

LONDON ELECTORAL HISTORY – STEPS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

7.13 LORDS & LADIES: TITLES, STATUS AND PRECEDENCE

The LED contains a range of data relating to people's titles, offices, ranks, and degrees. All this information was supplied by the individuals concerned, whether as electors or as rate-payers. These people with status titles were a small minority within the LED as a whole; but, at the same time, they constituted the self-identified 'people of consequence', to use an eighteenth-century phrase to describe the social elite.

In terms of their occupational classification, most are denoted RE for Rentiers.¹ Yet a separate and discrete field, recording all status-designations, is also incorporated, so that those with titles can be analysed separately as well. The number who declared both a status title and an occupation are relatively few within the LED. In those cases, they were allocated into their primary occupational field, though retaining their social classification separately. One example was Rear Admiral Sir Edward Codrington,² who lived in Charles Street, Westminster, and voted in both 1818 and 1819. In terms of occupation, he appears among the professions – naval. In terms of status, he was a knight, which in terms of precedence left him 'below' the titled nobility but elevated him 'above' the ordinary commoner (see 7.13.2). He thus can be analysed under two headings, respecting his mixed occupational and social public labelling.

All such material is invaluable. It throws significant light not upon the individuals concerned but upon the social elite within society more generally. The LED listings did not automatically include all socially prestigious individuals within the metropolis. Many grandees were temporary residents, either attending for the winter season or to sit in parliament or for a short-term visit. Nonetheless, the LED captures the social elite with an electoral qualification and a permanent address in the metropolis.

The following sub-sections accordingly review the range of status information included in (and excluded from) the LED: including the titled

nobility; titled commoners; and professional titles. In addition, a further sub-section explains the order of precedence among Britain's titled families, and the 'correct' way to address them. These were rules established by custom rather than by law. Such conventions may seem abstruse today, although they are still invoked on ceremonial occasions and in court and diplomatic circles. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, by contrast, the rules of precedence were more widely known; and people, especially in polite society, were expected to follow them. Of course, far from all electors in the LED were worried about the details. Some radicals were prepared to challenge the conventions. They refused to doff their hats to social 'superiors' and instead preferred the democratic handshake.³ Other Londoners were not bothered. Upper class men, for example, often found that people did not make way for them in the streets.⁴

Yet questions of title and precedence retained their social significance, especially for ceremonial purposes. Civic leaders were always attentive to their institutional rights and claims, as were the London livery companies, which had their own rankings.⁵ The hierarchic model was a persistent one, imbued with history. It could be understood, if not approved, by all. 'The Law of Precedence, when strictly adhered to, regulates to general satisfaction everyone's proper position in society', remarked that conservative apologist, Sir Bernard Burke, who continued his father's life-work in publishing *Burke's Peerage*.⁶ Thus, despite challenges from some radicals and nonconformists, metropolitan society shared an intensive and often competitive status-consciousness, which historians in turn need to understand.

7.13.1 Titled nobility

People with special status were (as they still are) publicly identified by prestigious social 'handles' attached to their names. In the years 1700-1850, elite men voted on level terms with the ordinary rank-and-file voters, the plain John Smiths and William Browns. Nonetheless, a range of public titles signified that some voters were, socially speaking, 'more equal than others'.

At the apex came the titled aristocracy, the 'lords' of the land. They formed the classic 'nobility'. Their numbers were few, their status high.⁷ In ceremonial and social gatherings, peers of the realm took precedence over all commoners. Moreover, amongst themselves, precedence within each rank of duke, marquess, earl, and so forth, was determined by the antiquity

of the original patent. These hereditary titles, which were either inherited or newly granted by the monarch, could not then be recalled. Life peerages in this period were constitutionally unknown.⁸ If a peer died without offspring, the title went to the nearest qualified legitimate relative. Only in the very rare circumstances of an Act of Attainder for high treason⁹ were the heirs of a titled man disbarred from their inheritance. In fact, the last attainder in the British kingdoms occurred in this period, when Lord Edward Fitzgerald was attainted by the Irish Parliament for his role in the Irish Rebellion of 1798.¹⁰ But the act was later rescinded in 1819, so conciliating his family.

In electoral terms, no peers of the realm were entitled either to vote or to stand in elections for the House of Commons, because the individual title-holders were members of the House of Lords. That constitutional position remained the case whether they attended regularly or not.¹¹ Where individuals holding noble titles appear in the LED, they do so by virtue of their position as rate-payers.

Not all noble titles, however, conferred membership of the House of Lords. So a considerable number of high-ranking men joined the hurly burly of metropolitan elections. For example, if a duke, marquess or earl held more than one title simultaneously, his oldest son would hold the lesser title of the set, as would the oldest son of the oldest son, if the family had enough titles to allot between the generations. This custom saluted the status of the direct heir apparent. But such individuals still remained legally commoners. So in Westminster in 1749 the Earl of Ancram, the oldest son of the Marquess of Lothian, polled using his title as an Earl who was a valid elector on a par with all others.¹² In other words, at this point in the family life-cycle, he was socially more elevated than he was constitutionally.

Incidentally, two apparently high-ranking voters, who appear in the LED, were not actually aristocrats at all. They lived in public houses and were identified by the name of their hostelries. Thus in the London register of 1847 the 'Duke of Gloucester'¹³ and 'Guy Earl of Warwick'¹⁴ were not aberrant peers, breaking the constitutional rules, but publicans voting as property-owners.

Many other aristocratic titles were indicative of high social status but were potentially confusing, since they did not automatically confer special constitutional rights. The designation of a 'lord' was a case in point. A man with that title certainly might well be a peer of the realm.¹⁵ But he might hold one of the Scottish¹⁶ or Irish titles¹⁷ that did not confer a seat in the

House of Lords.

Or he might simply be given the courtesy designation as the son of a peer.¹⁸ All the offspring of titled peers were socially honoured in this way, while remaining legally commoners – unless they held a separate title in their own right. Lord North was one example. Throughout his hapless tenure as ‘prime minister’ from 1770 to 1782, he sat in the House of Commons, since his father the Earl of Guilford was still living.¹⁹ While socially an aristocrat, North was legally a commoner. Indeed, as a Westminster elector, he polled in 1784 for Charles James Fox, his old antagonist who had recently become North’s political ally in the notorious Fox-North coalition.²⁰

By such diverse usages, the status divisions between the peerage, their extended families, and the commoners were considerably blurred and softened. The position of the Irish peers before 1802 (when the Act of Union came into force) was particularly anomalous, since those who were not ‘representative’ peers in the Lords were eligible, if they met the relevant franchisal requirements to vote and indeed to stand for the House of Commons. Thus Hervey Morres, who contested Westminster in 1774, was Lord Mountmorres in the Irish peerage. Another case was that of Sir Samuel Hood, MP for Westminster 1784-8, and 1790-6. He was an Irish peer, who was seeking advancement. Anxious to appease him, yet unwilling to risk a by-election in such a precarious constituency, the government granted an English peerage to Hood’s wife in her own right.²¹ It was a rare decision, though not completely unprecedented.

Other than in such exceptional cases, however, the inheritance system remained strongly patrilineal. A peer was succeeded automatically by his oldest son or, failing a son, by the next closest male blood relation, although some Scottish titles could pass to women in the absence of male heirs. Only very few females held titles in their own right. And, throughout this period, a strong convention dictated that they were not summoned to take a seat in the House of Lords.²²

Virtually all titled electors identified themselves in terms of status rather than occupation. In fact, there were no legal barriers to prevent these personages from running a business or, more commonly, pursuing a professional career. Status and occupation were thus, in certain circumstances, complementary rather than alternative markers of social position.²³ However, in the LED sources, most titled men stuck to their social labels.

In particular, it is worth noting that those who were active in politics at this time would not have identified themselves as ‘politicians’. Some

ministers did take paid office under the crown, which put them into a different category (the so-called 'payroll vote'). But elected MPs and councillors in this period were entirely unpaid.²⁴ They viewed their elective office as a civic duty to represent the 'people' or, in less elevated terms, as suitable way of life for those with an interest and inclination for public affairs. In that way, the world of politics drew its recruits from the world of status, as well as from the world of work.

7.13.2 Titled commoners

Below the highest ranks of aristocratic society, there was a further range of valued titles, both formal and informal, that were held by elite men who were not noble but were legally commoners. They were thus not debarred by rank from voting or standing in elections for the House of Commons. In descending order of status, these non-noble social leaders included baronets, knights, esquires, and the fluidly defined gentlemen.

Legally bestowed non-noble titles had the advantage of clarity. The rank of a knight or baronet was conferred by the monarch, enabling the recipient to be known as 'Sir'. A baronetcy, being hereditary, outranked a knighthood. James I had devised this significant augmentation in status, when he began in 1611 to sell baronetcies to fund his Ulster campaigns.²⁵ But later monarchs and their ministers, who advised on such social appointments, were well aware that the titles of both knights and baronets would become devalued if they became too widespread. As a result, a very notable caution prevailed throughout the eighteenth century. In 1800, there were only 859 knights and baronets throughout Britain, whereas in 1700 there had been 1,150 in aggregate. New appointments had not kept pace with the attrition from death and family extinction. Interestingly, such totals may be compared with the 396 titled peers in 1700, whose numbers had risen to 504 in 1800.²⁶ Thus, while the noble and non-noble elite remained highly exclusive among a growing national population, those in the 'foothills' of the titled world were actually declining outright.

Ranking below these officially conferred titles came an unnumbered group of men who enjoyed the nebulous status of 'Esquire'. This social label was rightly described by the eighteenth-century jurist William Blackstone as one 'of worship' rather than of law.²⁷ It depended upon custom and practice. A man signalled his claim to the honorific title by adding Esquire, or Esq., after his name. It was usually taken to indicate

that he had the right to bear a coat of arms, whether inherited within the family or gained by a fresh application to the Heralds' College (College of Arms).²⁸ Because it was a historic accolade, the status of Esquire remained prestigious.²⁹ By this period, however, it was not so socially desirable that huge numbers ever applied to the Heralds. And eventually the title dwindled into a formalised term of respect without any clear qualifications for its adoption.

Much more attractive was the amorphous but distinguished accolade of being a 'gentleman'. Traditionally, 'gentle' status was interpreted with many sub-divisions. For those who cared about super-fine distinctions in the early eighteenth century, a 1719 tract explained that there were four 'excellent' (royal) degrees within society and six 'noble' ones. It included among the latter category, the 'gentlemen', who were themselves sub-divided into nine descending categories, starting with the 'Gentleman of Ancestry'.³⁰ But such minutiae of distinctions were hard to sustain. Gentlemanly status became more generic, while its qualities were rising in public esteem. It had persistent if loosely defined connotations of chivalric 'honour'. So when the unlovely Prince Regent, later George IV, sought to puff his status, he prided himself on being not the 'first Prince' but the 'first *Gentleman* of Europe'.

Particularly important in the attraction of this social position was that it did not depend upon royal conferment but was instead a matter of individual status. 'A king may make a nobleman', ran the often-repeated mantra: 'but he cannot make a gentleman'.³¹ The unofficial title of 'gentleman' marked a recognition of social importance, based upon individual self-presentation and public acceptance of that claim. It was all the more esteemed for that reason.

Indeed, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a literary chorus of praise for the innate goodness of 'nature's gentleman'. 'Riches and rank have no necessary connexion with genuine gentlemanly qualities. The poor man may be a true gentleman – in spirit and in daily life', as Samuel Smiles decreed in *Self-Help* (1859).³² This view had a long pre-history. 'The appellation of gentleman is never to be affix'd to a man's circumstances, but to his behaviour in them', declared Richard Steele in 1710.³³ It was moral worth that was proclaimed as 'true' nobility. However, that was a presumption more commonly held outside than within the aristocracy.

In practice, it took some social status and wealth to claim successfully the unofficial title of 'gentleman'.³⁴ The criteria emphatically did

not depend upon the ownership of country estate, as some scholars mistakenly assume. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a majority of those labelled 'gentleman' in poll books and other comparable listings were 'town gentry': successful businessmen; professional men; urban officials; men living off private incomes; and indeed all others who 'live idly and without manual labour', as a celebrated tract had explained in 1583.³⁵ 'Elegant' service occupations like dancing-masters had some reason to claim the status, to reassure their clientele. Yet apparently unromantic figures did the same. Samuel Collins of Tothill Fields polled as a rubbish-carter in the Westminster election of 1784, and as a 'scavenger' in 1788 and 1796. Yet by 1802 he had become 'Samuel Collins, gentleman'.³⁶ The point was that the unofficial title could be claimed by anyone sufficiently bold and socially plausible.

Given that the gentlemanly title was attributed by custom and practice, rather than by law, there was also a variety of terminology in use. A gentleman might simply appear as Mr John Halifax (using the abbreviated form of Mister, anciently Master). That prefix indicated a man who ranked above an ordinary commoner, who would appear in standard form as plain John Halifax. Or, to make absolutely sure that there was no mistake, a man of gentlemanly status might present himself specifically as *John Halifax, Gentleman*. Dinah Craik's 1856 novel of that name recounted the aspirational tale of a poor boy who gained social respect (and economic advancement) through his hard work and chivalrous behaviour. Only at the end did she mute the social lesson by revealing that Halifax's own impoverished father had also been 'a gentleman' by status.³⁷

Over time, it is worth recalling that families fell as well as rose. Hence there were people who could be identified as 'distressed gentles', who struggled in respectable poverty, while trying to live up to their claims for social status.³⁸ Jane Austen's Miss Bates in *Emma* was a fictional example: 'She is poor; she has shrunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more'.³⁹ Such individuals might be described, with a nuance of disparagement or sarcasm, as 'shabby-genteel'. In real life, a number of gentles did indeed fall back into the embrace of the masses. Hence downwards social mobility continually worked to winnow the elite, counterbalancing the upwards social mobility that renewed it.

7.13.3 Professional titles

Numerous occupational labels carried connotations of status too. A barrister ranked within the 'senior branch' of the legal profession and could condescend to an attorney. Physicians similarly claimed seniority of status over surgeons and apothecaries, just as the qualified apothecary in the eighteenth century would claim to outrank a mere druggist.

Within the Church of England, there were (and, of course still are) traditional hierarchies of status among those classed economically as having clerical occupations. At the helm were the two Archbishops, Canterbury and York, the former outranking the latter (both styled *Most Reverend*), followed by the bench of Bishops (*Right Reverends*). All of these were ineligible to vote in parliamentary elections, being *ex officio* members of the House of Lords.

Within the Cathedral precincts, the Dean (*Very Reverend*) or, in the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Provost, remained the senior resident cleric.⁴⁰ Meanwhile the Archdeacon (*Venerable*) ran the temporal business of the diocese, with delegated power from the bishop. Both ranked above the Cathedral canons.⁴¹ And they in turn had more status than the rank-and-file parish clergy,⁴² who had more status than their curates, the clerical deputies or assistants to an incumbent clergyman.⁴³ All these 'men of the cloth' below the dignity of Bishop were commoners and entitled to vote, although by virtue of their clerical status (formerly attending Convocation) they were ineligible to stand for election to parliament.⁴⁴ Whatever their clerical rank, they were habitually accorded the status of 'Mr', as an abbreviation of 'Magister'.

Most explicitly of all, the armed services maintained distinctions of rank that embodied an unbroken chain of military command. Admirals in the Royal Navy were indisputably rulers of the fleet. And, below them, ranked in due order the commodores, captains, commanders, lieutenants, ensigns, petty officers, and leading rates, all the way down to the 'common' seamen or Jack Tars who climbed the rigging in storms and sunshine.

Similarly, the army paid respect to the high status of a Marshal (denoted as Field Marshal in wartime, like the 1st Duke of Wellington)⁴⁵ followed in due order by the other commissioned officers: generals,⁴⁶ brigadiers, colonels, lieutenant-colonels, majors, captains, lieutenants; and then by the non-commissioned officers,⁴⁷ the sergeants,⁴⁸ and corporals, who between them commanded the private soldiers.

For the purposes of the LED, all these status-denoting occupations have been classified with the other occupations. In that way, the range of economic roles undertaken can be established. And anyone wishing to review (say) the voting practices of the different ranks in the army or navy can identify the relatively few voters within the military sector and group them by rank.

7.13.4 Precedence and modes of address (men)

Numerous handbooks offered advice on the intricate rules of precedence and the ‘correct’ ways of addressing titled persons.⁴⁹ The genre was designed to reassure the socially nervous, reporting on ancient conventions that were always being subtly updated. An example from 1835 accordingly promised guidance to *The most modern and authentic tables of rank and precedence in the state, navy, army, and learned professions, and of all classes, male and female*⁵⁰ – note the adjective ‘modern’, alongside ‘authentic’.

Over time, the system had indeed become complex, requiring judicious expertise to avoid accidentally giving offence. A court equerry or a society hostess organising a formal dinner party would need to know the answers to the following questions: did the wife of an earl’s younger son take precedence over the wife of a baron’s oldest son? (Yes) Did the younger son of a duke of the blood royal rank above an earl? (No, but his older brother did) Did the younger son of a baron outrank a baronet? (Yes - just) Did the unmarried senior daughter of a peer take precedence over the wife of her oldest brother? (No.)⁵¹ And so forth.

The areas of potential uncertainty were multiplied by questions of descent over time. For how many generations did the inheritance of noble blood confer status upon the cadet (junior) lines? Even that great admirer of titled society, Sir Bernard Burke of *Burke’s peerage* conceded that: ‘It is very difficult to determine’.⁵² Nonetheless, for the first generation, the conventions were clear enough. The junior offspring of noble families indicated their connection to the titled world by the prefix ‘Honourable’, abbreviated as ‘Hon’, before their full names. That honorific was also allowed by convention to the younger sons of viscounts and barons. By contrast, the prefix ‘Right Honourable’ (abbreviated as Rt. Hon.) was accorded to Privy Councillors, whether the individual concerned had noble blood or not. That accolade was personal and awarded for life (other than in exceptional circumstances), whereas the social ‘Honourables’ tended to

lose the appellation over successive generations.

At the apex of the aristocratic apex, came the monarch, followed by the princes and princesses of the blood royal. Any illegitimate offspring had lower status, unless granted titles in their own right. Then came, in rank-order, dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons: as shown in Table 95. Ranked after them were the titled commoners and then commoners with courtesy titles.

Table 95
Men's titles and styles of address, in order of precedence

Style of address: X = first name; Y = family surname; Z = specified title

<i>Titled nobles*</i>	
King	His Majesty, King of Z
Prince	His Royal Highness, Prince of Z
Duke	His Grace, the Duke of Z
Marquess	Lord X Y, Marquess of Z
Earl	Lord X Y, Earl of Z
Viscount	Lord X Y, Viscount Z
Baron	Lord X Y, Baron Z
Noble sons	Lord Y (son and heir) or other family title Lord X (younger sons)
<i>Titled commoners</i>	
Baronet	Sir X Y, Bart; or Bt.,
Knight	Sir X Y
<i>Courtesy titles / commoners</i>	
Esquire	X Y, Esquire or Esq; or simply X Y, Esq.
Gentleman	Mr X Y, gentleman (gent); or simply X Y, gentleman
Mister, abbrev. Mr **	Mr X Y
<i>All other commoners</i>	No prefix X Y or Y if in superior Service; X if in menial service

Notes:

* Most title holders were men but a few women had titles in their own right, either by grant or by inheritance (usually Scottish titles).

** Among others, men with the University degree of MA; plus ordained clergymen used the prefix Mr, unless having a grander title.

Sources: Compiled from information in contemporary manuals of precedence and in W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the laws of England* (8th edn, 1778), i, p. 405.

These titles were applied to a tiny sector of the population, which was not growing proportionately as fast as the growth of the total. In the meantime, the mass of commoners in this period had no ‘handles’ to their names, being plain ‘John Bulls’.

It was a mark of respect, however, at all levels of society to address people by their surname. Readers of *Pride and prejudice* never encounter anyone using the first name of the insufferable Mr Collins (he wrote to the family as William Collins). However, first names were used, if at all, in intimate family circles. They were also applied by ‘superiors’ to their menial servants. If a gentleman’s gentleman might remain austere ‘Jeeves’, a coachman would be ‘John’ or ‘James’.

The hierarchic system made sense in its way, although at middling levels in society it was much harder to ascertain who outranked whom. Thus the deep bows and curtsies and hat-doffing of yore were gradually becoming attenuated over time, just as were accurate references to titles and the strictest protocols of precedence.

7.13.5 Precedence and modes of address (women)

A number of women appear in the LED, chiefly as rate-payers. They also had a range of titles and nomenclature. For example, some women in the rate-books were described as ‘Madam’ or ‘Madame’. A few of these may have been French. But others were simply using the polite form of address to a respectable woman. A servant would address her mistress as ‘Madam’ or ‘Ma’am’. The Queen today is still addressed as ‘Ma’am’, unless her formal status as ‘Majesty’ is invoked for ceremonial purposes.

Such general salutations, however, did not necessarily indicate a precise awareness of status. ‘Ma’am’ or ‘missus’ were applied generically, just as the appellation ‘Sir’ might be addressed to any respectable gentleman, whether knighted or not.

In terms of precise hierarchy, all women were in theory ‘placed’ by their relationship to men. A married woman took rank and title from her husband, except in the rare cases where the woman held a higher title in her own right. Queen Victoria accordingly out-ranked her husband and cousin Albert, who was Prince Consort but not king.

Strict etiquette further stipulated that a married woman should be recognised in public by not only the surname but also the forename of the husband. Thus Ursula, the wife of John Halifax, would be addressed in polite society as Mrs John Halifax, only becoming Mrs Ursula Halifax

upon widowhood. But such technicalities were never widespread among all ranks of society; and, by this period, formal usages were generally reserved for formal occasions. So female styling in directories and rate-books was variegated. A certain number of married women were listed by surname only ('Mrs Halifax'), while others had the honorific prefix and both names ('Mrs Ursula Halifax') or they signalled their widowhood directly ('Widow Halifax'). The usage was insufficiently systematic to be certain that women's marital status was always indicated precisely; but the prefix continued to signal status.

Widows certainly kept the status and title(s) of their former husbands. The relicts of peers were given the courtesy title of 'Dowager', as in Dowager-duchess. It was a special usage that acknowledged their earlier elevation. Indeed, social nomenclature was generally respectful of high titles. A widowed noblewoman, who remarried an untitled commoner, legally became a commoner upon her second marriage – again, unless she had an independent title in her own right. Yet she was allowed 'by courtesy and modern usage' (as noted in the 1835 handbook to precedence) to keep her titular style as 'Lady'.⁵³ On the other hand, she could, if she wished, waive that option. Anthony Trollope portrayed such a situation in his novel, *The way we live now* (1875): 'Lady Carbury [a baronet's widow] became the wife of Mr Broune [an editor], and, in furtherance of her own resolve [to commit herself to the second marriage], *took her husband's name*'.⁵⁴ Since Lady Carbury was depicted as a snob, her transformation into Mrs Broune was all the more notable. She had scope for some choice, within the framework of conventions, and had exercised it.

Single women, meanwhile, took their rank from their father, although if they moved away from the parental household they might, over time, fly under their own flag. Unmarried women generally signified their status with the prefix 'Miss', unless they were from a titled family or held a title in their own right. But an old tradition, slowly disappearing in this period, did allow the respectful nomenclature of 'Mrs' or 'Mistress' (from which 'Miss' was historically derived) to add dignity to spinsters of special venerability or note in the public eye. For example, the nephew of Elizabeth Carter, the unmarried savant and poet, published an account of her life as *Memoirs of Mrs Elizabeth Carter*.⁵⁵ In general, however, spinsters, even among the social elite, tended to be of lowly status, especially if they were poor, untitled, elderly, and living away from the parental home.⁵⁶ An example was another eighteenth-century

blue-stocking, Elizabeth Elstob, who had a tough time making a living on her own account, despite her superior abilities. She ended her life as a governess in a ducal household, close to but excluded from the cultivated world of polite society.⁵⁷

When there were many unmarried daughters living together, they would be further distinguished from one another by age. Thus sticklers for punctilio would address the oldest as (say) Miss Bennet, while the younger sisters would be ‘Miss Elizabeth Bennet’, ‘Miss Mary Bennet’, ‘Miss Lydia Bennet’, and so forth. But a younger sister, marrying before an older sister, immediately took precedence over her single siblings. Jane Austen’s *Pride and prejudice* (1813) depicted such a scene. When the new Mrs Wickham is received at a family dinner to recognise her unconventional wedding, Lydia ‘with anxious parade’ takes precedence after her parents. And she explains to her unmarried oldest sister, Miss Bennet: ‘Ah! Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman’.⁵⁸

Very few women held the highest-ranking titles in their own right. Hence decisions about female precedence generally involved reference to the status of the relevant husbands and fathers. After the princesses of the blood royal, came the senior title of a duchess, who was addressed as ‘Your Grace’. The Duchess of Devonshire who canvassed so vigorously for Charles James Fox in Westminster in 1784 created a sensation not only through her Whig partisanship but also through her social rarity. Georgiana Cavendish, *née* Spencer, was an aristocrat among aristocrats.⁵⁹ Her father was an earl and descendant of the 1st Duke of Marlborough; she married a duke; and her children included the next duke and two daughters who married earls. The arrival of such a woman to canvass in the Westminster workshops was a tribute to the power of the electorate. But she was both ridiculed and criticised for her daring informality, which indicated the strength of feeling vested in preserving normal social distances.

After the women at the very top of the hierarchy came the high-ranking but elastic status of the ‘Lady’. This nomenclature was spelt both with a capital L and in lower-case: the ‘lady’ being of lower rank than the ‘Lady’. The distinction was generated by the man’s title, whether royally conferred or awarded by courtesy: see Table 96.

Table 96
Women's titles and styles of address, in order of precedence

Style of address: X = first name; Y = family surname; Z = specified title

Titled nobles

Queen	Her Majesty, Queen of Z
Princess	Her Royal Highness, Princess of Z
Duchess	Her Grace, Duchess of Z
Marquess	Lady X Y, Marchioness of Z
Countess	Lady X Y, Countess of Z
Viscountess	Lady X Y, Viscountess Z
Baroness	Lady X Y, Baroness Z
Noble widow	Dowager + rank of deceased husband, such as Dowager Duchess*
Noble daughter	Daughter of King = Princess X Daughter of Duke/Marquess/Earl = Lady X Daughter of Viscount/Baron = the Honourable Miss X Y (abbrev. the Hon.)

Titled commoners

Baronet's wife	Lady Y
Knight's wife	Lady Y
Baronet/knight's widow	Lady Y*

Courtesy titles/commoners

Esquire's wife	Mrs Husband's first name Y, lady
Gentleman's wife	Mrs X Y, lady
Mistress, abbrev. Mrs	Mrs Y or sometimes Mrs X Y
Miss	Miss Y for oldest of unmarried sisters Miss X Y for all younger unmarried sisters

All other commoners

No prefix	X Y or Y if in superior service; X if in menial service
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Note:

* A titled widow, whose second husband was of a lower status than the first, was permitted to retain her higher rank as a courtesy title, unless she decided to shed the appellation upon her remarriage.

Sources: Compiled from information in contemporary manuals of precedence and in W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the laws of England* (8th edn, 1778), i, p. 405.

Hence, among the nobility, the wife of a marquess, earl, viscount or baron was styled as Lady Y, accompanied by her noble ranking as Marchioness, Countess, Viscountess or Baroness of Z. And the wives of titled knights and baronets were also Ladies. To take one example cited above, the wife of Admiral Sir Samuel Hood, MP for Westminster was correctly known as Lady Hood. She was an apothecary's daughter, who had accordingly 'risen' in the world by her marriage. Later she outranked her husband, when she was awarded the noble title of Baroness in her own right; before he too was elevated as a Viscount.⁶⁰ Thereafter, she would still be correctly styled 'Lady Susannah Hood' but with the suffix 'Viscountess', since that outranked her personal peerage as 'Baroness'.

So coveted was the accolade of 'lady', however, that it had long escaped the confines of titled society. The wife of an esquire or gentleman was also described as 'lady', although not addressed as 'my Lady'. Thus the spouse of the fictional John Halifax, gentleman, if she had been listed in an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century directory, would appear as 'Ursula Halifax, lady'. She would not have rank as high as a Lady Ursula Halifax. Such a person might be the wife of anything from a Marquess to a knight (see Table 96). But the fact that Ursula Halifax, the gentleman's wife, and Lady Halifax, wife of a peer, were both 'ladies' enhanced label's charm. Indeed, any 'common' woman might be flattered by being informally addressed as 'm'lady'.

Below the ranks of titled society, the majority of women in this period were simply known by their unadorned names: 'Jane Bull'. As in the case of men, a woman in menial service would be addressed simply by her first name: 'Jane'. But if holding a superior post, such as housekeeper to a gentleman, she might be known by her surname. As ever, Jane Austen provides an apposite example. In *Pride and prejudice*, the voluble Mrs Bennet waxes confidential with her housekeeper who is named as Mrs Hill but addressed as Hill: 'Oh! here comes Hill. My dear Hill, have you heard the news? Miss Lydia is going to be married and you shall all have a bowl of punch, to make merry at her wedding.'⁶¹ Even within the intimacies of the household, the formalities of correct naming were observed, allowing people to 'know their place'.

7.13.6 Social nuances - summary

Such nuances kept everyone on their toes, trying to assess and give proper expression to their relative social rankings. A few radical

individuals, often from the egalitarian Quaker tradition, boldly insisted that the world of titles and status-anxiety should be entirely ignored or discarded.⁶² Yet the system provided a conventional hierarchic framework, which was known in its broad outline to all.

The system, moreover, contained some flexibility, which permitted adaptations in changing times. With no legal requirement to produce identity cards,⁶³ British men and women ultimately named themselves as they thought fit and as the world would accept them. The conventions were applied most strictly to those possessing ranking titles, conferred by the monarchy. For the rest, custom, practice, and a not-so-covert flexibility reigned. So it was fitting that the Knight of Malta known as ‘Chevalier’ Sir James Lawrence, who published a tract in 1824 to argue that all British gentlemen were really noble, proved to have invented his own knightly affiliation.⁶⁴ It took an adventurer to praise the value of status designations, while simultaneously revealing their social artifice by his own career. Titles thus proved matters for reverence and for anxious emulation; but also for critique⁶⁵ and for pure invention.

Notes

- ¹ See section 7.11.4 and Table 92.
- ² Sir Charles Codrington (1770-1851), a career naval officer from a Gloucestershire landed family, who became Vice-Admiral in 1825 and full Admiral in 1837.
- ³ P.J. Corfield, ‘Dress for deference and dissent: hats and the decline of hat honour’, *Costume: Journal of the Costume Society*, 23 (1989), pp. 64-79; also available via P.J. Corfield website: *on-line*.
- ⁴ T. Burke, *The streets of London* (1940), pp. 62, 94-5.
- ⁵ At the head were the great Twelve companies, which retained their status at the head of the rankings, even while their relative importance in terms of size was falling: see section 7.4.
- ⁶ B. Burke (1814-92), *The book of precedence* (1881), p. [i].
- ⁷ For details, see esp. J. Cannon, *Aristocratic century: the peerage of eighteenth-century England* (1984); M.W. McCahill, *Order and equipoise: the peerage and the House of Lords, 1783-1806* (1978); idem, *The new peerage: recruitment to the*

House of Lords, 1704-1847 (2003); and A.S. Turberville, *Aristocracy and revolution: the British peerage, 1789-1832* (1942).

- ⁸ In 1876, the Appellate Jurisdiction Act established that a certain number of Law Lords could hold life peerages – an expedient which was introduced to enhance the House of Lords’ role as court of appeal. Other than those, life peerages were not introduced until 1958: Life Peerage Act, 6 & 7 Elizabeth II, c. 21 (1958). The status of a life peer equates to that of a baron – the lowest-ranking noble title.
- ⁹ Attainder, much used in the fifteenth century, was revived in the early seventeenth century; comparatively rarely used after 1689; and finally abolished in 1870 by the Forfeiture Act: 33 & 34 Victoria. c. 23 (1870).
- ¹⁰ For Edward Fitzgerald (1763-98), fifth son of the 1st Duke of Leinster, see S.V. Tillyard, *Citizen lord: Edward Fitzgerald, 1763-98* (1997), p. 297.
- ¹¹ Generally levels of attendance were low; but votes were augmented by proxies, which allowed an absent peer to nominate an attending peer to vote on his behalf: see A.S. Turberville, *The House of Lords in the age of reform, 1784-1837, with an epilogue on aristocracy and the advent of democracy, 1837-67* (1958), pp. 33-7.
- ¹² In the later twentieth century, the Conservative front-bench politician Michael Kerr (b. 1945) sat as MP for a variety of constituencies, while holding the title of Earl of Ancram as son and heir of the 12th Marquess of Lothian. Upon his father’s death, Michael Ancram became the 13th Marquess but remained in the lower House without having to renounce the peerage (as formerly required under the 1963 Peerage Act) following revised rules under the 1999 House of Lords Act.
- ¹³ Prince William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh (1776-1834), the great-grandson of George II, had no issue and the title was not revived until the twentieth century.
- ¹⁴ Guy Earl of Warwick was a chivalric hero of popular legend, and thence used as the name of a public house. In the period 1700-1850, the earldom in its fourth creation was held by the Greville family and the name Guy was incorporated from time to time among the given names of the heir.
- ¹⁵ Marquesses, earls, viscounts and barons were officially styled as Lord Y [family surname], followed by their full title. The ennobled poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson (1809-92), is one example. But in general parlance, the style was more casual: as in Lord Tennyson.
- ¹⁶ The 1707 Act of Union allowed only 16 representative Scottish peers to sit in the

British House of Commons, leaving many others without that constitutional status: see Cannon, *Aristocratic century*, pp. 27-8; and M.W. Cahill, 'The Scottish peerage and the House of Lords in the late eighteenth Century', *Scottish Historical Review*, 51 (1972), pp. 172-96.

- ¹⁷ Irish peers with representative status sat (before 1800) in the Irish House of Lords; and (from 1800-1920) in the United Kingdom House of Lords: see Cannon, *Aristocratic century*, p. 28; F.G. James, *Lords of the ascendancy: the Irish House of Lords and its members, 1600-1800* (Washington DC., 1995); and A.P.W. Malcolmson, 'The Irish peerage and the Union, 1700-1971', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 ser. 10 (2000), pp. 289-37.
- ¹⁸ The oldest son of a duke, marquess or earl, was given the courtesy title Lord + family surname (if he did not hold any other family title), while the younger sons and daughters of peers were known by courtesy as Lords and Ladies + first name.
- ¹⁹ Lord North became 2nd Earl of Guilford only in 1790, two years before his own death: see P.D.G. Thomas, *Lord North* (1976), pp. 151-2.
- ²⁰ See Corfield, Green and Harvey, 'Westminster man', p. 171; and, for context, J. Cannon, *The Fox-North coalition: crisis of the constitution, 1782-4* (Cambridge, 1969).
- ²¹ See section 6.2; and below n. 59.
- ²² The situation was not changed until 1963, when the Peerage Act specifically allowed women peers in their own right to attend.
- ²³ For 'gentlemen' in the late eighteenth-century directories, who were also listed as having occupations, see Corfield, 'Business leaders', p. 48.
- ²⁴ In Britain, state payment for MPs was introduced in 1911; and, in local government, special allowances for councillors were adopted in 2000, although claims for expenses had been allowed since the 1970s.
- ²⁵ See K.S. Van Eerde, 'The Jacobean baronets: an issue between king and parliament', *Journal of Modern History*, 33 (1961), pp. 137-47.
- ²⁶ All figures from Cannon, *Aristocratic century*, p. 32.
- ²⁷ Blackstone, *Commentaries* (1778 edn), i, p. 404.
- ²⁸ For the College of Arms, founded in 1484 to regulate heraldry in England and Wales, see A.R. Wagner, *Heralds of England: a history of the office and College of Arms*

(1967). The comparable official for Scotland was Lord Lyon King of Arms; and for Ireland the Norroy and Ulster King of Arms.

- ²⁹ P.R. Coss, *The origins of the English gentry* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 217-38.
- ³⁰ Anon., *Of the several degrees of gentry, and their precedency* (1719), pp. iii-v.
- ³¹ Traditional saying, quoted in Corfield, 'The rivals', p. 6.
- ³² S. Smiles, *Self-help: with illustrations of character and conduct* (1859), p. 328.
- ³³ R. Steele in 'I. Bickerstaff' (ed.), *Tatler*, no. 207 (5 Aug. 1710).
- ³⁴ Corfield, 'The rivals', pp. 8-12, 18-21, 23.
- ³⁵ Sir Thomas Smith, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 5.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11, quoting case-history from WHD. See also section 12.1.2 and within that n. 32.
- ³⁷ Dinah Craik, *John Halifax, gentleman* (1856). The novel was, reportedly, loosely based upon the life of a Cheltenham wine merchant, named John Dobell.
- ³⁸ The Distressed Gentlefolks' Aid Association, now known as Elizabeth Finn Care, was founded in 1897 by Elizabeth Finn (1825-1921).
- ³⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816 ; in 1969 edn), p. 368.
- ⁴⁰ Westminster Abbey, a collegiate church having the status of a 'Royal Peculiar', has its own Dean, without the presence of either an archbishop or bishop.
- ⁴¹ Canons included the precentor (who led or directed the cathedral singing) and the prebendaries, who had clerical *prebends* or stipends and special stalls (including some lay prebendaries who were not in holy orders).
- ⁴² Parish clergymen, often collectively described as 'parsons', included rectors (with incomes derived from parish tithes), vicars (with stipends from lay impropiators who received parish tithes) and perpetual curates (in churches within a large ancient parish, with stipends from lay tith-impropiators and licensed by a bishop.) In fiction, the archetypal perpetual curate, impoverished and lurking at the base of the clerical hierarchy, is the learned, bedraggled figure of Josiah Crawley, in Anthony Trollope's *Last chronicle of Barsest* (1866/7). For practising clergymen in these years, see the *Clergy of the Church of England database, 1540-1835 (CCEd): on-line*,

incorporating clerical data from 50 archives in England and Wales

- ⁴³ The clerical deputy or assistant to an incumbent parish clergyman.
- ⁴⁴ See section 1.9.1.
- ⁴⁵ The Duke of Wellington's twelve Field Marshal batons are on display in Apsley House, Hyde Park Corner, London.
- ⁴⁶ Generals have their own rankings, generals being senior to lieutenant-generals, who are senior to major-generals.
- ⁴⁷ While the commissioned officers are volunteers with a royal commission that specifies their rank and duties, the NCOs are enlisted men who have been appointed to positions in the army's 'junior management' and who have effective charge of the rank-and-file.
- ⁴⁸ The senior of the non-commissioned officers is known as sergeant-major.
- ⁴⁹ One key source was the Table of Precedence itemised by William Blackstone at the end of his chapter 'Of the civil state', in his *Commentaries on the laws of England* (8th edn, 1778), i, p. 405. For the rules of precedence in the mid-twentieth century, see also G.D. Squibb, *Precedence in England and Wales* (Oxford, 1981).
- ⁵⁰ Anon., *The court and country companion: containing the most modern and authentic tables of rank and precedence in the state, navy, army, and learned professions, and of all classes, male and female ...* (1835).
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-7, 21-3.
- ⁵² Burke, *Book of precedence*, p. [ii].
- ⁵³ Anon., *The court and country companion*, pp. 19-20.
- ⁵⁴ Anthony Trollope, *The way we live now* (1875), pp. 15, 405.
- ⁵⁵ Montagu Pennington, *Memoirs of Mrs Elizabeth Carter ...* (1807), writing of the unmarried Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806).
- ⁵⁶ B. Hill, *Women alone: spinsters in England, 1660-1850* (New Haven, Ct, 2001).
- ⁵⁷ For Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756), the Anglo-Saxon scholar, see *ibid.*, pp. 86-92; and *ODNB*.

- ⁵⁸ Austen, *Pride and prejudice*, p. 329.
- ⁵⁹ See section 6.2.1 and within that n. 39.
- ⁶⁰ Admiral Sir Samuel Hood (1724-1816) gained an Irish peerage in 1782 as Baron Hood of Catherington; his wife Susannah, née Linzee (1726-1806), the daughter of a Portsmouth surgeon-apothecary, was created Baroness Hood of Catherington in the British peerage in 1794. When he retired from his Westminster seat in 1796, Hood too was elevated in the British peerage as Viscount Hood of Whitley: see *ODNB*; and *Hist. Parl., 1754-90*, ii, 636-7.
- ⁶¹ Austen, *Pride and prejudice*, p. 320.
- ⁶² For a Quaker remonstrance against obsession with status distinctions, see A. Opie, *A cure for scandal ...* (1828; Boston, 1839).
- ⁶³ Unlike countries with legal systems derived from the Napoleonic Code, the common law countries have not traditionally required government-issued identity cards. In Britain, a first national register was adopted in wartime (1915-19), while the second began in wartime but continued into peacetime (1939-52). Recent plans for a new national identity card system remain controversial and are being implemented, if at all, only very slowly.
- ⁶⁴ For James Lawrence (1773-1840), author of *On the nobility of the British gentry: or the political ranks and dignities of the British Empire compared with those on the continent* (1824), see *ODNB*. Lawrence's book was republished posthumously under the title *British and continental titles of honour* (1842).
- ⁶⁵ On this, see esp. A. Goodrich, *Debating England's aristocracy in the 1790s: pamphlets, polemics and political ideas* (2005).