

*In my right worshipful
gentleman good my lord, with
kind remembrance to
you*

The World of the Stonors



He is

A Gentry Society

ELIZABETH NOBLE

you or thyse tyne



*By your dno
Elizabeth Stonors*

at Stonors

in xxij. 1524 Stonors

*the holy gift of me you and
be to you here you shall have a copy
of the book of the Stonors*

The World of the Stonors
A Gentry Society

The World of the Stonors

A Gentry Society

Elizabeth Noble

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	vi
<i>List of Tables and Maps</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction: Approaching the Stonors and their Papers	1
1 The Stonors: A Gentry Family Biography	15
2 Lineage	39
3 Landed Estate	67
4 The Stonors' Lords	99
5 Early Social Networks: Judge John to Thomas I	129
6 Later Social Networks and Gentry Values: Thomas II and William	160
Conclusion: Gentry Networks, Culture, Mentality and Society	192
Bibliography	199
Index	217

Abbreviations

AgHR	<i>The Agricultural History Review</i>
AHEW	J. Thirsk ed., <i>The Agrarian History of England and Wales</i> , 8 vols, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1967–1991
BIHR	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research</i>
Boarstall	<i>The Boarstall Cartulary</i> , H. E. Salter, ed., Oxfordshire Record Society, 88, Oxford, 1930
<i>Boke of St Albans</i>	J. Berners, <i>The Boke of St Albans</i> , Amsterdam, Da Capo Press, 1969
BP Reg	<i>Register of Edward the Black Prince preserved in the Public Record Office</i> , 4 vols, London, HMSO, 1930–33
CAD	<i>A Descriptive Catalogue of Ancient Deeds preserved in the Public Record Office</i> , 6 vols, London, HMSO, 1890–1915
<i>Cal Ch Rolls</i>	<i>Calendar of Charter Rolls 1300–26</i> , vol. 3, London, HMSO, 1912
CCR	<i>Calendar of the Close Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office, Edward II to Henry VII</i> , 45 vols, London, HMSO, 1891–1916
CFR	<i>Calendar of the Fine Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office, Edward II to Henry VII</i> , 22 vols, London, HMSO, 1911–1962
CIM	<i>Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous ... preserved in the Public Record Office</i> , 7 vols, London, London, 1916–68; vol. 8, 1422–85, Woodbridge, Boydell, 2003
CIPM	<i>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem ... preserved in the Public Record Office, Henry III to Henry IV</i> , 19 vols, London, HMSO, 1904–92; vol. 23, 1427–1432, Woodbridge, Boydell, 2002
CIPM, H7	<i>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem ...</i>

	<i>preserved in the Public Record Office, Henry VII, 3 vols, London, HMSO, 1898–1955</i>
CPR	<i>Calendar of the Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office, Edward II to Henry VII, 45 vols, London, 1894–1916</i>
DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography, Sir L. Stephen and Sir S. Lee, eds, 21 vols, London, Oxford University Press, 1937–38</i>
DNB 2004	<i>Dictionary of National Biography, H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds, 60 vols, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004</i>
EcHR	<i>The Economic History Review</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
EHR	<i>The English Historical Review</i>
Feudal Aids	<i>Inquisitions and Assessments relating to Feudal Aids 1248–1431, 6 vols, London, HMSO, 1899–1920, Kraus reprint, Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1973</i>
G.E.C.	<i>The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, extant, extinct or dormant, G. E. Cokayne, ed., 13 vols, London, St Catherine Press, 1910–59</i>
JBS	<i>Journal of British Studies</i>
‘John Russell’s Boke of Nurture’	<i>The Babees Book, F. Furnivall, ed, London, EETS, o.s.32, 1868, Greenwood reprint, New York, 1969, pp. 115–239</i>
KSLP	C. Carpenter, ed., <i>Kingsford’s Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483</i> , Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996
L&P	<i>Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII, 2nd edition, 23 vols, London, Longman, 1862–1932, Kraus reprint, New York, 1965</i>
Lists, Escheators	<i>List of Escheators for England and Wales, PRO, List and Index Society, vol. 72, London, Swift Printers, 1971</i>
Lists, Sheriffs	<i>List of Sheriffs for England and Wales, Lists and Indexes, no. IX, London, HMSO, 1898</i>
Names of Members	<i>Names of Members Returned to Serve in Parliament, H. Connors, 2 vols, London, H. Hansard, 1878–1891 (no pagination)</i>
ORS	Oxfordshire Record Society
P&P	<i>Past and Present</i>
Peter Idley	C. D’Evelyn, ed., <i>Peter Idley’s Instructions to</i>

ford, PMLA	<i>his Son</i> , Boston, D. C. Heath, and Oxford University Press, 1935 <i>Proceedings of the Modern Language Association</i>
PRO	Public Record Office
Roskell, <i>H of C</i>	J. S. Roskell, L. Clarke and C. Rawcliffe, <i>The House of Commons 1386–1421</i> , 4 vols, Stroud, Alan Sutton for the History of Parliament Trust, 1992
RP	<i>Rotuli Parliamentorum; ut et petitiones et placita in Parlamento tempore Edwardi R.I, Edwardi II, Edwardi III, Ricardi II, Henrici IV, V, VI, Henrici VII, 1278–1503</i> . 6 vols, J.
Strachey, ed., 1767–77	
RS	<i>Rolls Series</i>
<i>Seneschaucie</i>	<i>Walter of Henley's Husbandry together with an Anonymous Husbandry</i> , E. Lamond, ed., London, Longmans, Green, 1890
SL&P	C. L. Kingsford, ed., <i>Stonor Letters and 1290–1483</i> , 2 vols, Camden Society, 3 rd
<i>Papers</i>	29, 30, London, 1919
series,	C. L. Kingsford, ed., 'Supplementary Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483', in <i>Camden Miscellany</i> , 13, Camden Society, 3 rd series, 34,
SL&P, Supplementary	London, 1924, pp. i–viii, 1–26
<i>S of R</i>	<i>Statutes of the Realm 1225–1713 printed by the command of His Majesty George the Third</i> , London, Dawsons, 1963
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
VCH	<i>Victoria County History</i>
Wedgwood, vol. 1	J. C. Wedgwood, <i>History of Parliament: Biographies of the Members of the Commons House</i> , vol. 1, London, HMSO, 1936
Wedgwood, vol. 2	J. C. Wedgwood, <i>History of Parliament: Register of the Ministers and of the Members of Both Houses</i> , vol. 2, London, HMSO, 1938

Tables and Maps

Tables

1	The Core Stonor Landholdings	73
2	Number of places in Extant Accounts	78
3	Stonor Estate Income in the Fifteenth Century	90

Genealogical Tables

1	The Stonor Family	40
2	The Stonors' Extended Family	47

Maps

1	Location of the Stonors' Lands	72
2	The Thames Valley	158

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Introduction: Approaching the Stonors and Their Papers

It is more than three-quarters of a century since Charles Lethbridge Kingsford first edited and published the Stonor letters and papers.¹ Nevertheless, no historian has used the abundance of material they contain to study the life and times of this particular late-medieval family. This is surprising, given the wealth of available studies about some other gentry families. For example, it is more than eighty years since the famous Pastons were first set in their England, and, following this pioneering study, a number of other authors have used the Paston letters to write about the family. Among the more recent of these studies is Richmond's three-volumed consideration of the family and their close connections, described as 'illuminating facets of aristocratic life that Bennett neglected or scarcely touched'.² The mercantile Celys and their world of the wool trade have also been the subjects of a study that was completed over twenty years ago.³ Even the Plumpton collection, which is less than half the size of the Stonor, has attracted some attention in the literature.⁴ It seems particularly surprising, therefore, that

- 1 C. L. Kingsford, ed., *The Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483*, 2 vols, Camden, 3rd series 29, 30, London, 1919, henceforth cited as *SL&P*; C. L. Kingsford, ed., 'Supplementary Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483', in *Camden Miscellany*, 13, Camden Society, 3rd series, 34, 1924, henceforth cited as *SL&P*, Supplementary.
- 2 H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and their England*, Cambridge, 1922, reprint, Canto edition, 1990; R. Barber, ed., *The Pastons: A Family in the Wars of the Roses*, Woodbridge, 1993, reprint of Folio Society edition, 1981; F. & J. Gies, *A Medieval Family: The Pastons of Fifteenth Century England*, New York, 1998; H. Castor, *Blood and Roses*, London, 2004; C. Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase*, Cambridge, 1990; C. Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will*, Cambridge, 1996; C. Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings*, Manchester, 2001; M. Hicks, 'The Sources' in A. J. Pollard, ed., *The Wars of the Roses*, London, 1995, p. 37, referring to the first volume.
- 3 A. Hanham, *The Celys and their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1985.
- 4 T. Stapleton, ed., *The Plumpton Correspondence*, Camden Society, o.s. 4, London, 1839; J. Taylor, 'The Plumpton Letters 1416–1552', *Northern History*, 10, 1975, pp. 72–87; K. Dockray, 'The troubles of the Yorkshire Plumptons', *History Today*, 27, 1977, pp. 459–66; T. Stapleton, ed., *The Plumpton Correspondence* with a new introduction by K. Dockray, Gloucester, 1990.

no major study of the late-medieval Stonor family and papers has been published, despite the re-issue of Kingsford's edition of the papers that appeared in 1996 in one convenient volume.⁵

This lack of attention may be because most of the letters in the collection were written *to* the Stonors by others, rather than *by* the Stonors themselves. Consequently, our understanding of the personalities of the family members is less well developed than is our understanding of the Pastons. Indeed, fewer than half of the Stonor documents are letters. By comparison, Norman Davis's edition of the Paston letters contains 930 numbered items, of which over 800 are letters, with nearly 350 of these written by members of the Paston family.⁶ Kingsford estimated the Stonor collection to hold around 600 documents in total.⁷ Since then an additional 152 other documents (or fragments) relating to the family have been found in the Public Record Office and re-filed as one set. This set contains only two letters, the rest being a mixture of expenses, accounts, receipts, rentals, writs, lists and miscellaneous documents.⁸ Therefore Kingsford's count of 256 letters (excluding fragments) requires little modification. However, members of the immediate or nuclear family have written only forty-four of these letters, the men of the family writing twenty-three, and the women (wives, sisters and mothers) twenty-one.

It is letters to the Stonors from a range of people that make up the remaining two hundred or so letters. Their writers range from members of the social élite, such as Thomas Rotherham, archbishop of York, and Alice, duchess of Suffolk, to the more humble, such as Thomas Porchet and the parishioners of Didcot. Members of the broader or extended family, such as uncle William Harleston and step-cousin Thomas Mull, wrote to the Stonors, while lawyers, bailiffs and other family retainers were also frequent letter writers. The wealthy merchant, John Elmes, also figures in the collection, as do three London apprentices.⁹ This variety of correspondents surely invites the historian to look at the social contacts of the Stonors, the people who

5 C. Carpenter, ed., *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483*, Cambridge, 1996 henceforth cited as *KSLP*. See also A. Truelove, 'The fifteenth-century English Stonor letters', unpublished University of London Ph.D. thesis, 2001.

6 N. Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols, London, 1971 & 1976. Volume 1 contains all but one of the 349 letters written by family members.

7 *SL&P*, vol. 1, p. xxxviii, n. 5.

8 This is PRO C47/37/22. *KSLP* has a summary listing of these additional 152 documents, pp. 514–19. Truelove, 'Stonor letters' p. 23 prints one of these letters. PRO C47/37/23, a household book, was added to the collection in 1998, and therefore is not included in *KSLP*.

9 *SL&P*, vol. 2, no. 278, vol. 1, nos 148, 57 & 74 respectively; vol. 1, no. 135, vol. 2, no. 260 are from Harleston, vol. 1, nos 69, 100, 111, 121, 123 & 124 are from Mull; for John Elmes, vol. 1, no. 60; for the apprentices, vol. 2, nos 163, 222, 225, 251 (Thomas Henham); vol. 2, nos 164, 165, 167, 213 (Goddard Oxbryge); vol. 2, no. 223 (Thomas Howlake). The latter became a member of the Staple Company but then fell into debt, Hanham, *Celys*, p. 250.

inhabited at least part of their social world, which in turn may tell us important things about the Stonors themselves. The other documents, comprising estate accounts, deeds, rentals, household accounts, tradesmen's bills, drafts or copies of legal documents provide information about the context, both social and material, in which the Stonors lived. The forty or so family letters could therefore be placed in the context supplied by these other documents. Yet Kingsford's original comment, echoed by Christine Carpenter in the 1996 edition, that the value of the collection as a whole has not been properly recognised, still holds true.¹⁰

The Stonor papers have nonetheless often been mined to provide illustrations of many aspects of late-medieval social life, including social display, family and marriage. In addition, the letters written by Thomas Betson have provided the basis for a short study on medieval biography, while one of the two letters from Simon Stallworth underpinned a brief debate about the date of Lord Hastings's execution. More recently, some of the fifteenth-century Stonors' social connections, mainly with other gentry, have been considered as forming a structured network performing certain social functions.¹¹ While these studies have resulted in an increasing familiarity with the content of the Stonor collection, they may also have engendered a perception that the field has already been harvested and, perhaps, that little more can be gleaned from this particular source.

Whatever the reason, the Stonor collection of letters and papers has never been considered in its entirety. Piecemeal approaches to the papers have possibly masked insights that they may provide were they considered as a whole. When H. S. Bennett mined the Paston letters he extracted from them what they could tell about a range of social themes such as love, marriage, religion and the law. Bennett focused on the daily detail similar to the way that various authors have mined the Stonor papers for illustrative detail. In contrast Alison Hanham considers the mercantile Celys in the single context

10 *SL&P*, vol. 1, p. xxxvii; *KSLP*, p. 15.

11 C. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society 1401–1499*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 210, 284, 285, 289, 548; R. Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450–1700*, London, 1984, pp. 74, 76, 77, 179; P. M. Kendall, *The Yorkist Age*, London, 1962, pp. 212, 374–8, 402; K. Dockray, 'Why did fifteenth-century English gentry marry?' in M. Jones, ed., *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, Gloucester, 1986, pp. 68–70; E. Power, 'Thomas Betson: a Merchant of the Staple in the fifteenth century' in *Medieval People*, London, 1937, pp. 116–36; A. Hanham, 'Richard III, Lord Hastings and the historians', *EHR*, 87, 1972, pp. 233–48; B. P. Wolffe, 'When and why did Hastings lose his head?' *EHR*, 89, 1974, pp. 835–44; J. A. F. Thomson, 'Richard III and Lord Hastings: a problematical case reviewed', *BIHR*, 48, 1975, pp. 22–30; A. Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians*, Oxford, 1975, pp. 24–9; A. Hanham, 'Hastings redivivus', *EHR*, 90, 1975, pp. 821–7; B. P. Wolffe, 'Hastings reinterred', *EHR*, 91, 1976, pp. 813–24; C. Carpenter, 'The Stonor circle in the fifteenth century' in R. Archer & S. Walker, eds, *Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England*, London, 1995, pp. 175–200.

of the wool trade.¹² As the editor of the Lisle Letters has commented 'it is not possible to appreciate the full overall value of the (Lisle) collection unless the material it provides can be treated as an organic whole'.¹³ The Stonors and their documents, to demonstrate their full value, similarly need to be placed in one overall context, not in the many, as has been the case when they have been previously mined for illustrations. The unifying context in turn should originate from the source material, in that this material will both inform and impose limitations on the context chosen.

That the Stonor papers have been mined for illustrations applicable to a range of contexts is not, however, surprising. Kingsford says that they are the most considerable collection of private correspondence next to the Paston letters. Carpenter sees them as 'a major archive', giving 'almost unparalleled information' on various aspects of the lives of a gentry family. Both Kingsford and Carpenter describe the Stonor papers as wonderful source material. Both agree that they are very informative about the gentry's economic and agricultural activities, legal business, involvement in the wool trade, consumption, marriages and family and other relationships. Carpenter notes that the Stonor papers contain, as well as letters, many other types of documents. In this she echoes a point that Kingsford had also made, that the Stonor collection contains material of a more varied range than the Paston collection.¹⁴ As Colin Richmond has noted, documents of estate management for the Pastons are missing, presumed burnt. Those 'mundane materials', to use Carpenter's words, such as bills, accounts, receipts and expenses, have not survived for the Pastons in anything like substantial numbers.¹⁵

In the Stonor collection a range of themes is illuminated both through letters and through various other types of document. At the very least, opportunity is provided to study how the Stonors, described by Carpenter as typical members of the gentry, lived their lives within the family and how, from this base, they related to the outside world. As Charles Moreton has suggested, a family-based study allows seemingly unconnected themes to be linked by that family.¹⁶ Consequently, the appropriate context for putting the Stonor papers to use could simply be the family lives of the gentry. However, this approach would be more descriptive than analytical and would tend to ignore more recent developments in thinking about the gentry and their place in late-medieval society.

Studies of the social group called the gentry have formed an important component of the historiography of late-medieval England in the past thirty

12 Hanham, *Celys*, p. x, notes no orthodox biographical study is possible because of deficiencies in evidence. The nearly 500 documents in the collection comprise 242 letters and 232 accounts and memoranda (p. ix).

13 M. St. Clare Byrne, ed., *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols, Chicago, 1981, vol. 1, p. xxxiv.

14 *SL&P*, pp. xxxviii, xxxix; *KSLP*, pp. 10, 18, 21, 23, 25, 27.

15 Richmond, *Paston Family: First Phase*, p. 30; *KSLP*, p. 11, n. 41.

16 C. E. Moreton, *The Townshends and their World*, Oxford, 1992, p. 3.

years. Of great influence in this field has been the work of K. B. McFarlane, who emphasised that the nature of the English state could only be understood if the evolution of its governing class was studied. His own study of the nobility concentrated on the peerage, but he realised that the gentry formed an important part of the governing class. Their importance is revealed by their work as unpaid officials carrying out the king's government in the counties. McFarlane called for studies to be undertaken detailing the biographies of those men who had represented their counties in parliament.¹⁷

Subsequent historians have developed this broadly political orientation into a wider focus on many aspects of the gentry's lives, including their material and social surroundings. These studies range from some that focus on individual gentlemen through those focussing on gentry families to a broader approach that studies larger groups of associated gentry. Although some historians have carried out general surveys of the late-medieval gentry as a 'national' group, on balance the most popular focus of group studies has been to locate the gentry in a particular county.¹⁸

As the study of an individual gentleman, Colin Richmond's *John Hopton* attempts to reveal the 'real particularity' of one person's life without dwelling on the extent to which he may be typical. However, the lacunae in source material make medieval biography a notoriously difficult task, and Richmond acknowledges the difficulties with Hopton, referring to 'those awesome gaps in our evidence' about him and his life. It is this paucity of

17 K. B. McFarlane, lecture, 1940, cited in Introduction, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, Oxford, special edn, 1997, p. xx; see also J. P. Cooper, *Land, Men and Beliefs*, London, 1983, p. 248; Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, p. 47; N. Saul, *Knights and Esquires: the Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*, Oxford, 1981, p. 254; K. B. McFarlane, 'Parliament and "bastard feudalism"' in *England in the Fifteenth Century*, London, 1981, pp. 20–1.

18 C. Richmond, *John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman*, Cambridge, 1981 is the sole book-length treatment of an individual gentleman. Family studies include Moreton, *Townshends*; R. Virgoe, 'The earlier Knyvetts: the rise of a Norfolk gentry family', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 41, 1990, pp. 1–15; N. Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex 1180–1400*, Oxford, 1986. General studies include N. Denholm-Young, *The Country Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*, Oxford, 1969; C. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Later Middle Ages*, London, 1987; G. E. Mingay, *The Gentry*, London, 1976. County-based studies include S. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century*, Derbyshire Record Society, vol. VIII, Chesterfield, 1963; G. G. Astill, 'The medieval gentry: a study of Leicestershire society 1330–1399', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977; I. D. Rowney, 'The Staffordshire Political Community 1440–1500', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Keele, 1981; Saul, *Knights and Esquires*; M. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Cambridge, 1983; P. W. Fleming, 'The character and private concerns of the gentry of Kent, 1422–1509', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales, 1985; S. Payling, *Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire*, Oxford, 1991; E. Acheson, *A Gentry Community: Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century, c. 1422–1485*, Cambridge, 1992; Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*.

documentation that makes *John Hopton* a courageous but perhaps over-ambitious study. Richmond attempts to discuss Hopton's estates, how he obtained them, his family and his social circle but ultimately, and unfortunately, there are as many questions raised as answers given, as Richmond frequently acknowledges. Yet some quality of John Hopton's experience of life, its individuality rather than its stereotypicality, does filter through. While gaps in what can be said about the Stonors would no doubt emerge should greater attention be paid to them, their letters and papers certainly provide a wealth of material compared to that which is available for John Hopton.¹⁹

As with the biography of John Hopton, most studies of individual gentry families are similarly constrained by the lack of surviving sources. It is thus not surprising that Colin Richmond should have used the rich source of the Paston letters to write, first, about the family and its rise, second, of its struggle to retain the lands left to John Paston I in Sir John Fastolf's will, and third, about the family's subsequent fortunes.²⁰ Richmond focuses on the family members and their close associates, friends and enemies, subjecting the letters to extremely detailed attention, with lengthy quotations from the originals, because he wants 'to let the Pastons do the talking'. He is not concerned to provide the Pastons with any additional context, because context, he feels, has been adequately provided by the writings of others.²¹ Such an approach is less suitable for the Stonors, whose own surviving words are less prolific, and whose world is relatively unexplored. They should be placed firmly in the context of their world, as Charles Moreton aims to place the Townshends in their world.

Charles Moreton's study of the Townshends uses the superb and extraordinarily rich family archive to look at their rise, by means of the legal profession, from yeoman to gentry status in the later part of the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth.²² He consciously avoids an approach based on the administrative context of the county, because only a third of gentry were involved in local government. However, he does discuss the Townshends and their county, Norfolk, where magnate influence was strong. Moreton concludes that the Townshends' everyday horizons were limited to the social and geographical locality close to their *caput*, but that they chose to limit themselves in this way. Their kin, friends and trustees were from the

19 Richmond, *John Hopton*, pp. viii–ix, xvii, 30, 32–4, 94, 99, 158, 159, 223, 241.

20 Richmond, *Paston Family: First Phase*; Richmond, *Paston Family: Fastolf's Will*; Richmond, *Paston Family: Endings*.

21 Richmond, *Paston Family: First Phase*, pp. x, xi. Richmond in particular refers to the agricultural context provided by R. H. Britnall, 'The Pastons and their Norfolk', *AgHR*, 36, 1988, pp. 132–44.

22 Moreton, *Townshends*, pp. xiv, 4, 18, (as well as estate papers and accounts, the archive contains two personal memoranda books kept by Roger I and Roger II. Roger I's notebook contains diary-like entries); M. Hicks, 'Review of *The Townshends and their World*', *EHR*, 110, 1995, p. 990.

locality, as were most of the people to whom they sold sheep and other produce. The family papers that Moreton was able to use tend to reflect the Townshends' contacts in the locality more than their contact with the wider world, perhaps over-emphasising the former, while the boundaries of the locality are, perhaps, drawn more widely than the term implies.²³ Moreton also notes that Roger Townshend I and his son, Roger II, were important in the county's administration and played some part in national affairs.²⁴ Similarly, with regard to the Stonors, there is need to take account of their immediate locality but not restrict them to this, should their world appear to extend beyond it.

The popularity of the county as a unit of study for the gentry is partly because of the dearth of sources for most individuals and families. There is also the practical convenience of searching government records, which are organized at the level of the county, for details of individuals and families. The orientation of the early modern historians has also had a part to play in focusing the attention of medieval historians. The early modern historians found the idea of county-based gentry forming and leading a county community a useful focal point to elucidate the breakdown of relations between Crown and parliament in the seventeenth century.²⁵ As well as being a political and administrative unit the county was seen as the focus of gentry sentiment and identity.

Thus when late-medieval historians began to consider the locality rather than the centre, a search for the origins of gentry identity was already on the historiographical agenda. Moving from a consideration of 'national' political matters required more emphasis to be placed on those lesser men who, in working to make government operate at the local level, formed such a vital element of the medieval body politic. From the point of view of the late-medieval king and his officials, the shire or county was a major unit through which the localities were governed. Gentry, or their historical forebears, have since been sought in these localities, not only for the late-medieval period but also as far back as the thirteenth century.²⁶

23 Moreton, *Townshends*, pp. 3, 51, 81, 196, 49, 190; pp. 197–201 contains a listing of the Townshend trustees which shows that they came from all parts of Norfolk, and from Suffolk.

24 C. Moreton, 'A social gulf? The upper and lesser gentry of later medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History*, 17, 1991, p. 257; Moreton, *Townshends*, p. 192. Roger I was an assize judge on the northern circuit, attended the peers in parliament six times and sat on many Norfolk commissions, *ibid.*, pp. 11, 13. Roger II was a royal councillor and crown servant, a JP and sheriff of Norfolk, *ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

25 C. Carpenter, 'Gentry and community in medieval England', *JBS*, 33, 1994, pp. 342, 341; R. Virgoe, 'Aspects of the county community in the fifteenth century' in M. Hicks, ed., *Profit, Piety and the Professions in Later Medieval England*, Gloucester, 1990, p. 1.

26 A. Gross, 'Regionalism and revision', in P. Fleming, A. Gross & J. R. Lander, eds, *Regionalism and Revision: The Crown and Its Provinces in England 1200–1650*, London, 1998, p. 2; C. Carpenter, 'Fifteenth-century biographies', *The Historical Journal*,

Also placed on the agenda by the early modernists was a sense that the county was 'a community', although this conclusion tended to be based on an analysis of social relationships and roles in county administration restricted to the gentry.²⁷ It has been argued, however, that during the medieval period the shire community could include others as well as its resident gentry. Many social ranks were involved in the business of governing, which not only required personnel for offices such as sheriffs and commissioners but also required bailiffs of the hundred and jurymen.²⁸ Equally, gentry could have lands in a number of shires, which could either prevent the formation of county identity or allow identification with more than one county. However the temptation for late-medieval historians to adopt the phrase 'gentry county community' has not always been resisted. Consequently, the county is treated as if it were a natural and communal unit for the gentry even though they may experience it more as an administrative unit of medieval government. There is danger of the existence of such communities becoming an accepted generalisation although their ubiquity is not unquestioned.²⁹

Studies of the late-medieval gentry in the county have focused on land and office-holding as key factors bestowing and confirming gentry status, and on the way relationships were forged among gentry through marriages, land transactions and co-operative allocation of offices. The Stonors then could be studied by focusing on them in the context of the county where the manor of Stonor lay, through land ownership, office bearing and thus power distribution. However, the Stonors also held lands in a number of other counties.

In introducing her re-issue of *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers*, Carpenter expresses her surprise that the Stonors themselves have received

25, 1982, p. 730; P. Coss, *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: A Study in English Society c. 1180–1280*, Cambridge, 1991. He describes his study as an inquiry into the pre-history of the gentry, p. 2.

27 Gross, 'Regionalism and revision', p. 2; C. Holmes, 'The county community in Stuart historiography', *JBS*, 19, 1979–80, p. 72.

28 Maitland viewed the county as a *communitas* or an organized body of men based on the county court, F. Pollock & F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law*, 2 vols, Cambridge, 1968, vol. 1, p. 534, while H. Cam, 'The community of the shire and the payment of its representatives in Parliament' in *Liberties and Communities*, Cambridge, 1944, p. 236 asks if varying classes or grades made up the community of the shire. A statute of 1429 required county court electors to hold land worth at least 40s *per annum*, *S of R*, vol. 2, p. 243; G. L. Harriss, 'Political society and the growth of government in late medieval England', *P&P*, 138, 1993, p. 33.

29 Doubters are Wright, *Derbyshire*, p.146 who believes a sense of county community had yet to develop and that the bonds of gentry society were primarily local and Saul, *Scenes*, p. 60 who suggests Sussex was more a county of communities. See also J. Freeman, 'Middlesex in the fifteenth century: community or communities?' in M. Hicks, ed., *Revolution and Consumption in Late Medieval England*, Woodbridge, 2001, pp. 89–104.

no overall historical attention, especially in the light of the surge of interest in the gentry as a group in the last thirty or forty years. She has, furthermore, questioned some of the approaches adopted in a number of the studies of gentry undertaken in these years. For example, she has judged parts of Richmond's biography of John Hopton to suffer from a lack of facts caused by the meagre sources, and so to contain passages replete with speculation, though the chapter placing John Hopton in his society is better received. She also criticises Richmond's approach to the Pastons. He does not detail the social and political context of fifteenth-century East Anglia, and lacks sufficient focus on the world in which the Pastons lived, she complains. Moreton's study of the Townshends, while praised for crossing historical periods and correcting the excesses of the county focus, attracts criticism as well, for being too localist.³⁰

Carpenter also expresses surprise that there has been no systematic study of the region from which the Stonors come.³¹ The use of the word 'region' rather than 'county' is deliberate, for Carpenter's own work on Warwickshire has led her to reject the use of the county as the best framework within which to investigate gentry political and social relationships, which were both with other gentry and with nobles. A more regional approach may be needed to capture these relationships, in part because there was rarely a perfect correspondence between a noble's lands and county borders. The elite gentry, often, but not always, those who were knighted, could hold manors in more than one county, and therefore might be involved in relationships encompassing a wider world. Alternatively, the narrower world of the *pays*, the local economic and geographical region, may have been sufficient for the relationships of the lesser gentry.³²

If the county is problematic, Carpenter's work has also led her to recommend jettisoning any use of the term 'community' to elucidate the lives of the medieval gentry. Not only is noble power unlikely to cover a whole or only one county, but also the wielding of noble power does not mesh with the a-political nature that Carpenter attributes to the notion of 'community'. As she says, the term 'community' has been used imprecisely and is riddled with theoretical confusion.³³ In her study of the Warwickshire gentry, Carpenter's method is to look at gentry identities through their choice

30 Carpenter, 'Fifteenth-century biographies', p. 730; C. Carpenter, 'Review of *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase*', *EHR*, 107, 1992, p. 129; C. Carpenter, 'Review of *The Townshends and their World*', *History*, 79, 1994, pp. 322–3.

31 *KSLP*, p. 18; also Carpenter, 'Stonor circle', p. 176. Indeed, this is true of the East Anglia of the Pastons, the Yorkshire of the Plumpton, as well as the Thames Valley of the Stonors. See also her comment in 'Review of *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase*', p. 128.

32 Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, pp. 27, 33, 290, 318; Carpenter, 'Gentry and community', pp. 350, 356, 354.

33 Carpenter, 'Gentry and community', pp. 356–7, 342.

of associations, which could be geographic, tenurial or based on a magnate's affinity. She singles out land, lineage and lordship as three key elements in the gentry's lives. In a later paper she suggests that it is the mental worlds of gentry groups that ideally should be the focus of attention, acknowledging in the process that such a prescription is fraught with even more vagueness and difficulty than the previous search for gentry communities.³⁴

Carpenter seems to define 'mental worlds' as the identities bestowed by gentry connections. Presented with vague terms such as 'community' and 'mental worlds', a way through the quagmires of uncertainty and difficulty, Carpenter says, is to concentrate on the gentry's networks. The focus of the historian's attention, she suggests, should be the connections made with significant others, particularly those who figure in the legal transactions associated with marriage, land and other property.³⁵ Carpenter has, indeed, made such a preliminary analysis, mainly of the Stonors' gentry connections in the fifteenth century, looking at these as a structured network performing certain functions.³⁶ The network's members had, or she assumes them to have had, shared values. Beyond Carpenter's focus on the gentry, however, the papers reveal other 'networks' or connections enduring over a period of time with people who were not necessarily country gentry, such as tenants, lawyers, clerics and merchants of the Staple.

For these networks to function, however, their members also had to hold some things in common, such as ideas, aims and attitudes. Perhaps, then, those aspects of mental worlds called 'mentalities' should be the centre of focus, those particular modes of thought or casts of mind.³⁷ Mentalities have also been defined as the totality of those implicit assumptions that are imposed on us by our environment and which rule our judgements; 'environment', one presumes, including the social environment.³⁸ How did the Stonors relate to these different types of people in their world? Did they have ideas about a range of relationships and, if so, from what sources did these ideas come?

Recent work on politics has suggested that the common currency of ideas behind political actions are equally as important to understanding as the

34 Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, pp. 10, 287; Carpenter, 'Gentry and community', p. 367.

35 Carpenter, 'Gentry and community', pp. 367–8 describes these connections as relationships requiring strong levels of mutual trust. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity* p. 282, n. 2, designates relationships of kinship, marriage, local office and political allegiance.

36 Carpenter, 'Stonor circle'. She acknowledges neglect of the London mercantile connection, p. 194.

37 The definition is from M. Mauss quoted in A. Kuper, *Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1999, p. 27.

38 S. Reynolds, 'Social mentalities: a case of medieval scepticism', *TRHS*, 6th series, 1, 1991, p. 21, quoting Jean Guitton. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, p. 3 equates mentalities with beliefs. Robert Mandrou defines them as 'visions of the world' (cited in M. Vovelle, *Ideologies and Mentalities*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 5).

actions themselves, and can be identified by judicious use of sources, in particular literary and propaganda materials. As well as being acquired through circulation in social networks, including the family, the ideas and values that lie behind mentalities would have been acquired through those 'mass' media operating in the late-medieval era, media such as sermons and songs, or the most widely-circulated, popular literature.³⁹ This is not to forget that there are major difficulties in accessing popular culture before the early modern period. But certain of the *topoi* (commonplace situations and standardised phrases) broadcast in medieval media would have been widespread and could give us an insight into the world as the Stonors saw it.⁴⁰

The context for the Stonors, then, should be their familial and regional worlds, but should include the mental and communicative aspects of these worlds, by focusing on the parameters of their cultural capital communicated to them and by them through their social and mental contacts. Cultural capital can refer to the words, ideas and symbols circulating through a network.⁴¹ The words, ideas and symbols that the Stonors knew and used reached them through family, social networks and 'mass' communication. A consideration of the Stonors with an emphasis on communication, using the letters and papers and other sources, could show how, and out of what material, part of the gentry's mental worlds, their mentalities, were constructed, and what aspects of the collective consciousness, or culture, they did access or had access to, and through what channels.

When introducing his edition of *The Stonor Letters and Papers*, Kingsford portrays the family members in a series of short individual biographies. A family history written in the 1950s adds few reliable new facts.⁴² The

39 J. Watts, 'Ideas, principles and politics' in A. J. Pollard, ed., *The Wars of the Roses*, London, 1995, pp. 112, 119. See also his *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, Cambridge, 1996, esp. Introduction; C. Morris, 'Propaganda for war: the dissemination of the crusading ideal in the twelfth century', *Studies in Church History*, 20, 1983, pp. 84, 92. Morris also notes the spread of the crusade through rumour and the use of the symbol of the cross as a badge, pp. 82, 83. C. Morris, *Medieval Media: Mass Communication in the Making of Europe*, Southampton, 1972; D. L. D'Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars*, Oxford, 1985, p. 4. G. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, Cambridge, 1926, p. 42 notes the similarity of the modern popular press and the medieval pulpit. H. J. Hewitt, *The Organization of War under Edward III*, Manchester, 1966, p. 162 notes government's use of sermons to inform the populace about the war and popularize its prosecution.

40 P. Burke, 'Oblique approaches to the history of popular culture', in C. W. E. Bigsby, ed., *Approaches to Popular Culture*, London, 1976, pp. 69, 71; Morris, 'Propaganda for war', p. 98; F. Graus, 'Social Utopias in the middle ages', *P&P*, 38, 1967 suggests using medieval literature to identify 'collective concepts', those views and prejudices of the past that were generally widespread.

41 R. Collins, *Theoretical Sociology*, New York, 1988, p. 424.

42 R. J. Stonor, *Stonor: A Catholic Sanctuary in the Chilterns from the Fifth Century till Today*, Newport, 1951.

problems with medieval biography have already been noted.⁴³ However, the origins and rise of the gentry family formed part of its members' world at some level, reinforced by the emphasis placed on the value of lineage among the gentry. Therefore the origins of the Stonors and the overlapping of the generations (or its absence) on both patrilineal and matrilineal sides provide an opportunity to consider family continuity.⁴⁴ Such consideration could also throw light on social and geographical mobility in gentry families. Gentry, it is said, were emulating the peerage in valuing a patriarchal lineage, but differed from them in often having less tradition to refer to by way of long-held manors or family papers and documentation.⁴⁵ In the Stonor lineage, too, reinforcement of the patriarchal connection between fathers and sons through the overlapping of lives happened only rarely, but mothers tended to live longer.

The head of the family was both head of the lineage and in a position of stewardship over the lands of the family.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, although the Stonor family was sometimes without a head, the family's landed estate, that second element so vital to the gentry's lives, appears to have survived the broken generational links. Such survival possibly combined elements of luck and geography but factors such as the support of wider kin and other connections bridging the gap in the patriarchal ideal had a part to play. Carpenter's preliminary expedition into the forging and working of the Stonors' networks therefore deserves to be extended in this context. Moreover, the range of people to whom the Stonors were connected seems worth exploring further to consider how far they extended the Stonor world, spatially and mentally, as a way of developing Carpenter's suggestion about gentry identity and mental worlds.

When considering the Stonor circle, Carpenter concentrates less on the vertical than on the horizontal ties, and on the connections the Stonors had with other gentry in the area, rather than, for example, their merchant connections. With regard to vertical ties, lordship, that third element of concern to the gentry, is therefore still largely unexplored.⁴⁷ The Stonors were both subordinate and superior, depending on the context, for lordship

43 G. L. Harriss, *Cardinal Beaufort: A Study of Lancastrian Ascendancy and Decline*, Oxford, 1988, p. v says that biography 'may seem a folly and a fraud for the medieval period' and reminds us that Bruce McFarlane felt that the historian cannot honestly write biographical history; his province is rather the growth of social organizations, of civilization, of ideas.

44 J. Rosenthal, 'When did you last see your grandfather?', in R. Archer, ed., *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century*, Stroud, 1995, p. 227, writes of the idea of a living chain as the fruit of successful procreation that encompassed three generations, a state that the Stonor family rarely reached. See also J. Rosenthal, *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege in Fifteenth-Century England*, Philadelphia, 1991.

45 Virgoe, 'The earlier Knyvetts', p. 1; Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, pp. 254–6.

46 Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, p. 245.

47 Carpenter, 'Stonor circle', pp. 194–5, 195–8.

operates both upwards and downwards. Those to whom the Stonors looked for lordship widened the Stonors' horizons beyond the locality and shire. But those who looked to the Stonors for lordship may not have come only from the locality or shire. Further, indications of similar or different values or mentalities might be detectable among those in different social spheres and grades in the correspondence or identified in other related source material.

Indeed, can the letters and papers assist in any way towards elucidating the cultural capital that may lie behind the concept of typical gentry, which is what Carpenter believes the Stonors to be? Was there in any way a national gentry culture and, if so, of what did it consist and how was it accessed? Certain of the Stonor papers, such as household accounts, can illuminate some aspects of the Stonors' material culture, their consumption and lifestyle, the meals they ate, their dress and other objects that they consumed. How does this consumption compare with that of the other gentry we know about or differ from the consumption by other groups that the Stonors knew?

The letters in the Stonor collection can throw light on this cultural capital, too, by indicating words used and ideas held about relations with other people. Are these words and ideas reflected in or refracted through the proto-mass media of religious material or popular literature?⁴⁸ Kingsford's emphasis on the growing literacy at the time suggests asking about the role that literacy may have played in the spread and development of gentry culture. Many historians have noted how a growth in literacy, aided by the increasing use of the vernacular, is a defining feature of the fifteenth century. Caxton's translations and publications in the vernacular, it is claimed, were aimed at an already existing market. Some point, as well, to an increase in the use of vernacular propaganda as a government tool, even before the widespread use of printing, while seditious literature was increasingly considered a threat because of its greater potential for dissemination.⁴⁹

48 N. Davis, *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, p. 210, n. 3, detects the influence of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* in one of John III's letters. G. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 2nd revised edition, Oxford, 1961 sees a traditional homelitic view in the work of Gower, p. 231, pulpit caricature and social types in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, p. 229–30, and echoes of orthodox preaching in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, pp. 548–9.

49 *SL&P*, vol. 1, p. xlvi; M. Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages 1348–1500*, London, 1990, pp. 224–5; L. C. Gabel, *Benefit of Clergy in England in the Later Middle Ages*, New York, 1969; H. S. Bennett, 'The production and dissemination of vernacular manuscripts in the fifteenth century', *The Library*, 5th series, 1, 1947, pp. 168–9; L. Hellings & J. B. Trapp, 'Literacy, books and readers' in L. Hellings & J. B. Trapp, eds, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, Cambridge, 1999, p. 31; A. S. G. Edwards & C. M. Meale, 'The marketing of printed books in late medieval England', *The Library*, 6th series, 15, 1993, p. 95; C. Ross, 'Rumour, propaganda and popular opinion during the wars of the roses', in R. Griffiths, ed., *Patronage, the Crown and the Provinces*, Gloucester, 1981, p. 15.

Communication through vernacular literacy should therefore be emphasised in the context for considering the Stonor papers as an entity. The existence of the letters and papers themselves suggests that the issue of gentry literacy also needs to be considered. The contribution of literacy to the formation of particular types of mentalities is also worth noting.⁵⁰

In his review of Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages*, Kingsford agrees with Huizinga that we cannot understand the later-middle ages without also understanding the mental attitudes and forms of thought which created the ideals and governed the actions of people at the time. Colin Richmond makes a similar point in his second volume on the Pastons when he says 'it is norms, attitudes, ideals which matter'.⁵¹ Although Kingsford believed that the high art and literature available for Huizinga to use for the continent was lacking for late-medieval England, he pointed out that there existed alternative sources such as private letters. We should allow the Stonor documents, therefore, to help us attempt this understanding of the mentalities and ideals of the late-medieval period. The first task, however, is to become better acquainted with some of the men and women of the time, those various generations of Stonors who lived in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

50 C. L. Kingsford, 'English letters and the intellectual ferment', in *Prejudice and Promise in Fifteenth Century England*, London, 1962, pp. 34–5; J. Goody & I. Watt, 'The consequences of literacy', in J. Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge, 1968.

51 C. L. Kingsford, 'Review of J. Huizinga *The Waning of the Middle Ages*', *EHR*, 40, 1925, pp. 273–5; Richmond, *Paston Family: Fastolf's Will*, p. 81, n. 98.