Poltimore Village After the Sale of the Poltimore Estate

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Figure 1: Poltimore House, Poltimore Park (Poltimore House Trust)

Poltimore, was 'a parish and village 1 mile from the Exeter road, 2 ¾ miles east from Stoke Canon Junction station… about 2 north from Pinhoe station… and 4 ½ north-east from Exeter' according to Kelly's 1919 Directory.[1]

> This place gives the title of baron to the Bampfylde family. Poltimore Park is the seat... of Lord Poltimore, J.P, D.L., lord of the manor and chief landowner: the house is a large and imposing mansion, standing in a level plain...; the park, of 300 acres, is well stocked with deer, and contains an ornamental lake... The area is 1,740 acres; the population in 1911 was 291.[2]

The 'Private Residents' in the village were listed as Lord Poltimore, Rev J.H. Hopkinson, the rector; William Snow of Bampfylde Lodge; and Samuel Tozer, tenant of the largest farm. The 'commercial' list of residents included five other farmers, Lord Poltimore's clerk of works, head gamekeeper, and head gardener; the blacksmith and wheelwright; the post office and shopkeeper; and the assistant overseer/tax collector. It also referred to the Chess and Recreation Club and its hon. secretary, William Gill.

By the time of the 1930 Directory, the list of 'Private Residents' still contained the names of the rector, William Snow and Samuel Tozer, but Lord Poltimore was no longer listed. Poltimore Park was described as 'Poltimore Park, formerly the seat of Lord Poltimore... now the Poltimore College for Girls'. The college was listed in the 'Commercial' section of the directory, along with the six farmers, the post office and shopkeeper, and the blacksmith and wheelwright. The head gamekeeper

[1] *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1919), p. 624.
[2] Ibid.

was also listed, and the clerk of works now described himself as farm bailiff and head gardener to Poltimore College. He was also listed as the tax collector.[3]

This essay explores what happened in Poltimore village after the lord of the manor sold up, as Lord Poltimore did in 1921, choosing to live instead on his lands in North Devon. It considers the change from a private to an institutional landlord, the direct impact of the sale on farming and employment, and the more indirect effect on church and social activities.

Sale of the Estate

George Wentworth Warwick Bampfylde became the fourth Baron Poltimore when his father died on 2 November 1918, just before the Armistice ended the First World War. At that time he was still on active service, although with a London posting, and his wife and children were living in North Devon, where his father had died. The correspondence with his solicitor throughout 1919 details the process of valuing the estate,[4] dealing with the separation of his mother's property from his own, and the settlement of money on his sister and brothers. However, it was clear that the income from the estate no longer covered its outgoings, despite his father's efforts to make savings. The Twitchen estate (part of the North Devon holdings) was already scheduled for sale, and that went ahead in the autumn of 1919, along with the sale of properties in Huxham and Pinhoe (East Devon) and the family home in Exeter.[5] The sale of Poltimore Park and the estate in Poltimore was also mooted. Lord Poltimore had no particular attachment to the house, where he had never lived, and preferred the hunting and shooting opportunities that his North Devon estates offered. His agent, Mr Riccard, a solicitor in South Molton, was confident of selling the Poltimore estate as a whole, as he had 'several applicants' in July 1919.[6]

Meanwhile, the residents of Poltimore had been trying to rebuild their lives. The village, like other communities, had been hard hit during the war. The war memorial lists the names of ten men who died, representing about one in seven of the younger male population. Farming activity had been subject to central government direction. Production in the gardens and glasshouses at Poltimore Park switched from flowers and fruit for the family to tomatoes, early vegetables and potatoes for markets in Exeter and London. A backlog of repairs had built up, because so many of the estate staff were at war. Poltimore House was shut up, and Home Farm no longer housed Lord Poltimore's prize-winning herd of Jersey cattle. Although Lord Poltimore had promised all the estate staff who signed up to fight that they could have their old jobs back when they returned from the war, when Harold Western, one of the gardeners, came back, he was told that as Lord Poltimore had been reducing posts, his job no longer existed.[7]

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[3] *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1930), p. 662.

[4] *Western Times* (WT), 23 May 1919, quoted the value as £50,847 (over £3 million today) but the properties were heavily mortgaged.

[5] Hartland Archives. *Poltimore Letter Books,* HaB-LTR-037, Jan to Dec 1919. I am grateful to Sir Hugh Stucley for permission for the Poltimore Estate Research Society to use material from this archive, which is not open to the public.

[6] Ibid., 4 July 1919.

[7] Ibid., January 1919. Fortunately his training in the gardens stood him in good stead and he was able to get a post on Lord Derby's staff at Knowsley Hall, Lancashire. (Family information.)

Determined efforts were made to recreate life as it had been before the war. The summer seaside outing for the choir went ahead, the Pinhoe and Poltimore Cottage Garden Society show was revived, the football and cricket teams re-established. One of the tenant farmers sold up and left the village. The old clerk of works who had managed the estate and its workmen, died and was succeeded by his nephew. Hunting resumed. The young assistant teacher at the school decided to emigrate to New Zealand. Lord Poltimore's head gardener once again conducted tours for groups who wanted to visit the park and gardens.[8]

In January 1921, the news that Poltimore Park was for sale became public. The solicitor's optimism about being able to sell it privately had not been justified, despite initial interest from such clients as Mr Jolly, the department store owner from Bath. (Jolly's agent's opinion, relayed to Lord Poltimore, was that the mansion and the pleasure grounds were 'a white elephant'.[9]) The *Western Times,* though a Liberal-leaning paper, took the opportunity of the appearance of the notice of the planned sale on 26 January to publish a leader, a column simply headed 'Appalling'.[10] The author lamented that:

> The landowner is being taxed out of existence. Estate after estate is being sold – that of Poltimore is now in the market – and the fear is that the new owners may not be as sympathetic as the squirearchy as a whole were wont to be. The sale of an estate, in turn, compels tenants to purchase who might under other circumstances have preferred to keep their capital free, or escape from the trammels which mortgages represent.

Were either of these prophecies to come true at Poltimore?

Lord Poltimore's agent, Mr Riccard, a solicitor in North Devon, instructed Collins and Collins, a firm of London estate agents, to handle the sale. The property was initially featured in *Country Life* on 28 February 1921, described as 'a residential and sporting estate in the midst of glorious country and enjoying a delightfully mild climate'.[11] Twenty years earlier – even ten years earlier – it might have been possible to attract someone who had made their money in trade or industry, at home or perhaps in India, to purchase an estate on which to set up as a country gentleman. By 1921 these were hard to find, and more cautious. There were also many other properties for them to choose from. One national estate agent alone, Messrs Knight, Frank and Rutley, claimed to have sold between 1918 and 1921 a total of 1.8 million aces 'equivalent to the counties of Middlesex, Herts, Beds, Bucks and Berks.'

The property failed to sell as a whole, however, and the auctioneers were told to try to market it in separate lots. It was readvertised in *Country Life* on 20 August, giving notice that it would be sold at auction on 23 September. Twenty-six lots were listed in the detailed sale catalogue. The advertisement headed 'Devonshire' now referred to it as 'The Important Agricultural Property known as the Poltimore Park Estate'.[12] The house itself was marketed as 'suitable for a family seat, residential hotel, club, school, hydro, hospital or other public institution' with a note that 'the well-

[8] *Devon and Exeter Gazette* (DEG), 11 February, 18 July, 5 August, 7 November 1919; 22 January, 28 January, 6 March, 22 April, 28 May, 15 June 1920.
[9] Hartland Archives, *Poltimore Letter Books*, HaB-LTR-038, 8 September 1920.
[10] *WT*, 26 January 1921, pp. 4– 5.
[11] Supplement to *Country Life,* 28 February 1921, p. xix.
[12] Ibid., 20 August 1921, p. xix.

timbered deer park particularly lends itself to the formation of an ideal golf course.' The offer – with or without the Home Farm attached – still did not appeal to buyers, at least not at the price Lord Poltimore had set as the reserve, and after 23 September the house was withdrawn from the market while Lord Poltimore considered his options.

The Farms

Five substantial farms were listed for sale with the estate, shown in Figure 2. Home Farm shaded in green, Lathys in yellow, Hayescote in blue, Poltimore Barton in brown, and Pynes, lot 10, in pink.

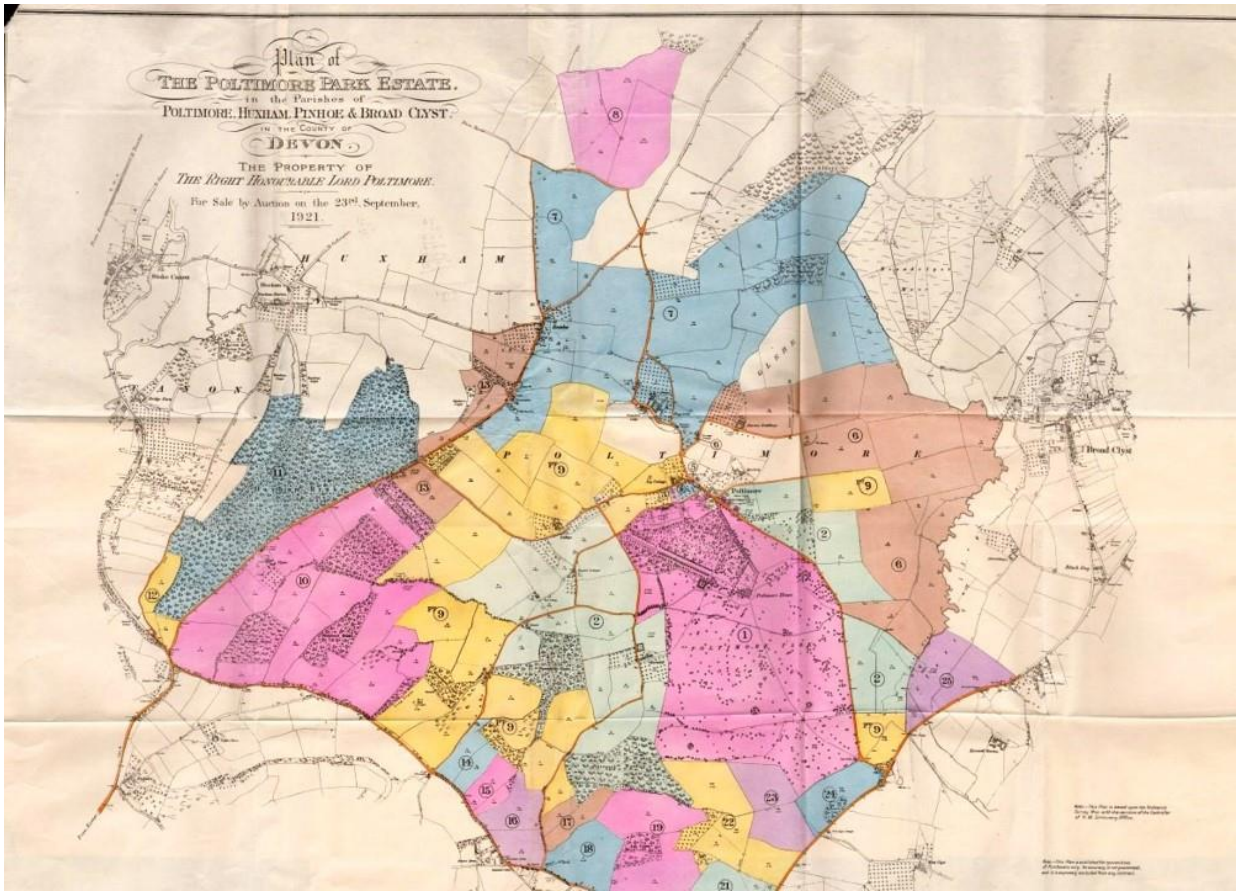

Figure 2: Poltimore Park Estate Sale Plan, 1921 (Poltimore House Trust)

Some adjustment of boundaries had gone on before the sale so that they could be offered as five separate lots of between 190 and 300 acres. The farms were mainly stock-rearing, predominantly pasture, with small amounts of arable land, much of which was used to grow animal fodder such as mangolds. Each farm also had a few acres of orchard. Devon is not known for its apples. What was grown was used primarily for cider – some still made on the farm, but the rest sent under contract to Whiteway's' big cider factory at Whimple, only a few miles away.

The sitting tenants (except for the very new and apparently unsatisfactory tenant at Poltimore Barton farm) were invited to discuss the purchase of their properties directly with Lord Poltimore if they were interested, and, according to the newspapers, Lord Poltimore was even prepared to offer them mortgages to help them buy their farms. Samuel Tozer at Hayescote and Edwin Tavender at Lathys both bought their farms. Their farmhouses and other buildings had both been upgraded by

Lord Poltimore over the years, often when tenancies fell in, and both farms had been connected to mains water when Lord Poltimore brought the supply to the village. From now on, the owners would be responsible for paying for any improvements themselves. The remaining three farms went forward into the auction, but only Pynes was sold there. It was bought by a farmer from a neighbouring village, who let the tenant stay on for a further year before putting in another local man as tenant.[13] Home Farm, marketed with Poltimore House, was withdrawn. It was eventually sold to an incomer once the future of the house was decided.[14] After the auction, Lord Poltimore's agent negotiated the sale of the fourth farm, Poltimore Barton, with the unsuccessful highest bidder, a farmer from North Devon.[15]

What difference did the break-up of the estate make to farming in Poltimore? First, there was greater stability in the farming community. The farms had tended to change hands every decade, but now the farmers stayed on. None of them, despite the warning about mortgages published in the *Western Times*, went bankrupt. Those who bought in 1921 or shortly afterwards were still farming the same land in 1939,[16] although Edwin Tavender had passed on the active management of Lathys to his daughter and her husband. The farmers provided a continuity in village life, which Lord Poltimore and his family had once supplied.

There was, however, a more intangible loss to the Poltimore farming community, the loss of a patron who was genuinely interested in farming, particularly in stock breeding. The second and third Lords Poltimore had used the Home Farm as their base for breeding cattle and horses. In the early 1910s, the third Lord Poltimore had been a noted breeder of Jersey cattle and shire horses, winning prizes at local and national shows. The Poltimores were stalwarts of the Devonshire Agricultural Association, which promoted good farming and organised the County Show to enable such farming to be demonstrated. They also encouraged their tenants to take an interest in improving their stock and in other practices of model farming. The third Lord Poltimore used to allow his tenants free use of his shire stallions for their own mares.[17] Now there was no such local focus for agricultural improvement. The County Council Agricultural Committee did its best to promote interest in farmers' clubs and seed and crop trials, but there is no evidence that these farmers took part.[18]

Lord Poltimore owned almost all the land in the parish. This had meant for many years that he and his bailiff had been able to be flexible about the use of properties such as the cottages, providing some of them to the farmers to house extra workmen when the attached or adjacent buildings were not available. Two sets of 'model cottages' had been built, the first group in the 1860s and the second just before the First World War. These had added to the flexibility of accommodation at his disposal. Once particular houses were allocated to and sold with the farms, that flexibility was lost.

[13] Tom Tozer of Huxham Barton bought it and let it to Mark Tucker, who had run the dairy at Ratsloe.
[14] Advertisement for sale in *DEG*, 25 January 1923. It was bought by Thomas Lee.
[15] Hartland Archives, *Poltimore Letter Books*, HaB-LTR-039, 3, 10, 26, 30 September 1921; HaB-LTR-040, 2 May 1922; *WT,* 24 September 1921.
[16] Find My Past, 1939 Register.
[17] Poltimore Estate Research Society, *Poltimore: A Village in Transition* (Short Run Press, 2019).
[18] Accounts of visits in the area feature in the *Western Times*, 28 September 1923, and the *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 16 June 1924, but there is no indication of any engagement at Poltimore.

In 1926 when William Frankpitt, one of the workers at Home Farm, died, his home was needed for the next employee. In an earlier era, Lord Poltimore might have been able to offer the farmer an extra cottage or assist the widow to find other accommodation, but after the sale of the farms there was no such capacity to respond to a crisis. Less than two months after Frankpitt's death, the farmer applied for and obtained an eviction order, which gave the widow only one further month before being required to leave.

Generally speaking, however, there was no great shortage of housing in Poltimore, and the Parish Council did not push for the local authority to build council houses, though four were in fact constructed on the under-used allotments in 1927.

Social and Community Life

The fact that the population of the village had shrunk probably eased the housing situation. The village population shrank from 266 in 1911 to 249 in 1921, a loss of 17. Numbers on the school roll had fallen to such a degree that the two-class school was reduced to a single class, and the post of headteacher was downgraded by the County Council from a headmaster to a headmistress. (Female teachers were paid less than men.) The Education Committee required William Gill, the headmaster who had been in Poltimore for fifteen years, to seek employment elsewhere in the county in order to retain his level of salary.

The absolute reduction in numbers also meant the loss of training opportunities for the young men in the village. In 1911 there had been an apprentice carpenter and an apprentice mason on the staff; and there had been four young trainee gardeners in the bothy. By 1921 all those posts had gone. Eleven of the thirty-six young people between the ages of 14 (the new school leaving age) and 25 who were in work were employed outside the village, most of them in Exeter. Ten years earlier, only three of the forty in the same age group were employed away from Poltimore.

All these changes had consequences for the social life of the village. The headmaster had run a night school for the young men, and an evening recreation club in the reading room. When he went, the night school ceased and, though a secretary was found in the short term for the recreation club, that too faded away in the 1920s.[19] The football and cricket teams founded in 1921 were both defunct by 1923.[20] Of the fourteen men who played in the cricket team in 1922, only six had actually lived in Poltimore, but those six included the captain, vice-captain, secretary and assistant secretary.[21] The captain and his brother left the village when their father was unable to buy his smallholding. The vice-captain was the son of the Home Farm tenant. His father did not buy the farm and the family moved away. The secretary was Lord Poltimore's head gardener, who lost his post in March 1922. The assistant secretary, once an estate carpenter, had to take up employment with a builder in Exeter and moved away from the village. No one came forward to take their places, though a scratch team could be assembled from time to time.[22]

[19] According to the entries in Kelly's *Devonshire Directories* for 1923 and 1930.
[20] The last reference to the football team is *WT*, 20 January 1922.
[21] *DEG*, 22 April, 9 May 1921; *Western Morning News*, 20 April 1923.
[22] *WT,* 9 July 1926, shows a Poltimore cricket team playing at Killerton.

The absence of the Poltimores was felt in other ways. It was true that they had never been closely engaged in village life, though they attended church services when in residence. They would call in at the end of events for which they had paid, such as the harvest supper or the New Year pensioners' tea, to receive thanks and to wish the tenants and their families well. The third Lady Poltimore no longer inspected the children's work at school, as her predecessor had done, but she had taken a personal interest in the district nursing service run by the Pinhoe and Poltimore Nursing Association, also set up by her predecessor,[23] and provided rooms in the village for the nurse. When the Poltimores sold up, the rooms were no longer available, and the association had to make provision outside the village.[24]

The gap left in these community arrangements was filled to an extent by Mrs Hopkinson, the rector's wife, with the assistance of other women, usually the regular churchgoers. They raised funds for the Nursing Association and for other charitable causes, usually by organising an event in the schoolroom. The pattern of fundraising events in the middle years of the decade are shown in Table 1.[25]

Table 1: Fundraising events reported in Poltimore in 1925

Date reported	**Cause**	**Nature**
1 Jan 1924	Sunday school prize fund	Children's play and concert
8 Feb 1924	Nursing Association	Whist drive and dance with draw
2 May 1924	Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital	Egg collection
9 Jan 1925	Sunday school prize fund	Concert in schoolroom
13 Feb 1925	Nursing Association	Whist drive and dance with draw
17 Apr 1925	Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital	Egg collection[26]
8 Sep 1925	Mothers' Union fund	Collection
15 Jan 1926	Sunday school prizes	Entertainment and dance
9 Apr 1926	Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital	Egg collection
23 Apr 1926	Nursing Association	Whist drive and dance with draw
30 Apr 1926	Church Schools Appeal	Collection
30 Apr 1926	Crippled Children's Association	Concert and dance
17 Dec 1926	Nursing Association	Whist drive and dance with draw
31 Dec 1926	Sunday school prizes	Concert and dance

There were fewer fundraising activities than before the First World War, and those that did take place focused on local charities rather than, as in earlier years, national organisations such as the Waifs and Strays Society. And where once outdoor events had taken place in the park at Poltimore House, now the Rectory lawn was used.

One area where the withdrawal of Lord and Lady Poltimore's charity was particularly felt was the church funds. Before the First World War, Lord Poltimore would give generously to church funds, or supply the workmen for repairs to the church fabric. Although the formal church rate had long

[23] *DEG*, 6 February 1912.
[24] The rooms in Poltimore 'had to be given up' in September 1922 and Lady Poltimore was thanked for having provided them since the foundation of the Association in 1908 (*DEG*, 21 April 1922).
[25] Information compiled from listings in *DEG* and *WT.*
[26] A regular spring time fundraiser for hospitals. The eggs were pickled for use in hospital catering.

been abolished, the tradition in Poltimore (a predominantly Anglican village) was that those who had paid the church rate made a voluntary subscription of an equivalent amount. In 1915, for example, Lord Poltimore contributed £10-6-4. By 1923 he made no contribution at all. In 1915, the farmers contributed £4-18-0, and in 1923 they contributed £10 between them.[27] Lady Poltimore also withdrew her contribution to the organist's salary.[28] The amount the Poltimores had once contributed was not made up by the increase paid by the farmers, and of course inflation increased church expenses. Minutes of the Parochial Church Council show how they struggled to find money for maintenance, and they were less able to give assistance to the poor and needy. It was only the exceptional circumstance of the urgent need for roof repairs that prompted them to approach the Poltimores in the 1920s, as Lord Poltimore remained patron of the living. Lord Poltimore and his mother between them did then contribute half the sum required.[29]

An indication of what the community of Poltimore was missing can be seen by studying what Lord Poltimore did in the North Molton community that he had chosen to live in. Newspaper reports from the *North Devon Journal*[30] show him as the president of the South Molton Agricultural Association; sitting as a magistrate; unveiling the war memorial; as master of the Dulverton Foxhounds, opening the new village hall; presiding at Exmoor Pony Society meetings and exhibiting at agricultural shows. Similarly, Lady Poltimore can be observed giving Christmas teas to the children in the parish, and tea and a cinema viewing to local women; she is the president of the Nursing Association, donates to the North Devon Infirmary; and they both host events such as a bazaar for church funds at Court Hall (their home). This behaviour is all reminiscent of the way his predecessors had behaved in the Poltimore and East Devon communities before the war. It reminds us that as well as the gaps left in offices and services in Poltimore, the village lost a link with a wider world of county networks and institutions.

Poltimore College: A New 'Lady of the Manor'?

Lord Poltimore terminated his contract with the London estate agents after they failed to sell the house at auction, and continued to explore other opportunities for disposal. In 1923 he leased the house to the headmistress of a girls' school, Miss Cloelia Wontner.[31] Miss Wontner took on the house, the gardens, the grounds and a number of houses in the village. She must have considered it an ideal place for her new educational venture. Poltimore College, as it was to be called, was aimed at the daughters of 'professional men'; families interested in ensuring that their daughters were given an education that enabled them to earn their own living.

At the college they could, of course, take the examinations that would enable them to study for a teaching qualification or a degree. But they could also take options in more practical courses such as horticulture, dairying or poultry keeping. No doubt, to her eyes, the large house (marketed as having 'about 50 bedrooms') the spread of gardens, a stable yard easily adapted for dairying and the

[27] Devon Heritage Centre (DHC) 2810A Acc 9162. *Churchwardens' Accounts*.
[28] DHC, 2810/PP, *Minutes of the Parochial Church Council*, 18 April 1924.
[29] Ibid., 19 November and 19 December 1927.
[30] *North Devon Journal*, references to 'Poltimore', 1920–26.
[31] *WMN*, 27 March, 9 August 1923.

large aviaries built for exotic birds, but capable of use for more everyday poultry, had seemed ideal. The college opened for students in September 1923.

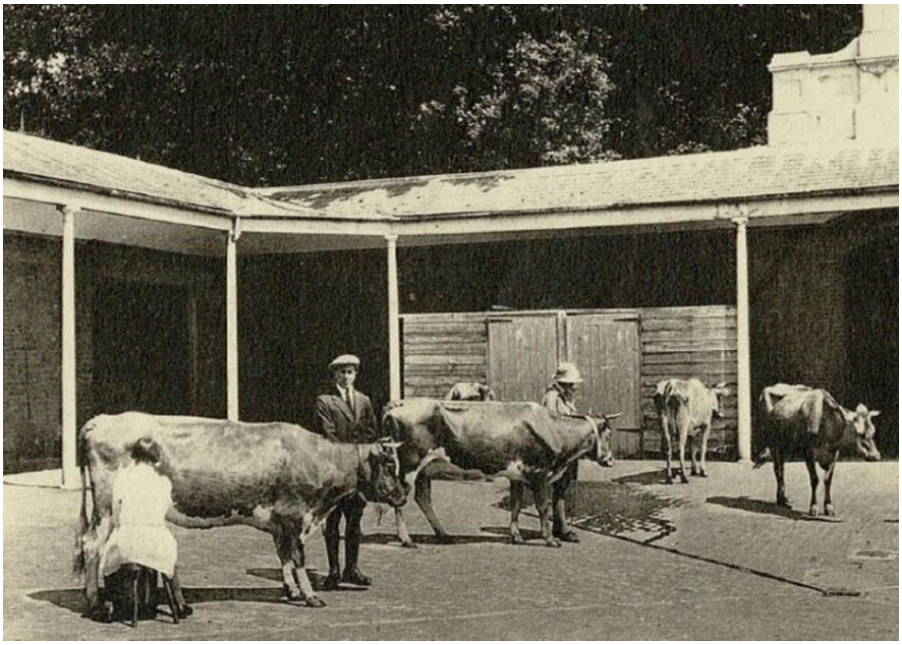

Figure 3: Poltimore college girls milking the Guernseys in the stable yard (Poltimore College album)[32]

The history of Poltimore College and its place in the mosaic of the provision of education for teenage girls in the 1920s is the subject of a separate article, but what is relevant to note here is that it did create a degree of stabilisation in village life. Miss Wontner appears to have taken on the oversight of all the remaining functions of the estate, including the woodlands and the deer park. In Kelly's 1930 *Directory of Devonshire*, both the bailiff and the gamekeeper describe themselves as employed by Poltimore College. Enough men seem to have been employed on the estate to form a cricket team to play the young ladies annually. The college also provided cooking and cleaning jobs for women from the village, although both its ethos of self-sufficiency and its lack of funds meant that the students were also expected to help with these chores.

Miss Wontner herself was initially interested in assuming some of the roles of the lady of the manor. In 1924, she paid for a Christmas tea for pensioners, and one for the school and Sunday school children. She was co-opted onto the Parochial Church Council, and invited to become a vice-president of the Cottage Garden Society. But she was not a businesswoman. She got into financial trouble and in 1926, only three years after establishing the college, she was unable to pay the bills. She was personally declared bankrupt, and the college was taken over by a trust. After that, the village could no longer look for generous donations from her, although she did arrange for the young ladies from the college to put on additional performances of their theatrical productions, *The Mikado* in 1927 for church repairs, and *Merrie England* in 1929 for the school seaside outing. Supporting charitable activities was part of the sense of duty she aimed to instil in every girl.

[32] Devon Heritage Centre, 7274Z/1.

Conclusion

This account has described the impact that one estate owner who sold up in the 1920s could have on a local community. Lord Poltimore's actions affected the farms and cottages, the employment and training opportunities for people in Poltimore, and also in the surrounding villages, and the resources available for church and community needs. The woman who ultimately became the tenant of the 'big house' used it as an institution rather than as a family home. She did provide continuity of employment for some of the estate staff, but kept a strict distance between pupils and villagers. She did not have the resources in her own right to make good the financial hole left in the finances of the parish by the withdrawal of subscriptions by the patron of the living. Meanwhile the local authority was stepping in. The Rural District Council built new council houses. Devon County Council organised additional educational opportunities.

Was this situation paralleled on other estates where the owners sold up? This does not appear to have been the case elsewhere in Devon. Other estates sold during the 1920s were centred on communities that, like Kingsteignton or Moretonhampstead, were larger and had developed a greater degree of self-sufficiency.

Poltimore was too small a community to have developed self-sufficiency. It had become during the nineteenth century very much a private fiefdom of the Poltimore family who had displaced the independent businesses like the market gardens in favour of increased management by the steward. When Lord Poltimore left there was no alternative tradition on which to build. More evidence from other parts of the county and country will help demonstrate if this experience was widely shared in the 1920s.

Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to my fellow members of the Poltimore Estate Research Society who have contributed information and ideas to this analysis of Poltimore in the 1920s.

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