Cumnor in the 1860s essay

A straggling line of scattered cottages with mud or rough stone walls uncemented and rude and low overhanging thatched roofs with here and there the bee hives on a bench by the gate in the low stone wall or a few brown faced urchins who peeped slily at the unaccustomed stranger…. (Anon 1850) .. ‘ We turned our back upon the line of cottages or huts perhaps they might be called’ the writer continued, ‘ .. Cumnor is at best a poor squalid place. Though lacking the intensity of urban life famously described by Engels (1844), Cumnor epitomizes aspects of a sharply polarised society with a land-less rural working class. This paper considers the relationship between the economic foundation of a Berkshire parish and its ‘ social structure’ (ie the pattern of social stratification and the practices and expectations underlying it). 1 It rests primarily on nominal record linkage, exploiting 1861 Census enumerators’ books, a trade directory for 1864 and an electoral register for 1865.

Similar linkage provides evidence of land ownership from an 1851 rating list. 2 Occupational Structure and Social Power The relationships that reproduced social structure in the 1860s, (including those in the workplace, between landlord and tenant, and relationships within households) worked themselves out at varying geographic scales. Some relations- those concerned with church, school and (potentially) politics- might have been primarily articulated at the parish scale, and these are considered in later sections.

The initial focus is on relations of production, and abstracting from varying relationships within households, on the occupational division of labour between householders. As Figure 1 shows starkly, in 1861 a single occupational group predominated in Cumnor- ‘ Agricultural and Animal

Husbandry Workers' (minor group 62 within the HISCO classification). 3 Together with ' Farmers' (minor group 61) they constituted 2. 3% of all householders. The absence of craftsmen and traders is equally striking.

Arguably the character of Cumnor suggested by the anonymous visitor's remarks stem primarily from the hierarchical position and economic power of the villagers (rather than dependence on agriculture). Assignment of particular occupations to levels of social power (using Van Der Putte and Miles 2005 SOCPO scheme), exposes the poor ' life chances' of the villagers. Their scheme (see Figure 2) brings together economic power represented by ownership or control of means of production, and cultural power.

Table 2 indicates that three fifths of Cumnor's householders exercised the very lowest level of social power- (ie had least potential to influence their destiny through control of scarce resources (cf Van Der Putte and Miles 2005 p63). The pattern of social power implied by the occupational classification is almost perfectly matched by relation to political enfranchisement. 4 Setting aside the question of why dependence on agriculture was so great, suggesting that such dependence of itself implies a specific social structure makes implicit assumptions about the organization of agricultural production.

Although in principle, this might have been undertaken by households controlling their own land, the distinction between ' farmers' and ' agricultural labourers' points to a division between capitalist farmers and a rural proletariat with nothing to sell but their labour-power. In the market economy of mid-nineteenth century Britain, the feasibility of particular

approaches to organizing agricultural production was checked by competitive pressures. Competitive grain production demanded economies of scale which were unlikely to be realized without capitalist production methods.

Grazing, and more particularly, dairying could by contrast be undertaken competitively in far smaller units, allowing local persistence of pre-capitalist relations(Reed 1984, Hall 1992, Allen 1992, Neeson 1993, Howkins 1994). The mix of agricultural products in particular areas reflected shared perceptions of comparative advantage (grounded in variation in soils, rainfall etc). By mid-century, England had been represented as two agricultural provinces –grain production being concentrated in the east, and grazing favoured in the west (Caird 1851).

The first BoT agricultural returns in 1866 provide a more nuanced picture in which Berkshire and Oxfordshire together had a relatively large area under corn, a relatively small area under permanent pasture, but were also important for sheep rearing. 5 Dominant perceptions prescribed for the locality a unified system of wheat growing and sheep rearing where ‘ grass lands do not reduce the production of food, but in addition to their own produce, .. enable the adjoining arable lands to increase their production’ (Smith 1863 p50).

Dominant perceptions militated against dairying in the country around Cumnor and favoured larger capitalist producers rather than smallholders. A precise distinction between smallholders and capitalist farmers is difficult (both are included within minor group 61). Assuming a need for wage labour

on any Cumnor holding of more than 60 acres, eight smallholding families are identified in Table 3 (roughly 4% of households) and assigned to Level 2 of the SOCPO schema. 6 Waged labour was essential to those fourteen capitalist farmers (listed in Table 4) whose holdings clearly exceeded this threshold.

They farmed 3465 acres in aggregate (an average holding of almost 250 acres). Local businessmen assigned to SOCPO Level 4, they approximated the ideal type described by classical economists such as David Ricardo; renting farms, providing working capital, advancing wages, organizing production and receiving profits. They represented about one householder in fifteen in Cumnor. The proportion of householders in the parish exercising the lowest level of social power reflects their place within this particular form of capitalist agriculture.

On the basis of an analysis of tax returns for 1860, Purdy (1861) provides a rule-of-thumb suggesting the division of revenue between the three classes: the yearly inco me of the Labourers is equal to the yearly rental of the landlords and to twice the yearly profits of the farmers. His paper suggests that farmers might typically have advanced ? 3. 40 an acre on rent and wage payments together, securing in return a profit of around 86 pence per acre. On this basis, the lessee of a typical Cumnor farm might have anticipated an annual income of around ? 215.

Extending this logic, the annual income of farm labourers' families might have been around ? 50 7 . Land Ownership and Occupation The power of landlords to shape local social structure was substantial and it will be argued

that Cumnor’s dependence on agriculture resulted primarily from the principal landowner’s perception of his interests. Influence might be exerted through controlling farm size, through controlling the supply of workers’ housing, or through control of agricultural practice through leases. In this paper such matters can only be imputed.

Cumnor was a close parish: in 1851 the principal landowner, Montagu Bertie, 6th Earl of Abingdon held four-fifths of its land. 8 Resident at Wytham Abbey in the adjoining parish, he controlled almost 16, 000 acres in Berkshire and Oxfordshire alone, with an annual rental value exceeding ? 23, 000 in 1873. 9 Although his Cumnor tenants included smallholders, his property within the parish (cottage and garden tenancies apart), was disproportionately allotted as substantial ‘ farms’, 10 in contrast to that of the lesser freeholders (see Figure 3).

Combining Census, rating assessment, and other information allows identification of the farms and farmers operating in Cumnor in the 1860s. The management of Bertie’s estate seems consonant with prevailing wisdom regarding farm size and farming practice. Chawley Farm provides an example. When Thomas Adams left the farm in 1861, it was managed on the sheep-corn system typical of Berkshire-Oxfordshire as a whole (albeit at a rather higher intensity). 11 For whatever reason, Charles Capel relinquished his adjoining tenancy at the same time. Holdings were reorganized.

Chawley Farm’s new tenant, Edward Nevell, lacked local roots, in contrast to Adams and Capel, having previously been bailiff of a very large Oxfordshire farm. He showed an apparent commitment to progressive, scientific farming

(being admitted to the Royal Agricultural Society in 1870) and employed 14 people to produce sheep and corn on 282 acres under a more complex rotational system than that of Adams. 12 The difference in the background of the farmers suggests a social distancing between master and men possibly more significant than differing agricultural practice.

Changes at Chawley suggest Berties's sympathy for and confidence in large-scale scientific capitalist agriculture, however great or small his active involvement may have been. Although most of Cumnor's capitalist farmers were Bertie's tenants (see Table 4), Blake's Lower Whitley Farm was leased from the Morrell family, the freehold of Ward's Bradley Farm was held by Merton College and William Deadman was himself the owner of the largest part of the land he farmed at Henwood. Some farms rented from other landowners were at times managed by bailiffs, creating an intermediate social stratum not found on Bertie's estate.

In 1861, William Claridge and James Fligh played this role, exercising a degree of control over labour and production (and are assigned to SOCPO Level 3). 13 Beyond Agriculture The effect of land-ownership on the social structure of Cumnor appears to extend beyond farm management. There is nothing in the organization of agricultural production or the social distance between farmers and farm labourers that accounts directly for the relatively modest engagement with other economic activity.

It appears that in 1861 only 9% of householders were involved in crafts and trades, a low figure compared with those found in recent studies of similar communities. It might be argued that proximity to Oxford reduced demand

for a range of trades (Goose 2000, Reay2004), but that same proximity provided domestic outworking opportunities realised in Cumnor to a relatively limited degree. There clearly were opportunities for further economic activity in Cumnor. To appreciate both the possibilities and the extent of their realization, consider the employment of women.

In 1861, a third of Cumnor women aged between 21 and 44 in the parish engaged in some formal employment. Domestic laundry work was significant in villages around Oxford, (notably Headington; Reay p62); twelve Cumnor women in seven separate households undertook laundry work. Hand finishing of machine-sewn clothes (or slopping) supplemented activity in villages around Abingdon (Reay p62); although slopworking is recorded in the Cumnor enumerators' books Cumnor only twice, domestic needleworking was significant to one household in eight.

Although gloving made a significant contribution to the economy of Eynsham across the Thames it was not recorded in Cumnor in 1861. 14 Arguably, the explanation of relatively limited participation should be sought in the exercise of the landowners' control over property. More crucially, promotion of trades and crafts demands release of land for building, but Bertie appears to have restricted such releases. Having a property income perhaps eighty times larger than the typical income of one of his tenant farmers, he could be indifferent to the rents foregone on 479 acres of pasture and woodland in the parish retained for his own use (possibly ? 50 pa). 15 That he seemed to avoid even modest physical development of Cumnor is therefore not particularly surprising.

Back in 1851, Bertie owned three quarters of the land in the parish, but controlled only two thirds of its dwellings. In contrast to other freeholders, the Berties had granted no long leases in Cumnor, frustrating property development, so that villagers were disproportionately accommodated on land controlled by others. 16 Moreover, the dwelling stock of the village- typified by the line of huts described by the visitor- was unusually poor with a modal annual value of less than ? 2. 60- see Figure 4). Across the South Midlands in the 1850s one dwelling in four had an annual value of ? 6 or more (Newmarch 1859), but in Cumnor the value of only seven dwellings exceeded ? 6 (see Figure 4). Neither was this handful of more substantial dwellings on Bertie's land. 17 More generally, Bertie's restriction of economic life is suggested by the diversity of activity in those small ' islands' within the parish outside his control.

Here, lessees had taken the opportunity to build housing, freeholders allowing or encouraging its use as shops, or workshops. Before 1851 eight Henwood Cottages had been built (styled ' New Town' in the rating assessment) and were under the control of two of the farmers- William Deadman and William Midwinter. Residents included the tailor Hannah Bridger, and the seamstress Mary Enoch. 18 The principal such island lay between Abingdon Road and Leys Road where the freehold belonged to St John's College Oxford, and small ' owners' let property.

Only fourteen Cumnor traders (review) are listed in the directory for 1864, but at least nine of them worked from this small quarter. Jane Farnell ran her grocery business here. Here were all but one of Cumnor's pubs, and its nonconformist chapel. William Barrett's possession of a tiny copyhold estate

provided him with space for his carpenter’s shop, gave a foothold for other traders and ensured his entitlement to vote. Robert and William Bennett the two shoemakers listed in the trade directory lived here, Robert’s wife Elizabeth working as a shoe binder.

This little cluster of properties was also home to at least 19 of Cumnor’s 29 domestic clothing workers. 19 The lesser freeholders thus provided opportunities for a range of services beyond those accommodated by Bertie (see Figure 5), and hence for engagement in occupations allowing more autonomy than that accorded to agricultural labourers. As Figure 6 suggests, this was critical to the presence within Cumnor of particular individuals at SOCPO Level 4 (eg grocers and publicans) or at Level 3 (eg shoemakers and carpenters).

If capitalist agriculture implied social polarization, the actions of the principal landowner tended to ensure that Cumnor became a single-class locale. Reproducing Social Structure Expectations constituting social structure are continuously reproduced in daily life usually without deliberate intent. In Cumnor in the 1860s, conscious actions through parish institutions sought to stabilize or modify social expectations and to promote social harmony. A new school was opened in 186120, and a parish reading room by 1867. 1 In 1861 almost half of Cumnor children attended school, participation being higher among tenants of the lesser freeholders. It is not suggested that Bertie actively discouraged participation, but his power as landlord was not used to enforce it. The response of the farmers to the school was mixed. In 1861, few of them had children of school age. Robert Haynes and William Deadman attended its opening; Haynes eight grandchildren and Deadman’s niece

being scholars. Frederick Dawson – Cumnor's ' scientific' farmer of the time- was not present 22.

His children were educated elsewhere, developing very different expectations to those of the village labourers; his second daughter Harriett began her married life as Mrs Noblett Ruddock in 1872 with a honeymoon in Paris. 23 When Nevell moved to Chawley, the education of his children followed a similar path, a governess being employed. 24 A school for the villagers might intensify rather than moderate social divisions, and without farmers' children the classroom was more solidly proletarian than the village (see Figure 7).

It was, however, the annual celebration of ' Harvest Home' from 1866 that provided the greatest opportunities for publicly acknowledging the dependence of rural society on agriculture, and for overt reiteration of the proper roles of differing classes. This form of celebration was a new tradition, growing popular across the country in the 1860s, instituted through an established church in the face of rural social tension (see Obelkevich 1976). In Cumnor they started with a church service (including an address from a visiting preacher), followed by a meal provided by the farmers for farmworkers and their families.

Speeches followed- proposing and responding to toasts- before a programme of races and dancing. From 1867 this was complemented by a horticultural show. 25 The clergy stressed cooperation: ' farmers and labourers were mutually dependent on each other', remarked the Rev Coxe in 1868, hoping that ' they would grow in peace, charity and love together. ' 26 A visiting

preacher might, however, seek to show the labourers particular benefits of Cumnor’s social structure and the underlying organization of agriculture.

Alluding to the Prussian annexation of Alsace-Lorraine the preacher of 1870 explained that ‘ We had large farmers, but should such a devastating wave roll over the country, they would be ruined, and the consequence would be that the labourers would not be able to get employment. The case was more pitiful for those in France, the whole of the land being held by small proprietors, who farmed their own land, and should the Prussians lay waste and take away their crops, nothing but ruin and misery would be the result’ 27 The Harvest Home showed who had the power to be heard.

While banners might have read ‘ Masters and Men’, or ‘ Labour Conquers All’ , there were no toasts to the labourers alone, and hence no need for a labourers’ voice. More subtly, a hierarchy appears amongst the masters, with the scientific farmers – those least deeply rooted in the parish- playing the largest public roles. Thus it was Edward Nevell who organized the successive horticultural competitions and who in 1869 and 1870 replied to the toast to the farmers and labourers. In 1868, this latter role fell to the other prominent scientific farmer, Frederick Dawson. 8 Members of long-settled farming families played much lesser roles, and the content of their speeches was not reported. 29 In this way the cultural power of particular farmers- underpinned by education and strengthened through participation in professional networks -came to reinforce their class position. In Cumnor as elsewhere, the ‘ capitalist vanguard’ became the ‘ prop of traditionalism’ (cf Obelkevich 1976 p14). The Harvest Home showed who was in control. The

speeches of the scientific farmers developed- in an assured manner- the theme of cooperation promoted by the clergy.

Dawson in 1868 held that ‘ these harvest festivals proved the growing influence of all classes. ’ Edward Nevell’s 1869 speech allowed him to quietly reassert the farmers’ authority. Remarking that ‘ it was a great pleasure to see around him every face he saw there last year,’ he added ‘ that he had ‘ no cause of ill will with his labourers during the past year and he hoped every farmer in the parish could say the same,’ thereby providing a reminder of the power of the masters to determine who should be waged. 30 The Harvest Home showed who had sufficient power to stay away.

The vicar clearly intended that all parties should be brought together, and most of Cumnor’s capitalist farmers were incorporated. 31 The principal landowner, however, seems to have responded with measured condescension. Noting his absence in 1867, the visiting preacher proposed a toast ‘ to the health of a nobleman who lived in the neighbourhood, to whom the chief portion of the property in the parish belonged, and one of whose family he did expect would have been among them on that occasion to show that the owners of the soil sympathize with the occupiers and tillers of the soil’ (emphasis added). 2 Reflection on the 1867 Harvest Home explains much of what was distinctive about the social structure of Cumnor.

The distancing of Bertie from his labourers contrasts with the central place taken that same week at the Harvest Home at Hughenden twenty miles away by its principal landowner, Benjamin Disraeli. Moreover, Disraeli’s engagement with full employment ‘ at good wages,’ with the significance of

rural manufactures, with the construction and improvement of cottages on his estate indicates an approach starkly different to Montagu Bertie’s . 3 At a time when Disraeli was actively enfranchising fractions of the working class, modestly dispersing social power and (at the same time) impeding broader class consciousness; in his role as landlord, Bertie was reinforcing dependence on agriculture, frustrating possibilities for economic diversification and thereby encouraging polarisation of social power. The social structure of Cumnor in the 1860s manifests in an almost ideal form the projection of capitalist relations of agricultural production in a close parish.