

An 18th Century Leicestershire Squarson: Robert Sherard, 4th Earl of Harborough (1719-1799)

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Whether the quaint expression squarson was first coined by Sydney Smith or (as seems less likely) bishop Samuel Wilberforce,¹ it strikingly emphasises the tight links which bound together landed society and the Anglican clergy of Georgian England. After 1700 the younger sons of peers and baronets entered the established Church in substantial numbers and were rewarded by generous preferment which made them financially independent of their elder brothers.² But, occasionally, the parson also found himself the landowner, and was thus translated into a squarson; the accidents of death could often result in a younger son having to look after the patrimonial estates as well as his glebe. Locally, there is no finer example of this particular eighteenth century hybrid than the Rev. the Hon. Robert Sherard (1719-99), a clergyman who, at the age of 51, succeeded his brother Bennet as 4th Earl of Harborough against all the odds, none of Bennet's four wives having given him a son who had lived. Any reconstruction of the 4th Earl's career is fraught with difficulties. The Harborough title became extinct in 1859, and there is a limited amount of material for the years after 1750 in the Gretton Mss. from Stapleford Park. Nevertheless a survey of what sources there are indicates that the 4th Earl can be rescued from neglect, and that the attempt is worth making both for what it reveals about a Leicestershire peer-priest who was, in some ways, untypical of the 18th century English nobility, and as a useful supplement to Professor Cannon's 1982 Wiles Lectures on this topic.³

Robert Sherard's career nicely illustrates the point that the squarson was not so much of a hybrid after all. His combination of roles, offices, and duties, his straddling of the secular/sacred divide, made excellent sense in the 18th century when few churchmen felt that the Erastian framework of the contemporary Establishment required any apology. A squarson, especially one who was a peer, was in a position to make an effective contribution at any of several points in late Georgian society. Landowner, clerical dignitary, patron, legislator — he could be all these, provided he had the energy and resources of character. Sherard, it seems, was found lacking. His middle-aged succession to comital rank came too late for him to give over the even tenor of his clerical ways in favour of the public responsibilities and duties of a peer. As Earl of Harborough, he was unable to achieve the balance between parson and peer a squarson might be expected to find, and though he gradually relinquished his clerical preferments,⁴ he could not undo his ordination and never resigned his Holy Orders.

He adjusted more successfully to the responsibilities of estate management thrust upon him after 1770 than he did to participation in the work of the House of Lords. With the assistance of his steward, father-in-law and friend, William Reeve, the 4th Earl consolidated all the Sherard landholdings before his death in 1799. Even so, it is surely no accident that the most tangible reminder of the Earl's life that remains to us are the three churches that he had built in the 1780s at Teigh, Stapleford and Saxby. To the last, the Reverend Lord

Harborough retained a clerical cast of mind; he was at all times, essentially a parson before he was a squire. And he was a local man too, pleased with a retired life on his Leicestershire estates, and a generous benefactor in the county. London society and the House of Lords had little appeal for him.

Yet the Earldom to which the Rev. Robert Sherard succeeded in 1770 was a declining asset. By that date, the political influence of the Harborough family was waning, and with it came the diminution of their social prestige.⁵ The Sherards were on the way down, despite their estates in Leicestershire, Rutland, and South Kesteven. It was the 4th Earl's distinctive achievement that he briefly arrested this decline in local importance. The Sherard family had a proud Parliamentary tradition. They had first represented Leicestershire in 1491, picked up an Irish Barony in 1627, and at the end of the 17th century, Bennet, Lord Sherard sat for Leicestershire, and his nephew, another Bennet, for Rutland;⁶ with the two branches of the family settled at Stapleford and Whissendine since the 15th century, the Sherards were a political force to be reckoned with. Moderate Whigs in their politics, they were amply (perhaps too generously) rewarded for their loyalty to the Hanoverian Succession by the award of three British peerages to Bennet, 3rd Baron Sherard of Leitrim (1677-1732), in George I's reign, culminating in the Earldom of Harborough in 1719. These favours were conferred at a time when the Harborough electoral interest in Rutland was subjected to acute pressure from Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham, and his eldest son, Lord Finch, who had lived at Burley-on-the-Hill since the early 1690s.⁷ The two families had fought a bitter contest for Rutland in 1710; the Sherards had the worst of it,⁸ and though the future 1st Earl of Harborough briefly represented Rutland in 1713-14, the successful Finch challenge to Sherard predominance was confirmed by the result in the 1722 General Election.⁹ It was such an expensive contest that the Sherards never risked another until 1795.¹⁰ It was the same story in Leicestershire where the electoral interest of the Harborough family declined steadily in the 18th century.¹¹ Moreover, after 1750, the Sherards ceased to be the obvious choice as Lords Lieutenant of Rutland — a post held by the first two Earls for half a century, with only a break from 1712-1715.¹²

Political eclipse was matched by economic decline. The Sherard estates were rather too small to generate the wealth necessary to support comital rank, and family disputes exacerbated the problem. Rather than bequeath his Stapleford estate directly to his cousin and male heir, Philip Sherard of Whissendine (also heir to the Earldom under the special remainder included in its patent), he incorporated it into a trust and made specific provision denying residence to Philip. Effectively, use of the estate was to pass (after the demise of the 1st Earl's sisters, the duchess of Rutland and Viscountess Irwin¹³) to Philip's eldest son, Bennet — if he survived his father.¹⁴ Therefore, even after succession to the Earldom in 1732, Bennet per force, continued to reside with his growing brood in his family Manor House at Whissendine¹⁵ — hardly a suitable setting for an 18th century Earl! The bad feeling engendered by this financial slap in the face was to have repercussions felt years afterwards,¹⁶ and the 2nd Earl was left to support his large family of five surviving boys and four girls without direct access to the revenues furnished by the Stapleford estate. Little wonder then that for a family with an Earldom, the Harboroughs had an untypically low profile and were socially isolated to an exceptional extent among their peers, with few friends of rank outside the number of their relations.

It was against this background that Robert Sherard was born on 21 October 1719, the third but second surviving son of Philip Sherard, 2nd Earl of Harborough from 1732.¹⁷ The selection of a profession for each of his sons was a difficult exercise. Daniel, the fourth boy, went into the Royal Navy and died unmarried aged 22, in 1744, as a Lieutenant on

HMS *Falmouth*, while the fifth son, Philip, ended a distinguished military career as a Lieutenant General and Colonel of the 69th Regiment of Foot. The Church was reserved for Robert. Though endowed, at best, with average mental talents — one scornful satirist of the Peerage later unfairly mocked him as ‘cursed with a Disposition of Mind incapable of any liberal Accomplishments’¹⁸ — it was a sensible option with his sister, Dorothy, married to a well-off clergyman and his aunt Margaret (sister of the 2nd Earl) the wife of the Rt. Rev. John Gilbert, a rising prelate.¹⁹ At all events, after Eton, Robert Matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, in December 1737, switched colleges while in residence,²⁰ and graduated B.A. from Merton in 1740.²¹ Three years later he was ordained Deacon and then Priest at the Spring Gardens Chapel, Westminster.²² It was a typical progress for the younger son of an Earl.

There was no difficulty about finding Robert Sherard a suitable first benefice. In 1743 he was nominated by his father to the family living of Teigh, in the heartland of Sherard territories, just inside Rutland²³ — very much the clerical equivalent of a pocket borough seat in the House of Commons. Sherard held the Rectory of Teigh until 1787, and from the evidence of building alone one can conclude that the parish had a special place in his affections. He rebuilt the church and appears to have substantially modified the Rectory where his only son, Philip, was born in October 1767.²⁴ It was to this group of buildings that he always returned after fulfilling Prebendal duties at Salisbury or Southwell, certainly before inheriting his Earldom in 1770. Teigh made few demands on his time and energies, and the living acted as a foundation for Sherard to accumulate more lucrative preferments and so advance his progress up the *cursus honorum* of the Augustan Church. Accumulation of pluralities compelled him after 1754 to nominate a succession of curates to take the services at Teigh on his behalf,²⁵ and the parish records testify to his regular absences most years prior to 1770; after that date his curate, the Rev. John Lambert was effectively full-time minister at Teigh.²⁶ Sherard himself personally took services on a regular basis in 1756, 1761, 1764, 1766 and 1768-69.²⁷ It was no coincidence that this increase in pastoral dedication in the later 1760s was directly linked to Sherard’s growing realisation that he was within striking distance of the title and needed to monitor developments from close at hand.

Almost concurrently with Teigh, Sherard was presented with the Rectory of Wistow. The marriage of his sister Dorothy to the Rev. James Torkington (d.1767), Rector of King’s Ripton and Little Stukeley, and a prominent member of a Huntingdonshire gentry family with strong clerical links, gave Sherard a set of relations with whom he established a lifelong affinity, based on close social bonds and temperamental compatibility.²⁸ Lady Dorothy’s marriage settlement of 1731 had brought the Presentation rights to the benefice of Wistow into the hands of the 2nd Earl of Harborough,²⁹ who wasted no time in installing Robert Sherard weeks after his ordination, having first ‘persuaded’ the Rector in possession, Dr Morley Unwin (friend of the poet Cowper) to resign the living and let in his son.³⁰ Wistow, for the next 39 years, provided Sherard with an invaluable supplement to his income from Teigh, but he personally left little impact on this Fenland community. Indeed the physical condition of the church of St. John the Baptist became noticeably dilapidated during Sherard’s incumbency,³¹ and he clearly spent precious little of the £150 that the living was worth³² on the needs of the parish. He was content to delegate his responsibilities as village priest to the Rev. Thomas Pyke, curate of Wistow from 1740, who remained on duty there until 1776.³³ It is possible that when visiting his Torkington relations at Great Stukeley Sherard occasionally officiated at Wistow, but otherwise, he was hardly to be seen.³⁴

When not at Teigh, Sherard made his home in the Cathedral Close at Salisbury,³⁵

thanks to the patronage of his uncle, Bishop John Gilbert.³⁶ One of Gilbert's first actions on his translation to Salisbury in 1750 was to have Sherard installed as Prebendary of Grimston and Yatminster on 16 February 1750, and virtually his last before promotion to the archdiocese of York was to help secure his nephew's election as one of the six Residentiary Canons of the Cathedral on 1 February 1757.³⁷ Though not spectacularly wealthy like the equivalent stalls at Canterbury or Durham, Sherard's prebendal duties were not demanding.³⁸ Residence was occasional in practice, and not strictly enforced. Under the 17th century statutes, it was allowable for a Residentiary Canon to compound for non-attendance at the Cathedral in weeks when he was supposed to be in residence.³⁹ Despite his frequent absences from Chapter meetings, Salisbury had the first call on Sherard's clerical loyalties before succession to the Earldom changed the pattern of his life. His seniority resulted in his election to the post of Proctor for the Chapter in Convocation on 11 April 1768. There are hints too of a definite musical interest, for Sherard was Master of the Choristers in 1768, and may have held that title in other years as well.⁴⁰

It was no coincidence that, following his Salisbury preferments, Sherard decided to marry for the first time at the ripe age of 43. He chose his wife carefully. She was Katherine Hearst, the daughter and co-heiress of a Wiltshire landowner and one of the principal lay residents of the Cathedral Close, Edward Hearst. The wedding, which took place in the Cathedral on 17 May 1762, had much to commend it on both sides. Hearst acquired the brother of an Earl and one of the most prominent clergy in the diocese as his son-in-law, while Sherard stood to gain lands in Wiltshire and Hampshire through his wife that would end his financial worries by vastly supplementing his clerical income. Unfortunately, it was the first of Sherard's three marriages which did not last. Katherine died before her father in 1765 after less than three years as Mrs Robert Sherard, and thus under the terms of her father's will, his fortune went after his death in September 1767 wholly to his other daughter, Caroline, except for Hearst's own house on the west side of the Close (known as 'Aula le Stage', which went to Sherard.⁴¹ The Residentiary Canon was thereby denied his anticipated fortune, but he stayed on in the Close and busied himself with building schemes.⁴² These Salisbury years deeply affected his outlook, and may well have kindled an appreciation for Gothic architecture which was no small inspiration for the churches later erected at Teigh and Stapleford.

Sherard also owed his second capitular appointment to the patronage of his rather pompous uncle John Gilbert, archbishop of York after 1757.⁴³ With only a few months of life left in him, the archbishop named Sherard to the Prebend of Woodborough in Southwell Minster on 29 January 1761, vacant by the death of the Rev. Robert Ayde.⁴⁴ Woodborough was not the wealthiest of the Southwell Prebends,⁴⁵ but it was the best that the expiring archbishop could do for his nephew at the time, and residential duties at Southwell were if anything less onerous than those enforced at Salisbury. Prebendaries were expected to be on hand for no more than three months of the year every four years under archbishop Sharpe's regulations of 1693, so that primary responsibility for the round of daily services in the Minster was left to the hard pressed Vicars Choral.⁴⁶

Sherard proved initially incapable of meeting even these undemanding requirements, or of turning up to any of the three or four annual Chapter meetings. He was present for the initial meeting after his induction, and for the two subsequent ones on 23 April and 22 October 1761.⁴⁷ Thereafter there was no sign of him for the next six years, and he established a reputation as one of the most lax of those Prebendaries expected to attend at least one of the annual gatherings. A concern for smooth capitular administration rather than any particular anxiety about Sherard's neglect of his duties caused the Chapter of Southwell on 18 October 1764 to take formal notice of his absence, and dispense him from

the formal requirements of residence.⁴⁸ It was not until 23 November 1767⁴⁹ that Sherard again personally attended a Chapter meeting, and thereafter he came more regularly.⁵⁰ He was at two of the four meetings in 1768, voted at a Proctors' election on 23 April the same year,⁵¹ and when personally unable to fulfill the duties of Residence now took care to nominate a deputy and notify the Chapter of his choice.⁵² Moreover he went into Residence for the first time in 1769! Perhaps it was lack of creature comforts that had kept Robert Sherard away from Southwell, for he gained the Chapter's permission to move a 'Green Marine' bed into his family's quarters and 'to paper with green and white paper the Chamber in the residents house called the Green Room'.⁵³ No ascetic he! When in Southwell on a slightly more regular basis in the 1770s, Harborough (as he had become) showed enthusiasm for the musical traditions of the Minster, and defended the retention of a full choral service, observing,⁵⁴ '...if that was discontinued, what reason was there for a choir or prebendaries — ?' But on the whole, it remained an undistinguished record. He retained his stall of Woodborough until resigning it on 7 February 1778,⁵⁵ but came to Southwell in person only in 1770, 1772, 1774 and 1775.⁵⁶

For a man of rank, Robert Sherard's clerical career cannot be considered a great success. Two rectories and two prebends constituted the sum of his preferment at the age of 50, and the death of the archbishop of York in 1761 effectively stopped his progress. The Harborough Family lacked the electoral influence to interest the duke of Newcastle (*de facto* minister for the Church, 1737-61 and 1765-66) in Robert Sherard, who possessed neither the piety nor the scholarship to have any appeal to George III after 1760; Sherard signally lacked the administrative competence for running a Diocese or a Cathedral Chapter which that pious young Monarch so respected. In fact, he was not even appointed one of the Royal Chaplains which, as an Earl's son, Sherard might reasonably have expected as his due. It was all indicative both of lack of standing, and lack of ability. Sherard had not used his opportunities as a canon to make the most of his uncle's bounty, and had preferred to chase an heiress and skimp on residence at Salisbury and Southwell rather than build up some reputation as a preacher or an administrator.

But though Sherard was denied a Bishopric, he still obtained a seat in the Lords — as a temporal rather than a spiritual peer. His route to the Upper House was a tortuous one, but he finally, in 1770, against the odds, succeeded his brother Bennet in the family Earldom. The undistinguished 3rd Earl — he wanted 'head', Lady Cowper complained⁵⁷ — had as his main object in life the begetting of a male heir who would live, and he went through no less than four wives in a frantic effort to achieve that ambition. Success eluded him,⁵⁸ and Robert Sherard remained as heir presumptive to his brother, though by the late 1760s, it was at great cost to the parson's nerves. Bennet's third wife, Margaret, gave birth on 3 February 1767 to a son and heir, Lord Sherard, who lived for just over a year to 21 February 1768, and this at the time that Robert's wife had also produced a son Philip!⁵⁹ Lord Sherard's birth cost Lady Harborough her life, but her husband wasted no time in remarrying before the year was out. His new wife was the perfectly healthy Elizabeth, first daughter of Sir Thomas Cave, 5th Baronet, of Stanford Hall,⁶⁰ and it must have seemed to Robert, even after his infant nephew's death, that the new Countess would soon produce another heir and dash his precious hopes of a coronet for good.

It seems that Bennet had not taken up the option (under the 1st Earl's will) of living at Stapleford Hall, until in 1767, his more forceful father-in-law, Sir Thomas Cave, decided to make sure his daughter went to live there and took the matter personally in hand. He had an examination made of the Inventory of possessions at Stapleford,⁶¹ and discovered that the house and grounds were so dilapidated that repairs would cost £2,010.⁶² It was apparent that the trustees of the 1st Earl will had not (perhaps because of the 2nd Earl's

refusal to cooperate with them) laid out any of the £400 set aside to be spent annually on the upkeep of Stapleford. Cave's response was to put in his own capable agent, Mr Brigstock, at Stapleford to guard the interests of the Earl and Countess, and to insist that the trustees (or their survivors) spend the money in their hands to make Stapleford Hall once again habitable.⁶³ The case went to the Court of Chancery which in July 1768 decided in favour of the Harborough/Cave parties and against the Rev. Robert Sherard and General Philip Sherard: Robert was also appointed Receiver of the Trust Estates.⁶⁴

Relations between Robert and Bennet had been extremely fraught since at least the early 1760s, as the parson's hopes of inheriting the Earldom gradually mounted. From the occasion when Robert quarrelled with the Earl's agent, Alban Flour, over exacting tithes from a farm in Whissendine previously regarded as exempt,⁶⁵ the Rector of Teigh had not missed any opportunity of snubbing the Earl his brother. He had no intention of prompting the trustees to disgorge monies for Stapleford if it would only be for the benefit of the Earl and his family. Even when appointed Receiver, Sherard deliberately refused to cooperate with his brother's agents. He shouted abuse at seven workmen undertaking repairs at the Hall and threatened them with no pay, behaviour which prompted Sir Thomas Cave to warn that Sherard stood in grave risk of Contempt of Court.⁶⁶ Nothing daunted, in June 1769 he refused to hand over title deeds and other official documents to the agents of the Earl,⁶⁷ in what can only be described as calculated obstructionism and mismanagement of his duties as Receiver as laid down by the Court. It was extraordinary behaviour for a priest, and there were signs that he was on the verge of a total breakdown in 1769 — or worse. Alban Flour described him as:⁶⁸

'...more like a dead Corpse, than a living Being. His Eyes are sunk in his Head, his Face full of wrinkles, his Flesh quite emaciated, & many other Appearances portending a Dissolution not very remote.'

Sherard was obviously frantic with worry that the new Lady Harborough was pregnant, which indeed she was in 1769.⁶⁹ It was difficult to tell since she was carrying the baby 'high', and this made it possible to deny the news to Robert. He went off to Buxton, perhaps to prepare for the worst, in a low state of nerves.⁷⁰

Just when Sherard's hopes were at a nadir, the miracle happened: Robert Sherard — parson — became 4th Earl of Harborough — squarson, on the sudden death of Bennet on 23 February 1770. Nothing more was heard of Lady Harborough's alleged pregnancy, and the child may well have been still-born. Robert thus unambiguously inherited both the title and the full range of the Sherard estates, bringing to an end the financial uncertainties of his own career in the Church, and making possible a sizeable increase in total estate yields from the long delayed merger of the Stapleford and Whissendine holdings. Diminished resources caused by a divided inheritance had eroded Sherard family prestige considerably in the period c1720-1770.⁷¹ The 4th Earl spent the last 29 years of his life working to arrest that decline, and temporarily succeeded, boosting his income by careful management of his resources and benefitting, like so many of his peers, from the general rise in rents in the late 18th century.⁷²

Precise figures charting this new prosperity are hard to come by, though we do possess a break down of estate income for 1773. It suggests that Harborough had wasted no time in consolidating his resources. His principle landholdings were at Stapleford and Saxby in Leicestershire (c1772 he purchased the Lordship of Wymondham, a township of 250 people on the verge of the Sherard estates⁷³), at Teigh and Whissendine in Rutland, and at Stainby and Gunby in Lincolnshire. The revenues due in rentals on Lady Day 1773 were:⁷⁴

	£	s	d
Rutland estates	2062	10	4
Leicestershire estates	3850	11	11 (figure of 1774)
Lincolnshire estates	881	14	0
Wymondham land	700	0	0
	<u>£7494</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>3</u>

Credit for this upward turn in the family's fortunes is perhaps less due to Lord Harborough than to his principal agent and father of his second wife, William Reeve, who had been his supporter and adviser during the bitter family disputes of the late 1760s. Reeve himself had an impeccable minor gentry background, as the owner of estates at Leadenham in Lincolnshire, and at nearby Melton Mowbray and Stonesby.⁷⁵ Reeve made quite sure that no Sherard land was alienated; the emphasis was placed on additional purchases, like the land at Wymondham, which would add considerably to the total value of the estates. Grazing remained the predominant form of agriculture in the area, with much existing enclosure when the 4th Earl inherited. 390 acres at Stapleford itself were enclosed by an Act of 1772.⁷⁶

Harborough's interests as a squarson extended far beyond rents and enclosures. He had a strong sense of obligation. First, to the local community around Stapleford, where he showed himself a just landlord, relishing the opportunity which had come relatively late in life to be convivial with his tenants and to ply them with strong drink. Throsby called at Stapleford as preparations were in hand for the Earl's 70th birthday:⁷⁷

'The Earl, on this day, is happy in the company of his tenants; who are also happy in return, with his Lordship's October, & c'.

Harborough took a strong but never obtrusive interest in municipal life at Melton Mowbray. In 1775 he had one of the bridges over the River Eye repaired at his own expense,⁷⁸ and in 1793 gave 50 oil lamps to illuminate the town streets.⁷⁹ Lord Harborough was also keen to emphasise the links of the Sherard family with Leicestershire. He accepted office as Vice-President of the Leicester Infirmary, and his principal contribution to the spiritual well-being of local folk was to rebuild the churches at Teigh, Stapleford and Saxby in the 1780s. A few years later the Earl acted as a generous patron of Nichol's History of the County,⁸⁰ and his interests in canal construction are well known.⁸¹ The 4th Earl also established for the first time a link between the Earldom and the town of Market Harborough when in 1785 he purchased the Lordship of that Manor, and in the remaining years of his life, showed himself to be its generous benefactor.⁸²

Robert, Earl of Harborough, may have obtained great satisfaction from the local prominence that his succession to the title conferred, but he was temperamentally ill-suited for public responsibilities on a larger stage as his record of attendance at the House of Lords indicates. It compares unfavourably with almost every other member of the late Georgian British peerage: during his 29 years membership of the House he was in his place on only 24 occasions.⁸³ The explanation (or the excuse) may lie in his lack of a London house, for during the years of steady decline in the mid-century, the Sherard family could not meet the annual expense of transferring their household from Rutland to London. Robert came too late to the world of Westminster to develop much interest in the work of Parliament, though the improved estate yields gave him the option by the late 1770s of leasing a London residence. However, he never appears to have done so.

Robert's succession to the title coincided with the beginning of Lord North's ministry in 1770, to which Harborough gave his consistent if sporadic support until its final collapse in 1782. Like some far more prominent peers, he was reluctant to speak in the House, and

there is no record of the Earl participating in debates. As it was, he was very seldom present. On 13 November 1770 he presented a copy of his pedigree to the Lord Chancellor and took his seat for the first time.⁸⁴ He next returned on 5 February 1771,⁸⁵ then there was an absence of four years! Debates on the American War of Independence did not tempt him to town, and even the set-piece Parliamentary occasions failed to sustain his interest. Harborough attended the trial of the bigamous Duchess of Kingston in 1776, but shied off on the last day.⁸⁶ He made a special effort in February 1778 to be present at a critical stage in the American War,⁸⁷ and during the momentous debates early in 1780.⁸⁸ But after the fall of Lord North, Harborough's attendance dwindled still further, and ceased completely after 1790 as increasing infirmities detained him at Stapleford.⁸⁹ Out of loyalty to the King, he voted against the East India bill of the Fox-North Coalition in December 1783, and attended several sittings during the first precarious weeks of the Younger Pitt's ministry in the winter of 1783-84. It was Harborough's last political effort, and he took no part in the Regency crisis of 1788-89 despite an order passed by the Upper House on 20 November 1788 that all peers attend on 4 December; Harborough did not even trouble to inform the Lord Chancellor of the reasons for his absence.⁹⁰

The limited number of peers to whom Harborough entrusted his proxy vote when he intended to be absent for a parliamentary session reveals the Earl's isolation from party strife in the 1770s and 1780s, and emphasises that he remained a stranger in London society: Harborough had, after all, spent most of his adult life in a cassock rather than a peer's robes. His proxy holders were either relations, as George, Lord Mount Edgcumbe (who married Emma, only daughter of the archbishop of York and Lady Margaret Gilbert⁹¹), minor courtier and one-time Admiral, or a sympathetic neighbour like Lord Howe, First Lord of the Admiralty in Pitt's ministry, who lived at Langar, Notts.⁹² On a single occasion, another member of Pitt's cabinet, the Duke of Rutland,⁹³ received Harborough's proxy on the strength of local acquaintance and the government's weak position.

Ties of blood counted for more with Harborough than political friendships forged at Westminster. Yet domestic life was far from unruffled, and he went through wives almost as rapidly as his brother, the 3rd Earl. In January 1767, Robert Sherard (as he then was) was wedded to Jane, daughter of his friend and adviser, William Reeve of Melton Mowbray. She died at Bath on 9 November 1770, but Harborough only briefly lived as a widower. In 1772 he married Dorothy, daughter of William Roberts of Glaston in Rutland, a family on the fringes of the gentry.⁹⁴ It was, one suspects, a union founded primarily on mutual affection, though Dorothy Roberts did bring the Sherards manorial rights at Thorpe-By-The-Water in Rutland.⁹⁵ Harborough's Countess lived until 1781, a year of great personal tragedy for the Earl, who lost not only his wife, but his unmarried sister Lucy, and his six year old daughter, Sophia-Dorothy, within the space of twelve months; his elder sister, Lady Dorothy Torkington, had died in 1780. The striking feature of all three marriages is surely that Robert Sherard was taking partners from unexceptional minor gentry families rather below what might have been expected from the heir presumptive to an Earldom. Yet it was in such circles that he mixed as a parson, and these familiar associations continued quite naturally after he became an Earl. Harborough was always something of an odd man out among his peers: an Earl forging links outside the exclusive circles (as Professor Cannon has reminded us⁹⁶) of the 18th century Nobility.

Harborough had children by all except his first marriage. His only son, Philip (styled Lord Sherard after 1770) was born at Teigh Rectory in 1767, and educated at Clare Hall, Cambridge, where his cousin, the Rev. John Torkington, was Master.⁹⁷ Philip, an unremarkable young man, married in 1791 Eleanor, daughter and coheir of Colonel the

Hon. John Monckton of Fineshade Abbey, Northants, and they probably lived at Whissendine Manor House during the 4th Earl's lifetime. Philip provided his father with grandchildren (all girls except for Robert, the future 6th and last Earl, born in 1797) at a steady rate until succeeding to the title and estates in 1799, but Harborough was closest to his last child Lucy, born at Southwell on 13 October 1769. He took great pains with her education, and gave a solid foundation to the Christian faith that she passed on to her famous son, Edward Bouverie Pusey. In June 1791 Lucy left Stapleford to go to another famous Leicestershire house, Stanford Hall, as the wife of the young 7th Baronet, Sir Thomas Cave,⁹⁸ recently elected MP for the county. This union, from which so much was hoped, was abruptly ended by the sudden death of Sir Thomas in January 1792, leaving Lucy a widow back home at Stapleford, where she stayed for the next six years. Her presence probably did as much as anything to keep her father alive, and he survived her second and final departure by only eight months. Harborough thoroughly approved her marriage to a sensible, highly intelligent, middle-aged Berkshire landowner, the Hon. Philip Pusey, brother of Lord Radnor,⁹⁹ but the prospect of having to give his favourite child away for the second time left him entirely distraught. When the wedding day came on 20 August 1798, the Earl lay in bed all day and would not come out to conduct Lucy into St. George's, Hanover Square.¹⁰⁰

Harborough was particularly close to his Huntingdonshire relations, the Torkingtons of Great Stukeley, who offered the Earl the kind of clerical and academic company that he relished. Harborough in 1787 presented his nephew, the Rev. John Torkington, Master of Clare Hall, with the Rectory of Teigh and the Vicarage of Stapleford (Torkington obtained a dispensation to hold them in conjunction¹⁰¹), which gave Torkington a sound excuse for spending his vacations in Leicestershire.¹⁰² Clerical society remained Harborough's natural milieu, and he remained more a priest than a peer in habits and outlook. Squarsons could have difficulties reconciling their dual roles. It was palpably so in Harborough's case, and reflected in his clothing. As one commentator acidly noted,¹⁰³ 'He kept a motley mixture of the spiritually Grave, and the temporally Buckish'.

Harborough only gradually relinquished his clerical offices after becoming an Earl. He did not resign his Salisbury Canonry or his Residential house until 10 February 1773,¹⁰⁴ and retained the Prebend of Grimston and Yatminster to his death. His stall in Southwell went in 1778, but his new dignity did not cause him to neglect his associates in the Minster. He gave generously to building schemes and repairs on the fabric,¹⁰⁵ and in 1772 the Chapter gratefully accepted his offer of 'half a Buck and half a Doe in the season' from the Stapleford estates¹⁰⁶ — a peace-offering for his habitual absence in the 1760s! Sustained improvements in estate yields allowed Harborough to resign the benefices at Wistow in 1782 and Teigh in 1787, but he did not abandon his professional concern in the appointment of priests to the five livings in his gift: Teigh, Stapleford, Whissendine, Saxby, and Stainby with Gunby.¹⁰⁷ Not merely his Torkington relatives benefitted from Harborough's patronage. His main clerical aide was the Rev. Robert Lambert (Rector of Saxby, 1763, and Vicar of Tilton, 1770), who officiated at Whissendine, c1771-79, and acted as curate of Teigh until 1788.¹⁰⁸ Lambert seems to crop up everywhere in Harborough's parishes. He was replaced as Rector of Saxby by the Rev. Robert Myddleton, another Clare Hall man, Rector of Rotherhithe, Surrey, and one of Harborough's executors.¹⁰⁹

Failing eyesight and family losses reinforced native shyness outside his own immediate circle to keep him increasingly at home from the later 1780s, and away from that significance in county society to which Harborough's rank entitled him. But this aloofness did not prevent the Earl from nurturing a steady ambition to re-establish the local

importance of the Sherard family in politics. The steady growth in estate yields had made it possible for him to contemplate a potentially expensive contest; the opportunity was afforded in Rutland in 1795 through the death of one of the sitting Members, John Heathcote.¹¹⁰ Harborough had a candidate to hand in the person of his son, Lord Sherard, who was sprung on the electors of Rutland and in time returned at the by-election. Harborough had successfully caught the strong Heathcote interest unprepared. The young head of the family, Sir Gilbert Heathcote of Normanton, was away in Scarborough on his uncle's death, and his position was weak because of the doubts entertained as to the eligibility of a serving High Sheriff to stand for Parliament.¹¹¹ For once, Lords Exeter and Gainsborough were committed to a Stapleford candidate, and Lord Sherard could not be stopped. It proved to be a short-lived triumph. At the General Election of 1796, Lord Sherard (who seems to have been as a poor politician as his father) was replaced as M.P. by Sir William Lowther of Cottesmore. It was a humiliation which pointedly emphasised the relative lack of territorial importance attached to the Harborough title in comparison with the Winchilsea, Exeter and Heathcote families.

If the possession of political weight was the true measure of success for an eighteenth century peer, then the record of the 4th Earl of Harborough was sadly deficient. The interest of his career does not lie in that area. Rather its fascination is to be found in watching a relatively undistinguished clerical dignitary suddenly in middle life acquiring a set of responsibilities that reorientated the pattern of his affairs. The Rev. Robert Sherard responded to the challenge, and he deserves recognition (despite his very shabby conduct when his succession was in doubt) for restoring some of the most extensive estates in East Leicestershire and Rutland to financial good health. It was an impressive achievement, though it turned out to be only a temporary respite from the ineluctable downward turn of Sherard family fortunes. Philip the 5th Earl, died prematurely in 1807, and his successor was a 10 year old boy. In the 19th century, the Sherard family suffered from its usual problem — a lack of male heirs — with the result that the Earldom became extinct in 1859 and the Stapleford estates were put on the market. Yet the influence of the 4th Earl persisted outside the direct line. For Robert Sherard (though he never lived to see it) was the grandfather, through his daughter, Lady Lucy Pusey, of Edward Bouverie Pusey, that great leader of the Catholic revival in the Church of England. Pusey always acknowledged the vital formative influence of his mother on his Christian understanding, an influence that she herself had absorbed from her father and his clerical friends. In 1879 Pusey insisted that he had learnt the doctrine of the Real Presence from Lady Lucy's explanation of the Catechism:¹¹² there was not so great a difference in outlook between the undemonstrative religion of this conservative squarson and his grandson, one of the leading luminaries in the Oxford Movement. For, throughout his life, and despite his Earldom, Robert Sherard retained essentially a parson's view of the world, whatever his duties as a peer and landlord after 1770.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, X(i). 732
2. 24 bishops in the 18th century belonged to the peerage, and eight sons of peers were named to bishoprics in England and Wales in the period 1760-1800. John Cannon, *Aristocratic Century: The Peerage of eighteenth century England* (Cambridge, 1984), pp.61-62; C.J. Abbey, *The English Church of its Bishops, 1700-1800* (2 vols., London, 1887), II, 205-74. See also Tables VII-IX in N. Ravitch, *Sword and Mitre: Government and Episcopate in the Age of Aristocracy* (The Hague/Paris, 1966)
3. *Aristocratic Century*, *supra*
4. See *infra*

5. *There is a basic outline of Sherard family history in Rutland Magazine*, 4 (1909-10), pp.6-8
6. For full details see *History of Parliament: House of Commons, 1660-1690*, ed. B.N. Hanning (3 vols., London, 1983), I, 294-95, 362; II, 431-32
7. H.J. Habakkuk, 'Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham: his house and estate', in *Studies in Social History: a tribute to G.M. Trevelyan*, ed. J.H. Plumb, (London, 1955), pp.141-78
8. W. Speck, *Tory & Whig: The Struggle in the Constituencies, 1701-1715* (London, 1970), pp.26-27, 43, 68
9. *History of Parliament: House of Commons, 1715-1760*, ed. Romney Sedgwick (2 vols., London, 1970), I, 307-8
10. *Infra*
11. *History of Parliament*, ed. Sedgwick, I, 274-75
12. J.C. Sainty, *Lists of the Lieutenants of the Counties of England and Wales, 1660-1974* (London, 1979)
13. Elizabeth Sherard, married Edward, 2nd Viscount Irwin (c1662-88). In 1696 she married the Hon. John Noel, son of Baptist, 3rd Viscount Campden, and she died 1 Mar. 1747, aged about 80. Lucy Sherard married in 1713 as his second wife, the 2nd Duke of Rutland (1676-1721). She died in October 1751, aged 66. *Complete Peerage*, ed. Vicary Gibbs, VII, 72; II, 266-67. Neither of the sisters appear to have resided at Stapleford Hall as their brother's will entitled them
14. The 1st Earl's will is in Leics. R.O., *Braye Ms. 23D57/1734* dated 27 May 1732
15. All trace of the Manor House at Whissendine, situated near the church, has disappeared. See *V.C.H. Rutland*, I, 111, 117, 119; II, 157, 159 and note 66
16. *Infra*
17. *Debrett's Complete Peerage* (London, 1836), p.101
18. Sir Herbert Croft, *Supplement or Second Part of the Abbey of Kilkhampton or Monumental Records for the Year 1980* (London, 1780), p.120
19. John Gilbert (1693-1761), bishop of Llandaff, 1740; bishop of Salisbury 1750; archbishop of York, 1757. *Abbey, The English Church and its Bishops, op.cit.*, II, 47
20. The migration was probably at the suggestion of Robert's elder brother, John (1713-46), a Fellow of Merton and rising barrister
21. J. Foster, *Alumni Oxoniensis* (4 vols., Oxford, 1887-88), IV, 1287
22. H.I. Longden, *Northamptonshire and Rutland Clergy from 1500* (16 vols., Northampton, 1938-52), IV, 147
23. Presentation Papers for Teigh are in Northants R.O., (thereafter N.R.O.) *Peterborough Diocesan Records*, ML 434/1-4
24. Robert Sherard's activities as a builder and architectural patron will be discussed in a forthcoming article
25. His curates were: B. Storer, 1754; John Adcock, 1758-59 (Rector of Eastwell, Kent, and son of the Oakham Grammar School Master); R. Sherwin, 1760 (Rector of Ashwell, Rutland); John Fancourt, 1765; John Lambert, 1771-89. N.R.O., ML 580, *Peterborough Diocesan Records: Episcopal Visitations*
26. **Lambert appears as no more than semi-literate; his parish accounts are liberally scattered with ink.** *Ibid.* For curates in the 18th century Church, see N. Sykes, *Church and State in the 18th century* (London, 1934), pp.206-9; A. Tindal Hart, *The Curate's Lot* (London, 1970), pp.102-3
27. N.R.O., ML 580, *op.cit*
28. Details of the Torkington family are in Hunts. R.O., *Tork. Ms. 15/295*
29. *V.C.H. Hunts.*, II, 250 for the Wistow advowson
30. Hunts. R.O., *Mandates for Induction 236, 1734/35-1777*, dated 14 Nov. 1743
31. Hunts. R.O., *Archdeaconry of Huntingdon* (Parochial HWY 262), see Archdeacon's Visitations, 30 July 1771, and 28 Aug. 1795
32. Lincs. R.O., *Speculum 4, Hunts. Archdeaconry, 1788*
33. He was also curate at Upwood. Hunts. R.O., 2789/1/2, *Wistow Registers from 1715*; Hunts. R.O. *Archdeaconry of Huntingdon, Note Book, 1701-51*, No.305. Rev. Samuel Cooper also undertook some duties at Wistow after 1767
34. Sykes, *Church and State*, p.216 for the prevalence of non-residence
35. Sherard's career at Salisbury is documented in the Chapter Act Books of the Dean and Chapter. I must thank the Cathedral Librarian, Miss Suzanne Eward, FSA, for information on several key points
36. S.H. Cassan, *Lives and Memoirs of the Bishops of Sherborne & Salisbury, from the year 705 to 1824* (3 vols, Salisbury, 1824), III (pt.3), 268-78. Bishop Gilbert's brother, John, was also a canon of Salisbury
37. W.H. Jones, *Fasti Ecclesiae Sarisberiensis*, (Salisbury, 1879), p.245
38. Sykes, *Church and State*, pp.186-87, for the competition for canonries in 18th century England
39. Jones, *op.cit.*, pp.247-48
40. This was no doubt something of a formal title, as major responsibility for services lay with the Precentor and Organist. Salisbury Cathedral, *Chapter Act Books*, No.21 (1741-96)
41. Will proved P.C.C. 26 Nov. 1767, Wilts. R.O. 2126/195. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mr K.H. Rogers, FSA
42. To be separately considered

43. Horace Walpole considered Archbishop Gilbert full of 'ignorance, meanness, and arrogance'. *Memoirs of King George II*, ed. John Brooke (2 vols., Yale, 1985), II, 245
44. *Southwell Chapter Act Book*, Oct. 1727-Aug. 1784, XII, 116
45. N. Summers, *A Prospect of Southwell* (London/Chichester, 1974), p.25; cf. Note Book of Prebendary Kaye, British Library, Add. Ms. 15553B (20)
46. I gratefully acknowledge the active assistance of Mr R.M. Beaumont, Honorary Librarian of Southwell Minster. For 18th century Southwell see G.M. Livett, *Southwell Minster* (Southwell, 1883), pp.38-40; R.M. Beaumont, *The Chapter of Southwell Minster* (Southwell, 1956), pp.26-27
47. *Chapter Act Book*, XII, 117, 118
48. *Ibid.*, XII, 130
49. *Ibid.*, XII, 139
50. A more rigorous attitude to residence may have been occasioned by the death in 1767 of the Rev. Edward Chappell, Canon and Prebendary
51. *Chapter Act Book*, XII, 140
52. As on 20 Oct. 1768, 26 Oct. 1769, 19 Dec. 1771, *Ibid.*, XII, 143, 147, 156
53. 20 April 1769, *Ibid.*, XII, 145
54. Note Book of Prebendary Kaye, British Library, Add. Ms. 15553B (17)
55. *Chapter Act Book*, XII, 186
56. Between 1769 and 1778 Sherard attended Chapter Meetings on the following dates: 20 Apr., 20 July 1769; 18 Jan., 19 July 1770; 22 Oct. 1772; 21 Mar., 21 July 1774; 20 July, 19 Oct. 1775. *Ibid.*, XII, 145, 146, 151, 152, 161, 169, 170, 176
57. Quoted *Complete Peerage*, ed. V. Gibbs, VI, 297
58. Cf. Debrett, *Complete Peerage* (1836 ed.), p.101. The only surviving child of the 3rd Earl proved to be a daughter by his second wife, Frances. He had the distinction of being the only 18th century peer to marry four times! Cannon, *Aristocratic Century*, *op.cit.*, p.83
59. *Infra*
60. *Complete Peerage*, VI, 296-97 ed. V. Gibbs
61. Leics. R.O., *Braye Ms.* 23D57/1733, Sir Thomas Cave to Lord Robert Manners, 27 Oct. 1767
62. *Ibid.*, 23D47/1747, 'Estimate of repairs wanted immediately at Stapleford', and 23D57/1809
63. Thus see *Ibid.*, 23D57/1755, Sir T. Cave to Mr Reeve (Robert Sherard's father-in-law and agent), 17 Aug. 1768
64. For details see *Ibid.*, 23D57/1739, Mr Brigstock to Lord Harborough, 20 July 1768
65. *Ibid.*, 23D57/1744, Deposition of Alban Flour, 14 Oct. 1768
66. *Ibid.*, 23D57/1755, *supra*
67. *Ibid.*, 23D57/1786, **Richard Ball to Sir Thomas Cave, 29 June 1769**
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*, 23D57/1774, Ball to Sir T. Cave, 25 Mar. 1769. 'We sincerely congratulate you upon Lady Harborough's promising situation, and do earnestly wish for the completion of it by a stout & healthy Ld Sherard —'
70. *Ibid.*, 23D57/1786, *supra*
71. For problems of declining returns see G.E. Mingay, 'The Agricultural Depression, 1730-1750', *Econ.H.R.*, 2nd ser., 8 (1956)
72. G.E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the 18th century* (London, 1963), pp.19-20, 52-53
73. John Nichols, *The history and antiquities of the County of Leicester* (4 vols. in 8 pts., 1795-1815), II, i, 403; Leics. R.O., DE669/16, *Valuation of the Lordship of Wymondham*, 1780; DE261/2, *Estate at Wymondham*, 1816
74. Leics. R.O., *Gretton Ms.*, DG444
75. For details of his Stonesby estate in 1774 see Lincs. R.O., *Reeve Ms.* 6/1/44-45, and for settlements between Harborough and Reeve (1795), *Ibid.*, 1/3/3/5 and 6. Reeve's son, William Key, became a Fellow of Clare Hall, thanks to the patronage of the Torkingtons
76. Nichols, *supra*, II, i, 336
77. J. Throsby, *Select Views in Leicestershire* (2 vols., London, 1790-92), I, 152
78. Nichols, *op.cit.*, II, i, 248
79. Oliver Roe, *Melton Mowbray: Recollections and the Past* (Melton Mowbray, 1977), p.6
80. *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. 69, Jan.-June 1799, p.438
81. D. Tew, *The Melton to Oakham Canal* (2nd ed., Wymondham, 1984), pp.7-9, 19-25; C. Hadfield, *The Canals of the East Midlands* (2nd ed., Newton Abbott, 1970), pp.80, 94-95
82. J.C. Davies, *Georgian Harborough* (Market Harborough, 1969), pp.127, 129
83. Lord Harborough attended Parliament on the following dates: 13 Nov. 1770; 5 Feb. 1771; 10 Nov. 1775; 15, 16, 19, 20 Apr. 1776; 2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 16, 19 Feb. 1778; 2, 5 Mar. 1778; 8 Feb. 1780; 6 Mar. 1780; 15,

- 16, 17 Dec. 1783; 18 Mar. 1784 (opening of new Parliament); 16 May 1786; 25 Nov. 1790 (opening of new Parliament). *Lords Journals* (thereafter L.J.). For discussion of attendance at debates see Cannon, *Aristocratic Century*, *op.cit.*, p.101
84. *L.J.*, vol.33, p.4
 85. *Ibid.*, vol.33, p.52
 86. *Ibid.*, vol.34, pp.645, 650, 652, 658. The House was Called Over on 15 Apr. 1776
 87. *Ibid.*, vol.35, pp.286-338
 88. *Ibid.*, vol.36, pp.28, 54
 89. His eyesight (as his few surviving letters reveal) became steadily worse. Inflammation of the eye was reported as early as 1772. Leics. R.O., 4D51(5), *Autograph Letters of the Earl of Harborough, Lady Lucy Sherard, Lady Dorothy Torkington, & others relative to family affairs, 1772-75*. 1 vol., (no date), Philipps Collection, Letters of 20 Oct. 1775, and 12 July 1772
 90. *L.J.*, vol.38, p.266
 91. George, 3rd Baron Mount Edgcumbe (1720-95), cr. Viscount 1781 and Earl 1789; C-in-C., Plymouth, 1765-71; Capt. of the Band of Gentleman Pensioners, 1772-82
 92. Richard, Viscount Howe (1725-99), cr. Earl, 1788; First Lord of the Admiralty, 1783-88
 93. Charles, 4th Duke of Rutland (1754-87), a distant kinsman of Robert Sherard; Lord Steward, 1783; Lord Privy Seal, 1783-84; Ld.Lt. of Ireland, 1784-87
 94. Dorothy's great uncle, the Rev. Edward Roberts (d.1739), was Rector of Thistleton, Rutland. *V.C.H. Rutland*, II, 187
 95. *Ibid.*, II, 218. See also Nichols, *op.cit.*, II, ii, 609
 96. *Aristocratic Century*, *op.cit.*, Ch.3, esp. pp.85, 92
 97. Master of Clare Hall, 1781-1815; Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, 1783-84
 98. For Cave, see *Complete Baronetage*, II, 293
 99. Sir Ernest Clarke, *Philip Pusey (1799-1855)*, (London, 1900), pp.4-5
 100. H.P. Liddon, *The Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey* (4 vols., London, 1893), I, 476
 101. Nichols, *op.cit.*, II, i, 340
 102. Thus see Hunts. R.O., *Tork. Ms.*, 15/285, Lord Harborough to Rev. John Torkington, 3 June 1776
 103. Croft, *Abbey of Kilkhampton*, *op.cit.*, p.120
 104. *Chapter Act Books*, 10 Feb. 1773
 105. Summers, *Prospect of Southwell*, *op.cit.*, p.65
 106. Southwell, *Chapter Act Book*, XII, 161, 22 Oct. 1772
 107. For details of these benefices see Lincs. R.O., *Speculum 7, Diocese Book*; John Bacon, *Liber Regis vel thesaurus rerum Ecclesiasticarum* (London, 1786), pp.406-7, 541; *Patroni Ecclesiarum* (London, 1831)
 108. N.R.O., ML580 (29), *Episcopal Visitations: Bishops' Transcripts of the Parish Registers of Whissendine, 1707-1812*; *supra*, note 25
 109. Nichols., *op.cit.*, II, i, 312
 110. See my forthcoming article in *Rutland Record* on the Rutland by-election of 1795
 111. Lincs. R.O., 3 Anc. 9/4/14, Harborough to Sir G. Heathcote, 8 July 1795
 112. Liddon, *Pusey*, *op.cit.*, I, 6-7