

Sir Traffic's name so well apply'd
Awak'd 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

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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 practises 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-verses-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 too 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 an 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

¹ Echoing those academic studies which have identified the rural South East as being as desirable a place of residence and focus of migration (see Hoggart 1997; Murdoch and Marsden 1994; Phillips 1998a, 1998b).

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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 immigrants, 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 Pitlochrie, 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 Remarketed*², it is apparently of little

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 become 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

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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.

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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

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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

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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 subsidies, 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 national 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

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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

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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

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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 gentryfication 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 gentryfication 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 of 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 bench marks.

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 gentryfication, 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.