The Parish

The parish was for the eighteenth century squire a private empire, in which he enjoyed the privileges and responsibilities of status, as the major landowner and first citizen in the community. The letters in this section are so grouped that they illustrate the several agencies through which the authority of a squire could be felt and made effective.

Letters 1-6 deal with the responsibilities of being the parish's leading citizen. In any dispute with neighbouring communities, in any legal action which the parish might feel compelled to undertake as a body, or in any negotiation with London or the outside world at large, the squire would naturally be expected to give a clear lead. In many cases, this might involve him in a considerable personal expenditure of money, but it was an unavoidable corollary of holding the respect of the parish. The eighteenth century had a very clear idea of what was involved in 'supporting the dignity' of an office or position, and was censorious about those who failed in this responsibility. If the Purfoys were to command attention in the parish and among their peers in the county at large, the kind of burdens described in the letters had to be shouldered.

The parish priest was second only to the squire in local standing, and this group of people is of the first importance, in that they provided the backbone of the parish, and took on the responsibilities of the church establishment by virtue of their wealth, birth and literacy.

Letters 19-25 deal with the Purfoys' relationship with the respectable inhabitants of the parish. The term 'respectable' is used advisedly, as enshrining the eighteenth century belief that people so designated would never apply to the village authorities for poor relief, would never, in other words, involve the community in expense. They are dignified with the title 'Goodman' or 'Goodwife', are known to have employed servants of their own, and are the principal tenants of the Purfoys or, as carpenters and wheelwrights, are the village artisans serving a rural community. The farming families of Penell, Franklin, May and Friday make frequent appearances in the diaries, as does 'Simon Hobcraft the Carpenter', 'Zachary Jordan the ploughwright', and 'Mr Hunt the Baker'. Interestingly, Shalstone was apparently more stable in the eighteenth century than in the previous two hundred years. Terriers of land surviving from 1571 and 1646 give only three names which are familiar in the Purfoy diaries, suggesting that all the other families must have entered the parish after the later date. By contrast, a terrier of 1805 lists Penells, Franklins, Mays, Fridays and Hobcrafts as still living in the parish. By this yardstick, the community over which Henry Purfoy presided was in fact becoming more and more stable.

This group of people is of the first importance, in that they provided the respectable backbone of the parish, and took on the responsibilities of the parish offices. The Parish Clerk tithed crops on the Rector's behalf, took up collections in church, was responsible for the parish records, and polished the Purfoy pew for a wage of 2s. 6d. a week. The Parish Constable had the difficult and unpopular task of making provision for the poor. Finally, the two Churchwardens, who seem to have held office on a yearly basis, were responsible for collecting both national taxes, like the Window and Land...
Taxes, and also the impositions to meet local emergencies. The account books record that on 30 September 1737, Henry Purefoy 'paid Goodman Daniel Burman then for the Tax for the County Goal at 2d. in the pound'. The respectability and usefulness of these people gave them a claim to the squire's regard and protection. The scarcity of good tenants meant that the squire's authority could never be dictatorial, but rather that his relationship with this segment of village society was characterized by a mutual respect and a mutual fulfilling of obligation.

The final group of letters (26-40) deals with that submerged and impoverished element in the village, who only became prominent when their distress became a public issue. They appear in the diaries only in fleeting references to 'great Nan Woodcock the washerwoman' or 'Anne Mumford (maid to Mr Haws)'. Basically, they were treated with suspicion because at some stage they were likely to involve the rest of the parish in the expense of poor relief. By the Act of Settlement of 1662, the destitute had a right to claim assistance from the parish in which they were born, or from that in which they had last enjoyed a legal settlement. The last qualification was won by having lived quietly in a given community for a fixed term of years. The Purefoys' concern over maidservants giving birth to illegitimate children stemmed primarily from the knowledge that the parish would inevitably be put to expense for an indefinite period. Equally, no stranger could be accepted into the community, and thereby be able to claim settlement in Shalston, until his financial circumstances looked assured. The difficulties with the Jaycock and Woodcock families (letters 26-29 and 30-34) relate to the problem. They were people who had perpetually to be threatened, punished and exhorted, lest they became a permanent charge on the community. If possible, they would be forced to leave the parish altogether.

In their dealings with any element in the parish, however, Elizabeth and Henry betray a marked preference for the regular and the orderly. Any peculiarity, which might make an individual less receptive to the known methods of control, was noted in the diary. As was mentioned earlier, whenever Henry met Goodman Hawkwood, he never failed to note after his name the fact that he was a Quaker, and therefore escaped every Sunday from the influence of the squire and his priest. Equally, 'Mr Mack Whurr the Scotsman' was marked out by his curious nationality. Order and stability depended on the regular functioning of traditional practice. In a countryside in which Henry Purefoy was forced to postpone journeys by creditable rumours that the road was infested by bands of armed beggars, the emphasis on order and stability was not unwise. Eccentricities of religion, nationality or situation were by implication suspicious. As the following chapter suggests, the Purefoys performed their parish responsibilities with conscientiousness and rigour, and, not unreasonably in a contractual society, expected the rest of the community to do the same.

(a) THE SQUIRE

1. H.P. to John Jones

Shalstone, Wednesday, March the 2d 1736.

Goodman Jones,

Shalstone folks have always hitherto kept in repair Evershaw lane gate next Shalstone Cowpasture, & also kept in repair the two pieces of hedge we are on each side the gate across the end of the lane. Mr Sayer, notwithstanding out keeping this gate & hedge in repair, has cut down a large ash tree out of the hedge on the right side of the gate post. Pray let me know if ever you knew Shalstone folks cut the hedge or lop any of the trees in that hedge, & if you know the reason why we kept the hedge & gate in repair, we will oblige

Your friend & servit

H.P.

For /

Goodman John Jones at Wappenham /

This.

2. H.P. to Henry Sayer

Shalstone,

March the 11th, 1736.

Sir! /

Your workmen, who are ditching Evershaw lane, have cut down an ash

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18. H.P. to John Greaves

Shalstone,
Septemb’ the 19th new style 1752.

Mr. Greaves

I have awaited on Mr. Haws our minister about your affair & he appoints Monday the 2d day of October next new style for you or Mr. Gregory to come over here, when you may have from him a certificate out of Shalston Register Book of the pedigree of such of your family as are therein mentioned. Wishing you success

am

Your humble serv’t

1. By an Act of Parliament in 1752, England moved over from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar. Since this involved the loss of eleven days, it was important for letter writers to make it clear on which dating system they were operating.

2. The Greaves family was established in Shalston at least as early as 1646, and representatives of the family were still in the parish during Henry Purefoy’s lifetime.

3. She was the widow of Simon Hobcraft, the village carpenter, and her son took over both his father’s name and his father’s function within the village.

4. The Penell family held the office of gamekeeper at Shalstone throughout this period.

For / Mr. John Greaves at Broughton near Newport Pagnell
Bucks
By London

19. H.P. to Mr. Bell

Shalstone,
April the 28th, 1736.

Sir!

Mary Hobcraft the bearer hereof waits on you to prove her late husband’s will. I presume there is no occasion for an inventory by reason there is no cattle or crop, & what effects there are they be left to her only. I entreat

the favour of you to dispatch her (if you can), so that she may be at home before ’tis dark, for she is ancient. This will oblige

Your very humble serv’t

H.P.

For / Mr. Bell at Buckingham
This.

20. H.P. to Mr. Bell

Shalstone, May the 19th, 1736.

Sir!

I have sent the Widdo Penell the bearer hereof to Aylesbury, according to Cooper the Apparitor’s summons. I ordered her to wait on you at the Visitation at Buckingham soon after her husband’s death, which she tells me she did & proffered to make affidavit she was not worth £3 &c. And that you was pleased to decline administering the oath to her, but, when you had examined her, bad her give the Apparitor a shilling & told her her business was done. ’Tis very hard upon this poor woman who has 5 small children, & all her effects to the very bed she lies on were seized by my mother for rent, and the inventory came to but £3 odd shillings more than her rent, & when we came to sell some of the cattle we found, if they had all been then sold, they would not have fetched money sufficient to discharge the rent. Upon her friends’ importunity, my mother permits her to go on with the stock to see if she can breed up her family in case times should mend, for otherwise ’tis impossible she should go on. The poor woman is a very painstaking person, & ’twill be very hard if she is to pay anything for process wth the Apparitor threatens her with, when she actually proffered to take the oath before you, which I chid her for not doing when she came home. I am inclined to think the old Apparitor dying (who had her shilling) occasioned this mistake from the son, who might give you a wrong information.

I am, Sir!

Your very humble Serv’t

H.P.

P.S. I hope you will be pleased to discharge her that she may be at home again at night.
her & that she would stand at house; so soon as ever he brought her home & kept her in the stable, she broke out with the mange & that was the reason he says she was kept at grass as a distempered mare so long before he had her . . . if you'll take the mare again, Mr Hunt says he is willing to give you a guinea with her or else to pay you three pounds by a Lady day next - and I believe that is as much as he is able to do - He seems concerned you should intend to arrest him, or else I believe I could not have prevailed on him to do what he now proposes - if you were to arrest him, there will be nothing for you, for I must have my years rent first and then if I was to seize I verily believe there will be no overplus - if you will let me have your answer, I will endeavour to get the money for you against you come down at Lady day next, & am

Your humble servant
H.P.

For /
M' Conquest Jones at his house
the next door to the Angel
Inn in Piccadilly.
London.

82. H.P. to Jemmy Paine

Shalstone,
March the 14th, 1738.

Mr Paine /

The tenants complain of your cuts of furze you bought standing in the Cowpasture (which if cut down it would be the better for their cattle now the grass begins to grow), so I desire you would have them cut down forthwith & get off the ground as soon as may be. which will oblige

Your humble serv't
H.P.

For /
M' Jemmy Paine a Baker
at Brackley.

P.S. If you don't take the furze away you will be the loser, for I have promised them the ground shall be rid.

83. H.P. to John Lucas

Shalstone,
Wednesday, March the 26th, 1740.

M' Lucas /

I have not seen you here according to appointm' [and] must tell you of the information I have receiv'd since I saw you.

Eight years ago, I cleaned the mill dam at Huntmill, & then the workmen (who are now living) carried the mud taken out of the dam on my land & when Old Savage rented Huntmill my mother cleaned it & laid it on likewise, & when there was a dispute about the island at Huntmill, M' Bly told me the river was mine as far as the mill dam extended, & now I understand all mill dams are originally dug out of the owner's land. Therefore desire you will inform Thomas Yates either to deliver me the mud again or else to make me satisfaction for it before Wednesday next, otherwise shall be obliged to proceed against him according to law.

I am your humble servant
H.P.

For /
M' John Lucas
This.

84. H.P. to M' Morgan

Shalstone,
August 22nd, 1741.

M' Morgan /

I am sorry to tell you my servants & workmen have cut one of your oaks instead of my own. It is not used, & I should be glad if you would come or send somebody to see it, that I make recompense for their misdoings. I understand it to be yours but as yesterday - if you have a mind I should have it, if you chose one man & I another what they two decide I will stand to.1 I have not cut a tree down at this time of year but for a beam to lay a parlour floor upon, & I sent them to choose one of the most mazzardly2 sticks & the least lop because of the bark. I hear the lop of this oak will throw out about a score of fagots and a small matter of hard wood. I hear

1 This recourse to unofficial arbitration, with each of the disputants appointing one referee, was a favourite device for settling disputes.

2 Mazzardly: dialect word meaning knotty or knarled.
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103. H.P. to M’ South

Shalstone,
Wednesday, Nov’t the 18th, 1747.

M’ South,/

M’ Land the Attorney of Buckingham acquaints me that you want a
bargain of about three score pounds a year. I have a bargain of seven yard
lands in the open field with the homestall to set next Lady Day. The yearly
rent is eight pounds the yard land & there is a close let with them, w’th
altogether make sixty three pounds a year—if this suits you, I shall be
willing to accept you as a tenant. Your answer directed to be left for me at
M’ Benam’s at the Horseshoe aleshouse at Brackley will oblige

Your friend to serve you
H.P.

For /

M’ South at Astrop

This.

Carriage paid two pence.

104. H.P. to John Wentworth (Cresswell)

Shalstone,
Novemb’ the 22th, 1747.

Sir /

James Reeves rents £39 a year of me, most of it ploughed land, &
leaves my bargain at Lady Day next. I heard he had a mind to take a grazing
bargain, for less stocks than that ploughed land & I believe him sufficient
to rent your bargain of £50 a year. He is a very civil fellow & I hope he
will make you a good tenant. My mother has been ill and taking mercury
some time, otherwise we had waited on you & M’ Wentworth before this.
We are very glad to hear of your healths which we wish may continue, &
desire our compliments may be acceptable to you both & I am Sir!

Your obliged humble serv’t
H.P.

For /

John Wentworth Esq
at Lillingston Lovell

This.

105. H.P. to Alexander Croke

Shalstone,
January the 9th, 1748.

Sir! /

I have lately had several young ash trees cut up in Shalstone Cowpasture
& such shameful destruction made of the wood there that, unless I can put
a stop to it, in a little time I shall have no wood left there. Tho’ I give the
poor of Shalstone leave to pick up rotten wood there, tho’ there is enough
for ’em they won’t be content without making such waste as above, so I
desire you would send me a Lodging Warr’ to search not only for the
present but as often as any offences shall be committed on my wood &c. If
it should require two Justices hands to it, must beg the favour of you to get
another Justice’s hand besides your own, w’th you may do at the next Qr.
Sessions at Aylsham if business should call you there, & send it by some
hand or other to M’ Wallbank’s at Buckingham. But if you don’t attend the
Sessions, pray send the Warrant by the bearer signed by yourself under a
cover, & I will procure another hand to it. Pray don’t inform the bearer of
anything of this lest it should take wind. What the Warrant comes to
he has orders to pay. This will much oblige

Your very humble serv’t
H.P.

Pray let the Warr’ be directed not only to the Constable of Shalstone, but
to any other Constable in the County, or otherwise if they should abscond
they will not be so easily taken.

For /

Alexander Croke Esq at
Marsh Gibbon/

This.

106. H.P. to M’ Spiers

Shalstone,
Wednesday, Jan’y the 31st, 1749.

M’ Spiers /

Now my ash is viewed, I desire you will come over here tomorrow or

This.
126. E.P. to Mrs Porter

Shalstone,
October the 21st, 1739.

Dear Sister /

I received yours a considerable time ago and am glad to hear your son Porter & his spouse were to visit you. We should have been glad if it had been in our power to have done your younger son any acceptable service, but, as it is now war time, I hope you will find it no difficulty to have your expectations answered as to him as he has been bred to sea affairs. All our friends who could have served him are either dead or who have no interest at Court. I have my health pretty well now, all but a sore leg which has been very bad as I have been in health. It is a scorbutic humour & I cannot learn when it is to be well. My son presents his duty to you & we both desire our love & service to your family, & shall be glad to hear of all your healths, which concludes me

Your affect: sister

E.P.

For /

Mrs Porter at
Scarborough
in Yorkshire
By London.

127. E.P. to Thomas Robotham

Shalstone,
March the 8th, 1740.

... I know you used to have acquaintance of Lincolnshire gentlemen, & I desire you would enquire if there be such a person as Mr. Kent an Attorney of Grantham in Lincolnshire, & what character he bears in that country, & what sort of a person of a man he is.

A stranger man came to us as from Mr. Porter on the 5th of this instant March at 7 in the morn., & said his name was Kent, and that he was an attorney of Grantham in Lincolnshire. He came as he pretended upon a very impudent errand from Mr. Porter, which you shall know more of when I have the character of the man. As to his person, he was very near six foot high, of a fair & fresh complexion, with a white periwig, a short loose greatcoat, & a blue-grey coat with gold buttons, & a black waistcoat, & a coloured handkerchief about his neck, & had a young fellow with him about 20 years old in a black cap. Both of them were very well mounted & they lay the night before they came here at the Lord Cobham's Inn, as he said. When you have enquired if there is such a person & his character, let me know by the post as soon as may be, we will oblige

Your humble servant

E.P.

P.S. Our service & respects are with yourself & Mr. Robotham.

For / Mr. Robotham . . .

London.

128. E.P. to Thomas Robotham

Shalstone,
March the 18th, 1740.

I rece'd Mr. Robotham's letter of the 12th instant. I am glad to hear Mr. Kent is a man of good character, for he came in such a manner I was afraid he was an incendiary, his coming so early in the morning & refusing to send in his business, and desiring to speak with me alone without anybody's letter or name to introduce him very much surprized me, till my son looking out of the window & asking him his business, he said he came from Mr. Porter, upon which my son asked him to walk in, & we went down to him. Upon my enquiring his business, he told me he came from Mr. Porter, who said that I would be bound with him for £3,000, and that one Mr. Preston was to advance the money & asked if such a person did not live hereabouts. I told him there was no such person as Mr. Preston in this country, & that I would not be bound with Mr. Porter for 3 farthings, & that I had not seen him these 7 years. Mr. Kent seemed shocked when I told him I had not seen Mr. Porter for 7 years, & that I would not be bound with him, & so took his leave, & I could not help telling him he came with the Tale of a
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Tub without a bottom.1 To be sure, Mr Porter must tell him some strange
story to give him an assurance to come in such a manner. I desire you will
write to Mr Porter & let him know that Mr Kent called here on the 5th
of March last in this manner, & that unless Mr Porter writes me word by the
post that he never had any will of mine in his keeping, & that I never was
bound with him nor for him for any sum of money whatsoever, nor ever
promised to be bound with him, & that I never gave him any sum of money
more than 2 or 3 guineas at a time, and that I have not seen him these 7
years last past, - if Mr Porter does not comply with this, & that soon to, I
shall be obliged toadvertise something of this nature in the newspapers.

I seldom go into any company in this country, but I am told Mr Porter
reports I gave him £4,000 this last year, besides other sums before, wh.
you know is false. I pray you would not spare Mr Porter, but inform him of
all these particulars, for I am really apprehensive it has some mischievous
design against me, to prevent which I am advised by my friends toadvertise
what I have mentioned unless he makes me the above acknowledgement, for
I think, if Mr Porter has no ill design in this matter, it is well if he is in his
right senses, for I never heard of such a thing in my life before. We both
join in our service & respects to yourself & Mrs Robotham, & I am

Your humble servant

E.P.

For /

Mr Robotham . . .
London.

129. E.P. to Mrs Jane Conington

Shalstone,
December the 31st, 1740.

Madam /

I rece'd yours of the 20th instant, & in answer thereto I do assure you I
have never given my nephew Ralph Porter one farthing of money since he
has been married not some time before, not never shall give him anything

for I have a son of my own & if I had ten times what I have I would not
leave it him. My nephew lost my favour on account of some little indiscre-
tions here, & soon after, I heard he had bought chambers at Barnard's Inn,
or rather built them at a great expense, & put himself in a garb of velvet
silk, gold & silk, & a fine diamond ring at a greater expense, & after that I
discarded him knowing that his circumstances could not bear anything of
that kind, for I suppose my sister Porter has £40 a year in land at Old
Newton in Yorkshire for her life & he has it after her in fee, & I suppose my
sister may have to the value of £1,000 besides at her disposal, as he told me
for I have not seen my sister Porter since the year 1716.

As to what Dr Trimnell said about my giving my nephew a great sum
of money, I heard it from several of my neighbours that Dr Trimnell should
say so, & when the Dr. was at Astrop Wells last season, I took care to send
him word there was nothing in it. I look on the Doctor to be a very worthy
gentleman & am sorry to bear my nephew has used him as he has. I doubt
my nephew takes his baseness from the Porters, for I never knew any of my
father or mother's kindred behave as he has done. I think his father made
a poor improvement of the fortune he had with my sister, for he had £3,000
with her at my father's death besides what he had with her before.

I once thought my nephew Porter as likely to get an estate by his business
as any young fellow whatsoever, & if I could have prevailed on him to have
been advised by me & my son, we thought no otherwise than to have
encouraged him & to have been kind to him.

I hope Mr Porter as an heiress has kept her land to herself at least. He
reported, when he came to Town & bought the chariot & fine equipage,
that he had £400 a year in land left him by the Conington family exclusive
of you, & there was a report that he had got your money in his hands wh.
came from a merchant in the City, & that he had put £800 thereof in the
late Alderman Childs' hands to take up to pay tradesmen, & he once gave
out he had my will in his keeping wh. is entirely false. I aver this for truth
and wish it may be serviceable to you.

I am, Madam,
Your humble servant

E.P.

For /

Mrs Jane Conington

... in Lincoln in Lincolnshire.

By London.
Since my unhappy kinsman is fallen into yours & Mr Clarke’s hands, I question not but you will use him with tenderness & care.

I am at times afflicted with the gout, so can’t at present entertain company here, but hope when I come to Town next summer to see you there. My mother & self desire to give you & Mrs Jervoise the compliments of the season, & I am Sir!

Your affectionate kinsman &
very humble servant.

H.P.

For /
Richard Jervoise Esq
at Mr Huddleston’s in
Bedford Street in
Covent Garden
London.

136. E.P. to Susannah Clarke

Shalstone,
February the 16th, 1745.

I received Mr Clarke’s letter of the 4th instant, & am very sorry to hear of my sister’s death, as I am that I could not have an account sooner that we might have gone into mourning for her, but now the time is almost expired. I am glad you did not give yourself the trouble of coming to Shalstone, for since I received the barbarous usage from your brother Ralph, I made a resolution never to see or have anything to do with any of the family of the Porters, & thereupon have settled my estate & what I have on my son Purefoy. Ralph was so great a favourite with my son & self, that we used him & intended him as a younger son in the family. His return was that he made me (as far as in him lay) a forgerer & a felon by bringing a woman down to Aylesbury & executing a counterfeit conveyance in my name for £4,946 10s. on Lord Cobham’s estate at Westbury, & when the Commissioners set on Ralph’s affairs in Lincolnshire, they sent up the deed by the attorney, who saw the woman sign it, to see if I was her, & when he saw me, he acknowledged I was not the woman, but that she was taller & bigger than me. This transcendent villany occasioned me a great deal of trouble as well as charge. Ralph also took an house in our neighbourhood & cheated the country of what plate & goods & money he could, & then made of it, which was a great trouble & disgrace also to us. The reason I did not acquaint my sister with this was I was not willing to add to her sorrow. I have not heard from her these 4 or 5 years; then she said she had a son at sea & desired us to endeavour to get some preferment in the navy for him, but I acquainted her it was not in my power. 'Tis well if Ralph is dead, otherwise, as he would have put an halter about my neck, I fear 'twould have been his fate. Adieu /

E.P.

For / Mrs Susannah Clarke living
near Allbrough gates in
Scarborough
Yorkshire

137. H.P. to Browne Willis

Shalstone,
March the 2d., 1745.

Sir !

I am favoured with yours of the 27th instant as likewise with another letter before that containing the Excl. History of Shalstone, both which are very perfect accounts of what they contain. As to the fee in the Herald’s Office, I will pay it you when I have the favour of seeing you. I have nothing more to request of you now but to have the civil history of Shalstone from the Conquest down to the present time, wch. I hope I shall have an opportunity to accomplish when I have the pleasure of waiting on you at Shalstone. If I could have the favour of you to dictate to me, I think verily I could take it down in an hour or an hour & an half’s time. If I could have the satisfaction of having your company one night, we have a little bedchamber for your man to lie in next to your bedchamber. With thanks for all favours, I am Sir !

Your obliged humble servant.

H.P.

For /
Browne Willis Esq at the
Plough Inn in Carey street near Lincoln’s Inn
London