Continuity or Change?

Gentry Life in Devon in the 1920s

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Lord Clinton and the Dukes of Bedford and Portland warned that unless some abatement of taxation occurred in 1921, the squirearchy was doomed to extinction.[1] Landed wealth probably declined substantially after the First World War, and with dwindling incomes and rising outgoings, some owners were forced to sell the whole or parts of their estates. Lord Mount Edgcumbe of Torpoint, speaking at the Truro Fat Stock Show, explained that he was compelled to part with some of his land in the locality in order to pay death duties.[2] Other territorial magnates retained their larger portions, such as Lord Poltimore, who sold the smaller portion of his Devon estates at Poltimore in East Devon while retaining the larger portion, his Court Hall Estate, North Molton in North Devon. The sale enabled him to pay off death duties and concentrate on Court Hall.[3] But some land owners chose to sell certain property in order to diversify their investments. For example, Captain Buller of Downes, Crediton, disposed of some of his urban property and reinvested in farmland.[4]

The Devon gentry, such as Sir Henry Lopes of Maristowe, Roborough, remained in possession of their mansions and estates. Some houses were demolished, since they were expensive to maintain and the owners preferred to live elsewhere. Lord Portsmouth chose to live at Barton House, Morchard Bishop, which was more comfortable than Eggesford House (his former seat, which was demolished).[5]

David Cannadine has argued that the power of the aristocracy in the countryside declined in the interwar period in response to both increasing bureaucratisation and the withdrawal of aristocratic interest.[6] In Devon, there appeared to be continuity in local government so far as the gentry was concerned: Sir Henry Lopes was chairman of Devon County Council; Sir John Kennaway of Escot House, Talaton, was a member of the Devon Agricultural Committee. The landed elite still held prestigious positions within the county. Lord Fortescue of Castle Hill, Filleigh, was Lord Lieutenant and Col. Bastard of Kitley House, Yealmpton, High Sheriff. Other members of the squirearchy carried on their cultural patronage as county magistrates, such as Brig. Gen. Sir F Garratt of Ashbury House, Okehampton.

Cannadine refers to the sale of London town houses necessitated by falling revenues from land rentals and suggests that society was fragmented as a result of it.[7] But the London seasons continued. In spite of his sale of property, Lord Mount Edgcumbe took a prestigious

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[1] *Lichfield Mercury*, 11 November 1921.
[2] *Western Morning News*, 15 December 1927.
[3] *Poltimore: A Village in Transition* (Poltimore Estate Research Society, 2018).
[4] Devon Heritage Centre, 2065M/E/10/16, Schedule of property sold.
[5] *North Devon Herald*, 17 November 1927.
[6] D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (Yale University, 1990), p. 167.
[7] Ibid., p. 342.

house in London's Belgrave Square.[8] The gentry flocked to town for the parliamentary season and the debutante season. The Churston, Lopes and Mount Edgcumbe families were very much part of the London scene. Although the Devon nobility perhaps spent less time in London than their forebears, most were in evidence from time to time and were part of elite society.

The gentry made use of their London clubs. The London Devonian Association was popular.[9] In March 1925, Lord Fortescue (president) dined with other members of the Association and was graced by the company of the Prince of Wales.[10] In 1929, Lord Devon of Powderham, Lord Clifford of Chudleigh, Lord Churston of Churston Ferrers and Sir Ian Amory of Knighthayes, Tiverton, were all vice-presidents of the Association.

Both Lord Churston and Sir Henry Lopes had daughters of an age to be presented at court. Dances were arranged in Mayfair and Belgravia. Lady Lopes's annual dance held for her daughters at 71 Cadogan Square, London, was described as 'one of the most successful dances of the week' by the *Sunday Express*. Fourteen dinner parties were given for the dance; the hostesses included the Duchess of Buccleuch.[11]

The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* reported that there were more dances in the London season in 1926 than ever before, with debutantes attending three a night.[12] At a New Year's ball at the Albert Hall, Lady Churston's debutante daughter, the Hon. Joan Yarde-Buller, was one of a party in Prince Chichibu's box. The Japanese prince, brother of the Emperor of Japan, 'smiled gaily on the decorous English who seemed for once to have lost every trace of self-consciousness'.[13] Joan Yarde-Buller might possibly have been described as one of society's 'bright young things'. She was one of the most beautiful girls in society and also one of the best dancers in Mayfair. [14]

The parliamentary season was another time when the gentry flocked to London. MPs would take a London house, such as Col. G. Acland Troyte of Huntsham Court, Tiverton, Conservative MP for Tiverton. There were concerts, musical parties, tea parties and balls. Mr Ernest Farquhar of Whiteway, Chudleigh, attended a tea party given by Lady Sligo for Col. Wilson to meet his prospective constituents.[15] The Countess of Beauchamp held a reception in Belgrave Square for the Liberal party before the opening of Parliament in 1929 for 900 guests.[16] Lord Clinton was among the peers entertained by the Marquess of Salisbury at a parliamentary dinner at 21 Arlington Street, London.[17] There were clubs for the ladies, such as the Liberal Women's Club, which was the social centre for the women of the party. A frequent Devon visitor was Lady Acland of Killerton House, Killerton,[18] who was politically active in her own right in the cause of liberalism.

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[8] *Western Morning News*, 20 December 1929.
[9] *The Devonian Yearbook 1929*, (The London Devonian Association, 1929).
[10] *North Devon Journal*, 12 March 1925.
[11] *Sunday Express*, 3 June 1923.
[12] *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 1926.
[13] *Daily Express*, 2 January 1926.
[14] *Newcastle Journal*, 2 March 1927.
[15] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 March 1922.
[16] *The Scotsman*, 2 July 1929.
[17] Ibid., 8 February 1927.
[18] *Daily News (London)*, 1 May 1929.

Constituency politics were of interest to local landed elites. Lord Devon was the Ruling Councillor of the Courtenay Habitation of the Primrose League and Sir Ian Amory was President of the Tiverton Division Liberal Association.[19] When the Rt. Hon. Stanley Baldwin visited Devon in 1925, Cdr and Mrs Adams opened their grounds at Bradfield, Cullompton, to accommodate between 30,000 and 35,000 people who gathered to hear the Prime Minister speak.[20]

Commentators discuss the changes in British elite society. Madeline Beard writes:

> While hunt balls, comings of age, and Christmas gatherings continued in style after the war, there was also a reaction by landed society against the old pre-war world. Many expressed boredom with the life accepted for so long […] Although travel and even periods of residence abroad had long been common, the 1920s brought into being an international smart set. [21]

In many respects, the social life for the Devon gentry continued very much as it had prior to the First World War. The Riviera was a popular destination. Some ventured further afield to Algiers and Egypt. Lady Cable of the Lindridge Estate, Bishopsteignton, travelled to India[22] and Miss Chichester of Arlington Court, Barnstaple, cruised around the world.[23] The social diary was predominantly a mix of visiting town houses, country seats and travel within the United Kingdom. Smart hotels in Bath were a popular destination. Lady Stucley of Hartland Abbey was a regular visitor to the Pultenay Hotel,[24] and Lord and Lady Seaton, who inherited Nutwell Court, Lympstone, chose The Empire Hotel.[25] The Clintons visited Fettercairn House, the family seat in Scotland.

There was a merging of London and county society. For instance, Lord and Lady Milford Haven and their daughter spent a few days at Bicton. The house party included Lord and Lady Mount Edgcumbe.[26] Lady Clinton was then a guest at a dinner party in London given by the Earl and Countess of Southesk.[27] However, many landowners spent the greater part of the year in the countryside, either hunting, shooting, racing or sailing. Cannadine argues that the agricultural depression forced many landowners to give up expensive pursuits like fox hunting.[28] Although there were changes to the financial commitments of the Masters, hunting remained very much a part of the social diary among Devon land owners, many of whom rode to hounds, and others embraced the social life associated with it. Lord Fortescue was chairman of the Devon and Somerset Staghounds in 1923, Lord Poltimore became master of the Dulverton Foxhounds in 1920,[29] and another master was Col. James who became the new owner of the Stevenstone estate and took over the Stevenstone hunt. For so many, hunting was a passion.

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[19] *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 19 March 1926.
[20] *Somerset Standard*, 3 July 1925.
[21] M. Beard in A. Howkins, *The Death of Rural England, (*Routledge, 2003) pp. 58, 59.
[22] *Western Morning News*, 4 December 1924.
[23] *North Devon Journal*, 5 January 1922.
[24] *The Bath Chronicle*, 22 November 1924, 1 June 1929.
[25] Ibid., 5 July 1924.
[26] *Truth*, 30 June 1920.
[27] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 May 1923.
[28] Cannadine, '*The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy'*, pp. 342, 343.
[29] *The Tatler*, 13 December 1922.

The racing season was also very fashionable. Lord Mount Edgcumbe registered his colours as a racehorse owner under National Hunt Rules.[30] Ladies would wear the latest outfits for the Ascot races, the Derby, the St Leger, York and Goodwood, to name but a few. Locally, there were the hunt point-to-point races, and the Devon and Exeter 'chases were well patronised by the gentry.

The regatta season was another time when society was very much in view, particularly at Cowes. Lord Churston and Cdr. and Mrs Adams were all keen yachtsmen. In 1928, Lord Mount Edgcumbe arrived at Cowes on the Royal Yacht.[31]

Devon regattas were equally competitive. Lord Churston was officer of the day at the Torbay Royal Regatta in 1929, when he was the guest of Lord Waring on his yacht, White Heather, which collided with Candida.[32] Another keen yachtsman was Major Penn-Curzon of Watermouth Castle, Berrynarbor, who was president of the Ilfracombe Regatta Committee.[33]

Alun Howkins acknowledges that 'on many great estates, public rituals of deference continued unchanged'. However, in many country districts, he writes: 'At the simplest level the aristocracy in particular appear to have withdrawn from an active cultural role.' This did not seem to be the case in Devon. By tradition, landowners were obliged to discharge the responsibilities that rank and possession entailed. They supported local and county affairs of magistracy, churches, charities and schools, and most embraced it wholeheartedly. The landed elite opened their parks and gardens to the public in aid of local charities. They supported groups such as the Women's Institute (WI), the Scout and Guide movement, local sports clubs, and horticultural and agricultural societies.

Mrs Hamlyn of Clovelly Court, Clovelly, invited all the North Devon WIs to visit her lovely grounds and gave them tea on the terrace.[34] Mrs Penn-Curzon of Watermouth Castle, Berryneber, opened her gardens to swell the funds of the District Nursing Association.[35] Miss Rosalie Chichester appeared to spend much of her time fundraising and working for the benefit of the local community. She bred Shetland ponies and sold some to fund the District Nursing Association.[36] Fundraising was not reserved for local charities; Lady Cable hosted a garden party at Lindridge, Bishopsteignton, in aid of Working Girls, Bermondsey, which was founded by Princess Marie Louise, who was in attendance.[37]

The decline in landed wealth brought about cuts in expenditure by disposing of certain portions of land and buildings, and sometimes the demolition of country seats. In that context, the prestige and influence of the gentry would have diminished somewhat, but in other respects, the gentry remained dominant. Social life for the landed elite was in the process of changing with the merging of London and County society. Better transport links made travel abroad more accessible. But, in general, the lifestyle of the Devon gentry continued very much as it had done before the First World War.

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[30] *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 July 1923.
[31] *London Daily Chronicle*, 9 August 1928.
[32] Ibid., 29 August 1929.
[33] *North Devon Journal*, 7 July 1927.
[34] *Western Morning News*, 14 June 1926.
[35] *North Devon Journal*, 12 May 1927.
[36] *North Devon Journal*, 28 October 1915.
[37] *Western Morning News*, 20 August 1928.