8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

> 'He was an odd fish, the guv'nor, and he and I had always been wary of each other. He was a nabob's grandson you see, old Jack Flashman having made a fortune in America out of slaves and rum, and piracy too, I shouldn't wonder, and buying the place in Leicestershire where we have lived ever since. But for all their moneybags, the Flashmans were never the thing – "the course streak showed through, generation after generation, like dung beneath a rosebush, "as Greville said. In other words, while other nabob families tried to make themselves pass for quality, ours didn't, because we couldn't.
>
> My own father was the first to marry well, for my mother was related to the Pagets, who as everyone knows sit on the right hand of God. As a consequence he kept an eye on me to see if I gave myself airs; before mother died he never saw much of me, being too busy at the clubs or in the house or hunting – foxes sometimes, but women mostly – but after that he had to take some interest in his heir, and we grew to know and mistrust each other.' (Fraser 1969, 18).

8.1. Addressing 'common knowledge'

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

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

On the 15th September, 2005, I was sat in the garden of the Six Tuns talking with one of my respondents about the possible existence of a New Squirearchy; whether it was a recent phenomenon in the area; how it made its presence felt; and what it meant in terms of the community and the countryside as a whole. True to the suggestions of, for example, such noted historians as Mingay, Asa Briggs and G.M. Trevelyan, and cultural commentators including Jane Austen, Henry Fielding and John Sullivan[1], it was concluded that while Eamesworth's gentry-incumbent were particularly in evidence at the time, they were no more than an acute manifestation of "that process which has gone on since time immemorial". Determining the path from business premises to rural mansion and surrounding acres as being well-worn by the "eighteenth century at least", this commentator was keen to verify the continuing importance of that "urban-myth" which drives successful professionals and businessmen out of the city and into such village communities as Eamesworth; imagining – like Thrifty, the subject of the satirical verse presented on the first page of this study – that their exodus would bring the assumed benefits of country living and "transform them into blue-blooded ladies and gentleman". On this basis, he suggested, current media attention on such people was little more than "lazy, unimaginative journalism", based purely on Britain's unceasing fascination with success, wealth and "keeping up with the Jones's".

[1] Whose recent television spin-off to the hugely successful *Only Fools and Horses* entitled *The Green, Green Grass* details the exploits of Peckham's most successful second-hand car dealer as he relocates his family to secluded Shropshire and attempts to make it as a gentleman farmer.

8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

Declaring that urban-myth driving would-be aristocrats into rural space as being no more prevalent than their existence in the public psyche as a subject of derision and miss-placed presumptions, I was told to "look no further than the antics of *Flashman* as a prime example of un-ingratiated social climbing … or even *Candide*". Perhaps misconstruing Voltaire's satire as a criticism of man's desire to better his social circumstances in the face of inherent and often unassailable cultural barriers, as opposed to humanity's hopelessly optimistic belief in its capacity to overcome social and natural evils, this interpretation nevertheless underscored the existence of a New Squirearchy as being, in many respects, a superficially defined collective; one mobilized in *response* to the (alleged) movement of people through the lower and middle classes towards the (apparently unreachable) rural upper class by those who would place themselves outside (and define themselves in opposition to) this manifestation of scripted performances and lifestyle choices within and beyond the fabric of Eamesworth.

A relatively short exchange, the conversation in the pub garden that afternoon nevertheless encompassed the key threads of my investigation, and gave voice to both its premise and findings; the order of which will provide the structure of this final chapter. In the first (and most obvious) instance, it confirmed a belief in the existence of a New Squirearchy as a quantifiable force for rural restructuring within this village at least, but also as a social force with a longstanding - but currently intense – pedigree. Secondly, in literally paying reference to such actions as "social climbing" and "keeping up with the Jones" through the "often uninspired" provision of "cars, cottages and riding lessons for the daughter", my co-conversationalist highlighted identity creation as both conscious and unconscious, reflexive and non-reflexive, process borne out of action played out with, by and through the imposed and received materialities of (rural) space.

At once stipulating the existence of a New Squirearchy as being expressive of, but in many ways extraneous to, the operation of class as a 'live' concept (both in theory and in practise), this exchange also traced that theoretical distance travelled in chapter two. Moving through debates surrounding property, the (new) middle class, the post-structural turn and the rise of embodiment in human geography, I contend, in the third instance, that a path can be navigated which takes in their varied concerns without resorting to straightforward pragmatism, and one that is capable of illuminating identity as a fluid, uncertain upshot of current actions. Informed by (and *informing*) wider contexts and other discourses (including those of gender, occupation, age, sexuality, the business leader, the jet-set) without necessarily being governed by them, I have attempted to provide an 'interpretative analysis' of gentryfication which – to paraphrase Savage and Butler – attempts to make the existence of the New Squirearchy as a partly-situated echelon of the middle-class in Eamesworth 'slightly less ambiguous', and one which further details their 'messy connection with other social phenomena' (1995, 346).

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

8.2. Performing the middle class; performing the gentry

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

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

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

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

In looking to those strategies which identify a New Squirearchy as being distinct from others (e.g. hobby farming, shooting, attending Royal Ascot etc.), the people

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

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

8.3. Appropriating a discourse

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

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

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

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

Among the swelling ranks of 'new guns' at shooting grounds and ranges throughout the Home Counties and beyond; habitually present in the enclosure at Royal Ascot and other top-flight race meetings and, less obviously; regularly drinking in the private bar of the village pub, there was a categorical, corporeal

attachment to those spaces allied to the identikit squire-at-leisure, but the basis of their involvement was not as clear-cut as may be supposed. Alongside golf, which has long been recognised as a principle apparatus through which the inner circle of business organizes itself, the grouse moor, snug and racecourse have become a staple medium of information exchange in financial and mercantile networks. Mixing business and pleasure, many of Eamesworth's high-fliers reciprocated broader trends and occupied these spaces; partly as a consequence of new ways of 'doing manager' (Thrift 2000, 675); and partly in or at play.

8.4. Other spaces, other identities

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

Underlining the nature of performance as an interactive and contingent process which succeeds according to the skill of the actors, and also the context within

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

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

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

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

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

8.5. On a collaborative, ethnographic methodology

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

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

In contrast to many researchers who go out in the field, I am in many respects more of an 'insider' in the context of the study than many of those whose existence I have sought to scrutinize and trace. Something of an oddity insofar as those undertaking extensive tracts of in-situ observation tend to stress their

dissimilarity, and a corresponding degree of 'critical distance', I was already deeply embedded in the field through family heritage, schooling, employment and in already knowing many would-be informants. Although many of those actions and performances which may or may not qualify and clarify the existence of a New Squirearchy in Eamesworth and the surrounding area may have been so familiar as to have passed me by, I have also reaped the benefits arising from a local background.

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

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

An approach which deliberately and explicitly emphasizes cooperation at every stage of the investigation, respondents and co-conversationalists have been involved at every point of the study – from project conceptualization, to fieldwork and through the writing-up period.

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

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

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

[2] Although not necessarily outside of the discursive realm of the shrewd financial operative.

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

8.6. The New Squirearchy and the future

As for the future, I am unsure of the extent to which the New Squirearchy will continue to characterize rural space. Having provided an extensive historical review of the landed elite and a sometimes incorporated, sometimes external nouveaux riche – one can only speculate as whether or not gentryfication is a process at its zenith as a result of those discursive practices and materialities 'filtered' through bodies functioning and territorialized in relation to very particular, contemporary socio-economic circumstances; or whether its intrinsic performances are set to live on undiminished through new incumbents. In Eamesworth at least, my experiences have led me to believe that in the case of this topography, the former condition is more likely; although it is probable that the process of gentryfication will subside in the near future.

8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

As discussed in the introduction, the rise of the New Squirearchy as a media phenomenon followed closely on the heels of – or rather as part of - what Woods has described as the 'strange awakening of rural Britain' (2005a, 1). Challenging the myth of the apolitical countryside; and yet quite deliberately and astutely (re)invoking this myth for the purpose of demonstrating the extent to which 'rural society' had been 'pushed' to breaking-point, the Countryside Rally of 1997, the Countryside March of 1998 and the Liberty and Livelihood demonstration of 2003 at once challenged 'urban' sensibilities over issues such as foxhunting and sparked a wave of public nostalgia for a near-lost rural idyll and the roots of the nation. (Re) popularizing 'country' literatures, arts and fashions, and reinvigorating an already potent desire of the (financially able) middle class to buy their own slice of health and happiness in the bucolic wonderland, the New Squirearchy was born in the eyes of the media – and in Eamesworth.

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

8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

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

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

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

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

8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

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

> 'After a period of static conditions, the malaise in the UK's housing market has finally begun to depress values for prime country houses. For the first time since 2005, prices for prime country houses have fallen on a year-on-year basis and, at 2.8% it's the biggest margin in the history of the index.'
>
> (Bailey 2008).

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

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

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

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

8.7. To pastures new – an epilogue

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

8. Closing the stable door … after the horse has bolted

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

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

> 'At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blew
> Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new'
>
> (*Lycidas*, John Milton)