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THE Purefoy family came into possession of the manor of Shalstone in Buckinghamshire in 1415, when a William Purefoy married Mariana, daughter of Alan de Ayete, whose family had in turn been resident there from 1280. For nearly seven hundred years, therefore, the responsibilities of ownership have remained firmly in only two families. The will marking the transfer of authority is preserved at Shalstone, and is worth quoting at length:

This indenture made between Alan de Ayete on one part, John Barten senior, John Barten junior, William vicar of the church of Stowe, David rector of the church at Shaldesdon, and John Smyth of Buckingham on the other part attests... [that] it is the will and intention of the said Alan to the said manor of Shaldesdon and to all the said lands, tenements, rents and services in Shaldesdon that the said John, John, William, David and John might give the said manor and also all lands, tenements and rents and services aforesaid with all appurtenances to William Publicreyc to have and hold to the said William for the term of life of the said Alan paying annually to the said Alan for his life 20 marks at 4 terms of the year by equal portions. And after the death of the said Alan that the said John, John, William, David and John might give and concede to the said William Publicreyc the said manor to have and hold with all appurtenances to the said William and his heirs... The Said Alan wills also that the said John, John, William, David and John might give and concede to the said William Publicreyc and his heirs in perpetuity all other lands, tenements, rents and services which they have by gift and enfeoffment of the said Alan in the said will of Shaldesdon, held by him by sufficient security that the said William might provide annually during the next 12 years a suitable chaplain to celebrate divine service for the soul of the said Alan and the souls of his mother and father and
all the ancestors, relations and benefactors of the said Alan. To which
things testified by the indentures we place our seals in turn. Dated at
Shaldestone 2nd March 1415.1

The estate in question lies some five miles to the north west of Bucking-
ham and only a mile or so from the great house at Stowe, which, under the
management of Lord Cobham, represented the major political influence in
that part of the county in the first half of the century. Shalstone itself is
surrounded by the parishes of Biddlesdon, Westbury and Water Stratford,
all of which predictably make several appearances in the Purefoy correspon-
dence. Brackley, Towcester, Bicester, Aylesbury and Banbury were just
within reach in a day’s journey, and these towns effectively delimit the area
in which the Shalstone family would trade, make visits and amuse them-
selves. It was an overwhelmingly rural community, serviced by a network
of small craftsmen and tradesmen in the towns. The leaders of opinion
naturally consisted of the landowning gentry, together with a sprinkling of
successful and educated lawyers, doctors and clergymen. It was a tight,
largely self-sufficient, community, whose basic social and political attitudes
changed barely at all in the eighteenth century. Elizabeth Purefoy and her
son Henry write with the confidence of people living in an assured and
immutable environment.

A contemporary description of the parish is given by Browne Willis,
the Buckinghamshire antiquarian, who lived only a few miles from Shal-
stone, and was a great friend of the Purefoy family.

The Parish of Shalstone . . . contains 1274 Acres. The Number of Families
is 22, and of Souls 118, as was returned Anno 1712. It was then assessed
to the Land Tax £80. 15s. 9d.2 The Church, which is dedicated to St
Edward the Confessor, King of England, whose Festival is Oct. 13, (the
Sunday after which is a Wake observed here,) is a mean structure . . .3

1 I am most deeply indebted to Dr L. G. Black and Mr A. F. Butcher of University
College, Oxford, for their help in the translation and transcription of manuscripts.
2 The Land Tax was one of the principal sources of government revenue throughout
the eighteenth century. Owing to the high cost of the wars against Louis XIV, it was
rarely levied at less than 3s. in the pound. In the middle years of the century, a rate of
15s. in the pound would be more usual.
3 Browne Willis, The History and Antiquities of the Town, Hundred and Deanery of Bucking-
ham (London: 1755).
two references to national politics in the whole collection, both relating
to the invasion of the Young Pretender in 1745. Overwhelmingly, the
letters deal with local or county matters. Even England’s involvement in
war against France and Spain between 1739 and 1748 finds no echo in the
writings of a Buckinghamshire squire living only sixty miles from
Westminster.

The diaries, stretching, with a nine-year gap, from 1725 to 1736, exemplify
this tendency even more clearly. Entries for each day were made under one
of three printed headings; ‘Places where I was’, ‘Persons I spoke to’ and
‘Faults’. Unfortunately, this system allows the minimum of information
to the historian. We know where Henry Purefoy went each day, but only
rarely for what purpose. We know to whom he spoke, but never the nature
of the conversation, while the minor peccadillos listed under the last heading
have no special reference to the eighteenth century, being common to human
experience at any time. Certain fixed points in Henry Purefoy’s life are,
however, clear. He usually attended divine service twice on Sunday, and
took Communion at Easter, Whitsun and Christmas. Variation came in the
form of weekly visits to the neighbouring markets, the spa at Astrop Wells,
and other gentry families in the area.

More interestingly, by simply cataloguing the people Henry Purefoy
spoke to day by day, it is possible to build up a reasonable picture of Shal-
stone society at large. The substantial tenants on the estate, who are recorded
as having servants of their own, were dignified with the title of ‘Goodman’,
and were expected to shoulder the burden of the major parish offices such as
Parish Clerk, Overseers of the Poor, and Receivers of the Land Tax. Below
them were the village artisans, whose function was noted in brackets after
their names, as though more adequately to fix their station in the small,
organic society, over which he presided. Thus he regularly converses with
‘Mr Steell (the Hoppoker)’, ‘Mr Thomas Peers (the Ratcatcher)’, and
‘Mr Simon Hobcraft (the Blacksmith)’. Also appearing in brackets are
any oddities of nationality or religion, which might make a man stand
outside this closed community, and therefore make him potentially danger-
ous. In 1746, for example, he encounters ‘Goodman William Hawkwood
(the Quaker)’ and ‘Mr Wm Mack Whurr (the Scotsman)’. There was a clear
preference for what was known and familiar.

The Account Books of Elizabeth Purefoy and her son, which also span
the whole period under discussion, reinforce this theme. Village economics
figure prominently. The entry for 5 April 1743 reads as follows:

paid Goodman Daniell Burman & Aaron Gibbs Churchwardens to a
Levy at 1½ in the pound 5/4½
paid young William Strange (Overseer of the Poor) To a Levy at 2d in
the pound 7/2
paid young William Strange Constable To a Levy at an halfpenny in
the pound for carryeing the King’s Baggage from Buckingham to
Northton 1/9½

The squire would also be expected to contribute generously to church
collections, and would be under an obligation of meeting the incidental
expenses to traditional village ceremonies. The processioning round the
parish boundaries in May 1740 for example cost Henry Purefoy 10/6 in
beer, hops and bread for those taking part. His meticulous detailing of local
life even extends to a complete record of his financial transactions with his
mother. A sixpence passing from one to the other was faithfully noted down.
Long hours must have been spent in the compilation of these records, and
this fact emphasizes just how self-sufficient such an eighteenth century
community was.

From the combined evidence of letter-books, diaries and accounts, it is
possible to build up a comprehensive picture of a gentry family set in the
context in which it would have considered itself important. Power and
authority for them stretched out in concentric circles from the parish to
the county and then to the capital, but the larger the circles became, the less
telling was the influence of the squire, and the more uneasy or alarmed he felt.
Smollett’s Squire Bramble, Fielding’s Squire Western, and Addison’s
Roger de Coverley would all have subscribed to this view. Henry Purefoy
visited London irregularly, and, as the diaries and letters suggest, his reaction
was a mixture of wonder at the new Westminster Bridge and an ingrained
suspicion that the sharp practices of the Londoners would involve him in
financial loss at some stage. He and his mother approved of London fashion,
but feared London prices. The chapters on their dealings with London effec-
tively demonstrate this ambivalent attitude. In marked contrast, the parish was
the social context in which they were all-powerful and totally competent.

Elizabeth Purefoy was widowed in 1704, when she was thirty two years old,
and then lived on for a further sixty-one years. She came from a Hertford-
shire family named Fish, and some of her kinsmen appear in the correspon-
dence as co-heirs in her family's property. As her letters to tradesmen and
neighbours indicate, she was a woman of determined character, with a very
clear view of what her rights might be in any given situation. Her relations
with the rest of her family are particularly revealing in this respect. She was
always very ready to threaten inefficiency or suspected dishonesty with the
law, and was as careful as her son in her personal accounting. She clearly
dominated her son completely, and the only suggestion in the letters that
Henry might marry was met with a polite refusal. Further, in order to
ensure that posterity had a correct view of her personality, she had a marble
monument erected in Shalstone Church while she was still alive, and may
herself have written the inscription that appears upon it. She also plann
er own funeral, which cost no less than £1,110 1s. 9d. or approximately a
quarter of a year's income. The personality of this forceful lady is best
captured in the inscription on the monument:

She was a Woman of Excellent Sense and Spirit
Prudent and Frugal
As well as a true friend To the family She married into.
And was moreover endued
With all Those Graces and Virtues
Which distinguish and Adorn
The good Wife The good Mother and the good Christian.

Henry Purefoy was born in 1697, and predeceased his mother by three
years, dying in 1762 at the age of sixty-five. The earliest information about
him concerns his stay at Oriel College, Oxford, from 1720 to 1723. There is
no evidence that he took a degree, but that would not have been unusual
in this period. A university career was intended to provide that smattering
of polite learning necessary for a gentleman to take his place in society, and
nothing more. A sketchy account book is the only evidence of his activities;
the following are typical entries:

May ye 15th 1720. Paid Mr Weeksy then the sume of four pounds &
four shillings for halfe a years Tutoridge.

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1 The family had been in Hertfordshire since the sixteenth century, and Mrs Purefoy's
father, Leonard Fish, had also become involved in London property. This explains the
Purefoy interest as landlords in houses in Hatfield and London, which are discussed in
the correspondence.

April ye 4th 1723. I paid Monsieur Leffebriere my French master half a
Guinea for a Month's teaching and in full to this time.
July ye 30th 1723. I paid to Several persons underwritten as follows.

To Goody Erle In full 0 - 6 - 0
To Stubbs for Strapping Shoes In full 0 - 3 - 0
To Sedgly ye Barber for Shaving. In full 0 - 17 - 6
To Goody Robinson for 'tendance. In full 0 - 9 - 0
To Christian Newman for Washing & bedmaking In full 3 - 0 - 0

These three years, however, represent the longest period that Henry Purefoy
spent away from Shalstone, and must therefore be considered as an impor-
tant influence, given the rather narrow range of experience on which he
could draw.

Certainly he bore little resemblance to the prototype of the eighteenth
century squire drawn up by Macaulay, whose only reading would be
from the Bible and the fishing manuals of Izaak Walton. Purefoy was a
regular subscriber to the Gentleman's Magazine, the principal purveyor of
London politics and information, and to the Abstract of Acts of Parliament
passed this last Session, which suggests that he took his legal responsibilities
as a magistrate seriously, and tried conscientiously to keep up with changes
in legal practice. Much of the Shalstone library was dispersed after the death
of Mrs Purefoy, but a list of some of the volumes known to have been
represented will give some idea of their wide range of interests:

A Guide to Juries, setting forth their Antiquity, Power and Duty, from the
Common Law and Statutes. By a Person of Quality (London: 1699)
The Elements of Euclid (London: 1720)
The Secrets of Physick and Philosophy (London: 1633)
The Comedies of Plautus (London: 1739)
Bibliotheca Legum (London: 1742)
History of the Rebellion (London: 1745)
The Attorney's Practice Epitomized (London: 1746)
History of our National Debts and Taxes (London: 1751)