down the pub and talking about these things and what have you is obviously important to us … well, some of us at least. If I admit it. I think that it is a bit of an escape from work and all the stresses and strains of business that I think we all suffer from.” (Michael Marriot).

Candid, and often with an air of self-deprecation, testimonies such as that of Michael confirmed the existence of a group – whether referred to as the New Squirearchy or otherwise – as part of the Six Tuns landscape accounted for in this manner; not only as an ‘other’ by others, but also amid those said to constitute this formation.

The question now was; was this little inn the sole space of dwelling, or did it operate as part of a broader, enduring network of ‘squirely becoming’ deemed necessary for the appropriate application of this collective label? With talk of charity dinners, horse races, shoots, fields and farmhouses, an ‘influence beyond’ was certainly felt at the bar – but how important were these alternative venues in all actuality? Did they really feed into and out of the public house in a sense other than the imaginary? What is more, should this be the case, did these elements
4. Out of the Alehouse

play out in a manner considerably different than that which has been elsewhere attributed to generic scripts of masculinity and the ‘middle class’, as they perhaps did in the Six Tuns?
5. At the farm gate

‘He reassessed. Part of the fun of buying a house was making his townie friends pig-sick with envy, and to have rare historical documents stuck all over the bog walls would make them even pig-sicker. Nonetheless, the main game plan, as he constantly announced to everyone, including complete strangers, was to have a country estate ready for when he retired at forty, that age when all successful men retire and leave London. That was what mattered. And yet, and yet ... Like many an outsider and exile he hankered after roots, longed to appropriate a past, and the brittle bundles illuminating the private history of this house, this seventeenth-century manor house, were not just abstractions to him. He had seen the documents. He had felt them ... An archive that chronicled four centuries and seventeen generations of ownership by just one family who ... had finally come to the end of a four-hundred-year line.’


Having discussed at length the importance and centrality of such rural ‘props’ as Range Rovers and dealer boots to the existence of a New Squirearchy in the vicinity of the village pub, it is important to now discuss how they effectively transcend iconography and the visual economy, and the manner in which these technologies circulate and organise people. The basis of what has been referred to as ‘rural chic’, it was the fashioning of a nouveau gentry around the more substantial Jilly Cooper-esque world of large houses, stables and fields that was more indicative of a permanent, substantive investment in the landscape. In tandem with the subtle, but occasionally forthright adoption of equine and, more pertinently, agricultural identities and practises, this firmly tied many of Eamesworth’s arrivistes into the land; land being the historical basis of the power, influence and presence of a rural elite that was - and in some places still is - obligatory.
5. At the farm gate

5.1. From seeing to being

Considering the possibilities for the ‘influence beyond’, and those other ‘bits’ of New Squiredom which fed into, and out of, the public house, ‘rural’ symbols and symbolisms were evidently central to the forging of this – and other – senses of enacted belonging. Here the presence of four wheel drives, dealer boots, horses and farmsteads was felt - even in absentia - as facets of a broader picture; as part of an imagined geography in which dichotomies of New Squire/ local, indigenous/ parvenu and diffident/ ostentation prevailed. Their worth transcended iconography, and the implications of their being were both psychological and corporeal.

Discussing the idea of a ‘visual economy’, Poole (1997) calls attention to the way images serve to organise people, ideas and objects, and that this organisation involves three tiers: their production through individuals and technologies; their circulation; and the cultural resources and systems through which images are interpreted and valued. In addition to these organisational dimensions, suggests Campbell, the idea of a visual economy makes ‘clear that the visual field is both made possible by and productive of relations of power, and that these power relations bear at least some relationship to wider social and political structures which are themselves associated with relations of exchange in which images are commodities” (2006, 5). The consequence of this, he argues, is that people in disparate places can be part of the same economy when they might not be of the same culture. The visual economy may, therefore, produce and promote cultural difference, and invoking this concept ‘means that images cannot be isolated as discrete objects, but have to be understood as imbricated in networks of materials, technologies, institutions, markets, affects, cultural histories and political contexts’ (Ibid). In short, we are drawn to consider how the visual circulates, rather than simply performing iconographic interpretations.
The theoretical basis for an altogether more stolid consideration of documentary photography and photojournalism in arenas of war and violence, a number of Campbell’s observations resonated with my own experiences in the field, most notably that a ‘visual economy’ signals the ‘practises through which a place and its people is enacted and our response made possible (Ibid). Visual performance is facilitated by, and in turn engenders, discourses in which the interplay between site and sight is crucial (see Schwartz and Ryan, 2003).

‘[visual economy] calls attention to the role of visuality in the production of geographical imaginations, and how the conditions of possibility for a political response. These geopolitical discourses structure our encounters with other human beings in space and time; the visual culture of geopolitics therefore finds its primal scene in the face of the other, making it a significant location for questions of ethics, politics and responsibility.’

(Campbell 2006, 5).

At its most obvious, the visual presence of Range Rovers and ‘rural chic’, poignant through their association with leisure, wealth and privilege in a rural setting, partly prearranged interaction within the Six Tuns, and were effective in establishing the New Squirearchy as an immoral ‘other’ among regular-locals, but also as elements of institutional compliance among an alternative clique. As discernible, irrevocable connections to a broader, popularly envisaged web of rural middle class materiality, they amount to cultural, socio-economic and moral boundaries; as bricks in a wall that may, or may not, be complete.

Conceptualising the self in the postmodern ilk, neither as a given product of a class system nor as a fixed identity which the individual can simply adopt (Woodruffe-Burton 1998, 302), identity is something the person actively creates, partially through consumption (Giddens 1993). Described by Thompson (1995) as
a project actively borne of available symbolic materials, materials which the individual plaits into an inimitable account themselves, the self takes the form of a narrative. A ‘life project’, Featherstone characterises the postmodern consumer as ‘displaying their individuality and sense of style in particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, experiences and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle’ (1993, 63). Living in an increasingly rich symbolic environment within which those meanings attached to any situation or object is determined by interpretation, the consumer learns not only to develop their own, unique appraisals, but also to agree on certain shared readings (Woodruffe-Burton 1998, 302). These symbolic meanings are then used to construct, maintain and express (each of) his/her (multiple) identities (Woodruffe-Burton and Elliot 1998), some of which may partly revolve around ideas of class and that of the complete sir or lady. A desire enforced and accommodated by retailers, this is discussed at length by Frank Mort (1996) in his account of the meteoric rise of Burton’s as a ‘tailor of taste’ in 1950’s Britain, whose techniques of salesmanship centred on one clearly identifiable icon of masculinity; the image of the gentleman:

“In manners and self-presentation this was a decidedly English worldview. It was taken as given that the gentleman always appeared correctly dressed, for clothes were a public sign of social honour. Burton’s gentlemanly ideal was in part the legacy of nineteenth-century languages of class. Clothes as expressive of status, manners as visible markers of distinction, these were grounded in a vertical model of class relations.”

(Mort 1996, 137).

A strategy also adopted in the female sector by, for example, Country Casuals and Monsoon, the complex negotiation of aristocratic themes and an emphasis on status assiduously adapted for a broader gamut of consumers has been a perennial feature of the clothing industry. Traditionally distanced from, but clearly reliant
5. At the farm gate

upon, the ‘bespoke trade of Saville Row and upmarket competitors like Aquascutum or Simpson’s’ (Ibid, 137), a number of more ‘mainstream’ brands have emphasised affordable elegance. In more recent times, however, historically exclusive labels have been forced to move with the times, using their heritage to court a wider audience whilst also constantly remodelling elegance through the regular introduction of new lines and designs. As a result, what Mort describes as the ‘fantasy of upper-class mores’ has, for many, been upstaged by the reality, although the exact character of these mores has necessarily become cloudier and more open to interpretation.

5.2. Rural chic

Concentrating on role of clothes, ‘style’ and, most significantly, ‘labels’ as symbols, Woodruffe-Burton’s work is largely concerned with what might otherwise be referred to as ‘high fashion’, where constant change and a focus on originality, or at least the illusion of something new or different, means that signs and symbols are transient at best (1998, 303). Could this, therefore, be the case in regard to those dealer boots, check-shirts and moleskin trousers that popped up around Eamesworth during the study were destined for spare-room closets and charity shop clothes rails at the outset of a new season and a new collection? Was it, in fact, pure coincidence that ‘rural chic’ reached a head during the period of the research, with the majority of tweed-clad Eameworthians merely following current trends1 as opposed to consciously acquiring aesthetic elements of identikit squiredom? These courses of action are not so easily separated, although the subsequent passage, taken from the Daily Mail in the early autumn of 2005, hints toward the latter:

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1 Although, as detailed in the first chapter, these (re)emergence of these trends initially served to rouse my interest into the possible existence of a New Squirearchy in Eamesworth and beyond.
5. At the farm gate

‘They were once the ultimate must-nots. Despite an illustrious past and a reputation for quality, classic British labels such as Daks, Aquascutum and Pringle were as fashionable as a stripped pine kitchen. The only people clamouring for these clothes and accessories were Japanese tourists and ageing Sloanes ... But not any more. After years in the doldrums, they are again registering on the fashion world. Even Holland and Holland – a label for the shooting set, not a fashionista’s closet – has credibility, thanks to Madonna. Modelling the to-the-manor-born look in American Vogue, she has made the knee-length tweed skirt and gamekeeper’s cap must haves for this year.’ (Daily Mail, October 17 2005, 49).

Noticing a stiffly cut Burberry ecru mac draped across the back of her chair, and a rather racy green cashmere jumper across her shoulders, I commented on Maria Honeyman’s ‘lady-like’ appearance one afternoon over a pot of coffee. The ‘look’ she said, was not necessarily intended, although she had picked the two items up on a recent shopping spree in the House of Fraser department store, having been taken by their appearance in a number of ‘girly magazines’ that she regularly subscribed to. The branding had not been predetermined, nor had Maria purposefully set out to purchase these goods, and the “lady of the manor” aesthetic was not something she readily associated with either herself or her friends, bar one or two “dowdy” exceptions. It just happened to be the style of the time, and the coat and jumper would, in all likelihood, be superseded by garments of an altogether different kind “by this time next year”.

One of Maria’s closer compatriots, Tanya was equally keen to point out her ‘shopoholic’ tendencies, and made no bones about her love of designer brands and the “revolving door policy” that operated in her wardrobe. This, she intimated, was endemic among ‘the girls’, many of whom could take advantage of their partner’s credit cards on this front.
5. At the farm gate

“Some will spend a fortune on clothes and natter on about them. ‘So and so’s bought this’, and ‘so and so’s bought that’. I find it a bit trying to be honest. That said, if I see a pair of jeans I like, I will pay whatever. But I don’t go out and buy sets of clothes that match.” (Tanya Parkinson).

Sensing an opportunity, I raised the issue of rural chic:

“Oh yeah, that’s in at the moment isn’t it? Not my cup of tea, but you can see that one or two of the girls have gone in for that in a big way. But they will probably move onto something else in no time.” (Tanya Parkinson).

I asked Tanya if the same could be said about their men folk:

“Well take [Husband]. He is quite image conscious. The women are clothes shopping constantly and chop and change, but men less so. Some of those he [husband] drinks with keep up with keep up with fashion, but less so than the girls. They are not so competitive and have to have the latest shirt or whatever, but the brand is important. They are conscious of how each other look and the labels they wear. They seem to conform a bit more. Whether that’s because men’s fashion doesn’t change so much I don’t know.” (Tanya Parkinson).

Did they, then, go in for ‘rural chic’ in a purposeful manner?

“Oh the so do! Just look at some of them. Wearing the checked shirts and all that. I suppose it goes with the big farmhouse and all of that.”

(Tanya Parkinson).
5. At the farm gate

This perceptible preoccupation with designer labels fits neatly with theories of conspicuous consumption (e.g. Mason 1981), and the interplay between product symbolism and the consumer’s lifestyle or self-concept. This is not, as Woodruffe-Burton (1998) points out, a new phenomenon, with ‘luxury’ brands such as Daks having been around for many years, and, if Tanya was right in her synopsis - and a brief glance across the Office provided a degree of confirmation – it remains in accordance with a proposition put forward by Grubb and Grathwohl as far back as 1967:

‘First, the self concept of an individual will be sustained if he believes the good he has purchased is recognised publicly and classified in a manner that supports and matches his self concept … the effect on the individual is ultimately depended upon the products being a publicly recognised symbol … Goods as symbols serve the individual, becoming means to cause desired reactions from other individuals.’


Another function of ‘exclusive’ labels which, paradoxically, was dwelt upon by those who characterised the New Squirearchy as decadent and brash, was the perceived esteem of others as a result of their ability to purchase prestige goods – a trait allied to the nouveaux riches in LaBarbera’s (1988) study of self-fulfilment. Images or symbols of consequence within our constructed realities, Featherstone (1992) also talks of a ‘tendency for social groups to seek to classify and order their social circumstances and use cultural goods as a means of demarcation, as communicators which establish boundaries between some people and build bridges with others’ (in Woodruffe-Burton 1998, 309). Getting it ‘wrong’ and failing to place oneself amid the ‘right’ products is, therefore, to risk disparagement and possibly exclusion from the franchise, something Tanya had
5. At the farm gate

hinted at during one of our many conversations in the kitchen of her listed farmhouse:

“I won’t name names, but one of the chaps especially. He tries so hard to be like them, but he can’t. I mean, he turns up and, you know, they always take the piss out of him. To his face as well. It is sad really. Either he doesn’t get it or he doesn’t want to get it. You’d think people would have more self respect, but there you are. I wouldn’t stand for it. It’s because a lot of them are snobs. They own flat in Ibiza, a massive house in the countryside, a Ferrari. And he doesn’t. I don’t suppose it helps that he plays the big man, and that he just isn’t. But that isn’t a bad thing that he isn’t Mr Businessman is it?” (Tanya Parkinson).

With an identity as part of the economy of appearance, the emphasis on representation amidst New Squiredom could, it seemed, be experienced as oppressive. But, as David Chaney reminds us, it is important to recognise that ‘crucial ambiguity’ in seeing other’s expectations purely as a limitation; as they may also ‘offer an opportunity in that appearance can be exploited as a masquerade’ (2002, 66).

Considering Celia Lury’s work on the relationship between material culture and personal experience, the masquerade as a role of dramatisation is conceived of by Chaney as inherently creative, ‘not purely in the manner of self-aggrandisement which may be a more masculine project’ (Ibid), but as a series of simulations of identities which are ‘in part defined by the individuals’ relation to self identity, a relation closely linked to notions of authenticity’ (Lury 1996, 255-256). This conceptualisation is taken by Chaney as having two central tenets:
5. At the farm gate

“The first is that appearance and representation have been made more problematic by the cultural changes of late modernity which have been described as a radical destabilisation of both the boundaries and structures of personal experience. While the second is that this does not necessarily lead to an anomic fragmentation of the moral order, but rather new ways of making relationships through a more reflexive consideration of the significance of authenticity.” (2002, 66).

To Chaney’s mind, the more we consider how the material culture of everyday life is being used, the more apparent it becomes that it is ‘too simplistic to believe that it functions effectively as illusions that lack any personal meaning’ (Ibid). That the ‘semiotics of style’ is being used evermore playfully, ironically and even cynically in personal experience, is also the realisation of something of a paradox. As material goods have become more crucial, ‘they have in an important sense dematerialised in the multiplicity of uses and meanings to which they can be put’ (Ibid, 80). Moreover, it would appear that there is also a contradictory process of extreme sensitivity to, and yet comparative indifference regarding, stylistic norms in everyday life:

“Although fashionable codes are capable of infinite gradations and internal differentiations within any particular group, it has been assumed that the demands of fashionable conformity work to create a sort of uniform. The very attractiveness of the metaphor of uniform and its implied expectations of conformity should not, however, blind us to the way that the relativism of fashion both individualises as well as communalises.” (Ibid).

Consciously or not, playfully or not, purposefully or not; the tendency to dress in the fashion of rural chic was neither uniform among those in the gentryfied set, nor confined to either sex. Prompted by the tastes and trends exhibited on the
5. At the farm gate

high street, it could be more suitably described as a passing fad than a sign of allegiance to a steadfast self/group identity. In this sense, the act of buying a tweed skirt or hunters-cut jacket does not necessarily denote an intense, prolonged emotional (or financial) investment; at least, not to the same degree as purchasing a particular type of house, or committing to the everyday responsibilities required of animals and the working landscape.

5.3.  Paddocks, ponies and country piles

For Mark Price, the notion of a New Squirearchy as applied to those circles within which he operated was at once inappropriate and understandable, impersonal but well-founded. As a meaningful phrase he could, on reflection, see its basis in the pursuit of what he refers to as ‘marker posts’ which, according to the basis of desire, accounted for both individuality and a collective identity. This came thorough an account of his and his partner coming to own a “biggish house, a bit of land and a few horses”:

“It was nice to be able to move to a bigger house, although it was perfectly pleasant where we used to live. But there was obviously the feeling that … I say obviously, but we would have been happy if we had stayed where we were. But if there was ever the opportunity ever arose to move into a village place with lots of acres of land and the ability to maybe have some horses … and a really nice house with all the trappings, then we would take the opportunity. We were looking to move and, you know, we got details of this house … Like all estate agents, they send you everything you can’t afford, and you sift through them … And to get that style of house [fifteenth century listed farmstead], it is very difficult to get hold of.”

(Mark Price).
5. At the farm gate

“I mean, not being greedy for the sake of being greedy ... But, I would say that the desire or willingness to take on a larger place with all that goes with it, including horses and stables ... I think I can put my hand on my heart and say I have not done it for status. It was never about that. There are an awful lot of people who might deny it, but who you know damn well are doing it for that reason. I really do like the idea of just having space round me and, aesthetically, a nice looking property which I think we are quite fortunate to have at the moment.” (Mark Price).

Could ‘an awful lot of people who might deny it’ be found amongst his friends and colleagues? I put this to Mark:

“Yes. The old manor houses, farms, Range Rovers, horses and guns and whatnot that were once associated with the countrified middle and upper class are like ... well, they make them level in a sense. Not necessarily to me ... or should I say some of us. They are like middle class marker posts. They’ve made it you know.” (Mark Price).

“It’s almost an instinctive thing as much as a lot of people don’t like to admit it. There is a desire for self improvement or betterment or however you want to put it. And it’s something I feel I am guilty. But I feel quite happy with the idea of striving to get certain things in my life that I just enjoy. I say, without sort of banging on about it too much, they are things that I have probably thought about since I was a child. I have always liked the idea of having a nice big house in the countryside.” (Mark Price).

Almost without exception, the acquisition of a ‘significant’ country property and the land to go with it had been a long-time goal for Mike, his partner, and many of those friends they had in Eamesworth, all parting with significant sums of money
5. At the farm gate

for a residence with ‘all the bells and whistles’. As a consequence, local estate agents like Martin Turner were reaping the rewards of a buoyant rural property market, selling farmhouses and country cottages at a “rate and relative cost” not previously experienced in his 25 year career.

A ceaseless topic of conversation among villagers, many of whom seemingly scanned the property section of the local paper on a week-by-week basis, Martin, in light of his profession, was regularly called upon to provide definitive accounts of house sales in Eamesworth and the surrounding area. Why had they been sold, who had bought them, who had lost out and, more importantly, how much did they fetch? One such occasion was at the bar of the Six Tuns, when Martin was drawn into a conversation with Jacob Malpas, a retired shop fitter and Eamesworth native who was evidently troubled by the fate of Dovecoat Farm. Believing the advertised price to be ‘ridiculous’ on account of the farm’s ramshackle condition, Jacob was taken aback by the revelation that it had sold on value:

“No, it’s about right. You’ve got to consider the sort of people who are now buying these places and moving into villages around here. City boys who can’t quite afford to buy a fancy country house in Essex. They can pick one up around here for half the price. It’s cheap for them. Maybe not for us, but it’s cheap for them … It could be falling down around their ear holes and they will love it all the more. It’s authentic [laughs]. They’ll spend more than they bought the house for getting it fixed up … and before you know it there will be horse brasses everywhere you look.” (Martin).

A house with a couple of acres and a paddock was something, Martin assured Jacob, would always sell quickly, and even if his clients had no intention of getting
5. At the farm gate

a horse or pony on buying the property, the possibility would soon enter their minds:

“If they haven’t got horses now, you can bet whoever gets it will have a few wandering about within a few months of moving in. Especially if they’ve got a daughter. She’ll want to join the Pony Club with all her mates and become one of those horsey types who trot around the village all day long at weekends … getting in your way when you need to drive anywhere. They should be made to pay road tax.” (Jacob).

Such a synopsis was, to Tanya’s mind at least, slightly off the mark. Something of an “urban myth”, such an opinion when levelled at Eamesworth’s wealthier residents could not realistically result from a genuine account of the situation. On familiar terms with “a lot of these people”, she was not unaware of anyone who had taken on the ownership of a horse simply “because it is the thing to do when you’ve got a bit of land”, although there were “one or two” acquaintances who did not demonstrate what Tanya considered to be an appropriate level of interest in horses under their care.

A keen rider as a child, and having taken up the hobby again some twenty years later, the “extra outlay” required when buying a house with stables and ten acres of pasture was offset against livery fees; something Tanya described as a “financial black hole”. At around £150 per week, the large sums of money involved when having someone else feed, treat and shelter a horse also figured in Patricia Coupland’s decision to buy a property in Eamesworth with a large barn and two fields. Always happier watching her animals and tending to their needs than riding them, it is her daughter, Michelle, who is “more often than not” in the saddle. An accomplished show jumper, Michelle regularly competes in ranking events, with her mother towing a shiny new horse-box “around the country every
5. At the farm gate

weekend”. A present from her father, a dealer in new and nearly-new motor homes, Michelle is indulged by her parents in much the same way as Gillian Kemp, whose bay gelding, purchased at great expense from prized breeding stock, helped win her a podium position in a foremost national dressage competition. Unlike Michelle’s parents, the Kemps are happy to continue paying livery fees in the light of their daughters continuing success on the circuit, subjugating much of the considerable day-to-day labour required of such an animal to stable-hands in order that Gillian can more fully concentrate on her training and education.

One such stable hand is Christine Wells, who has worked at the Four Winds Equine Centre for the past 8 years, during which time she has gone from part-time, schoolgirl helper to full-time member of the team, enduring 4 am starts and midnight finishes on those occasions when they are called upon to prepare a horse under their care for competition. One of nine liveries recognised by the UK Directory of Riding Schools, Trekking Centres and Livery Yards within a 15 mile radius of Eamesworth, the Four Winds Equine Centre has seen a steady rise in business over the past 5 years, and Christine recognises the value of those who imagine themselves “riding around in *Pride & Prejudice*”:

“We make a large part of our living off of that lot. A lot of these women, and before you ask it is mostly women and girls, keep their horses in livery and pay us lot to do the hard work. You know, mucking out and all that. They tend to get their husbands or daddies to pay the costs. They turn up once a week, if that, and trot about the paddock for an hour before going home. That’s before half of them get bored and give it up. They do tend to be pushy though, ringing up and saying ‘I want this and I want that’ and won’t wait for anything. Saying that, they do pay my wages – what little I get!” (Christine).
5. At the farm gate

The value of the Eamesworth’s equine community to local trade was also acknowledged by Roger Titterton and Gareth Sewell, both some-time agricultural labourers and general handymen. In the regular employ of “twenty or so” of the “horsey set”, it is business Roger would do hard to survive without, even if this particular brand of customer has the tendency to play on his patience. An opinion shared by Gareth, who also greatly appreciated a regular supply of “cash jobs” fixing fences, trimming paddock hedges and maintaining stable blocks, the occasional late-afternoon phone call demanding “a gutter or whatever be fixed now and not next week” was something you simply had to accept as par for the course. Marcus Wynne, however, was less happy to bite his tongue, despite a strong commercial dependence on such people:

“They want everything done at the snap of their fingers, and think they can speak to people like me like dirt and you can’t always say nothing. We do get a tremendous amount of work from the horsey types around here, bailing their hay and topping [mowing] their fields. They sometimes argue over the bill, but they pay quickly. Most of them have got rich husbands, who pay a fortune for the horses and the stables just to keep the wife happy. Most of them have nothing to do all day. They have domestic help so the horses keep them occupied … Every year, we have 25 to 30 of these women we deliver hay and straw to, so we can’t afford to loose their business.” (Marcus).

Frustration aside, Marcus, Roger and Gareth all accredited their standing as ‘local boys’ as a significant factor in obtaining work from the ‘horsey set’ and a select band of wealthier, middle class ‘incomers’. With much custom secured through word of mouth as opposed to formal advertising, even the cost of a job would occasionally appear as though it were of secondary importance to some of these people. “People always like to think that they are helping out other villagers”,
suggested Gareth, smug in the belief that their loyalty to local traders was vital in sustaining the industrial lifeblood of the community. Some would even go so far as calling on him to do jobs that “they are perfectly capable of doing themselves in five minutes”, although whether or not this was a thinly-veiled attempt at philanthropy, because they were “lazy buggers”, or simply incapable, Gareth could not always tell.

5.4. Plastic farmers

For a number of Eamesworth’s wealthier arrivistes, having a ‘bit of land’ was a direct consequence of having an interest in equestrianism, and not visa-versa. Others simply liked being surrounded by a few acres that they could call their own. Michael Marriot, perhaps in the true spirit of aristocratic eccentricity, had bought his farmhouse and 15 acres so that he create an “ideal landscape garden, race cars, fly kites, play football and generally bugger about” with his son. In a similar vein, Michael’s neighbour, Arthur Kemplen, the owner of a successful specialised haulage firm, had bought Buttercup Farm because it came with a 9 acre plot and could therefore accommodate the family helicopter. Some Eamesworthians, though, took these activities as an affront to the heritage of their respective properties and the community as a whole. For Thomas Baster, it was a sad indictment of the times that the honest endeavour of “real farming stock” had been forced to make way to such “cut price playboys”:

“There’s probably 3 farms left in the village. 3 proper working farms that I can think of. But there’s at least another 5 or 6 farms in this village alone that aren’t farms anymore. The last generation didn’t want to be farmers and work 14 hours a day and not get any money for it. A lot of ‘new money’ types are buying these places and are paying x million for the
5. At the farm gate

house and the fields. But they aren’t having cows and chickens and spending all their summer nights ploughing fields are they.”

(Thomas Baster).

In some instances, however, the acquisition of land had been accompanied with a culpable interest in agriculture and what Thomas considered to be a more ‘genuine’, although not necessarily ‘productive’, use of their property. Roy Carter, for example, a prominent investment banker and property dealer, had appropriated the services of Christian Grosvenor, a retired book-binder and enthusiastic horticulturalist, for the sole purpose of growing fruit and vegetables in the grounds of his 12 bedroom mansion.

Other recently seated Eamesworthians were more ‘hands on’ in their approach, like James and Janet Kilbride, who’s sprawling fifteenth century cottage and 35 acres had been procured on the back of successful careers in the antiques and wine trade respectively. An extremely generous, well spoken couple, it had been Janet’s childhood dream to buy a small farm and raise rare breeds of sheep – Ryelands and Oxford Downs in particular. Towing their prized “woollybags” to livestock shows all over the country behind an old, but beautifully maintained, Series III Land Rover, Janet had a rudimentary grasp of animal husbandry but always “had the sense” to consult Marcus Wynne on more “serious issues like swayback 2 or grass staggers 3”. Mark Price also sought the advice of neighbouring farmers on how best to maintain his land, although his enthusiasm to get his ‘hands dirty’ was viewed as highly amusing in these quarters.

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2 A lack of muscle control in young lambs brought about from a lack of copper in the diet.
3 A sheep collapses or throws a ‘staggers fit’ due to low magnesium and/or calcium levels in the bloodstream.
5. At the farm gate

An occasional visitor to local farm auctions, Marks’ interest a 1950’s Fordson Major tractor at a sale in nearby Goddington had provided much entertainment for Jack Coughlin. An honest enquiry insofar as Mark intended to use the machine for the purpose of mowing, chain harrowing and inserting posts (via special attachment) around his pastures, the fact it had a ‘cracked block’ (engine fault) had completely eluded him until it was pointed out to him by a sympathetic bystander. Although Jack had assured Mark that he would have “let him in on it in due course”, it perhaps went to show that “such things were best left to them that know what they’re doing” – no doubt aware that his friend and fellow farmer, Nathan Moorgate, was currently contracted for all mechanised work required of Mark’s holdings.

Like Mark, Tanya had also struck up a friendship with the majority of those farmers whose’ land bordered with her own, and constantly sought advice and opinions regarding the upkeep of her “estate” – even on those occasions when she knew “perfectly well” what she was doing. Here, obsequiousness in the form of deference toward their agricultural credentials had seen their opinion of her shift from suspicion, amusement and bemusement to grudging respect and, in some cases, genuine affection:

“Lovely person. And she takes a real interest in how things should be done. And she is not at all like some of these ‘ladies that lunch’ types around here. She isn’t at all afraid to get her hands dirty. She’ll help you out with anything and is always keen to learn … I mean, she’s not a proper farmer. Never can be. [Her partner] makes sure she doesn’t have to work for anything, so it’s not her job. Her life, even. It’s a … hobby for her. She’s isn’t lying in bed worrying about how much wheat will fetch per ton this year, and doesn’t get up at four in the morning when its lambing … But she does care.” (Marcus Wynne).
Always keen to stress her countryist credentials as a person who, as a child, had spent her evenings and weekends walking the family dog through fields, woods and country lanes, and, as an adult, “knee deep in muck and animal crap”, Tanya was terminally conscious of being “lumped” in with an “ignorant townie lot” who had also bought a sizeable country retreat, but, quite unlike her, knew “sod all about what was going on in the countryside”. With a number of her closest friends to be found among “that lot”, Tanya ardently disassociated herself from this crowd as someone who constructively engages with the landscape, and took great pleasure in reminding them of this fact:

“I love it. I’ll come back to the farm really ... rebelling. I’ll say to them ‘don’t come too near because I stink of sheep shit’ and they go ‘arghh!’ If I have been helping out with Nathan [Moorgate] and the sheep, I often have to say ‘look, I’ve gotta go to school and pick the kids up’. So I run to the car. I’m sure when my friends come up to me at the school gate; they are thinking ‘Tanya you reek’. And I probably do smell. But there is more to life. I’ve got no-one to impress anymore. If they like me they like me, if they don’t they don’t.” (Tanya).

Despite a fierce independence and strong sense of personal responsibility for the upkeep of the land, livestock and lodgings that surrounded her, Tanya was, on reflection, drawn to acknowledge a privilege of choice shared with her newly-landed associates which fundamentally differentiated herself from Marcus, Nathan and the broader farming fraternity:

“At the end of the day, I don’t have to do anything ... I have Ted, who is always here who is not so much a gardener ... he does wonderful things like the electric and the plumbing and everything. He’s more like a
5. At the farm gate

handyman that cuts the grass. There is always so much to do. One of the animal shelters broke the other day so he mended that yesterday morning, and he’ll cut a tree down and things like that … I also pay Tamsin to come and help with the horses, because that means I can ride out … And I also have an ironing lady, and Carmella … she is the cleaner … But to keep a house this size, to keep it tidy and do the grounds … there aren’t enough hours in the day … It does take a long time, and it’s about priorities really. We are lucky enough to think ‘well, we can afford it.’” (Tanya Parkinson).

5.5. An agricultural (non) identity?

Passing into the ownership of those without agricultural backgrounds, and more often than not destined for a purpose other than primary production, the fate of Eamesworth’s acres in the hands of the New Squirearchy was a cause for concern among several local farmers. Where Tanya and Mark had done much to circumvent hostility on this front by regularly seeking advice from – thus entrusting a degree of control with – their farming neighbours, many of their contemporaries did not pursue this course of action, and as a consequence were subject to disapproval. Particularly evident at county show grounds, agricultural auctions and other farm-orientated events, it was animosity that Marcus Wynne could relate to:

“You can tell them apart. It is not just that I know every farmer in these parts, you can just tell those who are playing at farming. Rich, retired and fancy a day out. The way they dress, what they go for and how they bid for it.” (Marcus).

“Playing at farming?” (Interviewer).
5. At the farm gate

“Yes. Playing. I don’t begrudge them buying up farm and farmland ... well, actually, yes I do. They can pay good money and outbid us. Okay, so they might contract us in for the working of it or the management side of things, but as often as not they don’t do any thing with it when they’ve got it. They might stick a few horses or sheep on it, but they are not farming it. They have taken the land out of production if you like ... It isn’t honest. It is our job to use the land to feed the country. That is what we are supposed to do.” (Marcus).

Concerning the (in) appropriate use of the soil as what Thompson refers to as the ‘quintessential productive enterprise of the human species’ (1994, 47), Marcus’ argument was very much a moral one; one grounded in the notion of agrarian stewardship and a firm belief in the farmer as the rightful keeper of the land.

Complementing and qualifying the productionist ethic as a balance between conservation, sustainability and output, the ‘agri-ruralist’ discourse as mobilised by Marcus is a combination of ‘ruralist’ and ‘agrarian’ rhetoric, portraying the farmer as ‘carrier of an economic activity essential to the vitality of the countryside’ (Frouws 1998, 59), and as principle creator of the rural as a ‘social, economic and cultural space’ (Salmona 1994)\(^4\). Recently, however, this particular vision has come under threat in the form of a political shift toward agricultural multi-functionalism, allied to the restructuring of the subsidy system and the introduction of schemes intended to combine ‘technology-intensive agriculture, landscape and nature management, agri-tourism, agro-forestry, energy production, and so on within the confines of rural areas of the future’ (Frouws 1998, 60). However, it has become increasingly evident that many farmers have resisted change on the basis of an anticipated loss of identity traditionally

\(^4\) Although it is no longer feasible to perceive the rural exclusively as an agricultural domain, even among those most committed to the agri-ruralist discourse. (Frouws 1998, 59)
5. At the farm gate
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conferred through existing commercial behaviour. Here, argues Burton (2004), the
practise of production has been incorporated into the ethos of being a ‘good
farmer’, imbued with social/ cultural rewards as a prevalent feature of
contemporary farming culture.

Described by the American agriculturalist Leopold (1939) as “the owner’s portrait
of himself”, the condition of the farm landscape is identified by Burton as being
the principal criteria by which a farmer is judged to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ by their
peers. Seeing themselves ‘first and foremost as food producers’ (Burgess et al.
2000, 125), the physical appearance of the crop (or animal) and crop yield per acre
(weight/ quality per animal) are the critical factors in this interpretation; highly
visible to the assessment others as a permanent ‘front stage’ activity (Burton 2004,
201). A term coined by Erving Goffman (1959) in his ‘dramaturgical’ take on
symbolic interactionism, such exchanges form ‘part of the individual’s
performance which regularly function in a general and fixed fashion to define the
situation for those that observe the performance’, as opposed to those more
truthful activities that take place ‘back stage’ beyond the gaze of a given social
group (in Burton 2004, 199).

Although the concept of symbolic interactionism should be applied with caution
insofar as it has a tendency to cast behaviour as a enduringly self-conscious
consideration of collective appraisal and consequence, it does have value in
developing a fuller understanding of the symbolism of apparently utilitarian
action.

‘While productivism and its consequences for the landscape may represent
to us the excesses of an over subsidised agricultural industry, for many
farmers it represents a picture of good farming practise, displayed in a
manner that enables the farmer to obtain social status and recognition
within the community as a ‘good farmer’ and to judge the credentials of others.’ (Burton 2004, 208).

Grounded also in ‘past acts’, with any farm being a cumulative, predominantly intergenerational effort, the farmer represents not only themselves, but also has a duty to equal or surpass the achievements of their forebears. Thus, in lacking a familial or industrious connection with the land, and in augmenting an economically and symbolically unprofitable use of their fields and pastures, the practises of the New Squirearchy were taken as an affront by those by those who continued to take their custodial responsibility toward these assets seriously. For this reason, their claim on the land was not entirely accepted by a number of local farmers who they did not see it as ‘earned’ in terms of input and/ or what was expected of it. In some cases, long standing farmers were less inclined to respect the rights of these unconventional owners; at least, this was Michael Marriott’s experience in regard to one of his neighbours, a cattle dealer and “well known face in the village”:

“A couple of months ago I was asleep in bed, and I woke up to find a load of cattle had broken through some fencing and made their way into the field at the back of the property. I had recently spent a lot of money having it landscaped and putting in shrubbery, and a fortune on water spraying it day and night. As you know, it was a hot summer. So I rang up Bill and all he said was “oh, that’ll be alright”. Well, I didn’t think so. He did get round here in the end, and do you know what? As soon as he got here the first thing he did was tell me how he shouldn’t keep cattle because there is no money in them and this, that and the other. At the time, I had no wish to know about Bill’s declining agricultural prospects; I just wanted the bloody cows out of my paddock and away from my shrubbery.”

(Michael Marriot).
5. At the farm gate

Following a brief interlude in which the kettle was set to boil on a plush green Aga
range, Michael continued:

“Following that, I filed an insurance claim for damages which amounted to
an awful lot of money. Bill though, he was utterly at a loss. He simply
couldn’t understand how anybody could spend so much money on
shrubbery. “Surely it just grows” he said. I quickly put a new fence up
after that, because it became clear to me that farmers have the
understanding that if you want to keep their animals off your land, then it’s
your problem and not theirs. Having put up a fence of wood and barbed
wire, Bill came across the field and said – and he was laughing – “here boy,
anyone would think I am keeping bloody Lions in this here field”… Well,
you’ve got to laugh haven’t you.” (Michael Marriot).

Luke Murcott also had experiences of a neighbouring farmer being a “bit free and
easy” with his land and, like Michael, was willing to put up with this where
possible in the interests of peace and harmony – but there “would be a limit”,
nevertheless:

“I was out back one day when I noticed two blokes walking across my
fields with shotguns. I ran up – a bit nervous – and said “what are you
doing?” They said they were ferreting. I said “who gave you permission?”
They said “[adjacent farmer] said you wouldn’t mind if we walk across you
land”. I told them that it would have been fine otherwise, but as they
didn’t ask me – the landowner – they better leave this time. Its funny how
[adjacent farmer] presumed to tell them it was okay. I know he doesn’t
mean anything by it, but times have changed and you can’t tell people what
they can and can’t do on other peoples land. I don’t care if he has farmed
here for years ... but there you are.” (Luke Murcott).
5. At the farm gate

Far from acrimonious, but rather light-hearted differences of opinion, these incidents highlighted a tension between the outlook of the farming community and their new, moneyed neighbours in respect to the fitting use of the Eamesworth landscape. On occasion, however, genuine ill-feeling surfaced, with serious ramifications for those involved. This was certainly the case when Nigel Blackledge, a corporate hospitality specialist and property speculator, moved into Horvath Farm and, in the course of revamping the house and grounds, felled a large number of trees that were subject to a conservation order. Following a case brought by South Bedfordshire District Council, who acted on information supplied by ‘concerned members of the public’, Nigel was both fined and ordered to pay costs having pleaded guilty at a hearing in Luton Magistrates’ Court. His claim of ignorance, however, was hotly contested by a number of local residents – including at least three farmers - long before the conviction was passed down from the bench, and it was their written remonstrations that may, or may not, have resulted in Nigel’s summons:

“Have you heard about Nigel’s inspection? Someone evidently rang the conservation people. He’s got the right hump about it, and because he was told to harm the trees in any way he is just as likely to do the exact opposite. He doesn’t like being told what to do, and he has already supposed to have cut a couple of trees down…” (Gareth).

“I went down their and he [Nigel] told me about the trees. The officer took pictures and whatnot, and then told Nigel not to chop them down. He told me that he “doesn’t care and fuck ‘em”. The problem is, Nigel and all that lot think they are about it all and can get away with anything. They think that because they have a bit of money they can break the rules, but they can’t.” (Marcus).
5. At the farm gate

“It’s bloody typical. You should only buy a place like that if you are going to look after it. For the good of the nation, like. I was of a mind to ring the council and tell them myself.” (Robert).

A story that made front page in the local newspaper, and elicited a sizeable response in the *Letters to the Editor* column in the following weeks, the plight of the ‘Horvath Hazels’ was, for many, a testament to the licentious behaviour of many a wealthy *arriviste*, underscoring an apparent belief that money could belie responsibility for their assets:

‘Madam – I was pleased to read the ‘stern’ punishment dished out to Nigel Blackledge following his illegal removal of 15 trees. How he must have cried after finding out that he had been fined £500 and had to pay £500 costs by Luton Magistrates’ Court. My goodness that will certainly put these manor owners off chopping down trees. I have always been a believer that that those who are fined by the courts should be punished in a way that is appropriate to them ... That’s why it infuriates me to see footballers on millions of pounds a years fined £500 for speeding – it doesn’t punish them at all. So to read in your newspaper that the owner of Horvath Farm was punished so leniently was the icing on the cake.’

Cast in the same decadent vein as that other media bogeyman - the overpaid Premiership footballer – Nigel, more than any of his fellow Office dwellers, was looked on with disdain by a great many Eamesworthians as a prime example of the arrogant, extravagant, culturally moribund *nouveau riche* that was currently laying claim to rural Britain. Variously referred to as “Blackledge of Eamesworth”, or, in the case of one particular respondent, the “Van Hoogstraten 5

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5 Nicholas Van Hoogstraten, a well-known property tycoon who has received a degree of notoriety as the result of an ongoing dispute with the Ramblers Association regarding rights of way
5. At the farm gate

of Aylesbury Vale”, Nigel – by way of a workman’s chainsaw – fulfilled the role of local villain and ne’er-do-well for many villagers, but without the background or breeding required of the classical roué. In this sense, Nigel was somewhat unique, and the lack of respect he was seen to afford his estate as an historical, communally significant document was perhaps exaggerated and clearly isolated among the squirely clique; the majority of whom - like ‘Stefan’ in the opening paragraph of this chapter – ‘hankered after’ a noble history that is the ‘English country house’, and ‘longed to appropriate’ an aristocratic past in this manner. At best, however, this appropriation was a selective re-interpretation, symbolic of wealth, but not as a manifestation of local power in the political sense; whether spelt with a big ‘P’, or a little ‘p’.

5.6. A landed elite, or elite with land?

In the case Janet Kilbride, Mark Price, Tanya and to a lesser extent Roy Carter, their designs on rural living were more akin to those of ‘smallholding’ or ‘hobby-farming’ than an aristocratic presence. To use a definition developed by Davies, who considered part-time farming in the early post-war period, these people ‘farm for a motive other than profit, and are not, therefore, dependent on agriculture for a living’ (1953, 83). Considering these themes more fully, Holloway (2000) points to the work of a number of North American scholars, including Mage (1975), Layton (1980) and Daniels (1986), who, in the process of examining the structure of hobby-farming, describes how ‘hobby-farming is dependent on sufficient non-farming income to support recreational farming, and how non-monetary gains (e.g. prestige, recreation) and a sense of spiritual attachment to farming and farm land use are particularly significant to those involved’ (Holloway 2000, 2). Yet,

surrounding his estate near Uckfield, Essex. Calling Ramblers “perverts” and “the absolute scum of the Earth”, Van Hoogstraten was referred to as an “emissary of Beelzebub” by a High Court Judge during a case in which he was found guilty of blocking footpaths with barbed wire, padlocked gates and industrial units.
5. At the farm gate

with the majority of those farmhouses, manor houses and – for want of a better word – mansions dotted around Eamesworth being separated from the bulk of their lands on, or prior to, their passing from agricultural to ‘lifestyle’ interests, there is a significant break with the historic tendency of rural elites to consolidate these holdings for commercial, and in turn political, purposes.

An investment that was almost entirely emotional and dependent on profits garnered from alternative business ventures, the majority of those ‘new money types’ who had purchased tracts of agricultural land in the Eamesworth area were operating according to an altogether different logic than the majority of their theoretical antecedents. A condition specified by Francis Fulford; one of the increasingly isolated squires ‘of the old sort’, his family has sat on the same acres for over 800 years:

"They buy because they are making a statement about how rich they are. The estate and house are a luxury to them, not a profit centre. We have to make ours pay." (Quoted in Mitchell 2004, 1).

For the likes of Janet, Tanya and Mark, commercial success – or a fruitful personal engagement - had brought forth a reward in the form of acreage; for the squires of old, acreage was itself the root of accomplishment, bringing wealth, power and the means for conspicuous self-indulgence; a point clearly made by the Fifteenth Lord Derby.

“The objects which men aim at when they come possessed of land may be enumerated as follows: 1) political influence; 2) social importance, founded on territorial possession, the most visible and unmistakable form of wealth; 3) power exercised over tenantry; the pleasure of managing, directing and
5. At the farm gate

improving the estate itself; 4) residential employment, including what is
called sport; the money return – the rent.” (Quoted in Paxman 1990, 22).

A highly illuminating order of priorities, clearly accentuating what Paxman refers
to as the ‘primary connection between political and social power and the soil’. Of
great symbolic importance, supporting a socio-political order that depended on
the belief in the countryside as a space of agriculture (Short 1991), land was the
basis of what Woods (2005) refers to as ‘resource power’, not only in terms of
agrarian production but also in respect to tenant and rent:

‘One of the rocks on which the upper classes rested was the belief that land
was safe. Money invested in anything else was likely to do the dirty on
one, but it was impossible for land to burn down, or be stolen, or blow up,
or sink at sea. It was irremovably there and one could rely on it. This
belief was one of the main reasons why people invested in land, often to the
exclusion of everything else, and why it was the most prestigious form of
investment. Anyone who owned land had a permanent stake in the
country.’ (Girouard 1978, 300).

Considering those prerogatives of land ownership as outlined by Lord Derby, few
parallels can be drawn with the objectives of Eamesworth’s current crop of
wealthier residents. Undoubtedly, land remains a clearly identifiable form of
prosperity, and many of those with significant holdings certainly take great stock
in ‘managing, directing and improving’ their surroundings. This administration is
often undertaken according to the aesthetics of ‘country-house romanticism’ as so
clearly defined in such publications as Country Life which, suggests Girouard, has
5. At the farm gate

always had an audience in ‘country-loving businessman’ (Ibid 303)\(^6\), but this is not of a scale requiring a significant, dependent local workforce.

The majority of those individuals widely accredited with New Squire (anti) status relied on domestic help, and some, including Roy Carter, Michael Marriot and the Kemplens provided living quarters for full-time staff, but none routinely profited as agricultural employers or from agricultural tenants. That said, a fair few respondents identified land in the Eamesworth area as a sound investment in terms of resale to real estate speculators and property developers, while the majority generally believed that the rise in rural house prices would continue well into the future, easily recouping their initial investment if and when they decided to move elsewhere. Profit, however, seemed to be of little immediate concern for most, and a commercial interest in the soil most certainly did not provide the means with which to support themselves, although, for a select few, the decision to buy a farm was as much a financial decision as a lifestyle choice; one designed to aid their children in the long-term.

5.7. Death and the landscape

Since its introduction by Pitt the Younger’s Tory government of the late 1700’s, death duty in all its various guises\(^7\) has long been a primary cause of the break-up of large estates. A burden that really began to loosen the establishment’s economic grip on the British countryside in the 19th century following increasingly stringent taxation reforms levied by successive Liberal and Conservative Chancellors, it has, if anything, served to dissuade the purchase of significant domestic holdings. The possibility, therefore, that Inheritance Tax might serve as

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\(^6\) Incidentally, during the course of the research process I did not encounter a single individual who subscribed to, or claimed to have more than a passing interest in, *Country Life* magazine.

\(^7\) On introduction, its official title was that of ‘legacy, succession and estate duties’.
5. At the farm gate

a motivation supplementing - or even displacing - inspirational gentryfication in the 21st century was not even considered prior to the following discussion with Silvia Threlfall; one of Eamesworth’s elder stateswomen and resident of nearly 80 years:

“Do you have a perception that people might be buying some of the larger farms and houses in Eamesworth out of a desire to live a squirely existence?” (Interviewer).

“They are buying them and doing that so the government doesn’t have their money … They are buying farms in particular so their kids avoid paying tax when they go. This is because they don’t have to pay it for farms.” (Silvia Threlfall).

“So you don’t think that an aspiration to become a country squire is perhaps as important, or maybe not at all?” (Interviewer).

“Yes, it is partly, but I don’t think that it is the main reason. I think that if they are wealthy, they are doing that otherwise they’ve got to pay what used to be called death duties … My son told me about this. He tried to buy a smallholding nearby a while back. But that lot, they can afford that much more and so they come and buy up all of these small farms, put their money in it. They buy land and then the government can’t get them.” (Silvia Threlfall).

A small revelation, I set about finding the relevant facts somewhat surprised that this issue – if a relevant issue it was – had not featured in those broadsheet property supplements that had prompted the investigation.
5. At the farm gate

At the time of the study, inheritance tax relief on agricultural land and property was available to anyone who buys a farm, provided certain conditions were met. As a result, a greater proportion of an individual’s assets may be passed on to a beneficiary if they take this form. By no means illegal, it is commonly considered to be a ‘tax dodge’, and for this reason was a delicate subject to breach during the course of any conversation or interview. Nevertheless, Luke Murcott, a recent arrival to ‘Hawthorn’s Farm’, was happy to discuss these motives; motives that, as the head of a prominent local accountancy firm, he was aware of sharing with a number of local friends and clients:

“I can’t go into names and details, of course. But for a number of our clients, some of which I regard as friends of mine, it has been an important consideration. If you would like to live in a ... substantial property in a village area, and care about how much you’re kids will get ... then buying agriculturally classified property has always been a way of handing a bit less over to the Chancellor. But, things are ... or rather will change.”

(Luke Murcott).

With a subsequent change in the law rendering inheritance tax relief for those who leave the day-to-day running of farms to others and those who have significantly scaled down their agrarian activities applicable only to the ‘agricultural value’ of a farmhouse and not its market value (which is usually much greater), I returned to ‘the Hawthorns’ and sought Luke’s opinion in light of this change. Would this cause a significant reappraisal of wealthier living arrangements in the countryside? Would this have ramifications for Luke or any of his acquaintances, professional or otherwise?

“If you mean will we ... or they ... leave their farmhouses in droves then no, I don’t think so. A loophole has closed, another one has not opened up.
Most of us clearly want to live in the countryside, have a grand house and have a few acres, and I don’t think that will change. And, if I am entirely honest most of those we are talking about have got enough money to leave to their kids regardless. There are other ways of avoiding death duties anyway, and as shrewd operators they will have professional advice on such matters … As for people buying these types of country properties now, I think some will be less inclined to buy a small farm than, say, a big house, barn conversion or cottage. But, you know, a lot of people like to see tractors and that buzzing about on the fields. I do.” (Luke Murcott).

With a desire to see tractors “buzzing about on the fields” and “own a few acres”, Luke’s “rural dream” was not entirely dissimilar to that of Janet, Mark or Tanya, although – at his own admission – he was far less inclined to get “in at the sharp end” than several of his friends, clients and drinking partners. Similarly, this relative lack of enthusiasm as far as “the Lord of the Manor bit is concerned” manifested itself in Luke’s absence from village affairs. Partly as a result of several “run-ins” with the Parish Council whilst living in the nearby hamlet of Dustham, his communal involvement was restricted to the annual fete and inter-village sports contest, and although he could see “where the New Squire assumption” had come from, it was “not really appropriate in his case”. The material basis was in place but it had not been appropriated as - nor applied according to – a ‘landed’ discourse, and this, to Luke’s mind - marked a fundamental difference between himself and a number of his wealthy compatriots.

5.8. Prestige … and conviction?

As Chaney reminds us, while material goods are undoubtedly of increasing importance in the (post) modern era, they have, in a sense, also ‘dematerialised in the multiplicity of uses and meanings to which they can be put’ (2002, 80).
5. At the farm gate

Although, he suggests, ‘codes are capable of infinite gradations and internal differentiations within any particular group, it has been assumed that the demands of conformity work to create a sort of uniform’: The very ‘attractiveness of the term uniform and its implied expectations of conformity’ should not, however, ‘blind us to the way that the relativism of fashion both individualises as well as communalis’ (Ibid). Thus, with a varying degree of commitment to the materialities of the Office, ‘rural chic’, horticulture, agriculture, rural employment, land ownership and the country pile, Eamesworth’s New Squirearchy is more appropriately conceived of as a significant, (partially) cohesive variation on a theme than anatomical bloc. Without a consistent form constituting its substance, and – to draw on the terminology of Davis – ‘polymorphous as regards its thematic materials’, any structural frame is arbitrary to the intermediary roles of textually mediated discourses and local communities (1992, 149).

It is, notes Chaney, too simplistic to believe that materiality functions effectively without personal meaning (2002, 62), and with a varied appreciation and mobilisation of New Squiredom within Eamesworth, there is a very real need to consider the issue of intention and commitment more fully as regards to a ‘degree of fit’ with the emotional underpinnings of the discourse of the country gentleman. The definition of New Squiredom therefore, as a relevant, suitably christened cohort, must transcend the field, farm and gravelled driveway, and be realised as particular forms of scripted and semi-scripted political, economical, theological and moral engagements with the wider rural community. Here the village and its activities necessarily become express a dominant force that is the Squirearchy, and here the ‘big house’ as an expression of wealth and influence must necessarily become a central focus of social and political life as the subject of, and subject to, a deeply figurative construction; the ‘organic community’ (Cohen 1985).
6. Patronage and the ‘theatre of hospitality’

‘In the social hierarchy the gentry straddled the middle ground between the dominating heights held by the nobility and the broad lowlands occupied by the yeomen, farmers and husbandmen. Within their ranks the gentry, as we have noted, embraced landowners of very different levels of wealth and status, from the humble country gentlemen and members of learned professions to the titled owners of several thousands of acres. But for all of them a degree of wealth, particularly inherited wealth, conferred respectability and, combined with ancient origins and a long connection with one locality, ensured a certain social status and claim to deference. With status went influence, and the greater the wealth the greater the influence.’ (Mingay 1979, 108).

Averring certain elements of the village landscape, including farmhouses, gravelled driveways and many acres of its paddocks and pastures, a significant number of Office-dwelling arrivals laid claim not only to expressions of wealth and success in a rural context, but also to those equine, agricultural and elite identities assembled by, through and of their ownership. In order to legitimately fulfil the celebrated role of the country gentleman, however, it is – or rather would be – necessary to entwine the management of both the land and the people in a manner expressed in the language and performances of privilege, duty and responsibility toward their incumbents (Woods 1995, 28). Considering noblesse oblige in action at the manor house, village fete and some of the more sweeping statements of community spirit it is argued that a degree of paternalism has been sustained (if not rekindled) by Eamesworth’s wealthier debutantes, but that stewardship in the form of spiritual, social and political guidance has not featured on their collective agenda.

Generally absent from, for example, the meetings of the Parish Council, Church Committee and Recreation Association, any possible assumptions regarding a
6. Patronage and the ‘theatre of hospitality’

body of would-be-squires seeking to set the course and pattern of local
development are firmly rebuked. Moreover, it is suggested that even if there were
a trend to political dominance, substantial changes in the structure of rural
governance and employment patterns over the past 150 years would make any
(re)incarnation of the landed gentry in an authoritarian sense unfeasible and
incomplete. Consequently, it is argued that the New Squirearchy could only ever
exist as a partial, impotent and therefore largely unfounded namesake of their
distinguished forebears.

6.1. The weight of expectation

The time-honoured centrepiece of the ‘organic community’, the iconography of the
manor house has long been cultivated and exploited by the ruling elements of
rural society. Here rituals and festivals built around the natural order of the
seasons have for centuries existed as sponsored, deeply contradictory expressions
of both egalitarianism and social stratification, entangled with the ethos of
patriarchy and the discourse of stewardship. Protecting local interests from the
corrupt outer-world and a foolish desire to change, Laurie Lee’s famed childhood
memoir, Cider with Rosie, clearly illustrates the importance such sentiments had in
regimenting, ordering and maintaining rural life in the not-so-distant past:

‘The year revolved around the village, the festivals round the year, the
church round the festivals, the Squire round the church, and the village
round the Squire. The Squire was our centre, a crumbling moot tree; and
few of our local celebrations could take place without his shade. On the
greater occasions he let us loose in his gardens, on the smaller gave us buns
and speeches; and at historic moments of national rejoicing – when kings
were born, enemies vanquished, or the Conservatives won an election – he
6. Patronage and the ‘theatre of hospitality’

ransacked his boxrooms for fancy-dress that we might rejoice in a proper manner.’ (1984, 175).

While it is true that wealth has always been capable of providing the house and estate by which to confirm ones place in the top drawer, it is the associated rhetoric of gentility which has proved equally vital in the designation of status and the perpetuation of social discipline (Newby 1987). Upward mobility has, therefore, historically required the acquisition of a significant property alongside a pronounced embracing of societal responsibility in order to overshadow a belief in lordly breeding and lineage held dear by the populous.

A process which came to a head in the later part of the 18th century as an increased flow of the *nouveau riche* into county seats coincided with the French Revolution; the assertion of paternal values has traditionally been requisite not only for those seeking admission into the ranks of the gentry, but also for those who have sought to maintain their elite standing (see Wingfield Stratford 1956). Reacting to the violent spectacle precipitated by the unabashed self-indulgence of their cross-channel counterparts, this period witnessed the common notion of the English country gentleman wilfully transformed from that of the hunter, gambler, drinker and general pursuer of ‘manly vices’, to benevolent guarantor of agricultural, political, spiritual and cultural integrity. Playing down the role common ‘impostors’ may have had in diluting blue bloodstock (Baker-Jones 1999), a conviction in altruism and social obligation consequently shaped the discourse of the country squire as never before:

‘It is true that the gentry’s belief in their inherent superiority and natural right to regulate the ‘lower orders’ led sometimes to overbearing pride and extensive powers they commanded. Inevitably they also expected an unceasing tribute of deference from the inferiors whose lives they
influenced at every turn … Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the English
gentry in general showed a strong sense of public duty and of social
obligation towards their subordinates. Characteristically they wanted to be
held in popular esteem, to be thought of as generous landlords, humane
administrators, honest magistrates and trustworthy bulwarks against
misfortune. Deference was more to be earned by sincere respect than by
feudal right.’ (Mingay 1976, 164).

As we are subsequently reminded, it would be imprudent to argue that a mythical
‘Merrie England’ has ever really existed under the squirearchy, but their role as
instigators of the darker, poverty-stricken side of rural life has also arguably been
overplayed by some to produce an equally unbalanced depiction. Where the
gentry’s influence could be effective, in the day-to-day life of the villages, it seems
more likely that it was ‘a force for good than for evil’, sweetening and improving
‘the quality of the civilisation which they upheld, by doing much within their
power to safeguard prosperity and employment, by improving public facilities
such as transport by road or river, and by providing hospitality and
entertainment’ (Ibid).

Whilst the intense period of social, political and economic change that was the
twentieth century put pay to the role of the squire as the protector of regional
wealth and service, and fully supplanted the gentry’s responsibility for the
provision and upkeep of local infrastructure (issues that will be considered
directly) their role as benefactor and host has, in many locales, continued in
perpetuity. This condition is identified by Sandy Mitchell of the *Daily Telegraph*,
the focal point of her account of the booming country house market being the
rather caustic testimony of a gentlemen identified only as having ‘inherited a
substantial chunk of the entire Yorkshire landmass’:
“Noblesse oblige still exists. You have got to turn up to everybody’s funeral, whether it is the local beekeeper or the gamekeeper on a neighbour’s estate. If you have the living of the church, you have to appoint the vicar, turn up at church regularly and read the lesson. People get frightfully cheesed off if you don’t perform the role properly.” (2004).

Ordained by public expectation as much as individual generosity and/or egotism, the prime example of noblesse oblige in Eamesworth was the Summer Fete, held in late June at ‘the Manor’ for as long as anyone could remember. Second to none in terms of size or status, Eamesworth Manor surpasses even the sizeable Horvath estate as the local residence of note. Home to the Fowler family in the late fifteenth century, and Sir Edward Page-Turner in the mid to late nineteenth century the ‘big noises’ have, in more recent times, been without truly aristocratic calibre; most notably ‘the Colonel’ and the Bancrofts, who resided here during much of the later part of the twentieth century.

Setting the bar as far as magnanimousness was concerned, the Bancrofts leaving the village in 1988 caused considerable unease among parishioners, some of whom envisaged the right of the village to use the manor grounds on days of celebration being revoked by an inhospitable capitalist recluse. A superfluous concern in that the Bancroft’s successors – Joseph and Patricia Hardy – were equally keen to play the patrician, a subsequent changing of hands in the summer of 2006 brought forth comparable unease. The fete committee, therefore, bore a collective sigh of relief when the newly installed Lord and Lady opened their lawns to the village for the big event of the year, and this was palpable in the grand opening speech as given

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1 Of whom Richard Fowler was famously imprisoned in the Tower of London as a result of a letter forged by his wife, her brother and her lover implicating him in a plot to poison Elizabeth I.
2 The fifth Baronet Dryden of Ambroseden.
by Donald Bramwell, a hereditary Eamesworthian and sausage maker of great renown:

“When we first came to organise the fete in order to raise funds for the church, it was held in the grounds of the vicarage. After a couple of years, however, Mr Bancroft, who was the owner of the Manor at that time, very kindly invited us to the Manor. He oversaw proceedings for a number of years, but, unfortunately, Mrs Bancroft died and not long after that he moved up to Scotland to take up farming on a larger scale. Then we were fortunate enough to have Mr and Mrs Hardy, and when they came we were made to feel very welcome. They became greatly involved with the church committee and consequently played a great part in the running of the village. And when they moved on … and I had also moved away by then … Well, I am pleased to say that the new people who have moved in here … Mr Bolton and Mrs Robinson … Well, I am told that they are very accommodating and very friendly …” (Donald).

Having taken a short pause for a momentary microphone readjustment, Mr Bramwell continued:

“… You can have all the planning and arranging in the world, but if people didn’t come it would be for nothing. I suggest, although you have all come to enjoy yourselves - with the raffle and buying nice things from all these stalls – you should also take time to enjoy the Manor. It has been the centrepiece of this event for many years; well … accept for the one year when things did not go as planned and co-operation was not so easily achieved … I think that for many of you it has become a yearly pilgrimage. You come to see your old friends, and catch up with some of those people you haven’t seen since last year …” (Donald).
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The first opportunity for many residents to gauge their new potentates, they were keen to make certain their intentions toward the Manor, its heritage, and - by association – the village as a whole. As much, it would seem, the village’s to take as the owner’s to give; Donald Bramwell’s patter placed a firm burden of expectation on the shoulders of the new lord and lady, accentuating the generous spirit of past titleholders and a lack of confunction which had, in the past, forestalled the festivities. Mr Terry Bolton and his partner, Mrs Louise Robinson, were clearly on probation, but they had, at least, made a promising start.

6.2. *Afterimage*

With the ribbon across the gatehouse now cut, Mrs Robinson came forward to take a curtsey and receive the customary bouquet of flowers, before making her way around the grounds surveying the array of cakes, wines and assorted knick-knacks on offer. Mr Bolton, however, was not at her side. Conspicuous by his absence, spectators – including a gaggle of four women stood to my right - began to scan the assemblage and exchange opinions as to who they thought he may, or may not, be – if, that was, he had blessed the occasion with his presence in the first instance. Mulling on a question that would go unanswered during the course of that afternoon; I followed protocol and purchased one of the two historical booklets being peddled by the Women’s Institute in aid of village coffers. Praising old Squire Turner as the principle benefactor of an extensive restoration programme carried out at the turn of the century on All Saints (a structure of medieval origins adjacent to the Manor and situated on a small mound at the centre of the village), it greatly encouraged present-day philanthropists to do likewise and support the cause of the crumbling church:

‘After a severe gale that nearly removed what was left of the roof over the dilapidated and neglected church of [nearby village], this amazing man
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turned to the restoration of All Saint’s Church. Hard work by the parishioners and generous donations from Mr Page -Turner (who rebuilt the chantry as a vestry and organ chamber) and Thomas Green [vicar] revealed all the old glories of the church and restored it to its former beauty.’

Striking up a conversation with a couple of middle-aged, immaculately turned-out ladies who were perusing their newly acquired pamphlets in the shade of an old willow tree, the three of us made idle chit-chat about the glorious weather, good turn-out and all-round success of the event before the conversation turned to the contents of the brochure and the enduring legacy of Sir Edward Page-Turner. “You don’t get people like him any more; those sorts of people have gone”, said Cathleen. “I don’t know”, replied Judith with a hint of sarcasm, “we’ll have to see what this new lot are like”. Purposely taking this retort at face-value, I asked the pair if they genuinely believed that, in procuring Eamesworth Manor, Mr Bolton and Mrs Robinson should assume a level of communal responsibility as Page-Turner had a century before:

“Oh, heavens no! We are only having a bit of a joke. But you often hear about these rich businessmen who buy houses and pretend to be country gentlemen. I don’t think the two that have bought this place are like that necessarily, nor the last lot [the Hardys], although I haven’t met them yet. The new lot, that is. I just think that it is nice that they have continued the tradition and let us use the grounds for the fete. I mean, they have bought this place. It is quiet and quite secluded. They are obviously busy people. So it would have been understandable if they told us they did not want us here.” (Cathleen).
Judith picked up this thread:

“Oh yes, they could have told us we were not wanted. But they didn’t. It is just lucky they were willing to get involved and go along with the preparations and everything. I mean ... I think we were exceptionally lucky with the Hardy’s. They got very involved with the village, and with the church in particular. But I think they were perhaps the exception and not the rule. You know, you here of people who buy country houses like this these days who just do not want to get involved. That is why it is so nice to be here, and the goings-on at the Manor have always been an important part of village life. Saying that, it isn’t going to be like when that Page chap owned it, is it? Times have changed. He no-doubt owned the village. Now everybody around here is either retired or goes out [of the village] to work. They don’t have to look up to anybody, no matter how rich they might be ...” (Judith).

Whilst appreciative that the role of the squire as consummate authority had passed, both Cathleen and Judith had nevertheless identified the possibility of nurturing squirely credentials through patronage and a solicitous involvement in village affairs. By no means taken for granted, the Hardy’s pro-active residency had in effect produced a yardstick against which their successors would be judged, and although praised for a commitment to the ongoing tradition of the fete, Mr Bolton’s anonymity in particular had brought about disappointment in some quarters.

As afternoon gave way to evening, and the wives and partners of several regular Office dwellers had packed up their stalls and enjoyed the jazz band’s final number in the company of her ladyship, their other-halves loaded up their wagons with chutneys, raffle prizes and picnic hampers, and headed off for the
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post-match analysis in the Six Tuns. Moving from tombola to barbeque to bash-the-rat with interest and a practised ease, Mrs Robinsons’ performance had been warmly received by the assembly; but it was the subject of her partner’s identity (both as man and Lord) that was to form the crux of the discussion: Who, they wondered, was Terry Bolton? What did he look like? What was his line of business? How much was he worth? Had he, or would he, become a regular? - Was he, perhaps, ‘one of them’?

All these questions and more were discussed at great length; knowledge was pooled, comparisons were made, and conclusions drawn. Two individuals spoke knowingly of ‘Boltons’ business associates, commercial dealings and corporate success (evidenced by a weekly two-page advert in a national newspaper), whilst others even went so far as to use his first name with a balance of certainty and off-handed inconsequentiality, but none could profess to being more than a passing acquaintance of the individual concerned. Even Silvia Threlfall, whose son Justin was currently engaged in repairing extensive tracts of fencing at the big house, could tell them “next to nothing” about this hermetical character:

“It’s a mystery the people that own that … He’s got a bloke that runs it for him … A head-man. Justin went there and met this head man who told him what to do, and he never did see who he was doing it for. This other chap paid him. I mean, his lady friend, whoever she is, mixes a bit, but I don’t think they are like the Hardy’s and how they did things. They really did mix in.” (Silvia Threlfall).

Anxious for the Hardy’s to position themselves within the fabric of Eamesworth, and to gauge the fuller extent and character of their involvement as part of the community, I took afternoon tea with Joseph and Patricia in the conservatory of
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their recently purchased, exquisitely furnished country cottage. Here I enquired as to those circumstances which brought them to the village:

“The house, I should think [looked at Patricia who was nodding in agreement]. We had lived in [nearby town], which was because of my business and a need to be close by. We liked the idea of the village, and the chance of owning an old moated manor house came up and we took it. We spent about 5 years restoring it. Took it back to its glory. Yes, we both came to enjoy village life. Living opposite the church, having the fete, we joined the community from day one.” (Joseph Hardy).

“Having spoken to many people in the village, the Manor seems to be a focus …” (Interviewer).

“Yes it is.” (Joseph Hardy).

“Was it something that you felt people expected of the Manor and yourselves … that you had a responsibility to carry traditions on?”

Joseph: It didn’t really occur to me like that, but yes. From day one, we knew of the annual fete on behalf of the church …” (Interviewer).

“… Yes, the gentleman who sold it to us said that it would be nice if we continued to do these things …” (Patricia Hardy).

“So we did, and thoroughly enjoyed it. We upheld tradition and got to know all the people in the village. And of course, we then got involved with the church.” (Joseph Hardy).
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“Of course, Joseph got roped into being the treasurer of the church. Being an accountant …” (Patricia Hardy)

“… It was kind of inevitable. So I contributed. It came with owning the house. It came with the territory … and for us it’s very important, and the few others that go regularly from the village. Although the Church of England is in the minority now. I think about ten percent of the population attend nationally, and thinking about it, that’s probably the average in the village … but it’s a national trend. There are many small villages like Eamesworth, where you have got no shops … one pub … the church is probably the other focal point in the village …besides the Manor.”

(Joseph Hardy).

Relishing their time in Eamesworth and the Manor, a pleasure relinquished only when the cost of upkeep became too steep and strength of the country house market provided too greater a temptation to ignore, the Hardy’s had forged a lasting relationship with All Saint’s Church – an example that Joseph’s heir-apparent had not as yet followed.

6.3. Spiritual leadership

While economic, administrative and judicial powers provided the most obvious avenues through which the gentry have historically exercised their social domination of the lower ranks, another persuasive channel for their influence lay with the church:

‘Not infrequently church and manor house lay cheek by jowl, the slender spire of one overshadowed by the bulk of the other, symbolising both the affinity and the relationship of power spiritual and temporal. With the
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Reformation the gentry acquired wide powers over tithes and the right of presentation to livings ... and by the early seventeenth century lay imprisonations had become a vast vested interest which cut right across classes, politics and religion.’ (Mingay 1979, 134-135).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the squirearchy has been closely identified with the Church, over whose property it had, for such a long time, so much control; nor that the old gibe of the ‘Tory party at prayer’ has been levelled at the picture book vision of rural services under the C of E (Ibid). Nevertheless, the days when the Lord of the Manor was required to supply tithes or a stipend have (largely) gone, and the age of the squire marshalling his peasants to the pews of a Sunday morning is well and truly past. Charity though, remains, even if - in the case of Eamesworth’s gentry-apparent - there was little perceivable, collective commitment to local societies - religious or otherwise. Willing to attend flower sales, jumble-sales and bazaars, and open their gardens to the general public in aid of the ubiquitous ‘new roof appeal’, few of the new landed elite were proactive on this front:

“I have heard this being mentioned by lots of people who have lived in villages, that village life and the community spirit has died. From my own point of view, when I moved to the village ... and I feel that I am going to make the excuse like so many other people ... that I am just too busy with work. But, when it comes to the weekend I haven’t gone out of my way to get overly involved in village things. I know that [partner] has got involved in some events, and I have tagged along with her ... not unwillingly mind you. I have done a couple of things like bulb planting and litter picking.” (Mark Price).
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Similar arguments were put forward by Christopher Passant, Mark’s neighbour and owner of a floristry chain:

“We are not a driving force, no. For a start, there are other people who are here who have been doing it for years, but that isn’t the best reason is it. Had people like me moving into the village coincided with these people saying “we’ve had enough now, who’s going to take over”, would I have done it? No, I wouldn’t have, because I would struggle to justify the time and input required … although I would like to contribute more.”

(Christopher Passant).

For several of those who had attempted to get involved, however, there was a feeling that their efforts were misinterpreted or unappreciated by what Tanya referred to as the “village Mafia”, often, she suggested, on the basis of their possessing a “big house” and having a “bit of money floating about”

“I have become involved with the village hall committee … and I have been lumbered with the organisation of the fete, but I am so glad. It really feels like I am doing something this time, rather than turning up at meetings and being ignored … I get the impression that a lot of people in the village think I have never done a stroke of work in my life, which is simply not true. They think we are rich, but we have worked bloody hard to get where we are, and we aren’t snobs. But we are seen as rich, interfering newcomers. Take the other week, at the Greek food festival, where the villagers went along and contributed a dish … I made a real effort to go, but it was really cliquey. It is so hard to mix in with the older locals who look at me as if I am a rich incomer and a … kept woman. But I won’t let it get to me. I am determined to mix in.” (Tanya Parkinson).
Driven to contribute a lengthy article to the parish gazette in which she pleaded the case of those “younger people and recent arrivals” who “did care for the village”, but were hampered by work and family commitments, it was a perspective on modern village life shared by Thomas Baster, although he was also keen to acknowledge the “flip side of the coin”:

“It is no doubt a problem ... that organisations in villages like this are run by and for the retired middle class. But in terms of others taking an interest in them ... well ... I am going to make and excuse now. When you come to a village you should mind your own business for a while and not expect to fit straight in ... even if you do have the time, money and inclination to really contribute. But, saying that ... I’ve been here for 8 years, so I should probably take more interest now. I feel I can speak up now. But no, I don’t ... But then, you’ve got to look at the sorts of groups and clubs that exist in the village. The ones that feature in Eamesworth bit of the Observer ³, they are hardly the sorts of things people under fifty five are likely to go to, are they?” (Thomas Baster).

Whilst sympathetic to Tanya’s outlook in that they were aware of several of the ‘old guard’ who had a tendency to be hostile toward those of a limited Eamesworth pedigree, members of the Women’s Institute, Women’s Friendship Group, bell ringers, 3-to-5 Club⁴ and the Men’s Association were generally more convinced of Thomas’s analysis:

“Most of these things [organisations] are tied up with the church in one way or another, and those that go to the one are the same as those that go to

³ A local newspaper which features short weekly columns devoted to the happenings in a number of villages within south east Bedfordshire.
⁴ A group who met bimonthly between 3pm and 5pm and whose activities included theatre trips, leisurely walks, coffee mornings and audiences with guest speakers.
the other, if you know what I mean. What with the majority of folk around here not being overly religious, and a lot still working – and the meetings tend to be in the day time – it’s not surprising we get few new members. And let’s be honest, we are all what you might call fuddy-duddies, so the trendy people who have moved into Eamesworth are not going to want to be seen dead with us lot [laughs!]. Well, it’s true isn’t it!”

(John Franklin, member Men’s Association and bell ringer).

“[3-to-5 Club] It’s mainly for retired people, purely because it starts at 3 o’clock in the afternoon when a lot of younger people are at work. It’s got about 20 members, but we used to have about 40 members. But, you know, people move away and die and what have you.” (Patricia Hardy).

“Can we get anybody to join it [3-to-5 Club], no. When it started we had 50 or more. But a lot of them have moved or died, and new people simply don’t come. There is the Women’s Institute which is a bit more popular, and has been here forever. And of course the Women’s Friendship Club which is run by and from the church, but we don’t get many people and those that we do are in their 40’s and 50’s, and it’s all women in these things, anyway.” (Silvia Threlfall).

“No, no. We get few incomers joining these things. We have the Friends of the Church, but I can’t say as we have that many people turn up. We had a Church [Parochial] Council meeting last week, and there was only two people above the half a dozen that are on the committee. And then there is the Playing Fields Committee. That’s got one or two on it who are from outside the church helping to run it. We manage, though.”

(Sandra Thompson, member of the Parochial Council).
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Far from resenting the presence of incomers in Eamesworth’s social institutions as one might well expect, many longstanding members were saddened (but entirely unsurprised) by their absence, and welcomed any new arrivals; especially those of a dynamic, business-orientated and highly motivated disposition:

“You can read the paper and about these people that come in and upset all the parishoners, well there’s some that did come in and say “I’m in charge now”. Well they did. I have noticed it over the past 50 years ... but not recently. They are “oh, I’m going to do this” and “I’m going to do that”, and you know, they have been good at what they do. And without them ... well. But not recently ... Well, come along these newer people ... these power people ... they must have more go in them to run these things. If we could get some dashing younger types to come in ... the whole place would be going and doing ... But they are so busy that they haven’t got time ... and are a different class of people altogether. Professionals.”

(Silvia Threlfall).

6.4. Ennui

Time, noted Sandy Mitchell, “is the only luxury that the new squires rarely have in oodles”, and this was consistently identified as a principal reason for non-involvement in local organisations: Both by those who professed to being within such a clique, and those who were identified by others as part of this clique. Of these individuals, many felt obliged to contribute to the fabric of village life by attending the ‘big events’ and via financial contributions in lieu of direct, consistent personal involvement, but a good deal more did not. For them, village life represented an animated, but utterly detached backdrop; an aesthetically pleasing vista through which they travelled to and from work, but for which they claimed little or no responsibility, nor made a show of doing so. This, at least, was
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the considered opinion Richard Veasey, the proprietor of an agricultural contract firm and resident of Dappledown Farm:

“My perception of these ex-urban wanabee country gentlemen is perhaps that they moved into the village because they sought the quietness and the slower pace of country life, and it might be that having moved in and looked around they thought ‘we are better off than others around here’ and took the view that they had something to offer along those lines. So whether people are moving into the village with the immediate idea of being the Squire I’m not sure, but it may be something that creeps up on them. I mean you’ve got a few of them … [names] … But there are many others who have a bit of cash, relatively speaking, and they just enjoy living here and that is the end of it.” (Richard Veasey).

A leading member of the Eamesworth Community Association (ECA), Richard sat on the committee which had for several years been working avidly toward the provision of a village hall. Having bought the recreation ground from the County Council, with considerable financial help from the Parish Council and National Playing Fields Association, obtained planning permission, and having secured awards from both South Bedfordshire District Council and the National Big Lottery Fund, this “small, but dedicated band” had also staged numerous fund raising events to help meet remaining expenses. Faced with building tenders much higher than anticipated, the project nevertheless faced a significant shortfall and a letter was subsequently pushed through every letterbox in the village:

‘The best-case scenario is that we will need £35,000 to give the builders the go-ahead to start the building, and £72,500 to complete the project in its entirety. This is where we are asking for your help!!! There are a number of
business people\(^3\) living in the village. A quick add-up of the ones that we know identifies thirty-three, and there must be quite a few that I don’t know of. If you can all be persuaded to make a donation, call it sponsorship – tax deductible – we could very quickly reach our target. There are also very many **private individuals** who may be inclined to help, be it with cash, or the supply of equipment, or furniture.

When the Hall is complete, there will obviously be an acknowledgement of all donations. What we would propose is that anything between £250 and £500 should be designated as a Bronze donation, £500 to £1000 – Silver, and anything over £1000 – Gold. Anybody offering to underwrite the entire shortfall can have triple-platinum! **It’s YOUR Hall, so please help us to get it into use.**

What the chair of the committee openly referred to as “the begging letter”, he made no bones about “preying on the ego” in targeting wealthy entrepreneurs with the promise of enhanced personal status – a play that, in retrospect, fell well short of expectation:

“**You think, therefore, that wealthier locals who enjoy the environment had a responsibility, in regard to their affluence and business capacity, to contribute financially …**” (Interviewer).

“Yes. But we got a bloody nose in regards to *that* letter, I have to say. We had no response from businesses at all. I tend to take the view that people who live in the community … what is the expression *noblesse oblige* … they have got a bit more that the average villager and so it would be nice if they … not necessarily gave huge donations but contributed a few quid here and

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\(^3\) Emphasis in original.
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there. But the response from the business community has essentially been zero. If every businessman stuck - say a grand – in the kitty, it would have solved the problem. And, to be fair, I’ve put a lot of time and effort into this, and even if I had not I would have felt duty bound to contribute.”

(ECA Chairman).

Identifying himself as a commercialist within the “wealthier bracket”, Richard Veasey was nonetheless keen to point out the role he and a few of his ilk have played in seeing the venture through to its conclusion. Despite the indifference shown by the overwhelming majority of those “flashier” Eamesworth residents, the village hall now stands complete and furnished to the leeside of All Saints; testament to the “skill and commitment” of a number of key individuals who “could be bothered to give something back.”

“We’ve got a very good committee. There’s a couple who are very high climbers in the business world. Far in excess of anything I would ever aspire to. The guy that actually took on the writing of the application – and I won’t name him – he was the senior European sales manager of a big American company. Very able and very methodical, which showed in the length of time he took … making sure he’d crossed every ‘t’ and dotted every ‘i’. Those who receive these things said that it was probably the best application they had ever seen, it was so well set out. We’ve got a few other people, you know, within businesses or who own businesses … and we have drawn on their expertise as well. Not just on the application side of things, but also in terms of fundraising.” (ECA committee member).

Requesting anonymity, the modesty of the gentleman in question was, perhaps, the most genuine indication of paternal sentiment that I was to come across in the course of the study, and his considerable efforts remained largely
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unacknowledged by those many Eamesworthians who would go onto enjoy the fruits of his labour in the form of a superbly appointed communal hall. That said, he was - alike several others on the ECA committee – to be found at every fundraiser and social gathering Eamesworth could muster, and his face numbered among those few regularly seen at Parish Council meetings.

6.5. Playing formal rural politics

The only truly political institution in Eamesworth the Parish Council has, in more recent times, been characterised by a universal concern with speeding vehicles, the progress of roadside drainage repairs and the provision of ample street lighting. The verbal exchanges at each session did not betray a community in crisis fractured by burning local disputes, and various elements of the new middle class were not being driven to defend their investment in the rural idyll. With the full compliment of councillors being returned (often reluctantly) without contest, positions standing vacant, and attendance consistently poor⁶ there was little evidence of any collective politicization of in-migrants through this channel. In contrast to Harper’s (1988) observations, individuals were certainly not ‘competing for positions on the Parish Council in order to defend their image of the settlement’; although the sporadic presence of the “green welly brigade” was commented on:

“They don’t really have anything to do with the Parish Council. In fact, it seems that very few people want anything to do with the Council full-stop. But as far as this New Squirearchy, no. Like the majority of people hereabouts, they only want to involve themselves when a problem … something that affects their lives or the character of their beloved village

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⁶ 17 being the maximum number of individuals present at any one meeting during the course of the study.
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[mocking tone] … pops up. Development, for example. They don’t seem to like that. So they might come down to a meeting to voice their objection to a new house or what-have-you. Funnily enough, though, they are the ones with the most money to spend and are most likely to apply for planning permission for an extension or conservatory.” (Alan Bevan, Parish Council).

Unable or unwilling to engage in local politics, the scenario was not that of new residents successfully implementing their professional skills in a fight to represent their interests over those of localism and conservatism (see Woods 2005a, 49), but rather one of indifference and misunderstanding:

“I had run-ins with the Parish Council when I lived in my old village over planning permission. But I’ve never been connected to the Parish Council here [Eamesworth] I don’t think. I haven’t spoken to any of them I don’t think. But if I need them I am sure I can find them.” (Michael Marriott).

“I have only lived here for 10 years, and you can sort of imagine that they might not like me turning up. But I am sure that is not the case. But unless you are involved yourself you can’t criticize it [Parish Council]. People should get involved … and somebody’s got to do it. It’s like government. You hope somebody gets into power that you don’t mind. If you are only aware of 10% of the population, it’s because the other 90% of the population are apathetic and can’t be bothered to vote. As I said, I was going to complain and say ‘I don’t have any time’, but neither does anybody else. And the same few manage to contribute. The problem with the Parish Council and all the other organisations in this village and others is that they are by and for the retired middle class. There is less and less young blood, and I … and I imagine I am not alone in not being entirely sure as to what they do.” (Thomas Baster).
Although furnished with a high level of social mobility, and impressive educational credentials, Thomas was one of a number of respondents who was unsure of the form and function of the Parish Council, and assumed that other, more established villagers, put themselves forward as and when the need arose. Believing the institution to be dominated by retirees with the time and financial resources to dominate proceedings (and thus unrepresentative on this basis) it was a judgement which members of the Council were all too familiar with:

“What people have to remember is that us few who are working for a better village were incomers once. I mean, the newest arrival on the Council has probably been in the village for 10 years. We got involved once, and we want them to for our sake and theirs. To a point, when we got involved there was a degree of resentment from some of the real old villagers who had always run things and wanted to carry on doing so. But they are dead and gone now. I dare say it was harder for us. But we need new blood now. We push leaflets through letter boxes encouraging attendance at meetings ... but they don’t come unless they have specifically applied for planning permission or something. We try and talk people into going, but we don’t want to be restricted to friends and acquaintances. We want those we don’t know – and there are so many now - whether they have lived in Eamesworth for 5 minutes or 5 years.” (Alan Bevan).

In line with the findings of Edwards et al (2002), it became particularly evident that social and economic change had significantly weakened the cohesion of Eamesworth as a community, and had undermined the capacity of a local leadership to manage the political process. As the population had grown, and local residents had become either less inclined or less capable of personal interaction, the ability of the established leadership to identify possible candidates
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and draw them in had inevitably declined. This was despite concerted efforts to raise the profile of the Parish Council, and educate people as to its purpose.

Far from finding themselves marginalised by the exclusivity of an existing local leadership composed of farmers and other members of a traditional power bloc as we may well expect (see Woods 2005a, 49), those ‘more recent’ arrivals with political aspirations in Eamesworth would (presumably) be warmly received onto the committees of the Church Council, Community Association or Parish Council; all of which are principally composed of those from earlier waves of middle class in-migration. Often absent from those meeting places in which the spatial identities of existing networks of governance currently materialized (Ibid. 64), such as the church, Community Association fundraisers and the Men’s Association monthly dinners, a great many of the those who have come into the village over the period the past twenty years are not choosing to inhabit those spaces where co-option regularly takes place: Including the majority of those who have purchased Eamesworth’s more exclusive properties.

The proprietors of small to medium sized businesses, many of those who now find themselves in such residences would, it is argued, be well placed to infiltrate/augment those fluid and dynamic networks which Woods (1998; 2005) identifies as constituting contemporary rural elites. Although much removed from the traditional, middle class agriculturalism identified as the basis of the first distinctive socio-political core within this body, they may have conceivably fallen into a second, principally Conservative core brought together through such organizations as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club and Round Table, or - as part of a younger, less distinct liberal core - operating in the public voluntary sector. Yet, in the course of my studies I found few individuals who had little more than a distant connection with these ‘backstages of local politics’ (Ibid.63), although I did encounter three active members of a local Masonic Lodge. Less
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likely, therefore, to ‘fall’ into local governance, any passage into this arena is evidently reliant upon a stronger degree of self-motivation than perhaps it was in the past, when outside distractions were less prevalent, and a greater number of Eamesworthians (wealthy or otherwise) looked to each other for entertainment, support and fulfilment.

Should, however, the tendency towards residential isolation to reverse, and community interest become ever more geographically tied, the condition of prolonged economic dominance upon which the rural gentry’s ascendancy once rested could not realistically be revived by any aspiring cohort through such traditional socio-political channels as the Parish Council. The extent of their prescriptive power has never been more than limited, despite various parliamentary initiatives to modernise local government and encourage grassroots involvement (e.g. 1972 Local Government Act; 1997 Local Government Act; 2000 Rural White Paper), and in many instances they have acted as little more than a tangible extension of predisposed authority. Furthermore, as the shift towards a more formalized framework of institutions has, throughout much (although not all) of the countryside, witnessed a shift in representation from farmers and landowners to an immigrant middle class, this process has been largely indicative of a loss or dispersal – as opposed to a shift – in unitary power. This was apparent in Jim Eames’ reminisces:

“Well, my grandad was the Chairman of the Parish Council for many years after the First World War, and he was seconded and later replaced by Will Clarke. They ruled the roost on that front. And they were both church wardens at some time or another. I remember them walking me up to

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7 As Mitchell notes, parish councils never fulfilled the hopes and aspirations which their radical progenitors had had for them, and were, in ‘any case, dominated still by the wealthy and educated minorities of rural society, and in many instances their memberships appeared little different from the traditional social and political leaderships of centuries before’ (1951, 394).
church every Sunday morning. I had to go then! [laughs]. As I have told you, there was never a Squire as such in those days, and certainly not since, but one was a biggish farmer and publican – he had the Six Tuns, as you know, and Will Clarke was the village builder. Not a big concern as you might say today, but they were needed, had chaps work for them and commanded respect. And, when something needed doing in the parish, as you would say, it was. 90% of the people hereabouts would get involved if need be. Not like now, well since I came back from the [Second World] War.” (Jim Eames).

I asked Jim to elaborate:

“Since the 1960s and 1970s, when a lot more houses started to pop up around the village … [details the various developments] … Eamesworth was really expanding, growing. And everybody, it seemed wanted to get on the Parish Council and Church Council. There were proper elections then, as I recall. Anyhow, no one of them would listen to the other [laughs]. You would go along to the meetings and watch them bicker, and a great many of thought they were important. But they weren’t, were they. People like Jack Ing and Walter down the road here. They became regular fixtures, but only because it suited them. Various geezers came and went and still do, to my knowledge anyway. At least that what Silvia [neighbour] says, ‘cos I can’t get out and about a lot. All those that I came across, or at least the most part of them, were ‘intakes’ you know, not what you … we … might call old villagers. Not like when Grandad and Will were kicking about.” (Jim Eames).

Manifest within the dialogue, the foundations of a squirely remit, whether held by a blue blooded gent, local dignitary or even farmer or tradesman, have gone in
Eamesworth and, with all probability, the vast majority of rural communities. Should any number of wealthier residents seek to appropriate a degree of legislative influence and responsibility, and attempt to fashion a local political fabric in line with some form of landed vision, they could not realistically do so.

To paraphrase Newby et al (1978), a degree of paternalism is possible, but property – understood as the means to production (and employment) – and the power of reprisal, is no longer there for the taking. For this reason, in the modern era, any attempt to rekindle Squiredom will almost inevitably exist as material and without foundation in the working landscape, and for that reason is a model without many of those fundamentals to which it lays claim. The New Squirearchy becomes, therefore, a part copy not of the real and its spaces, practises and connections, but a truth in its own right; what Jean Baudrillard terms hyperreal. In some ways like his infamous example, Disneyland, the gentrified rural is very clearly a place of play; an appropriated schema of illusions and phantasms associated with a mythical ‘Merrie England’ in which many of its idealised values are exalted in a miniaturized (or rather selectively stripped down) comic – strip form (Baudrillard 1988, 169).

Although I do not wish to dwell too long on the conception of New Squiredom as a pseudo-rural hyperreal, and the underlying debility and ‘infantile degeneration’ which Baudrillard characterises of such spaces, it is pertinent to consider that range of sought-after gadgets which ‘magnetize the crowd’ (Ibid. 170) into direct flows and zones, and which contrast those ‘within’ from those outside into an contradictory, contextual outside. I have, in the course of this thesis, contemplated those fetishized, distinctly ‘rural’ objects (e.g. four-wheel drives, farmhouses and clothes) and arenas (e.g. the public house, the village fete) in which New Squires have been identified in the midst of others, but it also necessary to take into account those determinably exclusive, detached regions which mark out the
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landed gentry of old, and which may also serve to mark out a remade, reinvented or reprised phenomenon of the present. This will be the focus of the ensuing chapter, where those more – or in fact less - ‘remote’ spaces and performances of Eamesworth’s ‘privileged few’ will be fully examined.
‘A great follower of the hounds and racing, he excelled at every branch of sport. On one occasion he brought down 100 pheasants with 100 shots, and on another he bagged 97 grouse with 97 shots; he could put ten bullets from a duelling pistol through the ace of diamonds at 30 feet; at forty-five, after a crippling accident in the hunting field, he rode 200 miles across country in nine hours for a wager; he was a fine oarsman and brilliant tennis player, and at cricket he ranked among the six best amateurs in England. At sixty-eight he rode his own horse at Goodwood and lost by a neck. Racing was his downfall and throughout his life he could never resist a wager: in advanced age he once sat in his chair for twenty-four hours without moving in order to win a sovereign.’

(Squire Osbaldeston; the ‘Squire of all England’. Mingay 1976, 179).

Eamesworth’s new squires, then - if new ‘squires’ they can justifiably be labelled - are far from being an emergent body of local power-brokers bent on appropriating the leadership credentials of the vanished squire. Not seeking positions of authority and influence via formal traditional political channels, they are neither infiltrating nor establishing the fluid and dynamic networks which Woods (1998; 2005) has associated with the functioning of contemporary rural elites. They are not, observed Tom Baster, “the sort of people who know the big fish in the county”. Nevertheless, the majority of the men certainly enjoyed a number of those sports, pastimes and pleasures allied to rural high-society, as this - alongside an ownership of high-end properties – has been a crucial element of the media’s fascination with nouveau gentry: A fascination which has done much by way of alerting Eamesworthians to the possible rebirth of a ‘hunting and shooting’ set in their midst, although the suitable application of this cliché was, in reality, rather selective. Instead, a firmer set of connections could be drawn through particular public schools, associated rugby clubs and in accordance with more broad-
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spectrum, ostensibly middle-class propositions, practises and concerns, such as those relating to the environment, life-cycle and the raising of children.

7.1. The passing of the hunt

At its peak in the Edwardian era, where the popularity of the sport was such that there were almost 350 assorted packs in England and Wales alone (Horn 1992, 130), hunting was - within the cultural norms of the time - at once accepted as an activity confirming the country gent’s proximity to nature and as a unifying force supported by all parts of the population (Newby 1987). Yet, with working class participation strictly regulated by an internal hierarchy which reflected and asserted the existing class structure (Woods 1997), it was patently an elite sport; something not lost on one of Eamesworth’s oldest residents:

“Yes, only the well-to-do and local dignitaries as you might say were regular fixtures on the hunt. I mean, my old mate Wally Cox used to block the holes1 for them and turn up at the meeting, but he didn’t ride. No way. I mean the Prince of Wales rode through here in the 1930’s, and I remember that now. I would have been a young lad then, around 10 or 12 … I wasn’t allowed out to watch the hunt when I was very young, you understand. Anyway, I would go down with my uncle and my grandfather and they would run across their fields, jump the low hedges and latch-gates and then off over the railway line towards Dunstable. Except one time, I remember, old Harry Brown … now he owned a big fleet of trucks that took the sand out the pits in Leighton [Buzzard] – well he didn’t go over the railway line with them. No, he went over a hedge and into the brook. The silly old sod

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1 Obstructing the entrance to foxes’ dens in order to prevent them going to ground during the chase.
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got soaked, and that made me laugh all the more. His horse was alright though, which was the important thing I suppose.” (Jim Eames).

Amalgamated with the Old Berkeley and South Oxfordshire hunts in 1970 (and more recently combined with the Garth and South Berkshire hunts) the Hertfordshire Hunt Jim watched as a child is now part of the Vale of Aylesbury Hunt, based in the hamlet of Kimblewick, twenty miles to the South West of Eamesworth. Traditionally gathering on the village green opposite the Six Tuns, from which successive landlords would emerge to fill stirrup cups with port, brandy or whiskey, the hunt has neither met nor run in the village for over 15 years.

Cut off by the completion of A505 (otherwise known as the Leighton Buzzard bypass) in late 1997, and with at least two local farmers denying access to their land, the community’s connection with fox hunting has been limited at best for two generations, and is now practically non-existent. With the last known resident huntsmen and women either dying or leaving the village over 20 years ago, and the Office stripped of its hunting paraphernalia (including an authentic, 3 foot long brass horn and photograph of a mounted Edward VIII), the chance of any future involvement in the sport is slim at best. Despite various media reports of a nationwide resurgence in popularity since the introduction of the Hunting Act in 2005 (e.g. Aslet 2007; McGee 2005), this is most definitely not the case in Eamesworth:

“We have been going to the Hunt Ball and gone to the charity dinners they hold once or twice a year, but there is nobody else from Eamesworth or hereabouts and I can tell you that for a fact. I mean, we have known one of the masters for years, so that’s why we go … but there aren’t too many old-style country people left round here any more, and a lot of those who have
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moved in, despite their pretensions to being like that ... probably don’t agree with blood sports ...” (Alistair Gillig).

An accurate assumption, the bulk of those people I encountered were either ambivalent toward the practise of hunting with dogs, or against it in principle; although there was the general feeling that it was a subject not to be broached – at least not in unfamiliar company:

“I will be honest with you, it’s not the sort of subject you raise in the pub is it? For the sake of an easy life at any rate. I know most of us in the countryside are supposed to be against it, but I can’t think of any of my friends or acquaintances that are in the slightest bit bothered about the ban. Even those that seem to want to live the country life …” (Luke).

“I am rather uncomfortable talking about foxhunting. Like stopping development ... its one of those issues that, as a person living in the countryside – especially one who has moved in from the town - you either support in line with the wishes of real country folk, whoever they may be, or preferably keep your mouth shut.” (Michael).

Both self-proclaimed incomers and aficionados of the ‘outdoor life’, Luke and Michael were conscious that, in openly opposing the right to hunt, they would significantly reduce their countryist credentials in the eyes of largely figurative ensemble of rural traditionalists. This, it transpired, was equally true of shooting, where the identity of suitable targets was divisive issue even among Luke and Michael’s social circle.
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7.2. **A breech of conduct**

‘Hunting, like cricket and sometimes bowling, brought squire and village together, [and] many a young lad acquired valuable patronage, and perhaps the entry to a good career, through making his mark in the squire’s eleven. Shooting was a different story. It set the squire and his grand friends apart from the landowning classes. By law ... shooting was restricted to the superior land owning classes. The farmers disliked game preservation because the pheasants, partridges, hares and rabbits stripped their fields ... [and] the ordinary villagers were viewed with suspicion as actual or potential poachers …’ (Mingay 1976, 180).

Of all those performances that herald the emergence of the New Squirearchy in the public imagination, shooting sits alongside the purchase of a substantial country pile as a primary indicator. With the amount of certificates on issue for firearms and - more appositely - shotguns on the increase for the first time since the passing of the 1968 Firearms Act (Coleman and Kaiza 2005), and the largest ‘umbrella’ shooting organization in the country – the British Association of Shooting and Conservation (BASC) – now enjoying a steady annual increment in its membership base, it is a trend that has been strongly felt in the Home Counties. This was put to me by the Managing Director of Broomhill Country Club:

“We [Broomhills] have seen a significant growth in trade over the past decade and certainly over the past two-to-three years since I have taken over as director, both in terms of membership and more casual users. And, having spoken to my equivalents in some of the other, lets say equally prestigious, shooting grounds in Beds, Herts and Bucks, they are doing more and more trade each year as well. When you consider that over a million people now have shotgun licences’ in the UK, that’s one in sixty – at
least half of which are probably using their guns for sport and not pest control at facilities such as ours … And a lot of these people will be active in introducing others to the sport.”

(Managing Director, Broomhill Country Club).

It is a process that has clearly taken place as regards to the Six Tun’s New Squires, of the 13 Office-dwellers who now regularly attend Broomhills on a Sunday morning, 9 were initiated by two others; Stephen Irving and Barry Burnett. Both associates of the club for over a decade, they had been instrumental in arranging lessons for their compatriots and organising collective shoots at different ranges in and around South Bedfordshire:

“As some one who gives lessons and introduces people to the sport, as it were, I have noticed that the number of people wanting to try out clay pigeon and live shooting is definitely on the up, and the type of person is becoming … well, a bit more varied. The sport is gradually becoming less snobby, and more and more people are introducing their friends … Saying that, I can’t say that it is not an expensive hobby, and naturally that limits who can take it up as a regular activity.”

(Instructor, Broomhill Country Club).

Meeting at the Six Tuns subsequent to each session, often wearing the “clobber” associated with the sport and the identikit countryman more generally, various members of the group were conscious of the elitist tradition of shooting as detailed by their sometime-instructor, and the image they may - or may not - be portraying to other villagers as a result. This was particularly evident when one or two ‘characters’ would arrive at the pub in breeks and tweed – something that served to cause slight embarrassment for at least one of their colleagues, who felt guilt by association:
“You say about a New Squirearchy … it is the classic thing. You know there are people who … I mean, there is one person who I actually get on very well with. He wears plus fours, he does do a lot of shooting … a smashing chap and everything … but there’s that feeling of … But to turn up [in pub after the shoot] in your plus fours and tweeds … That is not my idea of … I kind of feel embarrassed … I don’t want to sound like I am taking the piss, but who do you think he is? The Duke of so-and-so?”

(Christopher Passant).

Unapologetic for their get-up, those who were seen as “getting into the spirit of things too much” by those within and beyond their social circle were eager to point out that their squirely trappings had come as a necessary result of their activities, not as a precursor. This justified, for example, their ownership of land and four-wheel-drives:

“Getting a few fields meant that myself and the boy [son] could do a bit of shooting as and when.” (Luke Murcott).

“I enjoy having a pop at a few clays [pigeons]. Sometimes me and a couple of friends will get the trap out and do some shooting on the fields behind the paddocks.” (Mark Price).

“People assume we drive Range … no wait a minute … Chelsea Tractors because they are fashionable and extravagant and all of that. I will admit, they are nice motors and they cost a few bob, but some of us do actually use them. We take them shooting and drive across muddy fields and sling the guns and boots in the back. You need them on that front. The Merc [Mercedes Benz] would soon get stuck and covered in shit”. (Stephen).
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Priming much of the banter in the Office post-shoot, the question of extravagant shooting props was for the most part laughed off, causing little genuine friction, humiliation or antipathy. This issue of ‘live’ shooting, however, did - or rather would have done - should it have been discussed in the open, something that was contrary to shooting etiquette:

“The issue of ‘live’ sport is one that our regular members do not tend to discuss beyond technicalities. They know better. I can tell you that I have been a twice-a-week shooter for the past twenty years, but that is clays and not live sport. I haven’t got it in me to shoot an animal, to be honest with you, and there are more of us than you might think. You occasionally speak to those starting out in the sport and, and one or two will say “clay discs are one thing, but real birds are quite another”. So I am not the only one … And while the number of people going on live shoots is on the up, how long that will last I don’t know. I am pretty certain that ten years down the line, it will be the next blood sport after fox hunting to go.”

(Managing Director, Broomhill Country Club).

A divide that was manifest in the Office, there were those who were avid game shooters, and those who found the prospect unpleasant if not distasteful, although both sides were careful to observe protocol:

“I don’t see a lot of point in shooting anything that is alive if you are simply concerned with being a good shot. Clays prove that either way. I mean, I have actually shot rabbits, but only because they are a nuisance. But I wouldn’t do it out of fun. But it isn’t for me to tell others that they cannot shoot birds or whatever on land that doesn’t belong to me …” (Luke).
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“I enjoy pheasant shooting, and I don’t make any bones about that. I go up to Scotland a couple of times a year and shoot grouse as well ... I was invited up with a business acquaintance-cum-friend, and now I go regularly and have taken clients as well. As I said, I enjoy it, and if someone doesn’t like the idea of it then they don’t have to come along, do they?” (Michael).

Attentive to, but unmoved by, perceived feelings of his associates, Michael’s comments were indicative of the range - like the public house – being a space not only of leisure, but also a space of ‘soft’ business.

While Michael was in the minority among Office-dwellers as far as downing live birds in the company of clients was concerned, the role of shooting in general as a networking tool for the New Squirearchy both within and beyond Eamesworth was made clear to me on several occasions, and this tallied with the experiences of those owning and operating local shooting facilities, and reports in national newspapers:

“I go shooting with some of the chaps around here, but I prefer going down to Holland & Holland. They make some very good guns and are a classy outfit ... They have lots of different stands open on their corporate days, and you can go around doing different activities, which I find fun. I take my clients and pay for the day. They always have a celebrity along and, they raise a lot of money for charity. Which is nice ... It’s very much a lads day out, but it oils the wheels, so to speak.” (Michael Marriot).

“A growing number of our customers are corporate, and that is true of the industry as a whole. They are, if you like, business people on business, and we are doing more and more corporate outings, whether they be fun days,
courting customers, thank yous or whatever. And what we have started to find is that more and more people are coming to us for tuition having been invited out clay pigeon shooting or game shooting. They don’t want to turn up and look like wallys in front of their boss, so they come to us – and we are only too happy to show them the ropes. For a fee of course!”

(Managing Director, Broomhill Country Club).

“Particularly attractive to property developers, bankers, chide executives and entrepreneurs for whom it is a great networking opportunity … it is thought that about 150 chief executives of Britain’s 250 biggest companies shoot regularly, as well as many senior figures in the venture capital industries.” (Bawden 2004, 11).

An exclusively male² pursuit among Eamesworth’s business elite (although a number of wives and partners had been on ‘family’ and ‘ladies’ days) Michael, in particular, was emphatic that his involvement in the sport should be taken in this context: That he defined himself as an entrepreneur using shooting as a means of business networking, not as a “true-blue gun” which, he surmised, patently marked out “pseudo Lords-of-the Manor” as those not born into the scene. This he assured me, was true for the greater proportion “of others in the gang”, who also used prestigious horse-races in a similar vein, without pretending to be “sheiks and trainers”.

7.3. Classic pretensions

‘Ascot is so exclusive that it is the only racecourse in the world where the horses own the people.’ (Buchwold, 1957).

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² Although, on a national scale, it should be noted that an increasing percentage of those participating in shooting are female (Woods and Elliot 2007, 11).
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Often referred to as the ‘sport of kings’, horseracing is popular diversion amongst Eamesworth’s incumbent gentry, with both male and female elements to be found at a good many of those ‘classic’ meets on the calendar, whether they be on the flat or steeplechase (national hunt). Seen at Aintree for the Grand National, Cheltenham on Gold Cup week, Doncaster for the St Leger and Epsom for the Derby, Royal Ascot is without doubt one of the principle social events of the year. Whether congregating in one of the Berkshire racecourse’s highly prized (and highly priced) private boxes, or joining the throng in the public enclosure, it is an outing characterised by the spending of much money and the consumption of vast quantities of champagne:

“I have gone to Ascot for well over twenty years, and always have a great time. Of course, we always end up three parts pissed, sometimes before we get there. In the old days before drink-driving, I remember me and the chaps always used to stop at a hotel on the way up there, and try and drink them out of champagne. I remember we had been drinking away in there all lunchtime and we decided to race the rest of the way. I had an Aston [Martin] DBS at the time and my mate had a Jaguar XJS and he ends up in a hedge trying to take me on the corner. He was alright, he got out and hopped in my passenger seat and off we went to the races and lost a fortune, same as always.” (John Mennie).

“I really enjoy Royal Ascot, especially Ladies Day. I often go with my sister, because it is a bit of a meat market and we always drink way too much bubbly. Anyway the chaps always like to have a boozy day without the women, so we women like to get our own back. We go and spend all their money! [laughs]. But of course, it’s not only the cost of the day itself. The specially-bought dress and hat generally cost a fortune … But you have to look better than the other girls, don’t you.” (Tanya Parkinson).
Highlighting the general air of competition that permeates the day, this was not confined to the women. Unable to deviate too much from the dress code of morning suit (and occasional top hat and walking cane) in a game of sartorial one-upmanship, members of the male contingent resorted to chartering limousines and helicopters for the 100 mile round trip, and engaged in what Craig Burrett wincingly referred to as “competitive punting”.

Signing up for the annual Eamesworth village coach trip to Ascot not long after moving into the village in order to get “better acquainted with the locals”, Craig Cabena and his wife Maria had enjoyed attending this communal get-together until, like a few of their closer friends, they opted out on the basis of it becoming an overly boisterous, dissolute spectacle:

“It used to be good fun, but we noticed that it all started to get over the top and out of hand, especially when you were on the coach and couldn’t, you know … escape. I found it too much, and I know Craig did. Some of the people that drink in the bar [Six Tuns] … you know who I mean [list of names], they would be well on the way before that had even got on the coach. They got cruder and cruder, and when you got to Ascot itself you could escape them and they would be shoving how much money they were spending down your throat.” (Maria).

“You started to dread the whole affair, so that is we stopped going. I would put a few quid down, no more than £20 on any one race, but some of the guys were laying down hundreds. It seemed to me that they were having a contest to see who could place the biggest bet and loose … Pretending that they didn’t care … like it was drop in the ocean to them. Pathetic.” (Craig).
For both Craig and Maria, the decadent behaviour of a few had spoiled their enjoyment of Ascot and transformed the day into something akin to “sixth form house party”. Those accused of boyish indiscretions, however, were mostly unrepentant and steadfastly unconvinced that they had consistently undermined the enjoyment of others. Royal Ascot, they argued, was the one event on the racing calendar where drinking and carousing were “practically expected”, and while some of their contemporaries were prone to good spirits they never knowingly hurt or upset other race goers:

“Why do people choose to go to Ascot in the first place? Because it is a big social event where everybody lets their hair down. If it is sombre racing you want, then go to Towcester on a wet Wednesday afternoon. Myself, and some of the others that I drink with in the [Six] Tuns actually do go to other meetings … but for a lot of people that go to Ascot it is the one meeting that they will go to in the year. If anything we are more ardent followers …” (Luke).

With the subtext that the horseracing credentials of many of those Office-dwellers present on the Eamesworth Ascot excursion were comparatively well established, and that - by implication - they were in a better position to judge appropriate conduct, Luke was quick to call attention to the fact that he often entertained some of his “closer” clients and drinking partners at less prestigious tracks. Of the opinion that horseracing, like shooting, served as an effective (and chiefly tax-deductible) conduit through which to combine business and pleasure; these activities, he noted, now matched the golf course in popularity among his white-collar colleagues as a venue for brokering deals. This was not to suggest, however, that fairways and clubhouse had been totally supplanted on this front.
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7.4. **Golf**

“You get to know more of the character of a man in a round of golf than in six months of political experience.” (David Lloyd-George).

Hardly an activity that, in this day and age, could be reasonably assumed to singularly mark out the existence of would-be landed gentry, golf has nevertheless historically operated as an elite pastime. Requiring an excess of time, money and, by its very nature, a rural setting, the game became a fashionable leisure activity for the upper classes during Edwardian years (see Horn 1992). Continuing to exist as an exclusive pursuit until the mid to late 1970s (and arguably beyond) when the number of European golfers (and courses) began to rise rapidly\(^3\), it retains a firm foothold in the public imagination as being a principle apparatus through which an ‘inner circle of big business’ organizes and mobilises itself (Grunig, Toth and Hon 2001).

A staple within the ‘social embeddedness’ framework employed by many sociological accounts of mercantile and financial networks (e.g. Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Uzzi 1996), the golf course has oft been identified as a key variable in the reciprocal development of business relations; especially amid small to medium sized firms (e.g. Beaverstock 2002; Bryson *et al* 1993; Chell and Baines 2000). Here, embedding commercial transactions ‘in the fairway’ - as with the shooting range and, to a lesser extent, the restaurant and public house – promotes benefits through enacting expectations of trust and reciprocal obligation that ‘actors espouse as the right and proper protocols for governing exchange with persons they have come to know’ (Uzzi 1999, 485). Purporting to ‘good faith’, the ‘meeting of minds’ and the ‘sharing of value and good fortune’, embedding was a

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\(^3\) The number of courses in mainland Europe has increased by 80% in ten years, while the number of golfers is growing by 5% annually (Charles 2006).
process cognitively familiar to a good number of executives and entrepreneurs whom I encountered in and around Eamesworth and had on occasion served as grounds for further friendship. Luke Murcott, Mark Price and Christopher Passant, for example, had all played golf with one another, and variously with other local residents, on the pretext of business;

“Although I think it is increasingly frowned upon … laughed at even … doing business on the golf course. I have certainly done it in a minor, off the cuff way. You have to know someone first, and know that they play golf, but it can certainly take the strict formality out of any discussions.”

(Christopher).

“Even when you are playing as friends on a Saturday morning, for example, you are always talking about what has happened in the week, and a lot of that is business related. Considering that the majority of people I play with have their own companies, and that some of them are clients of mine as well … it is practically inevitable we are going to discuss what is going on at work … as well as how the wife, kids and dog is so-to-speak … Even if we are not actually doing any business together, we ask each other advice and bounce ideas off of each other … you know, problems with staff and tax and so on and so forth.” (Luke).

At all times a mix of business and pleasure, even when “the lads” go on one of their occasional golfing excursions to France, Spain or Dubai, the raising of clubs continues to be accompanied by the casual chatter of balance-sheets and margins.

A traditionally male-orientated forum, wives and partners were habitually absent from these extended golfing sessions. They did, however, occasionally take part
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in ‘mixed days’, and many of them had taken up the sport amongst themselves, playing on a more regular basis than their significant other:

“It [golf] used to be a really big thing amongst the blokes, but it is not so much now … since the kids have come onto the scene and they have less free time … But we do all get together and play as couples. I think it’s alright, not great, but I know it makes my husband happy. But I have really embarrassed him the last few times I have gone along … But some of the girls can play and go far more often than the men, maybe once or twice a week.” (Tanya Parkinson).

Entering what Mott has described as ‘one of the last bastions of retreating chauvinism’ (1996, 7), they are part of a female contingent which has more than doubled since 1979 and is set to grow further (Kennedy 1997). Becoming members and associates of some of the more exclusive clubs in the south Bedfordshire region, including Woburn, Mentmore, Berkhamstead and Ashridge, they were challenging many of those oppressive gender relations that were – and in some instances still are - evident in their hallowed corridors:

“They can be quite stuffy, and you definitely get the sense that some of the older members resent you being there. But we don’t care … we sort of revel in it at times. We pay our fees, have all the gear and obey the rules … so why shouldn’t we be there? What is more, the women that are involved tend to have … for want of a better description … rich husbands and don’t work … That means that they tend to play in the daytime and are not clogging up the fairways on the evenings and at weekends.” (Maria).

Unusual in being the managing director of her own firm, a firm which, as it happened, designed and marketed golfing apparel and equipment, Maria made

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the point that while sexual intolerance lingered within the industry, it was rarely extended to herself and her female companions by those in the company of her husband; despite their having what she described as a general air of “laddishness and competitiveness” on the tee. This was a sentiment shared by Tanya, who had found it amusing when her spouse suggested she take up golf in order to unwind:

“He [husband] is so competitive … they all are. You wouldn’t think it is a game that men play to relax. They all seem to come back more wound up than ever. Unless they’ve won of course. The ladies are far more chilled out. It is more about having a giggle, and we go to out to lunch afterwards and maybe shopping …” (Tanya).

Tallying with broader evidence suggesting that male golfers place a greater value on winning and skill acquisition (see Shotton et al 2007), golf nevertheless stood out as a tangible connection within and between both male and female contingents of Eamesworth’s wealthier would-be lords and ladies, both as an interest and in practise. Needless to say, many other villagers who were not commonly associated with New Squiredom could also be customarily found on the golf course, as they could stood on sidelines of the rugby pitch on a wet Saturday afternoon.

7.5. Rugby

‘Expansion brought with it conflict. The middle-class version of the playing field was a testing ground for moral virtues and was reserved for amateurs with spare time to play and train. The adept working-class rugger wanted to be paid, if only in the sense of compensation for the time off work and the costs of travel. But the erosion of the amateur spirit was widely lamented. Clubs insisted that ‘players’ (that is, professionals) had separate
changing rooms from ‘gentlemen’ (that is amateurs) … If not quite sacred, it [rugby] had acquired a nobility that would be tarnished by money and the urge to win at all costs. Like the medieval knight, the true sportsman sought nothing more than honour and reputation.’ (James 2006, 335).

Referring to the so-called ‘Great Schism’ of the late 1900s, a period in which the National Rugby Union was coming to terms with the contravention of a strict amateur code forbidding the remuneration of players, this passage clearly underscores the privileged roots of rugby and its longstanding, but often difficult, relationship with chivalry and the qualities of bravery, loyalty and good judgement (Girouard 1981). Inherently tied to the gentlemanly ethic as a devise for perpetuating distinctions of status and authority through rituals of social intercourse (Woods 2005a, 28), the rugby pitch, as with the golf course, once cemented as opposed to straddled the class system, but this is no longer realistically the case. In rude health, the number of people playing rugby union from all backgrounds has been rising steadily over the past decade, and match day attendances have also climbed considerably in this period (Austin 2004).

Benefiting from this surge in popularity, clubs in and around Eamesworth – most notably Dunstablians RFC and Leighton Buzzard RFC – have all experienced a growth in membership over the past few seasons, and, in regard to the latter, are enjoying the patronage of some of the community’s wealthier arrivals:

“We have definitely seen a boost over the past five years, and a lot of that has to do with having a new club steward who has put a bit of oomph into the proceedings. We now have more people willing – even wanting – to be on the committee, rather than having just the same old few running things … No disrespect, but some of the chaps on the committee now are successful local businessman … As well as having the money to support the
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club – not directly, but getting odd jobs done for free or cost – they know how to operate and get the best deals for the clubs money. Look at Stephen [Irving]. He has done an awful lot for the club since he has got involved.”

(Rugby club committee member).

The owner of a carpentry firm, and occupant of Primrose Cottage (a house that has been extended no less than three times in fifteen years), Stephen has played “on and off as a prop-forward with ‘the Buzzards’ for donkeys years”, and has seen both sons retrace his efforts and progress through the youth sections into the clubs’ third and fourth teams. Described as a ‘steady and committed player’, he has now hung his boots up and taken his place among the many ‘social members’ who frequent the clubhouse on evenings and weekends, and populate the many pre-match lunches that occur throughout the season.

Habitually revert[ing from a polite, three course meal into a feral all-day drinking session, Stephen often organised a table at these events, attending with an assortment of other local ex-players, businessmen, shooters, and farmers. Frequently incorporating a host of other Office-dwellers whose relationship with the club (and village it claimed to represent) seemed much more short-lived and momentary; this was a factor that irked some of the older faces on the scene:

“I have lived in Eamesworth for 30 years now, and I have noticed that these _faux riche_ types that have moved in over the past 10 years or so have started to muscle-in on local affairs and ‘dos’ … and they are now starting to dominate the affairs at the rugby club. Events like the annual Sportsman’s Dinner and pre-match lunches have now become a place to mingle with each other and dress up in tuxedos and ball gowns. This is something they like to do. As a consequence they have put such a demand on for these get-
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togethers that they are effectively displacing proper players and locals because there are not enough tickets to go around.”

(Rugby club staff member/ former player).

Of the opinion that a fair few of these characters “had not lifted a rugby ball in anger since leaving school”, it was an assumption that found itself well wide of the mark; and their connection with the sport – and with each other – became apparent one afternoon when I joined Michael Murcott and Mark Price at their table one afternoon.

Both enjoying the opportunity for a “good piss up”, but also revelling in the prospect of a good game of rugby, both Michael and Mark had attended “at least half a dozen” pre-match lunches since moving into Eamesworth, and both had also played on one of the four pitches in the not-so-distant past. Friendly with a number of club sponsors, several of whom they were on first name terms with, I asked them if they had ever considered following suit and adding their respective businesses to one of the corporate billboards littered around the ground. Being a stockbroker, Michael made the point that his trade did not utilise this form of advertising, although he was more than willing to provide a trophy and/or prize “in the spirit of getting involved”. Mark, on the other hand, had already acted as a corporate benefactor – although this was for Tring RFC, not Leighton Buzzard RFC. A current member and former player at the club, he had, like a number of his close friends, progressed into their ranks having also played in the ‘sevens’ for Berkhamstead Collegiate and, prior to this, Berkhamstead Boys School.

In what Ryan Walker, a real estate manager and former prefect, determined to be a “natural progression”, several New Squires had followed this route and continued to support these teams as financial backers, members and spectators. Another element of an increasingly visible informal, semi-exclusive network operating in
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and around Eamesworth, characterizations of the villages’ nouveaux gentry as an ‘old boy network’ thus seemed ever-more appropriate and increasingly difficult to dismiss as over-employed cliché. Indeed, the fact that I had not spotted such a union at the outset of the study came as something of a surprise to Tanya:

“Have you not noticed … Oh my god? They are all public schoolboys aren’t they, the chaps that drink in the Six Tuns on Wednesday with [husband]. Yes, they all go out to play together at the pub, the rugby club, or the golf club - and goodness knows where else - but they met at school … They have that air about them, don’t they, although I don’t think [husband] would like me saying that.” (Tanya Parkinson).

I asked Tanya to elaborate:

“They are all very similar in their attitude and way of thinking. It’s a boy’s network and they all back each other up and stick together. They are very guarded and close kni, and I think that is partly why they do a lot of business together. I am not saying they are like the Masons or anything like that. They are friends first and then business associates, but they help each out …” (Tanya Parkinson).

Identifying her husband and his cohorts as a product of that privileged arena which devised, orchestrated and formerly dominated not only the game of rugby, but the world of business and politics also, Tanya’s comments were suggestive of the glue between Eamesworth’s New Squires being more than that of shared aspirations and rarefied rustic lifestyles, but rather that of a ‘privileged’ schooling and upbringing. Like the men-about-town and country squires of old, their edifying pool and cultural mores seemed to transcend urban/rural distinctions,
operating through an altogether wider amalgam of nodes and spaces within and beyond the countryside.

7.6. Public schools

‘That’s the public school system all over. They may kick you out, but they never let you down.’ (Evelyn Waugh).

Defoe once noted that the squirearchy was, for the most part, drawn to live not like men of learning, but like gentlemen; ‘enjoying their estates and their pleasures to the envy of nobody’ (1890, 138). Yet, and rather contradictorily, he went on to argue that what made the upstarts from the world of business acceptable in the circles of the old-established gentry was the education they could afford to for their sons, and, to a lesser extent, their daughters. So, it was the newcomer’s son who ‘was sent early to school, has good parts and has improved them by learning, travel, conversation and reading, and above all with a modest courteous gentleman like behaviour: despise as you will, he will be a gentleman in spite of all the distinctions we can make’ (Ibid. 139). Written at a time when English education was continuing to develop along alternate social and functional lines, these comments are symptomatic of the then-squirearchy’s concern with grammar schools and, for a wealthy minority, public schools, universities and Inns as the principle preparation for a prospective role among the ruling class; a role that ‘might be significant in the national sense, or might be obscurely parochial’ (Mingay 1976, 163).

A common base cementing the membership of an homogenous if hierarchal elite, the ‘great and dangerous gulf’ (Ibid) this wrought between the poorly and publicly educated has, in more recent times, diminished greatly in terms of the quality - or at least the possibility - of learning. The prestige and potential afforded
by a private education, however, has not necessarily declined at the same rate (see Cox 1998), and this was an undertow in both Luke Murcott and Micheal Marriot’s rationale in ‘going public’ with their children:

“I happen to think that if financially you can afford private education, and have an option as to how you educate your child then there is every possible chance that in a class with less than 18 children he might get a better education. It can pay dividends in later life. Not just by way of knowledge, but also ... in terms of going to school with certain ... [long pause] ... types of people who might be in a position to help you later on in life. And visa versa of course ... I mean, a lot of the people I associate with went to Berkhamstead, I have happened to have fallen in with them more by chance than anything. Through business really, and I can’t say I haven’t benefited. Through introductions and so forth. But I might not have gotten in so easily ... if you see what I mean.” (Luke Murcott).

“I hated school non-stop, so by the time I left school the idea of sending my children there [Berkhamstead] really went against the grain. But in the same way that I think that I rebelled fairly early on in my school days, I have since come round to accepting certain things in life ... even by the time I was in my mid twenties and we decided to have children. I considered private school to perhaps be the better of two evils. Certainly when they started going to school, and we were living in Hemel Hempstead at the time ... and of the available schools at the time I just felt there was no way my kids were going to go to any of them. As a consequence we started them off in a private nursery and so on.”

(Michael Marriot).
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Unlike Luke, who attended a comprehensive in nearby Hitchin, Michael was the first member of his family to accrue the benefits of a private education, his parents having moved a distance of 10 miles from Amersham into the Berkhamstead suburbs in order that he could be a ‘day boy’ in both Berkhamstead Boys School and Berkhamstead Collegiate ‘proper’.

Founded in 1541, and with alumni including Graham Greene and Lady Churchill, Berkhamstead Collegiate is a relatively exclusive institution, with strong Oxbridge connections and an exemplary academic record⁴ at both GCSE and A Level study. With fees in excess of £1000 per pupil per term for day attendance, and around £6000 per pupil per term boarding, it is a sizeable outlay for any family, but one that Luke and Michael (and their respective partners) considered to be a worthwhile investment. Accounting for their non-involvement in the affairs of Eamesworth Lower School, it was also a key binding agent within the ‘New Squire’ social circle and that of their children; a great deal more so than - but intrinsically tied into - that of residential proximity, drinking venues, or rural pursuits and aspirations:

“At school I mixed with my brothers and his clan who were a few years older than myself. And that led to going to the pub with them and us becoming a close group of friends later on in life. Even some of the people I would never have had anything to do with at school itself … we have now become quite close. Life’s a bit of a leveller, and we are now good friends …There’s Ryan, obviously and Nigel. They were in the same year as my bother, along with a number of other faces you often see in the Six Tuns. There is still quite a bond there, and there probably always will be …”

(Christopher Passant).

⁴ In 2003, for example, 97% of pupils achieved grade C or over in 5+ GCSE subjects.
An historic (and now very much imagined) space of union amongst the male contingent of Eamesworth’s New Squires, Berkhamstead’s public schools did not, however, constitute a common ground of experience between Eamesworth’s new ‘ladies’. For the most part state-educated, these select institutions had brought them together only in terms of their spouses, who had, at times, marked the nature and direction of their partner’s fraternising and lifestyle choices:

“Sometimes I feel as though the women are an asset ... that we belong to them. We are all in out 40’s now, but I don’t feel like it. Why should I have to take up something nice like golf or bridge with the other girls? My husband said to me “you’re in your forties now and should behave and dress like this”. And I thought ‘Oh no I don’t’. And some of the girls are the same, but others do what they are told. It sounds bloody awful but it’s an image thing and I have noticed it. We meet up and they are not an inch overweight. And they are not allowed to this, and not allowed to do that. It’s so superficial sometimes.” (Theresa Pettit).

Disparaging of her partner’s tendency for trophyism, Theresa’s concerns were shared by many others within this clique, some of whom had felt pressured into certain friendships, activities and roles on behest of their partners. Occasionally suggestive of gentility, this situation was on inspection more akin to traditional (expected) gender roles within financially comfortable circles and was, noted one observer, indicative of a belief in “the little women as child-bearer, house-keeper, and champion shoe-shopper”.

7.7. Lords, ladies and the role of gender

Aside from a couple of high-profile exceptions, the majority of Eameworth’s ‘New Ladies’ had left paid employment on settling down with their partners. Taking on
the preconceived supporting role of household management and childcare, several had become acutely conscious of being defined solely through their husband, his occupation, his pursuits, his wealth and – ultimately - his achievements. Nevertheless, in overseeing the employ of au-pairs, gardeners and housekeepers, and in keeping to an often busy social calendar, many of those women in question were equally acceptant and appreciative of their privileged circumstances.

“It is a bit of a double-edged sword, and I know I am not alone in feeling like this. I am privileged in the sense of not having to work, and being able to have cleaners and having someone to help with the children. The fact that I can fairly well do as I wish, and not worry about money over-much … But then, you look at women on the television who have started their own businesses and are super-confident and have made a fortune and … well I think I could do that. I am not stupid. But I don’t think [husband] would like me doing that. Not out of jealousy, but I think he likes being the provider and ensuring that I can look out for the kids and the little castle when he is at work …” (Theresa).

Evocative of those studies identifying the home as an important site where gender identities are created, expressed and recreated, Theresa’s comments were steeped in an acknowledgment of those persistent ideologies of the women’s (and especially mothers’) place in the home, and the traditional family unit as the best possible place to bring up children (see Gregson and Lowe 1995). Echoing scholarly accounts of the home/work relationship, both capitalism (the separation of production from reproduction) and patriarchy (women’s responsibility for caring work, men’s privileges in employment) class and gender conflicts (see Pain et al 2001) were manifest in New Squiredom.
Playing into and out of dominant socio-cultural constructions of rurality, the sustaining of highly conventional (but increasingly irregular) gender relations (Little 2002, 82) within the nouveau gentry were both practical and ideological, defining both responsibility and status. Here the belief that women’s ‘natural’ place is at the heart of the family and, as an extension of this, the community was tangible, and the imposition of strong, hierarchal moral ideas on the behaviour of self-consciously ‘privileged’ female arrivistes was intermittently experienced. Louise Robinson’s stint as host and ‘Lady Bountiful’ at the Manor Fete was the most palpable illustration of this, but there were a number of other – albeit less celebrated – cases in point.

Resonating with notions of women’s desire for a career as potentially damaging to rural social relations, both Tanya and Theresa, for example, stipulated that a want for paid employment had, in contrast to female neighbours and acquaintances, better prioritized the children - but also placed them in a position to “put more into the village”. In reality, however, and as with the overwhelming majority of those within this circle, they were conspicuous in their absence as far as the functioning of village institutions was concerned. In accord with those sentiments expressed in the previous chapter, the church, the village hall, the W.I etc. held little appeal to women who were unwilling to “consign themselves to old age”, despite making reference to the social environment of village England as a primary reason for relocation. Instead they preferred the company of each other and in this way replicated the more exclusive elements of the country ladies’ daily round; taking coffee together, going riding, frequenting gymkhanas, playing golf and, on a more ritualistic footing, attending such gender-tailored events as Ladies Day at Ascot, and the occasional Six Tuns’ formal dinner dance.
‘Predictions of the disappearance of the class system were premature: the hoped-for meritocracy that had emerged by 1979 did not demolish old barriers or sweep away any social pretensions. Arrivistes continued to proclaim their elevation by flaunting the trappings of their new status. In 1966 a thirty-two-year-old managing director of a publishing company of lower middle class origins confessed to a paranoia about ‘posh people’ who looked down on him. He overcame it: ‘I’ve got my Rolls, so bugger them. Life’s great.’ (James 2006, 448).

A familiar face at the Six Tuns Autumn Ball, as with every other regular Office-dweller, Christopher Passant was open to the fact that he liked his wife to “look good and turn a few heads” on entering the marquee, but did not profess to ever considering her in the manner of an object or prize: As for some of his associates’ intentions when it came to “some of those skinny young things they had sometimes appeared with”, he was less sure. Dubious of their motivations, he was of the opinion that in some cases these (fleeting) relationships were both conspicuous and materialistic in their basis. This, Christopher maintained, was true of their day-to-day lives more generally:

“It’s not only that … but of this country squire thing and pretty much everything else … and it makes me cringe sometimes when I am in the pub. The other thing that you’ve absolutely got to have is the villa in Spain or Portugal or Cyprus. And personally, it would be quite nice to have a place in the south of France or a ski chalet in the Alps. But really, it’s almost as if, with one or two of the people I regularly go about with … they have pushed themselves to go out and get a place abroad because all the other boys have. For instance, the other day a couple of the guys were talking
very about this place and that place, and talking in a very … knowing way about how the Spanish legal system works … so everybody else might think better of them … I feel it is a little too brash sometimes.”

Expressed as something “more than” - but still encompassing - a search for squiredom, the performed materiality of Michael and his comrades was apparently centred on the existence of what he referred to as “middle class marker posts” and an ongoing attentiveness to fashion in the wake of the cutting edge; be it technological, commercial or even this season’s must-go holiday destination.

Investing much money in foreign travel, dining out in prestigious restaurants, owning property abroad, driving exotic sports cars and motorbikes and, in some instances, maintaining yachts and helicopters, Eamesworth’s nouveau gentry revelled in products which, unlike country piles, Range Rovers and horses, are far from being ‘rural’ in any symbolic sense. Indicative of success on a broader scale, or rather in other realms such as those of the ‘ex-pat’, ‘jet-set’ or ‘Sloane Ranger’, they nevertheless served to characterise, constitute and differentiate the existence of a gregarious nouveau riche in and around the village. A staple of conversation, there was a competitive pre-occupation with appearance of having and playing with exclusive amenities, and in being part of those provisional spaces formed and sustained by these amenities. An occasional source of anxiety, conceivably because of what William Cobbett once called the ‘shame of being thought poor’

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5 Although it should be noted that elements of the squirearchy have, from the early 19th century onwards, also assumed such identities and operated through such networks. Here the growing ease of travel as afforded by turnpikes, railways and steamships meant a far greater freedom and cheapness of movement for the upper echelons of society in particular, with the general effect of loosening the gentry’s roots with the soil. By the middle years of the century, notes Mingay, landowners were finding in their Pall Mall clubs ‘the company and convenience which offered good substitutes for the former habits of visiting in the neighbourhood and entertaining at home’, while ‘Lucerne, Interlaken, and Wengen became familiar names among the cognoscente’ (1976, 177).
among ones would-be peers (Ibid, 159), it was an unease that was alleviated by conspicuous spending:

“A couple of our members, if you like, seem to do everything and buy everything for effect. Whether it’s down to a lack of confidence or a need for recognition I really don’t know. But it seems to me that it is all done for show. Take Michael Marriot for example. When Nigel, Stephen and Billy [property speculator] got a Ferrari or Porsche, he got a bright yellow Porsche. When they started investing in property abroad, so did he. And Andrew is another case in point. When everybody started going over to Majorca as a gang; he went and bought a thirty-foot yacht in the harbour. And he never uses it much. At least not to my knowledge.” (Mark Price).

Referring to the actions of Michael and Andrew as indicative of the “working lad come good syndrome”, in coveting certain goods and associated lifestyles there were, suggested Mark, blatant class pretensions at work in the fold; despite habitual claims to the contrary. This awkward juxtaposition; the etiquette which forbids accepting the relevance of traditional measures of social stratification verses their ongoing influence as tangibly expressed in material assets, cultural achievements and accreditations; was also (rather cryptically) expressed by Christopher and, perhaps more understandably, many other villagers who did not move in their circles:

“The chaps I socialise with, I suppose there is a cross-section of society in old class terms. The majority, I would say are what you might call middle class, or even upper middle class. But then again some are not, and would say class is now irrelevant, or take the attitude that they are and always will be working class and have … pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. Personally, I think that is very much an anti-status, status thing if you
follow … For example, on occasion a couple of the lads have made the odd comment about not being born with a silver spoon in their mouths. Which is probably a self-conscious reaction to the middle-class-ness of the public school element of the group. On the other hand, there are those who would only grudgingly admit to being working class, and take a rather different tack”. (Christopher Passant).

“A lot more ordinary - for want of a better word – people have been able to make money in recent times. They have been able to work themselves up and buy fancy cars and places in the countryside or Spain or wherever, and I think that is good. But it is a different class of people … a different kind of middle class. They have not inherited money and a stately pile. But there are those who came from working class backgrounds and still think of themselves as salt of the earth, and have no wish to be seen as anything different. They have the same friends as they had before and behave very much in the same way … But there are also those who draw attention to themselves by trying to be the old middle or upper class, be it in Eamesworth or wherever, and in doing that they show themselves up for what they are. An oik in a Range Rover or Jaguar with a mansion. It’s about of how you behave yourself, really.” (Thomas Baster).

Even as an ‘outsider’, the matter of (in) appropriate middle class behaviour and mannerisms was one that Thomas identified as an Office-dwelling fissure, although he remained adamant that, while several could purport to being “genuinely middle class”, none were (or could ever be) “old country middle class in the sense of being gentleman farmers or ex-army captains”.

Observing the use of received pronunciation, or rather “the Queen’s English”, Thomas was not alone in making such a distinction between the ranks of the New
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Squirearchy. Here, for example, he pointed to the non-uniform presence of (an assumed) public school education and entrepreneurial/managerial employment patterns. Referring to them as “wheeler dealers”, Thomas was one of many interviewees/correspondents who – and quite accurately – categorised Eamesworth’s New Squires in the vein of a mercantile petite bourgeoisie. A ‘contemporary’ channel of entry in rural areas and gauge of assets of class formation as identified by Cloke et al. (1995), any attempts to elaborate on associated characteristics and cultural principles in the fashion of Savage et al (1992) were principally fruitless. While it was possible to typify membership according to labour market situations, and draw major parallels in terms of the acquisition of (‘rural’ and ‘yuppie’) positional goods, the New Squirearchy – apparent could not reasonably be set-apart in line with a ‘post-modern habitus’ as expected of private sector professionals and high-climbers. Certainly they demonstrated a healthy and extravagant mode of living, and an unfathomable mix of high and low culture, but, like the majority of local residents I came into contact with, they portrayed no overarching organizing principle beyond that of a peculiarly, but selective, gentryfied communal identity – what Eric Harrison (2006) would term a ‘lifestyle package’.

Quite clearly, Eamesworth’s New Squires are part of a much broader (socio-economic) middle class base residing in the village; and class formation, as Savage et al, remind us, does ‘does not take place on the head of a pin’ (1992, 13): Rather, they take place in specific spatial contexts, shaped by changes in employment structures which are themselves a cause and response to (middle class) spatial (re)formation. Spatial mobility, notes Phillips, is a key feature of middle class lifestyle(s), and has the ‘consequence of allowing middle-class households gradually to acquire more prestigious properties in the course of housing careers’ (1995, 1218). But, more than this, there has for a long time been a trend towards the investment of cultural assets in housing and the surrounding areas ‘so that the
7. Elite rural networks and recreational associations

aesthetics of residence plays a major part in the exhibition of tastes and values’ (Savage et al 1992, 94). At the neighbourhood level, specific conglomerations of properties have taken on particular roles, geared to different household types and stages in the lifecycle via process of gentrification, or - in the case of Eamesworth – what may suitably be described as gentrification.

With the presence of ample farmhouses and a great many well sized, rustic period dwellings in a (relatively) bucolic setting, Eamesworth is well set for the part-communication of the ‘squirely’ ethos and, to some degree, the practical realisation of that ‘landed discourse’ beloved of the tabloid press. A visible (though highly problematic) trend in the locality, the underlying logic is far from uniform and the issue of longevity remains. While the properties in question will no-doubt remain for many more years to come as a reminder of a one-time rural hierarchy, their relationship with highly visible identikit re-creationists is one that is, perhaps, set to pass; either as a lifestyle choice or, at the very least, in terms of the individuals themselves:

“The New Squire thing is probably just a fad, or at least it just so happens that the newspapers are paying attention to it because Madonna has a gun ... As for moving onto pastures new, I think I might, for example, think about getting a dockside apartment on the Thames because it is easier to get out and about in London. Besides, there is more to do than shooting and riding horses. You can get to Spearmint Rhino [strip club] quicker, for a start [laughs].” (Tristan Baker).

“When my son has up and left, I will most probably downsize. I won’t need such a big house, and I may well move abroad ...” (Luke Murcott).
7. Elite rural networks and recreational associations

“I think that there are people that you should look to who still own the village in a sense of always having been here. The rest of us, perhaps are just passing through. And that goes for the nouveau riche - this New Squirearchy as you might put it – as well. When they get fed up with their farmhouses and there 12 acres, they will bugger off to their villa in Spain and the same few will stay here as they always have done ... Money doesn’t come into it. They belong.” (Thomas Baster).

“I suppose buying a country house has marked a stage in our [groups] lives. We have all become sensible, and have left the clubbing and partying - the London years, if you like - behind us. Most of us wanted somewhere safe to bring the kids up in. And now a lot of our friends are getting villas in Spain or Cyprus which, I think was initially about making money, but some are now going in for the ex-pat thing. The kids have mostly grown up and they have now either sold their businesses or have found someone to run it for them ... So yes, I suppose living around here is a stage in our lives, but I don’t think my husband and I will move out. I love England too much, and I belong in the countryside. I need my green fields, my farmhouse, my horses and my dogs.” (Theresa Pettit).

Positioning New Squiredom as subsequent to a pre-child, predominantly urban stage in an individuals existence; and prior to a post-child, possibly “ex-pat” or “downsized” retirement period, such comments were widespread and characteristic of the life-cycle/ life-course approach popular among human geographers in the 1980s and early 1990s (see Bongaarts et al 1987; Warnes 1992).

Correlated with mobility, income, the demand for spacious rural homes, healthier recreational opportunities and a relatively secure environment, a principle reason for the New Squirearchy’s arrival in Eamesworth (and one that was broadly
concurrent with their age and sex structure) was no different from that of many other families in the village; the notion that, as part of the countryside, it constituted a relatively ‘safe place’ to raise children. Commonly cited as a reason for migration into rural areas (Woods 2005, 244), the narrative of the countryside as being less exposed to the embodied dangers and undesirable cultural influences associated with urban space was one frequently mobilised in the course of interviews and discussions; although the suitability of their application was most certainly questionable, especially in the second instance. In Valentine’s account of parent’s motives in rural relocation, for example, one respondent remarked that children were without the pressure of having to have ‘Adidas tracksuits … and the latest videogames’ (1997, 140); but the sons and daughters of Office-dwellers were, if anything, more receptive to current fashions than their contemporaries, and wanted for very little.

While present in many of those recreational spaces synonymous with the landed gentry, Eamesworth’s ‘New Squires’ differ little from a much wider body of middle-class residents in this, and many other, countryside communities. With a penchant for ‘rural’ accoutrements, their tendency for conspicuous consumption nevertheless extended into wider a middle-class realm, supported by an equally analogous set of employment and educational credentials. Re-enforcing the rhetoric of a loss of community interaction brought about by in-migration and a break with traditional lifestyles (see Bell 1994), the New Squirearchy is, in this instance, perhaps atypical of a prominent middle-class incursion. Absent from the everyday operation of those socio-political organisations which continue to shape and define Eamesworth as a vibrant village, this wholly contradicted any revitalization of paternalistic structures as fairly suggested by such titles as “would-be lords of the manor”, “nouveau gentry” or “pseudo squires”.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

‘He was an odd fish, the guv’nor, and he and I had always been wary of each other. He was a nabob’s grandson you see, old Jack Flashman having made a fortune in America out of slaves and rum, and piracy too, I shouldn’t wonder, and buying the place in Leicestershire where we have lived ever since. But for all their moneybags, the Flashmans were never the thing – “the course streak showed through, generation after generation, like dung beneath a rosebush,” as Greville said. In other words, while other nabob families tried to make themselves pass for quality, ours didn’t, because we couldn’t.

My own father was the first to marry well, for my mother was related to the Pagets, who as everyone knows sit on the right hand of God. As a consequence he kept an eye on me to see if I gave myself airs; before mother died he never saw much of me, being too busy at the clubs or in the house or hunting – foxes sometimes, but women mostly – but after that he had to take some interest in his heir, and we grew to know and mistrust each other.’ (Fraser 1969, 18).

8.1. Addressing ‘common knowledge’

Why, in concluding this thesis, am I drawing on a character appraisal of George MacDonald Fraser’s legendary anti-hero, Harry Flashman? Is it because I wish to make a statement about the vulgar, self-aggrandising and generally untrustworthy nature of a new clique of nabobs in the British countryside? Certainly not. As I have been reminded, it is rarely the job of an academic work to pass moral judgement upon the source and subject of the investigation; but instead upon those self-levelled ethical considerations which guide the author in their exploration. Is it, therefore, because I want to reiterate the point that those who have recently (and here we may consider the course of several generations) bought
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

(or wed) into the upper echelons of (rural) society remain ‘parvenus’ – despite Britain’s broad claim to a 21st century meritocracy? Well, partly; but only in the context of how and why I was introduced to the infamous Flashman in the early stages of my fieldwork: I will explain.

On the 15th September, 2005, I was sat in the garden of the Six Tuns talking with one of my respondents about the possible existence of a New Squirearchy; whether it was a recent phenomenon in the area; how it made its presence felt; and what it meant in terms of the community and the countryside as a whole. True to the suggestions of, for example, such noted historians as Mingay, Asa Briggs and G.M. Trevelyan, and cultural commentators including Jane Austen, Henry Fielding and John Sullivan1, it was concluded that while Eamesworth’s gentry-incumbent were particularly in evidence at the time, they were no more than an acute manifestation of “that process which has gone on since time immemorial”. Determining the path from business premises to rural mansion and surrounding acres as being well-worn by the “eighteenth century at least”, this commentator was keen to verify the continuing importance of that “urban-myth” which drives successful professionals and businessmen out of the city and into such village communities as Eamesworth; imagining – like Thrifty, the subject of the satirical verse presented on the first page of this study – that their exodus would bring the assumed benefits of country living and “transform them into blue-blooded ladies and gentleman”. On this basis, he suggested, current media attention on such people was little more than “lazy, unimaginative journalism”, based purely on Britain’s unceasing fascination with success, wealth and “keeping up with the Jones’s”.

1 Whose recent television spin-off to the hugely successful Only Fools and Horses entitled The Green, Green Grass details the exploits of Peckham’s most successful second-hand car dealer as he relocates his family to secluded Shropshire and attempts to make it as a gentleman farmer.
Declaring that urban-myth driving would-be aristocrats into rural space as being no more prevalent than their existence in the public psyche as a subject of derision and miss-placed presumptions, I was told to “look no further than the antics of Flashman as a prime example of un-ingratiated social climbing … or even Candide”. Perhaps misconstruing Voltaire’s satire as a criticism of man’s desire to better his social circumstances in the face of inherent and often unassailable cultural barriers, as opposed to humanity’s hopelessly optimistic belief in its capacity to overcome social and natural evils, this interpretation nevertheless underscored the existence of a New Squirearchy as being, in many respects, a superficially defined collective; one mobilized in response to the (alleged) movement of people through the lower and middle classes towards the (apparently unreachable) rural upper class by those who would place themselves outside (and define themselves in opposition to) this manifestation of scripted performances and lifestyle choices within and beyond the fabric of Eamesworth.

A relatively short exchange, the conversation in the pub garden that afternoon nevertheless encompassed the key threads of my investigation, and gave voice to both its premise and findings; the order of which will provide the structure of this final chapter. In the first (and most obvious) instance, it confirmed a belief in the existence of a New Squirearchy as a quantifiable force for rural restructuring within this village at least, but also as a social force with a longstanding - but currently intense – pedigree. Secondly, in literally paying reference to such actions as “social climbing” and “keeping up with the Jones” through the “often uninspired” provision of “cars, cottages and riding lessons for the daughter”, my co-conversationalist highlighted identity creation as both conscious and unconscious, reflexive and non-reflexive, process borne out of action played out with, by and through the imposed and received materialities of (rural) space.
At once stipulating the existence of a New Squirearchy as being expressive of, but in many ways extraneous to, the operation of class as a ‘live’ concept (both in theory and in practise), this exchange also traced that theoretical distance travelled in chapter two. Moving through debates surrounding property, the (new) middle class, the post-structural turn and the rise of embodiment in human geography, I contend, in the third instance, that a path can be navigated which takes in their varied concerns without resorting to straightforward pragmatism, and one that is capable of illuminating identity as a fluid, uncertain upshot of current actions. Informed by (and informing) wider contexts and other discourses (including those of gender, occupation, age, sexuality, the business leader, the jet-set) without necessarily being governed by them, I have attempted to provide an ‘interpretative analysis’ of gentryfication which – to paraphrase Savage and Butler – attempts to make the existence of the New Squirearchy as a partly-situated echelon of the middle-class in Eamesworth ‘slightly less ambiguous’, and one which further details their ‘messy connection with other social phenomena’ (1995, 346).

Fourthly, in practically undertaking a study of rural identity which combines an understanding of the relevance of class as an expression of exploitation in society which incorporates and checks other praxis of recognition and cultural difference, I have been led to consider the methodological requirements of what Phillips’ (1998b; 1998c) refers to as a ‘third way’. At once recognizing the importance of occupation, income and broader repertoires etc. as a point of reference and the realization of those collective values, identities and knowledges that emerge in the playing-out of the everyday in (or rather as) local space, it is argued that an ‘intense’ ethnography lends itself to the process of suitably identifying the creation and performance of those socio-economic, moral and cultural boundaries which serve to delineate the existence and functioning New Squirearchy; and, by implication, other such groups operating as part of the rural tapestry.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

8.2. Performing the middle class; performing the gentry

Apparent in an appraisal of former Deputy Prime-Minister, self-made millionaire and country-estate procurer Michael Heseltine by the aristocratic Tory Alan Clark, who proclaimed him to be the “sort of person who buys his own furniture”, the initial characterization of a New Squirearchy emerged out of the upper classes who (when not seeking to bolster their fortunes and succession by marrying ‘new money’) have sought to ‘protect’ their elevated position against a ‘polluting’ influence. While absent in Eamesworth, which has been without any semblance of a hereditary landed gentry for a century or more, the allusion to ‘crudity’ and ‘pretence’ within this rhetoric undoubtedly also constituted a central tenet of those identities realised by those villagers who were placed – or consciously placed themselves - outside of the traditional upper class, but also as being outside of the New Squirearchy.

Discussed at length in chapter four, where a considerable number of ‘local’ and ‘regular’ pub-dwellers defined themselves in contrast to the roles, practises and appearances of a would-be gentry, analyses of their performing in and around this and other key ‘rural’ spaces was often reduced to conceptions of class; as with the significant proportion of academic treatise. Concurrently bringing forth the issue of performance what Edensor refers to as an ‘interweaving of conscious and unaware modalities’ (2004, 2), considerations of habit and calculated deed as regards to gentryfication alert us to the dual processes of identity assumption and identity imposition. Having considered how various Eamesworthians assumed and become characterizations of the New Squirearchy, I am also sensitive to the manner in which such an identity has been created, imposed and reacted-to by others.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

Highlighting the importance people attach to the actions of others; actions which are taken as a mindful attempt to signify apparent economical, cultural, moral and economical boundaries, they are very often undertaken without contemplation or rationalization, and are frequently devoid of such intentions. Nevertheless, such acts are certainly capable of conferring identity upon their protagonists, and may in fact spark intentional counter-actions. Presently, I was able to determine where certain members of the community made efforts, for example, to cultivate certain friendships, to publicly denigrate certain pastimes, to not drink in the pub at certain times and to not purchase particular vehicles for fear of assuming the identity of the nouveaux riche, or of being deemed to be “trying to hard to middle class” (and therefore not).

Sharing similar employment relations as financial executives, business owners and highly autonomous professionals, membership of the New Squirearchy certainly expressed itself in traditionally upper middle class terms, although this was widely disputed by both constituents of this clique who were unwilling to let go of the idea of being working-class, and those who maintained that many of those within this group were far from being ‘cultured’. A curious perspective predominantly held by those operating outside of the gentryfied realm, it implicitly recognised shared levels of income, privileged educational backgrounds, mannerisms and a predilection for exclusive leisure pursuits, but denied the New Squirearchy access to the rural upper middle class on the grounds of vulgarity and a concerted effort to forcibly appropriate – as opposed to naturally embody - a series of ‘countryfied’ practises and everyday routines; chiefly because of that condition of lineage which holds a central position within the historic discourse of the country gentleman.

In looking to those strategies which identify a New Squirearchy as being distinct from others (e.g. hobby farming, shooting, attending Royal Ascot etc.), the people
of Eamesworth demonstrated what Eric Harrison describes as a broad-brush tendency to ‘confuse or conflate class with status’ (2006, 2). Looking to a particular, highly conspicuous ‘lifestyle package’ and acquisition of those ‘positional goods’ (e.g. four-wheel drive vehicles, shotguns, horses) - the value of which stems not solely from their use but also from their scarcity and the gentryfied ‘message’ they send to others - it is unquestionably true that such tastes cut across ‘traditional’ class differences; but they cannot, and must not, be ignored. Reflecting on Phillips’ (1998b; 1998c) call for an ‘interpretative approach’, it is argued that people’s conceptions of class and class indicators should be more fully taken into account; and it is not difficult to see why class remains contested in these terms when there is so much at stake for self-assessment and the broader social identities ascribed by society.

Manifesting itself in a multitude of actions and in a multitude of places (Murdoch 1995, 1228), New Squiredom is very much a part and parcel of middle-class assumptions and understandings in Eamesworth (and visa-versa), and its existence is testament to how class and class-affiliated identities are ‘made’ and reproduced, and work in association with one-another: The New Squirearchy is, then, part of that ‘hybrid vocabulary’ of class and identity that is realized performatively in the ‘world out there’ (Ibid); but only part of a wider diversity. It is, therefore, only a sum part of that condition in which people ‘constantly confront other actors and practises which may contradict and challenge cherished, embodied and unreflexive ways of doing things’ (Edensor 1994, 14). By this means the habits of the New Squirearchy - but also the ‘old squirearchy’, farming community, established ‘locals’, locals-born-and-bred etc. – are brought to the surface; a revelation which produces conventions as ‘something on which one may take up a stance’ and the dilemma of ‘whether to kick the habit or stick tenaciously to it’ (Frykman and Löfgren 1996, 14).
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

8.3. Appropriating a discourse

Questioning a belief in the redundancy of class-based approaches to social inequality on the grounds of people ‘no longer thinking in terms of classes’, or of the wider population as finding it ‘difficult to locate themselves and others in such a notional hierarchy’ (Harrison 2006, 2), the widespread characterization of the New Squirearchy in ‘traditional’ class terms eclipsed the ease in which this collective could be suitably categorized in accordance with the full discourse of the country gentleman. As land owners, many of whom maintained their acres for the purpose of leisure, there was an evident recourse to notions of stewardship; although economic considerations in regard to inheritance tax and the rising value of agricultural holdings sat firmly in the background. Nevertheless, in spending much time and money on their homes and surroundings, and by employing local craftsman, farmers and labourers on the grounds of contributing to local society and local people, their leadership activities were in some ways cast not as a privilege, but as a duty (Woods 2005b, 28).

As individuals whose wealth derived from commerce, the New Squirearchy could in no way, however, lay claim to supremacy over the natural world and other rural dwellers as ‘natures most ancient peerage’; although it is duly understood that such a reinvention could never feasibly take place. Nor, as relatively recent incomers from surrounding urban areas, could they convincingly stand in defence of rural purity (Ibid 29); although they could and did occasionally promote a particular moral geography in the form of noblesse oblige. As detailed in chapter six, the spirit of patronage was alive and very much in evidence at the manor house, the village fete and other such established, charitable and quintessentially ‘village England’ events, but spiritual, social and political guidance was not an intrinsic part of a collective agenda.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

Predominately occupied by members of previous waves of in-migration, the committees of, for example, the Parish Council, Church Council and the Community Association did not dictate the emergence of a new elite. Instead, they reflected a dwindling interest in local affairs and the limited influence any one person or group may hold through such institutions; a condition that - coupled with the substantial decline in land-based employment – precludes the reinvention of the Squirearchy in meaningful socio-political context. Operating with and through particular recreational networks, their diminishing presence - and the absence of a would-be gentry therein - also contradicts the reassertion of the discourse of the country gentleman and an allied rekindling or rebirth of such connections at the hands of a new band of rural powerbrokers along these lines.

Historically performed primarily through the elite’s preferred pastime, that of hunting; the building of roads, houses and the rise of the anti-hunt lobby has long-since severed the link between Eamesworth’s fields, copses and hedgerows and the riders of the Aylesbury Vale. Where relationships remain between villagers and the sport in terms of equine competitions, charity events and social gatherings they are few and far between, and are definitely not providing a basis of contact between the establishment and a new generation of movers and shakers; despite media claims of a resurgence in popularity among newer elements of the rural population. An activity which at once brought the community together and imitated the internal stratification of wider rural society, other pastimes which are - or perhaps have been - customarily restricted to the gentry were, by comparison, frequently enjoyed among Eamesworth’s wealthier colonizers.

Among the swelling ranks of ‘new guns’ at shooting grounds and ranges throughout the Home Counties and beyond; habitually present in the enclosure at Royal Ascot and other top-flight race meetings and, less obviously; regularly drinking in the private bar of the village pub, there was a categorical, corporeal
attachment to those spaces allied to the identikit squire-at-leisure, but the basis of
their involvement was not as clear-cut as may be supposed. Alongside golf, which
has long been recognised as a principle apparatus through which the inner circle
of business organizes itself, the grouse moor, snug and racecourse have become a
staple medium of information exchange in financial and mercantile networks.
Mixing business and pleasure, many of Eamesworth’s high-fliers reciprocated
broader trends and occupied these spaces; partly as a consequence of new ways of
‘doing manager’ (Thrift 2000, 675); and partly in or at play.

8.4. Other spaces, other identities

Slipping in and out of the rural, gentlemanly discourse and that of the
businessman, either consciously, strategically and as an act of expression
management (e.g. changing their clothes or deliberately altering their tone of
voice), or more reflexively (e.g. attending the pub after work to ‘wind down’, or
slipping into a more ‘personable’ demeanour), it was often impossible – or rather
inappropriate – to draw the line as a researcher. From spectacular presentations
and carnivalesque revelry to the embodied dispositions of everyday life, and
emerging out of that proliferation of multiple, simultaneous enactions on rural
stages – but also a variety of different stages – Eamesworth’s New Squirearchy, or
Eamesworth’s business elite, or rather both - utilized a range of cultural resources
and improvised local performances from a range ‘of (re)collected pasts, drawing
on new media, symbols and languages’ (Clifford 1988, 15). As patterns of
performance become, therefore, more mottled and differentiated, the job of
research becomes increasingly complex and problematic, and the course of
communication ever-more cloudy.

Underlining the nature of performance as an interactive and contingent process
which succeeds according to the skill of the actors, and also the context within
which it is performed and interpreted by an audience (Edensor 2004, 12), the squire/businessman relationship made it highly apparent that individuals are capable of assuming multiple identities – often simultaneously. Intermittently hinted at during the course of the study, the investigation could usefully progress by seeking to more fully uncover those motives, choices and passages through which certain activities are appropriated as ‘tools’ of good business; and why others are not: Why are these arenas being (re)constructed as new spaces of corporate action, with embedded resources through which the passage of business is forged, eased and sped up?

A line of enquiry within the business media, it is yet to receive academic attention and would ideally contribute to that body of literature concerning the embodied circulation of capitalism (for example Gordon 1995; Callon 1998; Weich 1998). Particularly relevant to debates surrounding the performing of cultures in the New Economy, it has the potential to enrich our appreciation of mobile techniques in modern management; but also possibly engender a re-evaluation of the New Squirearchy as so defined. Here the mounting speed in which executives are led to develop new disciplines, skills and spaces while pushing aside others could feasibly mould certain squirearchal practises as transitory and perceivably little more than a passing fad; reducing the impact gentryfication may have on the countryside in the mid-to-long term.

In the context of this study, the presence of multiple/simultaneous identities and performances also involved characterizations and affinities drawn on the basis of a public school education, international travel (the so-called ‘jet set’), a child-rearing post-urban stage in the lifestyle and patriarchy. As with those institutional conditions prevalent inside the financial workplace (see McDowell 1994), those embodied and gendered (non) performances apparent to the female component of Eamesworth’s arrivistes surely reproduced a masculinist discourse which
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

excluded women from full participation. This is not to suggest that Eamesworth’s ‘new ladies’ did not amount to a full part in the New Squirearchy but - as with their rhetorical antecedents – re-enforced the dominant position of their “significant others” and played their own specific roles; albeit in a generally less visible manner as required.

Largely without formal employment, female efforts were mostly directed at the raising of children, undertaking (or presiding over) the running of the home, and they were also want to occasionally undertake voluntary work, act as social hostesses and – in the case of Louise Robinson – fulfil the duty of ‘Lady Bountiful’. More generally there was also the sense that these women were expected to behave and associate with each other in accordance with their partner’s wishes, and that the course and pattern of their ‘genteel’ lifestyle was in many respects an imposition. A sensitive issue, it was one that was intermittently raised in the course of the investigation, and is apparent at given points in this script; although it has not been fully pursued as a point of analysis. Why? Having acted as a participant observer and occasional confidante, the cost of imparting further information/perspectives is, in my opinion, substantially greater than their possible value to the study – although I would suggest that it is a fruitful avenue of investigation for someone considering the active construction of gender in (middle class) rurality: Someone who is, perhaps, from different circumstances and willing to ‘go further’ than I am as a reporter, and someone is – in the case of Eamesworth at least – prepared to tread carefully and sympathetically when seeking to elaborate on the production and performance of perceivably middle class, gendered subjectivities.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

8.5. On a collaborative, ethnographic methodology

In identifying class, Squiredom and other such aspects of self identity as being chaotic, blurred, interwoven and continuously played out through a mixture of intentionality and non-intentionality, I have been led to engage with current debates concerning performance. Theoretically, much has been said, but in terms of that work on the embodied countryside there has been little attention has been paid to how the researcher should practically address the construction and operation of rural social relations. Here, in needing to move between front and backstage as an active investigator, and in having to identify, ‘tease out’ and analyse roles and patterns of behaviour in conjunction with those whom we are considering, a form of reflexive, collaborative, ‘thick’ ethnography along the lines of those offered by Bell (1994) and Rapport (1993) is evidently most suitable.

Continuing to provide fertile ground for the investigation of social change, ethnography has been a common basis of enquiry within rural studies more generally – although details and guidelines for ethnographic procedures in this context are thin on the ground. Providing a brief synopsis of this body of work, I have been especially concerned with inter-textuality and the subjectivity of knowledge as conditions through which researcher and researched make sense of the identities they embody, and the spaces in which they figure. Always essential as part of any in-depth qualitative study to consider how the respondents look to the enquirer, I – like Bell – encourage readers to keep this in mind when evaluating this report and how they looked to me (1994, 244).

In contrast to many researchers who go out in the field, I am in many respects more of an ‘insider’ in the context of the study than many of those whose existence I have sought to scrutinize and trace. Something of an oddity insofar as those undertaking extensive tracts of in-situ observation tend to stress their
dissimilarity, and a corresponding degree of ‘critical distance’, I was already deeply embedded in the field through family heritage, schooling, employment and in already knowing many would-be informants. Although many of those actions and performances which may or may not qualify and clarify the existence of a New Squirearchy in Eamesworth and the surrounding area may have been so familiar as to have passed me by, I have also reaped the benefits arising from a local background.

Leading me to encourage other researchers to explore the ‘everyday’ in the everyday spaces that they themselves inhabit, the success (or failure) of this account in illumining a particular middle class presence that is the New Squirearchy in Eamesworth rests on my ability to produce both an autobiographical yet collaborative ethnography. As Eric Lassiter reminds us, the act of ethnographic research always draws on a pool of personal experience, and that ethnography is, by definition, collaborative:

‘In the communities in which we work, study, or practise, we cannot possibly carry out our unique craft without engaging others in the context of their real, everyday lives. Building on these collaborative relationships between the ethnographer and her or his interlocutors, we create our ethnographic texts. To be sure, we all practise collaboration in one form or another when we do ethnography. But collaborative ethnography moves collaboration from its taken-for granted background and positions it on centres stage.’ (2005, 15).

An approach which deliberately and explicitly emphasizes cooperation at every stage of the investigation, respondents and co-conversationalists have been involved at every point of the study – from project conceptualization, to fieldwork and through the writing-up period.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

Inviting commentary from consultants, this commentary has overtly formed part of the text as it has developed; and, in turn, this negotiation was reintegrated back into the fieldwork process itself. Evident in those quotes and passages of speech which have at once prompted the form, trajectory and findings of the enquiry, this procedure is, perhaps, most apparent in the final section of chapter five. A moment of revelation, my conversation with Silvia Threlfall on the subject of farmhouses and farmland brought forward the hitherto unconsidered topic of inheritance tax relief on agricultural properties. Opening up a fresh avenue of investigation, her comments effectively put pay to a belief in the New Squirearchy as a collective unequivocally buying into such dwellings on purely emotional, discursive\(^2\) grounds, and the analysis of this body developed accordingly.

Although the words in the main body of this thesis are undeniably mine own, in persistently discussing thoughts, findings and interim conclusions with the wider community, and in drawing them to question the actions and identities of those which inhabit this space, the production of this work has been a mutual affair. Bringing with it its own particular problems as regards to ethics and the disclosure of confidences, a discussion of which concerns much of chapter 3, this form of in-depth enquiry also causes the researcher to question the ‘transferability’ and ‘generalizability’ of their data (see McNeill 1990). More specifically, can the ‘results’ of the study be transferred to another context given certain similarities with other situations ‘elsewhere’, and; can we expect our observations to reoccur?

Having necessarily produced ‘thick description’ which has as its aim the provision of detailed information on gentryfied behaviour within a specific rural community, I cannot fully expect that such a clique uniformly emerges on a national or even regional basis. Moreover, the particular nature of my relationship with the host community as a facilitator of the data collection process renders the

\(^2\) Although not necessarily outside of the discursive realm of the shrewd financial operative.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

prospect of geographically ‘wider’ examination of the New Squirearchy to the same level of detail an impossibility – even with the required resources of time, money and assistance. Having utilized a deliberately eclectic methodology, however, and one that has involved perusing academic, governmental and popular (i.e. media) discourse concerning rural social change, class and the birth of a new gentry, I am confident that the social, cultural and economic circumstances which have seen the New Squirearchy emerge within Eamesworth are replicated, to greater or lesser extent, elsewhere – at least within areas of the South East. Nevertheless, because of the many and varied ways in which people and their attachments differ over time and (as) space, and despite the vast number of magazine articles, column inches, television programmes and claims to ‘common knowledge’ requiring a new rural elite, the most I could ever hope to achieve was ‘not prediction but rather a temporary understanding’ (Cziko 1992, 10) of a particular clique in a localized setting.

8.6. The New Squirearchy and the future

As for the future, I am unsure of the extent to which the New Squirearchy will continue to characterize rural space. Having provided an extensive historical review of the landed elite and a sometimes incorporated, sometimes external nouveaux riche – one can only speculate as whether or not gentrification is a process at its zenith as a result of those discursive practices and materialities ‘filtered’ through bodies functioning and territorialized in relation to very particular, contemporary socio-economic circumstances; or whether its intrinsic performances are set to live on undiminished through new incumbents. In Eamesworth at least, my experiences have led me to believe that in the case of this topography, the former condition is more likely; although it is probable that the process of gentrification will subside in the near future.
As discussed in the introduction, the rise of the New Squirearchy as a media phenomenon followed closely on the heels of – or rather as part of - what Woods has described as the ‘strange awakening of rural Britain’ (2005a, 1). Challenging the myth of the apolitical countryside; and yet quite deliberately and astutely (re)invoking this myth for the purpose of demonstrating the extent to which ‘rural society’ had been ‘pushed’ to breaking-point, the Countryside Rally of 1997, the Countryside March of 1998 and the Liberty and Livelihood demonstration of 2003 at once challenged ‘urban’ sensibilities over issues such as foxhunting and sparked a wave of public nostalgia for a near-lost rural idyll and the roots of the nation. (Re)popularizing ‘country’ literatures, arts and fashions, and reinvigorating an already potent desire of the (financially able) middle class to buy their own slice of health and happiness in the bucolic wonderland, the New Squirearchy was born in the eyes of the media – and in Eamesworth.

Not so much a new trend as one amplified by a current reassertion of the ‘rural good’ and the (not unconnected) popular decline of fast-paced, inner-city metrosexual ‘yuppiedom’, the biggest drive to ‘landed living’ since the 1860s came not so much from industrialists as those in the financial and service sectors riding the economic boom of the early 21st century. With the means to follow such ‘fashions’, the very wealthy of this era are, however, better able to take advantage of improved communications and ‘move on’ to – or perhaps split their time between - other residences and ‘lifestyles’ both at home and abroad. Severing the connection between the rural community, the ‘big house’ and those within it accordingly, this is serving to further distance a would-be new gentry from the day-to-day functioning of those (remaining) local cultural, political and spiritual institutions to which the particular presence of their nominal forebears was once indelibly linked.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

Spending large amounts of time away from their estates, both on business and in pleasure, those factors underpinning the separation of the New Squirearchy from ‘their’ neighbourhoods are much the same as those which transformed vast numbers of the ancien regime into little more than absentee landlords during the later part of the 19th century. As the agent increasingly replaced the resident owner, the visible hold of the Squire slipped and the effects of absence appeared more widely: In the words of Cobbett, a gentry;

‘foreign in their manners, distant and haughty in their behaviour, looking to the soil only for its rents, viewing it as a mere object of speculation, unacquainted with its cultivators, despising them and their pursuits, and relying, for influence, not upon the good will of the vicinage, but upon the dread of their power’ (Quoted in Mingay 1976, 177-178).

Perhaps overly harsh insofar as repeated agricultural recessions had forced many members of the gentry to sell their principle asset (i.e. land) and/or take advantage of improved rail networks and seek better returns in the City, although many were certainly drawn to the convenience and glamour of London life on a permanent basis. Gentryfication, on the other hand, represents the ‘pull’ of a countryfied existence, or rather the quest for a ‘balanced’ existence across both rural and urban spheres subject to both social and monetary imperatives.

Using money earned in the Capital to fund an elite rural lifestyle, rather than making use of City money to ‘sure up’ failing country estates, the (partial) decline of the old Squirearchy and the rise of the ‘New…’ are in part hinged on prevailing economic circumstances; a dynamic which is, by some accounts, bringing about a distinct downturn in the process of gentryfication:
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

‘Country homes worth between £1m and £5m in the Home Counties are no longer immune to the slowdown in the property market, estate agent Savills has warned. The listed agent said “prime” country property has held its value well until recently, but is now following London into a downturn.’ (Threlwell 2008).

‘After a period of static conditions, the malaise in the UK’s housing market has finally begun to depress values for prime country houses. For the first time since 2005, prices for prime country houses have fallen on a year-on-year basis and, at 2.8% it’s the biggest margin in the history of the index.’

(Bailey 2008).

A barometer used to identify the rise of the New Squirearchy, the rapid fall in value of ‘significant’ country homes in the £1m to £5m bracket is endemic of a climate of financial uncertainty, and may suitably be used as a measure of decline; at least in the short term. While there will always be those über-rich willing and able to buy into a lavish and opulent rural lifestyle, an extended period of recession is likely to have an negative impact on the appropriation of – and aspiration for - landed identities; especially among that broader pool of business owners, entrepreneurs and the service class at large.

While the breadth and gravity of this fiscal downturn is as yet unknown, it is probable that many likely gentrifiers will ‘tighten their belts’. Less likely to outlay equivalent amounts on those houses, farms and minor estates which has been symptomatic of the emergence of a New Squirearchy, there will be no doubt be an even greater reluctance to spend vast sums on horses, guns and four-wheel-drives. Coupled with the widespread, in-vogue repudiation of extravagant living and apparent frivolousness, it is likely that the base audience for gentryfication is fractured further still. As discussed, aspiring to a landed lifestyle is a highly
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

traditional feature of a predominately ex-urban, upwardly mobile middle class, but fashions for rural living are becoming increasingly diverse.

Open to a wider cross-section of society, although still largely allied to middle class socio-economic conditions in terms of buying into and negotiating these particular ventures, of particular importance here is the drive towards environmentally sustainable living. Manifested in, for example, the trend for cutting-edge homes with low carbon footprints and ‘grow your own’, the blend of a mounting ecological conscious with the need for frugality is paving the way for a new manner of ‘doing the rural’. Tied-in with broader agendas of green energy production, bio-diversity and organic production, these forms of living will become ever-more important in terms of reconstructing the countryside, and will involve specific performances centred around specific material conditions; much like the New Squirearchy …

8.7. To pastures new – an epilogue

Selectively absent from those broadly recreational spaces within which New Squires ‘become’, it was the private bar of the Six Tuns where I initially became aware of the possibility of gentryfication as being a discernable occurrence, and one very much party to a masculine, socially restrictive discourse which once marked out the presence of a landed elite and could conceivably do so again in specific contexts. It is, therefore, somewhat appropriate to return to the Office by way of a conclusion, and detail a changing state of affairs which made apparent the often-precarious, spatially contingent heterogeneous associations underlying such forms of collective belonging as New Squiredom. Here a change in the material character of the pub precipitated – or rather constituted - a localized ‘failing’ of this network within Eamesworth, but also underscored a shared capacity to alter, adapt, seek out and promote sympathetic situations.
8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

Following a period of absence of several months, I returned to Eamesworth mid-write up in order to discuss preliminary findings with my respondents and clarify various details. To this end, I made my way to the Six Tuns on a Wednesday evening for a chat with Michael Marriot and the rest of ‘the boys’, but they were not to be found in the Office as expected. Noticing that the pub and restaurant had been subject to a major refurbishment, I asked Jack Coughlin where they had gone and was happily told that they could be found at the ‘Moon and Sixpence’ in the nearby village of Tillbridge. Seeking an explanation – although it had, in truth, already presented itself – I spoke to Michael the following evening on the telephone and enquired as to the reasons for a change in venue.

A result of a commercial buy-out and change in management, the Six Tuns was now attempting to cultivate a more family-friendly image; one which did not sit well with constituents of the New Squirearchy. The bar stools now gone in order to improve approachability for newcomers; the beer pumps now playing host to dubious, cost-effective ‘smooth flow’ bitters and the whisky menu now confined to the past; the Six Tuns, it seemed, was no longer capable of playing host to this group. While Michael said that he would “obviously prefer to drink in the pub down the road”, this particular communal duty had been overshadowed by the more ‘authentic’ faces, décor and products provided in the ‘The Moon...’ Jack, meanwhile, seemed quite content with the change in affairs. In his eyes “real locals stay local” and “don’t pretend to be something they are not”. The only way he will be forced to stop drinking in the Office, on the other hand, is the day he takes “personal delivery of a pine box” – within which he will no doubt rest under a big gravestone in shade of All Saint’s steeple.

‘At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blew
Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new’

(Lycidas, John Milton)
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