

## 6. Patronage and the 'theatre of hospitality'

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

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

Generally absent from, for example, the meetings of the Parish Council, Church Committee and Recreation Association, any possible assumptions regarding a

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

### 6.1. *The weight of expectation*

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

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

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

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

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

'It is true that the gentry's belief in their inherent superiority and natural right to regulate the 'lower orders' led sometimes to overbearing pride and extensive powers they commanded. Inevitably they also expected an unceasing tribute of deference from the inferiors whose lives they

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influenced at every turn ... Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the English gentry in general showed a strong sense of public duty and of social obligation towards their subordinates. Characteristically they wanted to be held in popular esteem, to be thought of as generous landlords, humane administrators, honest magistrates and trustworthy bulwarks against misfortune. Deference was more to be earned by sincere respect than by feudal right.' (Mingay 1976, 164).

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

Whilst the intense period of social, political and economic change that was the twentieth century put pay to the role of the squire as the protector of regional wealth and service, and fully supplanted the gentry's responsibility for the provision and upkeep of local infrastructure (issues that will be considered directly) their role as benefactor and host has, in many locales, continued in perpetuity. This condition is identified by Sandy Mitchell of the *Daily Telegraph*, the focal point of her account of the booming country house market being the rather caustic testimony of a gentlemen identified only as having 'inherited a substantial chunk of the entire Yorkshire landmass':

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"Noblesse oblige still exists. You have got to turn up to everybody's funeral, whether it is the local beekeeper or the gamekeeper on a neighbour's estate. If you have the living of the church, you have to appoint the vicar, turn up at church regularly and read the lesson. People get frightfully cheesed off if you don't perform the role properly." (2004).

Ordained by public expectation as much as individual generosity and/or egotism, the prime example of *noblesse oblige* in Eamesworth was the Summer Fete, held in late June at 'the Manor' for as long as anyone could remember. Second to none in terms of size or status, Eamesworth Manor surpasses even the sizeable Horvath estate as *the* local residence of note. Home to the Fowler family in the late fifteenth century<sup>1</sup>, and Sir Edward Page-Turner<sup>2</sup> in the mid to late nineteenth century the 'big noises' have, in more recent times, been without truly aristocratic calibre; most notably 'the Colonel' and the Bancrofts, who resided here during much of the later part of the twentieth century.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Of whom Richard Fowler was famously imprisoned in the Tower of London as a result of a letter forged by his wife, her brother and her lover implicating him in a plot to poison Elizabeth I.

<sup>2</sup> The fifth Baronet Dryden of Ambroseden.

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by Donald Bramwell, a hereditary Eamesworthian and sausage maker of great renown:

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

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

"... You can have all the planning and arranging in the world, but if people didn't come it would be for nothing. I suggest, although you have all come to enjoy yourselves - with the raffle and buying nice things from all these stalls - you should also take time to enjoy the Manor. It has been the centrepiece of this event for many years; well ... accept for the one year when things did not go as planned and co-operation was not so easily achieved ... I think that for many of you it has become a yearly pilgrimage. You come to see your old friends, and catch up with some of those people you haven't seen since last year ..." (Donald).

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The first opportunity for many residents to gauge their new potentates, they were keen to make certain their intentions toward the Manor, its heritage, and - by association - the village as a whole. As much, it would seem, the village's to take as the owner's to give; Donald Bramwell's patter placed a firm burden of expectation on the shoulders of the new lord and lady, accentuating the generous spirit of past titleholders and a lack of confunxion which had, in the past, forestalled the festivities. Mr Terry Bolton and his partner, Mrs Louise Robinson, were clearly on probation, but they had, at least, made a promising start.

### 6.2. *Afterimage*

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

'After a severe gale that nearly removed what was left of the roof over the dilapidated and neglected church of [nearby village], this amazing man

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turned to the restoration of All Saint's Church. Hard work by the parishioners and generous donations from Mr Page -Turner (who rebuilt the chantry as a vestry and organ chamber) and Thomas Green [vicar] revealed all the old glories of the church and restored it to its former beauty.'

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

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



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Judith picked up this thread:

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

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

As afternoon gave way to evening, and the wives and partners of several regular Office dwellers had packed up their stalls and enjoyed the jazz band's final number in the company of her ladyship, their other-halves loaded up their wagons with chutneys, raffle prizes and picnic hampers, and headed off for the

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post-match analysis in the Six Tuns. Moving from tombola to barbeque to bash-the-rat with interest and a practised ease, Mrs Robinsons' performance had been warmly received by the assembly; but it was the subject of her partner's identity (both as man and Lord) that was to form the crux of the discussion: Who, they wondered, was Terry Bolton? What did he look like? What was his line of business? How much was he worth? Had he, or would he, become a regular? - Was he, perhaps, 'one of them'?

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

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

Anxious for the Hardy's to position themselves within the fabric of Eamesworth, and to gauge the fuller extent and character of their involvement as part of the community, I took afternoon tea with Joseph and Patricia in the conservatory of

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their recently purchased, exquisitely furnished country cottage. Here I enquired as to those circumstances which brought them to the village:

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

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

"Yes it is." (Joseph Hardy).

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

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

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

"So we did, and thoroughly enjoyed it. We upheld tradition and got to know all the people in the village. And of course, we then got involved with the church." (Joseph Hardy).

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"Of course, Joseph got roped into being the treasurer of the church. Being an accountant ..." (Patricia Hardy)

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

(Joseph Hardy).

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

### 6.3. *Spiritual leadership*

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

'Not infrequently church and manor house lay cheek by jowl, the slender spire of one overshadowed by the bulk of the other, symbolising both the affinity and the relationship of power spiritual and temporal. With the

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Reformation the gentry acquired wide powers over tithes and the right of presentation to livings ... and by the early seventeenth century lay impropriations had become a vast vested interest which cut right across classes, politics and religion.' (Mingay 1979, 134-135).

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

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

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Similar arguments were put forward by Christopher Passant, Mark's neighbour and owner of a floristry chain:

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

(Christopher Passant).

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

"I have become involved with the village hall committee ... and I have been lumbered with the organisation of the fete, but I am so glad. It really feels like I am doing something this time, rather than turning up at meetings and being ignored ...I get the impression that a lot of people in the village think I have never done a stroke of work in my life, which is simply not true. They think we are rich, but we have worked bloody hard to get where we are, and we aren't snobs. But we are seen as rich, interfering newcomers. Take the other week, at the Greek food festival, where the villagers went along and contributed a dish ...I made a real effort to go, but it was really cliquey. It is so hard to mix in with the older locals who look at me as if I am a rich incomer and a ... kept woman. But I won't let it get to me. I am determined to mix in." (Tanya Parkinson).

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Driven to contribute a lengthy article to the parish gazette in which she pleaded the case of those "younger people and recent arrivals" who "*did* care for the village", but were hampered by work and family commitments, it was a perspective on modern village life shared by Thomas Baster, although he was also keen to acknowledge the "flip side of the coin":

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

Whilst sympathetic to Tanya's outlook in that they were aware of several of the 'old guard' who had a tendency to be hostile toward those of a limited Eamesworth pedigree, members of the Women's Institute, Women's Friendship Group, bell ringers, 3-to-5 Club<sup>4</sup> and the Men's Association were generally more convinced of Thomas's analysis:

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

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<sup>3</sup> A local newspaper which features short weekly columns devoted to the happenings in a number of villages within south east Bedfordshire.

<sup>4</sup> A group who met bimonthly between 3pm and 5pm and whose activities included theatre trips, leisurely walks, coffee mornings and audiences with guest speakers.

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the other, if you know what I mean. What with the majority of folk around here not being overly religious, and a lot still working – and the meetings tend to be in the day time – it's not surprising we get few new members. And lets be honest, we are all what you might call fuddy-duddies, so the trendy people who have moved into Eamesworth are not going to want to be seen dead with us lot [laughs!]. Well, its true isn't it!"

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

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

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

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

(Sandra Thompson, member of the Parochial Council).



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

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

(Silvia Threlfall).

### 6.4. *Ennui*

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

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the considered opinion Richard Veasey, the proprietor of an agricultural contract firm and resident of Dappledown Farm:

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

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

'The best-case scenario is that we will need £35, 000 to give the builders the go-ahead to start the building, and £72,500 to complete the project in its entirety. This is where we are asking for your help!!! There are a number of

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**business people**<sup>5</sup> living in the village. A quick add-up of the ones that we know identifies thirty-three, and there must be quite a few that I don't know of. If you can all be persuaded to make a donation, call it sponsorship – tax deductible – we could very quickly reach our target. There are also very many **private individuals** who may be inclined to help, be it with cash, or the supply of equipment, or furniture.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>5</sup> Emphasis in original.

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

(ECA Chairman).

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

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

Requesting anonymity, the modesty of the gentleman in question was, perhaps, the most genuine indication of paternal sentiment that I was to come across in the course of the study, and his considerable efforts remained largely

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unacknowledged by those many Eamesworthians who would go onto enjoy the fruits of his labour in the form of a superbly appointed communal hall. That said, he was - alike several others on the ECA committee - to be found at every fundraiser and social gathering Eamesworth could muster, and his face numbered among those few regularly seen at Parish Council meetings.

### 6.5. *Playing formal rural politics*

The only truly political institution in Eamesworth the Parish Council has, in more recent times, been characterised by a universal concern with speeding vehicles, the progress of roadside drainage repairs and the provision of ample street lighting. The verbal exchanges at each session did not betray a community in crisis fractured by burning local disputes, and various elements of the new middle class were not being driven to defend their investment in the rural idyll. With the full compliment of councillors being returned (often reluctantly) without contest, positions standing vacant, and attendance consistently poor<sup>6</sup> there was little evidence of any collective politicization of in-migrants through this channel. In contrast to Harper's (1988) observations, individuals were certainly not 'competing for positions on the Parish Council in order to defend their image of the settlement'; although the sporadic presence of the "green welly brigade" was commented on:

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

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<sup>6</sup> 17 being the maximum number of individuals present at any one meeting during the course of the study.

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[mocking tone] ... pops up. Development, for example. They don't seem to like that. So they might come down to a meeting to voice their objection to a new house or what-have-you. Funnily enough, though, they are the ones with the most money to spend and are most likely to apply for planning permission for an extension or conservatory." (Alan Bevan, Parish Council).

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

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

"I have only lived here for 10 years, and you can sort of imagine that they might not like me turning up. But I am sure that is not the case. But unless you are involved yourself you can't criticize it [Parish Council]. People should get involved ... and somebody's got to do it. It's like government. You hope somebody gets into power that you don't mind. If you are only aware of 10% of the population, it's because the other 90% of the population are apathetic and can't be bothered to vote. As I said, I was going to complain and say 'I don't have any time', but neither does anybody else. And the same few manage to contribute. The problem with the Parish Council and all the other organisations in this village and others is that they are by and for the retired middle class. There is less and less young blood, and I ... and I imagine I am not alone in not being entirely sure as to what they do." (Thomas Baster).

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Although furnished with a high level of social mobility, and impressive educational credentials, Thomas was one of a number of respondents who was unsure of the form and function of the Parish Council, and assumed that other, more established villagers, put themselves forward as and when the need arose. Believing the institution to be dominated by retirees with the time and financial resources to dominate proceedings (and thus unrepresentative on this basis) it was a judgement which members of the Council were all too familiar with:

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

In line with the findings of Edwards *et al* (2002), it became particularly evident that social and economic change had significantly weakened the cohesion of Eamesworth as a community, and had undermined the capacity of a local leadership to manage the political process. As the population had grown, and local residents had become either less inclined or less capable of personal interaction, the ability of the established leadership to identify possible candidates

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and draw them in had inevitably declined. This was despite concerted efforts to raise the profile of the Parish Council, and educate people as to its purpose.

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

The proprietors of small to medium sized businesses, many of those who now find themselves in such residences would, it is argued, be well placed to infiltrate/augment those fluid and dynamic networks which Woods (1998; 2005) identifies as constituting contemporary rural elites. Although much removed from the traditional, middle class agriculturalism identified as the basis of the first distinctive socio-political core within this body, they may have conceivably fallen into a second, principally Conservative core brought together through such organizations as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club and Round Table, or - as part of a younger, less distinct liberal core - operating in the public voluntary sector. Yet, in the course of my studies I found few individuals who had little more than a distant connection with these 'backstages of local politics' (Ibid.63), although I did encounter three active members of a local Masonic Lodge. Less



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likely, therefore, to 'fall' into local governance, any passage into this arena is evidently reliant upon a stronger degree of self-motivation than perhaps it was in the past, when outside distractions were less prevalent, and a greater number of Eamesworthians (wealthy or otherwise) looked to each other for entertainment, support and fulfilment.

Should, however, the tendency towards residential isolation to reverse, and community interest become ever more geographically tied, the condition of prolonged economic dominance upon which the rural gentry's ascendancy once rested could not realistically be revived by any aspiring cohort through such traditional socio-political channels as the Parish Council. The extent of their prescriptive power has never been more than limited, despite various parliamentary initiatives to modernise local government and encourage grassroots involvement (e.g. 1972 Local Government Act; 1997 Local Government Act; 2000 Rural White Paper), and in many instances they have acted as little more than a tangible extension of predisposed authority<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, as the shift towards a more formalized framework of institutions has, throughout much (although not all) of the countryside, witnessed a shift in representation from farmers and landowners to an immigrant middle class, this process has been largely indicative of a loss or dispersal – as opposed to a *shift* – in unitary power. This was apparent in Jim Eames' reminisces:

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

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<sup>7</sup> As Mitchell notes, parish councils never fulfilled the hopes and aspirations which their radical progenitors had had for them, and were, in 'any case, dominated still by the wealthy and educated minorities of rural society, and in many instances their memberships appeared little different from the traditional social and political leaderships of centuries before' (1951, 394).

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church every Sunday morning. I had to go then! [laughs]. As I have told you, there was never a Squire as such in those days, and certainly not since, but one was a biggish farmer and publican – he had the Six Tuns, as you know, and Will Clarke was the village builder. Not a big concern as you might say today, but they were needed, had chaps work for them and commanded respect. And, when something needed doing in the parish, as you would say, it was. 90% of the people hereabouts would get involved if need be. Not like now, well since I came back from the [Second World] War.” (Jim Eames).

I asked Jim to elaborate:

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

Manifest within the dialogue, the foundations of a squirely remit, whether held by a blue blooded gent, local dignitary or even farmer or tradesman, have gone in

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Eamesworth and, with all probability, the vast majority of rural communities. Should any number of wealthier residents seek to appropriate a degree of legislative influence and responsibility, and attempt to fashion a local political fabric in line with some form of landed vision, they could not realistically do so.

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

Although I do not wish to dwell too long on the conception of New Squiredom as a pseudo-rural hyperreal, and the underlying debility and 'infantile degeneration' which Baudrillard characterises of such spaces, it is pertinent to consider that range of sought-after gadgets which 'magnetize the crowd' (Ibid. 170) into direct flows and zones, and which contrast those 'within' from those outside into an contradictory, contextual outside. I have, in the course of this thesis, contemplated those fetishized, distinctly 'rural' objects (e.g. four-wheel drives, farmhouses and clothes) and arenas (e.g. the public house, the village fete) in which New Squires have been identified in the midst of others, but it is also necessary to take into account those determinably exclusive, detached regions which mark out the

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landed gentry of old, and which may also serve to mark out a remade, reinvented or reprised phenomenon of the present. This will be the focus of the ensuing chapter, where those more – or in fact less - 'remote' spaces and performances of Eamesworth's 'privileged few' will be fully examined.