

### 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

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'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 practises 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 practises (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

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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] mitigate[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

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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-hierarchical 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

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notions, life in the 'littoral zone' could not furnish anything more than a *littoral* truth<sup>1</sup>, 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 Gardiner<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup> For more on Rolf Gardiner and his role in the 'organic nationalism' movement see Matless's *Landscape and Englishness* (1998).

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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<sup>3</sup>; 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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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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#### 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<sup>4</sup>. 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> century cottages, a number of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century farmhouses, and the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 its guide price, and the largest of

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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 17<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> 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,

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<sup>5</sup> 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 cliquy 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 which 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

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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 were 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).

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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

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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

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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.



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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 ones own backyard; especially in terms of that over-riding consideration – the need to guard the confidentiality 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

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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.

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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.

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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 friend<sup>6</sup> 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 –

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<sup>6</sup> As I hope I am to many villagers, and that they (continue to) regard me as such.

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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

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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).