William Hole and Parke in the 1920s

Frances Billinge

Figure 1: Parke, Bovey Tracey (Frances Billinge 2018, reproduced by kind permission of the National Trust)

At the start of the twentieth century, William Gerald Hole inherited Parke but found it too expensive to maintain. His family had owned Parke since 1826 but in the early 1920s he was living nearby in a comparatively modest house. From 1904, for economic reasons, he had let Parke, but by 1927 the Hole family were able to move back and remained there until giving the estate to the National Trust in 1974. This is discussed in the context of changes in society in the 1920s.

Family Background and How the Hole Family Acquired Parke

The Hole family were prominent local landowners who had lived in the parish of Bovey Tracey since 1731.[1] William Hole I had acquired Crownley/Crowndell farm and other lands on the eastern edge of the parish and his wealthy eldest son, William II, inherited half of his father's estate. William II was a surveyor, profitable map maker, lawyer and estate manager for the aristocracy, with his business base in Barnstaple, and he had developed an extensive land portfolio in various parts of Devon.[2] His brother Robert inherited from William II and rebuilt Stickwick farm, next to Crownley, as an elegant Georgian house (see Figure 2).

[1] TNA 312M, 'Hole of Parke' catalogue description, <www.nationalarchives.gov.uk> [accessed 21 March 2018]; Devon Heritage Centre 6684M, The National Trust 17th Century–20th Century; 312M/7/Z/1/12 Letters and Brochure R. E. Meyrick, *National Trust*, to Major W.G. Hole.

[2] M. Ravenhill and M. Rowe. 'One of the Most Profitable and Genteel Professions' in *Rep. Trans. Devon. Ass. Advmt Sci.*, 140 (2008), pp. 91–110.

Figure 2: Stickwick Farm (by kind permission of the owner)

Robert was survived by his son William III, who at the age of 27 purchased and rebuilt Parke in 1826. This is the Grade II listed building that stands today.[3]

In purchasing Parke, William Hole III had acquired one of the three most prestigious estates in Bovey Tracey, the others being Indio and Colehayes, which were smaller but owned by families with aristocratic links. Parke was a grand setting with its large deer park, a weir for fishing, fish-ponds, and hunting land reaching up to the moor. William III spent much of his fortune buying extensive holdings in Bovey Tracey parish. In total, he possessed 1,163 acres, of which the barton of Parke constituted 185 acres.[4] William III owned five times more land than any other holder in the area.

When William III died in 1859 he left under £4,000 – a surprisingly small amount.[5] It was the rebuilding of Stickwick and then of Parke, and acquiring more lands without adequate income, which had consumed his inheritance.

[3] Heritage Gateway Parke, MDV8949; Sheila Molland *Historical Summary of Parke Bovey Tracey* (The National Trust typescript report, 1996).
[4] Devon Heritage Centre Tithe Map 1841, DEX/4/a/TM/Bovey Tracey 1; ibid. Tithe Apportionment 1839 DEX/4/a/TA/50 Bovey Tracey.
[5] The National Archives National Probate Calendar, 1859.

William Robert Hole Starts to Sell Part of His Lands

William Robert was the only son and heir of William Hole III. He became a magistrate and later a county councillor and deputy lieutenant for Devon.[6] He also established a grammar school for boys on his land at Lower Down, Bovey Tracey.[7] In 1873, William Robert held 1,350 acres of land locally.[8] Despite having a good education and income from professional employment he found it necessary to start selling part of his estate from 1884, and this was to become a pattern for the family over the next fifty years.[9] He left £48,000, which was £44,000 more than he had inherited but was not going to be enough for the family to maintain the estate.[10]

Major William Gerald Hole and Parke, 1903–19

On his father's death in 1903, William Gerald Hole inherited Parke at the age of 21. In 1904, William Gerald was a trainee at Rolle Estate Office and qualified with the Surveyors' Institute, which as his great grandfather had made a fortune from land management might have seemed a sensible choice. William Gerald then became an inspector in the diseases of Animals Branch of the Board of Agriculture.[11]

However, partly because of death duties, William Gerald was experiencing financial difficulties and in 1904 he let Parke to Henry Whitworth, a successful cotton entrepreneur.[12] This was quite a different source of income from William Gerald, who continued to manage his Parke estate although not living there, and a photograph of him and his wife and young daughter in an automobile at Parke illustrates the family's lifestyle (see Figure 4).

[6] *The North Devon Journal*, 26 June 1856, p. 5 magistrate; *The Western Times*, 24 December 1886, p. 9, County Magistrate; *The Western Times*, 20 December 1889, p. 9, Devon County Councillor; *Kelly's Directory of Devon 1902* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1902) p. 818, Deputy Lieutenant.
[7] Devon Heritage Centre, 9195C Bovey Tracey Grammar School 1882–1916.
[8] 1873 Return of Owners of Land <www.ancestry.co.uk> [accessed 29 May 2022].
[9] Devon Heritage Centre Conveyance 1884 Forder estate 312M/3/T/2/9, as one example.
[10] *The East and South Devon Advertiser*, I4 February 1903, p. 4.
[11] W. G. Hole, 1970. W. G. Hole, B.A., ARICS., Journal of the Chartered Land Agents Society, vol. 69 (June 1970). Hole Family Archive.
[12] *The Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 23 Aug 1904, p. 1; The National Archives 1911 Census.

Figure 4: William Gerald Hole, with his wife and daughter
(by kind permission of the Hole Family)

By 1911 William Gerald Hole was living with his wife and child and three servants at Lowerdown House (see Figure 5) [13] This was a fourteen-room house he had built on his land a short distance from the town. It was a cheaper house to run than the twenty-eight rooms of Parke, which had eight live-in servants. How did this compare with the two other large local estates? Colehayes had nine live-in servants, and the Bentincks of Indio had eight servants at their London address and three retained in Bovey Tracey when they were not in residence.

[13] The National Archives 1911 census.

Figure 5: Lowerdown House (Frances Billinge, 2022)

From 1911, William Gerald started to sell almost a third of his land and properties and by 1912 had moved to Bradley Farm, which was another of his holdings.[14] He was not unusual in selling land at this time, as other landowners throughout the country were switching from low-income land to more lucrative stocks and shares.[15] Where the Hole family's land transactions were unusual was that they had started selling two decades earlier.

William Gerald then served in the Great War.[16] Afterwards, from 1918–20, John Augustus Bouck, a London doctor, with his wife and child rented Parke.[17] William Gerald then lived with his mother at Parke View, a comparatively small house in the middle of Bovey Tracey (see Figure 6). He still managed his Parke estate and had a resident agent.[18] Thompson described that country houses ceased to be viable after 1918 because of high taxes but William Gerald had found his house too expensive to live in a decade earlier than this.[19]

[14] *The Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 4 March 1911, p. 1; Devon Heritage Centre 547B/P/32/955 Sale Particulars: Part of the Hole Estates, Bovey Tracey, Devon. 1912, Surtees, Philpots and Co., Solicitors.
[15] Thompson, F. (1990) Presidential Address: English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century: 1, Property Collapse and Survival. Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 40, 1–24, p. 12.
[16] Mark Bailey, *Smitten Down Yet Not Destroyed* (Bovey Tracey Heritage Trust, 2016), p. 63.
[17] Hugh Meller, *The Country Houses of Devon* (Black Dog Press, 2015), pp. 576–78.
[18] *Kelly's Directory of Devon*, 1919 (Kelly and Co. Ltd).
[19] Thompson 1990, see note 19, pp. 21–22.

Figure 6: Parke View (by kind permission of Viv Styles, Bovey Tracey Heritage Trust)

Major William Gerald Hole and Parke from 1920

In 1920, Emily Gertrude Bannatyne took a lease of Parke House along with the Bouck family.[20] She had previously owned the forty-six roomed Haldon House, an estate of 4,000 acres which she put up for sale when her husband died. Just as Hole downsized from twenty-eight rooms to fourteen, so Emily Bannatyne had downsized to a house with half the number of rooms. Her Haldon estate became unviable and was demolished in 1925. Bovey Tracey is fortunate that this was not the fate of Parke.

During this decade William Gerald was leasing out his large house and other properites and living in a smaller house, but still managing his Parke estate. Rothery described that at this time estate owners were trying to leave their estates and invest in higher yielding securities, and in 1920 Willliam had acquired shares in an Indian tea plantation.[21] He still needed to sell

[20] 1920 electoral roll, <www.findmypast.co.uk>, accessed 29 May 2022.

[21] Mark Rothery. *The Wealth of the English Landed Gentry, 1870–1935* in *The Agricultural History Review*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2007, pp. 251–68, pp. 251, 253; Devon Heritage Centre 312M/7/E/2/1 Hole of Parke Note on Tea Plantations in India Belgoori and Serampore, c. 1920 ; ibid., DHC 312M/3/E/5/6, Hole Estate Accounts, 1919–24.

land to finance his lifestyle and by 1921 had sold 406 more acres – being almost half of his land. He continued to sell more throughout the decade, mainly in small lots.[22]

From 1921 to 1926, William Gerald returned to live at Lowerdown House. In 1923, Mrs Bannatyne was no longer at Parke and it was advertised to let as an unfurnished house with '3 reception rooms and 7 principal bedrooms, 3 dressing rooms bathroom ample domestic accommodation; town water; modern sanitation; electric light; central heating; inexpensively maintained; grounds garage stabling, cottage. Fishing available moderate rent.'[23] The 'inexpensively maintained' description is interesting as the grandness of the house was not accentuated. Francis Brough Maltby, a rector's son and retired army captain, rented Parke from 1924 to 1927.

Whenever he let a house at this time, William Gerald stressed that it was small. For example, *Five Wyches,* with its ten rooms including a bathroom and fishing on private water, was described as a cottage.[24]

Although William Gerald could not afford to live in his main house, he continued keeping up his position in the local community and supported many charities including the local hospital. He was also commandant of the Comrades of the Great War and led their processions.[25] He distributed prizes at events that he hosted in his garden and was on the committee of various local sports clubs.[26]

Figure 7: Parke in the 1920s (courtesy of Viv Styles, Bovey Tracey Heritage Trust)

[22] *The Western Times,* 16 April 1921, p.3.
[23] *The Western Morning News*, 17 February 1923, p. 10.
[24] Ibid., 27 February 1925, p. 9.
[25] *The Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, March 24 1921, p. 11.
[26] Ibid., 14 June 1926, p. 7, president of Bovey AFC Supporters Club as an example.

By 1927 William Gerald's income was enough to support his return to Parke. He was a keen photographer and an image he took shows the frontage of the house looking a little different from today (see Figure 7). He continued to sell livestock but also machinery, so although he was realising some money he was selling his assets.[27] Later, in 1927, he was appointed Land Tax Commissioner for Bovey Tracey.[28] He continued to be generous to the local community and gave some of his land free of charge to the council so it could widen a footpath near The Riverside Dairy.[29] In 1928, he let 75 acres of the home farm of Parke but he could still afford to employ a farm bailiff.[30]

In the 1930s, William Gerald sold land for building plots at £65 each and also built modest houses on some of his land, which were let to some of his staff at £55 per annum. His various enterprises were small but he managed to sell enough of his land and properties to continue to live at Parke.[31]

In this way William Gerald Hole could be said to have made sensible decisions, as by 1927 he was able to return to live in his grand house and continue to be a staunch member of the local community until his death in 1974, when he gave the estate to the National Trust.[32] He did not follow the trend described by Thompson of becoming a social white elephant and abandoning his large estate to end his days in a small new house.[33]

Discussion

This is the story of a family who acquired considerable land in Bovey Tracey from the 1700s, built themselves a prestigious country house there in 1826, made a significant contribution to local civic life, but finally gave up their estate to the National Trust.

The situation of the Hole family during the 1920s mirrored what was happening to other large estates. They had been at the centre of local civic life for three centuries. As well as being Justices of the Peace and even the deputy lord lieutenant of Devon, over the years the Hole family fulfilled local civic functions connected with the church, local charities and schools, provided new housing and sports facilities, and hosted fairs and festivities on their land, but this was a lifestyle they found hard to afford.

This was not an easy time to be the owner of a large country estate. David Canadine, in his study of the decline and fall of the British aristocracy, explained how landed riches were eroded through increased foreign trade and cheaper imports of meat and cereal.[34] Oscar

[27] *The Western Times*, 25 March 1927, p. 1.
[28] Ibid., 26 August 1927, p. 10.
[29] *The Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 5 October 1928, p. 15.
[30] *The Western Times*, 21 July 1928, p. 3.
[31] *The Western Morning News*, 25 March 1933, p. 2.
[32] Devon Heritage Centre, 312M/7/Z/1/12 Hole of Parke and the National Trust.
[33] Thompson, 1990, p. 22, see note 19.
[34] David Canadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (Yale University Press, 1990), p. 90.

Wilde's Lady Bracknell summed up the problem '…land has ceased to be a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position and prevents one from keeping it up.'[35]
William Gerald was by no means alone in finding that a large estate was becoming unprofitable. He started to sell part of his holdings, but by the mid-1930s land was selling for a third of what it had been worth in Victorian times.[36] Thompson described that it was not just death duties, but many factors including bad luck and no sons that led to estates being given up.[37] Perhaps having only one female child had an effect on the Hole estate, even though she married into the prestigious Pellew family who were descendants of the 1st Viscount Exmouth. Thompson also described how many of the landed gentry had experienced collapse of their wealth in the twentieth century, but that some – mainly the ancient nobility – had been able to maintain their estates. Low agricultural rents, the inability to employ servants and rising death duties all played their part. [38]

Although the Hole family lost some prestige by selling their land, they continued to be respected locally. Thompson considered that 2,000 acres was the minimum estate needed for the prestige and authority to be in the upper echelons of society for survival, and this Hole did not have.[39] Thompson showed that land was mainly going to 'new wealth', but this was not really the case with Hole as they lost theirs to more middling folk. The problem for Hole was that he did not expand enough into urban property or other business ventures.[40]

In his description of the large Devon estate of Powderham, Jackson explained how and why estates declined in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century because of the changes in land value and the reduction in the availability of workers. The Courtenay family of Powderham managed to diversify by concentrating their land holdings, speculating in town developments, investing wisely and latterly marketing their castle.[41]

Despite his dwindling fortune, William Gerald never lost sight of the importance of his relationship with local people. In 1969 he showed his appreciation of the Mann family when they discontinued their 80-year-old lease of some of his land. To their surprise, he presented them with a silver wine coaster, which the family still treasures.[42] He hosted an annual dinner for his tradespeople and workmen and their wives at his own residence, and for this he was praised as being 'The Moving Spirit of Bovey Tracey'.[43]

It was his generosity and community spirit that led him to bequeath Parke to the National Trust.[44] The house was subsequently leased to Dartmoor National Park Authority and is used

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[35] Oscar Wilde. *The Importance of Being Ernest* (Boston, Walker H. Baker, 1895) Act I, p. 28 <www.archive.org> [accessed 7 July 2019].
[36] Canadine (1990), p . 94, see note 39.
[37] Thompson (1990), p. 19, see note 19.
[38] Thompson (1990), pp. 3, 5, 22, see note 19.
[39] Thompson, Michael, 'The Land Market, 1880–1925: A Reappraisal Reappraised', *The Agricultural History Review*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2007), pp. 289–300, 292.
[40] John Beckett and Michael Turner, 'End of the Old Order? F.M.L. Thompson, the Land Question, and the Burden of Ownership in England, c.1880–c.1925' in *Agricultural History Review* vol. 55, no. 2 (2007), pp. 269–88.
[41] A.J.H. Jackson, 'Managing Decline: The Economy of the Powderham Estate in Devon, 1870–1939' *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, vol. 128, pp. 197–215, 213.
[42] *Mid Devon Advertiser*, 14 June 1969, and personal communication with Mr and Mrs Mann.
[43] *The Western Morning News*, 5 January 1969, p. 2.
[44] TNA 312M, see note 1.

as their headquarters.[45] The estate grounds are managed by the National Trust for everyone to enjoy. This is a lasting legacy from the Hole family, which is appreciated and well-used by the people of Bovey Tracey.

Of the Three Large Historic Estates in Bovey Tracey, Whose Legacy is the Greatest?

Colehayes, the country seat of the Adair family of Heatherton Park, Somerset and Ballymena, became a hotel in 1947 and from 1984 it was a field studies centre also available for hire for weddings. [46] There is no public access.

The Bentinck family, related to the Earls of Portland, sold Indio in 1939, and part of the estate has since been developed for housing. There is no public access.[47] Bentinck, as lord of the manor when Bovey Tracey became a town council, had his coat of arms adopted as the council's logo.

The Hole family are commemorated in the parish church and also by the naming of Hole Bridge, which from the 1980s has carried the A382 over the River Bovey on the Parke estate. Some of his local workforce and their families will tell you of the kindness of the Major and of their gratitude for his providing them with homes in which they still live. It is William Gerald Hole who is remembered most by his legacy of giving Parke to the National Trust. The estate is now open to everyone free of charge. Local people would be hard-pressed to tell you anything about the Bentinck or Adair families, but everyone appreciates the open space of Parke.

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[45] *History and Development of Parke*, A Dartmoor National Park Authority Factsheet, 1979, <www.dartmoor.gov.uk> [accessed 28 March 2018].
[46] Meller, 2015, pp. 271–72, see note 21.
[47] Ibid., p. 552.