

# The Schooling of the Peasantry in Cambridgeshire, 1575-1700<sup>1</sup>

By MARGARET SPUFFORD

GR<sup>E</sup>AT emphasis has been placed on the increasing prosperity of the farming classes during the sixteenth century, and the expression of this in a higher standard of living. From Harrison's description of the novelty of pewter, feather beds, and chimneys in ordinary houses in the 1580's, to Hoskins's 'Great Rebuilding' and illustrations of the revolution in the size of houses of the yeomanry, it is the material effects of this new prosperity that have called for comment. It is surely worth examining, though, the degree to which these economic changes freed sections of rural society to acquire new aptitudes, to become literate, and so to formulate attitudes and opinions, and participate at the parish level in the reformation of the sixteenth century and the 'further reformation' of the seventeenth century. The growth of a demand for education is in some ways a more significant development than the proliferation of domestic offices in farmhouses, and, like the latter, it demands prosperity, which can enable families to spare children from the labour force.

Any lecturer to adult education classes in rural areas today has probably met the middle-aged members of farming families who were forced to leave school at fourteen after the end of the last war, not for any lack of ability, but because of the desperate shortage of farm labour. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, on the other hand, farm labourers were desperately seeking employment. Only yeomen farming sixty acres or more were in a position to employ servants or labourers regularly.<sup>2</sup> Since the thickly populated arable counties of eastern England probably still had numerically far more farmers of medium-sized holdings of thirty acres or less than yeomen holding substantial acreages, it seems likely that the children in these rural areas had little chance of much education, even if schools existed for them to go to.

The disadvantages of the ordinary village child, constantly reclaimed by mother or father to help with brewing, bird-scaring, hoeing, haying, and all the crises of the agricultural year, are vividly portrayed in a description of a Suffolk National School between 1860 and 1880. In the village of Blaxhall, the farmers complained before a Royal Commission in 1880 that the loss of the school

<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank very warmly the Trustees of the Eileen Power Fund and the President and Fellows of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, who, by their support, have helped to make this work possible.

<sup>2</sup> *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, 1500-1640, ed. Joan Thirsk, pp. 652, 661.

children's labour had affected their farming adversely, since they were unable to pay men's wages for the work the children were accustomed to do.<sup>1</sup> One boy, whose father was a miller with a smallholding in the fens near Ramsey, described his schooldays in the mid 1870's: "Attendance at the school warn't compulsory,<sup>2</sup> and all the summer months the older boys . . . had to stop at home and go a-weeding or some such work in the fields. . . I often wished my father were a bit more like other boys' fathers, as a good many o' my associates never looked inside the school. Arter I were about nine year old, I got real ashamed o' going to school when other folks went to work. One morning some men were working in a field as I passed on my way to school, and I 'eard one on 'em say 'Look at that bloody grub ol' bor still a-going to school. Oughta be getting 'is own living'." After this, he hid in the ditches on his way to school to escape being noticed. He left at twelve.<sup>3</sup> It is admittedly dangerous to infer anything about seventeenth-century social conditions from those of the nineteenth century, but it is very difficult to believe that the village child of two centuries earlier can have been a great deal better off than his counterpart after the Education Act of 1870.

Probability suggests, therefore, that the children of labourers and farmers of holdings of only average size would have had little prospect of acquiring even a rudimentary education in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even if provision existed for it. It thus suggests that any improvement in educational standards among classes below the gentry consisted in the emergence of a class of yeomen, who were able to spare their children from the exigencies of the daily grind of keeping alive to acquire the inessential fripperies of education. Latimer's famous observation on the importance of the yeoman class in providing personnel for the church was soundly based on the economic facts of life. In areas of arable farming like southern Cambridgeshire, where the size of farms was increasing during the period and the numbers of the yeomen growing, one would also expect a growing demand for education and an improvement in educational standards, although it might be confined to a small part of the population. Conversely, an area of small farmers like the Fenland is likely to have had fewer literate children. Literacy, or rather illiteracy, rates should, in fact, vary from area to area and follow to some extent differences in types of farming, and therefore in social structure. At the present moment, however, even this simple hypothesis remains unproven.

Much has recently been made of the 'educational revolution' of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> The evidence for this is based, of

<sup>1</sup> George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows who cut the Hay*, 1956, pp. 62, 172-6.

<sup>2</sup> For those children who lived more than two miles from the school.

<sup>3</sup> Sybil Marshall, *Fenland Chronicle*, 1967, pp. 17, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Stone, 'The Educational Revolution in England, 1560-1640', *Past and Present*, 28, 1964, pp. 41-80.

course, on the intake of the universities and the functions and number of the grammar schools capable of producing such students, not on the extent to which the ordinary villager was taught to read and write, for the simple reason that the grammar schools and their products are easier to trace. There were two great periods of expansion in the universities, when the numbers of students rose steeply, one beginning in 1560 and reaching a peak in the mid 1580's, and the next beginning in 1604, after a lull, and reaching its peak in the mid 1630's.<sup>1</sup> During the latter, it has been very roughly estimated that 2½ per cent of the group of young men aged seventeen were going on to higher education.<sup>2</sup> The social composition of these university students has been exhaustively examined,<sup>3</sup> but more interest has been aroused in measuring the participation of the gentry and the professional middle classes than in measuring the participation of the sons of farmers and their servants, who, as yeomen, husbandmen, and labourers made up the bulk of the population. In a sense, an estimate of the proportion of the peasants' sons who went on to higher education is much less important than the much more difficult question of the extent of basic literacy amongst the mass of villagers. It is relevant, however, for the attainment of a university education can be used as one of the chief yardsticks of educational opportunity amongst the peasantry, and of the possibility of social advancement open to them.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to reach any conclusions about the numbers of university entrants originating from the families of yeomen, husbandmen, village craftsmen, or even smaller fry until the university matriculation registers and the college admission books begin to give the occupation of the entrant's father or, at the very least, to describe him as of an armigerous, gentle, clerical, or 'plebian' family. Forty-seven per cent of matriculands at Oxford between 1575 and 1639 described their parentage as 'plebian'.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to judge the proportion of these who came from a rural and agricultural background; 'plebian' included sons of merchants, professional men, and artisans, as well as yeomen and labourers, and in fact covered every social group except sons of the new or old gentry, the nobility, or the clergy. In the same way, the admissions registers at Caius College, Cambridge,<sup>5</sup> which are the only printed Cambridge ones which give the parentage of incoming students in the sixteenth century, initially describe the fathers of a large proportion of the entry as "mediocris fortunae." The term apparently covered sons of the clergy and the

<sup>1</sup> Stone, *art. cit.*, pp. 50-1 and graph 1 facing p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Stone, *art. cit.*, pp. 57 and 68.

<sup>3</sup> By Stone, *art. cit.*, pp. 57-68, and by Joan Simon, 'The Social Origins of Cambridge Students, 1603-1640', *Past and Present*, 26, 1963, pp. 58-67.

<sup>4</sup> Stone, *art. cit.*, pp. 60-1, particularly Table V. Professor Stone suggests that these men may really have represented something like 41 per cent of the intake, when the figures are adjusted to allow for those who misrepresented their parentage and those who did not matriculate.

<sup>5</sup> *Admissions to Gonville and Caius, 1558-1678*, ed. J. Venn.

professional and trading classes, as well as artisans and small farmers. The picture is further obscured by the fact that Caius appeared to cater more exclusively for the sons of the gentry than did other colleges like St John's, whose admissions register begins in 1630.<sup>1</sup> In the peak decade of the 1630's when the Caius register becomes more precise in its terminology, only fourteen entrants, or 5 per cent of the intake, were described as yeomen, farmers, husbandmen, plebians, or "mediocris fortunae." At St John's, in the same decade, 117 men, or 24 per cent, came from the same background. In the 1690's, after the end of the educational boom, the proportion of the intake from these social groups was reduced to 15 per cent at St John's, and 2 per cent at Caius.<sup>2</sup> There is no means of knowing whether the proportion of farmers' sons at St John's or at Caius was more representative of the university as a whole. One can only state that men from rural backgrounds could make up as much as a quarter of the intake in some colleges during the educational boom of the 1630's, although the proportion could also fall much lower.<sup>3</sup> Young men from rural, peasant, backgrounds certainly had the opportunity of a university education in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is fair to assume that the quarter of the entrants at St John's who came from the peasantry represent a maximum, however, and that the overall proportion of peasants among university entrants was much lower than this, while the section of society that they represented was, of course, much greater. Still, the opportunity existed, however rarely it was taken up.

There is a further general argument which suggests that some of the sons of the peasantry were able to benefit from a university education in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It seems to be generally accepted, although exact proof is impossible, that the bulk of the parochial clergy, holding benefices with incomes which in many cases were totally incapable of supporting the incumbent in a way of life in any way superior to that of the bulk of his parishioners,<sup>4</sup> were men of humble origin.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the evidence shows that the proportion of graduate clergy rose steeply. Only a fifth of the clergy instituted or beneficed in the diocese of Canterbury under Archbishop Bourghier between

<sup>1</sup> *Admissions to the College of St John . . .*, ed. J. E. B. Mayor.

<sup>2</sup> The whole of the foregoing passage is based on Stone, *art. cit.*, pp. 64-6.

<sup>3</sup> It is impossible to judge whether the farming classes were benefiting to a greater or lesser extent from the earlier educational boom of the 1580's, let alone trace the rise and fall of their prosperity measured in educational terms, for lack of more precise, and earlier, records. Harrison's general remarks on the prosperity of yeomen in the 1580's suggests that they were then sending their sons to university as well as putting glass in their windows and adding brewhouses to their kitchens.

<sup>4</sup> P. Heath, *The English Parish Clergy on the eve of the Reformation*, 1969, p. 173, shows that three-quarters of the parochial livings in England were probably worth less than £15.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church*, 1956, pp. 208-9. Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 137, supports this view, and cites the rare fifteenth-century example of John Pyndere, a bondman of Terrington in Norfolk, who was manumitted to take orders, and was parochial chaplain of Willingham in Cambridgeshire in 1462.

1454 and 1486 were graduates.<sup>1</sup> Sixty-seven per cent of the clergy of the diocese of Ely were graduates at the end of Elizabeth's reign.<sup>2</sup> Between 1660 and 1714, the proportion of non-university men instituted and beneficed in the diocese of Worcester never rose above 16 per cent. The largest group of Worcester clergy were of 'plebian' origin.<sup>3</sup> If we make the moderate assumption that the proportion of men of peasant origin entering the ministry remained the same during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (if this is wrong, it is more likely that the proportion rose than fell), then it is clear, since the proportion of the lesser clergy with degrees rose sharply, that a university education must have come more commonly within the reach of the farmer's son. General arguments suggest, then, that just as living standards improved amongst the yeomanry, so also did educational standards.

The hypothesis that different social structures produced different proportions of men free to take up educational advantages<sup>4</sup> can, to some extent, be tested by examining the numbers of college entrants from the county of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely who were admitted to the colleges of Gonville and Caius and of St John's between 1558 and 1700. For if it is valid, the numbers of college entrants ought to be directly related to the number of families in an economic position to dispense with their sons' labour. Therefore, if there were numerically fewer yeomen in this situation in the Isle than in the county, the numbers of college entrants should reflect the situation.

The county and the Isle were strongly differentiated economically. The county was predominantly a barley-growing region. It remained arable, and almost unaffected by enclosure, throughout the period. In 1524-5, 53 per cent of those taxed in the Great Subsidy in southern Cambridgeshire were wage labourers or servants earning 30s. or less a year.<sup>5</sup> This is a much higher proportion than in those other counties, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, and Devon, studied in detail so far,<sup>6</sup> and is obviously related to the exclusively corn-growing nature of the Cambridgeshire economy, which demanded a very large labour

<sup>1</sup> This evidence, drawn from the register printed by the Canterbury and York Society, ed. Du Boulay, 54, 1956, p. xxix, is summarized with other evidence on the literacy of the clergy by Heath, *op. cit.*, pp. 81 *et seq.*

<sup>2</sup> Stone, *art. cit.*, p. 47 (from Usher, *Reconstruction of the English Church*, 1, 242). Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 207, gives figures showing a sharp rise in the number of graduate clergy between 1540 and 1640 in the diocese of Oxford.

<sup>3</sup> P. Morgan, 'The Subscription Books of the Diocese of Worcester and Class Structure under the Later Stuarts', unpublished M.A. dissertation, Birmingham, 1952, pp. 90-108, 111-39.

<sup>4</sup> See above, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Spufford, 'Rural Cambridgeshire, 1520-1680', unpublished M.A. dissertation, Leicester, 1962, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> Averages of 22 per cent in Leicestershire.—W. G. Hoskins, *Essays in Leicestershire History*, 1950, p. 129; 36 per cent in Devon.—H. P. R. Finberg and W. G. Hoskins, *Devonshire Studies*, 1951, p. 419; 28 to 41 per cent in different areas of Lincolnshire.—Joan Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming*, 1957, p. 83.

force. All the available evidence goes to show, moreover, that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a great deal of engrossing took place. Cambridgeshire society was further polarized socially. The number of yeomen increased, and so also did the numbers of the landless, which were already high. Only the villages on the northern edge of the county bounding on the edge of the fen, like Willingham, developed differently. They resembled the villages of the Isle of Ely, which had a totally different economy, based on stock raising. There, there were large numbers of farmers with relatively small holdings, and both fewer labourers and fewer men with larger farms.<sup>1</sup> A man calling himself a yeoman held a far smaller acreage, and left fewer goods at his death in the fen-edge villages of southern Cambridgeshire and the Isle, than he did in the county.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1558 and 1700, a total of 236 men who were born in the Isle of Ely and southern Cambridgeshire came up to Gonville and Caius, and St Johns (TABLE I).<sup>3</sup>

TABLE I

College	Entrants from county				Entrants from Isle					City	Total
	Gent.	Clergy	Others	Total	Gent.	Clergy	Others	Unspec.	Total		
Gonville & Caius	36	10	21	67	10	—	5	3	18	30	156
St John's	11	10	7	28	6	3	8	5	22	71	80
Total	47	20	28	95	16	3	13	8	40	101	236

Forty-three per cent of these were from the city of Cambridge alone, and can be discounted for these purposes. Seventy per cent of the remainder were from the county of Cambridge, and only 30 per cent from the Isle of Ely.<sup>4</sup> Allowing for the very different populations of the county and the Isle,<sup>5</sup> it seems that there were seven men coming up from the county to every four from the Isle.

<sup>1</sup> Joan Thirsk, *Fenland Farming*, Leicester University Occasional Papers, 3, 1953, pp. 39-41. Dr Thirsk's work is based on the Lincolnshire fenland, but the farms in the Isle of Ely seem to have been very similar.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Spufford, dissertation *cit.*, p. 76. The median yeoman farm in the 1660's was 92 acres, and the median wealth of yeomen dying in southern Cambridgeshire in that decade was £180. There were very few examples of yeomen from the edge of the fens coming into this category. My evidence suggests that a fenland yeoman with between 29 and 40 acres of arable and his fen common was, very roughly, in the same situation as his upland counterpart.

<sup>3</sup> Excluding the considerable numbers of boys from outside, who came to finish their grammar school education at Ely or one of the schools in Cambridge itself. The registers of Christ's College and Peterhouse, which also provide information on schools, do not usually give information on parentage. See below, p. 123, note 1.

<sup>4</sup> Including the City of Ely.

<sup>5</sup> 5,091 occupied households in the Isle in 1674.—*V.C.H. Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely*, iv, 1953, p. 273. 6,952 occupied households in the county in 1664.—My figures, dissertation *cit.*, p. 47, amended to include the hundreds of Stapleho and Cheveley.

The chances of a man from the county coming up were nearly twice as great. Dividing the entrants up socially is a risky business; those whose father's status was described as 'gentleman' include men whose fathers are known to have been yeoman farmers, and the clergy included sons of people like the Master of Peterhouse at one end of the spectrum and those from the humblest livings at the other. However, if the pitifully small numbers of entrants of rural parentage who did not claim to be of gentle or clerical background are considered alone, it still seems that the chances of a county man from the peasantry coming up to college were nearly half as great again as those of his counterpart from the Isle. Such minute figures must of course, be treated with great caution. Twenty-eight men of peasant stock from the county, and thirteen from the Isle, acquiring an education up to university level over a period of 140 years, can hardly be claimed as a great educational boom.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, conclusions based on two registers could be totally misleading. If the Isle schools had special connections with a college, or colleges, whose registers are unprinted or do not give parentage, and if they in fact sent up far more entrants, this picture could be totally reversed. In so far as it goes, however, the evidence suggests that the different social structures of the Isle and southern Cambridgeshire did have a considerable effect, and that the areas with an enlarging class of substantial yeomen were more able to benefit educationally. But the evidence also suggests that few Cambridgeshire yeomen were able to take the final step in social aggrandisement of sending their sons to college, even though the numbers might be greatly expanded if more registers were printed.<sup>2</sup> There are odd

<sup>1</sup> Half of these (15) came up to Gonville and Caius before 1590, and all but one, who was specifically said to be the son of a husbandman, were described as sons of men 'mediocris fortunae'. The term covers many different types of parentage (see above, pp. 114-15, and Joan Simon, 'Social Origins of Cambridge Students, 1603-40', *Past and Present*, 26, 1963, p. 60). I have assumed that these men were of peasant stock, because they originated in villages where there was no cottage industry, apart from the normal number of craftsmen supplying the community with essentials. The major flaw in my argument is that they could have been the sons of clerics. However, I think this figure of twenty-eight is a minimum rather than a maximum one for the peasantry, despite the difficulty over the Gonville and Caius terminology, because I suspect that gentle status was claimed whenever this was possible. Henry Crisp, son of a yeoman of Willingham (see below, p. 120), who came up to Caius in 1627, is a case in point. I have not tried to draw any deductions on the period when farmers found it most possible to educate their sons to university level, because of these difficulties in terminology. On the face of it, it seems significant that half the men I have assumed to be sons of peasants came up before 1590, when the economic difficulties at the turn of the century began to loom, especially since only one of the registers supplies information for this earlier period, and that is one from a college which later appeared to have a bias towards the gentry. I think it likely, however, that there were a good many Henry Crisps amongst those described as gentlemen's sons in the seventeenth century, and that therefore no conclusions can be drawn.

<sup>2</sup> Again, this judgement could be totally reversed, if many of the county schools happened to have affiliations with other colleges rather than with Caius and St John's. Examination of entrants from other counties needs to be made, but can only be made by people aware of the social and economic structures concerned, to account for the high proportion of students of peasant origin at St John's in the 1630's (see above, p. 115).

examples of men of peasant stock whose careers were so notable that they can be picked out without the aid of printed registers. John Richardson was born in Linton in about 1564, and went up to Clare. He became Regius Professor of Divinity in 1607, and was one of the translators of the Authorized Version.<sup>1</sup> His father died in 1616, and "John Richardson, Dr. of Divinity," was duly admitted to his lands as his son and heir. When his successor inherited in turn in 1626, the copyhold amounted to only about fifteen acres, so John Richardson seems to have been born of relatively very humble stock.<sup>2</sup> The type of family which could normally afford to spare a son for college is exemplified by the histories of the Butler family of Orwell, in the uplands, and the Crisp family of Willingham, in the fens. Both stood out as exceptional in their own villages.

Nicholas Johnson alias Butler of Orwell, who died in 1601, and who was described by his neighbours as a yeoman, was able to send his eldest son, Thomas, who was born in 1570, up to Gray's Inn. The Inns of Court are usually regarded as the most socially exclusive of the establishments for higher education. One of Thomas's younger brothers was literate and able to write a letter and address it to "his loveing Brother Thomas Butler att his Chambers in Gray's Inn." A second brother was able to write his name when he witnessed Thomas's will.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas put his legal education to good use. He acquired a lease of a large part of the Orwell demesne, and then brought a suit against some of his fellow tenants, when his actions eventually brought him into dislike.<sup>4</sup> He sent his eldest son, Neville, first to school at the Perse in Cambridge, and then to Christ's College in 1623, when he was fourteen. By the time Thomas died, in 1622, he was known as a "gentleman." He left his son all his books. His widow held ninety acres of copyhold arable in 1628 during the minority of her son, over and above an unknown amount of freehold and demesne leasehold.<sup>5</sup> Neville Butler sent his eldest son away to grammar school in Hertford, before he went up to Christ's in his turn in 1649. By the time his fourth son John was educable, there was a "schola publica" in Orwell which prepared him for Christ's in 1661. John eventually became rector of Wallington. When Neville Butler died, after marrying an heiress, and buying the lands of the priory of Barnwell, one of the clauses in his will left £2 to his "good friend" Mr John Noon of Clare Hall to preach at his funeral.<sup>6</sup> The Butlers had made the

<sup>1</sup> Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, III, 452.

<sup>2</sup> Cambridgeshire Record Office (henceforth C.R.O.), Linton Court Minutes, R.59.5.1, entries for 1616, 1625, and 1626.

<sup>3</sup> P.C.C. wills, 18 Savile.

<sup>4</sup> All details of the Butler family, except those on the size of their holdings, are taken from the depositions in this suit.—P.R.O., E 134, 3 Jas. I, East. 18; and a reconstruction of the family from the parish registers.—*The Register of the Parish of Orwell, 1560-1653*, ed. R. W. Whiston, 1912.

<sup>5</sup> C.R.O., L 1/130, pp. 73 *et seq.*

<sup>6</sup> P.C.C. wills, 1675, fol. 42.

transition, both economically and in taste, from the yeomanry to the gentry.

George Crisp was the only man in Willingham, which lay on the edge of the fens, whose farm was comparable in size with those of yeomen in the upland part of southern Cambridgeshire. He held seventy-five acres of arable, both freehold and copyhold, in 1575, and stood head and shoulders above the other tenants. The most prosperous of them held under forty acres. George split his holding between his two sons, leaving the fifty-six acres of freehold to his son Henry, and a full yardland of thirty-six acres of copyhold to William. Even so, Henry Crisp still held the most considerable farm in Willingham in 1603. It was his son, another Henry Crisp, who went up to Gonville and Caius in 1627, described in the College register as the son of a "gentleman." For all that, when either his brother or his cousin, both of whom were unfortunately christened William, got into an altercation with a youth from a gentle family in the Isle of Ely in 1639, and told him that he was "a better gentleman," the gentle family was so piqued by this language from what they described as "an ordinary country fellow" that they took the case to the Court of Chivalry.<sup>1</sup> The Crisps had obviously not made the grade to gentility, in local eyes.

During the rest of the seventeenth century, the whole of the tenurial history of Willingham is one of the breakdown of holdings into smaller and smaller units. It is no wonder that after 1627, despite the well-established school in Willingham,<sup>2</sup> no other Willingham boys, so far as is known, went up to college.

Illustrations of individual families who were able to afford university education do nothing, however, to illuminate the related, and in many ways much more important, question of the degree of literacy amongst the mass of villagers who could not hope to free their sons from farm labour for schooling which would lead to a university course. At the moment, the main statistical evidence bearing on literacy in the countryside is that a proportion ranging from 17 to 38 per cent of the signatories to the Protestation Oath of 1642 in each parish were able to sign their names.<sup>3</sup>

This whole question of literacy is at present being examined by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. When the work of the Group is completed, those interested in the quality of life lived in local communities will have as accurate a picture as it is possible to obtain of the extent of literacy at this level, measured solely in terms of the ability to sign

<sup>1</sup> Case referred to by George Squibb, *The High Court of Chivalry*, 1959, pp. 175 and 209. I am indebted to my husband for this reference. I am also deeply obliged to Mr Francis Steer, Archivist to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk, who made a special journey to Arundel and sent me a transcript of William Crisp's submission to the Court (Arundel Castle MS., E.M.134), and notes on two other newly discovered documents in the suit (Arundel Castle MSS., E.M.3154 and 3155). It is most unfortunate that the documents cited by Mr Squibb, including the plaintiff's petition, cannot at present be found at the College of Arms.

<sup>2</sup> See below, pp. 131 *et. seq.*

<sup>3</sup> Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900', *Past and Present*, 42, 1969, pp. 100-1.

one's name. The limitations of such a criterion are self-evident. It is impossible to gauge exactly the relationship between the ability to write one's own name, and the ability to read, which is the real subject of inquiry for those who want to know how far the ordinary villager was open to external influences and pressures.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the two main classes of documents surviving from before 1700 which bear enough signatures to be analysed in this way are the depositions in ecclesiastical cases, and the original wills. The former were signed by witnesses, who were necessarily completely arbitrarily chosen and came from every social group. The latter, which are more likely to be available for any particular community, have the considerable disadvantage that they were signed or marked by a man who was, more often than not, on his death-bed, judging by the rapidity with which the date of probate followed that of the will. He was probably therefore much less able to make the effort to sign his name than usual,<sup>2</sup> and statistics drawn from the wills are suspect because of this. However, there is no better material available for the historian to work on.

Some insight both into the relationship between the abilities to write and to read and into the failing powers of testators is given in a dispute in 1578 concerning the will of Leonard Woolward of Balsham. He was a retired man who asked the young surgeon, who was trying to give him some relief from pain in his last illness, to write his will for him.<sup>3</sup> He did this because he was living with his son and daughter-in-law in his old age, and wanted his will made "as pryvely as mighte be," for he feared that if it were known to his son and his wife that he was going to leave some of his free land to someone other than them "he shoulde not be well tended & have that he woulde have, and yf enye of his frends or acquaintances . . . should write his sayd will, his sayd sonne yonge Lennard . . . woulde knowe of yt, and soe laye on him yt he shoulde not or coulde not make his wyll accordinge to his owne mynde." The old man held about twenty-four acres of free land, and so is likely to have been a fairly humble yeoman. The will was actually written on the day Leonard Woolward died, although he could still sit up in bed. It was disputed by the family in the consistory court. In response to questioning, the young barber-surgeon replied: "Yt whether oulde Lenard Woolward in his lyef time coulde wrighte or noe

<sup>1</sup> There seems to be a general impression that, although the relationship between the ability to sign and the ability to read is unknown, the two were related, and that reading ability very probably exceeded writing capacity. Discussed by Laurence Stone, *art. cit.*, pp. 89, 98. V. E. Neuberg, 'Literacy in Eighteenth Century England: a Caveat', *Local Population Studies Magazine and Newsletter*, 2, 1969, p. 44, points out that eighteenth-century educationalists stressed that the teaching of reading was much more important than that of writing, which did not necessarily follow it. At Orwell school, boys were taught to read and write, girls 'only' to read. See below, p. 140, n. 1.

<sup>2</sup> See below, pp. 134 *et seq.*

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge University Library, Ely Diocesan Records, D2/11, fols. 259-61. I am deeply indebted to Mrs Dorothy Owen for drawing this particular case to my attention.

this deponent knoweth not, for he saythe he never sawe him wryte, yet saythe yt he hathe hard the sayd oulde Leonard saye yt he cowlde wryghte, And further saythe yt yf he the sayd oulde Leonard cowlde wryghte in his lyef tyme, yet that at the tyme of his will makeing, this deponent verelye belevethe that he cowlde not well write wth ease or to his contentation, for yt he was then verye oulde, & for yt his sighte then fayled him muche, for this deponent saythe yt ymediatelye after the wyll was wrytten he the sayd oulde Leonard toke the sayd will in his hand & woulde have red yt him selfe but sayd yt his sighte was soe evell (excepte he had spectacles) yt he coulde not reade yt, & deliveringe yt to this deponent desyred him to reade yt, wch he this deponent did accordinglye." It is therefore perfectly evident that this old man was known to be able to read, and that the chirurgeon attending him was in no way surprised by this, although he was not entirely sure that he could write. Elsewhere in the chirurgeon's testimony it appears that Leonard Woolward had an "oulde parchment booke" in his house. On the very day of his death Leonard Woolward made an attempt to read the will written according to his directions, although he made no attempt to write it. Reading was an easier skill.

In many ways it is premature to attempt to produce anything on literacy until the work of the Group is complete. However, there are two ways in which it seems that this work can be supplemented. In the first place, bare statistics on literacy are in some ways uninformative unless they can be combined with information on the schools existing in the area from which they are taken. There is still a dearth of regional studies of schools,<sup>1</sup> particularly those which include full studies of elementary schools, since the latter involve working through all licences, visitations, and subscriptions of schoolmasters in episcopal records.

In the second place, although the work of the Cambridge Group in examining literacy rates is irreplaceable, and cannot be done effectively on any small scale, there is still some advantage to be gained from examining literacy in a few communities which a local historian has already portrayed. There are obvious benefits in knowing something of the social structure of a community as well as the number of its inhabitants able to sign their names at a given date. I have therefore added an examination of literacy, based mainly on the testators' ability to sign their names to their wills, of three villages in Cambridgeshire between 1600 and 1700 to a survey of schools in the county.

<sup>1</sup> Like, for instance, Brian Simon's 'Leicestershire Schools, 1625-40', *British Jnl of Educational Studies*, III, 1954, pp. 42-58; the survey of education in the Diocese of Norwich in E. H. Carter, *The Norwich Subscription Books*, 1937, pp. 81 *et seq.*; P. J. Wallace and W. E. Tate, 'A Register of Old Yorkshire Grammar Schools', *Leeds University Researches and Studies*, XIII, 1956, pp. 64-104, which confines itself to schools sending pupils to the universities.

*Cambridgeshire Schools and Schoolmasters*

The Ely diocesan records, for the period when references to schoolmasters abound, from 1574 to about 1628,<sup>1</sup> give a startlingly strong impression that education was readily available in southern Cambridgeshire (see MAP I). There were twenty-three places where a school seems to have been kept more or less continuously during the sixty years.<sup>2</sup> Most of these were in the larger villages. The settlements on the fen edge, which had had over a hundred households in 1563 (see MAP II) like Cottenham, Waterbeach, Bottisham, and Fulbourn, had them. The larger villages in or near the Cam valley, like Great Shelford, Barrington, Sawston, and Linton, which had accommodated over fifty households, had them, and so also did the larger villages of over fifty households in the Upper Rhee valley, like Melbourn and Bassingbourn. There is a remarkable degree of coincidence between the sites of these well-established schools and the sites of the present Cambridgeshire village colleges. At least eight of the present ten village colleges<sup>3</sup> lie where a school was well-established in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The explanation lies either in the continued size of the village, which makes, and made, it a suitable settlement to provide enough work for a school, or in a combination of size and status. Market towns, like Linton, were obvious foci for schools, and were both easily accessible and much visited, so that they had a large catchment area. It is noticeable that the ancient market town of Bourn was the only settlement to

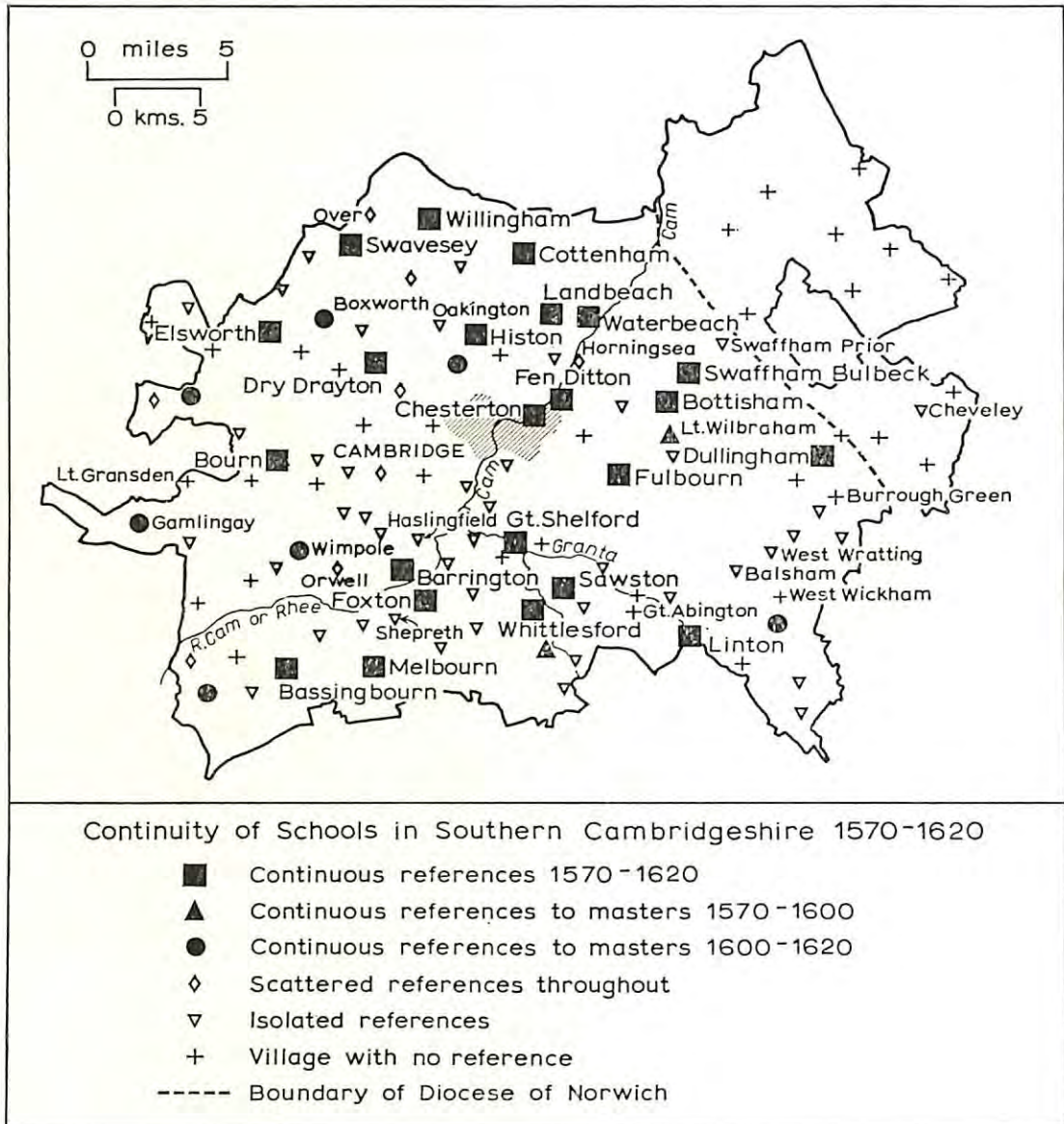
<sup>1</sup> I have taken all my information on schools and schoolmasters in the diocese of Ely from the register compiled by Mrs Elizabeth Key, which I hope will shortly appear in print in the *Cambridge Antiquarian Society Proceedings*. I should like to thank Mrs Key very warmly for giving me unstinted access to this material, and information on it. Her register is based on an examination of the Ely Registers of Licences (Cambridge University Library, E.D.R. G/2/18-21), which mention schoolmasters from 1574-1618; the Libri Cleri (E.D.R. B/2/various) which include the names of schoolmasters at visitations from 1601 to c. 1628 and after 1665 to 1692, and the Ely Subscription Books (E.D.R. A/5/1-8 and Bodleian Rawl. D340) which only cover the period after 1662. The careers of the schoolmasters named in the diocesan records were traced in Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*. She has also searched the printed registers of *Admissions to Gonville and Caius, 1558-1678*, ed. J. Venn (in which schools are noticed throughout), *Biographical Register of Christ's College, 1505-1905*, I, ed. J. Peile (schools noticed from 1622 but no indication of parentage given), *Admissions to the College of St John . . .*, ed. J. E. B. Mayor (opens in 1630 and mentions schools throughout). *The Admissions to Peterhouse*, ed. T. A. Walker, give the names of schools after 1637. Mr David Cressy, of Clare College, who has worked through all the visitation and licensing material of the diocese of Norwich, has very generously given me all the references he has found to teaching in the Deanery of Fordham, which lies in the diocese of Norwich and the county of Cambridge. MAP I is therefore based entirely on the work of Mrs Key and Mr Cressy.

<sup>2</sup> I have assumed continuity where there was a gap in the records for ten years or less. Records exist for the same man teaching for twelve years, like Mr John Jackson, vicar of Gamlingay, who was licensed from 1607-19.

<sup>3</sup> Excluding Soham and Burwell village colleges, which lie in the Deanery of Fordham in Norwich, for which there is little information. References to teaching were made for only four villages in the deanery in the entire seventeenth century. It may be significant that two of these were Soham and Burwell. Soham was endowed in the mid-seventeenth century.—*V.C.H. Cambs.*, II, 1948, pp. 331-2.

have a well-established school on the western clay plateau of Cambridgeshire.

Apart from these twenty-three well established schools, masters were continuously referred to in another nine villages either up to 1600 or after 1600.

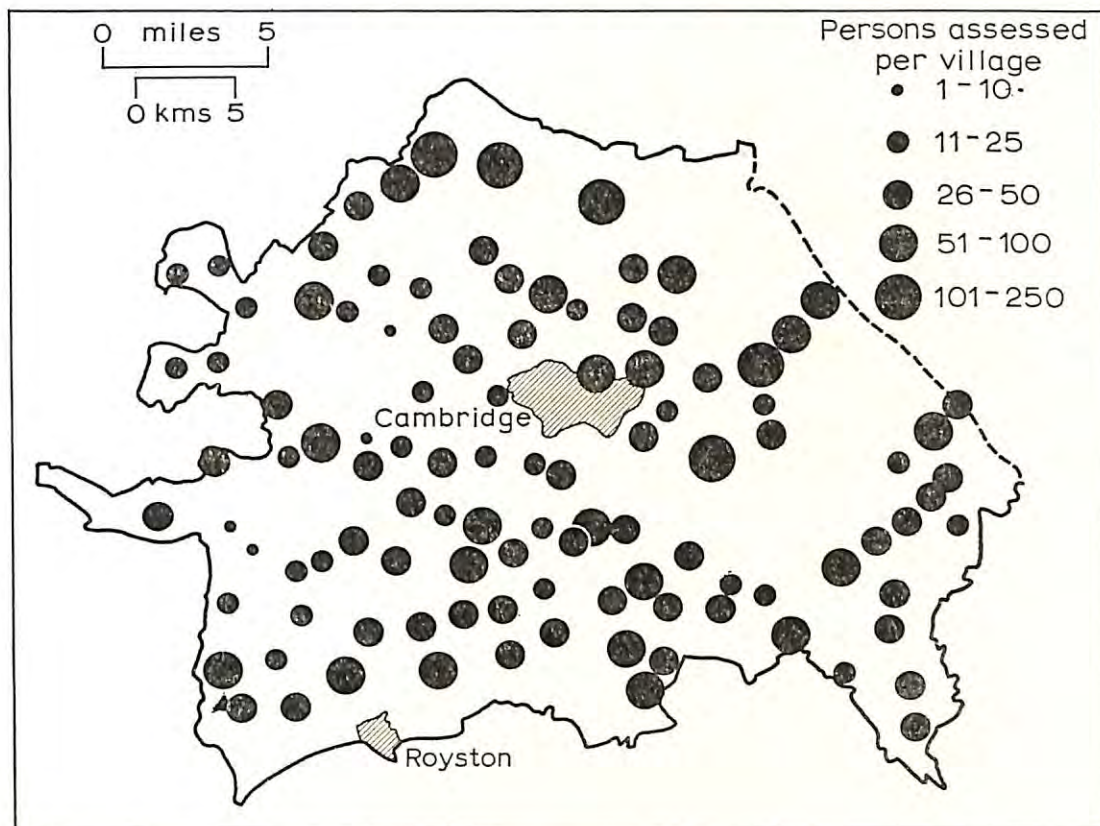


MAP I

They also had scattered references in the later, or earlier, period. These villages may well have had schools consistently for a much longer period. The records do not give the appearance of scrupulosity in licensing. A college entrant in

1589, who had been at school in Hauxton, is a salutary reminder of the unreliability of the records. There is not a single mention of a master at Hauxton in either the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century documentary records.

Yet a third group of eight villages appeared in the records as having a school-master both before and after 1600, and was referred to between four and six times altogether. In these villages, and those with even fewer references, it seems probable that individual masters, rather than established schools, were



MAP II. DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE, 1563

concerned. The high academic quality of many of these men<sup>1</sup> makes it seem very likely that they were the products of the bulge in university entrants in the 1560's to 80's, and were reduced to searching for jobs wherever they could find them. The number of college entrants taught by men in villages which have no other record of a school gives the same impression that isolated individuals were often teachers in villages with no established school.<sup>2</sup> Detailed work on

<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> This confirms Professor Stone's impressions in 'The Educational Revolution in England, 1560-1640', *Past and Present*, 28, 1964, p. 46, that college entrants were often privately prepared in small

the careers of schoolmasters show that many of them were very young men doing a short spell of teaching between graduation and getting a benefice elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> The spells for which they taught were therefore brief and there was little or no permanence. It is no wonder that endowment, even of a very humble kind, had the immediate effect of establishing a school, when there were so many graduates obviously seeking work which offered a steady income, however small.

Over is an example of one of these villages with a record of occasional teaching throughout the period 1574 to 1628. A master was licensed to teach young children there in 1583; in 1604 and 1607 Ezra Parkes was teaching there when the place was visited. The clerk who drew up the visitation book expected to find him there in 1610, but his name was crossed out, presumably because he had gone. By 1616, though, the vicar was schoolmaster there. These scattered references may well have indicated some continuity in teaching over a short period, and certainly did mean that the children in villages of this type had periods of several years when they could go to school at home, instead of walking to the nearest established school.

Finally, another forty-seven villages had up to three references to masters teaching in them between 1574 and 1628. Sometimes there was certainly a master in one of these villages for five or ten years; sometimes there was only a single reference. But in all, only twenty-two villages in the county had no schoolmaster licensed at any time between 1574 and 1628.<sup>2</sup> Most of them were very small.

The overall distribution of schools in the county shows that north of Cambridge the villages on the fen edge both to the west and to the east were well provided with established schools, or schools where there was a fair degree of continuity. A child born here would rarely have to walk further than to the next village to acquire an education, if he could be spared from more pressing work. The river valleys and whole area south of Cambridge were also well provided for; again, a child would rarely have to walk further than the next village. The two exceptions to this abundant provision were the line of villages from Balsham out to Borough Green, and the villages west of Cambridge on the clay plateau out to Bourn. Most of these villages had schoolmasters licensed, or noted in visitations occasionally, but there was much less continuous schooling available here, and very often a child would be out of walking distance of a school.

This pattern of distribution fits very well with the economic differences hamlets. It is quite wrong to assume, as W. A. L. Vincent did in *The State and School Education, 1640-60, 1950*, that any village in which a college entrant was prepared automatically had a grammar school. His county lists are suspect for this reason.

<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming article by Mrs Elizabeth Key, to whom I am indebted for this information.

<sup>2</sup> One of them was Little Gransden. See below, pp. 128-9.

between these areas of Cambridgeshire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The settlements on the fen edge and in the valley area were expanding during the period, whereas those on the boulder clay to the west were shrinking. The villages on the chalk ridge were noticeably poorer than those in the rest of the county, judging from the much higher proportion of houses with only one hearth taxed there in the 1660's.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to know what type of education was available in these schools for the village child, but it is also difficult to establish this. The licences issued for schoolmasters between 1574 and 1604 sometimes simply gave permission to teach and instruct; but frequently the licence was issued for a specific function. These varied from "to teach grammar," "to teach the rudiments of grammar," "to teach boys and adolescents to write, read and caste an accompte," "to write and read the vulgar tongue," and "to teach young children." It looks, on the face of it, as though they were grammar and English schools, and as if the latter were divided into the two types described by Professor Stone, petty schools teaching children to write and read, and those teaching English grammar, writing, and arithmetic up to the age of sixteen.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, there is a great deal of inconsistency in the type of licence issued for the same village within relatively short spaces of time. Licences not uncommonly specified the teaching of the "vulgar tongue" or "young children" at one visitation, and grammar at the next, or vice versa. Moreover, the college admissions registers gave evidence that boys were prepared in some villages in which, according to the episcopal records, there had never been a schoolmaster, or there was not a schoolmaster at the right time, or there was only a schoolmaster who taught the "vulgar tongue."<sup>3</sup> These suspicious contradictions make any attempt

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Spufford, dissertation *cit.*, pp. 55-7; *idem*, 'The Significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax', *Cambs. Antiq. Soc. Proc.*, LV, 1962, p. 59, and Fig. 2, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Stone, *art. cit.*, pp. 42-4.

<sup>3</sup> Grammar was certainly taught up to university entrance level in half a dozen Cambridgeshire villages in the period up to 1628, but village grammar schools were of very little importance compared with the schools in Cambridge and Ely. The latter, for instance, prepared nine boys from the county for the three colleges with printed registers before 1622, while no village school sent up more than three entrants. The only cast-iron evidence that a village had a grammar school was provided by the combination of a continuous succession of masters recorded for the place, preferably licensed to teach grammar, together with evidence that a boy who went up to college was taught grammar there. The schools which sent entrants directly up to college in this period were Cheveley 1593, 1603, 1629 (*V.C.H. Cambs.*, II, 1948, p. 331); Elsworth 1581; Fulbourn 1573, 1592; Hauxton 1589; Oakington, 1583; and Willingham 1627. Of these 'grammar schools', Cheveley lay in the diocese of Norwich. Elsworth, although it prepared a boy for Caius in 1581, had a master licensed to teach reading and writing of English only at the end of the decade. Fulbourn had a continuous record. There is no mention of a schoolmaster at Hauxton in the Ely records at any time. Oakington had had a pupil taught by Mr Longworth for seven years before 1583, but Mr Longworth managed to escape episcopal attention entirely. The first master who appeared in the diocesan records, in 1596, was licensed to teach, not grammar, but the "vulgar tongue." Willingham had a continuous record. In addition, Bassingbourn prepared two pupils for other schools, who went up in 1574 and 1634, and Dullingham, Fen Ditton, and Little Wilbraham also acted as preparatory schools for boys who went up in 1580,

to establish a typology of local schools futile. For one thing, the definitions given in the episcopal records may not be reliable, for another, these small village schools probably changed in character remarkably fast. Many existed over a brief period only, or for the working life of an individual teacher. Others, which apparently had no continuous history, may well have done so, and escaped episcopal notice. It is obvious that the records are only impressionistic, and the impression that they give is of flexibility and change. The school held in Little Gransden should serve as a salutary reminder against too rigid definition. It escaped episcopal notice altogether, and Little Gransden was one of the few villages with no record of any teaching there. The existence of the school is known only because the tenants of Little Gransden fell out with the new lords of the manor in the early seventeenth century over the whereabouts of the demesne which they themselves had leased since the late fourteenth century. One of the witnesses in the consequent series of suits was an old gentleman settled in Lincolnshire, who deposed that he had known Little Gransden for sixty years "for he was born in Great Gransden nearby and went to School in his youth in the chancel of Little Gransden."<sup>1</sup> Another was Christopher Meade, gentleman, steward of the manor court, who likewise went to school in Little Gransden, and therefore knew all the local gossip of the place.<sup>2</sup> He was responsible, in 1607, for searching the thirteenth-century episcopal surveys of Gransden, and the medieval reeves' accounts, and tying these descriptions together with surviving earthworks to reconstruct the layout of the medieval demesne. Such was his expertise as an antiquarian that the judge ruled testily that "no more such old books should be brought in unless they were . . . not above forty or fifty years continuance." This school at which Meade was trained, which did not even exist according to the diocesan records, evidently flourished in the 1570's and 80's, and served as a preparatory school, at least, for the local gentry. It is impossible to believe either in the reliability of the records, or in any interpretation of sixteenth-century local schooling which rests on a rigid typology of schools according to class. It is perfectly

1587, and 1599, as did Fulbourn. Of the preparatory schools, Bassingbourn and Fen Ditton had impeccable records of schoolmasters licensed to teach grammar, or simply to teach. Both had a continuous life and were well-established schools. Dullingham had a continuous life and had a master licensed only to teach reading and writing in 1579. (*V.C.H. Cambs.*, II, 1948, pp. 332-3, for its later endowment.) Edward Barton, son of a gentleman of Dullingham, who went up to Caius after going first to Dullingham, then Ely, and then to Hitchin grammar school for four years, must have learned to read and write in his own village. Little Wilbraham, which prepared its rector's son to go to grammar school in Cambridge, had a continuous record of masters licensed in the 1580's but even so, Mr Cockman who was master there at some point in the 1590's, according to the register of Caius College, escaped episcopal notice. The records for the schools acting as preparatory schools therefore showed just as much variety and lack of consistency as those of the 'grammar' schools.

<sup>1</sup> P.R.O., E 134, 1649, East. I. He must have been to school in the late 1580's, according to his deposition.

<sup>2</sup> P.R.O., E 134, 5 Jas I, Hil. 26.

obvious that the children of Little Gransden who could be spared to go to school, including the children of the gentry, went along to the church chancel. How much they learnt there cannot be known. However, those who were later to go to university acquired an adequate foundation. And they all strengthened the common bonds of community which bound them, for, amongst other things, they talked about the rumour that houses had once stood in the Bury Close, and about the size of the yardland.

Although the schools may have changed rapidly in character between 1574 and 1604, the general quality of the masters teaching in them was extraordinarily high. Nearly two-thirds of the men licensed specifically to teach grammar are certainly known to have been graduates.<sup>1</sup> A number of the remainder may, of course, have graduated as well. Much more surprisingly, a third of the masters licensed merely "to teach younge children to read write and caste accompte" were also graduates.<sup>2</sup> After 1604, when the licences stopped specifying the kind of teaching to be done, no generalizations can be made on the qualifications of teachers in different schools.

After 1628, until the Ely subscription books start in 1662, the only evidence available on schools is that provided by the college entrance books. Whereas a few villages had provided entrants in the earlier period (although nothing like as many as the grammar schools of Cambridge and Ely), no local school sent up an entrant in the boom years of the 1630's at all, while the schools of Cambridge and Bury became much more predominant. Local schools only really started sending up entrants again in any numbers in the 1660's. The period when college registers are helpful coincides with the period when the diocesan registers reopen.<sup>3</sup> Even after 1662, the references in the records to schools are too scanty to give any real knowledge of the villages in the county which had schools functioning permanently. There is usually only one reference to a schoolmaster subscribing between 1662 and 1700; and the gap from the late 1620's is far too long to postulate continuity, although where there is a later reference to a school which had had a continuous record up to 1628, it is tempting to suspect it.

At least half the schools with continuous records between 1574 and 1628 reappeared at the end of the century. There was very little overlap between them and the places which sent up entrants to college. Again, it looks as if many of the latter were privately tutored by individual masters. However, Bottisham, which had had an early continuous record, and had been left a little bequest producing an income of a pound a year for teaching three poor children in

<sup>1</sup> Fifty-one out of eighty-one.

<sup>2</sup> Ten out of twenty-nine.

<sup>3</sup> Nine villages produced entrants for the colleges which had printed admissions books between 1660 and 1700. They were Orwell 1661; West Wrattling 1666; Oakington (2 entrants) 1666; Bottisham 1668; private school Bourn 1671; Shepreth 1671; private school Swaffham Prior 1678; Willingham, preparatory to Eton, 1685; Fordham 1690.

1639, managed to send a boy from the village up to college in 1668. Willingham, which was early endowed by public subscription, had masters who subscribed in 1666 and 1675, and an attorney from Cambridge sent his son there in the 1680's to be prepared for Eton. Endowments had an immediate effect. Dullingham had had a continuous record in the earlier period, but did not appear in the episcopal records of the 1660's. In 1678 Barradill Millicent left rents worth five pounds a year for teaching poor children in "grammar and learning," and in 1679 a master subscribed, if only to teach writing and arithmetic. The most considerable endowment noted in the inquiry into charitable donations of the eighteenth century was at Haslingfield, where Simon Ertman left an income of twenty pounds a year in 1658. There had been scattered references to a master teaching there in the earlier part of the period, before 1628, but as a result of the Ertman endowment, masters from Haslingfield appeared five times in the episcopal records after 1662, more than from any other school.

The references in the subscription books are so thin that they can be used only as positive evidence. It is not safe to suggest that no school existed where no schoolmaster subscribed. Therefore, although masters appeared in far fewer villages between 1662 and 1700 than between 1574 and 1628, it is impossible to say whether the ordinary village child had more or less chance of an education at the beginning or end of the seventeenth century. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that at the end of the century, as at the beginning, the areas best served by schoolmasters were the thickly settled edges of the fen north of Cambridge, and the valleys of the Cam south of Cambridge. The western clay plateau and the poverty-stricken chalk uplands were still relatively unprovided for.

Even though schools seem so often to have been taught by young men before they obtained benefices elsewhere, it still seems true to say that, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries at least, the combination of the number of village schools in southern Cambridgeshire and the quality of the masters teaching in them should have given the Cambridgeshire peasantry ample, if erratic, opportunities for education. If their economic situation allowed them to benefit from their opportunities, then the literacy rates should have been fairly high.

#### *Elementary Ability to Write*

The communities chosen for special study were strongly contrasted socially. Willingham was a fen village, in which the economy was based largely on stock raising, rather than on the arable holdings. This economy produced a very different social structure from that of the uplands. In 1575, only one man held an arable acreage appropriate to a yeoman in the south of the county; the backbone of the community was formed by the holders of the twenty-eight half

yardlands. These men were only copyhold tenants of between thirteen and twenty-three acres of arable, but here, on the edge of the fen, they were men of substance, and they, in their wills, described themselves as yeomen. These wills give the impression of prosperity in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, at a time when the upland counterparts of such men were losing their holdings because they were unable to withstand the combined economic pressures of the price rise and frequent bad harvests. During the seventeenth century there was an influx of people into Willingham, and probably a rise in the resident population also, because the opportunities provided by the fen meant that it was possible to exist on a relatively small holding. The old half yardland units, which had remained intact since the thirteenth century, broke down, and there was actually a diminution in the number of the landless, and an increase in the number of tenants holding between two and fourteen acres, at a time when, in the uplands, the most noticeable movement was towards the polarization of the size of holdings and an increase in the number of landless labourers.

Lawrence Milford was the first schoolmaster known to have taught in Willingham. He was licensed to teach "young children" in 1580.<sup>1</sup> He had obviously been living in Willingham before he was licensed there, for he acted as the regular scribe for the villagers' wills for the last thirty years of the century. He had no cottage there when the place was surveyed in 1575, but must surely have been resident. In March 1578, John Loder of Willingham made a will which was written and witnessed by Lawrence Milford, in which John left him the crops of one "land" of meslin, one acre of wheat, and "my best hat." In 1579, before he was officially licensed, Lawrence Milford held a lease in Willingham.<sup>2</sup> When John Loder's brother, Robert, died in 1583, he left a pregnant wife, and specifically provided in his will "that if it be a man child that she go with all I will that she bring it up in learning til it comes to the age of sixteen years,"<sup>3</sup> He must have been thinking of Lawrence Milford's school.

There was obviously some interest in education at Willingham, and in 1593 this bore remarkable fruit, for in that year, the inhabitants endowed a school by public subscription.<sup>4</sup> The rector, Dr William Smyth, may well have been the initiator and driving force behind the foundation, for he seems to have been

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge University Library, E.D.R. G/2/18.

<sup>2</sup> P.R.O., E 310/9/13. This reference is given in *Charity School to Village College*, produced by the Cottenham Village College Local History Group, 1968, pp. 5-7, which discusses the early history of the Willingham school. The school has also been discussed by E. H. Hampson.—*V.C.H. Cambs.*, II, 1948, p. 339.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Loder appears from his will to have held only a copyhold house and close, and one rood of free land. This is not the kind of holding one would suppose would keep a child at school until he reached the age of sixteen.

<sup>4</sup> C.R.O., P 177/25/1, pp. 1-2. I am informed by Dr Roger Schofield that this subscription list is, so far as he knows, unique.

resident in Willingham for a considerable part of his incumbency from 1586 to 1601.<sup>1</sup> He had been a Fellow of Kings before his appointment in 1586, and went on to be Master of Clare in 1601. His name came high on the subscription list with a donation of one pound a year during his incumbency. Whether or not he was the initiator of the scheme, the really striking thing about it was the degree of support given by the villagers.<sup>2</sup> The 102 people who subscribed raised £102 7s. 8d. between them, and only five donations were of more than £2.<sup>3</sup> The core of the list was made up by the sixteen men who gave sums ranging from £1 up to and including £2, and the fourteen who gave £1 apiece. All the rest gave less than £1. Thirteen of the sixteen men who gave the largest sums were, or had been,<sup>4</sup> half yardlanders. Another six of those who gave £1 were also half yardlanders. Almost all the tenants of half yardlands were represented somewhere on the list, and almost all the larger sums given by villagers were given by them. This is the most concrete proof it is possible to have that the half yardlanders of Willingham were indeed relatively prosperous. They could afford to give sums which amounted to more than two years' rent in most cases.<sup>5</sup> It was also proof they were sufficiently interested in education actually to dig into their pockets to give their children some chance of it. The half yardlanders, although they were the most substantial villagers contributing, were not the only ones. Involvement in the plans for the school to the point of making a financial sacrifice on its behalf spread right down through Willingham society. There were examples of the younger sons of half yardlanders, like Henry Bedall, who contributed 10s. 2d., and held three and a half acres. There were also plenty of examples of cottagers like Matthew Ewsden, who had a lease to help provide a living for his five children,<sup>6</sup> and subscribed 4s., and of less fortunate landless cottagers like William Ridley, Simon Bissell, and William Haynes who all contributed 8s. or 10s.

It is impossible to gauge the motives of these men, but concern to provide some kind of education for their children was evidently uppermost. The school articles agreed by the inhabitants<sup>7</sup> laid down that only the children of men resident in Willingham should be taught in the school, and only if their families had made a contribution, with the notable exception that the children of the

<sup>1</sup> Canon F. J. Bywaters, 'Historical Notes' in the *Willingham Parish Magazine*, January 1949.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible to identify a large number of the subscribers on the list of 1593 by using a combination of the surveys of 1575 and 1603, and abstracts of the court roll entries which give the descent of each holding between these two dates. Many of the tenants of 1593 can be identified with certainty by these means, and their wills give additional personal information.

<sup>3</sup> These were all made by people described as "gentlemen" except for Anne Pearson, widow. I have been unable to identify any of them, except the lord of the Manor of Burne. I have excluded his contribution, and the £1 a year given during the term of his incumbency by the rector.

<sup>4</sup> Two of them had, according to the rolls, surrendered their holdings in favour of their sons.

<sup>5</sup> C.R.O., R 59.14.8(b). The rents of half yardlands varied between 14s. 4d. and 17s. 10d., and were usually nearer the former.

<sup>6</sup> Will proved 1595.

<sup>7</sup> C.R.O., P 177/25/1, pp. 2-5.

poor should be taught free. If a man either bought or rented a house or land in Willingham, his children were not to be eligible for instruction unless he made a contribution, if he was able to do so. Subscribers presumably made their gifts, therefore, specifically so that their children could go to school.

There is a certain amount of information which gives an indication of the number of these parents, who desired education for their children, who were able to write their own names. Eighteen of the subscribers acted as witnesses to wills in the next decade or so.<sup>1</sup> Of these eighteen, only five, or just over a quarter, could sign their names. Naturally, however, the more prosperous men in Willingham acted as witnesses more often than their poorer neighbours. They are also easier to identify. Eight of the eighteen witnesses held a half yardland, and they accounted for four of the five signatures.<sup>2</sup> One of them, William Ashman, may have even written a few wills on his own account. Half the half yardlanders who witnessed wills, therefore, could sign their names. Not all the prosperous could sign their names, but on the other hand, all those who could do so were relatively prosperous. It is startlingly obvious that if only just over a quarter of the identifiable subscribers could sign, a very much lower proportion of the whole group of men who subscribed must have been able to do so, considering that the group contained a large number of unidentifiable, less substantial men. This lack of the elementary ability to sign amongst at least three-quarters, and probably more, of the subscribers to the school makes their desire that their children should acquire some elementary schooling even more poignant, considering the financial sacrifices that they were prepared to make to provide the opportunity.

Willingham school was upgraded in status when William Norton was licensed to teach grammar in 1596.<sup>3</sup> He remained there until 1607, and the seventeenth-century history of the school is as continuous as the records permit thereafter. It survived various vicissitudes in the eighteenth century, and functioned until its eventual closure by the Charity Commission in 1876.<sup>4</sup>

The vital question is how much difference the continuous existence of this subscription school, which had been set up by costly communal effort, made to the inhabitants. Unfortunately, this very question is almost impossible to answer. The education provided in the school was obviously an adequate one, or it could not have prepared Henry Crisp, son of a 'gentleman' of Willingham,

<sup>1</sup> A mark or signature as a witness is a more reliable guide to the ability to sign than the mark or signature of a testator, which might so evidently be influenced by his illness or his physical weakness. See below, pp. 134-6.

<sup>2</sup> The fifth was a signature of a tenant of the sub-manor of Burne, who in fact held an acreage appropriate to a half yardlander.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Milford remained in the village and continued to act as principal scribe for the villagers' wills until his death in 1604.—Willingham Parish Register.

<sup>4</sup> *Charity School to Village College*, pp. 8-10, 50-1.

for entry to Caius in 1627.<sup>1</sup> It is true that Richard Pearson, another son of a 'gentleman' of Willingham<sup>2</sup> went to school in Huntingdon, rather than Willingham, for four years before going up to John's in 1658. Despite this, the place must have had some continuing merit at least as a preparatory school, or James Drake, attorney of Cambridge, would hardly have sent his son out from Cambridge itself to Willingham school before transferring him to Eton for the two years before his entry to Caius in 1685. The real interest does not lie, however, in whether the school was fitted to prepare college entrants, but in how much it did to raise the standard of literacy of the more ordinary village families, who were not able to consider a university education for their sons.

The only material which bears on this is the ability of men, who were usually dying, to sign their wills, and this, as evidence, is fundamentally unsatisfactory. There are specific examples, apart from the detailed history of old Leonard Woolward, which show the obvious fact that a man's ability to sign his name deteriorated when he was on his death-bed.<sup>3</sup> Robert Caldecot, or Cawcot, of Willingham itself, was one such man.<sup>4</sup> He held between thirteen and fifteen acres of copyhold between 1575 and 1603, and subscribed 13s. 4d. to the school fund in 1593. In 1588, he witnessed a will, and was able to sign his name on it. In 1607, when he died, described as a 'yeoman', his staggering attempt at his initials was set down as a mark by Francis Chapman, who wrote the will (Fig. I).

Orwell yields an even more striking example. Thomas Butler of Orwell had a first cousin, Nicholas Johnson.<sup>5</sup> Nicholas never left Orwell to acquire an education, as far as is known, but he was literate. He acted as rent collector for his cousin, and was able, in an Exchequer deposition, to identify the handwriting of Thomas Butler's brother, George. He was a churchwarden, and he acted as the scribe of some of the villagers' wills between 1614 and 1626. It was probably his nephew, another Nicholas Johnson, who frequently acted as a witness to wills with his second cousin, Neville Butler, Thomas's son. The

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> I have been unable to find much material on the Pearson family. They were not considerable freeholders or copyholders in the 1575 or 1603 surveys; yet Anne Pearson, widow, gave £3 towards the school.

<sup>3</sup> A further disadvantage is that very few people in any of the village communities discussed here made wills. In five villages, under two people per household assessed in the Hearth Tax made wills during the entire seventeenth century, including those proved in the Prerogative Court at Canterbury. If only the most prosperous, who were therefore more literate, tended to leave wills, the proportion of those unable to sign must in reality have been much higher.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Miss Marie Rowlands for giving me a similar example which she found amongst the wills and inventories in the Lichfield Record Office. Samuel Freeman, an apothecary of Uttoxeter in Staffordshire, who must surely have been a fully literate man to practise his profession, marked his will, rather than signed it, in June 1696. On 5 July, a codicil was added, and whereas his mark on his main will approximated to rough letters, his mark on the codicil was a mere cross. On 15 July he was dead, and his inventory, as one would expect of a professional man, set a value on his books.

<sup>5</sup> See above, pp. 119-20.

And to get my wife Kall into the custody of my eldest son to hold  
 to my said son & his heirs to. To be lawful eyes & good being  
 witnesses Robert Caldecot William Struygman and Thomas  
 myself

Robert Caldecot

D

to draw my wife's assent I do make my self executor  
 of my said wife's will

John Button

marks

John Button

Robert Caldecot By me Robert Caldecot  
 his

Thomas Struygman  
 Thomas Struygman

FIG. I. Top: Robert Caldecot witnesses Anthony Haidon's will, 1588; bottom: Robert Caldecot marks his own will, 1607.

for testimony of the right of a foreign lord acquired by  
 the grace of god of England Scotland France & Ireland King  
 depending of the faith of  
 subscribed & delivered  
 in the presence of  
 Neville Butler  
 Nicholas Johnson

John Barton & his marks

my last will & testament in witness whereof you have full and  
 soundly been sworn in the presence of the said witnesses  
 foreign lord: Charles the first of England Scotland France  
 Ireland King depend of the faith of 1648.

signed published & delivered  
 in the presence of

Neville Butler  
 William de la D his marks

marks of Nicholas Johnson

FIG. II. Top: Neville Butler and Nicholas Johnson witness John Barton's will, 1637; bottom: Nicholas Johnson marks his own will, 1648.

contrast between the polished hand of one cousin, educated at the Perse and Christ's, and the rough village hand of the other, is a very illuminating one. Nevertheless, the younger Nicholas Johnson could write. When he died in 1648 he marked his will with an almost unrecognizable attempt at an N, though his cousin Neville witnessed it in his usual style (FIG. II).

Any estimate of ability to sign based on wills, therefore, presents absolute minimum figures of the proportion of the will-making population able to write their names; and it reflects the toughness of their constitutions, as well as their literary prowess. An analysis of signatures on the Willingham wills for the period 1600 to 1690 shows that 15 per cent of the wills were signed. (TABLE II).

TABLE II  
TESTATORS SIGNING AND MARKING WILLS AT WILLINGHAM

	<i>Yeomen &amp; above</i>		<i>Husbandmen</i>		<i>Labourers</i>		<i>Craftsmen</i>		<i>Women</i>		<i>No occupation given</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>	
-1600	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
1601-1625	2	10	1	4	0	6	2	11	0	8	0	5	5	44
1626-1650	4	4	2	19	0	10	2	9	0	7	0	4	8	53
1651-1675	9	8	0	5	0	6	0	5	1	7	0	2	10	33
1676-1700	6	16	0	5	0	3	2	5	0	7	0	3	8	39
<i>Total to 1700</i>	21	39	3	33	0	25	6	30	1	29	0	15	31	171

It is a very great pity that hardly any wills bear marks or signatures before 1600. As a result it is impossible to make any comparison of ability to sign before the endowment of the school and after it. However, one might expect some slight increase in the ability to sign amongst testators beginning in the 1620's and 1630's, if they had attended school in the 1590's. It does not seem to be there. The figures give a slight impression of improvement in the second half of the seventeenth century, but this is too small to be statistically significant, and might be a mere chance.<sup>1</sup>

However disappointing the wills prove generally as a source of information on ability to sign, one inescapable conclusion emerges. At Willingham, yeomen were both better represented and far more able to sign their names than any other group. Over a third of the yeomen who made wills could do so. A sixth of the smaller group of will-making craftsmen could sign their names. A few husbandmen and one woman signed; no labourer could do so. Yeomen there-

<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank Dr R. S. Schofield for much general help and encouragement, as well as for detailed comment on these and similar figures.

fore stood out as a class persistently more able to afford an interest in education than any other, as common sense suggests.<sup>1</sup>

It seems, therefore, that the school, even though it began with whole-hearted support and encouragement from the relatively rich and the relatively poor alike, and even though its rules laid down that the children of the genuinely poor should be taught free, really benefited the sons of yeomen far more than any other class. It is necessary to add that, considering the way holdings broke down in Willingham in the seventeenth century, and that the acreage farmed by a 'yeoman' became smaller and smaller, the school may have been responsible for keeping up basic standards of educational techniques that would otherwise have fallen far lower.

The community at Orwell was strongly contrasted with that of Willingham in many ways. A dependence on barley production and lack of common led it near to famine in 1612 and 1617, and the first thirty years of the seventeenth century saw the disappearance of many of the half yardlands and yardlands, apparently under the same economic pressures as those at Chippenham,<sup>2</sup> although the evidence is not nearly so conclusive. The same years saw four or five prosperous yeomen families increasing their acreages, and the numbers of cottagers rising. Later in the century, the demesne farms were expanded, again at the expense of the farmers of traditionally sized holdings.

Orwell was, of course, much smaller than Willingham. In 1563 it was less than half the size, and in the 1660's it had fallen even further behind the expanding settlement in the fens, as its own surplus population emigrated. The difference in the size of the two villages meant that Orwell had fewer yeomen families than Willingham, although they made up a slightly larger proportion of the village population.<sup>3</sup> Only the outstanding yeoman family in each village took what was perhaps the decisive step into the ranks of the gentry by sending a son up to university. The Butlers of Orwell seem to have started with more pretensions, and taken them further, than the Crisps of Willingham.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising that no more than one family in each village considered university education as a possibility; the number of university entrants from rural back-

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 113. Professor Stone shows that there was a very marked difference between the ability to sign of yeomen and husbandmen marrying by licence in the Archdeaconry of Oxford and Diocese of Gloucester in the seventeenth century. Between 71 and 72 per cent of yeomen, as against 43 to 52 per cent of husbandmen could sign.—'Literacy and Education in England 1640-1900', *Past and Present*, 42, 1969, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Spufford, *A Cambridgeshire Community: Chippenham from Settlement to Enclosure*, Leicester, 1965, pp. 44-9.

<sup>3</sup> Orwell had four or five families with over 40 acres, in so far as one can judge on the basis of the copyholds alone. These accounted for 9 per cent to 12 per cent of tenants in 1602 and 1603, and the 1670's. Willingham had between five and eight families with over 25 acres, which I have suggested is roughly equivalent (see above, p. 117, n. 2). These accounted for 5 per cent or 6 per cent of the tenants in 1603 and in the 1720's.

<sup>4</sup> See above, pp. 119-20.

grounds must have been directly related to the number of yeomen families in a position to make this sort of economic sacrifice. But if it is not too facile to suppose that the proportion of families who could free their sons to attend school should bear some relationship to the proportion of the people in the community who were later able to sign their wills at death, then the differing proportions of yeomen families in Willingham and Orwell should have made some difference to the basic literacy rates there. An examination of the Orwell wills, however, shows that the true position was not so simple. (TABLES III and IV).

TABLE III  
TESTATORS SIGNING AND MARKING WILLS BEFORE 1700

	<i>Yeomen &amp; above</i>		<i>Husband-men</i>		<i>Labourers</i>		<i>Craftsmen</i>		<i>Women</i>		<i>No occupation given</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>		<i>Sign Mark</i>	
Willingham	21	39	3	33	0	25	6	30	1	29	0	15	31	171
Orwell	3	13	3	15	0	5	2	6	2	10	1	6	11	55
Milton	6	9	1	9	0	6	0	4	1	4	2	6	10	38

TABLE IV  
TESTATORS SIGNING WILLS BEFORE 1700

	<i>Yeomen Total</i>		<i>Non-Yeomen Total</i>		<i>All Testators Total</i>	
	<i>No. of Wills</i>	<i>% Signed</i>	<i>No. of Wills</i>	<i>% Signed</i>	<i>No. of Wills</i>	<i>% Signed</i>
Willingham	60	35	142	7	202	15
Orwell	16	19	50	16	66	17
Milton	15	40	33	12	48	21
Total	91	33	225	10	316	16

The information given by the wills was frankly disappointing. It did nothing to prove this suggestion, and something to refute it. The number of wills surviving was really too small to show any changes over a period of time. The yeomen of Orwell shared the general inability to write the letters of the alphabet on their death-beds, and they did nothing to leaven the illiterate lump of their fellow villagers. Seventeen per cent of those who made wills at Orwell could sign, as against 15 per cent at Willingham, but a much lower proportion of yeomen, and a correspondingly higher proportion of husbandmen, signed at

Orwell. Prosperity and elementary ability to write were therefore less clearly related at Orwell, where there was more economic polarization of the community than at Willingham.<sup>1</sup>

If the proportion of those able to sign their names at death was approximately the same in Willingham and Orwell, it seems that the basic tenet that the number of smaller farmers in the fens should have led to a higher illiteracy rate is wrong, unless the wills which survive from Orwell are too small a selection to be representative.

Apart from the small numbers, part of the solution appears to lie in yet another major difference between the two villages: Willingham had a permanent school; Orwell did not. There were scattered references to a master teaching at Orwell from 1575 onwards, but they never amounted, in the episcopal records, to anything like Willingham's consistent record. Robert Clark was licensed to teach grammar there in 1587 after graduating from Queens' in 1583. There was a master there in 1590, and again in 1596. In 1609, William Barnard, the vicar, was teaching in Orwell. He may have done some sporadic teaching for some time, for he held the living until his death in 1644. He seems also to have acted as scribe for a number of the villagers' wills from 1615 to 1642.<sup>2</sup> However, no later visitation took notice of him as a teacher and, if he taught, it is obvious that his standard never came anywhere near that of the Willingham school. If it had done so, Thomas Butler would not have found it necessary to send his son Neville to the Perse in Cambridge before he went up to Christ's in 1623.<sup>3</sup> Nor would Neville Butler, in his turn, have sent his son away to school in Hertford before he went to college in 1649. Things must have changed considerably before 1661, for in that year Neville Butler's fourth son, John, went up to Christ's, after being prepared by "Mr. Griffen" at the 'schola publica' at

<sup>1</sup> These figures are to some extent falsified by the fact that the most prosperous in the community tended to assume the aura of gentility, and get their wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury. The Butlers of Orwell did this, and so also did one or two Fairchilds, Godfreys, and other yeomen. It is fair to assume that a higher proportion of these men could sign their names than of those men whose wills were proved in the Consistory Court. The number of Orwell wills proved in the Consistory Court was so low that these Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills could make a considerable difference to the pattern. On the other hand the wills of prosperous Willingham men, like Henry Crisp, also went to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury. The proportion of wills in relation to the size of each community going to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury was approximately the same over the seventeenth century, so it is unlikely that an analysis including all these Prerogative Court wills for both communities would be fundamentally different from one based on the Consistory Court wills alone. This conclusion is based on the *Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills*, Index Library, IV-XII, covering wills proved in the Prerogative Court, 1584-1629, 1653-60, 1671-1700; J. & G. F. Matthews, *Year Books of Probates*, 1-8, 1903-27, covering the years 1630-55; J. H. Morrison *Wills, Sentences, and Probate Acts, 1661-1670*, 1935. I have excluded the years 1653-60, when all wills were proved in the Prerogative Court in any case.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Johnson appears to have written a parallel series of wills at approximately the same time.

<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 119.

Orwell. The school was still not permanently established,<sup>1</sup> but a Mr Wright was there in 1665 and John Lowe, "schoolmaster," was buried in Orwell in 1689. It looks as if more schooling may have been available at Orwell in the second half of the seventeenth century.

There is another complicating factor in Orwell. The wills which survived are probably too small a group for statistical analysis and this may account for the disappointing results. These results are in any case in many ways at loggerheads with the general impression given by the wills that witnesses were highly literate. Such impressions, of course, are not capable of this type of analysis. There seem also to have been more scribes at work in Orwell. Many of the hands at work are unidentifiable, but many of those which are identifiable belong to the Johnson and Butler family. This leads to the suspicion that there may have been a tradition of literacy in some families, which was not necessarily based on economic factors at all. On the Butler side of the family, of course, education was based on prosperity, from Thomas who went up to Gray's Inn in 1589 onwards.<sup>2</sup> On the Johnson side of the family, however, it was not. Nicholas Johnson, the churchwarden who wrote a series of villagers' wills, had inherited about thirty-four acres in all. His brother Richard, who could sign his name on his death-bed, seems to have had a conventional fourteen-acre holding. The tradition continued, for Lawrence Johnson wrote a couple of wills at the end of the 1640's, and one of these was witnessed by Elizabeth Johnson, who was one of the rare women who could write her name clearly and well.

Family tradition, cutting across economic divisions, may therefore be another reason for the apparently low numbers of yeomen, and the comparatively high proportion of husbandmen, who could sign their names at Orwell.<sup>3</sup>

The generally unsatisfactory and contradictory nature of the evidence at Orwell suggested the desirability of adding a third village study. Milton, immediately north of Cambridge, had about 400 acres of fen common, which was obviously important in the economy, but it must have relied more heavily on its thousand acres of arable in the open fields than Willingham. The

<sup>1</sup> Until the incumbency of Dr Cobbatch, rector of Orwell, who died in 1748/9. The parish register records, "Dr Cobbatch gave the school for ever." His foundation appears to have spread literacy down the social scale. In 1775, the death of John Lawrence, "labourer and Church Clerk," is likewise recorded in the register. Boys were taught to read and write and cast accounts; girls to read, as well as to sew, knit, and spin.—C. E. Parsons 'Notes on Horseheath Schools and other Village Schools in Cambridgeshire', *Cambs. Antiq. Soc. Proc.*, n.s., 16, 1920, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Foster, *Gray's Inn Admission Register, 1521-1889*, 1889, p. 75. He had previously been at Staple Inn. The Butler wills themselves were proved in the Prerogative Court at Canterbury, and are therefore excluded from the Orwell analysis, which is based on the wills proved in the Consistory Court.

<sup>3</sup> Family literacy deserves separate study; the same thing was true of the Crisps at Willingham who likewise sprawled across class divisions.

village was very small. It had only thirty-six households in 1563, and thirty-eight houses in 1664. The community based in this environment was a remarkably placid one, able to agree peaceably on the enclosure of its commons with its lord, and remarkably free from change. If the evidence of the surveys made of the place in 1599 and 1707 is to be trusted, the distribution of land changed very little during the seventeenth century. There were only four tenants with over fifty acres at both dates.<sup>1</sup>

There was even less evidence for the existence of a school at Milton than at Orwell; only two references were found to a master teaching there in the entire seventeenth century. Even fewer usable wills survive for Milton than for Orwell but, such as they are, they confirm the impression suggested by the Willingham evidence. Six of the fifteen yeomen who made wills at Milton signed their names; only four of the remaining thirty-three will makers did so. Again, literacy and prosperity were related, despite the absence of a school. At Milton, as at Willingham, the yeomen stood out as a group, which even at death, retained the acquired skill of scrawling out letters far more markedly than any other section of the community.

#### *The Importance of Reading in the Village Community*

However helpful information on the proportion of villagers actually able to sign their names may be, statistics of this sort remain bleak and arid unless some idea can be gained of the extent to which writing, and more particularly reading, entered into the ordinary life of the village community. Information of this kind can never be complete, and will never be capable of expression in statistical terms. It must necessarily be fragmentary and impressionistic. J. W. Adamson collected such information for the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and showed, for instance, that "Englische billes" were placed on the Norwich city gates in 1424. They were presumably intended to be read not only by the urban inhabitants but also by country folk coming in to market. By 1534, girls in Langham village on the borders of Essex and Suffolk could read Matins in English.<sup>2</sup> The number of devotional works, from Richard Whitford's *A Werke for Householdors* printed in 1530 to Josias Nicholas's *Order of Household Instruction* which appeared in 1596, argues a market for such works.<sup>3</sup> It is highly unlikely that these books were all aimed at the urban market. Herbert Palmer the minister, of Ashwell on the Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire border, who set up a model Puritan household in the 1630's

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Spufford, dissertation *cit.*, pp. 85, 108-14.

<sup>2</sup> J. W. Adamson, 'Extent of Literacy in England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', *Library*, 4th series, x, 1930, pp. 169-70.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Professor Kenneth Charlton for these references and his opinion on this point. Professor Stone uses a similar argument.—'Literacy and Education in England', *Past and Present*, 42, 1969, p. 99.

and provided a schoolmaster to teach those who repaired to him, also regularly presented a bible or 5s. to any new communicant who could read.<sup>1</sup> In 1578, a man was "sellinge of lytle bookes in Balsham churcheyard." A young barber-surgeon, who does not appear to have been very prosperous, since he was also a patcher of old clothes, and swore on oath that he would be "worthe nothings" if his debts were paid off, bought one.<sup>2</sup> There were, then, itinerant booksellers about, who appear to have caused no special remark. It is an interesting coincidence, if no more, that Balsham had a few members of the Family of Love. The way dissenting opinions could be spread about, if such book pedlars were at work, is obvious.

Unfortunately, the probate inventories for Cambridgeshire survive only from the early 1660's, and they give hardly any information on the books to be found in the ordinary household. The bible is occasionally mentioned, in the houses of people who were not outstandingly prosperous. Richard Broomhead of Fenditton had a bible, and his goods were worth £54 19s. 10d. when they were valued in 1669.<sup>3</sup> Robert Reynolds of Hauxton was worth only £18 7s. 8d., or little more than the norm for a labourer. He had a bible, but he may of course have been a retired yeoman. It is impossible to get an accurate impression of the number of households with bibles from the inventories, however. The usual form of the inventories was to give a small notional value at the end for "a bible and other lumber" or "a bible and other trashe," in the same way that small furniture in a room was often not described but simply valued as "other lumber." It is quite evident that books were not worth listing, even if they were there, and that bibles would not necessarily be entered separately. The only book apart from the bible mentioned by name in these probate inventories of the 1660's is a copy of Gray's *Complete Horseman*, which was listed, along with a pair of pearl-coloured silk stockings, amongst the few possessions of a gentleman who apparently died while on a visit to the county. Reading obviously did not assume sufficient importance in the lives of most villagers for the books to be allocated special house room. Of nearly 350 inventories which survive from between 1660 and 1670, only one single house apart from those of the clergy and gentry had a study in it. Thomas Laurence, a yeoman of Trumpington, whose goods were worth £138 when he died in 1669, had at least ten books in his study. The only other example was that of Richard Wootton,

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A Generall Martyrologie. . . The Lives of Sundry Modern Divines*, London, 1651, pp. 423-4.

<sup>2</sup> E.D.R., D2/11 fol. 261. See above, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> The median wealth of the 18 labourers whose inventories occur amongst those presented in the Consistory Court of Ely for the 1660's was £15. That of the 24 husbandmen was £30. That of the 55 craftsmen was £40, and that of the 58 yeomen was £180. Analysis of all the inventories surviving for the decade gave a median of £40 for the area of southern Cambridgeshire. See my 'Significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax', *Cambs. Antiq. Soc. Proc.*, LV, 1962, pp. 53-64.

a yeoman of Ickleton, who had "his books" and money, with a desk in his chamber.

The inventories also give some indication of the importance of money-lending, and the way that even the humbler members of the community were owed cash, and held bonds for this. William Bourne of Cherryhinton, who died in 1666, was a fell-monger. It was not surprising that he held £154 in bonds, since he must have travelled around the county collecting skins, and was an obvious person to give credit. But it seems that when men retired from active farming and took up residence with their sons or daughters, they often put their savings into bills and bonds. George Morling of Langstanton was described as a yeoman when he died in 1669, but he had no household goods apart from a few pairs of sheets. He had kept eleven hives of bees to care for in his retirement, but apart from these and his little flock of sheep, his property was in bills and bonds. Richard Caldecot was a husbandman, and was worth only £21 6s. 8d. All this was in bills and bonds, except his own personal clothes, and a chest to put them in. Robert Cole of Duxford had a "sole and only dwelling and lodging room" in 1662 and the furnishings were of the most meagre. "One Hutch, one shouell and one Iron Rake, and an old bedsted" were priced at 3s. 6d. and his clothes and money in his purse at 5s. His whole estate was worth less, at £12 18s. 6d., than that of the typical labourer. But in spite of his poverty, he held bonds worth 12s. 10d. Thomas Doggett of Over, who was described as "labourer" by the appraisers who made up his inventory in 1666, held bonds worth over £77, although his personal goods were again of the poorest. He must have been putting his saved earnings out at interest for years. Most striking of all in some ways was Alice Scott, a spinster of Bottisham, who left only clothes, and bonds worth £40, in 1669. These examples seem to represent standard practice. A series of thirty-one inventories which survive for Chippenham from 1576 to 1700 show that a third of the people who were well enough off to be appraised at death were involved in money-lending.<sup>1</sup> The three groups of people concerned were retired yeomen and husbandmen, prosperous craftsmen, and widows and spinsters. Although no inventories exist for the diocese of Ely before 1660, the wills which survive give ample confirmatory evidence of the widespread use of credit, since they sometimes contain lists of debts both owing to, and owed by, the testator. In 1566, a yeoman of Orwell, Richard Kettle, drew up his will. He was owed £4 by a neighbour, over £6 by someone from the next village of Barrington, sums of between £1 and £8 by three men in Little Gransden, six miles away, and another £1 by a man in Royston, where Orwell people frequently marketed. John Hart, a husbandman of Milton, who died in 1588, was an extreme ex-

<sup>1</sup> Amongst the records of the Episcopal Commissary Court for Bury St Edmunds at Bury St Edmunds and West Suffolk Record Office.

ample of indebtedness. He owed money to fourteen men from seven villages including his own. All these villages lay within five or six miles, except Bourn, over ten miles away, where he owed the very large sum of £11.

It can be argued that people who entered into bonds were not necessarily able to read them,<sup>1</sup> providing they understood what they had signed or marked their names to. On the other hand, those who were owed sums on bond, who were most frequently yeomen, had a very powerful practical incentive to be able to read them. There must, indeed, have been a more powerful incentive for lenders of money to be able to cope with written figures than with letters. The written word cannot have been so inherently useful. If it was indeed normal for retired farmers and even widows and spinsters to hold their money in bonds, written notes of hand must have been extremely commonly exchanged amongst ordinary villagers, and it is no wonder that the ability to "caste an accompte" was included as a basic skill with reading and writing in the curricula of many schools which set out to teach the humblest village child.<sup>2</sup> Simple accounting must have been a very necessary skill in the farming community if credit was so generously used.<sup>3</sup>

Even if the inventories give little direct information on the importance of reading in the community, a study of the growth of dissenting opinion in Cambridgeshire under the Commonwealth gives a very strong impression of the vitality and fervour with which religious topics were canvassed in the villages in the 1650's and 60's, and the extent to which the humblest, and even the women, joined in the debate. Many communities seem to have been hotbeds of religious dispute and conviction. When the Baptist evangelist, John Denne, went on a preaching tour in the early 1650's, he was engaged in constant dispute with Ranters, and proto-Quakers like the 'maid' Isobel in the village of Kingston, who was convinced of the need to "judge the Scriptures by the Spirit, not the Spirit by the Scriptures."<sup>4</sup> She could presumably read them. The records of all the dissenting churches of Cambridgeshire give some intimations of the importance of the ability to read, and an impression that this was widespread. They are sprinkled with references which give at least indirect information on literacy. John Aynslo, "farmer," who lived in Over and

<sup>1</sup> For instance, John Aves of Chippenham, who may have been a scribe, died owning goods worth only £9 6s. 2d. in 1676. A baker of Fordham, George Durrant, held a bond of his for £4 10s. George Durrant had been unable to sign his name when he appraised the goods of another Chippenham man in 1669. It is, of course, always possible that he was able to read, even if he could not write.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 127, and the curriculum of Orwell School, p. 140, n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Miss Marie Rowlands, who has been working on tradesmen's probate inventories of Staffordshire in the late seventeenth century has found the same or even greater use of credit amongst mercantile members of the community. It seems that credit extended throughout local society by this period and probably did so much earlier.

<sup>4</sup> *Records of the Churches of Christians gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham, 1644-1720*, ed. E. B. Underhill for the Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854, p. 74. (Henceforth, *Fenstanton Records*.)

was recognized as the teacher of the Quakers of Over, and indeed of Cambridgeshire, which sect was described in such a derogatory way by the bishop in 1669 as "all of very poor condition, scarce a yeoman amongst them," could write a vivid letter. His accounts of the prosecution of the Quakers in 1660 and the conditions in Cambridge Castle at that time are horrifying documents.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that a recognized Quaker teacher, even if he was a local farmer, could write so fluently, and indeed there is some doubt about whether he did not originally come from a gentle family in Northumberland.<sup>2</sup> He was writing tracts for publication by 1664. It is perhaps more surprising that the otherwise unknown Baptist John Blowes of Bourne could in 1657 be disciplined into writing a letter of sorrow, apparently in his own hand, to the brethren he had duped on a visit to London by sneaking away leaving his bill unpaid.<sup>3</sup> Much more general evidence is provided by the standard disciplinary practice amongst both Baptists and Quakers of writing letters of admonition to erring members who for some reason could not be visited. These were addressed to both men and women. The General Baptists of Fenstanton wrote a stinging letter to Jasper Dockwra of Bassingbourn in 1657,<sup>4</sup> after he had given persistent offence by going frequently to hear the minister of the Church of England. It is quite evident that this letter was intended to be read by Jasper Dockwra himself. The Baptists can scarcely have written it under the assumption that he would be obliged to take it to be read by the minister in question, or even by the parish clerk in Bassingbourn. The same argument applies even more strikingly to the letter of reproof addressed to Thomas Sterne of Haddenham in the Isle of Ely, after he had "dishonoured" the name of God by giving consent to the "sprinkling" of his child. Thomas was invited to come to a general meeting at Fenstanton in 1658 to account for himself.<sup>5</sup> John Bunyan's Open Baptists also communicated with their congregations in the same way. In 1669 they addressed letters of encouragement to two men and to two women who were suffering in the persecution.<sup>6</sup> There seems to have been a general assumption that members of the meetings could read, and could therefore commonly be addressed by letter. Indeed, much business between the elders of different congregations was conducted by correspondence as the appeal addressed by the Baptists of Caxton to the various Baptist congregations in Cambridgeshire on behalf of John Wilson in 1654 bears witness.<sup>7</sup> John Wait, a yeoman of Toft, who was a local preacher affiliated to the Open Baptists of Bedford, sent them information by letter on the misdeeds of one of

<sup>1</sup> Printed in J. Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers*, 1753, I, 89-91.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Spufford: 'The Dissenting Churches in Cambridgeshire from 1660 to 1700', *Cambs. Antiq. Soc. Proc.*, LXI, 1968, p. 92, n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Fenstanton Records*, pp. 224-37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212-13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247-9.

<sup>6</sup> *The Church Book of Bunyan Meeting, 1650-1821*, ed. G. B. Harrison, pp. 39 *et seq.*

<sup>7</sup> *Fenstanton Records*, pp. 104-5.

their members, who was begging from the brethren in St Neots in 1669<sup>1</sup> without the permission of his church.<sup>2</sup>

One direct and striking piece of evidence shows the way in which the written, as apart from the spoken, word could be responsible for the spread of dissident religious opinion, and could bring about conversion at the lowest social level. The General Baptist, Sister Sneesby of Over, was in 1654 in a state of great spiritual distress. She was tormented by the new Quaker teachings, and by the necessity to choose between them and her Baptist principles. In the end, she became a Quaker, and therefore formed one of that group which Bishop Laney had found of such humble origin. During her conversion to Quakerism, she was visited by Baptist messengers, who "found [her] in a very sad and deplorable condition. . . We told her, that we heard that one of those commonly called Quakers was at her house and preached there; and we were afraid his preaching had brought her into that condition. She answered, that she could hear very little that he said [perhaps she was deaf]; but she said that she had read many of his books. Then we asked her whether the reading of them were not the cause of her trouble." When she confessed that this might indeed be the root of her distress, she was advised "to continue reading" the Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> In 1660, Widow Sneesby was amongst the Quakers imprisoned for not swearing the Oath of Allegiance. John Aynslo sent a list of the prisoners to Quaker headquarters in London and annotated this with notes on their status.<sup>4</sup> He wrote of the small group of women of which she was one, "they were most of them poor women and had nothing to live on but what they did labour for." In his letter to London describing the prisoners he expanded this to explain that the women "had little but as they diderne it by day labor." This woman from Over, then, was in all probability either of a labouring family or reduced to day labour in her widowhood. Despite the poverty of her social background she had enough education to read the Bible and Quaker literature, and the printed word conveyed a sufficiently powerful impression to bring about her conversion.<sup>5</sup> No

<sup>1</sup> *The Church Book of Bunyan Meeting*, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> A certain amount of caution is necessary in interpreting this evidence, particularly in view of the statement of a miller's son from the fens in the nineteenth century that of the local preachers who served the local Wesleyan chapel, "Some on 'em couldn't read at all, and had to learn by heart everything they were likely to want for the service, hymns and psalms and readings from the Bible and all the lot. . . Some on 'em could only put two or three words together at one time."—Sybil Marshall, *Fenland Chronicle*, 1967, p. 97. Still there is no doubt that the elders of the Baptist congregations in the seventeenth century wrote both the church books and letters of admonition, just as a yeoman of Croyden-cum-Clopton wrote, about 1690, the evilly spelt account of the life of the Congregationalist Francis Holcroft which opens the Great Gransden Church Book.—Unprinted typescript in the possession of H. G. Tibbutt, Esq., of Bedford, partly quoted Margaret Spufford, *art. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> *Fenstanton Records*, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> *Volumes of Sufferings*, 1, Friends' Meeting House, London, pp. 110–12.

<sup>5</sup> It is very difficult, unfortunately, to discover exactly what the Widow Sneesby was reading, apart from the Scriptures. John Aynslo later lived in Over, of course, but there is no record of any

more positive proof could exist of the importance of literacy in bringing about the spread of new religious opinion in the seventeenth century amongst people who were of far too humble status to be touched by any growth or decline of grammar school or university education. It will always be impossible to know, for lack of documentation, whether the ordinary villager was better educated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than before the Reformation. We can only state that the written word was a powerful and influential weapon at the parochial level in seventeenth-century Cambridgeshire, not whether it was more, or less, powerful than in the preceding period.

We can also show that yeomen, as a class, were more literate, and, indeed, the only class generally able to afford the luxury of developing skills which were not strictly necessary to the upkeep of their farms. The detailed village studies carried out in Cambridgeshire, however, do not offer any proof of the thesis that the uplands, with their more diversified social structure, produced communities of more literate people. The proportion of substantial yeomen in a community did not appear to bear any strong relationship to the basic literacy of that community, gauged by the ability to sign wills alone. If anything the reverse was true. The small number of college entrants from the Isle of Ely, compared with those from the southern Cambridgeshire uplands, did suggest, on the other hand, that yeomen from the uplands could afford to send their sons to university more often than could those from the fens.<sup>1</sup> The more numerous, less prosperous yeomen in the Isle may have been less able to afford university education than their more substantial brethren in the uplands, but larger numbers in communities in the Isle could perhaps afford elementary education. The history of the Willingham school shows that at the end of the sixteenth century there was in some places an interest in education which permeated whole villages, even though it did not enable the villagers to give their children any protracted schooling.

work of his being printed until 1664. James Parnell was the Quaker apostle of Cambridgeshire.—Margaret Spufford, *art. cit.*, p. 74. He was active from the autumn of 1654 to the spring of 1655, and Sister Sneesby developed qualms of conscience in November 1654, at just the right date to be the result of his ministry. However, only one of James Parnell's tracts seems to have been printed before 1655, so unless he circulated broadsheets before they were formally printed, these cannot have been responsible. If broadsheets of his were responsible for Sister Sneesby's distress, she was able to follow a highly intricate argument. Despite James Parnell's extreme youth, he was responsible for such indigestible matter as *The Watcher: or, the Stone cut out of the mountains without hands, striking at the feet of the Image, whose head is gold, and brest of silver, and thighs of brass and legs of iron and feet part iron and part clay, or, A Discovery of the ground and end of all Forms, Professions, Sects and opinions. . .*, London, 1655.

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 117–18.