

THE GENTRY OF HUNTINGDONSHIRE

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The Herald's Visitations

Studies of migrant populations in England before the nineteenth century are rare and generally limited in scope. Until the institution of the national census, appropriate data for research into migration and persistence must be looked for among such manuscript sources as settlement records, apprenticeship registers, ecclesiastical deposition books and occasional local listings. These sources have survived only in small quantities, in particular places and for random samples of population classes.

In the herald's visitation returns of English counties between 1530 and 1688, preserved at the College of Arms, we have a considerable body of source material on the English gentry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which has hardly been explored in such a context. By their nature the visitations provide us with a useful method of assessing the number of the gentry class at this period. Better still, they give us information from which we can learn their places of origin and calculate, with a fair degree of precision, the date of migration into, or their persistence within, the county of current settlement.

In 1530, Henry VIII gave Thomas Benold, Clarenceux King of Arms, a commission to travel the counties within his heraldic jurisdiction (south of the river Trent) 'to visit the arms and cognizances of gentry and to reform the same if it were necessary'. Such authority had been given before, but had not been used with the systematic energy and expertise which generally characterized the herald's visitations over the next 150 years. The Kings of Arms' commissions were renewed by every succeeding monarch up to and including James II, after which they lapsed and have never since been re-issued. Between 1530 and 1688 nearly every English county was visited once, most of them three times and some four or five times.

At first the inspecting herald called on each gentleman in his own house; later the High Sheriff of the county was requested to prepare a list of the gentry, hundred by hundred, and to require them to wait upon the herald, usually in the chief inn of the district on a certain day, and to bring such documents or provide such information as would satisfy the officer that he was entitled to the status to which he pretended. Those who failed in this were required to 'disclaim', that is to say, they were forbidden to make use of the title and privileges of their rank, either for ever or until they had corrected their

situation and the county authorities were informed accordingly. These methods appear to have been extraordinarily effective, at least for the first century or so of their application.

A leading heraldic scholar has written: 'Visitations ... are not always comprehensive. While heralds endeavoured to include all the gentry of a county, arriving themselves beforehand with lists obtained locally and, on occasion, pursuing those who ignored their summons ... almost every visitation has what appear ... to be glaring omissions. This is particularly marked in the later visitations'.¹ These omissions, however, can often be rectified, and by checking other contemporary sources and matching subsequent visitations every attempt has been made to do so in this study. The same writer goes on to say: 'It is somewhat remarkable that in an age when the officers of arms were prepared to provide their private clients with pedigrees of inordinate length and incredible splendour, they should have displayed such rectitude when engaged in their official duties on behalf of the Crown'. As far as visitations were concerned, Sir Edward Coke was justified when he wrote that the heralds' 'learning and faithful dealing in descents and pedigrees upon just proof may be a mean to quiet many controversies ...'.² When all due allowance has been made for human frailty, visitation pedigrees fully justify Sir Anthony Wagner's description of them as 'a unique and immensely valuable corpus of genealogical record'.³

Correcting the abuse of arms by persons not entitled to them - those who were not 'gentlemen' - was only a part of the heralds' brief. They were concerned just as much, if not more, with finding those who were entitled to them but were not using them, and supplying the deficiency. This was, after all, how they obtained the greater part of their fees. Before they could confirm a gentleman's status they had to be able to recognize it, and it would seem that in the seventeenth century it was sometimes just as difficult to do so as it is today, since then, as now, it hung upon the definition of the word 'gentleman'.

There were, of course, certain indisputable qualifications, such as the sovereign's commission, a call to the Bar or a university degree, but for those who lived simply in the country or achieved prosperity in the town, the detection of gentility called for an objective judgment. The acquisition of personal merit or proof of distinguished ancestry might help, but the overriding attribute was the ability to live in the manner of a gentleman and be so reputed.⁴ It must also be remembered that most families changed their status over a period of time, either rising or falling in the social scale. Often, where the head of a large family was a landowning gentleman, other members would be in professions or trade, while some would claim no more than yeoman or even husbandman status, so that if the senior lines expired, the family no longer appeared in the visitation returns.

Each gentleman interviewed gave the herald information which enabled him to make a rough drawing of his armorial bearings in his work-book and accompany it with a pedigree, usually of some three or four generations. The place of residence is nearly always stated in each generation, and by using a time-scale of twenty-five to thirty years per generation approximate dates of

movement can be calculated.

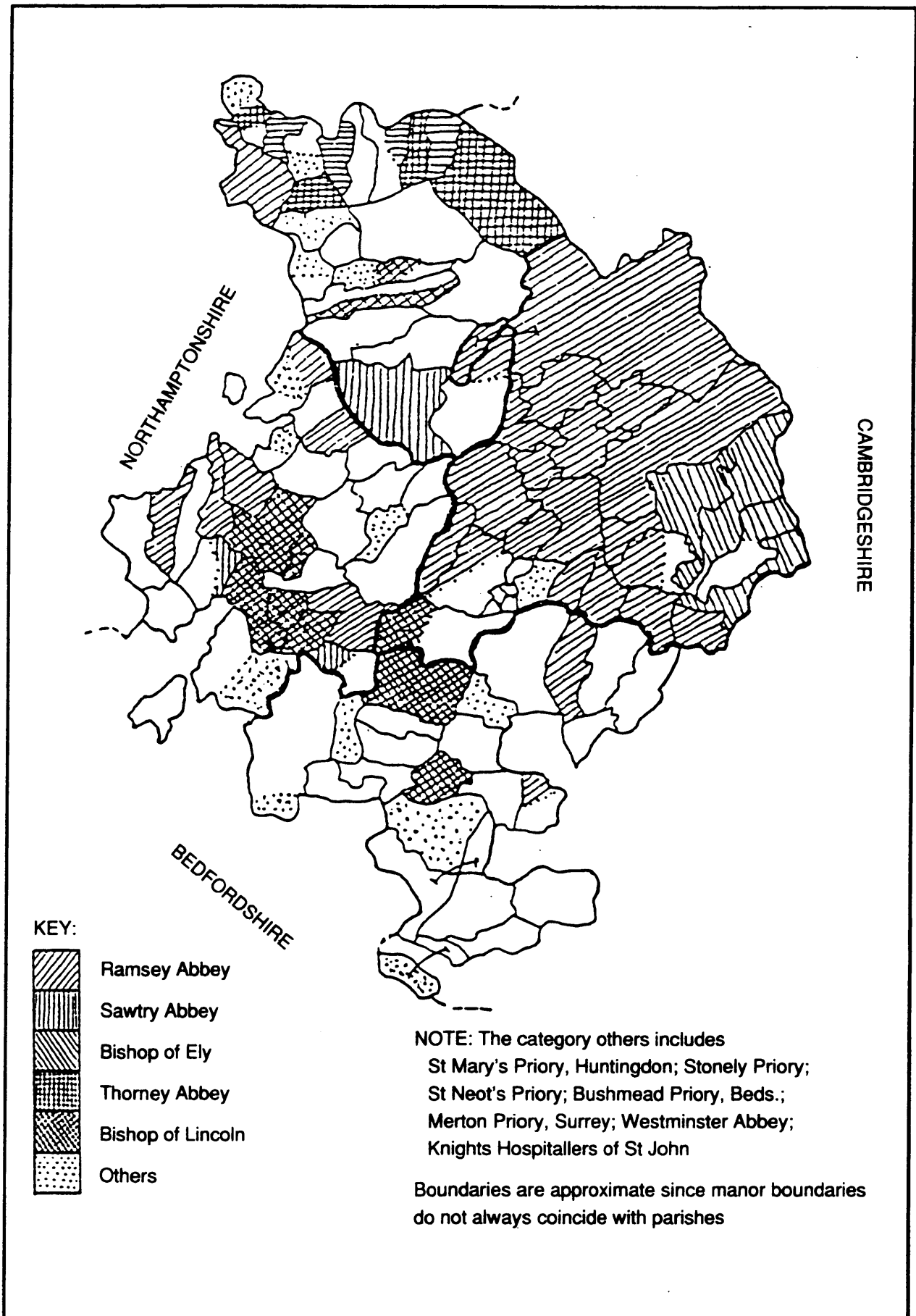
Previous studies of pre-industrial migration have invariably been limited to small cohorts of a particular class in one place (e.g. apprentices in East Anglia⁵ and the poor in Birmingham)⁶ or are the fortuitous results of rare and unusual listings, such as surviving ecclesiastical deposition books⁷ and exceptionally informative parish registers.⁸ From the pedigrees in the Visitation Books we can gain information as to the origins of each gentleman in almost any county and his place of settlement there. Where the pedigree includes three, four or more generations we can discover the stages of internal migration of the head of the family and of the junior branches. Although few dates are given, we can arrive at an approximation by using the generation scale mentioned above, taking into account seniority within the family. Moreover, since most counties were subjected to at least two visitations within the period 1530-1688, in many cases turnover and persistence rates can be calculated. The continuous nature of the pedigrees and the ability to analyse from a single volume the gentry population of a whole county are advantages which compensate for the long intervals between visitations.

Gentry settlement in Huntingdonshire

While research into the mobility and persistence of the gentry could be carried out using the visitation returns for almost any English county, Huntingdonshire has been chosen firstly, because it is one of the smallest of the (historic) counties, and can therefore be adequately surveyed within the compass of a short exercise. Secondly, it received three visitations⁹ from the Kings of Arms - in 1564, 1613 and 1684, thus providing two intervals of forty-nine and seventy-one years respectively. There are likely to be fewer 'lost' families than if the intervals had been longer. Lastly we have reason to believe that, at least in the first half of the visitation period (1530-1688), Huntingdonshire was exceptional among English counties in having an unusually low persistence rate. In an early study of the English counties and their gentry populations, the Reverend Thomas Fuller wrote: 'this seemeth a probable cause why many new families (... more in proportion than elsewhere ...) are seated therein, because Huntingdonshire being generally Abbey land, after the dissolution many new purchasers planted themselves therein'.¹⁰

The *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, compiled by Thomas Cromwell's commissioners, is the primary source for the value and extent of lands in the possession of the Church a few years before the Dissolution of the Monasteries. It would show that the greater part of Huntingdonshire had been 'Abbey land' until 1539, when it was taken into the hands of the Crown and gradually made available for sale or by gift to lay gentry from other parts of the country as well as those within Huntingdonshire itself. It is, however, a monumental work, and for this study a secondary source. The volumes on Hunts. in the *Victoria County History*, have been used to compile figure 1, which illustrates the extent of ecclesiastical property in Huntingdonshire in 1539. The *Victoria County History* includes a breakdown, parish by parish, of the occupation and descent of every manor in the county so far as this could be ascertained. Notwithstanding the

Figure 1 Ecclesiastical property in Huntingdonshire, 1539



confused and involved nature of manorial tenures, they can also confirm, in many cases, the approximate time spent by gentry families in those parts of the country in which they moved.

In order to test the truth of Fuller's statement, we shall compare the persistence rate in the period 1564-1613 with that of 1613-1684, to discover whether there is any substance in the explanation he gave for the short tenures of Huntingdonshire gentry in the period before he wrote; namely that the majority of them had taken advantage of the seizure and sale of ecclesiastical property in and after 1539 by purchasing and settling in former Church lands. That such land formed the greater part of the county is demonstrated by figure 1.¹¹ Consequently, if Fuller was correct, the further away in time we go from 1539 the more settled the Huntingdonshire families ought to be. Let this then be the hypothesis upon which we shall proceed: the persistence rate of the Huntingdonshire gentry in the period 1613-1684 is significantly higher than that of 1564-1613.

The hypothesis is tested in two ways: firstly, by mapping each occurrence of a gentry family for each visitation year; secondly, by arranging the observations extracted from the data to compare the length of time each family was settled in Huntingdonshire at each visitation.

The gentry of Huntingdonshire were fortunate in their Visitations; all three of them were conducted by experienced and reputable officers. Nevertheless, our study of the Hunts. returns has shown that in each case a number of gentle families slipped through the net. The results of the 1684 Visitation were by far the least satisfactory. Many of the 'wrong' people were summoned and some of the 'right' people failed or refused, to appear. No such difficulty seems to have been encountered on the previous occasions, even in 1564 when the Tudor influx of 'new men', accelerated by the booming market in old monastery land, was at its height.

Before commencing the study of the office books a number of sheets were prepared to receive the extracted observations from each Visitation, divided into columns with the following headings:

- i Name of family
- ii Place of origin
- iii First place and date of settlement in Huntingdonshire
- iv Senior branch: place and date of internal migration
- v Junior branch: place and date of internal migration

The 1564 Visitation

The narrative pedigrees made this visitation more difficult to analyse than the two later books, partly because they had not in every case been correctly set down. No dates at all are given, even for the first arrival in the county, so it was necessary to estimate the age of the current head of the family and work backwards using a generation scale adjusted to the number of children in each generation (an approximation made even wider by the knowledge that not all

members of the family are included in the pedigree, in particular the non-surviving children).

Nevertheless, it was apparent that a number of families had entered Huntingdonshire within a year or two of the Dissolution and a few had been there a considerable time before. The number of gentry families in the survey - only nineteen in all - was suspiciously small. Examination of the next visitation (1613) revealed that several families, for whatever reason, had been omitted in 1564. As a result, a further eight names were added to the nineteen families included by Hervy.

One important omission was the Wingfield family of Kimbolton, the most eminent in the county. It is likely that Sir Edward Wingfield, one of the Queen's Generals, was away on royal service and so could not be interviewed. At least two other omissions, and probably more, were of men who received grants of arms after 1564; perhaps they were reckoned as yeomen at the time, but they were certainly present.

There are no explanations or amplifying remarks in the text, and the documents used in the preparation for this visitation and the subsequent fieldwork have not survived. There appear to have been no 'disclaimers' and all the pedigrees save one were accompanied by coats of arms.¹²

The 1613 Visitation

There were few problems with this extremely well-conducted survey. The tabular pedigrees are a great improvement on those of 1564. Few intermediate dates are given in the pedigrees, but almost invariably the age of the heir to the head of the family is stated, which made it easier to calculate length of settlement using generation intervals. Many of the pedigrees have explanatory notes and some of the preparatory documentation, correspondence and fieldwork are bound up with the Visitation returns.

The old county of Huntingdonshire comprised ninety-eight county parishes grouped into four hundreds, together with the four parishes of the borough of Huntingdon. In 1613 Charles listed sixty families of gentry living in forty-eight parishes. More than half the parishes contained no gentry at all; most of the others held one or two families, while four parishes, including the town of Godmanchester, held three. Only one gentleman was found in Huntingdon itself. Of the heads of these families, two were peers,¹³ two baronets¹⁴ and three knights; the rest were esquires or gentlemen. Of these, ten either had no arms or could make insufficient proof of those they claimed; in all but one of these cases, Lancaster was apparently prepared to make good this deficiency, subject to his principal's approval. Robert Castle of Glatton who had twice failed to respond to his summons, first to appear before Lancaster at Stilton, then to keep a second appointment at Huntingdon, was made to 'disclaim'.

A count of the gentry population in Huntingdonshire in 1613 showed that some forty of the families had sprung from other places within the past fifty years,

many from the neighbouring counties of Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire but a number from as far away as Lancashire, Yorkshire and Dorset. Several had their origins in Wales, including Sir Oliver Cromwell, alias Williams, the owner of Hinchbrooke and uncle of the man who was to become Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. Ten owed their position in the county to the business or legal acumen of their fathers or grandfathers in London. A good deal of the internal 'step' migration was due to the purchase or inheritance of properties in other parishes by younger sons.

The sixty families on Charles' return have been made up, in this study, to sixty-one. Mason of St Ives was accorded gentle status in the 1684 Visitation and the family was certainly living there in 1613, but were probably yeomen. A Mason was included among the common soldiery at the 'Armada' muster of 1588.¹⁵

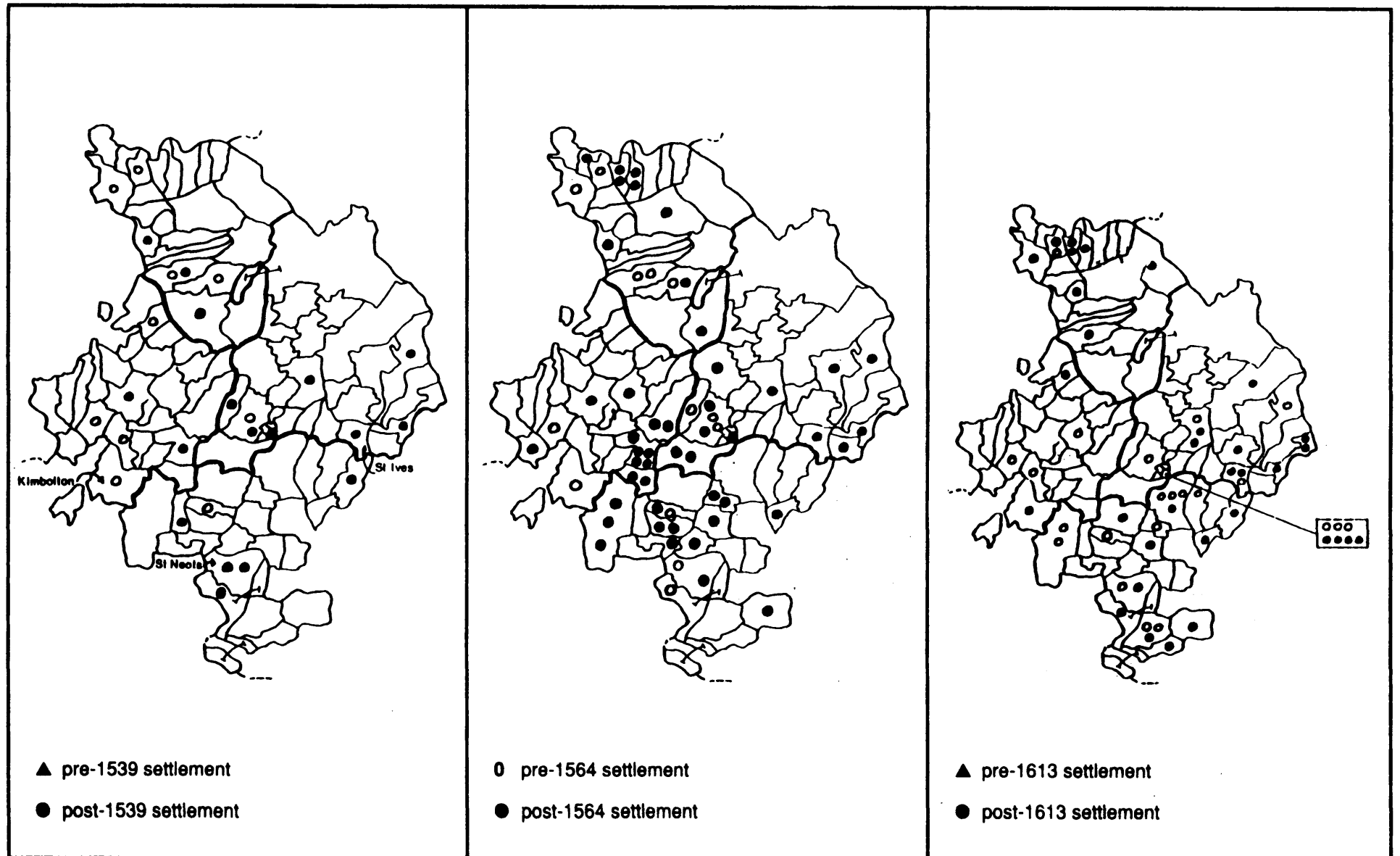
The 1684 Visitation

This visitation seems to have been less successful than the earlier ones and may partly explain why visitations ceased altogether within a few years. All the ancillary papers are bound up in a separate volume, from the announcement of the visitation in the 'London Gazette' to the lists of those interviewed, with Clarenceux's observations on them. The hundred-bailiffs had supplied Clarenceux with very full lists of those persons presumed to be gentlemen, culled from the Hearth Tax Returns. A numeral representing 'chimneys' was entered against their names; all those living in houses with five chimneys or more seem to have been summoned. Many of them did not answer the summons, perhaps because they did not consider themselves eligible or because they did not want the trouble of making the journey. They may have saved themselves an indignity, since of those who did present themselves no less than thirty-five were obliged to disclaim. Against some of the names Sir Henry's clerk has entered such remarks as 'an innkeeper', 'a baker', 'very small estate', 'he disowns his family and says he has no use for armes', and 'say'd peremptorily he wd. not come'.

Of the fifty-three who were accepted as gentlemen and whose pedigrees were recorded, twenty-two either had no arms or could produce no satisfactory proof of entitlement to those they were using.

To this total has been added the names of two more Huntingdonshire families whose claim to arms was undoubted. The Montagu family, whose two branches headed by the Earls of Manchester and Sandwich were seated at Kimbolton Castle and Hinchbrooke House respectively, were not, as peers, required to present themselves before Clarenceux King of Arms. The Bedell family had been represented in both previous visitations; the senior male line became extinct in 1643, but a junior branch was still seated at Catworth. William Bedell was summoned but did not appear; against his name is a note: 'Mr Bedell of Catworth went to Bedford, if he could not return in time he sayd he would come to London before Mich'as terme'.

Figure 2 The location of heads of families, 1564, 1613 and 1684



Locations of gentry families

Once the data had been collected, it was possible to enter the locations of each family on a map (figure 2), and from these several observations can be made. Comparing the 'Abbey lands' map (figures 1 and 2a), with that of 1564, we note that of the nine pre-1539 settlements all but two are on 'lay' land. The two exceptions were both tenants of the clergy. Releasing the Crown lands for sale was a gradual process. After twenty-five years only another eighteen gentlemen were in residence, and some of these may have been former copyholders who bought their own estates.

By 1613 many more had settled (figure 2b). The best land was in the south and west of the county, an area of fertile undulating ground through which two or three good tributary brooks flowed into the Ouse near St Neots, and the northern strip in the valley of the Nene adjoining the Soke of Peterborough. The 'wet lands' of Ramsey fen, stretching across the county from Cambridgeshire, were almost uninhabitable; the projected fen drainage schemes had not yet got under way. It is not easy to discern 'betterment' migration at this stage, although a small number of townsmen, probably merchants, from Huntingdon and St Neots moved to country seats, presumably after successful business careers.

Figure 2c illustrates that by 1684 the gentry population of the county had declined in number, even in the desirable south-west. No doubt there were many reasons for this but one of them must surely be the failure of the fen drainage enterprise. Despite interruption by the Civil War this had been resumed, apparently with great success at first; but the drying out of the peat had resulted in shrinkage and lowering of the surface level, and by the last quarter of the century much newly-reclaimed land had been re-inundated.

On the other hand, since the war Huntingdon had developed as a business and administrative centre and the gentry now residing there were generally wealthy merchants and past mayors or bailiffs of the borough.

Persistence of gentry families

At first it was envisaged that a simple count of 'old gentry' (those present at more than one visitation) as against 'new gentry' (those only appearing in a single visitation) might be sufficient to validate the hypothesis. As the material was extracted however, a trial count showed that this was not the case; not only would the test be too crude but the result would tend towards the opposite conclusion to that which would logically be expected. A much more careful alignment of the observations was required, and this could only be done by using such information as could be gathered from a thorough study of each pedigree contained in the herald's office books. This can be better explained by a description of the data as they presented themselves on closer examination.

With so few dates provided in the pedigrees, we must be content with approximations and decide upon the best units of time with which to work. We

Table 1 Number of gentry families, by categories, in each year of assessment

Length of Settlement	1539	1564	1613	1684
A (0-25 yrs)	2	17	20	15
B (26-50 yrs)	3	3	24	9
C (51-75 yrs)	1	3	10	12
D (76-100yrs)	3	1	2	7
E (101-125 yrs)	-	3	3	7
F (126-150 yrs)	-	-	1	4
G (151 yrs & over)	-	-	1	1
Total	9	27	61	55

note that the period from the Dissolution to the first Visitation is exactly twenty-five years; from 1564 to 1613 is almost fifty years, and from 1613 to 1684 is not far short of seventy-five years. A generation can be assumed to be twenty-five to thirty years. Let us then work in units of twenty-five years and derive an 'index of persistence' as is shown in table 1. From this table we can see that the gentry population rose significantly from the middle of the sixteenth century to the latter half of the seventeenth, and to a lesser extent that the persistence of some families increased; thus proving, by inversion, the correctness of the Reverend Thomas Fuller's dictum about the small number of ancient families of Huntingdonshire.

Our hypothesis, that the further we proceed in time from 1539 the more settled Huntingdonshire gentry families should be, requires us to compare the situation in 1613 with that in 1684, when there was apparently a decrease in gentry population (or rather, a decrease of those accepted and recognized as gentry by the heralds). This is by no means as obvious, and in order to assure ourselves that by 1684 significantly more families stayed in Huntingdonshire for a longer period than in the early period, a chi-squared test of the two right-hand columns must be carried out. The results of this test confirm our hypothesis at the ninety-nine per cent probability level.¹⁶

The heralds' visitations were instituted for the correction of heraldic abuses, but their true purpose was to reinforce the contemporary social structure - the 'natural order' of things. To the heralds themselves they presented a legitimate means of supplementing their incomes. They have for centuries provided genealogists with a mine of evidence acceptable at English law. This paper has attempted to show that they can also be of some value to the historical social scientist.

NOTES

1. G.D. Squibb, *Visitation pedigrees and the genealogist*, 1978, p.5.
2. Coke, Sir Edward, *Fourth Institute*, 126.
3. A.R. Wagner, *Records and collections of the College of Arms*, 1952, p.18.
4. 'He who ... can live idly and without manual labour and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be called Master' - Doderidge, Sjt., in the Abergavenny Peerage case, 1588, cit. in G.D. Squibb, *The High Court of Chivalry*, 1959, p.172.
5. J. Patten, 'Patterns of migration and movement of labour to three pre-industrial East Anglian towns', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2, 1976, pp.111-29.
6. R.A. Pelham, 'The immigrant population of Birmingham, 1686-1726', *Transactions, Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 61, 1937, pp.45-80.
7. P. Clark, 'The migrant in Kentish towns 1580-1640', in P. Clark and P. Slack, (eds) *Crisis and order in English towns 1500-1700*, 1972, pp.117-63.
8. B.A. Holderness, 'Personal mobility in some rural parishes of Yorkshire 1777-1812', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 42, 1971, pp.444-54.
9. The principal data sources are the office books of these visitations, namely; Northants and Hunts, 1564, by William Hervy, Clarenceux (abbreviated 'H.4' at the College of Arms), Huntingdonshire, 1613, by Nicholas Charles, Lancaster Herald, deputizing for William Camden, Clarenceux ('C.3'), and Cambs and Hunts, 1684, by Sir Henry St George, Clarenceux, ('K.7'). The 1613 visitation has been published by the Camden Society and is an almost exact transcript of the original, see Sir Henry Ellis KH, (ed) *The Visitation of the County of Huntingdonshire, 1613*, Camden Society, 1848. H.4 and K.7 are unpublished and are held at the College of Arms. The three books together contain 132 pedigrees.
10. Rev T. Fuller, *The history of the worthies of England*, 1662, p.163.
11. The location of manors on the map is approximate, as manor boundaries do not always coincide with parishes and the information given in the VCH for Huntingdonshire is less detailed than that in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*.
12. The exception was Castle of Glatton, whose descendant was forced to disclaim at the next Visitation. Since he had clearly been accorded gentle status for a long time, the family has been included in the counts of both Visitations.
13. Lord St John of Bletso, who succeeded his brother in 1596 but retained his seat at King's Rippon, Hunts, and Lord Clifton of Leighton Bromswold, whose grandfather had been *customarius* of the City of London.
14. Including Sir Robert Cotton, the famous antiquary.
15. Rev W. Mackreth Noble, *Huntingdonshire and the Spanish Armada*, 1896.
16. Since more than twenty per cent of the observations in the table are smaller than five, the chi-squared test will be invalid unless the units of persistence in column 1 are altered. This can be done by combining the categories A & B, C & D and E & F & G for the years 1613 and 1684, and setting out a contingency table thus:

Persistence	0-50	51-100	101-151+	Row Totals
1613	44	12	5	61
1684	24	19	12	55
Column totals	68	31	17	116