

'The Shame of Me and My Poor Ruinate House':

Cust, Richard

DOI:

[10.1080/0047729X.2023.2174794](https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2023.2174794)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Cust, R 2023, 'The Shame of Me and My Poor Ruinate House': The Fourth Earl of Huntingdon and the Decline of Aristocratic Power in Elizabethan Leicestershire', *Midland History*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 21-48.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2023.2174794>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

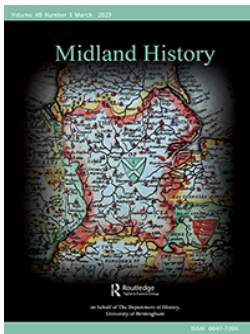
Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



'The Shame of Me and My Poor Ruinate House': The Fourth Earl of Huntingdon and the Decline of Aristocratic Power in Elizabethan Leicestershire

Richard Cust

To cite this article: Richard Cust (2023) 'The Shame of Me and My Poor Ruinate House': The Fourth Earl of Huntingdon and the Decline of Aristocratic Power in Elizabethan Leicestershire, *Midland History*, 48:1, 21-48, DOI: [10.1080/0047729X.2023.2174794](https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2023.2174794)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2023.2174794>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 20 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 756



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

‘The Shame of Me and My Poor Ruinate House’: The Fourth Earl of Huntingdon and the Decline of Aristocratic Power in Elizabethan Leicestershire

Richard Cust

Department of History, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT



This article focusses on the Leicester parliamentary election of 1601 as a moment that exposed the rapid decline in the power of an aristocratic family. It analyses the various components of the third earl of Huntingdon’s dominance of Leicestershire for much of Elizabeth’s reign and the causes of the unravelling of this following his death in 1595. Foremost among these were the political failings of the fourth earl which destroyed the family’s dynastic solidarity, forfeited religious leadership of the shire, undermined their position at court and led to a loss of influence over the county gentry and Leicester corporation. Gorge Belgrave’s defiance of him in the 1601 election accentuated these faults. However, under the fifth earl, during the early Stuart period, the family recovered much of its power and authority which highlighted the political resources and advantages enjoyed by ‘ancient noble’ families, such as the Hastings.

KEYWORDS

Aristocracy; puritanism; honour; dynasticism; elizabethan; hastings; grey; leicestershire

In April 1602 George, fourth earl of Huntingdon wrote to his friend Sir Robert Cecil lamenting his fate at the hands of George Belgrave esq, a Leicestershire gentleman who had piled ‘insolencies’ and ‘dishonour’ upon him through ‘his false imputation of my misgovernment’ and his ‘scorn at Leicester’. This was a ‘scandal . . . witnessed by the parliament, court and country to the shame of me and my poor ruinate house’.¹ There was a certain amount of hyperbole in this because Huntingdon was desperate to get the privy council to arrest Belgrave before he could flee overseas. But he was also acutely conscious that Belgrave’s challenges had revealed a collapse in the power of the Hastings that had simply not been evident a few years before and that left him, as head of the family, exposed to bitter humiliation.

We will return to the Belgrave case. This article is intended to be about more than this. It is based on the premise that the investigation of decline and failure is just as interesting and informative as success and achievement. It is a truism that dominant systems of political power are essentially impermanent. They are , generally, a matter of

CONTACT Richard Cust  R.P.CUST@bham.ac.uk  Department of History, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

¹Hatfield House, Hertfordshire (HH), Hatfield MS, 92.109.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

individuals or coalitions operating at specific moments in time pulling together and shaping particular sets of circumstances to their advantage. All too often the impression of dominance is illusory, based on a perception of the impregnability of the current regime and the lack of a feasible alternative. But leaders and commanding coalitions pass away, circumstances change and the illusion of invincibility can be shattered by events. What appeared permanent can, in retrospect, look all too vulnerable and transient, and it is in the moment of collapse that the features that made it effective and successful in the first place are often laid bare. This is the rationale for looking more closely at the processes by which a local aristocratic power structure in Elizabethan England was diminished and broken down. The Hastings hegemony in Leicestershire was summed up in what the *History of Parliament* has described as a control over county elections ‘unparalleled’ in any other shire.² Yet, within little more than five years it had collapsed to the point at which the head of the family could be defied and humiliated in the manner described by Earl George. An analysis of how and why this happened can tell us a good deal about the nature of aristocratic power in Elizabethan England.

It should be emphasized at the outset that this is not, primarily, intended as a contribution to the broad debates that have taken place about aristocratic decline and crisis in early modern England. It may offer insights that can be applied to these debates, but it is about something more fleeting and impermanent: the short-term collapse of a family’s local political power. There are a number of striking examples of this happening in Tudor England: the downfall of the duke of Buckingham in 1521, the collapse of the power of the Percies, earls of Northumberland, in 1537 or the destruction of the duke of Suffolk in Mary’s reign. Most of these were the result of some catastrophic event, such as an act of treason and the consequent attainder of a family’s estates. Hassell Smith brilliantly documented the impact of the removal of Thomas Howard, fourth duke of Norfolk, for the politics of Elizabethan Norfolk following his treason and execution in 1572. Overnight it created a power vacuum that different groupings amongst the gentry competed to fill, plunging the county into decades of political in-fighting.³ No such catastrophe happened to the earls of Huntingdon, unless the death of the third earl can be described as such. But within a few years of his demise the Hastings hegemony had crumbled and Leicestershire, like Norfolk, was rife with factional conflict.

The Third Earl of Huntingdon in Leicestershire

Claire Cross has provided a superb account of the third earl of Huntingdon at the height of his powers in Leicestershire.⁴ The foundation of this, as was invariably the case with aristocratic dynasties in Elizabethan England, was the family’s territorial possessions. These were centred on two blocs of manors in Leicestershire that had been in the hands of the Hastings since at least the late fifteenth century. To the south

²P. W. Hasler, ed., *The History of Parliament. House of Commons 1558–1603*, 3 vols. (London: HMSO for History of Parliament Trust, 1981), i, pp. 192–3.

³A. Hassell Smith, *County and Court, Government and Politics in Norfolk 1558–1603* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁴M. C. Cross, *The Puritan Earl. The Life of Henry Hastings Third Earl of Huntingdon 1536–1595* (London: Macmillan, 1966), chps. 2 & 4.

and west of Leicester were their ancestral estates, around Kirby Muxloe and Wistow; then in the north-west of the county, the manors around Ashby-de-la-Zouch given to William Lord Hastings by Edward IV to support his title, and the location for the castle that he built in the 1470s and 1480s.⁵ When the third earl of Huntingdon acquired his title in 1560 he inherited these estates, together with extensive landholdings in the home counties and the southwest that had come into the family via his mother Catherine Pole and his great-grandmother Mary Baroness Hungerford. But at the same time, he also inherited considerable debts that he himself added to during his lifetime. This forced him into undertaking major land sales and mortgaging of estates which eventually led to the alienation of estimated 94 manors amounting to more than £100,000 worth of landed property. In pursuing this course, however, he followed a careful strategy designed to protect his position in Leicestershire. The first estates to go were those in the far-flung counties of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, followed by others in Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. He held back as long as possible from alienating property in Leicestershire and when he did sell here it was as far as possible to his four brothers, George, Edward, Francis and Walter, each of whom had been left a generous endowment by their father, the second earl. Loughborough and Castle Donington went to George; Leicester Abbey to Edward; Market Bosworth, that he himself had been able to purchase from his uncle, Edward Lord Hastings of Loughborough, to Francis; and Braunstone and Kirby Muxloe to Walter.⁶ This ensured that across the western hundreds of Guthlaxton, Sparkenhoe and West Goscote there continued to be solid blocs of tenants, bailiffs, estate managers and retainers who were primarily dependants of the Hastings family.

In spite of his indebtedness, the third earl was also able to maintain an impressive household at Ashby Castle, which in 1564 numbered 77 servants, including 10 gentlemen and 26 yeomen. By the standards of the leading aristocratic households of the day this was not particularly large; but it was far bigger than any other household in west Leicestershire.⁷ The only family in the region that could rival the Hastings in terms of territorial power was the Manners, earls of Rutland, based at Belvoir Castle in the far north-east of the shire. The household establishment of the second and third earls in the mid-sixteenth century was around a hundred and they enjoyed a reputation for particularly lavish hospitality. But the estates that serviced the castle were scattered across Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and parts of Yorkshire rather than being concentrated in a single shire. Inevitably this gave them less territorial clout.⁸

The political fortunes of leading aristocratic families, however, depended on much more than just landed possessions. They also rested to a very considerable extent on their ability to navigate the treacherous currents of mid-Tudor court politics. Hassell Smith's assessment of the fourth duke of Norfolk is that the chief cause of his downfall was 'his aloofness from the court' and his failure to engage in the 'constant application to intrigue, negotiation and courtly behaviour which made for success in sixteenth

⁵Ibid., pp. 4–5, 69.

⁶Cross, *Puritan Earl*, chp.3 (see map of Leicestershire estates p. 69); M. C. Cross, 'Supervising the finances of the third earl of Huntingdon, 1580–1595', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research (BIHR)*, xl (1967), 34–49. Bodleian Library, Oxford (Bodl.), Carte MS 77, fos. 286–7; A. Thrush, ed., *The House of Lords 1604–29*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for The History of Parliament Trust, 2021), iii, pp. 24–5.

⁷Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 86; L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558–1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 212.

⁸L. Stone, *Family and Fortune. Studies in Aristocratic Finance in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 169–173, 185–90; *The House of Lords 1604–29*, iii, pp. 316–21.

century politics'.⁹ This was not a charge that could be laid at the door of either Henry, the third earl of Huntingdon or his father, Francis, the second earl. Both were astute and, in their earlier years, assiduous courtiers. Henry was educated in the intellectually precocious and staunchly protestant household of the future Edward VI. Francis grew up at the court of Henry VIII and then under Edward proceeded to hitch his fortunes to those of John Dudley, duke of Northumberland. He became one of the duke's most trusted lieutenants in the early 1550s and, as part of the project to put Lady Jane Grey on the throne married his son to Northumberland's daughter, Catherine. Huntingdon and the young Lord Hastings were arrested and sent to the Tower at the same time as Northumberland; but they were quickly able to make their peace with Queen Mary through the good offices of the second earl's wife, Catherine Pole, grand-daughter of Mary's former governess, and his brother Sir Edward Hastings who was one of the first to declare his support for the queen. Huntingdon and his son then moved swiftly to accommodate themselves to the new regime in spite of their protestant sympathies. At the time of Wyatt's rebellion, the second earl quelled the threat of a rebellion in Leicestershire led by Jane Grey's father the duke of Suffolk. He then conducted the duke to the Tower and served as one of the commissioners at his trial.¹⁰

The subsequent attainder and execution of the leaders of the Grey clan had the effect of removing the Hastings' main rivals from Leicestershire politics for several generations. Like the Hastings, the Greys had established themselves in the shire in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth century. The centre of their patrimony was the estates around their two major residences at Bradgate Park and Groby Castle in Charnwood Forest, between Leicester and Ashby. The two families had been on different sides in the Wars of the Roses and violent clashes between their supporters were still taking place in the 1520s. The Suffolk author of the *Vita Mariae Reginae* referred to the 'perpetual enmity' between the between them as a fact of political life at Mary's accession.¹¹ The eclipse of the Greys was, perhaps, the most important factor in ensuring the Hastings' dominance of the shire under Elizabeth. But the advantage that this provided was cemented by the courtly skills of the third earl.

Under Queen Mary he built a considerable reputation for himself at court in spite of his avowedly protestant religious beliefs. His mother, his uncle, Sir Edward (later Baron Hastings of Loughborough) and his great uncle, Cardinal Reginald Pole, all stood high in the queen's favour and made every effort to co-opt him to the new regime. He responded with apparent enthusiasm, becoming a regular attender at court after his appointment as a gentleman of the chamber to King Philip in 1554. Great uncle Pole, one of the leading humanist intellectuals of his day, also took a fatherly interest in his welfare and education, on one occasion encouraging him to undertake an English

⁹Hassell Smith, *County and Court*, pp. 22, 26.

¹⁰Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 7–13; M. C. Cross, 'Hastings, Francis, second earl of Huntingdon, 1513/14-1560' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*, ed. by H. C. Mathew and B. Harrison, 60 vols, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xxv, pp. 740–1; E. W. Ives, *Lady Jane Grey. A Tudor Mystery* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 148, 185, 187, 192–3, 244; D. M. Loades, *Two Tudor Conspiracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 25–34, 100–1.

¹¹*The House of Lords 1604–29*, ii, pp. 850–3; S. T. Bindoff, ed., *House of Commons 1509–1558*, 3 vols. (London: The History of Parliament Trust, 1982), i, pp. 128–9; K. Bridger, 'It is no walking for thee in the high wey: gentry encounters, hierarchy and the Leicestershire landscape in the records of Star Chamber, c.1496–1547', *Midland History*, 42 (2017), 159–82; 'The *Vita Mariae Reginae* of Robert Wingfield of Branton' in *Camden Miscellany*, XXVIII, ed. by D. MacCulloch (Camden Soc., 4th ser., xxix, London: Offices of The Royal Historical Society, UCL, 1984), p. 280.

translation of a humanist work that they had both read together, Osorius's *De Nobilitate*.¹² The young Lord Hastings was coming to be recognized as a role model for the classically educated courtier-nobleman of the day. When Sir Thomas Hoby translated Castiglione's *The Courtier* into English in 1556, he dedicated it to him as an exemplar of 'the courtly fashions, comely exercises and noble virtues that unawares have from time to time crept into you and already with practice and learning taken custom in you'.¹³

At Elizabeth's accession Hastings was in the ideal position to prosper at court. His protestantism was underpinned by the mastery of classical scholarship and courtly manners that were now seen as essential prerequisites of the renaissance statesman. Even more significantly his brother-in-law, Robert Dudley (later earl of Leicester), was quickly established as the queen's favourite. Henry began trading on this connection almost immediately. His wife wrote to her brother in May 1559 asking for a payment of debts that would enable Hastings to wait on the queen and £400 was immediately forthcoming. Other grants and favours followed and Dudley's constant support was to be a continuing source of political strength.¹⁴ Hastings, however, did not fully capitalize on his courtly assets and connections. After succeeding his father in June 1560 his attendance on the queen was less regular than might have been expected of a leading peer. He was present at ceremonial occasions, such as Leicester's creation as an earl in September 1564. He was also part of Elizabeth's entourage on her progresses to the midlands in 1566. But the offices he held did not require regular presence at court and he chose, instead, to focus on his responsibilities in Leicestershire, on one occasion confiding to his friend, the young earl of Rutland, that he was 'but a rare courtier'.¹⁵

Partly, this had to do with the indebtedness that his wife claimed was preventing his attendance in 1560. But a more important reason was the distrustful attitude of Elizabeth as a consequence of his claim to the succession through his mother Catherine Pole, a direct descendant of Edward IV's father, Richard duke of York. Because of his religious credentials and his relationship with Dudley, he became the candidate for the succession favoured by the protestant power brokers at court at the start of the reign. When the queen's life was in serious danger from smallpox in October 1562, the Spanish ambassador reported that Cecil, Dudley, Bedford, Pembroke and Norfolk had all opted in favour of Huntingdon's claim at a debate in the privy council.¹⁶ This did not endear him to Elizabeth. During the parliament of the following year, when the succession was the main issue of debate, Huntingdon observed that she delivered 'a privy nip [to the Countess] especially concerning myself whereby I perceive she hath some jealous conceit of me'. The earl responded by addressing a letter to Dudley, clearly intended for public circulation, in which he effectively ruled himself out of any ambition to succeed. He vehemently denied 'conceiting any greatness

¹²*Calendar of State Papers Spanish 1554*, p. 297; Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC) *Hastings*, ii, pp. 3–5; Bodl., Carte MS 78, fo. 251; Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 17.

¹³Castiglione, *The Courtier*, trans. by Sir Thomas Hoby (1556) (London: Everyman edn., 1928), p. 2.

¹⁴Longleat House, Dudley papers, 1/14, 1/166, 1/147; S. Adams, ed., *Household Accounts and Disbursements Books of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester* Camden Soc., 5th Ser., 6 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1995), pp. 120, 141 n. The favourite's backing also secured for him his father's court office of Master of the Hart Hounds.; Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 338.

¹⁵E. Goldring, F. Eales, E. Clarke, J. E. Archer, eds., *John Nichols's The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth 1*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), i, pp. 254–5, 439, 462; HMC, *Rutland*, i, p. 95.

¹⁶Cross, *The Puritan Earl*, pp. 142–7; *CSP Spanish 1558–67*, pp. 122, 174, 262–3, 271–2.

of myself' and emphasized that his manner was 'always to shun applauses'.¹⁷ This was the last time he referred to the matter; and when the Commons raised the issue of the succession once again during the 1566 session there was a conspicuous silence about his claim.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Huntingdon showed no such reticence when it came to attending parliament. In the parliamentary sessions of 1563 and 1566, and again in 1571, he showed himself to be an assiduous and thoroughly trustworthy supporter of the protestant leadership in the upper house.¹⁹ In consequence, in 1569, when the queen and the council were casting around for a reliable custodian for Mary Queen of Scots, they settled on Huntingdon. He did not disappoint them, taking the main responsibility for the queen for the duration of the emergency created by the Northern Rising. The whole episode demonstrated to Cecil, in particular, that he could be relied on in a crisis. So in the autumn of 1572, when the council was looking for a strong and committed protestant to take over the presidency of the Council in the North, he was the ideal candidate.²⁰ From this point onwards until the end of his life he was largely removed from day-to-day involvement in politics either in Leicestershire or at court. But his early experience in the royal presence, together with the trust and gratitude of Burghley and Leicester, and eventually the queen herself, provided him with solid support at the centre which, as well as ensuring that the crown looked favourably on his efforts to service his considerable debts, immeasurably strengthened his family's position in his native shire.

The nature and extent of the third earl's power in Leicestershire has been thoroughly documented by Claire Cross.²¹ He was a JP in the county by 1562 and *custos rotulorum* (chairman of the county bench) by 1573. He held a string of offices in and around Leicester acting as steward and receiver for the Duchy of Lancaster honour of Leicester, and bailiff, high steward and town clerk for Leicester itself. He was also responsible for supervising the county's military affairs, first as a musters commissioner during the 1560s, then as lord lieutenant during the first round of appointments to lieutenancies in 1569, and finally as lord lieutenant again from 1587 when the post was made permanent. This monopoly of the principal local offices was reinforced by his hands-on approach to local government. He managed the fallout from the revaluation of the coinage in Leicestershire in 1560, sat as a subsidy commissioner at Leicester throughout the decade, arbitrated a dispute there in 1568 and acted as an intermediary with the council in passing on information about seditious words in 1571. Once he became President of the Council in the North, however, he governed the county largely by remote control, through the agency of his brothers. George, the eldest, who lived mainly at Loughborough, was active on the county bench and later as muster commissioner and deputy lieutenant. His second brother, Edward, after retiring from a military career in the early 1570s, settled at Leicester Abbey and became a significant force in the

¹⁷British Library (BL), Harley MS 787, fo. 16.

¹⁸W. MacCaffrey, *The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime. Elizabethan Politics 1558–1572* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 142–8.

¹⁹R. P. Cust, 'Hastings, Henry, 3rd earl of Huntingdon (c.1536–95)', History of Parliament trust unpublished article for the House of Lords, 1559–1601 section of the History of Parliament.

²⁰Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 147–56, 159–61.

²¹M. C. Cross, 'The third earl of Huntingdon and Elizabethan Leicestershire', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society (TLAS)*, 36 (1960), 6–21; R. P. Cust, 'Hastings, Henry, 3rd earl of Huntingdon'.

politics of the town, taking over the town clerkship from his elder brother in 1591.²² His third brother, Francis, was the most active of all until, in 1582, he moved to Somerset to oversee the family estates there. From his initial base at Market Bosworth, he served as a JP, county sheriff and knight of the shire, sat on subsidy commissions, took the lead in hunting down Catholics and acted as musters commissioner and deputy lieutenant.²³ The fourth brother, Walter, was not involved in the commission of the peace because he had a recusant wife. But he did protect the county's interests in Leicester forest where his estates were located.²⁴ The council acknowledged the influence of the brothers by occasionally writing to them directly in matters relating to the lieutenancy. But for the most part the earl was kept in the loop even whilst he was at York; and he would liaise with his brothers over sensitive matters, such as the apportionment of privy seal loans in 1589. He also continued to attend county business in person whenever he was in the shire. His control was demonstrated most clearly in the shire's elections to parliament. Members of the family filled 8 of the 20 available county seats during Elizabeth's reign, serving in tandem in the parliaments of 1584, 1586 and 1597. Other knights of the shire, notably Nicholas Beaumont (1563 and 1572) and William Turpin (1589), may also have relied on their Hastings connections to secure election. This was a record of electoral dominance within a single shire unmatched in Elizabeth's reign.²⁵ Only in 1601 is there evidence of any sort of challenge; and on that occasion Sir John Grey withdrew when 'the country all with one voice said no gent[leman] in England should carry it from a Hastings if any of them would have it'.²⁶

The earl had a particularly close association with the borough of Leicester. He purchased a house called 'the Lord's place' in the High Street in 1569 and was regularly resident there. Every year he and his brother's received gifts from the corporation in recognition of his influence and his various benefactions. These included his endowment of the Free Grammar School in 1574, a scheme to provide cheap coal for the townsmen and support for a local clothing venture to set the poor on work. Such was his reputation for generosity that over 20 years after his death the corporation commissioned a special portrait recording his charitable deeds that still hangs in the mayor's parlour.²⁷ In his dealings with Leicester, his court connections were often of particular value. Between 1584 and 1589 he played a notable role in helping the town secure a charter of incorporation and a grant of fee farm property from the crown. The town's legal agent, Richard Archer, was in constant contact with the earl and reported that he found him 'their very good lord' throughout these negotiations.²⁸ Huntingdon, in return, clearly expected to get his way when it came to making recommendation for posts such as the town recordership; but he was careful not to push this too far. The town was part of the Duchy of Lancaster and therefore generally beholden to the chancellor of the duchy when it came to parliamentary elections. The only election

²²*House of Commons 1558–1603*, ii, pp. 269–70, 273–4.

²³Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 116–30; M. C. Cross, ed., *The Letters of Sir Francis Hastings 1574–1609* (Somerset: Somerset Rec. Soc. lxix, 1969), pp. xix–xx.

²⁴Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 117.

²⁵*House of Commons 1558–1603*, i, pp. 192–3, 416; iii, p. 356.

²⁶Bodl., Carte MS 77, fo. 518.

²⁷Cross, 'Huntingdon and Leicestershire', 6–21.

²⁸Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 123; M. Bateson, ed., *Records of the Borough of Leicester 1509–1603* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), p. 239.

for which we have evidence of the earl intervening directly was for the parliament of 1586–1587 when he requested the return of an unnamed candidate who was ‘well-affected’ in religion. But he politely backed off when he was told that the borough was going to follow the privy council’s recommendation and return both the MPs from 1584.²⁹

Huntingdon’s relationship with both town and county was in many ways the model of ‘good lordship’ that Archer testified to. He afforded local interests his patronage and support at court and, in return, enjoyed all the respect that he could have hoped for. This was also evident in his support for evangelical protestantism within the shire. This was a new component of aristocratic power that emerged during Elizabeth’s reign. Prior to this noblemen had taken a prominent role in establishing a variety of ecclesiastical endowments that promoted their reputation for piety and augmented the prestige of their families. But, amidst the frenzied religious politics of Elizabeth’s reign, such activities took on a new dimension. Godly magistrates, such as Huntingdon, were in the vanguard of an ideological struggle to suppress popery, promote the protestant religion and secure the survival of the English nation. Amidst this raising of the religious stakes, ecclesiastical patronage, and the ways in which it was deployed, took on a much harder and more urgent political edge. Being seen to be at the forefront of this struggle was an essential element in the Hastings’ dominance of the shire.

The earl deployed his ecclesiastical patronage in a systematic campaign to promote the Calvinist evangelical message. He held the advowsons to eight livings within Leicestershire, including the wealthy benefices of Loughborough and Market Bosworth, and his strategy, wherever possible, was to use these to advance university-trained preaching ministers. These included the likes of Thomas Wyndowes, who became minister at Ashby-de-la-Zouch in 1569, and Arthur Hildersham, who succeeded him in 1593. As with several other promising young students with local connections, the earl sponsored Hildersham’s studies whilst at Cambridge; and his protégé went on to become a leader amongst midlands puritans and one of the organizers of the Millenary petition of 1603. However, perhaps his most influential appointee was Anthony Gilby, a former leader of the exiled English congregation in Geneva whom Huntingdon made his chaplain at Ashby within a few months of his father’s death. He became a leading light of the Elizabethan puritan movement, described by one cleric resentful of his influence as ‘Bishop’ Gilby. Amongst his most enduring achievements was the inauguration, under Huntingdon’s auspices, of a preaching lecture at Ashby.³⁰ The earl was also the moving force behind a similar lectureship at St Martin’s church in Leicester in 1562. The terms of the endowment stipulated that one member of every household was required to attend sermons on Wednesdays and Fridays, on pain of a 12d fine; and the corporation paid for the building of a special pew in ‘my lord’s chapel’ at the east end of the church so that the earl himself could attend, and be seen to attend.³¹

²⁹J. E. Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons* (London, pbk. edn, 1976), pp. 163–7; *House of Commons 1558–1603*, i, pp.193–5; J. Thompson, *A History of Leicester* (Leicester: J. S. Crossley, 1849), pp. 277–8.

³⁰M. C. Cross ‘Noble patronage and the Elizabethan church’, *Historical Journal (HJ)*, 3 (1960), 1–16; *ODNB*, ‘Hildersham, Arthur (1563–1632)’, xxvii, pp.93–4; ‘Gilby, Anthony (c.1510–85)’, xxii, pp. 213–14.

³¹Cross, ‘Huntingdon and Leicestershire’, 9–13.

Huntingdon and the more religiously zealous of his brothers, Sir Edward and Francis, can be described as ‘puritans’; but, like Gilby and Hildersham, they were part of the moderate wing of the movement. They were willing to extend their patronage and protection to nonconformists who had misgivings about some of the requirements imposed by the Book of Common prayer, such as John Willock, the minister at Loughborough, and Thomas Sampson, former dean of Christchurch Oxford, whom Huntingdon installed as the Master of Wyggeston Hospital in Leicester. But they believed in working through the existing church structure for further protestant reform and rejected the extremes of the presbyterian programme being advocated by radicals such as Cartwright and Field. The earl’s version of puritanism – with its emphasis on evangelical preaching and the eradication of popery – fitted comfortably alongside that of councillors like Burghley and Leicester, or ecclesiastics, such as Edmund Grindal with whom he worked closely between 1572 and 1575, when the latter was archbishop of York. In the face of the popish enemy, they believed that it was essential for all good protestants to unite and work together.³² This helped set the tone for the Calvinist ministry in Leicestershire which quickly established a reputation as a model protestant shire. Their united front was evident in 1584 when virtually the whole of the local ministry signed up to a conditional subscription to Archbishop Whitgift’s Three Articles, undertaking to use the prayerbook, but only insofar as it was found to contain nothing ‘contrary to God’s word’.³³

Patrick Collinson described influential town lecturers, like Gilby, Johnson and Sampson, as the ‘conscience’ of their communities, ‘looked to for a lead in all religious and moral aspects of their affairs’.³⁴ The lead that such ministers provided from their pulpits – emphasizing the need for godly repentance and the hazards of popery – had a profound, and well-documented, impact on the religious and political opinions of their congregations. In this context, the earl and his brothers were, no doubt, regularly held up as exemplars of the godly magistracy that was providing leadership to the nation in perilous times and this can only have enhanced their claims to authority and leadership amongst the politically engaged constituencies of the godly.³⁵ The effects of this can, perhaps, be discerned in the ‘voice’ of the ‘country’ in the 1601 election, ‘that no gent[leman] in England should carry it from a Hastings’.

There is one further dimension of the Hastings hegemony in Leicestershire that is worth analysing at this point: that is the notable clannishness of the family, the sense that they were part of a collective enterprise whose fortunes would rise and fall together. We have already seen the ways in which the third earl’s brothers filled in for him in running Leicestershire whilst he was in the north and collaborated under his direction. Francis articulated this sense of common purpose in a lengthy letter of advice to his elder brother in 1592, the main thrust of which was to ensure that he preserved the patrimony of family lands in Leicestershire. Francis lamented that ‘poor I shall live with little credit anywhere and with less comfort if the pillar of our house stand not upright

³²Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. xiv, 3, 33, 38,51–2, 131–4, 141–2; *Letters of Sir Francis Hastings*, pp. xiii–xxi, xxvii–xxviii.

³³P. Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London: Cape, 1967), pp. 244–5; Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 138–40.

³⁴P. Collinson, ‘The shearmen’s tree and the preachers: the strange death of merry England in Shrewsbury and beyond’, in *The Reformation in English Towns 1500–1640* ed. by P. Collinson and J. Craig (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 213.

³⁵For clerical tributes to the third earl of Huntingdon, see Gilby’s translation of Calvin’s *Commentaries... upon the Prophet Daniel* (1570), dedicated to his family, or the bishop of Lincoln’s description of the earl as the moving force in the conversion of his shire: *ODNB*, ‘Gilby’; Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 138.

in his full strength' and the whole letter was a classic statement of the importance of dynastic solidarity. The earl was reminded of his responsibilities to a line which stretched before and after him. Whilst 'the staff of Ashby' was entrusted to him, he was expected not only to secure a solid inheritance for his heir, but also to provide for the various 'branches' of his family. Failure would be disastrous for all of them because:

the honour and credit of the whole house dependeth upon your leaving the heir of the house in strength and ability to live in his place and calling as an earl . . . If you fail of this in Leicestershire I see not how it will be avoided but that the honour of the house must fall and the credit thereof in that shire [be] quite overthrown.³⁶

In these circumstances the earl could expect unstinting loyalty and service from his siblings and kin. In a subsequent letter to his brother George, when he became fourth earl, Francis explained that 'if every good member of the house will not add his best strength therein he is much to be blamed'.³⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Earl Henry took umbrage at the imputation that he was neglectful of the dynastic interests of the Hastings. In a subsequent letter, Francis was quick to back track and assure him that 'I never doubted of your honourable mind to the whole house . . . and sure I am that all the branches together can yield no such regard as you have showed at all times for the good of the whole house'.³⁸ The earl had a point. He had been remarkably generous and conscientious when it came to fulfilling the terms of his father's will and providing endowments for his siblings. He also took responsibility for the upbringing of his heirs presumptive, George's son, Francis, and his grandson, Henry.³⁹ Yet there was some justice in Francis's original charge. Huntingdon had not applied himself as diligently as he should have done to managing his territorial legacy.

One of the keys to understanding the third earls' career is the fact that he did not have any children of his own. Nobles and gentry in this situation were sometimes less focussed than they might have been on building up a dynastic inheritance. They often paid more attention to providing the charitable benefactions and public service that would enhance their personal reputation and ensure that this lived on after their death. The two sets of priorities were, of course, by no means incompatible. Huntingdon himself saw his acts of charity and dedication to his offices as augmenting the strength of the dynasty. But such activities came at a cost and there was a balance to be struck. In Earl Henry's case his instincts and preferences inclined him more towards charitable acts, demonstrations of 'good lordship' and the service of God, queen and country that was so evident during his presidency of the Council in the North. In all this there was a certain distaste for the bargaining and calculation that was required to get the most out of his landed inheritance.⁴⁰ Francis had first-hand experience of this in 1580 when it was he who was forced to go cap-in-hand at court around the earl's contacts at court to persuade the queen to accept a new mortgage on the earls' estates.⁴¹ Huntingdon also lacked the pushiness and sharp elbows that enabled his friends like Burghley, Leicester and Walsingham to make significant fortunes out of the royal service under Elizabeth.

³⁶*Letters of Sir Francis Hastings*, pp. 50–2.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 57–8.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 52–3.

³⁹Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 31–2, 53–4, 84–5.

⁴⁰*Letters of Hastings*, pp. 58–61.

⁴¹Cross, 'Supervising the finances', 36.

Occasionally he received a lucrative grant, like the licence to export 8,000 broadcloths in 1576, but this was small beer by the standards of many Elizabethan courtiers.⁴²

Francis' advice to his brother was remarkably prescient. With hindsight, it is evident that the family's grip on power depended to a considerable extent on the survival and continuing participation of the third earl. Whilst he was alive his massive prestige and reputation, the credit at court that enabled him to stave off his creditors and his understanding of the processes of political management and negotiation were sufficient to sustain the vulnerable edifice on which their power rested. Once he was out of the way, unless his successor could pick up the threads with the same skill and effectiveness, its fragility was liable to be exposed.

The Fourth Earl and the Decline of the Hastings' Power

The first and most pressing problem that the fourth earl faced on succeeding to his title was the scale of his brother's debts. The third earl had intended to make a journey to London to secure a final settlement when he died at York on 14 December 1595. His arrears amounted to over £35,000, of which £18,000 was owing to the crown and a further £17,000 to private creditors. In spite of his widely recognized qualities, 'all the speech now amongst some', according to Francis, 'is to lay blame upon him for wasting his patrimony and leaving his heir in so weak terms of ability to maintain himself according to the dignity of his place'.⁴³ To compound the family's misfortunes, the 25-year-old Francis died 3 days later. His shattered father was left to pick up the pieces.⁴⁴

As a country gentleman, Earl George had been a shrewd and effective manager of his estates. His marriage to Dorothy, daughter of Sir John Porte in the 1550s, had brought him a substantial landed inheritance in Derbyshire. He added to this with steady and well-judged acquisitions in Leicestershire. Following a series of small purchases from his brother, he secured the valuable lease of the manor of Loughborough which became his main residence by the 1580s. Then in the 1590s he moved to Donington Park which he purchased just before Earl Henry's death.⁴⁵ But none of this prepared him for the magnitude of the task he faced in trying to service his brother's debts. He was under pressure from Lord Treasurer Burghley to redeem what he owed to the crown almost immediately. This led to lengthy negotiations and, eventually, a complicated arrangement whereby the crown seized all his unpledged properties then leased them back to him on relatively generous terms.⁴⁶ But there were also the private creditors to contend with and this forced him into land sales and further mortgages which alienated estates worth over £2500 a year. He fought tooth and nail, but ultimately unsuccessfully to recover the valuable Buckinghamshire manor of Stoke Poges which had long been

⁴²Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 103–5.

⁴³Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 81–2; *Letters of Sir Francis Hastings*, p. 60.

⁴⁴Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 274–5.

⁴⁵*House of Commons 1558–1603*, ii, pp. 273–4; *House of Lords 1604–29*, iii, pp. 24–5; Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 68, 312, 314, 323, 330.

⁴⁶HMC, *Hastings*, ii, pp. 44–5; Huntington Library, California (Hunt), HA Correspondence 5282–5286; BL, Lansdowne MS 86, fo. 53; Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 82.

a family base in the home counties; and he engaged in a series of ultimately fruitless lawsuits to recover debts owing to his brother.⁴⁷ Restoring the family finances was a task that consumed much of his energy for the remainder of his life. But he did achieve some success. After years of lobbying the crown, he was allowed to buy back the cherished manor of Lubbesthorpe in July 1604, with the help of his brother-in-law, the earl of Worcester.⁴⁸ And his most successful transaction was arranging the marriage of his grandson and heir, Henry, to Elizabeth Stanley, daughter of the countess of Derby, in January 1601. This was not only a massively prestigious match, it also brought the family a dowry of £4000.⁴⁹

William Dugdale, the historian of the family, later claimed that Earl George 'entered upon the estate almost quite torn in pieces and ruined, but by his prudence and discreet managery thereof . . . did exceedingly repair it and at last left it such, though not comparable to what it had been formerly, yet not unsuitable to his dignity and degree.'⁵⁰ This was something of an exaggeration. The earl may have succeeded in steadying the ship, but he still left debts of more than £13,000 to the crown and his heir faced years of continuing struggle to make ends meet.⁵¹ Just as important he had to accept that the family now faced an era of retrenchment. This induced a sense of lowered expectations and ambition that was evident in his correspondence with Burghley and the latter's son, Sir Robert Cecil. He repeatedly alluded to the 'ruinate' or 'impoverished' state of 'my poor decayed house'.⁵² There was in all this a certain amount deal of calculation and special pleading but it also reflected a lack of self-confidence and induced an unwillingness to invest in the levels of display and hospitality that, as his elder brother had recognized, were so important to maintaining the grandeur and status of the aristocracy. This belt tightening was most evident in his decision to live mainly at Donington Park – what he described as his 'little lodge' – rather than at Ashby Castle.⁵³ Donington required a much smaller household establishment. But in choosing to live there he forfeited much of the prestige and reputation that accompanied the lavish hospitality at Ashby. This was to be on display again, briefly, when the fifth earl received his bride and mother-in-law at Ashby in 1607 and drew up his household ordinances in 1609.⁵⁴

The constant need for economy was also evident in Earl George's reticence about travelling to London and attending the court. In his formative years he had lived as a country gentleman and the habit stayed with him. He would occasionally go up to London to deal with his financial affairs; and as a reliable ally of the Cecils he was one of the senior peers appointed to sit on the commission to try the earl of Essex in 1600.⁵⁵ But he was much less in evidence at the centre of affairs than might have been expected of a premier peer and largely absented himself from proceedings in the House of Lords.

⁴⁷T. E. Cogswell, *Home Divisions. The Aristocracy, the State and Provincial Conflict* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 71; Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 71, 81–2, 95, 103, 326–7.

⁴⁸*House of Lords 1604–29*, iii, pp. 24–5.

⁴⁹HMC, *Hastings*, ii, pp. 47–9; HH, Hatfield MS 251/58a.

⁵⁰BL, Harley MS 4777, fo. 143.

⁵¹Cogswell, *Home Divisions*, pp. 73–7.

⁵²HH, Hatfield MS 251/ 58a, 92/9, 92/150; Hunt., HA Correspondence 5283.

⁵³Cross, *Puritan Earl*, pp. 86, 99–100; HMC, *Salisbury*, xi, p. 55; Cogswell, *Home Divisions*, p. 71.

⁵⁴J. M. Knowles, 'Marston, Skipwith and The Entertainment at Ashby', *English Manuscript Studies*, 3 (1992), 137–92; J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, 4 vols. (London: for J. Nichols, 1795–1811), iii, pp. 594–9.

⁵⁵BL, Lansdowne MS 83, fo. 65; Hunt., HA Correspondence 5282; HMC, *Bath*, v, p. 269.

During the early stages of the 1597 session, he was excused by Burghley from attending due to sickness. It was not until 21 November that he took his seat for the first time and in all he was recorded as attending only seven of the 41 sittings of the parliament and receiving only one minor committee nomination.⁵⁶ During the 1601 and 1604 Parliaments he was not present at all and delivered his proxy to Worcester.⁵⁷ At James I's accession, he did his best to ingratiate himself with the new regime by arranging for the queen and Prince Henry to stay at Ashby Castle on their journey south.⁵⁸ But he had neither the stamina nor the inclination to follow up on this.

The fourth earl did not lack for contacts at court. Lord Burghley took a keen interest in his family and financial affairs; and following his death in 1598 he transferred his loyalty to Sir Robert Cecil. It was to Sir Robert that he wrote in September 1600 when he feared his own imminent demise, asking him to give his blessing to his marriage negotiations with the Countess of Derby and take care of his grandson during his minority.⁵⁹ He could also rely on the support of his privy councillor brother-in-law, Edward, earl of Worcester. But having powerful supporters at the centre was not the same thing as knowing one's way around at court; and his lack of understanding in such matters was exposed early in 1604 when he sent his grandson to London with a request to his friends that they find him a place in the household of either the king or Prince Henry. In a polite and lengthy letter, his wife's nephew, Sir John Holles, pointed out the inappropriateness of such a course of action. Henry was too young to join the king's household and too old to join that of the prince. Besides he lacked the experience and artfulness in the ways of the court that was needed to show himself to best advantage and risked being 'mocked' or 'scorned', or making a poor impression on his first entry. The subtext throughout the letter was that it was the earl himself who lacked the requisite guile and know how.⁶⁰ This was to compound his political problems in Leicestershire.

During the early 1600s Huntingdon relied a good deal on Holles to act as his agent in financial dealings in London.⁶¹ This was a consequence of another disadvantage that he faced in comparison with his predecessor. He no longer enjoyed the united support of his brothers. Since 1580 it was Francis who had acted as the family's go-between in dealing with London and court business and he indicated that he was happy to go on doing this following the third earl's death. But during 1598 he and Earl George had a falling out. Francis had hoped to relocate from Somerset to Leicestershire following the death of his wife in 1596 and to this end was negotiating to take a lease on the family manor of Lubbesthorpe. He also showed his intention to pick up the threads of county politics by serving as knight of the shire in 1597. However, it appears that Earl George got the impression that his younger brother was trying to upstage him; and late in 1598 Francis was writing to the earl's wife to defend himself against such a charge. He eventually resettled in Dorset, after marrying a local heiress; and, to judge by their lack of further correspondence, had little more to do with the fourth earl.⁶²

⁵⁶*Lords Journals*, ii, pp. 198a, 199a, 191b, 208b, 191–225.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, ii, p. 226a; *House of Lords 1604–29*, iii, p. 25.

⁵⁸Nichols, *County of Leicester*, iii, pp. 589–90.

⁵⁹HH, Hatfield MS 251/58a.

⁶⁰HMC, *Portland*, ix, pp. 78–9.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, ix, pp. 119, 121, 150.

⁶²*Letters of Sir Francis Hastings*, pp. xxiv, 57–8, 70–1; *House of Commons 1604–29*, iv, pp.574–83.

Earl George appears to have enjoyed a relatively respectful relationship with the eldest of his brothers, Edward. But there is no evidence of the warmth or personal closeness that characterized Edward's relationship with Earl Henry, or indeed Francis.⁶³ The brother with whom George felt most comfortable was the youngest, Walter who, because of his Catholic sympathies, had always been a somewhat marginal figure in county politics. He now emerged as the member of the immediate family who was most trusted to handle the fourth earl's affairs in London, often in tandem with the earl of Worcester; and it was Walter who took the fifth earl under his wing following Earl George's death in December 1604.⁶⁴

At the heart of the rift between the brothers was religion. William Camden once observed of the Hastings siblings, that 'whilst agreeing in brotherly love yet [they] were not of one mind in religion'.⁶⁵ Earl Henry, Sir Edward and Sir Francis were all zealous puritans, whilst Walter, whose early education had been entrusted to his godfather, Cardinal Pole, was married to a Catholic. Sir George can probably best be described as a Calvinist conformist. His wife Dorothy was the aunt of the Catholic priest, father John Gerard; and in 1586 a notorious local Catholic gentleman, John Palmer, was detained at the family house at Loughborough.⁶⁶ But there is no evidence that George himself was a Catholic. When Sir Edward sought to ascertain his religious views at his accession to the earldom he was assured that Earl George would continue to support the puritan ministers in Leicestershire whom their elder brother had patronized. Edward told Francis, that 'not only myself but all the godly preachers and others are of my mind, that he is very desirous to hear the word preached'.⁶⁷ In some respects, the earl delivered on his assurances. Over 30 years later Arthur Hildersham would acknowledge his 'favour and bounty' in continuing to sustain his ministry at Ashby.⁶⁸ But he was only prepared to go so far. He was conspicuous by his absence from the list of the Leicestershire gentry supporters of the Millenary petition of 1603 which was headed by Sir Edward.⁶⁹ The united leadership that the three brothers had provided for evangelical Protestantism within Leicestershire had conferred immense prestige and drawn widespread support to the family in the time of the third earl. Once this was lost it left the fourth earl in a far weaker position.

Cracks began to appear in the edifice of Huntingdon's authority almost as soon as he succeeded to his earldom. On the face of it, he was in a powerful position. He had acquired his elder brother's various local offices, including the lieutenantancy, the chairmanship of the county bench and the important Duchy of Lancaster appointments of steward, receiver and master forester of the Honour of Leicester.⁷⁰ He also had the advantage of long experience in county government and more-or-less continual residence within the shire. But there were already mutterings about the appointment of

⁶³Hunt., HA Correspondence 4714; *Letters of Hastings*, pp. 45–6, 58–64, 71, 118.

⁶⁴Hunt., HA Correspondence 1021, 5281; Bodl., Carte MS 78, fo. 418; R. P. Cust, 'Honour, rhetoric and political culture: the earl of Huntingdon and his enemies', in *Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern Europe*, ed. S. D. Amussen & M. A. Kishlansky (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1995), p. 91.

⁶⁵William Camden, *Annals* (1636), p. 36.

⁶⁶Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 31; TNA, SP 12/193/50. There was also a tension between the countess and the virulently anti-Catholic Sir Francis that emerges from the letter explaining his actions to her: *Letters of Sir Hastings*, pp. 70–1.

⁶⁷Hunt., HA Correspondence 4714.

⁶⁸Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 142.

⁶⁹BL, Additional MS 8978, fos. 109–10.

⁷⁰*House of Lords 1604–29*, iii, pp. 24–5.

Thomas Warde, a Hastings client, as county coroner, following some rather heavy-handed interference by Sir George and Sir Edward in what was supposed to be a 'free election'. This was later said to have been 'contrary to the liking of most of the gentlemen' and led to a quarrel at the county assizes in 1595 in which Sir Edward Hastings and William Skipwith came close to drawing their swords on each other. Then during 1596 Warde traded insults with George Belgrave in Leicester which led to both men being bound over to keep the peace. Belgrave also complained to the privy council about Sir Edward's son, Henry Hastings, interfering in his collection of the subsidy.⁷¹ These quarrels provided the background for the fractious county election of September 1597 in which the ambitious Skipwith stood for the place of second knight of the shire, behind his antagonist Sir Edward Hastings. According to his ally Belgrave, Skipwith 'secured a public and general assent, first had after the convention of the whole country'. This would appear to refer to some sort of informal pre-election meeting at which the gentry and freeholders had agreed on their candidates to avoid the acrimony of a contested election. Late in the day, however, Sir Francis Hastings entered the fray and after some ruthless lobbying by two Hastings retainers, John Bale and Edward Needham – described by Belgrave as 'indirect, undecent practices' – it was he who was elected.⁷²

This sort of bickering and antagonism between leading local gentry was a familiar enough event in other shires in the Elizabethan period⁷³; but there is a striking lack of evidence of such animosity in Leicestershire. However, this situation changed rapidly during the 1590s. Partly this was due to the reduced participation in local government of the third earl and Sir Francis during the early part of the decade. This had allowed Sir George and Sir Edward to come to the fore, neither of whom appears to have possessed the political tact that had enabled their two brothers to run the shire so effectively. Moreover, their principal enemies, Belgrave and Skipwith, both carried considerable clout within the ranks of the local gentry and Leicester corporation. The two men had been JPs since the early 1590s and both were active in the affairs of the town. Belgrave served as one of its subsidy commissioners, was called on to arbitrate local disputes and acted as an intermediary on the corporation's behalf in their dealings with the county gentry. Skipwith's father had served as one of the town's members of parliament during the 1580s and he would follow suit in the parliament of 1604–10. Significantly both men also had influential contacts at court. Belgrave was a friend of Michael Hickes, Burghley's powerful secretary; and it was to Hickes that he turned for assistance in the mid-1590s when involved in legal battles with Sir George over the valuable inheritance of William Stokes for whom he was acting as executor. Skipwith's father had been an equerry to the queen and a trusted ally of Burghley; and his court connections enabled him to entertain Queen Anne and Prince Henry at his house in

⁷¹Bodl., Carte MS 78, fos. 319, 361; *Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, p. 328; J. Roche Dasent, ed., *Acts of the Privy Council 1595–6* (London: HMSO, 1901), p. 216.

⁷²Bodl., Carte MS 78, fos. 319, 361. Neither Bale nor Needham were prominent gentry; but it was their names that headed the election indenture: TNA, C 219/33, no. 116. For pre-election 'selection', see M. A. Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection. Social and Political Choice in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986), pp. 22–31.

⁷³Hassell Smith, *County and Court*, pts.2–4; W. MacCaffrey, 'Talbot and Stanhope: an episode in Elizabethan politics', *BIHR*, 33 (1960), 73–85; A. Wall, 'Patterns of politics in England, 1558–1625', *HJ*, 31 (1988), 947–63.

Leicester on their journey south in June 1603.⁷⁴ Both men, then, had the backing, and self-confidence, to take on Sir George and Sir Edward and provide leadership for others who chafed at the Hastings ascendancy.

However, the most formidable opposition to the family was provided by the Greys who suddenly re-emerged as a force in county politics in the late 1590s. Sir Henry Grey, heir to the original Grey inheritance in Leicestershire, served at court under Elizabeth and eventually became lieutenant of her band of gentleman pensioners. In 1575, he secured a grant of much of the former Grey property around Bradgate and Groby; but, by that stage he was already well-established as a gentleman in Essex and he left it to his son, Sir John, to set himself up in the family residence at Bradgate Park after a military career in which he was knighted by Essex at Cadiz. Grey was appointed to the Leicestershire commission of the peace in 1598 and, around the same time, was himself made one of the queen's gentleman pensioners.⁷⁵ By the time he re-engaged with county politics he was already a confident and forceful political operator, as was demonstrated in a remarkable letter to the mayor of Leicester in December 1599. He warned that unless the town handed over a prisoner who had trespassed at Bradgate 'I will be righted of this your fond and unjust dealing with me ... if you be able to cross me in one thing, I can requite your town with twenty ... for as I am a gentleman I will be revenged one way or another to my contentment and to your dislikes.'⁷⁶ Even allowing for the gentry's traditional contempt for townsmen, this was an extraordinarily aggressive way of dealing with a powerful corporation. But it was a measure of Grey's political temperament. True to his word, within a few weeks he was convening a meeting of local gentlemen and justices at Bradgate, including Belgrave, which raised the thorny issue of the market tolls being charged on market traders in Leicestershire.⁷⁷ Sir John was beginning to offer the sort of sympathetic political leadership to the JPs that was no longer being provided by the Hastings.

It was, perhaps, with all this in mind that Earl George trod extremely warily in his dealings with Grey. In September 1601 Sir John put himself forward be knight of the shire, alongside William Skipwith. He approached the earl of Rutland, who was considerably indebted to him for help at court following the earl's implication in the Essex rebellion; and Rutland's agent was preparing to organize his tenants on Sir John's behalf by the end of the month. Grey also approached Huntingdon who, according to later report, consented to him becoming first knight and 'wrote effectually' on his behalf. However, late in the day, Henry Hastings of the Abbey, Sir Edward's son, decided to stand for the first seat himself; and such was the continuing prestige of the family name and the support he enjoyed from freeholders in and around Leicester that he carried the day. Grey appears to have withdrawn before there was an actual contest. But the damage had been done. It was common knowledge in the shire that he was intending to stand and his credit and reputation had been fully committed which made this a particularly bitter humiliation to have to face in his adopted shire. The fifth earl

⁷⁴*House of Commons 1558–1603*, i, pp. 42–1, iii, pp. 391–2; *House of Commons 1604–29*, vi, pp. 340–2; *Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, pp. 370, 388, 392–3, 414, 429; BL, Lansdowne MS 83, fo. 65.

⁷⁵*House of Commons 1558–1603*, ii, pp. 222–4; *House of Commons 1604–29*, iv, pp. 473–5; *House of Lords 1604–29*, ii, pp. 850–3.

⁷⁶*Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, pp. 385–6.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 393.

would later remark that this was the trigger that re-ignited the traditional feud between the Greys and the Hastings.⁷⁸

Sir John himself was predictably unforgiving and from then onwards did his best to make life difficult for the Hastings. Early in 1602 he and Belgrave, together with a senior justice, Sir Henry Beaumont of Coleorton, had a head constable called Gossen indicted as a 'common barretor' after his appointment had been pushed through at the behest of the earl and Walter Hastings. Grey and Belgrave also secured commissions to deal with the delicate matter of arrears on the county's purveyance payments which gave them an opportunity to interfere with Earl George's management of the service.⁷⁹ However, in the summer of 1602 Sir John left the shire to take up campaigning in the Low Countries and returned only intermittently, leaving his father to pick up the baton. Sir Henry was ennobled at James's accession as Lord Grey of Groby and took up residence at Bradgate. He was soon in evidence providing leadership for the county bench in an initiative to set up a house of correction in September 1604.⁸⁰ Then in December, at the death of the fourth earl, he mounted an attempted coup. Earl George was succeeded by his grandson, Henry, who was still a minor and therefore not considered capable of filling the traditional family offices of lord lieutenant, chairman of the bench, steward and receiver of the honour of the Duchy of Lancaster and master of the game in Leicester Forest. Grey immediately applied to have the offices transferred to him. He was in a strong position as a former ward and protégé of the Cecils with a long record of loyal service to the regime. Moreover, he had recently been removed from his office of lieutenant of the gentleman pensioners, for which he had received no compensation. Cecil, however, sided with the young fifth earl. He was awarded the Duchy of Lancaster and forest offices and the lieutenancy was held in abeyance until he came of age in April 1607.⁸¹ In the meantime, there was effectively a Hastings interregnum. Grey and his allies – notably Sir Henry Beaumont of Coleorton who took over the chairmanship of the bench and his brother, Sir Thomas of Stoughton, knight of the shire in the 1604–1610 Parliament – ran the county's affairs. Even after the fifth earl had resumed all the family's offices, Grey continued to act as party leader for all those who were disgruntled with the power of the Hastings and there ensued a series of battles over the management of the lieutenancy, the administration of purveyance and appointments to the commission of the peace.⁸²

The Belgrave Case and Leicester Politics

These battles were in the future, however. As far as Earl George was concerned, the most important struggle was with George Belgrave. This came about largely because of the slippage of his influence within Leicester. Over his years as a country gentleman, he had built up a respectful relationship with the townsmen. He could not compete with his elder brother's spectacular acts of generosity; but he had been involved in the town's

⁷⁸HMC, *Rutland*, i, p. 380; Bodl., Carte MS 77, fos. 518–19.

⁷⁹Bodl., Carte MS 78, fo. 361; TNA, C 231/1, fo. 110; LS 13/168, fo. 32.

⁸⁰H. Stocks, ed., *Records of the Borough of Leicester 1603–1688* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1923), p. 21.

⁸¹HH, Hatfield MS 189.57, 197.14; *House of Lords 1604–29*, ii, pp. 850–3, iii, p. 26.

⁸²R. P. Cust, 'Purveyance and politics in Jacobean Leicestershire', in *Regionalism and Revision: The Crown and its Provinces in England 1200–1650*, ed. by P. Fleming, A. Gross and J. R. Lander (London: Hambleton 1998), pp. 145–62; Cust, 'Honour, rhetoric and political culture', pp. 84–111.

affairs as a local governor and received his due share of gifts and gratuities. He had also lobbied successfully in 1584 for the election of Thomas Johnson, one of the queen's sergeants-at-arms, as one of the MPs for Leicester.⁸³ The offices that he inherited when he succeeded to the earldom gave him an opportunity to exercise more extensive powers. However, since the corporation had received its charter in 1589 it had become more assertive in claiming its rights and his own family's influence had been reduced by their surrender of the town clerkship to the corporation in 1597. Earl George lobbied Sir Robert Cecil to regain this, but without success.⁸⁴ In these circumstances, the town's relationship with the earl became tenuous and more fraught than under his predecessor. He continued to work closely with the corporation over matters relating to the lieutenancy and subsidy, and used his influence as steward for the Duchy of Lancaster to prevent a patentee levying tolls on the town markets. He also got his way with some of the senior appointments, notably over sparing Hugh Hunter from being appointed as mayor in 1602 and securing the office of recorder for his client, John Stanford in 1603. But on other occasions the corporation resisted him. They fought a long, and ultimately, successful legal battle to oust the earl and the duchy's nominee for the town clerkship, Christopher Tamworth; and, when Stanford died, they rejected his candidate Christopher Cheyney and appointed Augustine Nicholls as recorder.⁸⁵

Perhaps the most embarrassing demonstration of the limits of Huntingdon's influence was the 1597 parliamentary election. He wrote to the town in support of the candidature of Thomas Beaumont of Stoughton, a gentleman whom he would later denounce as a 'Machiavellian knave' after he sided with Belgrave and Grey.⁸⁶ But, when his letter was read out by the recorder to the town assembly of aldermen and common councilmen, Beaumont's candidature was rejected on the grounds that he was 'an encloser' and would be unlikely to rectify that particular grievance in the coming parliament.⁸⁷ Huntingdon was incensed by this very public rejection. He wrote to the mayor, declaring (somewhat disingenuously) that whilst he had no wish to 'a placer of burgesses', he regarded himself as having been 'very hardly dealt with ... wherein you played an unseemly [part]'. He concluded with an ominous warning that they and their recorder would feel the force of his displeasure.⁸⁸

With the experience of 1597 as a precedent, both sides proceeded extremely warily at the next parliamentary election in October 1601. The mayor wrote to Huntingdon on 22 September, as soon as he received news that the writs were being issued, expressing the corporation's willingness 'to please you therein', but also warning that 'the contrariety of factious heads and minds and voices [hinder] our good wills therein'.⁸⁹ The earl replied a few days later approving the town's choice of William Herrick, a wealthy London goldsmith who had assisted both the third and fourth earls in their business dealings, and also recommending Roger Bromley of Bagworth, long time land agent to

⁸³*Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, pp. 168, 241; *House of Commons 1559–1601*, i, p. 194; ii, p. 273.

⁸⁴C. F. Patterson, 'Leicester and Lord Huntingdon: urban patronage in early modern England', *MH*, xvi (1991), 45–62; *House of Commons 1558–1603*, ii, p. 269; *Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, p. 339; HMC, *Salisbury*, vii, p. 518.

⁸⁵Thompson, *Leicester*, pp. 303–5; *Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, p. 449, *Records of Leicester 1603–1688*, pp. 5–6; *House of Commons, 1604–29*, ii, pp. 224–5; Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR), Leicester Hall Papers 1600–6, vol. 7, fos. 240, 398, 407, 409.

⁸⁶Bodl., Carte MS 78, fo. 326.

⁸⁷Thompson, *Leicester*, pp. 300–1.

⁸⁸*Records of Leicester*, pp. 336–7.

⁸⁹*Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, p. 435.

the Hastings family. However, he had also got wind of the fact that his avowed enemy Belgrave ‘still continues his great practising in labouring to be chosen’ and that there were some amongst the electors ‘who do yield to his proud and saucy enterprise’. He warned the mayor that on no account must this be allowed to happen, following up with the menacing remark that if the townsmen ‘think him a person better able to protect them and their causes when occasion falls out they may work their wills and free me from showing those kindnesses’.⁹⁰ By the normal standards of his correspondence, this was an unusually aggressive tone to adopt, but it was a measure of the extent to which the earl felt that his credit and reputation were on the line. With less than a week to go before the election, the mayor rode over to Donington to confer with Huntingdon. The choice of Herrick was confirmed, but he made it clear that Bromley was encountering opposition from ‘many wilful unruly people’ amongst the 48 common councilmen who had a voice in the election. The earl recognized the danger and did not press the case for Bromley, but, in a follow-up letter, he warned again that ‘if ever you account of my love a friendship towards you and all your brethren let Belgrave have no place’.⁹¹

Meanwhile, Belgrave himself was under considerable pressure and was busy drawing on every ounce of political credit that he had accrued with the townsmen of Leicester. It was alleged in the eventual star chamber suit against him that he was seeking election in order that ‘he might in the parliament time freely walk up and down without fear to be arrested by his creditors (being indeed greatly indebted to many ...)’.⁹² This was entirely plausible. For years Belgrave had been struggling financially, to the point at which in 1597 he was considering giving up Belgrave Hall and retiring to more modest accommodation. He also blamed Huntingdon and his family for his predicament.⁹³ Such was his desperation, however, that he was willing to seek a reconciliation with the earl, reportedly offering ‘to follow his honour in that sort as is fitting for a gentleman of his worth’.⁹⁴ But Earl George was having none of it. So, at this point, Belgrave determined on a desperate ploy. He knew that he had considerable support amongst the electors, because, according to William Skipwith – who, with his Leicester contacts, was well informed about the whole affair – some had already ‘given their voices and desired Mr Belgrave to take it’.⁹⁵ The sticking point was the mayor and senior aldermen who were all too aware that electing him would bring down the wrath of the earl. So on the day of the election, Tuesday 16 October, Belgrave presented himself before the burgesses wearing the Hastings livery of a blue coat with a boar’s head on the sleeve and announced that he had made his peace with the earl and was now his servant. He claimed to have reached an accommodation the previous evening through the good offices of Sir Henry Harrington. When asked whether he had a letter to support this, he answered ‘that this (pointing at the cognisance on his coat) was a sufficient testimony of

⁹⁰Thompson, *Leicester*, pp. 316–17. On Herrick’s relationship with the Hastings, see Bodl., Eng. Hist., c.477, fos. 122–3, 127, 130–1, 150–1.

⁹¹*Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, pp. 435–6; Thompson, *Leicester*, p. 317.

⁹²TNA, STAC 5/A54/2.

⁹³Bodl., Eng. Hist. MS c.482, fos. 42–3; TNA, SP 12/287/56. Belgrave’s indebtedness was evidently common knowledge in Leicestershire: BL, Harley MS 6383, fos. 71–3.

⁹⁴T. E. Hartley, ed., *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, 3 vols. (London and Leicester: Leicester University Press 1981–95), iii, p. 448.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

his lordship's favour towards him and of his submission', offering to testify to this effect on oath.⁹⁶ The mayor and senior aldermen evidently saw Belgrave's assurances as a way of avoiding the acrimony of a divided election and with suspicious promptness – which Skipwith later observed was because they were 'willing ... to be deceived' – took him at his word and voted him into first place.⁹⁷ According to later testimony, as soon as the election was over Belgrave went 'openly into the street and in great contempt pulled it [the Hastings livery] off and cast it into the channel, saying now thou hast served me this turn thou shall never serve me more'.⁹⁸ To compound Huntingdon's humiliation all this took place on the same day as the shire election when the town was full of gentlemen and freeholders, there to approve the choice of Henry Hastings and William Skipwith.

Back at Donington, Earl George received news of the election surprisingly calmly and exonerated the corporation from any blame in the matter. He had probably already calculated that Belgrave had overreached himself and given him a unique opportunity to strike back. He assured the mayor that he was ready to 'take such order as in honour and lawfully I may' and promptly launched a star chamber suit for a 'misdemeanour' committed 'to the dishonour of her Majesty and the house of parliament', persuading the attorney-general, Sir Edward Coke, to file the bill.⁹⁹ Huntingdon must have hoped that this would result in very public retribution for Belgrave at the hands of both Lords and Commons. The problem was that the case was being brought against a sitting member of the Commons which raised the issue of privilege.

From the start the lower house was divided. Sir Edward Hoby reported from the privileges committee on 7 December 1601 that some 'censured it to be an enormous fault [for Belgrave] to invest himself ... in a blue coat', whilst others were 'of contrary opinion because they were satisfied that it was done *ad redimendam vexationem* which had been offered to him'.¹⁰⁰ The following day when the case was debated on the floor of the house, it was the same story. Hoby and Sir George More were in favour of a conference with the Lords because Belgrave's actions challenged the interests of both houses. This was supported by Sir Francis Hastings. But, whilst he acknowledged that his brother's honour was at stake, he spoke up for Belgrave as 'a man of very good carriage' and urged that some sort of settlement be reached 'that the honour of the person [Huntingdon] may be saved, the gentleman freed from further offence, and this cause ended with good conclusion'.¹⁰¹ This was not what Earl George would have wanted to hear. Given Sir Francis's previous protestations of his willingness to defend whoever held 'the staff of Ashby' to the hilt, he might have anticipated that his brother would deliver an unequivocal condemnation of Belgrave. Instead, what he got was an even-handed encouragement to arbitrate. The intervention of William Skipwith, the county's MP, was even more damaging. He pointed out that, far from wronging the earl, Belgrave had done his best to be reconciled to him and that the electors of Leicester had willingly colluded in his actions. He too hoped that the whole matter

⁹⁶ROLLR, Leicester Hall papers Bound, vol. 7, fo. 205; *Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, p. 436.

⁹⁷*Parliaments of Elizabeth*, iii, p. 448.

⁹⁸Bodl., Carte MS 78, fo. 310.

⁹⁹Thompson, *Leicester*, pp. 318–19; *Parliaments of Elizabeth*, iii, p. 436; TNA, STAC 5/A54/2.

¹⁰⁰*Parliaments of Elizabeth*, iii, p. 440.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, iii, pp. 446–7.

could be settled, but without resort to star chamber.¹⁰² The Commons decided to refer the matter to the Lords; but, after a conference between the two houses, the latter decided to take the matter no further until a properly certified copy of the star chamber bill had been presented to them. With the ball back in the Commons' court the privileges committee decided that Belgrave, as 'an honest gentleman and a good servant to his prince and country', should be absolved from 'any abuse offered to this house' and remain as a sitting MP.¹⁰³

This was very obviously not the outcome that Huntingdon was looking for. Belgrave had been exonerated by the Commons and the Lords had shied away from action to defend the honour of one of their number. The earl had only himself to blame. His lack of regular contact with the court, his failure to attend the Lords and the rift with Skipwith and his own brother left him without allies to plead his cause when he needed them most. The star chamber case dragged on until the summer of 1602 when Belgrave was finally sentenced and required to make a public submission to the earl at the Leicester assizes.¹⁰⁴ However, he was able to evade even this punishment for several months. It was not until March 1603 that the earl could feel that his honour had, in some sense, been vindicated when the privy council imprisoned Belgrave for casting aspersions on his appointment of local officers. Significantly it appears to have been the earl's brother-in-law, Worcester, one of his few active allies at court, who applied the pressure during Belgrave's interrogation.¹⁰⁵ But the damage had been done. Huntingdon's reputation and powers of command had taken a very considerable battering, prompting the anguished letter to Cecil cited at the start of this article. For the remainder of his life his authority and, just as significantly, his self-confidence in asserting it, were much diminished. Chastened by the whole experience he did not even attempt to intervene in the county election in March 1604; and at Leicester he simply requested that the town endorse the Duchy of Lancaster candidates.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

What lessons can be drawn from this analysis of Leicestershire politics at the close of Elizabeth's reign? Why did the fourth earl of Huntingdon so rapidly forfeit the dominant position that his family had enjoyed for generations? What does the rapid collapse of the Hastings hegemony reveal, more generally, about the nature of aristocratic power?

It is important to recognize that Earl George was to some extent the victim of ill fortune. The full extent of the earldom's financial problems was largely concealed until the death of the third earl and came as a shock to his executors. The absence of the Greys had given the Hastings a clear run at governing the shire and their re-emergence at this juncture was sheer bad luck. And the circumstances that led to gentry like Belgrave and Skipwith turning against the Hastings, after earlier generations of their families had been loyal, were largely unpredictable. But circumstances could be

¹⁰²Ibid., iii, pp. 447–8.

¹⁰³Ibid., iii, pp. 450, 457, 479, 485.

¹⁰⁴HMC, *Calendar of the Talbot and Shrewsbury papers in Lambeth Palace Library and the College of Arms*, M65.

¹⁰⁵TNA, SP 12/287/56.

¹⁰⁶HP *Commons 1604–29*, ii, pp. 220, 224–5.

managed; and how successful he was in doing this was the measure of a 'good lord'. In financial terms, Huntingdon achieved a good deal. Through a policy of retrenchment, attention to detail, assiduous lobbying and the coup of the Stanley marriage, he set the family finances on an even keel and was able to pass on a still-impressive patrimony to his grandson.

It was in the realm of politics that his limitations were exposed. He appears to have recognized the threat to his position posed by the combative Sir John Grey and did his best to accommodate him by giving his support in the county election of 1601. But this approach was derailed by the sudden decision of Henry Hastings of the Abbey to stand against him. Whether this was due to a lack of communication or a rift between the earl and Sir Edward Hastings is unclear. But the resultant re-igniting of the traditional feud between the families was a disaster for the earl for which he had only himself to blame. Had the Hastings brotherhood been as united as it had been for much of Elizabeth's reign it is likely that this and other setbacks could have been avoided. An individual with a grievance against the family, such as Belgrave, would probably have been denied a platform in county politics or in parliament. Similarly, an ambitious politician like Thomas Beaumont would have had nowhere else to go after his failure to get elected at Leicester in 1597.

The fourth earl's political shortcomings can largely be traced back to his upbringing and personality. He had been raised and lived most of his adult years as a country gentleman, with none of the advantages of the early entrée into court circles enjoyed by his elder brother and his grandson. This deprived him of the range of contacts and knowledge of the workings of the court that might have encouraged him to come to London more often and take up his place in the Lords. In spite of the support of the Cecils, he lacked the familiarity and sense of shared interest with privy councillors and fellow peers that would surely have led to Belgrave being crushed when his case was brought before them. This was, indeed, what happened to the fifth earl's antagonist, Sir Henry Shirley, in similar circumstances during the 1628 Parliament.¹⁰⁷ The fourth earl's lack of a grounding amongst the noble élite might also go some way to explaining why he lacked his elder brother's aura of assurance and natural authority. The tetchiness, anxiety over whether he would be obeyed and exaggerated sensitivity to slights to his honour that he displayed in his dealings with Leicester corporation were telling indications of a lack of confidence that in itself invited challenges and defiance.

Some of the same considerations shaped his relationship with his brothers on which rested the all-important advantage of dynastic solidarity. The fact that he had grown up as a country gentleman meant that they tended to regard him as their equal. In spite of Sir Francis's protestations at Earl George's accession that 'if every good member of the house will not add his best strength he is much to blame', dynastic unity was not much in evidence during the latter's tenure of the earldom.¹⁰⁸ Neither Sir Francis nor Sir Edward displayed the loyalty and respect that they had afforded Earl Henry. The one brother the fourth earl appears to have felt comfortable with and fully trusted was Walter, which was an indication of the importance of the religion in the fraternal rift. George and Walter were both married to Catholics or crypto-Catholics and, although

¹⁰⁷Cogswell, *Home Divisions*, pp. 167–72.

¹⁰⁸*Letters of Sir Francis Hastings*, p. 57.

there is no clear evidence that they were Catholics themselves, they certainly did not share the puritan views of their three brothers. Given the importance that Sir Francis attached to godly zeal as a measure of integrity and worth, there can be little doubt that religion made a significant contribution to the brothers' loss of a sense of common purpose.

It also prevented Earl George enjoying the considerable cachet of being regarded as the natural lay leader of the godly within the shire. In spite of the assurances he gave to Sir Edward at his accession, there is no evidence that his support went beyond the formal patronage of Arthur Hildersham. He did not have any works dedicated to him by godly ministers; he showed no discernible interest in the preaching lectures at Ashby and Leicester; and, most tellingly, he was not one of the signatories to the petition from the Leicestershire gentry in support of the Millenary Petition of April 1603 in which Hildersham was a prime mover.¹⁰⁹ The list was headed by Sir Edward and Sir Henry Hastings of the Abbey, followed, amongst others, by his antagonists Skipwith, Beaumont and Belgrave. By the time of Earl George's death, it had become apparent that the religious leadership of the shire had passed into the hands of the Greys and their allies. In a petition to Cecil in January 1605, in support of the godly ministers in the shire threatened with deprivation, Henry Lord Grey was the leading signatory, supported by Skipwith and Sir Henry Beaumont of Coleorton.¹¹⁰ The political fallout from this is difficult to measure, but it was surely considerable.

A final element in Earl George's make-up and personality that had an impact on his political prospects was his reluctance to engage in the scale of expenditure and hospitality that might have been expected of a premier earl. In part, of course, this was a consequence of the need for retrenchment. But, to judge by the lavish outlay of his grandson when he was still facing financial constraints, this was also a matter of temperament. What he lost by this was demonstrated on James I's journey south in April 1603. The king stayed at Belvoir Castle, the home of Huntingdon's neighbour the earl of Rutland, where the new monarch and his entourage were lavishly entertained, whilst the leading gentry of Leicestershire and the neighbouring counties – including the earl's kinsman, Sir Henry Hastings of the Abbey, and Sir Thomas Beaumont – flocked to the royal presence to receive knighthoods. Had this happened at Ashby Castle the boost to the earl's prestige would have been enormous. As it was, his entertainment of the queen and Prince Henry in June was a much lower key affair that, according to one contemporary reporter, was rather overshadowed by Skipwith's reception the following day in Leicester.¹¹¹ There was also none of the lavish entertaining that Leicester corporation had conferred on his brother in the 1580s, probably because the fourth earl had not provided reciprocal hospitality.¹¹² The prestige that such events conferred on both host and guest is hard to quantify. But in an age when much of the aristocracy's status depended on their ability to project an aura of splendour and majesty, the earl was evidently missing out.

¹⁰⁹Collinson, *Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, pp. 447–56; BL, Additional MS 8978, fos. 109–10.

¹¹⁰HH, Hatfield MS, 103.100.

¹¹¹J. Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions and Magnificent Festivities of King James I*, 4 vols. (London: J. B. Nichols, 1828), i, pp. 90–3; Nichols, *County of Leicester*, iii, pp. 589–90.

¹¹²*Records of Leicester 1509–1603*, pp. 184, 187, 195, 205.

The decline of Earl George's authority in Leicestershire can, then, be traced back to a compound of unfortunate and difficult circumstances, financial constraints, failures of political judgment and a lack of self-confidence and assertiveness. This is a reminder – if one is needed – that the political fortunes of aristocratic dynasties depended as much on the personal and political capacities of their leaders as did those of early modern monarchies. The success and failure of both rested on how effectively they could manage the political circumstances they faced. Those who were most successful tended to be good judges of character and counsel, with the capacity to project an aura of majesty and authority, the ability to overawe subordinates, but also inspire their loyalty, combined with a reputation for being sound in religion. On none of these measures was Earl George a match for his elder brother.

However, in all this it is important to recognize that his grandson did succeed in recovering much of the family's political authority in the shire. Their fortunes may have been at a particularly low ebb when he succeeded the fourth earl, but he was able to see off the Greys' challenges to his administration of purveyance and appointments to the local bench in the late 1600s and early 1610s; then in the 1620s and 1630s defeat further attacks on his running of the lieutenancy by Sir Henry Shirley and Sir William Fawnt. He was helped in this by the deaths of Henry Lord Grey and his son in 1612–1614 and the resultant minority in the Grey family until 1621.¹¹³ But as Thomas Cogswell has demonstrated, it was the fifth earl's political assertiveness and ability to mobilize support amongst his fellow peers, privy councillors and, ultimately, King Charles that enabled him to restore the family fortunes to something approaching their former heights by the end of the 1630s.¹¹⁴ This cycle of ascendancy, decline and recovery puts into perspective some of the broader components of aristocratic power.

One of the most significant elements in this was the considerable shrinkage in the manorial holdings of the aristocracy. Stone and others have estimated that these fell by an average of around a quarter over the course of Elizabeth's reign which led to a considerable reduction in both their capital resources and political authority.¹¹⁵ The Hastings certainly exemplified the loss of territorial holdings, with family sources suggesting that the third earl alone alienated some 94 manors, well over half of his total estate. This had a political impact on the fourth earl in that it forced him to adopt a policy of retrenchment which limited opportunities for hospitality and display and, perhaps also, deterred him from making regular visits to London and the royal court. But in other respects, it appears to have left the Hastings authority in Leicestershire relatively unscathed. The key consideration here was that the third earl and Sir Francis followed the normal aristocratic practice of selling off outlying manors first and doing their best to preserve the family patrimony. The result was that the earl and his brothers continued to hold a relatively compact bloc of estates across the western hundreds of Guthlaxton, Sparkenhoe and West Goscote. It was the tenancy of these manors, and the numerous servants and family retainers within these hundreds and in and around Leicester, that provided – and continued to provide – a solid power base when it

¹¹³*House of Lords 1604–29*, ii, pp. 855–9.

¹¹⁴Cogswell, *Home Divisions*, chp. 11.

¹¹⁵Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, pp. 156–60; C. G. A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500–1700*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984), i, pp. 142–3, 156–7; D. M. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 102–4.

came to voting in county elections. Sir Wolstan Dixie provided an indication of what this meant when he was canvassing on behalf of the fifth earl in March 1628. Writing from Market Bosworth, in the heart of Sparkenhoe hundred, he was able to assure him of the ‘affections of the freeholders my neighbours ... [I] find them wholly your loyal countrymen and servants’. He was also able to report similar results from the northern parts of Guthlaxton and the town of Leicester – and the same probably applied to West Goscote which was the heart of the Hastings patrimony.¹¹⁶ The ability to influence county elections had become the supreme test of territorial power by the latter part of Elizabeth’s reign. In this respect, the influence of the Hastings was second to none amongst the aristocracy and remained so for much of the early Stuart period.¹¹⁷

The political importance of holding a compact bloc of estates within a single shire was illustrated by the contrasting electoral experience of the Manners, earls of Rutland. The extent of their estates at the end of the sixteenth century was considerably greater than that of the Hastings. But instead of being concentrated around their residence at Belvoir Castle in north-east Leicestershire they were scattered across Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire. They held office in all of these counties and were the hereditary lords lieutenant of Lincolnshire up to 1629.¹¹⁸ But their electoral influence within Leicestershire was negligible; and even in Lincolnshire they were only intermittently able to affect the outcome of county elections.¹¹⁹

If the significance of concentration rather than total extent in territorial holdings has been underplayed by historians of the aristocracy, so too have the advantages of ‘ancient nobility’. Stone, in particular, argued that the sale of honours under the early Stuarts significantly undermined their prestige and fomented faction and conflict within their ranks that weakened the order as a whole.¹²⁰ But this overlooks the crown’s concern to uphold and maintain the status of those it recognized as its natural servants and supporters. Burghley was the foremost proponent of this policy under Elizabeth, consistently intervening to use his power – not just as royal councillor and Master of the Court of Wards, but also as the principal commissioner for the office of the Earl Marshal – to protect the interests and status of ‘families of ancient blood’.¹²¹ His insistence on Earl George providing an expensive heraldic funeral for the third earl at Ashby in April 1596 was an example of this approach. This cost the family some £1400 at a time when it could ill afford it. But it brought considerable benefits in terms of enhancing their prestige; and the fourth earl was able to harp on this in the negotiations

¹¹⁶R. C. Johnson, M. F. Keeler, M. J. Cole and W. B. Bidwell, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1628*, ed., 6 vols. (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1977–83), vi, pp. 154–5.

¹¹⁷*House of Commons 1604–29*, ii, pp. 220–3. J. K. Gruenfelder (in ‘The electoral influence of the earls of Huntingdon 1603–40, *TLAS*, lix (1974–5), 20–1) notes that between 1614 and 1628 Hastings candidates were returned for seven of the twelve available county seats in Leicestershire.

¹¹⁸*House of Lords 1604–19*, iii, pp. 307–20.

¹¹⁹The only references to their marshalling of freeholder support in Leicestershire were in 1601 and 1640; *House of Commons 1559–1601*, i, pp. 192–3; *House of Commons 1604–29*, ii, pp. 220–3; Cogswell, *Home Divisions*, p. 262. For their limited impact in Lincolnshire, see *House of Commons 1604–29*, ii, pp. 229–30.

¹²⁰Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, pp. 119–28. The extent to which the Hastings were in fact members of the ‘ancient nobility’ is a moot point. The family had not entered the peerage until 1461 with the ennoblement of William Lord Hastings. There were plenty of noble families who could trace their descent back to the fourteenth century and beyond. But ‘ancient nobility’ is an elastic concept and it certainly suited Burghley to present the Hastings as such since they were one of the relatively few pre-Tudor creations who were securely loyal to the Elizabethan regime. I am grateful to Andrew Thrush for raising this issue which certainly merits further investigation.

¹²¹Cust, *Charles I and the Aristocracy*, pp. 9–12, 17–18.

with the Cecils that eventually secured a relatively generous financial settlement with the crown.¹²² There were other assets that long-established families, like theirs could draw on. They had privileged rights of access at court and a seat in the House of Lords; they could stake a hereditary claim to the leading county offices – particularly the lord lieutenancy – that it was hard for councillors and the crown to ignore; and they were in prime position in the marriage market when it came to securing large dowries or alliances with wealthy heiresses. These advantages all played an important part in the third earl's rise to dominance and they were much in evidence at the accession of the fifth earl. His grandfather was able to carry off the considerable coup of marrying him to Elizabeth Stanley, offspring of one of the most senior and best-connected families in the peerage, the earls of Derby, but also the step-daughter of the Lord Keeper, Sir Thomas Egerton.¹²³ The family was also a beneficiary in the struggle to retain its offices at the death of the fourth earl. The young fifth earl responded to Lord Grey's attempted coup by pleading that 'to miss these places might make my house less esteemed where I hope to live and faithfully serve your majesty'.¹²⁴ This subtle reference to the discourse of loyal service across the generations that underpinned the 'ancient nobility's' case for preferential treatment – alongside lobbying by Cecil and Egerton – no doubt helped to carry the day.

The fifth earl also benefited from the same policy being pursued by Charles I, acting in tandem with his reforming Earl Marshal, the earl of Arundel. Following the death of Buckingham, and in response to a widespread perception that the prestige and honour of the 'ancient nobility' were in decline, the granting of new titles was carefully regulated and greater efforts were made to involve established noble families in the life of the court. The king also intervened more closely in appointments to the all-important county office of lord lieutenant, ensuring that senior members of the nobility were appointed and that sons were groomed to succeed their fathers. In addition, the courts of Chivalry and Star Chamber were given enhanced powers in dealing with challenges to aristocratic honour and status.¹²⁵ In spite of being stand-offish towards the royal court in his earlier years, the fifth earl received a warm welcome when the state of his finances allowed him to attend during the 1630s. He enjoyed the kudos of escorting visiting ambassador, sitting as one of the panel of noble judges in the Court of Chivalry and having his son join him in the lieutenancy commission in 1638. He also profited considerably from the hard line against those who had impugned the honour

¹²²HMC, *Hastings*, ii, pp. 44–5.

¹²³Cogswell, *Home Divisions*, pp. 22–4.

¹²⁴HH, Hatfield MS 197.14.

¹²⁵Cust, *Charles I and the Aristocracy*, chps. 2–3. The significance of this newly created office for the political power of the nobility has again been underplayed. Initially, its main responsibility was supervising the militia and raising troop levies for the Elizabethan wars. But, as the council came to recognize the value of small commissions operating under the royal prerogative with whom it could communicate relatively rapidly and efficiently, it piled on extra duties in collecting benevolences, suppressing the threat of riot, pursuing Catholics and arbitrating local disputes. As a consequence, the lord lieutenant also came to acquire a good deal of patronage, from the appointment of deputy lieutenants and militia officers to dispensing contracts for county munitions. He also enjoyed a direct line of communication with the privy council and extensive powers under the royal prerogative. For excellent discussions of these themes, see N. A. Younger, *War and Politics in the Elizabethan Counties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), chp. 2; V. L. Stater, *Noble Government. The Stuart Lord Lieutenancy and the Transformation of English Politics* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), chp. 1. For the considerable boost to their local prestige and authority enjoyed by the earls of Huntingdon as well-established, hands-on, lords lieutenant, see Cross, *Puritan Earl* pp. 120–1; Cogswell, *Home Divisions*, pp. 19–63.

of the nobility. Sir William Fawnt who publicly criticized his running of the lieutenancy was sentenced in Star Chamber to pay the exceptionally large fine of £5000, together with £2000 in expenses to the earl. It was this that did much to restore the finances and morale of the earl in the late 1630s.¹²⁶ Far from being a declining asset, as Stone suggested, the political and ideological leverage afforded to those who enjoyed the status of members of the ‘ancient nobility’ remained high, especially when Burghley and Arundel were driving the crown’s policy.

A third component of aristocratic power that has also received less attention than it deserves was their religious patronage. This was of minor relevance for their political influence prior to the Reformation; but the religious conflicts of Elizabeth’s reign changed all this. With the nation’s security threatened by the forces of Catholicism it suddenly became imperative that members of the nobility be seen to be taking a lead in the ideological struggle and one of the most effective ways of doing this was deploying their religious patronage to promote a godly preaching ministry. In this respect, the third earl of Huntingdon’s religious impact on Leicestershire was exceptional, perhaps only matched by that of his friend, the second earl of Bedford, on Devon.¹²⁷ But the patronage exercised by the likes of the earl of Leicester in Warwickshire, Robert 3rd Lord Rich in Essex, or Lord North in Cambridgeshire and west Suffolk had similar effects, albeit on a smaller scale.¹²⁸ The combination of religious zeal, domination of local offices, extensive territorial holdings and religious patronage gave these peers a unique capacity to shape the religious complexion of their shires and ensured that they forged close alliances with the leadership of the protestant regime at the centre which guaranteed them considerable political leverage. It also meant that they were held up amongst the politically engaged constituency of puritan ministers, gentry and freeholders, as exemplars of a godly magistracy that was in the vanguard of the struggle against the forces of popery. Elizabethan peers, like Huntingdon and Bedford, can be regarded as the fore-runners of those ‘country lords’, like the earl of Warwick in Essex and Lord Brooke in Warwickshire, whose extensive range of puritan patronage and contacts were to be so significant in mobilizing their counties for parliament in 1640–2.¹²⁹ The extent to which all this mattered was illustrated by the collapse in the political authority of Earl George. His indifference to godly concerns exacerbated the fatal split with his brothers Edward and Francis, but, more damagingly, deprived him of the role of standard bearer for the puritan interest in Leicestershire that by the end of his life had passed to the Greys and their allies. This loss of trust and approval amongst the godly appears to have played

¹²⁶Cogswell, *Home Divisions*, chp. 11.

¹²⁷On Bedford, see Collinson, *Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, pp. 52–3, 166, 278; Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, pp. 733–8; P. Hunneyball, ‘Russell, Francis, 2nd earl of Bedford (c.1527.85)’ and A. Thrush, ‘Alley, William, bishop of Exeter (1510/11–70)’, History of Parliament trust unpublished articles for the House of Lords, 1559–1601 section of the History of Parliament. I am grateful to the History of Parliament for allowing me to cite these articles in draft.

¹²⁸Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, pp. 733–8. For Leicester, see S. Adams, ‘“Because I am of that country and mynde to plant myself there”: Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester and the west midlands’, in *Leicester and the Court*, ed. by S. Adams (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 310–73; for Rich, see *House of Lords 1604–29*, iii, pp. 465–75; for North, see E. J. Bourgeois II, ‘The queen, a bishop and a peer: a clash for power in mid-Elizabethan Cambridgeshire’, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXVI (1995), 3–15; D. MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 207, 340.

¹²⁹For Warwick, see C. Holmes, *The Eastern Association in the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 19, 21–2, 34–5; for Brooke see A. L. Hughes, ‘Thomas Dugard and his circle in the 1630s – ‘a parliamentary-puritan connexion’, *HJ*, 29 (1986), 771–93; A. L. Hughes, *Politics, Society and Civil War in Warwickshire, 1620–60* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987), chp. 4.

a part in emboldening his enemies and critics, and limiting his effectiveness in parliamentary elections.

The successful exercise of aristocratic power emerges from this study as a complex amalgam of economic, social, political, ideological and personal elements. Wealth and territorial holdings were a crucial underpinning; but much depended on how this wealth was deployed and whether estates were concentrated. The cachet of ‘ancient nobility’ brought advantages in terms of family and court contacts and favourable treatment by the crown; but to make the most of it one had to be assiduous in cultivating these connections. Local office under the crown, especially the newly-created office of lord lieutenant, garnered considerable power and patronage; but at the same time exposed the holder to challenges and criticism if he did not exercise it responsibly. Godly zeal and commitment to the protestant cause enabled peers to mobilize widespread support amongst the opinion-formers within the ranks of ministers, gentry and freeholders. Conversely the stigma of popery could limit the influence that a peer might otherwise have commanded by dint of his wealth and landholdings. But in the final analysis, it was often the personality and ability of the individual peer that determined their success or failure. Like early modern monarchs, those most likely to succeed were those who were assertive and confident; who had the capacity to overawe subordinates, but at the same time command loyalty; who had a reputation for godliness, but were capable of displaying the appropriate degree of magnificence; and who were politically astute and attuned to the requirements of ‘good lordship’.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Dr Andrew Thrush of the History of Parliament for his comments and suggestions on this article. I am also grateful to the History of Parliament Trust for allowing me to cite material from my two draft articles on ‘Hastings, Henry, 3rd earl of Huntingdon (c.1536-95)’ and ‘Hastings, George, 4th earl of Huntingdon (c.1537-1604)’. The author is grateful for funding support from the British Academy and the University of Birmingham for the research on which this article is based.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Richard Cust is Professor Emeritus of Early Modern History at the University of Birmingham and the author of a number of books and articles on late Tudor and early Stuart politics, including *Charles I and the Aristocracy, 1625-1642* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Funding

This work was supported by funding from the University of Birmingham and the British Academy.