

Social Mobility in the Fourteenth Century: The Example of the Chelreys of Berkshire

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EDMUND Chelrey was born a few years after the beginning of the 14th century, the eldest son of a Berkshire family of slender means, lords of no manors and bearing no title of gentility. He lived and worked through a period of recession in agriculture and recurrent and dramatic visitations of the plague. By the time of his death in 1372 he had established himself as a knight and a landholder of substance in his native county where his descendants were able to live in the comfortable style of landed gentry. Though the meaning of knight may be seen as a clear title the term gentry in this period is more complex. What we have is a number of definitions: men with land valued at £20 p.a., men dubbed knights, men described as 'valettus', 'esquire', 'gentilman', often coming from long-established families and having knightly birth and training, and landholders of some substance. Though each of these might claim to be valid for a part their sum is too rigid for a class which was wide and evolving; and a definition of gentry remains elusive. A detailed study of individuals and families can contribute to building up a concept of 'gentry'. One of the agents of evolution in the gentry class was a career, an important means by which to enter the class, and for established gentry to increase or reinvigorate their estates. Among those careers was the law and a useful example of its potential rewards is provided by the career of Edmund Chelrey.

In order to appreciate his achievement it is helpful to look first at his background. His family's history to the beginning of the 14th century is obscure. All the evidence available shows that they had only small and isolated holdings, none of very much account. As they bore the name Chelrey in the mid 13th century it may be assumed that they lived in the Berkshire place so called, now rendered Childrey;¹ they may have been tenants though there is no direct reference to their holding land there. The first member of whom we know is Henry de Chelrey who was an approver of lands, appealing some men of robbery in Childrey in 1244.² The next is Master John de Chelrey who was head of the family, evidently living at Childrey c. 1272-96 when he was witnessing deeds there.³ He had three sons Henry, John and Richard, the last of whom was murdered by their neighbour, John de Rampayn, in 1313.⁴ John was still alive in 1314 when he was manucaptor for his

¹ During the period when this family existed neither the personal nor the place-name was ever spelt with a 'd' in documents; the only exception is isolated, and perhaps doubtful in its printed version, viz: Childrey (Cur. Reg. R. IV, p. 425).

² Cal. Lib. R. 1240-5, 233.

³ B.R.O. D/EBp T 74/1 and 2. These are dated by the witness of Richard de Pusey whose name appears in numerous deeds at this time (*Ibid.* T1 and T8 passim).

⁴ C.P.R. 1317-21, 79, 114.

eldest son Henry⁵ but this is the last mention of him and it is clear that Henry was already by then a man with some land of his own, though the extent of it is not known; Henry's only known holdings were small plots of land which he had c. 1300-12 in Wantage and Uffington both about four miles from Childrey.⁶

These few references to their landholding are all we know and by c. 1312 their holdings seem to have been at Childrey and within a four mile radius of it, rather far apart for small-holdings of no great value. Nevertheless there was potential value for anyone who could make good here. This was an area where the land was some of the most valuable in England,⁷ and proximity to London, Windsor and Wallingford afforded a greater chance than many places of some sort of contact, or service, with the crown. This is the background for the first member of the Chelrey family who emerges as more than a name *viz.* Henry who was knight of the shire for Berkshire in the parliament of 1314.⁸

Henry seems to have had a considerable sum of money available in 1317 when he was owed £400 by Warin de Insula.⁹ The latter was baron of Kingston Lisle, only three miles west of Childrey, and it is possible that Chelrey was associated with de Insula as a servant—perhaps a steward—and this might explain the debt.¹⁰ Though de Insula was executed after Boroughbridge¹¹ there is no evidence that Henry Chelrey was involved against Edward II though at least one of his brothers was.¹² This is all that is known of Henry Chelrey's background and, on this evidence, it would seem that his eligibility to sit in parliament as 'among the more discreet men and those more fitted to the task'¹³ was due to something other than landholding. Yet it may be that Henry Chelrey had more land—perhaps as free tenant—than we know of. His wife Alice was evidently related to the Raumpayn family for she later claimed land in their manor and perhaps Henry held land there during his lifetime.¹⁴ Furthermore his sister, Margaret, in 1314 paid £20 for the reversion of certain lands in Childrey (probably in Mautravers manor);¹⁵ if a woman of the family was able to buy property in her own right it seems likely that the head of the family was at least as well endowed. It is at least a possibility that he gained from service with de Insula, though his holdings must have been modest, and in this family making good in the world could not hinge, in the first instance, on its members

⁵ *Parlt. Writs*, II, 3, 664.

⁶ Arch. Queens Coll., nos. 1543, 1544.

⁷ F. H. Baring, *Domesday Tables for the Counties of Surrey, Berks. etc.* (London, 1909); *V.C.H. Berks.*, II, 167-203; J. Thorold Rogers, *History of Agriculture and Prices*, I, 100; IV, 89. In 1341 Berkshire was the sixth richest county in England and the part of it in which the Childreys lived was at or above the average for the county.

⁸ *Ibid.*; *Ret. of M.P.s*, I, 46.

⁹ *C.C.R.* 1313-8, 476. This is slightly more than the median income for a baron in the period 1260-1320, that is £339 per annum (S. Painter, *Studies in the History of the English Feudal Barony* (1963), chapter VII) and therefore seems an unbelievable sum for such a man as Henry Chelrey to possess.

¹⁰ See below.

¹¹ *G.E.C.* VIII, 48-9.

¹² Henry's two brothers, John and Richard, were both associated with Roger Dammory in some permanent way for John obtained a living in the diocese of Norwich at Dammory's instance in 1318 (*C.P.R.* 1317-21, 114), a John was one of Dammory's followers in the rebellion of 1321 (*Ibid.*, 1321-4, 16; *Parlt. Writs*, II, 3, 664). Richard was murdered in 1313 by the neighbour John Rampayn, and Dammory also intervened here to obtain a pardon for Henry in not prosecuting an appeal in this matter (*C.P.R.* 1317-21, 79).

¹³ *Parlt. Writs*, I, 150, 156 (from the writ of summons of 1304).

¹⁴ *V.C.H. Berks.*, IV, 274.

¹⁵ P.R.O. CP 25(1) 10/43 no. 12.

staying in agriculture and patiently accumulating estates¹⁶ but on their going away from home and taking up careers. This can be seen in the cases of several of Henry's contemporaries who were perhaps other brothers or cousins, clearly with no portion of land. In 1314 a Daniel Chiltre was warden of the Cordwainers in the City of London¹⁷ and in 1336-8 William Chelrey, probably his son, was a member of the same company.¹⁸ Richard Chelrey was in 1332-3 burgess in parliament for the City of Bristol,¹⁹ evidently having made his mark as a merchant. Matthew de Chelrey in 1312 was bailiff of Brent on the estates of Glastonbury Abbey²⁰ and Thomas de Chelrey in 1330-3 was apparently a minor churchman of some drive for he had two livings in quick succession²¹ and was given licence to study for a year in England in 1331²² and to absent himself for one year in 1333,²³ which indicates a training in some branch of law or theology.

In this family a career, common among young sons, was also a necessity for the eldest. The younger sons mentioned all seem to have had a little more than average success and it may be that they had qualities in common with Edmund Chelrey, Henry's eldest son and successor, whose drive and determination were instrumental in raising the family.

Edmund Chelrey was probably born a few years after the beginning of the 14th century for he is first mentioned as witnessing a deed at Childrey in 1324.²⁴ The next trace of him is in 1338 when he represented Berkshire as knight of the shire in parliament; he subsequently acted in this capacity in 1341, 1344, 1346 and 1348.²⁵ Yet, like Henry, he seems to have had no substantial holding in land and for the period to 1342 little information survives. However his later years show him as a busy professional lawyer and he was probably already so in these earlier years.²⁶ Though little is known about the type of training a lawyer received at this time the standard of practice suggests that it was a rigorous one.²⁷ Edmund Chelrey in this earlier period may well have had a theoretical training, acted for private clients, and served the government lawyers in some humble, unrecorded capacity; the first known link with the central government was in 1342 when he was one of the keepers of Steventon Priory.²⁸ From 1343 to 1362 Edmund did much service on royal commissions;²⁹ the nature of these and the identities of those who served with him

¹⁶ The only Chelrey who was dealing in land in this period was Adam but he was parting with land in Shinfield which was of negligible size, in 1334 (B.R.O. D/EB b T19).

¹⁷ *Letter Books, City of London*, Bk. C, 127.

¹⁸ *Coroners Rolls, City of London*, 1300-1378, 176.

¹⁹ *Ret. of M.P.s*, I, 100.

²⁰ *The Great Chartulary of Glastonbury*, I, ed. Aelred Watkin (Somerset Record Society, Vol. 59 (1947), 234.

²¹ *C.P.R.* 1327-30, 500; Warminster and Sevenhampton, both in Wiltshire, *The Register of Ralph of Shrewsbury, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1329-63*, ed. T. S. Holmes, Pt. III, (Somerset Record Society, Vol. 10, (1896)), 46, 76, 396.

²² *Ibid.*, 76.

²³ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁴ B.R.O. D/EBp T74/3.

²⁵ *Ret. of M.P.s*, I, 124, 133, 138, 140, 145.

²⁶ His career which was eventually in royal service suggests the possibility that, as a member of parliament, he was a curialist, chosen for professional ability, but there is no evidence to show that this was responsible for his election to parliament. I owe my caution in this matter to the counsel of Professor J. S. Roskell.

²⁷ *Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench under Edward III*, Vol. VI, G. O. Sayles (Selden Society, Vol. 82), Introduction (This work will henceforth be referred to as *Select Cases*).

²⁸ *Cal. Fine R.*, V, p. 262.

²⁹ See Appendix.

make it clear that such service was an essential preparatory stage before being appointed a serjeant-at-law, just as Sayles has shown that the holding of the office of serjeant was an essential prerequisite for promotion to judge.³⁰ Though the group of commissioners often included local men, such as Richard Williams of Oxfordshire and other royal servants such as Richard Talbot steward of the king's household, every commission was composed mainly of professional lawyers who were either already in royal service or were to be so later, as serjeants-at-law and, later, judges.³¹

When Edmund began his public career in 1343³² he stepped into what must have been an expanding field of opportunity for professional lawyers. In Edward III's reign the central government used such men increasingly, especially those who specialized in criminal cases: firstly as additional members of general commissions; secondly to make up, with magnates, special groups appointed to undertake particular enquiries; and thirdly to undertake commissions of oyer and terminer. Edmund Chelrey can be seen acting in all these categories: for example he was in 1348 commissioner of the peace for Berkshire,³³ in 1348 and 1349 he served on a commission to enquire regarding the confiscated de la Beche properties in Berkshire;³⁴ in 1351 he was investigating a dispute between royal and ecclesiastical jurisdiction in Berkshire and Oxfordshire;³⁵ he served on several commissions regarding Queen Philippa's property;³⁶ and he was commissioner of oyer and terminer in five counties between 1343 and 1361.³⁷ In such capacities Edmund Chelrey and his fellow professional lawyers took over a good deal of the jurisdiction of felony and gaol delivery and other duties of the local gentry who were commissioners and, later, justices of the peace.

This royal policy of increasing professionalism, begun under the influence of Scrope, Mortimer and many distinguished lawyers, was not popular with the class whom they displaced—that is the knights who resented the rivalry to their jurisdiction and preferred and demanded men with local knowledge.³⁸ Chelrey, not a knight, was to find, in a policy which offended the knightly class, an opportunity through his career to become a knight and to buy estates and thus establish his family within that very class—an interesting indication of the fluidity of the knightly class and the means of entering it.

Edmund embarked on the third stage of his career in 1362 when he was appointed a king's serjeant-at-law and from that time on the number of commissions of the types mentioned on which he sat increased dramatically, for serjeants had a good

³⁰ *Select Cases*, cvi-cvii; App. XVIII.

³¹ Three examples of such men were: Robert de Thorpe serving with Chelrey in a commission of 1344 (*C.P.R.* 1343-5, 287); he was made a serjeant in 1345 and justice in 1346 (*Select Cases*, cvi); Thomas Ingelby who served with Chelrey on a commission of 1352 (*C.P.R.* 1350-4, 287); he was made a serjeant in 1359 and justice in 1361 (*Select Cases*, App. XVIII); John Knyet first appeared as commissioner in 1352 (*C.P.R.* 1350-4, 287) and was made serjeant in 1356 and justice in 1361 (*Select Cases*, App. XVIII). The careers of numerous others show the same pattern.

³² *C.P.R.* 1343-5, 86. Commissioner of oyer and terminer for Berkshire.

³³ *C.P.R.* 1348-50, 161.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69; *Cal. Inq. Misc.*, III, no. 11, no. 547.

³⁵ *C.P.R.* 1350-4, 387.

³⁶ See Appendix.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ The duties and position of this class of lawyer is fully discussed by B. H. Putnam in the Introduction to *Proceedings before the Justices of the Peace: Edward III to Richard III* (The Ames Foundation, 1938), xiii to cxxviii; cf. also *Select Cases*, Introduction, xxvii-xxxv.

deal of vacation work outside the periods of law terms : in the sixteen years between 1343-61 he undertook thirty-four commissions ; and in less than three years from 1362-4 he undertook twenty-three. He also acted as justice of assize and gaol delivery in this period, as justice of labourers and occasionally as justice of the peace.³⁹ His work lay in the southwestern circuit, that is in the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Hampshire and Wiltshire,⁴⁰ and, except on isolated occasions, he did not act any longer in Berkshire.⁴¹

The final stage of Edmund's career began in November 1371 when he was appointed a justice of the king's bench⁴² but this, the crowning achievement of his career, was not long enjoyed for he was dead by April 1372.⁴³ His promotion came not only late in his life—for he would have been then aged about 69⁴⁴—but also after a rather longer period as a serjeant than the average, which was about 5-6 years,⁴⁵ whereas he spent 9 years in this office. Possibly he was not a man of showy qualities, but of solid professional achievement. Indeed, when one considers that he travelled about the south west of England for nearly thirty years, increasingly as he grew older until he was nearly 70, one can only conclude, with admiration, that, as well as being professionally able, he was physically very tough indeed.

What we are concerned with, more than with his very interesting career, are the rewards which he gained from it. It is clear from the commissions Edmund Chelrey undertook before he became a serjeant that he was already in government service and furthermore that he had some particular association with Queen Philippa's household, for on four occasions in 1351, 1352 and 1353⁴⁶ he was investigating breakings into her parks in 22 counties, the affairs of her lands in general and her right to wrecks ; and in 1362, with Robert Cok, he was rewarded by Queen Philippa with the grant of the wardship of the lands of the late William Fitzwaryn at Whityngton in Gloucestershire.⁴⁷ He would also have received the perquisites of acting on the royal commissions, the fees of any other work he did as a lawyer, and from 1362 a salary and the perquisites of the office of serjeant.⁴⁸ But there may also have been other more substantial rewards for the service to Queen Philippa and to the crown for it was in 1355 that Edmund began to acquire property in Berkshire (FIG. 1). These were firstly a small estate of a messuage and a carucate in West Hagbourne, known as Watlingtons manor, acquired in 1355 ;⁴⁹ secondly Frethornes manor in Childrey, acquired in 1357 and assessed at half a knight's fee ;⁵⁰ and thirdly, the two manors of South Fawley, consisting of a messuage, 200 acres of land, 40 acres of pasture and a 12s. rent held as one quarter of a knight's fee, and of Balsdon in

³⁹ See Appendix ; *cf.* also *Select Pleas*, 211.

⁴⁰ Putnam, *op. cit.* note 36, 42 ; Table V.

⁴¹ *C.P.R.* 1367-70, 103.

⁴² *C.C.R.* 1369-74, 254.

⁴³ *Cal. Fine R.*, VIII, 168, 200 ; *Cal. I.P.M.*, XIII, no. 171.

⁴⁴ This assumes he is the Edmund who witnessed at Childrey in 1324 (see above).

⁴⁵ *Cf. Select Pleas*, App. XVIII. The time before promotions varied from 2 to 9 years.

⁴⁶ *C.P.R.* 1350-4, 287, 288, 390 ; *Ibid.*, 1354-8, 353.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1361-7, 236. He already had some association with Fitzwaryn for he had acted as attorney for him when he went overseas on a pilgrimage in 1350 (*C.P.R.* 1350-3, 10).

⁴⁸ See Putnam, *op. cit.* note 36, lxxxix-xci.

⁴⁹ *Cal. Chart. R.* V, 191 ; P.R.O. SC 2/154 nos. 28 and 29.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, CP 25(1), 11/66.



FIG. 1

The Chelrey estates in Berkshire. Key : 1. land in Childrey ; 2. land in Wantage ; 3. land in Uffington ; 4. Watlington's manor, West Hagbourne ; 5. Frethornes manor in Childrey ; 6. South Fawley manor ; 7. Balsdon manor, Kintbury ; 8. land in Letcombe Basset ; 9. land in Westcote ; 10. land in West Challow ; 11. Bayworth manor, Sunningwell ; 12. Inkpen manor ; 13. land in Charlton ; 14. land in Blewbury ; 15. land in Upletcombe (Letcombe Regis) ; 16. land in Farnham ; 17. Philips Court manor, Buscot ; 18. Upton Russells Manor ; 19. land in East Hagbourne.

Kintbury, assessed at one fifth of a knight's fee. These last were purchased in 1364,⁵¹ two years after Edmund had become a serjeant-at-law and it may be that his earlier service to the royal family was rewarded, not only by the wardship already mentioned in 1362 but by the appointment as serjeant which was also made in 1362 and that his service was rewarded by money which enabled him to buy these estates. Royal recognition of his services is also implied in the grant in 1365 to Edmund de Chelrey, the king's serjeant, of free warren in his demesne lands in Childrey, Balsdon, South Fawley, Hagbourne and Stokenchurch. By the time of his death Edmund had also acquired 4 virgates of land in Letcombe Basset, a messuage and a carucate in Westcote in Sparsholt, and also 4 virgates of land in West Challow.⁵² In the last case he held jointly with his sister,⁵³ which implies that they had inherited it, but the others do not occur in any earlier records so may have been acquired by Edmund. He also

⁵¹ *C.P.R.* 1361-7, 523. These were granted by Richard son of Edmund de Polhampton under royal licence.

⁵² *Cal. I.P.M.* XIII, no. 171.

⁵³ *C.C.R.* 1369-74, 370.

held the manor of Barton Stacey in Hampshire probably as a trustee,⁵⁴ and two pieces of land in Oxfordshire, at Stokenchurch and Southey, which were probably his wife's.⁵⁵ Thus, though we are not certain how much land he inherited, it is clear that Edmund Chelrey acquired several estates in Berkshire and it seems almost certain that he was enabled to do so as a result of his career as a professional lawyer. Moreover their location reflects his own local knowledge and contacts. An example of this is to be seen in Frethornes manor in Childrey, an attractive proposition with about 240 acres of land, common rights, the advowson of the church, a manor house and, probably, a mill. The Chelrey family already lived in the mill and Edmund's fortune was rising just as that of the holders' was declining. The holder who sold to Edmund Chelrey, Walter de Frethorne, had been an heir minor for over three years and the sale was completed only a few months after he came of age. There is evidence to suggest that the interest of the Frethorne family in this manor had been declining long before this. They had other lands in Gloucestershire and Somerset held of the same lord as was Childrey (the barony of Newmarch) but their prosperity to the early 14th century had depended upon military service and modest royal service (as falconer and officer in the royal forest of Windsor). After 1320 they seem to have been little involved in Berkshire and, although they kept the advowson of the church and manorial jurisdiction, it seems likely that they had been leasing increasing areas of their demesne lands to the Chelreys long before the actual sale. Though elaboration on this theme would be superfluous here it must be said that the tangled network of tenurial and personal relations in the three manors comprising the vill of Childrey provide an excellent example of the strength of local knowledge and contacts in the land market.⁵⁶

A further testimony to Edmund's own estimation of his resources and status is seen in his contribution to the founding of a chantry in Childrey for the souls of the king, himself, his father Henry, Lucy his wife and other members of his family in 1368. The fact that he used the seal of the Bishop of Salisbury in the deed of endowment 'because the seal of Edmund Chelrey is to many unknown'⁵⁷ points to his lowly origins. Lowly origins notwithstanding the circumstances suggest that this foundation may have owed something to a desire to emulate aristocratic neighbours. The adjacent manor, Mautravers in Childrey, was held by the baronial family of that name. They already had a family chantry in Dorset and in 1371, only three years after Edmund Chelrey's foundation, a Mautravers widow gave her manor in Childrey to augment the endowment of the family chantry.⁵⁸

Edmund's career gave him one more reward—knighthood. He was not a knight earlier but was called so at his death,⁵⁹ and it therefore seems certain that he was made a knight at the time of promotion to the office of justice of the king's bench as was usual. The Wardrobe and Household Accounts and Liberate Rolls

⁵⁴ *C.C.R.* 1369-74, 312. He held this in 1371 but as the holder in 1370 was a woman, Elizabeth Coudray, and as it passed to the Coudray's heirs, the Popham family by 1379 Edmund probably had an interest only as a trustee. (His name is not mentioned in *V.C.H. Hants.*, IV, 418).

⁵⁵ *Cal. I.P.M.*, XIII, no. 171. We do not know his wife's name and she evidently predeceased him.

⁵⁶ Details are in the author's unpublished Ph.d. thesis, University of Reading.

⁵⁷ *C.C.R.* 1364-8, 462-3.

⁵⁸ *C.P.R.* 1370-4, 116. The chantry was at Lytchett Mautravers.

⁵⁹ *Cal. I.P.M.*, XIII, no. 171; *Cal. Fine R.*, VIII, 200.

show that the king defrayed the initial expenses of becoming a knight, providing clothes, furs and other requirements for the ceremony, and also paid the justices £40 per annum to sustain themselves in their new social status.⁶⁰ Edmund Chelrey, of course, enjoyed little of this income but the fact that it was given shows that a serjeant *per se* was not regarded as a wealthy man and it was only by rewards over and above the normal ones of office that he could enter the ranks of the knightly class.

The entrée to the landowning class made by Sir Edmund Chelrey made possible a change in the way of life of this family. In the next generation careers became less important and the family can be seen as established members of the gentry class where their place was assured, staying at home, acquiring new estates, making good marriages and carrying on some of the largely unpaid local government duties taken on by their class. This change can be seen in the lives of the younger children of Sir Edmund, as well as in that of his heir, Thomas. Sir Edmund's daughter, Isabel, married a man who, though probably a younger son, was heir to two estates in Berkshire and Gloucestershire. He was Sir Maurice Russell who held the manor of Upton Russell, Berkshire,⁶¹ and also the manor of Derham, Gloucestershire, which his father settled on him and Isabel on their marriage in 1369.⁶² In marrying with the Russell family the Chelreys would seem to have acquired aristocratic connections for the manor of Upton Russell had been held by the Russell family since 1219 when a moiety of the barony of Newmarch had passed by marriage to Ralph Russell. Though this family became extinct in 1340 with the death of Theobald Russell⁶³ the name of Sir Maurice Russell and the continuous tenure of this manor suggests a family connection.⁶⁴ The Chelrey family already had connections with the other moiety of the Newmarch barony, the Botreaux family who were overlords of Frethornes manor.⁶⁵

This ability to arrange an advantageous marriage for a daughter contrasts with the position of Sir Edmund's sister, Margaret. She had a tiny independence in holding 4 messuages and 4 virgates of land in West Challow jointly with her brother⁶⁶ but was evidently in service at court, probably in a humble capacity, for in her last years she had, by way of a government pension, maintenance at the Hospital of St. Katherine by the Tower of London.⁶⁷ Sir Edmund's younger son and namesake somehow acquired a small estate of his own at Wokefield Banaster and Sulhamstead and apparently had no need to seek a profession. He predeceased his brother Thomas, who held this property by 1374.⁶⁸

Thomas, the eldest son of Sir Edmund, was born in 1350 and inherited his father's lands in 1372.⁶⁹ He was never called a knight but his resources were such as to give him comparable status. One of his first recorded transactions was in

⁶⁰ *Select Pleas*, xxiv-xxv.

⁶¹ *C.P.R.* 1399-1401, 423.

⁶² *C.P.R.* 1367-70, 281; *Cal. Fine R.*, XIV, 175, 176. His father held other lands in the Isle of Wight and Gloucestershire (*Ibid.*) which Maurice did not apparently inherit.

⁶³ Sanders, *English Baronies*, 68.

⁶⁴ *Excerpta & Rot. Fin.* (R.C.), I, 36, 59; *C.C.R.* 1227-31, 351, 589; *V.C.H. Berks.*, III, 283 also assumes this is a descent in the family.

⁶⁵ *V.C.H. Berks.*, IV, 273.

⁶⁶ *C.C.R.* 1369-74, 370.

⁶⁷ *C.C.R.* 1374-7, 115; she was dead by 1374.

⁶⁸ *C.C.R.* 1374-7, 212; the means of acquisition is not known.

⁶⁹ *Cal. I.P.M.* XIII, no. 171; *Cal. Fine R.*, VIII, 168, 200.

1373 when Thomas de la Mare entered into a recognizance with him for £200.⁷⁰ From 1377 to 1389 he performed various functions in local government, though, unlike his father, apparently in an amateur capacity: he was commissioner of the peace in Berkshire in 1377, 1378, 1379 and 1389;⁷¹ commissioner of array in Berkshire in 1378 and 1385;⁷² commissioner of oyer and terminer in Hampshire in 1380⁷³ and in Berkshire in 1388.⁷⁴ He represented the county in parliament in 1390 and 1405-6,⁷⁵ and, from the time of his first attendance, he was clearly more closely associated with the central government. His duties included special commissions and the work of escheator⁷⁶ though on occasions he still acted on commissions of the peace⁷⁷ and, in 1404, as tax collector.⁷⁸

The nature of his special commissions make it clear that he was connected with, and acting for, the Exchequer but there is no evidence that he had a full-time professional appointment there. The qualities required for such special commissions as these⁷⁹ were rather a knowledge of estate management, and in this Chelrey was clearly an expert for in 1403 he was steward of the estates of William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester.⁸⁰ Though there may have been rewards for such services to the crown it is impossible to link these with any particular acquisition of land; indeed several of such acquisitions came before 1390, so that Thomas's service to the crown, which was not, in any case, of great extent, can be seen as a result of his status rather than as a cause of it, and it seems more likely that his best source of income apart from his own lands was his stewardship.

Thomas married Elizabeth who brought to her husband (for her life only) a moiety of nine shops and rents in the City of London.⁸¹ It seems very likely that her father was Roger Long, citizen and vintner of London, for whom Thomas Chelrey was acting as executor in 1377 and 1382.⁸² This would fix his marriage as before 1377 and, indeed, the ages of his children suggest that he married young.⁸³ Elizabeth also had some right of inheritance from the Polhampton family, with whom the Chelreys had long been associated,⁸⁴ for it was in her right that Thomas acquired

⁷⁰ *C.C.R.* 1369-74, 572.

⁷¹ *C.P.R.* 1377-81, 47, 48, 306, 388; *Ibid.*, 1388-92, 135.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1377-81, 306; *Ibid.*, 1381-5, 590.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1377-81, 568.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1385-8, 547.

⁷⁵ *Ret. of M.P.s.*, I, 239, 268.

⁷⁶ He was escheator for Berkshire and Oxfordshire 1392-4 (*C.P.R.* 1392-6, 57, 76, 113-14).

⁷⁷ In 1401, 1403, 1404, 1406-7 (*C.P.R.* 1399-1401, 311; *Ibid.*, 1401-5, 515; *Ibid.*, 1405-8, 489).

⁷⁸ *Cal. Fine R.* XII, 257.

⁷⁹ In 1398 he was, with the Bishop of Salisbury, to examine the government of Amesbury Priory (*C.P.R.* 1396-9, 347) and the same year commissioner of forfeited lands in Wiltshire (*Ibid.*, 363). In 1400 he was commissioner for wastes in the royal manor of Crookham (*Ibid.*, 1399-1401, 311). In 1406 he was among the commissioners to investigate the finances of escheators and sheriffs in Berkshire and Oxfordshire (*Ibid.*, 1405-8, 153) and also to borrow money for the king in these counties (*Ibid.*, 199), and in 1407 he was one of the auditors of accounts for the treasurers of the king's wars (*Ibid.*, 351).

⁸⁰ *Testamenta Vetusta*, ed. N. H. Nicholas (1826), II, 773.

⁸¹ *Cal. Fine R.*, XIII, 235.

⁸² *C.C.R.* 1377-8, 133; *C.P.R.* 1381-5, 14.

⁸³ See above; Elizabeth his eldest daughter was of age in 1412 (*Cal. Fine R. loc. cit.*) and had been married by 1394 (*Somerset Feet of Fines*, Third Series, 208). By 1412 Thomas had a granddaughter Elizabeth (*Cal. Fine R. loc. cit.*), daughter of his second daughter, Joan, who was born perhaps about 1380.

⁸⁴ John de Chelrey had been the agent for a settlement in 1313 of the Polhampton's manor of Balsdon (*Cat. A.D. IC* 195; *P.R.O. CP* 25(1) 10/43 no. 18; *C.P.R.* 1301-7, 485; *Ibid.*, 1313-7, 42, 611)—a manor which Edmund Chelrey bought from them later (see above).

the Polhampton's manor of Bayworth in Sunningwell sometime before 1390.⁸⁵ His purchases of land, while all made from men who were already family associates, aimed at expanding and consolidating the estates he already had. Modest additions were made to the outlying properties, *viz.*: in the Kintbury and Hungerford area, South Fawley, an isolated manor, and Upton, but most gains were in the area of Childrey. In the first of these groups, where Thomas already held the manor of Balsdon in Kintbury, he was, *c.* 1379-1407, farmer of the nearby manor of Inkpen.⁸⁶ South Fawley remained isolated and there is no evidence that he added to its lands.

The third group was centred on Childrey and was the heart of the family estates comprising many aggregations of land. In 1388 Thomas acquired more land in Childrey itself and a rent, by exchanging land in Westcote in Sparsholt,⁸⁷ though he still retained land there.⁸⁸ By the time of his death he had acquired several more parcels of land in this area *viz.* at Charlton near Wantage; at Letcombe Basset (2 virgates to add to the 4 he already held); at Letcombe Regis and at Sparsholt, Fernham and Dephames.⁸⁹ He also acquired between 1381 and his death, by means which we do not know, the manor of Philips Court, Buscot, near Faringdon.⁹⁰ This was in the hands of trustees, Walter Catewy, John de Estbury and others in 1381⁹¹ but had formerly belonged to the Louches family⁹²—and perhaps this acquisition was in payment of a debt by the Louches to the Chelreys, for Adam Louches and Thomas Chelrey were associated on two occasions which suggest a close connection; in 1376 Thomas acted as mainperner of Adam Louches, knight of Oxfordshire,⁹³ and in 1383 they were together involved in conspiracy at Grafton, Derbyshire.⁹⁴ It is not out of the question that Chelrey could lend money to Louches for he had been able to lend money from the beginning of his tenure of the family estates—lending £200 to Thomas de la Mare in 1373,⁹⁵ and it is clear that Louches had more than one brush with the law.

Further to the east—and perhaps as part of a fourth group—Thomas bought the manor of Upton Russells, valued at one quarter of a knight's fee⁹⁶ in 1401, from his brother-in-law, Sir Maurice Russell.⁹⁷ The personal association was probably a strong factor in this purchase but Upton was only a few miles from Childrey and Thomas already held land even nearer to Upton, at West Hagbourne.⁹⁸ To add to the last he also bought a small piece of land at East Hagbourne.⁹⁹

Thus in all his dealings in land are seen the combined factors of local knowledge of both the land and the sellers, which emphasizes the very local focus of Thomas Chelrey's life, a focus which was not much affected by his attendance at parliaments

⁸⁵ P.R.O. CP 25(1) 12/77. It was then granted to feoffees.

⁸⁶ *The Hylle Cartulary*, ed. R. W. Dunning (Somerset Record Society, Vol. 68 (1968)), nos. 289, 300.

⁸⁷ Arch. Queens Coll. no. 1516.

⁸⁸ *Cal. Fine R.*, XIII, 235; *C.C.R.* 1413-19, 469.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*; *Cal. I.P.M.* (R.C.) III, 316 (9 Hen. IV, no. 28).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ P.R.O. C146/C8228; *C.C.R.* 1377-81, 517.

⁹² P.R.O. C148/C54.

⁹³ *C.C.R.* 1374-7, 471.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1381-5, 296.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1369-74, 572.

⁹⁶ *Feud. Aids*, I, 54.

⁹⁷ *C.P.R.* 1399-1401, 423.

⁹⁸ *Cal. Fine R.*, XIII, 235.

⁹⁹ *C.C.R.* 1413-19, 469; *Cal. Fine R.*, XIII, 235.

and his association with the central government ; he was indeed a Berkshire man, and his daughters' marriages to Berkshire knights echo the same theme.

When he died in 1407 he had six manors and numerous sizeable pieces of land¹⁰⁰ and could have provided a substantial inheritance for his son. He had one son, Thomas, who by 1405 had married a lady named Elizabeth, at which time Thomas set them up in the manor of Balsdon in Kintbury which he settled on them and their heirs ;¹⁰¹ but by the time of Thomas, senior's, death in 1407 Thomas junior was evidently dead also and the estates were partitioned among his widow Elizabeth, who later married Sir Thomas de la Pole, knight,¹⁰² and his three daughters and their heirs. The manor of Balsdon passed to Elizabeth the wife of William Darell,¹⁰³ a man who was sheriff of Berkshire and Oxfordshire ;¹⁰⁴ she was the granddaughter of Thomas Chelrey. She also inherited the manor of South Fawley jointly with her aunt Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Chelrey and wife of John Kingston, a knight¹⁰⁵ who held the neighbouring manor of Kingston Bagpuize and also considerable estates in Somerset ;¹⁰⁶ both these ladies had made marriages in the class of knights who held several manors, a further testimony to Thomas Chelrey's status, despite the fact that he was not a knight.

The remainder of the Chelrey properties were held by Thomas's widow Elizabeth until her death in 1412¹⁰⁷ and were then partitioned among the two heiresses above and the youngest daughter of Thomas, Sybil, who was at that time under age. It seems that her shares and those of Elizabeth Darell who was also under age both escheated to the crown for a time.¹⁰⁸ Sybil eventually married Thomas Beckingham who was holding her lands in 1428.¹⁰⁹ This partition of the lands did not result in their being sold up, for each claimant took certain whole manors which were absorbed into already existing groups of estates. However the failure of the male line of the Chelrey family did divide the group of estates—a group which had been established from obscure and evidently lowly origins by a career man, and the further expansion of which was due to the combined effects of marriages and probably of good husbandry and business ability which made it possible to buy land in the late 14th century, when many families established much earlier were in difficulties ; in all of these luck played a part, though the lack of it also led to the end of the Chelrey family line.

Professor Perroy estimated that the average survival of the male line of the French and English nobility was three or four generations and, at the most, two centuries.¹¹⁰ There is no reason to suppose that the gentry, such as the Chelrey family, should differ much in this respect. Professor McFarlane went on to point

¹⁰⁰ *Cal. I.P.M.*, III, 316 (9 Hen. IV, no. 28) ; *Ibid.*, IV, 11 (2 Hen. V, no. 52) ; *Cat. A.D. C395*, 2516.

¹⁰¹ *C.P.R.* 1401-5, 493.

¹⁰² *Cal. Fine R. XIII*, 235 ; *C.C.R.* 1413-19, 469.

¹⁰³ *Cal. I.P.M. (R.C.) III*, 316 (9 Hen. IV, no. 28).

¹⁰⁴ *P.R.O. List*, 108—in 1432-3.

¹⁰⁵ *P.R.O. C146/395* and /2516 ; *Cal. I.P.M. (R.C.) IV*, 11 (2 Hen. V, no. 52).

¹⁰⁶ *Somerset Feet of Fines (Third Series)*, 208 ; *Ibid. (Fourth Series)*, 37 (*Somerset Record Society*, Vol. 17 (1902) and Vol. 22 (1906)).

¹⁰⁷ *Cal. Fine R. XIII*, 235 ; a settlement of some of the properties had been made earlier.

¹⁰⁸ *Cal. Fine R. XIII*, 235 ; *C.C.R.* 1413-19, 469.

¹⁰⁹ *Feud. Aids*, 1, 65.

¹¹⁰ E. Perroy, 'Social Mobility among the French noblesse in the Thirteenth century', *Past and Present*, 21 (1962), 25-38.

out that the result of this dying out of the English nobility (together with entail settlements) was the concentration of estates in fewer hands. But here there is a real difference. McFarlane's mature definition of the nobility emphasized those summoned to parliament as lords and even his earlier conclusions related very largely to the great baronial houses.¹¹¹ These differed from the gentry in having great political and dynastic importance and also far smaller numbers from which marriage alliances could be made. And marriage was the key factor. The gentry, like the barons, sought brides with a parity of fortune but they had a far greater number of families from which to choose (including those just rising like the Chelreys) and a greater chance of finding wives with estates in their own neighbourhood. The Chelrey family is typical of many where the manors, though divided between female heirs, remained in the hands of local families of comparable status. Though it might be too detached to say that the failure of the male line had little effect beyond the disappearance of a surname, when we look at the overall pattern of landholding in the county it seems that the chief effect was to change the relative position of manors in a group—a 'caput' might become a dower house for instance. The effect is far from dramatic. The strength of the gentry class lay in their numbers, the range of their careers and their social mobility which provided constant renewal of both blood and fortune.

APPENDIX

Judicial commissions of Sir Edmund Chelrey

Special commissions of enquiry :

- 1348-9 *re de la Beche* property in Berkshire (*Cal. Inq. Misc.* III, no. 11 ; *C.P.R.* 1348-50, 69)
 1350 *re* property Bradfield (*Ibid.*, 523)
 1352 *re* encroachment of ecclesiastical courts (*C.P.R.* 1350-4, 387)
 1365 *re* property of king's daughter Isabel at Stratfieldsaye (*Ibid.*, 1361-7, 509)
 1371 *re* Hampshire (*C.P.R.* 1370-4, 103)
 1371 *re* complaint of Edward Prince d'Aquitaine and Wales (*Ibid.*, 170)

Commissions of oyer and terminer

- 1343 Berkshire (*C.P.R.* 1343-5, 86, 179)
 1344 Wiltshire and Southampton (*Ibid.*, 287)
 1344 Oxfordshire and Berkshire (*Ibid.*, 292)
 1345 Oxfordshire and Berkshire (*Ibid.*, 576)
 1346 Southampton (*Ibid.*, 1345-8, 97)
 1347 Oxfordshire (*Ibid.*, 471)
 1348 Gloucestershire (*Ibid.*, 1348-50, 162, 166)
 1349 Berkshire (*Ibid.*, 452)
 1350 Berkshire (*Ibid.*, 1350-4, 25, 26)
 1351 in 22 counties *re* breaking into parks of Queen Philippa (*Ibid.*, 287, 288)
 1352 *re* Queen Philippa's lands in 22 counties (*Ibid.*, 390)
 1353 *re* Queen Philippa's lands in 22 counties (*Ibid.*, 448)
 1353 Berkshire (*Ibid.*, 446)
 1353 *re* Queen Philippa's right to wrecks (*Ibid.*, 459)
 1354 Wiltshire (*Ibid.*, 1354-8, 64)
 1356 Wiltshire (*Ibid.*, 447)

¹¹¹ K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (1973). See especially pp. 6-9, 122-6, 172-6.

- 1355 Berkshire (*C.P.R.* 1354-8, 229, 230, 334)
 1359 Wiltshire (*Ibid.*, 1358-61, 282)
 1361 Oxford (*Ibid.*, 1361-7, 69)
 1361 Sussex (wreck) (*Ibid.*, 151)
 1362 Devon (wreck) (*Ibid.*, 209)
 1362 Somerset (*Ibid.*, 212)
 1362 Dorset (wreck) (*Ibid.*, 283, 284)
 1363 Dorset (*Ibid.*, 294)
 1362 Devon (*Ibid.*, 285)
 1363 Wiltshire (*Ibid.*, 358)
 1363 Dorset (*Ibid.*, 358)
 1363 Surrey (de wallis et fossatis) (*Ibid.*, 359)
 1363 Devon (*Ibid.*, 366) (ship stealing) (*Ibid.*, 369)
 1363 Berkshire (*Ibid.*, 372/3)
 1363 Somerset (*Ibid.*, 443, 450)
 1364 Devon (*Ibid.*, 526, 545)
 1364 Wiltshire (*Ibid.*, 523)
 1364 Devon and Cornwall (*Ibid.*, 534)
 1364 Dorset (*Ibid.*, 538, 544)
 1364 Hampshire (*Ibid.*, 540)
 1367-70 Numerous counties as 1361-7 (*C.P.R.* 1367-70, *passim*).
 (including
 1368 Berkshire (*Ibid.*, 103)).