

‘An Undoubted Jewel’: a case study of five Sussex country houses, 1880-1914

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‘The efforts of social man, directed from immemorial time toward the stability of things, have culminated in Worsted Skeynes. Beyond commercial competition — for the estate no longer paid for living on it — beyond the power of expansion, set with tradition and sentiment, it was an undoubted jewel, past need of warranty’.¹

So wrote John Galsworthy of his fictional *Country House* in 1907. Throughout the novel, Worsted Skeynes and its stolid, unimaginative inhabitants are assailed by malignant forces from a new, less structured and moralised, more urban and commercial society. Nevertheless, the old values and way of life emerge, in the end, deeply scarred but intact; a symbol of all Galsworthy despised, yet could never totally reject.² Like many novelists Galsworthy offered sympathetic insights into the fabric of his world which an historian can ill afford to ignore.

Studies of political, economic and legal changes have led most historians to see the late Victorian and Edwardian eras as the ‘Indian Summer’ of the English landed élite; a period of gradual but inexorable decline in social position and power, leading to almost complete collapse by the outbreak of war.

Even contemporaries, perhaps dazzled by the dramatic changes occurring around them, lamented the passing of ‘traditional’ English rural society. T.H.S. Escott felt that the ‘squire à la mode’ had replaced his eighteenth century predecessor in most counties; this fashionable gentleman was rarely if ever resident in his country seat, but spend most of his time in London, the centre of a glittering social whirl.³ C.F.G. Masterman also struck a gloomy note when he wrote that ‘. . . estates are encumbered or falling into decay’, while at the same time, ‘in exercise and enjoyment, in parties and pleasure gardens . . . the decay passes almost unnoticed’.⁴

Modern historians have drawn a similar picture. According to G.E. Mingay and F.M.L. Thompson, falling farm rents undermined

the position of the country squire, and caused retrenchment or re-investment in non-agricultural concerns. Under these pressures, traditional relationships with the tenantry and local community dis-integrated.⁵ The dissipations of London society, Keith Middlemas maintains, were threatening the strength of the gentry family and distracting the squire and his lady from their age-old occupations and responsibilities. Increased reliance on servants for the care of children hastened the decay. Middlemas also suggests that servant-keeping was becoming a form of competitive consumption, rather than a social responsibility marked by traditional patterns of paternalism and deference.⁶ Leonore Davidoff has described the decline of close-knit, exclusive upper class society, and the replacement of kinship ties as a prerequisite for admission, by a set of elaborate and arbitrary rules.⁷

Most historians point out the effect on the gentry of a series of legislative changes, amongst which were: the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884; the introduction of county, rural, and parish councils; the House of Lords crisis of 1909; and the Ground Game Act and Agricultural Holdings legislation.⁸ Each piece of legislation may be seen as an attempt to chip away at the wall of privilege and deference which had once surrounded the gentry.⁹

The traditional rural life-style was also beleaguered by the influx of the new commercial and industrial wealthy, who bought up the estates of impoverished gentry families.¹⁰ F.M.L. Thompson probably sums up the consensus of historical opinion when he concludes his chapter on the 'Indian Summer' of the landed interest:

'The beginning of the break up of large estates may more profitably be seen as the natural culmination of the whole trend of the preceding generations. The landed interest had lost its pre-eminence and now land was losing many of its attractions'.¹¹

In the light of these views, must we conclude that Galsworthy was simply blinded by his own wishful thinking when he depicted the successful resistance of Worsted Skeynes to outside pressures? Or was he describing a human reaction to change which gives the lie to 'circumstantial' history?

Obviously, the social, political and economic changes of the late nineteenth century were affecting the traditional life-style of the gentry. Yet evidence from the five Sussex country houses examined in this study suggests that the process of decline was almost imperceptible in the period 1880-1914: attitudes and habits of life were not changing as rapidly as the objective conditions of landowning.

Many features of the eighteenth century squire's existence persisted well into the twentieth; as many continuities with traditional rural society and the life style of the gentry may be observed in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, as changes.

The basis of this paper is a collection of the household papers of five country houses in Sussex. These records are a largely untapped source for the social historian: they reveal, with startling richness, the inner workings of each household. In addition to wage books, stewards' accounts, inventories, agents' letterbooks and other business-related materials, are the personal letters and appointment diaries of the families themselves. Certain objections to such evidence cannot be denied; analysis requires a certain amount of 'reading between the lines' and educated guesswork. Much of the material is not directly comparable, either in terms of time span or the type of information supplied. The sample is small, and not representative: there are two estates over 10,000 acres in size, and only one under 4000. Sussex itself, out of the mainstream of industrialisation and urbanisation, was not a typical county. To this, one can only make the usual answer in defence of local history: that a small-scale study may be as accurate as a more generalised view, which glosses over regional and individual differences. A study of this sort may expose evidence which does not fit into the prevailing model of drastic change and decline, and may point the way to further exploration.

A short introduction to the families involved in the study may be useful. Henry Wyndham, the second Earl of Leconfield, was born in 1830, married Constance Dalmeny in 1867, and succeeded to his title in 1869. There were six sons and three daughters in the family, born between 1868 and 1888. Lord Leconfield was succeeded by his second son in 1901. Their major residence was Petworth House, although they also maintained a house in London and owned substantial lands in Yorkshire and Cumberland. Charles Henry Gordon-Lennox, the sixth Duke of Richmond, succeeded in 1861 at the age of forty-three. His wife, Frances Harriet Greville, bore him four sons and two daughters between 1845 and 1865. His eldest son, also Charles Henry, succeeded him in 1903. The family divided their time between Goodwood House, a London house, and Gordon Castle, the centre of their extensive Scottish estates. Colonel Edward Frewen, a member of a very old Sussex gentry family, married Anne Mary Bing in 1873, and fathered two sons and one daughter. Brickwall, a Jacobean mansion at Northiam in East Sussex, was the Frewen residence, although economic necessity

sometimes forced them to move to smaller houses and let the family home. Bertram, Earl of Ashburnham, married Emily Chaplin in 1888 and succeeded to his extensive property in 1898. When he died in 1919, he was survived only by one daughter, and his brother succeeded to the title, which is now extinct. Bertram was deeply involved in Carlist activities for most of his life and spent little time at his seat, Ashburnham Place. Sir George Croxton Shiffner married Elizabeth Greenall in 1854; they had two sons and four daughters. The family lived at Coombe Place in Hamsey, near Lewes, where George was also the rector. He was succeeded by his eldest son John in 1906.

For the class to which these men belonged, the basis of wealth had traditionally been agricultural. Regardless of how small the holding, land had an almost mystical significance for the gentry family. In the late 1870s farm rents began to fall, and the returns on agricultural investment decreased. Paul Thompson, like many other historians, paints a black picture of agriculture in Britain by the early twentieth century:

Left to the mercies of the market, unprotected by state subsidies, the Edwardian countryside was economically and socially moribund . . .¹²

In some cases, this provided the impetus for landowners to exploit other sources of income, such as stocks, mineral rights and urban ground rents. It has been claimed that land was no longer as lucrative, nor as important an asset as it once had been.

In the five Sussex country houses examined here, however, it appears that sources and levels of income did not change dramatically prior to World War One. Unfortunately income figures are not complete enough to be conclusive. At Petworth, farm rent receipts rose slowly between 1895 and 1900, and the estate agent was able to report in 1896: ' . . . audits this year have been very satisfactory; there are few arrears . . .'.¹³ The Ashburnham estate did see a decrease in income between 1875 and 1885, although not a serious one, and in any case, the 1875 levels were being approached again by 1899.¹⁴ Fragmentary evidence for Coombe Place suggests steady gains in receipts between 1898 and 1906.¹⁵ At Goodwood House a discernible decline did take place, in spite of the Duke of Richmond's expertise as an agriculturalist. However, this apparent decline may be due to a change in book-keeping practice; it is not clear whether the later figures included the Scottish rents, as the early ones did. In any case the decline was not steady: income was higher, for example, in 1884 than in 1873.¹⁶

Were new sources of income distracting these landlords from investment in, and concern for, their agricultural holdings? The 1903 will of the Duke of Richmond reveals that the value of his farm rents totalled £232,236 while the mansion, park and garden was valued at £20,500. Compared to this, the £12,777 invested in stocks and bonds represented a very minor source of income.¹⁷ For George Shiffner, the £1,090 realised on his bank stocks in 1891, or the £809 from the sale of consols in 1892, represented a more important, but still relatively insignificant, part of his budget.

It is probable that none of these houses depended for major parts of their income on non-agricultural funds. Indeed, they had little opportunity to diversify their local holdings, as Sussex was outside the mainstream of large-scale industrial and urban development. In any case, the capital necessary for investment was rarely available on estates where property was still securely tied up in settlements, jointures and mortgages.

In the area of household expenditure, the surviving records show even more clearly a continuation, as opposed to retrenchment, of the comfortable gentry life-style. In spite of the increasing cost of servant-keeping, the size of these households did not decrease. The grand style is represented by Goodwood, where there were twenty-five servants employed in 1875, including such non-functional, status-enhancing domestics as a groom-of-the-chamber and three footmen. This staff was maintained throughout the period, and only decreased substantially in 1917, after the introduction of conscription and the ready availability of lucrative war work. By 1920, the staff numbered twenty-one.¹⁸

At Petworth there were thirty-two servants in 1879, and still thirty-one in 1891. After the death of Lord Leconfield, the staff was reduced to twenty-three; by 1902, however, the household had returned to the customary size.¹⁹

At Ashburnham in 1878 an estate agent suggested a substantial reduction in staff as a money-saving measure. The suggestion was not taken up, however; sixteen to eighteen servants were always kept, although the family was rarely in residence.²⁰

Household and estate records also seem to suggest that landlords continued to invest in improvements: for example, Petworth was completely painted and redecorated and a new plumbing system was installed in 1906, and a complete electrical system was added in 1909.²¹ The amounts spent on Ashburnham Place varied from £290 to £1,354 between 1875 and 1900. Repairs to the estate property cost £891 in 1875, £2,315 in 1900.²²

At Goodwood, expenditure on the house increased dramatically between 1875 and 1902. Amounts spent on the gardens were staggering: £1,720 in 1873, £2,032 in 1908. Even Coombe Place, whose owners had a much smaller disposable income, had new plumbing and electrical systems by 1906.²⁴ The Frewens paid regularly into a Land Improvement Company and they apparently took their responsibilities to the estate very seriously. In the midst of serious financial embarrassments, the agent wrote to Colonel Frewen to recommend the installation of a new drainage system:

'It is the only thing to be done, but I am really sorry for you as 600 or 700 pounds a year added to the burden of the estate just now is a serious thing'.²⁵

If the ample lifestyle of England's landed classes was being cramped by lower incomes and higher prices, expenditure on sport is one area where cutbacks might be expected.

Game preservation continued to be a large item at Ashburnham, where costs varied between £700 and £903 per annum in the period 1880 to 1899; the 1899 figure was considerably higher than that of 1880.²⁶ At Goodwood game expenditure reached a high of £1,452 in 1913.²⁷ But racing was, as it still is, Goodwood's chief sport, and one of the most costly; the Dukes of Richmond in this period maintained the Goodwood racecourse out of their own pockets.²⁸

At least as costly was the Leconfields' maintenance of a private pack of hounds, one of the last in England. In 1888 the Earl employed six kennelmen and sixteen gamekeepers and assistants, a huntsman, and two whippers-in.²⁹ According to Trollope, the cost of such an extensive establishment was in excess of £2,500 a year.³⁰ Reginald Leconfield, one of the Earl's younger sons was a famous sportsman: he owned twelve hunters and hunted seventy days a year. He paid 10,000 guineas for a share in a race horse which once won the Gold Cup at Ascot. A big game enthusiast, he made trips to South Africa and the American Rockies in search of quarry.³¹

It has also been suggested that gentry families in financial straits cut back on their traditional charitable donations. At the two houses for which figures are available, Ashburnham and Goodwood, more was being spent on charity in 1900 than in 1873, and in the case of Goodwood, more in 1908 than in 1900.³²

Expenditures on food and drink also remained high in this period, in spite of rising food costs. At Goodwood in December 1888, an amazing 2769 pounds of meat were consumed; in April 1898, the figure was 3055. Large-scale entertainments were a tradition which

seemed unaffected by restraint. In January 1891, 152 guests were received at a ball; at a similar event in 1908, there were 197 guests. It was customary to have sixty house guests for Goodwood race week.³³ At Petworth, cellar records attest to a similar unstinting hospitality. For example, in January 1889, 92 bottles of claret, 5 of port, 6 of sherry, 11 of whisky and 42 of other wines, were consumed. At a ball in 1908, the guests downed 62 bottles of gin, 8 of peach brandy, and 89 of claret.³⁴ The Ashburnhams also enjoyed entertaining. In 1909 the earl held a ball for 500 in London, at which champagne, whisky, cognac, claret and moselle cups helped to wash down a cold buffet of salmon, sole, lobster, pigeon, liver, tongue, chicken, ham, desserts, fruit, sorbet and raspberry ice-cream.³⁵

It would appear that, in spite of falling incomes in some cases, many gentry households were maintaining the generous and comfortable life-style of their eighteenth century counterparts. The keeping of such meticulous accounts as those on which these figures are based seems in itself, however, to suggest an increasing awareness of expenditure. Household and personal account books record items such as postage stamps and rail and cab fares, trivial amounts in terms of overall expenses. However, this careful book-keeping was not a nineteenth century development. It reminds us of Mingay's characterisation of the eighteenth century landowner: '... fond of entertaining and not averse to some show and extravagance, and yet still careful to watch expenditure and keep minutely detailed accounts'.³⁶ But figures alone cannot reveal the changes in lifestyle and attitude which a beleaguered class might be expected to exhibit. Was the traditional gentry household breaking down internally? Were master and mistress becoming distanced from their families and servants: were the traditional ties disintegrating?

The Leconfield family letters seem to reflect a closely-knit, affectionate family. Lady Leconfield wrote almost daily to her children's nurse when she was away from Petworth, and received detailed accounts of their health and activities. As they grew older, the children themselves began to correspond with their mother, and continued to do so while at school and long after. Lady Leconfield's letters were apparently eagerly awaited in the nursery. Nurse wrote in 1884: '... Mr. Hughie has been very busy printing a letter to your ladyship yesterday and today ... he and Maggie received their letters tonight before going to bed, which were a great delight'.³⁷ This family affection does not seem to have diminished as the children grew older. When the eldest son, George, gave his maiden

speech in Parliament, his mother wrote that it had been read by the whole family 'with great joy and delight', and added that '. . . we are all looking forward to seeing you tomorrow, the house never seems the same when you are not in it'.³⁸ On another occasion, when Lady Leconfield was in Ireland and nursing her son Reginald, who had been injured in a hunting accident, her daughter Maggie wrote: 'Of course, I need not say how dreadfully we miss you here, all the more now the boys are coming home'.³⁹ Lord Leconfield also displayed a genuine and immediate interest in his children, not conforming to the archetype of the remote and severe Victorian *paterfamilias*. A letter written to his wife in 1899 is full of domestic detail: 'Bumps has returned (from school) looking very well and with a good report. Edward's is of course a very disappointing one . . . Maggie has immensely improved in her playing'.⁴⁰

The Frewen letter reveal a similar pattern of family relations in a smaller gentry household. Anne Frewen reported every detail of her infant son's activities to her husband when he was away from home. The Frewen sons wrote cheerful and affectionate letters to their mother from school and long after they had grown up and taken up their careers.⁴¹

Lady Beckwith's memoir of family life at Goodwood is also very different from the conventional picture of the Edwardian noble family; caught up in high society and meeting only at the parties of mutual friends.

'Considering our own early influences, first and foremost I must place my father, for he was not only the kindest and wisest of counsellors, but also the most devoted father . . . And I think I can say no family was more united, and none loved each other with such mutual affection'.⁴²

Another traditional aspect of family relations in these gentry households was the importance of the extended family. The Wyndhams paid frequent visits to relatives throughout Britain, and often went to 'Uncle Archie' in Edinburgh. Maggie's round of visits to country houses always included those of her many relations. She wrote from London in 1912 that: 'I spent Thursday afternoon looking up relations, but all are away, even Aunt Constance'.⁴³

But family ties went beyond mere socializing. Edward Frewen's cousin was one of his trustees during a period of financial crisis at Brickwall, and took a great interest in the estate, doing all in his power to prevent the decline of the family fortunes. Edward himself provided one of his needy cousins with a benefice, and loaned a needy one £400 to set up a medical practice.⁴⁴

Even the grand Ashburnham household maintained close kinship ties. A guest book kept between 1879 and 1882 reveals that more than half of the visitors were members of the immediate or extended family.⁴⁵ At Goodwood it was said that '... everywhere there were relations, near and distant'.

The children of these Sussex gentry families seem to have conformed to a traditional pattern in their later careers. Of the nineteen males examined: nine attended an old public school, five Oxford, one Cambridge, and four military colleges. Eight served as Guards officers, while three entered other armed services, one became a cleric, and one a member of the Royal household.⁴⁶

The gentry household consisted not only of the family members, however, but also of a large and complex network of servants. It has been suggested that the pressures of modern society were putting an unbearable strain on the ties which had once bound family and non-family members of the gentry household together: masters and mistresses were becoming distanced from the day-to-day operations, and in consequence, the reciprocal bonds of paternalism and deference were breaking down.

The evidence of Lady Elizabeth Shiffner's personal account books suggest that she had not relinquished her share of the housekeeping duties: she was responsible for the sale of home farm produce and for paying the female servants. She kept a notebook with recipes for mayonnaise, home remedies, furniture and metal polish, and even 'lotion for horses' legs'. She also performed such everyday tasks as the taking of an inventory of the linen and china at Coombe Place. The management, hiring and firing of servants were often mentioned in her diaries.⁴⁷ The diaries also reflect a beneficent paternalism toward servants. A New Year's Eve servants' dance was a regular event at Coombe Place, and Christmas treats included trips to the theatre in Brighton and gifts.⁴⁸

The ladies of Petworth also took a lively interest in the running of the household. Maggie's letters to her mother discuss such matters as choosing carpet for the servants' hall (she had '... found a large rug made up of some bits of cheerful red brussels carpet for 18s.'), the purchase of fruit and flour for Christmas cakes, accommodation for the maids of house guests, and other domestic problems.⁴⁹ The letters also reflect a close partnership between mistress and housekeeper, especially in the management of other servants: 'Mrs. Forty (the housekeeper) wishes to ask you if we ought not to be looking for another still-room maid, as Amy will soon be leaving'.⁵⁰

The involvement of the master in the everyday life of a gentry

household was also important, in spite of T.H.S. Escott's claim that '... the claims of society have acquired precedence over the duties of home'.⁵¹ Lord Leconfield spent a day in London in 1899 interviewing a valet and having 'a stormy interview with the fishmonger' about the quality of the supplies sent to Petworth. Maggie reported that he had suggested the use of a particular household soap which he believed would be cheaper than the usual brand. His main role, though was in the hiring of male servants, over which he took infinite pains.⁵² Evidence from other households studied also suggests that the master was active in domestic matters. The meticulous account books kept by stewards and housekeepers were obviously intended for his scrutiny. Relations with servants in the traditional gentry household had gone far beyond a mutual interest in domestic management. An emotional interdependence, paternalism on one side, deference on the other, bound together the members of the household. Such antiquated notions seem to have survived the factory age in some Sussex country houses.

Paternalism was double-edged; servants, like children, were both cared for, and firmly admonished. Maggie, the Leconfields' youngest daughter, wrote with concern about the butler, whose temper '... is just awful now; last night he blew up the footman quite out loud in the dining room. I cannot think what is wrong'. She also observed that the housekeeper was 'always thinking of her own position and taking offence at nothing'; Maggie thought that a servants' dance 'might hearten her up'. On the other hand, when a housemaid took to wearing costume jewellery, the housekeeper was told to 'give her a good talking', and the maid was eventually dismissed.⁵³

Lady Beckwith remembered that relations between the Duke of Richmond and his staff '... could not be said to have been anything but ideal'.⁵⁴ At Goodwood, as at Petworth and the smaller houses, Christmas treats were customary. A servants' ball was usually the high point of the season; in 1908, 197 guests attended such a ball at Goodwood. Even at Coombe Place, sixty guests were present at a servants' dance held in 1888.⁵⁵ Lady Elizabeth noted in her personal accounts such items as '2s.6d. — servants to theatre', while her husband recorded 'presents to housemaids — 2 pounds'.⁵⁶

Lady Beckwith also assures her reader that the servants at Goodwood 'enjoyed the stateliness of the regime'. But here our reliable information ends. We have very few servant diaries or accounts to balance the view from the top. Length of service has been suggested as one objective measure of loyalty amongst

servants. Lower servants tended to change jobs frequently in the households in this study. However, those who attained higher rank, and became more closely involved in the lives of their employers, often had remarkable service records. The butler at Goodwood in 1927 had first been hired in 1893, and the housesteward had also served the family for over twenty-five years. Mrs. Forty was the housekeeper at Petworth for more than fifteen years, and Mrs. Sumpter, the children's nurse, lived on in the household until her death.⁵⁷ An incident at Petworth in 1898 suggests that true devotion to a master was still to be found. Shortly after one of Lord Leconfield's sons was involved in a near-fatal hunting accident, his youngest son entered a steeple chase, causing his father great anxiety. Pattinson, the house steward, took it upon himself to cable his master as soon as the race was over, that his son was unhurt.⁵⁸

Traditionally, landowners and their tenants and villagers had been linked together by a commonality of interests and mutual respect. Evidence from the five Sussex houses of this study suggests that this relationship, too, had changed little by the early twentieth century. When the Frewens, in dire financial straits, were forced to let Brickwall, a correspondent wrote to Colonel Frewen from Northiam that: '... nothing can be expected to go right here until you come back again'. 'A Frewen in propria persona', he asserted, 'seems only natural'.⁵⁹ The choice of the word 'natural' unconsciously alludes to an almost organic tie between a landowner and his land. Even when fox-hunting was under severe attack elsewhere for the damage it caused to crops, Colonel Frewen's tenants seemed to consider it his natural prerogative to hunt over their land. One of his farmers wrote in 1881 that he was '... highly gratified at the good run you had' on his land, and piously hoped that he would continue to 'find a share of good foxes'.⁶⁰

In return, we find evidence that Edward Frewen was a concerned and understanding landlord. His agent obviously expected a sympathetic response when he wrote that one of the tenants '... has no means of paying anything at present ... I think he told me that he had eight children at home'. On another occasion, a long-standing tenant wrote to report that '... our grandson Anthony is getting on very well' in his new job, and to express his gratitude for 'the influence you used to get him appointed'.⁶¹

The final mark of respect for Edward Frewen was the message his tenants addressed to his wife on his death in 1919:

The Colonel was a kind and sympathetic landlord and worthily upheld all the best traditions of a long and renowned ancestry ...⁶²

However conventional the sentiments may seem, their expression is part of a long tradition of deference and loyalty.

This relationship between squire and tenantry is reflected in the records of other households, but never more forcefully than in a speech delivered by the Duke of Richmond in 1884:

I look upon myself and the tenantry as members of one large, vast, and I am happy to be able to add, united family . . . It is my duty — and I endeavour to carry it out — to look after the interests myself personally, individually, of the humblest crofter on this estate as well as the wealthiest tenant.⁶³

Traditionally, the landlord had looked after the interests of his tenants in bad times, as well as in good. The squire had always been the chief source and organiser of charity in his locality.

Among the charitable activities supported at Goodwood were: the provision of an estate nurse, annuities, pensions and coal allowances for retired labourers and servants, several cricket clubs and agricultural societies, church and clerical organisations, and local schools in fifteen villages. Charity also took more personal forms: for example, 600 quarts of soup were doled out to the poor from the Goodwood kitchens every month in winter.⁶⁴ The Petworth Park Friendly Society organised annual fêtes held in the gardens, and Lord Leconfield himself participated in all the planning. He also personally scrutinised applicants for admission to an almshouse he maintained at Tillington. Pensions, Jubilee treats and special allowances for the needy were part of his magnanimity towards his tenants.⁶⁵

In 1890 the Shiffners were supporting their local Diocesan Association and several other church funds, several hospitals, the Hamsey cricket club, the church choir and the Lewes musical society. In 1887 Sir George mounted a Jubilee celebration in Hamsey which included a dinner for 300 men, a tea party for the women and children, sports, and bonfires at night at Coombe.⁶⁶

F.M.L. Thompson has suggested that ' . . . the direct contributions of the great landowners diminished and their role as visible protectors and benefactors of their communities declined' during the late nineteenth century.⁶⁷ In fact, evidence of the five Sussex houses in this study suggest that local philanthropy continued to take up an important part of the landlords' time and money. The squire's wife and daughters were also involved in the distribution of charity in the community; this had long been an important link between the landowner and tenantry. Lady Shiffner organised fund-raising for

the Home Missions and for the purchase of a church organ. She regularly attended 'ladies' work' meetings, visited the local work-house, and organised the annual Hamsey school feast.⁶⁸ Her daughter-in-law continued the practice long after the outbreak of World War One. Although she worked at the Pavilion hospital as a nurse, she felt that Hamsey was 'her special love', and the 'well-being of the church . . . her chief concern'.⁶⁹ As Lady Leconfield once wrote:

' . . . though social work was not organised as it is now, there was full scope for individual energy, especially in the country, where parish life was a continual round of activity'.⁷⁰

The philanthropic activities of these country landlords had a different quality from those of their urban middle class counterparts. They did not seek to 'improve' or control, but simply to redistribute some of their surplus income to people whose needs they understood. The landlord was still personally involved and knew the recipients of his bounty by name. It was this sort of charitable activity which had been seen as a traditional link between the two rural classes.

The landlord's role as political leader of his community, either as representative or patron, had been eroded by the gradual democratisation of government at all levels throughout the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that traditional attitudes towards the gentry's right to rule persisted. Certainly Edward Frewen's aunt believed that her nephew was the most natural representative for the county. When he turned down the nomination in 1880, she reminded him of the ' . . . horrid nuisance it will be if some vile Liberal gets in. Your father's son should rather sell every horse and hound than allow such a thing to happen'.⁷¹ Frewen, in spite of his reluctance to run as a candidate, was an important Conservative organiser in his locality, as were George Shiffner and Lord Leconfield in theirs.

Often, however, the squire's influence depended simply upon the expectation that once his wishes were known, they would be respected by tenants and employees. Lord Leconfield's agent, discovering that a tenant had openly supported a Liberal candidate sternly advised that ' . . . it would be better he should consult your lordship before taking any active part in any of these election questions'.⁷²

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the landowners of Sussex were still deeply involved in the making and administration

of laws in their region. Between 1880 and 1914, nine men owned the five estates examined in this study. Between them, they held fifteen commissions of the peace and five deputy-lieutenancies. Three served as Members of Parliament, one as Lord-Lieutenant of Sussex and Chairman of the West Sussex County Council, one as Vice-Chairman and Alderman of the Council, and one as High Sheriff. In addition, four served as officers in the local Volunteers or Yeomanry and three as Guardians of the local Poor Law Board.

The established links between the gentry and the established church also seem to have survived the strains of modern society. Colonel Frewen took a personal interest in the affairs of his parish, to the extent of ensuring that a prospective curate at Northiam was '... fond of cricket and not stuck-up like some of his fraternity'.⁷³ Sir George Shiffner, as rector of Hamsey and rural dean of Lewes, combined the two institutions in his own person. He was very active in local and diocesan affairs and in the Hamsey Temperance League.⁷⁴ All of the men supported numerous church organisations and charities financially.

Nor did Sussex landowners appear to have relinquished their roles as leading agriculturalists. The memoranda of the Earl of Ashburnham's estate agent reveal that he consulted his employer on the minutiae of estate management-labourers' wages, the price of hops, railway rights-of-way, and individual applications for rent reduction.⁷⁵ George Shiffner's diaries show him buying livestock, consulting with his agent over water supply and vacant farms, carrying the hay, and treating a cow with 'milk fever'.⁷⁶ Even the grand seventh Duke of Richmond was well-known for his interest in agriculture; he was particularly enthusiastic about livestock breeding, and was considered an authority on the subject.⁷⁷ Sussex landowners had not yet become mere *rentiers*. Their tenants could feel that they shared many of the same concerns and interests.

Traditionally, county social life had been on a small scale, involving visiting neighbours and playing country sports, within an intimate circle of long-time friends and family members. T.H.S. Escott noticed at the end of the nineteenth century, that the exclusivity and parochialism of country society was breaking down; the aristocracy were seen to '... flit from mansion to mansion during the country house season ... existence for the fashionable and wealthy is thus one unending whirl of excitement'.⁷⁸

In these five Sussex families attitudes towards socializing and leisure pursuits seem to fit a traditional model. Fox-hunting remained the single most important gentlemanly activity. As a boy,

Edward Frewen felt that its importance lay in '... making you nice and tired so that you feel as if you had done something'.⁷⁹ Horse-racing also continued to be popular; at Goodwood, of course, it was particularly important. The family always returned from London in time for race week and entertained many house guests. The seventh Duke was also an avid hunter; he revived the Goodwood hunt and served as its master until 1894.⁸⁰

George Shiffner's diaries reveal that country sports were also important to the lesser gentry. In his diary for May 1885, there are nine references to hunting or shooting, in December 1887 seven, in March 1890 eleven, in January 1897 four. The summer months were dominated by cricket, but tennis, stoolball and croquet were also popular.⁸¹

Most social events in these country households retained their simple, local nature. Maggie Leconfield, for example, described a typical week of activities to her mother in a letter dated 1893. Her sister and brother had attended a charity concert in Pulborough, a picnic and fishing expedition was planned, a neighbour was entertained to tea, friends visited to play golf, and so many visitors came during an afternoon at-home that '... it was difficult to keep them all going at the same time'.⁸² Anne Frewen's social life also involved many local visits. On one day in 1876 she drove to Rye to 'leave cards' at one house, and visit four others, before returning home to find that neighbours had called at Brickwall while she was away.⁸³

Lady Elizabeth Shiffner's diaries also reveal that country social events were modest and localised. During a typical week in August 1895: she and her husband visited friends in Lewes, while their children attended a cricket match in Brighton; a ladies' cricket team played and took tea at Coombe; her daughters attended the Glynde tournament; her husband and daughters attended a garden party at a nearby house; and a second cricket match was held at Coombe.⁸⁴

The wealthier families spent less time at their country seats. The Duke of Richmond's family spent the season in London, returned to Goodwood for race week, spent August, September and October in Scotland, and then returned to Goodwood for the winter. Entertaining was also on a larger scale. This was also true of the Leconfields and the Asburnhams. But seasonal movements and extravagant hospitality had always been a part of the aristocratic life-style. In the face of the new industrial wealth, social exclusiveness did not break down; even Escott admitted that Petworth and Goodwood remained two of the most selective houses in the country.⁸⁵

It is always dangerous to write the history of attitudes and lifestyles on the basis of circumstantial evidence. There is no doubt that the social, economic and political position of the English gentry was deteriorating during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In retrospect, it is easy to see the period as an 'Indian Summer' before the long winter that began in November 1914. Without the benefit of this hindsight, however, some evidence suggests that many country families continued to live and think much as they always had.

The small sample of households examined here can no more than point the way to further investigation; the rich source of nineteenth century household records and accounts lies untouched in many county record offices. This study had suggested that, amongst the gentry of Sussex, continuities with the past may have been as significant as change, decline and forcible modernisation. Agricultural incomes showed no dramatic declines; lavish expenditure on houses, gardens, hospitality, large staffs, and sports continued up to, and after, World War One. Within the families, there is evidence of strong affective bonds and loyalties, rather than of disintegration and decay. Both masters and mistresses continued to play their accustomed roles as household managers and leaders of the local community. Their relationships with domestics, tenants and other dependants were marked by the expected attitudes of paternalism and reciprocating deference.

Of course, it is impossible to ignore the signposts of change and decline. Perhaps what we see in the late nineteenth century gentry is not a class submerged, but one successfully adapting its most resilient values to modern society.

Notes

¹ John Galsworthy, *The Country House* (1907, 1926) p.129.

² Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton 1968) pp.72-75.

³ T.H.S. Escott, *England. Its People, Polity and Pursuits* (1890) p. 105.

⁴ C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* pp. 157-159.

⁵ G.E. Mingay, *The Gentry* (1976) pp.176-190.

⁶ Keith Middlemas, *Pursuit of Pleasure* (1977), *passim*.

⁷ L. Davidoff, *The Best Circles* (1973), *passim*.

⁸ D. Roberts, 'The Paterfamilias of the Victorian Governing Classes' in *The Victorian Family*, ed. A.S. Wohl (1978) *passim*.

⁹ C.D. Orwin, E.H. Whetham, *A History of British Agriculture 1846-1914* (1964) pp.42-46.

¹⁰ Mingay, *The Gentry*, pp.173-180.

¹¹ F.M.L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (1963) p.25.

¹² Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (1971) p.38.

- ¹³ W(est) S(ussex) R(ecord) O(ffice) *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 2884, 1895-1900.
- ¹⁴ E(ast) S(ussex) R(ecord) O(ffice) *Ashburnham Place Mss.*, no. 1755-1760, 1880-1910.
- ¹⁵ E.S.R.O. *Shiffner Mss.*, no. 259, 1888-1896.
- ¹⁶ W.S.R.O. *Goodwood House Mss.*, no. 764, 1873-1913.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 952, 190.
- ¹⁸ W.S.R.O., *Goodwood House Mss.*, no. 1096-1098, 1869-1920.
- ¹⁹ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 5111, 1879-1911.
- ²⁰ E.S.R.O., *Ashburnham Place Mss.*, no. 2668, 1878.
- ²¹ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 2885, 1906; no. 5207, 1909.
- ²² E.S.R.O., *Ashburnham Place Mss.*, no. 1775-1760.
- ²³ W.S.R.O., *Goodwood House Mss.*, nos. 5270-5289, 1871-1913.
- ²⁴ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, no. 3254, 1906.
- ²⁵ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, no. 4185, 1880.
- ²⁶ E.S.R.O., *Ashburnham Place Mss.*, nos. 1755-1760, 1880-1913.
- ²⁷ W.S.R.O., *Goodwood House Mss.*, nos. 5270-5289, 1883-1913.
- ²⁸ Victoria History of the Counties of England, *A History of Sussex*, vol. II (1907) p.454.
- ²⁹ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, nos. 2317-2319, 1888.
- ³⁰ A. Trollope, *British Sports and Pastimes* p.87.
- ³¹ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 5293.
- ³² E.S.R.O., *Ashburnham Place Mss.*, nos. 1755-1760, *Goodwood House Mss.*, nos. 5270-5289.
- ³³ W.S.R.O., *Goodwood House Mss.*, 1104-1105.
- ³⁴ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 2643.
- ³⁵ E.S.R.O., *Ashburnham Place Mss.*, nos. 978-987.
- ³⁶ Mingay, p.116.
- ³⁷ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, nos. 1624-1626, 1884.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 1627, December 6, 1894.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 1658, December 1899.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ E.S.R.O., *Frewen Mss.*, nos. 4182-4183, 187-188, 1873-1897.
- ⁴² Lady Muriel Beckwith, *When I remember* (1936) p.36.
- ⁴³ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 1648, 1912.
- ⁴⁴ E.S.R.O., *Frewen Mss.*, no. 4186, 1884.
- ⁴⁵ E.S.R.O., *Ashburnham Place Mss.*, no. 2786, 1879-1882.
- ⁴⁶ The information in this paragraph was derived from several sources including: W.T. Pike, *Sussex in the 20th Century* (Brighton: W.T. Pike and Co., 1910) *Burke's Landed Gentry* (1965) *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage* (1975).
- ⁴⁷ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, 1529-1534, 1547, 1548, 1355, 869-872.
- ⁴⁸ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, no. 1529, 3466, January 1890.
- ⁴⁹ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, nos. 1641, Nov. 1905, 1648, Dec. 1898, 1647, 1911.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 1655, 1899.
- ⁵¹ Escott, p.308.
- ⁵² W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 1655, 1899.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, nos. 1655, 1898, 1638, 1907.
- ⁵⁴ W.S.R.O., *Goodwood House Mss.*, no. 1105.
- ⁵⁵ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, nos. 865, 867, January 1888, 1889.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, nos. 1529, 3466.
- ⁵⁷ W.S.R.O., *Goodwood House Mss.*, nos. 1096-1098 and C. Leconfield, *Random Papers*, (published privately at Petworth House).
- ⁵⁸ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 1655, 1899.
- ⁵⁹ E.S.R.O., *Frewen Mss.*, nos. 4206, 1885, 4198, 1895.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 4197, 1881.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, nos. 4207, 4210, 1895-98.

⁶² *Ibid.*, no. 4198, 1919.

⁶³ W.S.R.O., *Goodwood House Mss.*, no. 764, October 1884.

⁶⁴ Thompson, p.209.

⁶⁵ W.S.R.O., *Goodwood House Mss.*, nos. 5270-5289, nos. 1104-5.

⁶⁶ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 2885, 1906-08.

⁶⁷ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, nos. 3557, 3462, June 1887.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, nos. 836-879.

⁶⁹ From a local newspaper clipping, owned by Mrs. Elizabeth Fooks, Horsted Keynes, Sussex.

⁷⁰ Leconfield, p.75.

⁷¹ E.S.R.O., *Frewen Mss.*, no. 4186, March 1880.

⁷² W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 2885, 1902.

⁷³ E.S.R.O., *Frewen Mss.*, no. 4199.

⁷⁴ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House*, no. 1661, 1918.

⁷⁵ E.S.R.O., *Ashburnham Place Mss.*, nos. 2419-2422, 1886-88.

⁷⁶ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, nos. 3462-3471, 1887-1896.

⁷⁷ 'Nomad', 'The late Duke of Richmond and Gordon . . .', in *The Sussex County Magazine* (1928), p.120.

⁷⁸ Escott, p.305.

⁷⁹ W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 1634, November 1899.

⁸⁰ 'Nomad', pp.118-119.

⁸¹ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, nos. 486-489.

⁸² W.S.R.O., *Petworth House Mss.*, no. 1655, April 1898.

⁸³ E.S.R.O., *Frewen Mss.*, no. 4183, 1876.

⁸⁴ E.S.R.O., *Shiffner Mss.*, no. 877.

⁸⁵ T.H.S. Escott, *Society in the Country House* (1907) p.39.