The Landed Gentry: Land Sales and Social Change

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Introduction

In the years immediately before and after the First World War, one quarter of the land of England was sold by gentry and grandees.[1] The Ugbrooke Estate, situated in the parish of Chudleigh, Devon was brought to the Clifford family in 1604 through the marriage of Anthony Clifford, squire of Kingsteignton, to the Courtenay heiress. The land holdings grew over the years. In 1880 on the death of his father, Lewis, 9th Lord Clifford of Chudleigh succeeded to the family estates in Devonshire, Warwickshire, Somerset, Buckinghamshire and Cornwall, which comprised a total of 7,860 acres of land worth £9,109 a year.[2]

On the death of Lewis, his widow, the Dowager Lady Clifford remained at Ugbrooke House and her brother-in-law, William, the 10th Lord Clifford retired to a house in Kent. Because Lewis had a poor opinion of his brother's financial acumen, he left all that he could of his estate to William's son, the Hon. Charles Clifford.[3] William handed over the Clifford entailed estates to his son Charles, and in return received £2,000 per annum free of tax.[4]

In the early 1920s, the Cliffords still owned approximately 8,000 acres of land. Such an estate falls into the category (between 3,000 and 10,000 acres) which social historian Alun Howkins claims was that which suffered the most from the agricultural depression since 'they relied mainly on agriculture for their income'.[5] Like so many of his peers, Charles was squeezed between a dwindling income, heavy taxes, death duties, a large mortgage, tithes, jointures, rates, and insurance premiums. The rising costs of estate maintenance were also of concern.

This study focuses on the actions taken by the Clifford family in response to the agricultural downturn in the 1920s. It tries to discover firstly, if the sale of property affected the prosperity, lifestyle and status of the family, and secondly, its impact on the tenants, estate workers and the wider community.

When Charles returned to Ugbrooke after the war, he moved to the dower house, a fashionable residence, known as 'Lawell', situated on the estate. It was furnished and equipped almost entirely with goods purchased from Harrods.[6] Charles remained there until the death of the Dowager Lady Clifford in 1921. Soon afterwards, he moved into Ugbrooke House with his Aunt Bertha, the Countess de Torre Diaz together with his friend, Sir George Hammick who was the estates' agent.

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[1] David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), 111.
[2] Hugh Clifford, *The House of Clifford* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1987), 198.
[3] *Ibid*., 204
[4] *Ibid*., 201
[5] Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A social history of the countryside since 1900,* (London: Routledge, 2003), 60.
[6] Ugbrooke Archive, DRO Clifford II/1/Ugbrooke Estate/chapel/house/staff.

Figure 1: Ugbrooke House (photograph by kind permission of Andrew Turnbull).

Property sales

The exigencies of war had deprived the estates of builders and carpenters and many of the old cottages were now in a bad state of repair. The cottages in Kingsteignton in Devon and Cannington in Somerset needed modernising which was not considered financially viable. There were four cottages in Gestridge, Kingsteignton, which had been condemned by the Rural District Council. Sir George Hammick advised the Council that the cottages were not worth repairing and it was the Clifford Estate's intention to demolish them and build new houses in the rear. In the meantime, as there was nowhere available for the tenants to relocate, it was agreed that they could remain at the properties rent free.[7] The cottages still stand to this day!

As a consequence of falling rents, rent arrears and other pressures on the estates, Sir George wrote to the solicitors acting for the Clifford Estates' trustees recommending that a better return could be achieved by selling property and investing the proceeds in other commodities.[8]

Landowners were consolidating their holdings geographically since the work of management and supervision could be very costly.[9] The first of the Cliffords' land holdings to be sold comprised 1,326 acres of land on the Warwickshire estate. Land and houses at Gwennap in Cornwall were also sold.[10] The Cornish mines had been a valuable asset in the early nineteenth century but had produced little revenue since the late nineteenth century.[11]

The market for land picked up briefly in 1923[12] and Charles arranged for a large part of the Kingsteignton Estate to be offered for sale. This included freehold business premises, dwelling houses and cottages, small holdings and building sites together with ground rents with reversions. The cottages in the centre of the village were numerous and basic: such as Lot 21 in the sale catalogue in March 1923 which comprised three cottages in Fore Street, one containing a sitting room, kitchen, scullery, landing and two bedrooms, the other two comprising a kitchen, scullery and two bedrooms. To the rear

[7] *WT*, 25 Aug 1922, 8.
[8] Ugbrooke Archive, Office 7.
[9] Lord Scarbrough's Archive, Glentworth Estate.
[10] Ugbrooke Archive, WB/Estate Papers/3.
[11] John Bateman, *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Harrison, 1879), 91.
[12] Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall,* 111.

of the properties were two brick built galvanised iron roofed WCs for the use of the three cottages together with a piped water supply.[13]

In April 1923, the Estates' auctioneers wrote to Sir George advising him that it was in Lord Clifford's best interest to sell properties on the Cannington Estate[14] situated West of Bridgwater, Somerset. 58 lots were offered for sale including houses, farmland and business premises in the village of Cannington together with shops and dwellinghouses in the nearby village of Nether Stowey, and dwellinghouses and land at Spaxton. It was agreed that no cottages would be sold which were required for the accommodation of labourers on the estate's remaining farms. [15]

During the early part of the century, the large-scale country house was giving way to a more manageable house in the country and in a depressed market, there were few purchasers willing to buy large country houses.[16] Cannington Court, a former priory and seat of the Clifford family in the first half of the nineteenth century was an extensive premises which included a chapel. After various attempts to sell the property, it was sold to Somerset County Council together with Court Farm as a farm institute in 1926.

Although whole villages were sold off throughout the country, the alternative view was to sell cottages, commercial properties, smallholdings and allotments, but to retain the majority of the farms. Capt. Buller of the Downes Estate sold much of his interest in Crediton and St Thomas, Exeter, but retained the farms.[17] Similarly, the larger farms on the Clifford's Kingsteignton estate were retained. Between 1924 and 1930, building plots, buildings and cottages were sold piecemeal. In fact, the account books show that there were 78 cottages in the village owned by the Clifford Estates in 1921 but by 1929 there were only five remaining.[18] This meant that the estate would no longer be saddled with expensive repairs. The revenue from these sales enabled Charles to make a substantial reduction to the mortgage held by the Bank and to improve the condition of the remaining properties on the estate.

Alongside land sales, some of the great territorial families disposed of their expensive town houses. Unlike his predecessors, Charles did not take a London house and made other economies too. Shortly after he moved into Ugbrooke House, he sold Lawell together with eight acres of land. He also disposed of 'The Ness' at Shaldon which had been the family's summer residence for five generations.[19]

The Outcome

The village of Kingsteignton was described by the local Medical Officer of Health as 'chiefly inhabited by a working-class population'.[20] The sales carried out by the Clifford family enabled the local shopkeepers and tradesmen to purchase their business premises along with their homes. Others bought land on which to build houses and some of the dwellings were acquired for rental purposes. The sales gave new owner-occupiers the opportunity to invest in new businesses which led to a growth in the local economy. One was John Osborne, an oil merchant who set up a filling station on land adjacent to his house. This was the first filling station to serve the motorised transport in the village.

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[13] Ugbrooke Archive, WB/Estate Papers 3, Sales Catalogue, Kingsteignton.
[14] *Ibid*., WB/Estate Papers,4(e).
[15] Ugbrooke Archive, Office 7.
[16] Adrian Tinniswood, *The Long Weekend,* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), 142.
[17] DHC 2065M/E/10/16 Downes Estate, Schedule of property sold.
[18] Ugbrooke Archive, Cottage Rent Books 1921-1923, 1929.
[19] Clifford, *The House of Clifford,* 171.
[20] *WWI* to be found at http://www.kingsteigntonhistorysociety.org.uk/history, Accessed 12 Oct 2023.

There was a desperate need for new housing[21]and the sales provided much needed building land. In the 1923 Kingsteignton sale, thirteen freehold building plots were sold in a central location of the village (some small, others one to two acres). Lots 35 and 36 were purchased by Mr Kerslake who set up a nursery in Lot 35. A pair of shops were built with flats above and a short section of an un-metalled road put in to serve his nursery. The following year another seven small plots were sold on the edge of the village[22] which in fact generated more house building activity than the 1923 sale. Some of the land in Kingsteignton was purchased for clay extraction and this gave rise to the foundation of new clay companies providing much needed employment.[23] The 1923 sale enabled Mr Blake of Watts, Blake Bearne & Co (also director and chief shareholder of Hexter, Humpherson, clay merchants) to buy the freehold of the Newton Abbot Potteries together with 24 dwellinghouses and land to the rear.[24]

The Kingsteignton Estate had been in the ownership of the family for the longest time, but by the 1920s the village appeared to be largely independent. The family patronised tradesmen from Chudleigh rather than Kingsteignton, save one wax chandler. However, Charles supported Kingsteignton in many other ways, not least selling land at New Cross for a new burial ground at a very fair price.[25] He also offered two acres of the recreation ground free of charge with the remainder of the field at £80,[26] gifted land for the erection of a new British Legion Hall,[27] and agreed to a long lease of land to provide allotments for 100 men.[28] The water supply to the village had never been plentiful. The supply to those houses on the higher levels ran for a brief period only each day and the situation worsened in 1924 after thirty new houses were constructed. Charles agreed to increase the amount taken from a spring in Ugbrooke park and this enabled further development to go ahead. [29]

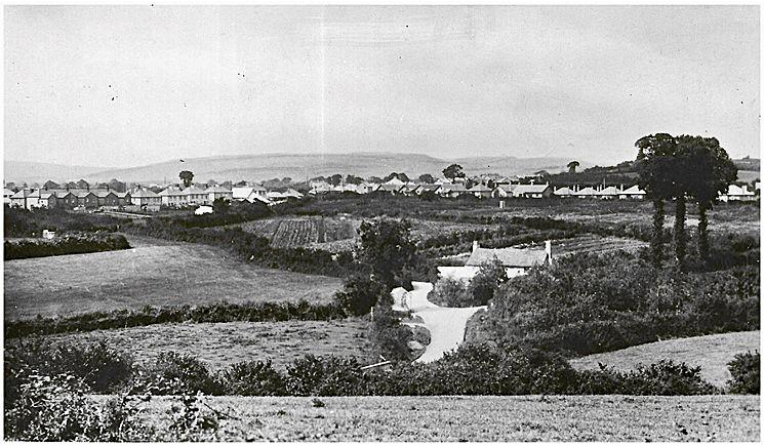

Figure 2: Kingsteignton in 1928 (photograph by kind permission of Richard Harris).

The photograph above taken *c.*1928 shows a line of houses formerly owned by the Clifford estates, some of which were in situ at the time of the auction sales of 1923/4 and new buildings built on the vacant plots. The land to become a recreation ground is to the left of the picture in front of the

[21] *E&PG*, 2 Jan 1925, 11.
[22] Ugbrooke Archive, WB/Estate Papers 3 Sale Catalogue, Kingsteignton.
[23] Lionel Bolt, *The Potters Field, A History of the South Devon Ball Clay Industry,* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974), 59 & 61.
[24] *E&PG*, 23 Mar 1923, 16.
[25] *E&PG*, 17 Oct 1928, 7.
[26] *Torbay Express & South Devon Echo*, 20 Apr 1929.
[27] *E&PG*, 6 Aug 1929, 5.
[28] *WMN*, 8 Oct 1926, 3.
[29] *WT*, 25 Jan 1924, 5.

terraced houses and the allotments mentioned above were to the right of the picture in front of the bungalows and to the rear of the three trees.

Following the sales, the new focus was on the Ugbrooke Estate. It comprised a large number of tenanted farms and in-hand enterprises which included farming, forestry, quarrying, and haulage. The most profitable industry was that of forestry for which men were employed in plant cultivation, felling timber and work in the sawmills.[30] The least profitable enterprise was that relating to the Hackney canal since the bargemen's wages together with repairs to both boats and to the canal ate into the profits. The canal closed to clay traffic in 1928 since by that time, most of it was being transferred to lorries.

In many villages, the aristocracy were traditionally predominant, providing employment, trade, education, and benevolence. When they sold their estates, their withdrawal was detrimental to the lives of the villagers. During the early nineteenth century, the Cliffords were influential in Kingsteignton, Chudleigh and Cannington. They provided for the religious needs, education and medical care of some of the tenants, estate workers and residents. By the 1920s their importance in Kingsteignton and Cannington was diminishing. This was counterbalanced by the rise of middle-class elements of rural Devon society who were to benefit from land sales; investors in local business enterprises and housing.

Cannington was primarily an agricultural community. In the 1800s the village was self-sufficient with numerous businesses such as grocers, drapers, saddle and harness makers,[31] many serving the Clifford household. By 1921 as a result of WW1 and the depression in agriculture, the population had dropped to 871. The Catholic elementary school for boys and girls had closed. The Catholic Industrial School for boys had moved to Bath, and Cannington Court leased to Somerset County Council.[32] As a result, the influence of the Clifford family had already been eroded.

Community administration

Cannadine states that the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century undoubtedly forced many notables to withdraw from county administration and constitutional politics and the great land sales of 1910-22 only intensified this development.[33] Lewis, 9th Lord Clifford had taken a keen interest in both national and local politics and supported the Liberal Unionist cause. His contributions to the House of Lords debates were many and varied.[34] Prior to his death in 1916 he was heavily involved in Devon County administration, e.g., chairman of the Devon Education Committee, Justice of the Peace, Deputy-Lieutenant and County Alderman.[35]

Although Charles became a local magistrate and shared his Uncle Lewis's interest in the Territorial Army,[36] he was far less involved in County administration than his uncle had been. However, he kept up to date with agricultural developments and held a number of roles on agricultural bodies.[37] He joined other members of the county elite in the affairs of the South Western district of the Fire Brigades Association.[38] He was a prominent member of a number of organisations in Chudleigh

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[30] Ugbrooke Archive, Office 7.
[31] Cannington Parish Council, *About Cannington'* to be found at https://www.cannington.org.uk.
[32] *Cannington Education* to be found at https://www.history.ac.uk/vch/som/vol6/p90.
[33] Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall,* 180.
[34] Clifford, *The House of Clifford,* 199.
[35] *E&PG*, 21 Jul 1916, 10.
[36] Clifford, *The House of Clifford,* 198.
[37] *D&EG*, 12 Apr 1929, 5.
[38] *D&EG*, 2 Dec 1929, 7.

and loaned money to the Chudleigh Town Band to help with their financial difficulties,[39] and as a keen sportsman, was involved with the local golf, tennis and cricket clubs. His other passion was fishing. He was a member of the Lower Teign Fishing Association and was chairman of the Teign Board of Conservators who were particularly concerned with the effects of pollution on fish stocks.[40]

Like his peers, Charles offered his home as a venue for a number of local events. The park was used for a number of summer camps for local troops of Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. It was a training camp for 1,700 territorials, constituting the 130th (Devon & Cornwall) Infantry Brigade.[41] In 1925 Charles opened the centre lake at Ugbrooke for trout fishing, the proceeds of which went to the Chudleigh Cricket Club and the Chudleigh Lawn Tennis Club.[42] Despite a diminished income, Charles continued to support numerous charities, not least the restoration of Buckfast Abbey.

Lifestyle

The family had always been well connected. In 1899 the Duke and Duchess of York visited Ugbrooke. The house party included the Duke and Duchess of Somerset, Lord and Lady Churston, Sir Stafford Northcote, Sir Redvers and Lady Buller, and Sir Thomas and Lady Acland.[43] Clifford and his wife entertained both British and foreign royalty, senior politicians, diplomats, authors, musicians and local dignitaries.[44] House parties were lavish. Guests stayed for long weekends and were feted with amateur theatrical performances which rivalled the celebrated performances at Chatsworth.[45]

Although the number of domestic servants in Ugbrooke House had fallen since the start of the war, there was still employment for estate maintenance men, gardeners, gamekeepers[46] and those employed in the various industries. Families often became almost 'hereditary' tenants or employees. [47] In 1928 there were sixteen members of the Coombes family living on the Ugbrooke Estate.[48]

Life at Ugbrooke House in the 1920s took a rather different form to that of the previous generation when the 9th Lord was alive. Gone were the lavish long weekends. The popular 'London season' enjoyed by the county elite was to some extent replaced by a season of local balls. Some were private and others charitable events. Charles and his house party were among the guests at the Lindridge Ball along with those of the Hon. Lois Yarde-Buller and Lady Goodson.[49] House parties appeared to be intimate affairs often associated with sporting events such as hunting, racing and shooting.[50]

Despite a change in fortunes, the aristocracy and gentry continued to enjoy a hectic social life. The first hunt ball to be held at Ugbrooke after the war was held in April 1924 to raise funds for the South Devon Hunt. Guests were received by Charles and his aunt, Countess de Torre Diaz together with the Master, Mr W. Whitley and his wife. Members of the hunt attended in red coats with buff facings which, with the beautiful dresses presented a brilliant spectacle.[51] A number of lawn meets

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[39] Ugbrooke Archive, WBXII (Box 2)
[40] *E&PG*, 25 Jan 1929, 12.
[41] *WMN*, 28 Jul 1924, 3.
[42] *WMN*. 26 Feb 1925, 2.
[43] *WMN*, 6 Jul 1899, 5.
[44] Ugbrooke Archive, Visitors Books.
[45] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 7 Sep 1906.
[46] Ugbrooke Archive, Clifford II/1/Ugbrooke Estate/chapel/house/staff.
[47] Ugbrooke Archive, Workmen's Account Book.
[48] Interview with Miss Dorothy Coombes, 2007.
[49] *E&PG*, 27 Aug 1924, 2.
[50] Ugbrooke Archive, WBXII (Box 2) Diaries, The Hon. Charles Clifford.
[51] WT, 25 Ap 1924, 6.

were held at Ugbrooke for both the South Devon Hunt and the Haldon Harriers. Followers were provided with refreshments before hounds drew the first cover.

Land sales and the rural community

Hunting had always been the province of the rural elite. But times were changing. Aristocrats like the Duke of Beaufort and the Duke of Rutland had provided sport at their own expense and were in complete control of the proceedings, but in the period of the agricultural depression in the late nineteenth century, they were obliged to ask for subscriptions to help with rising costs. Lord Haldon, great grandchild of Sir Robert Palk of the Haldon estate was Master of the South Devon pack who, in 1884 had promised to provide all the funding needed to hunt the country (territory) but found himself two years later compelled to sell the hounds.[52] Thereafter the management and funding of the hunt was no longer solely in the hands of the master. A committee would be set up to assist in these matters.[53]

Land sales had the effect of breaking down class divisions on the hunting field and in the countryside. Wealthy supporters and farmers now became a valuable commodity, and the balance of power was shifting. Farmers were the new owner-occupiers who had authority over the land they farmed. Without the sporting rights reserved, they could control vermin which had an adverse effect on the number of foxes to hunt. Farmers were asked not to use gin traps to catch rabbits and foxes. Farmers' hunt balls were organised with special endeavours to attract as many farmers and their wives as possible. Fund raising events were run by sub-committees comprising principally members of the middle classes, both male and female. Hunt supporters would be invited to 'puppy walk' which meant keeping and exercising young hounds. They would then be invited to the puppy shows. These were elaborate affairs where they could mingle with the 'great and the good'. In common with other traditional pursuits and leisure activities after the First World War, foxhunting was ceasing to be a solely upper-class recreation, it was also becoming a middle-class pastime.

Hunts were an integral part of country life and were important to the local economy. They provided work for local people such as the groom, the farrier, the saddler and the veterinary surgeon. Charles procured both his hunting apparel and his saddlery from Chudleigh tradesmen.[54] Farmers also provided animal feedstuffs. The hunts ran numerous whist drives, dances, races, and gymkhanas to which as many as several thousand spectators could be attracted.[55] Meets at Chudleigh and Kingsteignton provided a spectacle for local people. The introduction of the motor car now meant that followers need not be mounted. There was also an increase in women riders who also took on the roles of joint masters.

Commenters note that throughout the Country, diminished incomes and sales of land had an adverse effect on shooting. By the 1930s even the great game estates were affected. Some let their shoots to syndicates as a commercial exercise.[56] Charles let his Devon shooting rights during the season 1926-27 but syndicates are not in evidence until the season 1933-4. However, the nature of the shoot was changing. There were signs of practices moving towards commercialisation. Before the war, the Ugbrooke Game Books show that the birds shot were wild birds and not purely pheasants. By the end of the 1920s the three Ugbrooke gamekeepers procured 4,000 eggs for rearing into adult pheasants.

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[52] Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall,* 361.
[53] Edward Tozer, *The South Devon Hunt: a history of the hunt from its foundation,* (Teignmouth: Tozer, 1916).
[54] Chudleigh & District Amenity Society, *Oral History Project*, 1999.
[55] *D&EG*, 16 Sep 1929, 8.
[56] Adrian Tinniswood, *The Long Weekend,* 293.

Unlike hunting, which was absorbing the middle classes, the Ugbrooke shoot, like other Devon shoots was class orientated. It was principally enjoyed by the upper class. Guests would include Lord Cable of the Lindridge estate, Sir Robert Newman of the Mamhead estate, and Lord Courtenay of the Powderham estate. The grandees would in turn invite Charles to their shoots.[57] The gamekeepers and the beaters who were estate workers or their family members were well aware of their status, and were segregated from the other group over lunch. A traditional rook shoot as well as a rabbit shoot were held each May when tenants could enjoy a day's sport which also served as a means of vermin control.[58]

Women were not always welcome at shoots since many of the older 'guns' including the King disapproved of females shooting but during the 1920s increasing numbers began to do so.[59] Charles does not mention any women present at the shoots in his diary although there is a reference to wives being invited to a dinner party which followed the day's shooting.

Conclusion

Like other Devon aristocratic families, the status of the Cliffords remained largely unchanged unlike the decline of the upper-class elites cited by David Cannadine in the country as a whole. Land and buildings were sold principally for economic reasons. It was expedient for the Clifford Estates to sell property, particularly that which needed costly repairs and renovations, and to invest the proceeds in commodities which produced a better return. The family enjoyed an opulent lifestyle, albeit less lavish than its predecessors.

Charles was highly respected. He enjoyed a busy social and sporting life and continued many family traditions. He also managed to steer a furrow through the difficult economic times keeping Ugbrooke House and the estate intact.

A growing middle class was on the rise, but the grandees remained supreme. Class distinctions softened but class divisions remained. The people of Kingsteignton and Cannington were largely unaffected by the sales from a paternalistic aspect. In fact, the sales provided opportunities for certain tenants to become owner-occupiers and entrepreneurs to establish various businesses. The village of Kingsteignton was able to grow and develop economically. In all, the sales brought about a catalyst for change.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Richard Harris for the material provided on the village of Kingsteignton.

[57] Ugbrooke Archive, Ugbrooke Game Register.

[58] Ugbrooke Archive, Diaries, The Hon. Charles Clifford.

[59] Pamela Horn, *Country House Society: The private lives of England's upper class after the First World War,* (Stroud: Amberley, 2013), 96.