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# THE LANDED ELITE AND PROVINCIAL TOWNS IN BRITAIN 1660–1800<sup>1</sup>

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During the long eighteenth century the British Isles (and in particular mainland Britain), was the most dynamic area of urban development in Europe and perhaps in the world. One sign of this was the growing proportion of the population living in the larger towns. Though the proportion of the population inhabiting settlements of over 2,500 people in Ireland during the course of the eighteenth century appears to have remained fairly static at around twelve per cent (due to the rapid growth of the rural population), in England and Wales it rose from just under twenty per cent to just over thirty per cent, and in Scotland from around twelve to thirty-six per cent.<sup>2</sup> The flagships of the urban system were undoubtedly the metropolitan centres of London, Dublin and Edinburgh. London's population, for example, grew between 1700 and 1800 from half a million to almost a million people, Dublin's from 60,000 to 180,000.<sup>3</sup> But in many respects the most impressive feature of urbanization in the eighteenth century was the contribution of the provinces. Whereas London's share of the population of England and Wales remained relatively static at around ten per cent, that of provincial towns with populations of over 2,500 people more than doubled from eight to twenty per cent.<sup>4</sup> The dramatic rise of industrial towns and ports like Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool, and Glasgow were key elements in this process. But the contribution of medium-sized traditional urban centres should not be underestimated; Nottingham, Derby, Leicester, Northampton and Preston combined their roles as

county or administrative towns with that of an expanding industrial centre. Nor should we write off the role played by the mass of smaller centres. In the later seventeenth century there were about a thousand towns in England, Wales and Scotland. Of these less than ten per cent had populations of over 2,500 people, and a mere two to three per cent over 5,000.<sup>5</sup> The small town was thus the characteristic urban settlement in early modern Britain. It has been argued that during the eighteenth century, under the impact of a modernizing economy and communications' infrastructure, and under increasing competition from the larger settlements, many small centres simply lost their function and status as towns, as a more rationalized urban system emerged.<sup>6</sup> Something of this was no doubt occurring, but there is now a substantial body of research which suggests that the smaller settlements, particularly those in certain regions, held up remarkably well during the eighteenth century; that, indeed, they enjoyed something of a golden age, or – perhaps more accurately – an Indian summer.<sup>7</sup> This reflected not only the fact that some were able to develop specialist functions and expand in the favourable economic climate of the time, but also the continuing localized structure of demand, with the need for centres to service this.

In forcing the pace of urbanization the principal motor of change was an increasingly numerous, wealthy and confident middling order of merchants, manufacturers, professionals, prosperous tradesmen and the like, a group whose achievements have received much attention in the recent historiography.<sup>8</sup>

However, in highlighting the contribution of the middling sort to urban development that of the traditional landed elite can be easily overlooked. Its urban interests are often seen as focused on the dazzling social and political round of the metropolitan centres, and the aristocratic town house, and high-status terrace, crescent, and square that arose in London, Dublin, Edinburgh and Bath.<sup>9</sup> Outside the metropolitan network, the aristocracy and gentry's base was and remained rural society, with its core asset the country house and estate. Few of the members of this elite, unlike many of their European counterparts, would have seen a provincial town as the 'headquarters' of their extensive personal domains. That said, the gentry, like most rural dwellers, made heavy use of provincial towns for meetings, marketing and consumption; they often possessed property within or on the edge of such towns; they perceived local urban centres to be within their proper sphere of economic and political influence; and, with the seventeenth and eighteenth-century shift towards civility and enlightenment, they increasingly valued towns in general as locations of short-term residence and social and cultural activity.<sup>10</sup> Though the metropolitan centres had a very particular appeal, and London had a brand image which no other place could match, provincial towns also had their attractions; the smaller ones in particular were politically more malleable, less socially under the influence of the burgeoning middling orders, and less overrun by the lower orders, than the cities. Therefore, despite their rural roots, the landed elite often formed a close relationship with the smaller and medium-sized provincial town, and played an important part in its continuing prosperity.<sup>11</sup> Five ways in which the rural elite influenced provincial urban development, particularly in the modelling and reconstruction of the townscape, are explored in this article; through the presence of a permanent and main residence, through the establishment and planning of a new town, through the development of an urban estate,

through the gentry's political role in the town, and through its social and cultural use of urban centres.

First, there was the impact of those members of the elite who possessed their principal residence in or adjacent to a town. In many European countries such a pattern of lordly living was by no means uncommon, with secular and spiritual princes, together with the aristocracy, using a provincial city or town as their power base from which to control a rural territory. In Germany there is the *Residenzstädte* or 'landowner town', such as Hanover in Lower Saxony, Butzbach and Arolsen in Hesse, and Würzburg in Bavaria. Arolsen was developed in the eighteenth century by the resident princes as a baroque town with an 'old' palace, built between 1710 and 1729 and modelled on Versailles, and a Neues Schloss of 1764-78; and the character of Würzburg was transformed between the 1720s and 1740s when the prince bishops moved down from the adjacent castle (the Marienberg) and built a spectacular new palace and gardens, and remodelled the town.<sup>12</sup> In Britain such places were relatively few in number, but they accommodated some leading landowners, whose residences – in one sense at least – constituted the aristocratic town house *par excellence*. Examples which easily spring to mind in England are the Lords Brooke (later earls of Warwick) at Warwick, the Dukes of Norfolk at Arundel, the Dukes of Somerset at Petworth, the Dukes of Newcastle at Nottingham (one of their principal residences, rather than *the* one), the earls Bathurst at Cirencester, and in Ireland the Dukes of Ormonde in Kilkenny and the Taylors (later earls of Bective) at Kells. The relationship between lord, mansion and town was usually an accident of history or location, rather than reflecting a deliberate pattern of residence. In the medieval period it was common for towns to be developed around or adjacent to castles, such as at Alnwick, Arundel, Dunster, Ludlow and Warwick, and there were a number of houses, like Audley End (Saffron Walden), Stowe (Buckingham) and Blenheim (Woodstock), the perimeter of whose extensive

estates happened to abut a town. However, there is evidence that from the later seventeenth century the British aristocracy was beginning to value the potential that an urban location offered. This flowed from a rise in the cultural status of the town, as Renaissance theory and practice about the close relationship between civility and urbanity percolated elite attitudes and behaviour, a position which many have argued strengthened during the Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Ideas among the ruling order were heavily influenced by several prestigious models of how town and princely residence could be merged together successfully. There was of course no shortage of Continental, particularly Italian examples, but in the later seventeenth century the most potent prototype was Louis XIV's integrated development of the town, palace and gardens of Versailles.<sup>14</sup> Though in England Charles II's uncompleted plans of the 1680s to reproduce a Versailles-type model at Winchester were thwarted by his death, and his brother's eventual abandonment of the project in 1687, they must have been widely known,<sup>15</sup> and the erection of large aristocratic residences in or adjacent to several of the proliferating squares in post-Restoration London reinforced the notion that it was now fashionable to link together town and power house.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of these changes could be seen in a number of provincial towns. James Butler, Duke of Ormonde, celebrated the re-possession of his residence at Kilkenny after the Restoration by remodelling the medieval castle along the lines of a French chateau, and by demolishing the east side of Castle Street to create a new formal approach to his residence, that for the first time integrated it directly with the town.<sup>17</sup> The fourth Lord Brooke also undertook a radical remodelling of the interiors at Warwick Castle in the 1670s to create one of the first French-style enfilades of state apartments in England.<sup>18</sup> Upgrading the town to match these changes had to wait a little longer, but the opportunity arose with the Fire of Warwick in 1694, which destroyed much of the central area. An Act of

Parliament was obtained and a court of commissioners or fire court appointed to govern the rebuilding. Vernacular building materials and architecture were banished and replaced by brick, stone, and tile and a uniform classical house-design derived from post-fire London. There is little doubt that the key figure behind the rebuilding was the fifth Lord Brooke (1643–1710), who, despite being one of the wealthiest landowners in Britain, regularly attended the fire court to supervise the minutiae of the rebuilding. He intended the town to become a fashionable ante-chamber to his great house, modelled to the best metropolitan designs that he had observed from his residence in the capital. In particular there was developed a curving axis of elegant street architecture, formed from uniform brick houses, running from the northern edge of the town to the site of the castle on the southern perimeter. Along the way it took in the church of St Mary's (where the medieval earls of Warwick together with Brooke's own ancestors were buried, and which was rebuilt on a grand scale after the fire); a square, laid out to the west end of the church, which was among the first to be constructed in a provincial town; and the crossroads where the town's four principal thoroughfares intersected, at which the corner houses were required to rise to three instead of the standard two storeys and were ornamented with giant classical pedestals and pilasters. It is unlikely that Warwick would have been rebuilt in the manner which it was without Brooke's desire to enhance the setting for his residence; but it is equally unlikely that the townspeople would have gone along with the plan unless they perceived it to be to their economic advantage. The post-fire reconstruction provided an excellent opportunity for what in modern parlance might be called 'place-marketing' or 'image-repositioning', the architectural make-over greatly enhancing the town's appeal as a high-status consumer and service centre for the county elite.<sup>19</sup>

An upgraded image must also have resulted at Cirencester when in the mid 1720s Lord Bathurst

remodelled the Jacobean mansion which he had inherited, and though this was shielded from the prying eyes of citizens by a high wall and a giant yew hedge, the broad street of Cecily Hill linked the town directly with the spectacular avenues of his 'massive geometric landscape' park.<sup>20</sup> In the early 1770s Henry Arthur Herbert Earl of Powis obtained from the crown a lease of the ruined castle at Ludlow. Though Henry Arthur died in 1772, and the residence which it was later claimed he intended to build on the site – having parted with the family home at Oakly Park – never materialised, he and his successors landscaped the area and laid out public walks, developing its potential as a historic and romantic location. After difficult negotiations the Powises achieved their goal of outright ownership in 1811, acquiring a site that both enhanced the family's historic and aristocratic credentials, and cemented their relationship with the town. For Ludlow itself, the castle's new function as a place of romantic reflection and elegant recreation, reinforced a role which the town had been developing since the late seventeenth century as a centre of polite resort.<sup>21</sup>

A second, and potentially more radical manner in which members of the rural elite impacted on the urban sphere was by the creation, sometimes close to their principal residences, of new or improved settlements which displayed an element of formal planning. In Ireland and Scotland, especially from the middle of the eighteenth century, hundreds of very small towns or villages of this type were newly founded or remodelled, which possessed, whatever their size, some urban characteristics. A number developed into full-blown towns, such as Inveraray (Argyll), laid out in about 1740, and Westport (Co. Mayo) established in about 1780. For landlords they represented an economic investment; a way of developing the productive potential of their huge rural estates, as well as making money from leasing or selling urban property. But they were also seen as a means of introducing order and enlightenment to backward and uncivilized peoples, and of asserting

the landlord's own authority and civility.<sup>22</sup> In England and Wales such settlements were comparatively rare, because there was already a substantial stock of towns and there was little pressure for territorial colonization. Nonetheless, landowners did develop, or attempt to develop, a number of new towns – predominantly ports – such as Whitehaven (Cumberland), Buckler's Hard (Hampshire), Seaton Sluice (Northumberland), Milford Haven (Pembrokeshire) and Aberaeron (Cardiganshire).<sup>23</sup> These were primarily economic ventures, but the care applied to the planning of them suggests that their patrons conceived them as model communities, and as ornaments to their own enlightened reputation. The most striking example is Whitehaven, developed by the Lowther family, primarily from the late seventeenth century, as a port for their coal mines, though later becoming also a major player in the tobacco trade. A grid-iron plan of regular streets was adopted, strict lease controls were introduced to ensure the construction of uniform terrace houses, religious and educational buildings were provided, and a broad thoroughfare was laid out from the quay side to the Lowther residence, Flatt Hall, on the edge of the town. From a hamlet of scarcely a hundred or so people in the early seventeenth century, it had grown by 1700 to a smallish town of 3000 inhabitants and by the 1760s to a substantial urban centre of 9000 people.<sup>24</sup>

If Whitehaven is something of an exception in England and Wales, where the rural elite were generally reluctant to establish new towns, there was a third pattern of engagement that was much more common; the exploitation of estates in or on the edge of existing towns. Rapid urban expansion meant that there was considerable money to be made in the urban property market. Where, through inheritance or acquisition, country landowners possessed substantial blocks of town property in a location with developmental potential, there was every reason to exploit this asset. The West End of London provided the classic example of what could be

done,<sup>25</sup> but eighteenth-century provincial towns also offered plentiful opportunities, as in the cases of the estates owned by the Colmore and Gooch families in Birmingham, the Levers, Leghs and Moseleys in Manchester, the Earls of Sefton in Liverpool, and the Pulteneys in Bath.<sup>26</sup> Such sizeable projects in small towns that became cities were complemented by ventures in new or established settlements that did not grow on such a scale. These included schemes in quite a number of the burgeoning spas and seaside resorts, such as those promoted by the Duke of Devonshire at Buxton or Lord Courtenay at Teignmouth;<sup>27</sup> as well as undertakings such as the ninth Earl of Exeter's construction of uniform housing in St Mary's Hill and St Mary's Street in late eighteenth-century Stamford, or the Marquess of Bath's and the Earl of Cork's involvement, as property owners and trustees, in the Frome improvement scheme of c.1800.<sup>28</sup> Financial gain was no doubt the principal motive in most cases, but this did not necessarily run counter to aesthetic considerations. Landowners would have probably worked to the principle that fashionable, well planned architecture yielded a higher and longer-term return on investment than piecemeal, poor quality construction – a point of particular importance in the development of high status resorts.

The fourth pattern of influence arose from the landed elite's political relationship with the provincial town. The early modern period had seen Parliament, and particularly the House of Commons, playing an increasingly important part in the politics and governance of the nation. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 a close and continuous working relationship with Parliament became essential if monarchy and executive were to rule effectively. Though rural landownership was the principal source of power in eighteenth-century society, roughly four-fifths of seats in the Commons were located in boroughs (the other fifth were based on county-wide electorates).<sup>29</sup> If members of the landed elite were to influence the selection of those who sat

in the lower house, and therefore the decisions it arrived at, they were compelled to engage with the town and its electors. This did not necessarily constitute a problem. Country landowners possessed huge resources of wealth and influence, and could deploy this economic and political muscle to impose their own choice of MPs on a suitably compliant borough. Certainly there is no shortage of examples of aristocrats who used their financial assets and local sources of power to influence the outcome of elections, and often to considerable effect. However, the selection of borough MPs was not a cut and dried process. Quite apart from the fact that members of the landed elite might compete with each other to acquire or control a particular seat, the urban electorate was not the malleable object it has often been portrayed as. A bewildering variety of franchises existed (some more open to manipulation than others); many towns, particularly those which were incorporated, possessed a strong sense of their own civic identity and jealously protected their autonomy; and the growing ranks of the urban middling orders had an agenda of their own to pursue which might or might not coincide with that of the leaders of rural society.

The outcome was that the landed elite had to work for their seats, and that their political relationship with the town was not so much one of domination as of negotiation and the pursuit of mutual benefits.<sup>30</sup> Local aristocracy and gentry were expected to woo the town and its electors with gifts, and once an MP was elected it was anticipated that he or his patron would demonstrate their appreciation of the favours shown them. Though the historical literature on the subject tends to stress the element of personal treating in this (with the emphasis on alcohol and food), many of the gifts were of a public character, contributing substantially to the amenities of the town, and often to its specifically civic fabric and identity. The council house at Chichester, erected between 1731 and 1733 and designed by Roger Morris, was 'built by

subscription, under the more immediate direction and encouragement of his Grace the Duke of Richmond', and the Moothall at Wigan built between 1720 and 1723 at a cost of over £2,000 was paid for by the borough's two MPs.<sup>31</sup> In 1718 Robert Gay (a prosperous London barber-surgeon, who in 1699 had acquired through marriage estates on the edge of Bath with considerable developmental potential) gave the corporation at Bath £100 which it was agreed to use 'in sashing and wainscoting the Guild Hall of this city'. Since in this instance the franchise was vested in the members of the council, this was a shrewd investment, and may have played no small part in Gay's election as one of the city MPs in 1720 and again in 1727.<sup>32</sup> High Wycombe was described by one visitor in 1769 as 'regularly well built, and ornamented in the middle by a public room raised at the expense of Lord Shelburne, who sends one of its members to Parliament' – a reference to the fine Guildhall built in 1757 and designed by Henry Keene.<sup>33</sup> The country gentry's largesse spread far beyond town halls. The entire cost of the Market House built at Warwick in 1670 seems to have been covered by the £575 subscribed by the county gentry.<sup>34</sup> In Devizes in 1743 one of the recently elected MPs gave £200 to the corporation which was split between the churchwardens of the town's two parishes, 'to be disposed of for the use or ornament of each parish respectively', while two gifts of £500 in 1735 and 1744 from the Bath MP George Wade were applied towards the rebuilding of St Michael's Church and the erection of the Grammar School, and the £500 from one of Wade's successors, Sir John Ligonier, went towards the costs of dismantling the North and South Gates.<sup>35</sup> Improvement schemes, with their mixture of the practical and the symbolic, appear to have been a favourite target of urban MPs' benevolence. In 1707 the two members for Lincoln made handsome contributions towards the construction of a new causeway; at Chichester in 1724 'the North Walls walk and rampart were levelled, repaired and beautified by Lord Beauclerk,

then chosen member of Parliament for this city'; in the same year Daniel Pulteney, MP for Preston, donated a fire engine to the town – 'a further instance of ... Mr Pulteney's esteem & regard for the corporation & will be of extraordinary use & service to the public'; and three years later Thomas Lewis, one of the Salisbury members, presented 22 lamps to the city.<sup>36</sup>

Donations to facilitate urban improvements only scratch the surface of an MP's or local patron's contribution to urban development. Both were expected to use their time and offices to support the town's interests. After the Restoration a growing number of local gentry appear to have been recruited on to corporations, and though at times this may have been more in a honorific than practical capacity, it did cement the relationship between those involved and the town, and create an expectation that they would, when required, service its needs.<sup>37</sup> During crises the support of the rural elite could be vital in raising monies and facilitating solutions to the problems that had arisen. Fire damage, one of the spectres that haunted pre-industrial towns, was an obvious case in point, and it is significant that the fire court that governed the rebuilding at Warwick was largely staffed by the local gentry. In this instance an act of Parliament was obtained to control the rebuilding, and the use of Parliamentary legislation was increasingly resorted to by towns as a means to facilitate urban improvement schemes. The support and assistance of those with access to both Houses of Parliament was absolutely vital on these occasions, and one of the principal duties of a borough MP was to pilot through local legislation associated with schemes such as the turnpiking of roads, river navigation, the provision of marketing facilities, and the paving, cleansing and lighting of streets; and more broadly with the establishment of the so-called improvement commissions which proliferated in towns in the latter half of the eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Where a town did not possess its own MPs it could still use the services of the county representatives to

bring about change, particularly if that town was large enough to constitute a significant element in the county electorate. Such was the case with Birmingham. In 1707 there was pressure to build a new church to accommodate the rapidly expanding population of the town (and no doubt to counter any challenge that might be posed by the nonconformists). Lord Digby of Coleshill wrote to Sir John Mordaunt, who with Andrew Archer was one of the two county representatives for Warwickshire, ‘I am desired to send the enclosed petition with the heads for a bill to you and your brother Archer, to whose care the people of Birmingham do commit the management of the good work in the H. of Comm: They desire no time may be lost, since the occasion is drawing towards an end; & it may prove of fatal consequence to put this off to another. We hope it will not take much time to pass a bill with so good an aspect, that has already the consent of all the parties concerned.’ Matters did not progress smoothly and the bill appears to have been dropped, an indication that obtaining locally oriented legislation was no straightforward matter, and could meet a good deal of opposition from competing local and regional interests. However, an act for the building of St Phillip’s was eventually obtained in 1711 (no doubt due to the more favourable political climate once a Tory administration was elected in 1710 on a ‘Church in Danger’ ticket) and a commission appointed to govern the construction staffed by members of the local gentry.<sup>39</sup>

There were then strong political reasons why the landed elite should pay close attention to the needs of their neighbouring towns and promote urban improvement. Even the most powerful aristocrat had to be careful in this respect. When in 1701 the corporation of Warwick (in whom the borough franchise was vested) wrote to the fifth Lord Brooke informing him that it intended to return his two sons as members for the town, the great man, whose castle physically and symbolically overshadowed the town, attentively replied how ‘very much pleased’ he

was to find himself ‘not forgotten by those for whom I have ever had a cordial and sincere respect and whose interest (however I may have been misrepresented) I have and shall constantly advance and promote’. Ritualistic as these words may sound, the risks in failing to pay proper attention to one’s electorate are hinted at in 1716, when Sir Thomas Cave in a letter to Ralph Verney observed of Brooke’s son and successor the seventh Lord Brooke, ‘certainly Warwick must resent Lord Brooke’s absence, he having often promised them to reside there when married, and the contrary must lose him good interest’. Significantly there is evidence of growing opposition to the castle interest during this period.<sup>40</sup>

The reference to residence highlights the importance of the landed elite’s presence in the town. Warwick was a special case in this respect, but some form of second home, occupied on a regular if not permanent basis, not only provided a base from which a rural potentate could keep a close eye on the political scene, but also generated business for local traders (particularly if a gentleman resided with his wife and children), and was a clear statement of commitment to the town. In eighteenth-century Ludlow Brand House was used as a town house by the Walcots, and 27 Broad Street, which was heavily remodelled in the 1740s, by the Charltons, who migrated between their Ludlow property and their country estate, Park Hall, at Whittington in north-west Shropshire. The handsome Dinham House, built in 1716 under the walls of the castle, was variously occupied in the eighteenth century by the Knights of Downton, the Johnes’s of Croft Castle and the Earl of Powis.<sup>41</sup> In nearby Shrewsbury Lord Bath had (as it proved unfulfilled) plans to obtain a seat for his son, and employed the local architect Thomas Farnolls Pritchard to build the impressive Swan Hill Court House (1761–2) to provide a political base in the town. Though his agent was installed as tenant, Bath probably resided there when in Shrewsbury to execute his responsibilities as Lord

Lieutenant of Shropshire. The house contained a large room for private entertainments and routs, which may well have been employed to woo local voters.<sup>42</sup>

If politics was one factor which drew the landed gentry towards provincial towns, an equal, and probably more powerful element in the appeal of such places was their role as social and consumer centres. This was the fifth way, as users of towns for leisure, health and shopping, in which the landed elite influenced urban development. The substantial country estate, and the life associated with it, carried the ultimate prestige. But from the later seventeenth century attendance at town, as a short-term or seasonal visitor, became an essential facet of gentlemanly routine. Not to participate in polite urban living would be to miss out on a vital arena of elite display and networking, and would brand the offending party as backward, uncivilized and unsociable. Critically, it might lead to social demotion. The town was playing an increasingly important part in the reproduction and remodelling of the social elite itself. Economic growth and rising levels of personal prosperity, particularly among the middling orders, was expanding the volume of people with the wherewithal to cut a figure in fashionable society. Allied to this, genetic definitions of gentility were declining in favour of ones based on behaviour and appearance. Polite towns came to play a vital role in both providing the material goods and personal skills for expressing status, and the public arenas in which these accoutrements and attributes could be displayed. The rural gentry may not have wished to become entrapped in this urban-based rat race, and several grumpily complained of the dangers of visiting the town, but it was a process from which they could only disengage at peril of endangering their social position. The outcome was twofold. First, there was the emergence of a social calendar which contained a core urban element.<sup>43</sup> Country landowners and their families would visit town for the winter season, where they could enjoy a regular

round of entertainments. A sustained period of urban residence was a particularly attractive proposition, since inclement weather made the countryside gloomy and rural roads difficult, and sometimes impassable. In York, where the winter season ran roughly from October to March, there was by the 1730s an enticing weekly cycle of a dancing assembly on Monday, a carding assembly on Wednesday, the music club on Friday, and theatre performances on Tuesday and Thursday.<sup>44</sup> The county centres also hosted assize and race weeks, the latter located between spring and autumn. The summer was largely the domain of the seasons attached to the burgeoning spas and seaside resorts.

Second, there was a growth in towns of a range of luxury services – fine shops, fashionable finishing schools and dancing academies, theatres, concerts, assemblies, walks, pleasure gardens, horse races, coffee houses, clubs and societies. In some cases landed society would contribute directly to the provision of these. So, for example, many of the Yorkshire county gentry subscribed to the construction of the impressive York Assembly Rooms (1730–2), designed by Lord Burlington, and race grandstand (1755–6), designed by John Carr.<sup>45</sup> But more often than not facilities were provided by commercial entrepreneurs, so that landed society's influence in this area of urban development was an indirect (but no less essential) one as patrons and consumers.

Sometimes town councils themselves embraced a quasi-entrepreneurial role. When considering the construction or alteration of public buildings many corporations would have had at least one eye on the use of these structures to accommodate fashionable leisure, and thereby as a means to attract the lucrative gentry trade. Preston, the social capital of south Lancashire, provides a telling example of this. Every twenty years the town staged its famous guild. Though this possessed important political and economic functions, it was also a major social event which the town deployed in particular to cement and

celebrate its close relationship with the landed elite. As late as the 1820s, despite the impact of rapid industrialization on the character of the town, Edward Baines could still claim that the ‘nobility and gentry, not merely of the town and neighbourhood, but from all parts of the country are attracted to this gorgeous commemoration.’<sup>46</sup> In the post-Restoration period, with towns competing for the gentry market, it became increasingly important for Preston to put on a good show. At the same time expectations among the gentry themselves were also rising, as new activities like assemblies became a standard feature of their recreational repertoire. This placed pressure on the provision of suitable public accommodation. The town hall was the natural place to house the events of the Guild, and over the years the building was regularly improved to enhance its fashionable appearance. In 1719 a cupola was added, in early 1727 it was ordered that ‘the town hall be bricked about the next summer’, in the following year it was agreed that ‘the ladies have the use of the town hall for the assembly til further order’, and in 1743 three new windows were to be inserted ‘on the west side to make the same uniform’.<sup>47</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century this process of modification had probably reached its limits, particularly given the growing numbers of the well-to-do attending the Guild. The corporation’s solution was to build a special hall for the event of 1762.

A relatively young (and from the perspective of public buildings, inexperienced) John Carr was brought in. Since 1757 he had been working for Thomas Clifton, one of the in-burgesses of the Guild, on nearby Lytham Hall, but the key factor behind the choice of Carr was probably his part in designing the York racecourse grandstand, a building with an overtly social function (including a spacious public room) that had attracted much admiration.<sup>48</sup> In September 1759 Preston council appointed a committee ‘to show Mr Carr the architect the ground on which the buildings in Cheapside late in lease to the late Mr Alderman Addison stood and take his

opinion about the buildings intended to be erected there and procure a plan from him for such buildings and to pay him for his trouble what the committee shall think reasonable’.<sup>49</sup> By May 1760 the committee was reporting to the council that it had consulted with Carr ‘as to the method and manner of erecting the said buildings ... so as to be convenient both for the entertainment of company at the Guild and so as the same may after the solemnity of the Guild is over be with not much expense converted into dwelling houses fit for tenants’. Carr had drawn up ‘several plans and designs’ and contractors had been advertised for and chosen.<sup>50</sup> The financial prudence demonstrated by the idea of later conversion to dwelling houses was understandable, given that the scheme was projected to cost over £1658 3s. *od.*, the majority of which was to be raised by mortgaging the corporation tolls.<sup>51</sup> It is unlikely that any significant physical conversion took place after the event, since well into the nineteenth century the hall still appears to have been used for Guild meetings, despite the building of a new town hall in 1782 and Corn Exchange in 1824.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the most intriguing feature of the Guild Hall was the apparent interconnection with the old town hall. On assembly and ball nights, of which there were five during each week of the Guild, ‘the state room’ of the Guild Hall and ‘the adjoining Town-Hall (a spacious chamber) were ... illuminated by some hundred of wax tapers, in several grand chandeliers, girandoles and sconces ... These two rooms, being united, were capable of containing near one thousand people; which number, it was conjectured by many, appeared therein each ball night.’<sup>53</sup> The Guild Hall was built, in effect, as an extension to the Town Hall, an ingenious solution to the problem of providing extra space for the fashionable visitors flocking to the town during the Guild.

Vying for the role of a regional social capital, Preston could not afford to miss the opportunity offered by the Guild. One reason for this was not only the competition for the gentry market from

other county centres, but also that from lesser lights. A surprising feature of the urban renaissance underway at the time is the extent to which the process touched the mass of smaller towns.<sup>54</sup> A little country town like Atherstone in Warwickshire could accommodate a book club and bowling-green, regularly frequented in the 1750s by Sir Roger Newdigate of Arbury and his circle of friends, and small towns such as Cowbridge in Glamorgan, Stamford in Lincolnshire, Ashbourne in Derbyshire, and Ludlow in Shropshire, all probably with populations of under 3,000 in the mid-eighteenth century, drew in the local gentry as they became oases of fashionable architecture and pastimes.<sup>55</sup> For the 1844 New Year ball held at the Lion Hotel in tiny Leominster, located in the rural fastness of the Welsh-English border country, the list of those attending included almost 150 names, headed by notables like Lord and Lady Bateman, Lady Harriet Chichester, Earl Somers and Lady Emily Foley. The glittering event took place in a splendid, classically-designed assembly room, added as an extension in the previous year, the opening of which prompted the local newspaper to declare the town 'the Athens of Herefordshire'.<sup>56</sup> No doubt the reporter got carried away, but there was at least a grain of truth in the hyperbole.

The gentry came to town, to shop or participate in the various fashionable events and seasons, as visitors or short-term residents. Some also came to stay for longer periods. It made sense for a country gentleman facing financial problems, and pursuing a policy of retrenchment, to place his rural house and estate in moth balls, or preferably lease it out, and move to a smaller establishment in town. Moreover, as with Sir Walter Elliott in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, a provincial centre rather than London 'was much safer for a gentleman in his predicament'. Several towns were noted for their relatively low cost of living, such as Totnes in Devon, which Defoe called 'a very good place to live in, especially for such as have large families and but small estates, and many

such are said to come into these parts on purpose for saving money, and to live in proportion to their income'.<sup>57</sup> There was also a growing pool of polite individuals and families – daughters, younger sons and widows of country gentleman – who retained close social (and perhaps financial) links with the rural elite, but chose to reside permanently in fashionable towns. Such places provided an ideal environment for those with comfortable but limited incomes seeking to lead a leisured and genteel life. In particular, well-off spinsters and widows found urban living, especially in locations where they congregated together in numbers, an opportunity to construct an independent but respectable lifestyle, free from the potentially severe constraints of marriage. The high ratio of women to men found in the spas and seaside resorts, was in part a reflection of this, and some fashionable towns, such as Preston, were well known for their large cohorts of genteel single women.<sup>58</sup>

The impact of the country gentry who visited towns for a day or two, or resided there on a permanent or temporary basis, was an upsurge in demand for fashionably designed domestic accommodation. The true aristocratic town house represented the tip of the iceberg. Beneath were a plethora of lodgings and residences, clustered together in the more prestigious parts of provincial towns – such as Broad Street in Ludlow – which were helping to change the face of urban architecture. The emphasis in eighteenth-century urban classicism upon uniformity encouraged the development of the street as an integrated architectural unit. This process reached its apogee in the introduction of sophisticated large-scale multi-dwelling residential units, such as the square and crescent. These were considered the acme of fashionable urban living because they combined impressiveness of physical form (some modelled on a palatial façade) with the notion of a collective architecture, satisfying the gentry appetite for both status and sociability. Of course, the landed elite

were not the only group contributing to this process of change. In all probability more important were the expanding upper echelons of indigenous urban society, especially wealthy tradesmen, merchants and the professions.<sup>59</sup> It is a difficult task, and perhaps an impossible one, to distinguish meaningfully – at least at the level of the façade – between the town house of a country gentleman and that of a rich lawyer or doctor. Indeed, where it was not uncommon for the younger son of a country gentleman to be apprenticed for a career to one of the urban professions, it may be mistaken to distinguish too sharply between the relative contributions of rural and urban elites to urban development.

During the long eighteenth century British towns experienced both quantitative and qualitative urbanization, the latter the result of them becoming centres and agents of an enlightenment culture. The national capitals and bigger cities were undoubtedly at the forefront of these processes, but the medium-sized and smaller towns also shared in the urban renaissance underway. The principal human agents in effecting change were probably the urban middling orders. However, the traditional landed elite also played an important part. By the end of the eighteenth century its contribution to provincial urbanization appeared to be declining. In part this reflected the fact that urban society was increasingly able to generate its own momentum of growth. However, at the same time the rural elite began to be disenchanted with the ideals of urbanity and enlightenment, and the nature of provincial town life, as the effects of accelerating urban growth and industrialization diminished the appeal of the urban environment, and led to the emergence of a middle and working class showing growing signs of independence and militancy. The members of the landed elite withdrew more and more to their country estates and grouse moors or joined the international tourist set, displaying declining enthusiasm for their local urban centres.<sup>60</sup> Though great landowners continued to play an important

role in urban property development, the golden age of the gentry's influence on the character and culture of the provincial town was drawing to a close.

## NOTES

- 1 Versions of this paper were given at the Sixth International Conference on Urban History, Edinburgh, September 2002, and the conference on the Eighteenth-Century Aristocratic Town House, Rewley House, Oxford, January 2003. I am grateful for the comments I received on these occasions, and to the editor for various suggestions.
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