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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HERALDS' VISITATIONS IN ENGLAND AND WALES 1450-1600

Adrian Ailes

Between 1450 and 1687 at least 40 officers of arms of the Heralds' College in London made over 150 specially commissioned journeys into every county of England and Wales. Over half of these took place before 1600. The role of these visitations was to register the descents of the gentry, to justify the use by individual gentry of the titles 'esquire' and 'gentleman', and to record with due heraldic differences the lawful arms of those who had registered. Those found using titles or arms without sufficient proof or justification were publicly denounced or 'disclaimed'. The visiting heralds could also deface and remove false arms whether in private or public places. The resulting pedigrees with their accompanying arms were neatly drawn up in fair copies county by county and deposited in the College of Arms, where they remain.

The legal basis for these heraldic surveys stemmed from royal 'commissions'¹ granted on a regular basis to the two provincial kings of arms: Clarenceux, whose jurisdiction covered England south of the River Trent and south Wales, and Norroy, whose province lay north of the Trent and throughout north Wales. They could deputize junior officers – the heralds and pursuivants – to visit for them. For sure, the gentry had to pay a fee to have their arms and descents included by these men, but the resulting register did constitute a permanent, centrally held, legal record of their status, ancestry and immediate heirs, as well as the treasured symbols that visually encapsulated all these things and more besides, namely the family coat of arms. In essence this registration provided public recognition and it was hoped credible proof of their station in society.

The century and a half between 1450 and 1600 witnessed three key stages in the development of the heralds' visitations in England and Wales: the latter half of the fifteenth century, the early 1530s, and the 1550s and 60s. By the end of these three periods the basic administrative procedure and official recording of visitations in this country were virtually complete and they were not to alter in any significant measure before the demise of visitations in the late seventeenth century.

The fifteenth century had witnessed a remarkable revolution in the growing professionalism and consequently status of the heralds in England and Wales – a revolution that was to help provide them with the authority and resources to undertake and record regular visitations in the next century and beyond. From at least 1439 the kings of arms had begun a new venture as agents of the Crown: the granting and confirmation of arms. To achieve this they first needed to know who was armigerous

¹ Not all were strictly 'commissions'; initially some were licences, writs of aid or letters patent.

and what arms already existed. The mid-fifteenth century oath taken by a newly created king of arms required him, therefore, to have knowledge of all the nobility and gentry within his heraldic march and to 'trewly registre' these men along with their issue and coats of arms duly differenced.² Although the oath does not refer directly to the heralds visiting or reforming arms, it is difficult to see how such information could have been gathered without riding out and getting it. Moreover, the oath refers to gathering genealogical as well as armorial information and to differencing arms, actions only necessary and possible if different members and branches of the same family were known.³ This combination of recording genealogical and heraldic information laid the foundations for future officially sanctioned visitations.

The heralds' royal masters also had good reason to send these men into the provinces on a regular basis. The oath of a king of arms required him to discover which nobles and gentlemen held 'any service by knight's fee whereby they should do to the king service for the defence of his land'. The oath (and subsequent visitations) built upon the lists of potential fighting knights found in the heralds' 'local' rolls of arms dating back to the early fourteenth century; later heralds actually referred to them as visitations.⁴ It was still important for the king to know on whom he could call in times of war or rebellion, but as the gentry developed into a governing class both centrally (in parliament) and locally (as justices of the peace and sheriffs) so in the second half of the fifteenth century county lists of 'gentlemen of the shire' were kept for civil purposes. The king also needed to record potential local officials and servants. And there were fiscal motives too. Kings were eager to discover the identities and ages of any legitimate heirs of its tenants in chief, so that they could exploit its feudal 'incidents' such as wardship of a minor or marriage of an heiress or even escheat of the lands. In the last quarter of the fifteenth century the Crown also sought to bring financial evasion through enfeoffments to uses under more effective control. To the heraldic and genealogical information required by the heralds in the fifteenth century one must, therefore, add the military, political, and financial considerations of their royal masters.⁵

² NA (PRO), HCA 12/1 fo. 118; *The Black Book of the Admiralty*, ed. Sir Travers Twiss (London 1871-6), 1, p. 296. On who could bear arms see Maurice Keen, *Origins of the English Gentleman* (Stroud 2002).

³ Contemporary grants of arms and the 1469 ordinances of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, for the good rule of the office of arms both required differencing. The earliest versions of the ordinances (BL Mss Cotton Faustina E1 fos. 36-7 and Add 6297 fos. 60f.), like the 1484 letters patent incorporating the College of Arms (G. D. Squibb (ed.), *Munimenta Heraldica 1484-1984* (Harl. Soc. pubns n.s. 4, London 1985) [hereafter *MH*], pp. 14-19) and contemporary letters patent creating kings of arms, do not refer to the heralds going on visitation. Cadency marks also appear in the mid-15th century.

⁴ A. R. Wagner, *CEMRA* pp. xiv-xv; see also id., *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages* (2nd edn., Oxford 1956) [hereafter *HH*], pp. 51f.

⁵ J. M. W. Bean, *The Decline of English Feudalism 1215-1540* (Manchester 1968); Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity. A study of Warwickshire landed society 1401-1499* (Cambridge 1992), pp. 41, 92; D. A. L. Morgan, 'The individual style of the English gentleman', in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. M. Jones (Gloucester 1986), pp. 15-35 at 18f.

The first known armorial survey that is truly suggestive of a visitation in England and Wales was undertaken shortly before 1483 by William Ballard, March King of Arms 'of the West of England, Wales and Cornwall'. It includes a few English nobles many of whom had lordships in Wales followed by a collection of the arms of the nobility and gentry of south Wales and the adjoining English counties (the Marches). The survey is more than a simple armorial since it refers to tenure by knight service and to the number of sons and sometimes brothers and grandsons of the lord involved.⁶ 'Proto-visitations' of the north followed, but it is safer to regard these as individual collections of armorial pedigrees brought together over a number of years, perhaps even by different persons, rather than the product of one or more specific visitations taken at particular times.⁷

The earliest known official royal support for visitations comes in the form of a writ of aid granted on 26 June 1498 by Henry VII (**Figure 1**, over).⁸ His writ warned all those bearing arms that Garter and Clarenceux were by royal licence about 'to visite among other your Armes and cognisances' and record and, if necessary, reform them in accordance with the oaths they had taken on becoming kings of arms. Local officials were to give all possible assistance in this process. Surprisingly the writ allowed Garter to go on visitation. Technically he did not have a province to visit, a source of frustration for all future Garters, who thereby lost out on the revenues from such visits. The writ did not refer specifically to knight service. Nor is there any evidence that it resulted in any visitations. Maybe John Writhe, Garter, and Roger Machado, Clarenceux, were too old to visit. Machado, possibly a Portuguese, may not even have had sufficiently good English.

Nor do we know if any visitations stemmed from the next writ of aid, issued by Henry VIII on 8 January 1512 (**Figure 1**, over).⁹ Again this only referred to Garter and Clarenceux, but here there were important new additions or at least clarifications. For the first time descents had to be taken, an essential element of all future visitations. The requirement to reform arms was qualified possibly because the heralds' authority or remit in this area had been questioned by the gentry. The new writ made specific reference to two types of false armory. The first was to arms devised without authority, especially marks placed unlawfully on shields. This was very probably a reaction to the growing trend of merchants, now rising in the social hierarchy, placing their trade marks on shields, as though they were some kind of arms. The second was to banners, standards, pennons and coats of arms set up in churches

⁶ CA Ms M3 fos. 15v-24v; *HH*, p. 109; Siddons, *DWH* 1, p. 309; id., *Visitations by the Heralds in Wales* (Harl. Soc. pubns n.s. 14, London 1996), pp. 1-22. CA M3 f. 1-5v are Cheshire arms possibly by Ballard and called in Wagner, *CEMRA*, p. 112, a visitation of Cheshire, made c.1480 or earlier. Both 'visitations' include tenure by knight service. For an earlier visitation in Normandy c.1440, possibly undertaken by an Englishman, see Ludovic Fécamp (ed.), *La Visitation héraldique du Pays de Caux* (Paris 2002); cf. John A. Goodall, 'Editing rolls of arms', *CoA* 3rd ser. 1 (2005), pp. 164-6.

⁷ For 'proto-visitations' see *HH*, pp. 106-20, and A. R. Wagner, *The Records and Collections of the College of Arms* (London 1952), pp. 66f., 77.

⁸ *MH*, pp. 128-9.

⁹ *MH*, p. 129. For both writs see *HH*, p. 92-4.

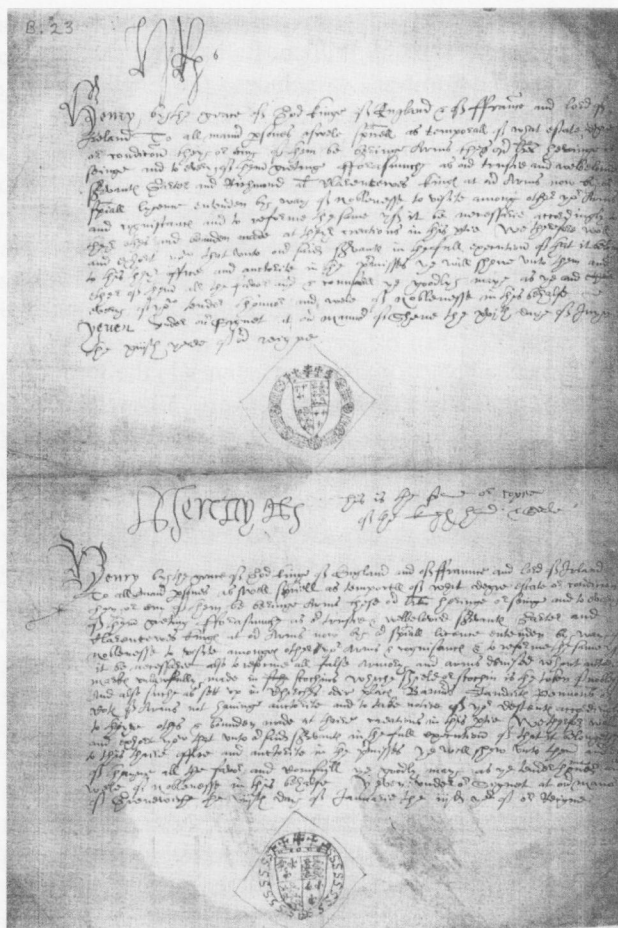


Figure 1: Copies (sixteenth-century?) of two writs of aid for Garter and Clarenceux to go on visitation, granted respectively on 26 June 1498 by Henry VII and on 8 January 1512 by Henry VIII. Ms, College of Arms, London. Edition in G. D. Squibb (ed.), *Munimenta Heraldica* (Harl. Soc. pubns. n.s. 4, London 1985), pp. 128-9.

By courtesy of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms.

without the heralds' authority. This very probably referred to the achievements placed in churches after elaborate heraldic funerals. These events were to become a very lucrative monopoly of the College of Arms in the sixteenth century and were strictly regulated by the heralds according to the status of the deceased.

Garter Writhe and his son and successor, Thomas Wriothesley, did make private agreements with the other kings of arms (including Clarenceux Benolt) to share their provincial duties, but it is not clear whether these agreements specifically included visitations or if any visitational profits were ever taken or shared.¹⁰ Benolt later

¹⁰ In 1530 Wriothesley clearly believed these agreements did include the right to visitations. See Sir Anthony Wagner, *Heralds of England* (London 1967) [hereafter *HE*], pp. 147, 160; BL Ms Cotton Faustina E1 fo. 236; *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, ed. J. Gairdner [hereafter *L&P*], vol. 5 (London 1880), p. 777; NA (PRO), SP1/73 fo. 196; CA Ms Heralds 3 fos. 1134-7. At the end of the 16th century Sir William Dethick, Garter, claimed that Thomas Wriothesley *had* gone on visitation (CA Ms Arundel 40 fo. 20v and Heralds 3 fo. 1193).

claimed that official duties abroad had prevented him from visiting his province and that such visitations were impossible anyway since Garter had kept all the College records in his own home and would not allow other officers of arms to consult them. A storm between the two men over Garter's right to visit was clearly brewing.¹¹

On 19 April 1530 the first-known visitation commission (technically letters patent of aid) received the great seal.¹² It licensed Clarenceux Benolt to visit his southern province. This was the first time for several years that Benolt had not been sent abroad on diplomatic mission and he was no longer a young man. Unfortunately the commission was granted almost exactly midway between the fall of Henry's Chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey, and the rise of his successor as chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, so it is impossible to discover a guiding administrative hand behind these initiatives. Certainly Wolsey had recorded the names of men who increasingly governed the shires on the king's behalf and in the 1520s he initiated several major surveys.¹³ It would, however, be going too far to say that the birth of regular visitations heralded the arrival of a state-controlled honour system.¹⁴

Whatever the case, like the previous writs, the commission was addressed to all nobles and local officials. First, it permitted the king of arms to reform all false armory found in his province, including defacing church monuments or taking away incorrect heraldry. Second, it instructed the visiting king of arms to take descents, as stated in his oath. Third, he could grant arms to appropriate persons. These were to be registered in the Earl Marshal's book and his seal applied to every new grant; the Earl Marshal supervised the heralds.¹⁵ Fourth, it instructed local officials to give practical support to the visiting herald. And finally, and here was a direct warning to Garter, it prohibited other officers of arms from interfering in the visitation.

The storm now broke out. Garter Wriothesley vigorously protested against Clarenceux Benolt going on visitation, but all to no avail.¹⁶ Such an initiative could only further limit Garter's hopes of going on visitation and granting arms by himself. The crisis was not helped by Norroy King of Arms, who, apparently not waiting for a commission but acting on the strength of his creation oath, set out on his own visitation of the north. Be that as it may, regular, formal, recorded visitations in England and Wales had at last begun but to a confused and ill-tempered start. Between 1530 and 1533 Clarenceux and Norroy Kings of Arms and their deputies

¹¹ See BL Ms Add 6297 fos. 78v-80; Wriothesley argued he had not kept all the books (BL Ms Cotton Faustina E1 fo. 223; *L&P* 5, p. 777).

¹² NA (PRO), C82/626; BL Ms Add 14417 fo. 35r-v and 6297 fo. 147; *MH*, p. 130f.

¹³ J. Guy, 'Thomas Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell and the reform of Henrician government' in *The Reign of Henry VIII: Politics, Policy and Piety*, ed. D. MacCulloch (Basingstoke 1995), p. 54; P. Slack, 'Government and information in 17th-century England', *Past and Present* 184 (2004), p. 38.

¹⁴ M. James, *English Politics and the Concept of Honour 1485-1642 (Past and Present supplement 3, Oxford 1978)*, pp. 24, 27, 59

¹⁵ For the Earl Marshal see *MH*, pp. 4-6.

¹⁶ *L&P* 5, pp. 774-7; Bod., Ms Rawlinson D806 fos. 210f.; *HE*, pp. 161-7. Articles concerning visitations are 3, 4, 7-11, 16 and 22.

visited most of England and all of south Wales (**Figure 2**). As a result new arms were granted, old ones confirmed, fees paid for registering descents and, certainly in London, unlawful arms defaced and carried away. Meanwhile Garter stayed at home and enmity between him and particularly Clarenceux festered.

In 1534 or 1535 the heralds petitioned the Earl Marshal for visitations every five years and in July 1536 letters patent appointing a new provincial king of arms included for the first time specific reference to visiting and correcting arms.¹⁷ In about 1537 Clarenceux may have requested a visitation commission¹⁸ and in 1539 the officers of arms agreed that only he and Norroy could visit.¹⁹ This paved the way for a new 'commission' for Thomas Hawley, Clarenceux, dated 2 July 1541. This was not a writ of aid but appeared in the form of a licence addressed to all Henry's loyal subjects stating that he had granted full power, licence and authority to Hawley to go on visitation.²⁰ It included no requirement that those addressed should provide assistance and did not mention the taking down of false arms. In fact, Hawley very probably never did visit. Later, between 1542 and 1547 Sir Christopher Barker, Garter, claimed that the only reason Hawley had requested the licence was to hurt the office of Garter and inhibit him from giving arms and visiting as (so Barker claimed) all Garters had done.²¹

Assuming that Hawley did not act upon his commission, then no new visitations were made for nearly twenty years after 1533. There were several reasons for this. Internal squabbles within the office of arms, ten new appointments to kingships, three new earl marshals and four new sovereigns, plus riots and rebellions in the provinces must have disrupted the visitational process.²² Moreover, increasing involvement by the officers of arms in heraldic funerals and the granting of arms, continued diplomatic missions at home and abroad, as well as the inevitable gap needed for a new generation to produce heirs and, therefore, be worth recording, all hindered or postponed an early return to a new circuit of visitations. The fact that the next commission (or rather patent of aid), granted on 9 June 1550, contained a new preamble comes, therefore, as no surprise. It noted the long elapse of time since the last visitation and the subsequent rise of false armory and controversies about titles of

¹⁷ BL Ms Add 9019 fo. 10; NA (PRO), C66/668 m. 29.

¹⁸ *L&P* 12 (London 1891), part 2, p. 84.

¹⁹ *HE*, pp. 179-180 and cf. CA Ms Heralds 3 fo. 1271v, BL Ms Add 6297 fos. 61-5, and Bod. Ms Rawlinson B102 fo. 46.

²⁰ NA (PRO), C66/704 m. 41.

²¹ BL Ms Add 6297 fo. 68r-v; Bod. Ms Ashmole 857 p. 479. Although Barker notes that Hawley did not visit, he may have made a few entries in 1553 for Essex, Surrey, Hampshire and elsewhere (Wagner, *Records and Collections*, pp. 68, 78). William Fellows, Norroy, may have received a similar licence in 1542, but there is no evidence for a subsequent visitation; G. W. M[arshall], 'Memoranda relating to the Heralds' College', *Genealogist* n.s. 13 [1896-7], pp. 137-40 at 139.

²² In 1562 Gerard Legh noted that riot and rebellion 'have defaced lawe and Armes'; *Accedens of Armory*, (2nd edn., London 1576), fo. 77v. For heralds negotiating with rioters see Anthony Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke 2002), pp. 68f., and *HE*, pp. 174, 177.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISITATIONS

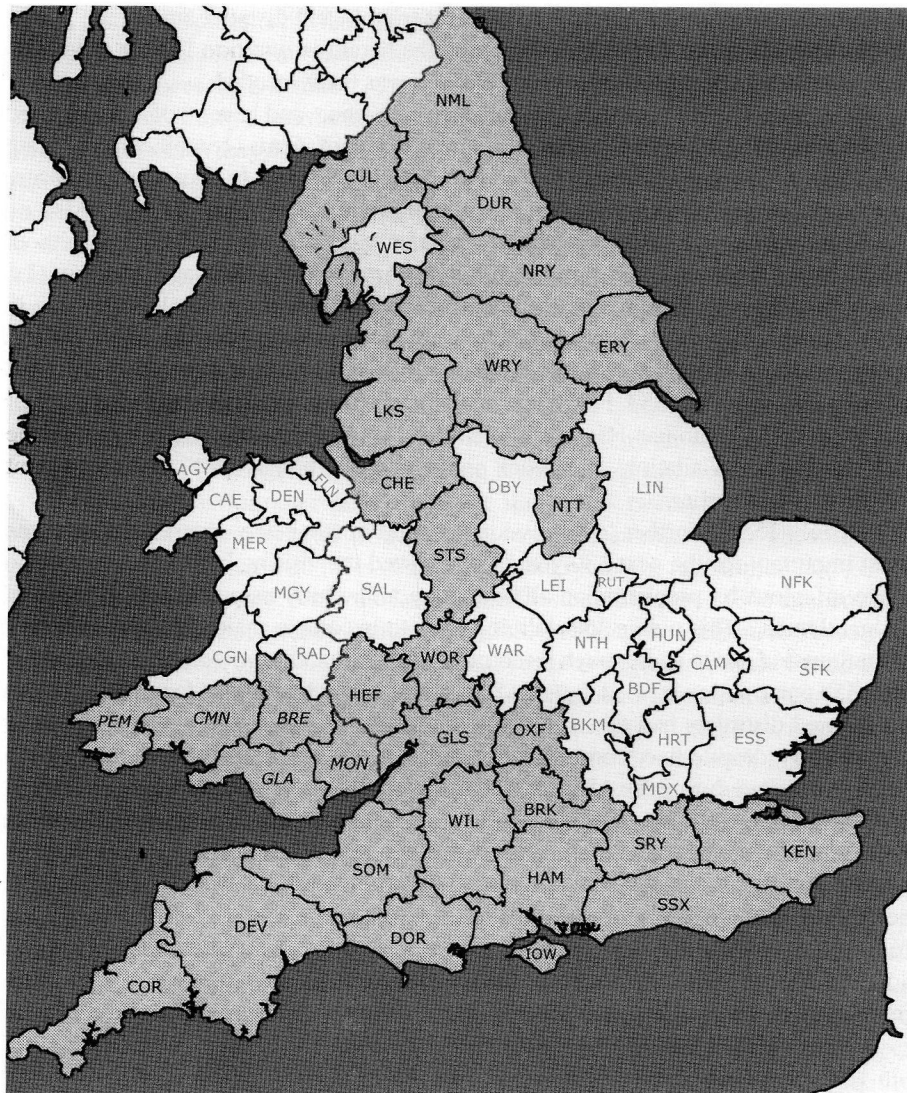


Figure 2: The counties of England and Wales. Shaded counties were visited in the period 1530-33. South Wales was visited together with Herefordshire in 1531.

inheritance which, it states, will lead to great trouble and disquiet among the gentry 'if reformation be not hadd'. It also granted the herald in question licence to visit so that 'one certeyn order be observed'.²³ Reform was badly needed.

The next commission (still technically a licence and patent of aid) granted on 15 June 1552 to William Harvey, Norroy King of Arms, contained significant innovations.²⁴ Henceforth, there was to be a policing element to visitations to ensure that no one wore mourning gowns above their station at heraldic funerals. Also no engraver, glasier, goldsmith, or painter-stainer was to paint or devise arms without the authority of the relevant provincial king of arms. Such artists and 'mechanicks' were not only siphoning valuable heraldic work away from the heralds but were in some cases actually devising the heraldry itself. Moreover, the heraldry produced was being neither monitored nor recorded. Norroy visited the north in the summer of 1552 and possibly again in 1553. Following an identical patent of aid granted 13 days later on 28 June 1552 Thomas Hawley, Clarenceux, may have visited three counties the following year.²⁵ Visitations were back on the agenda, though not to the same extent as twenty years earlier.

In July 1558 a further 'commission' brought another new clause – perhaps the most important for the next 130 years.²⁶ It allowed the visiting herald to reprove and make infamous by proclamation all who were unlawfully using the styles 'esquire' or 'gentleman'. This public 'disclaiming' was to become a major feature of all new visitations and one to cause much resentment with the local populace. The preamble of the 1558 commission echoed that of 1550 claiming that because of lack of visitations abuses and disorders had taken place in the matter of arms. Recent rebellions may explain why, despite five 'commissions', only four counties are known to have been officially visited during the 1550s.²⁷ The situation, however, was about to change.

On 27 June 1561, just over two and a half years after the accession of Elizabeth I, another new visitation commission containing yet further revisions appeared.²⁸ It was to represent the apogee for these royal documents and, as we shall see later, the perfecting of the visitation process. Moreover, unlike the recent commissions it was followed up with a series of new and regular visitations. Indeed, the late 1550s and 1560s witnessed not only a revival in the number of visits made but also a reform in the way in which they were organized and conducted. It was perhaps only in the

²³ The patent was granted in favour of Fulk ap Hywel, Lancaster, to visit Wales and the Marches but the visitation did not take place (Siddons, *DWH* 1, pp. 309, 386; T. Rymer, *Foedera* (20 vols., London 1704-35) vol. 15, pp. 236f.).

²⁴ NA (PRO), C66/847 m. 32d; *MH*, pp. 131-2.

²⁵ See note 21 above.

²⁶ Writ of aid and licence granted in favour of William Harvey, Clarenceux: NA (PRO) C66/937 mm. 13-14.

²⁷ The western rebellion of 1549 in particular contained a major element of class hostility; Anthony Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions* (3rd edn., London 1983), p. 7. The fifth 'commission' (ostensibly a confirmation of the 1552 and 1541 commissions) was granted in favour of Thomas Hawley, Clarenceux, on 19 March 1555 (Rymer, *Foedera*, vol. 15, pp. 416-18).

²⁸ Rymer, *Foedera*, vol. 15, pp. 614-16.

actual method of their recording that any further significant changes were to come. It is possible to see four main reasons for this extraordinary renaissance in the visitational process at this time.

Firstly, on 18 July 1555 the heralds had been made a corporate body and promised a new home, which they entered in 1564.²⁹ For the first time in over seventy years their separate libraries, including many visitation records, were brought together under one roof. Contemporary commentators had deplored the fact the heralds had had no place to store their records and had noted that when the provincial kings of arms died their widows sold their visitation books receiving little money for them.³⁰ These works were now to be accessible to the whole office and to provide an unprecedented shared genealogical and armorial resource upon which a new generation of visiting heralds could draw. Greater control could also be exercised on the borrowing and returning of books for visitations.³¹

Secondly, the time was ripe for a new series of nationwide heraldic surveys. By 1560 as many as fifteen of the forty English counties had still never been officially visited and at least another sixteen of the remaining twenty-five had not been investigated for over a quarter of a century. In the meantime a new generation of gentry men and women with heirs of their own and ready for registration had grown up in more ways than one. Since the last series of visitations in the 1530s the gentry of England and Wales had greatly increased in size, wealth and confidence. Those who had grown rich from office holding, or from the profits of trade or lands looted from dissolved religious houses, sought out pompous pedigrees and ancient arms as public proof of their emerging status.³² Heraldry spoke eloquently of gentility, lineage and family connections, and the heralds in particular equated it with such highly prized but ethereal qualities as honour and virtue. For the nouveaux riches these symbols afforded yet another opportunity for conspicuous expenditure. Not surprisingly, the number of new arms granted rose dramatically as they were conferred on a much wider populace.³³ Meanwhile heraldic funerals also grew in popularity creating even more competition from the commercial arms painters.

Many looked on all this increasing social mobility and its outward manifestations, such as the expansion in heraldic activity, with growing trepidation. The late 1550s were a time of general uncertainty – of hunger, disease, war and rebellion. The following decade witnessed a number of measures to curb social mobility and protect the existing order.³⁴ Heraldry did not escape the spotlight. In the late 1550s the

²⁹ *MH*, pp. 20-7; CA Ms Partition book 1527-1582 fo. 249v.

³⁰ Legh, *Accedens of Armory*, fos. 77-8.

³¹ See especially CA Ms Heralds 3 fos. 1258-60 and *MH*, p. 99.

³² Queen Mary wished to expunge the arms of those who, like brambles, had sprung out of the ruins of the religious houses they had recently purchased (Bod. Ms Ashmole 857 p. 531).

³³ Edward Elmhirst, 'The fashion for heraldry', *CoA* 1st ser. 6 (1956-8), pp. 47-50. Elmhirst's figures may be underestimates; see Peter Gwynn-Jones, 'Tudor enigmas', *CoA* 3rd ser. 1 (2005), pp. 73-104 at 77, 83.

³⁴ Norman Jones, *The Birth of the Elizabethan Age: England in the 1560s* (Oxford 1993), p. 7.

secretary of state, Sir William Cecil, took the discovery of Mary Queen of Scots' use of the English royal arms as a direct statement of her dynastic intentions towards the English throne.³⁵ In 1563 it became illegal to publish political prophecies foretelling bloodshed and war on the basis of coats of arms or the weather.³⁶ Granting arms to all and sundry (including on visitation) was viewed with disdain both inside and outside the College and commentators called upon the Earl Marshal for reform.³⁷

Clearly the heralds at the centre urgently needed to put their house in order and update their records particularly in the light of competition from private arms painters and engravers. In April 1561 the Earl Marshal commanded that no grants could be made without his permission.³⁸ The following January the junior officers petitioned him to cause the kings of arms to revive their visitations and correct all false armory.³⁹ Either in 1565 or 1566 the heralds sought to offer parliament an act to regularize and register grants of arms, and from January 1566 funeral certificates containing genealogical and heraldic details of the deceased were to be registered for the first time.⁴⁰ At the same time families at a local level required some form of easy and relatively cheap method by which they could record their arms, pedigrees and heirs on an official and permanent basis. It was time not only for a new circuit of visitations but also for the system to be reorganized and redefined.

The third reason for the renewal of visitations in the late 1550s and 1560s stemmed from changes in personnel at the top of the heraldic hierarchy. These included two new provincial kings of arms, William Harvey and William Flower, and two new rising heralds, Robert Cooke and Robert Glover, all of whom were to have a major impact on visitations.⁴¹ The most important appointment, however, was right at the top with the succession in August 1554 of Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, as Earl Marshal and, therefore, in charge of the heralds. He may well have been the inspiration behind the heralds' new charter of incorporation and their finding a new home. Above all he issued several sets of orders during the 1560s amounting to a

³⁵ See especially John Guy, 'My Heart is My Own'. *The life of Mary Queen of Scots* (London 2004), pp. 95f., 105, 464, 509; C. W. Scott-Giles, *The Romance of Heraldry* (London 1967), pp. 162-5; and Bod. Ms Ashmole 858 p. 54.

³⁶ Jones, *Birth of the Elizabethan Age*, p. 16.

³⁷ CA Ms Vincent 92 pp. 482-90; Gwynn-Jones, 'Tudor enigmas', pp. 79, 98-103; Legh, *Accedens of Armory*, fo. 77; *HE*, p. 206. Reform was promised (Bod. Ms Ashmole 840 fo. 75-76).

³⁸ Gwynn-Jones, 'Tudor enigmas', p. 79.

³⁹ CA Ms Heralds 3 fo. 1244; Bod. Ms Ashmole 858 p. 287.

⁴⁰ Bod. Ms Ashmole 840 fo. 76; 857 p. 532; BL Ms Cotton Faustina E1 fo. 203; *HE* p. 110, cf. p. 206.

⁴¹ Harvey or Hervy (Norroy 1550-57; Clarenceux 1557-67), Flower (Chester Herald 1547-62; Norroy 1562-88), Cooke (Rose Pursuivant 1562; Chester Herald 1562-7; Clarenceux 1567-93) and Glover (Portcullis Pursuivant 23 March 1568; Somerset Herald 1570-88). The appointment in July 1565 of Nicholas Narbon as Ulster Herald and Principal King of Arms, an office that did not belong to the College of Arms, led in September 1566 to the first visitation commission for Ireland.

grand reorganisation of the College.⁴² Such measures were essential if the heralds were to live amicably under one roof.

The orders were wide-ranging and stipulated that all records, including visitation books, should remain in the library and not be removed except by Clarenceux and Norroy or their deputies for making visitations.⁴³ The visiting officer had to return such books immediately after his visitation, 'as also the gatherings [rough notes and correspondence] of his said visitation'. Interestingly, the orders assumed such works to be a shared resource common to the office of arms and that Garter would not go on visitation.⁴⁴ This cannot have been popular, given that previous Clarenceux Kings of Arms had carefully left their works only to their successors in that office and not to the College as a whole. As recently as 1562 Harvey had declared that he would rather stop up 'jackesses' (privies) with his official books than hand them over to Garter.⁴⁵ The orders also stipulated that the two provincial kings should not sign and, therefore, not authorize any pedigrees produced on visitation. Rather these were to have the consent of at least two kings of arms, one of whom must be Garter.

The fourth, and perhaps most important, reason for a revival in visitations and their greater systemization was the 1561 commission itself. Unlike previous writs and patents it was a true commission in the Tudor sense, addressed directly to its subject 'our trusty and well-beloved servant' Laurence Dalton, Norroy King of Arms. Moreover, it brought together for the first time all those reasons for, and innovations and reforms of, visitations that had been included in previous royal pronouncements. It thus represented the apogee of these particular heraldic documents.

The 1561 commission was clearly comprehensive. Its preamble once again spoke of the need to keep due order in all matters touching arms and to reform abuses arising from the infrequency of visitations. It went on to stress the necessity of preserving the nobility and gentry in every degree so that persons and corporate bodies might know their station in society without confusion and disorder. The commission continued by authorizing the visiting king of arms to enter churches,

⁴² BL Ms Harl. 1107, fos. 84v-87.

⁴³ *MH*, pp. 97-105; CA Ms Herald's 3 fo. 1226; Bod. Ms Ashmole 857 pp. 22-30; *HE*, pp. 189-98. Much of what appeared was not new but had been agreed at chapters on 20 June 1539 and 31 October 1565 or 1566 (Bod. Ms Rawlinson B102 fo. 42v and BL Ms Cotton Faustina E1 fo. 202v). BL Ms Harl. 1107 fo. 86v notes that these orders were considered invalid by the heralds since they had been procured by Gilbert Dethick, Garter, without their knowledge or consent, yet they were frequently quoted in further College orders.

⁴⁴ Draft visitation commissions were drawn up for Garter's Wriothesley and Gilbert Dethick but they never received the great seal (CA Ms Herald's 3 fos. 1426, 1452).

⁴⁵ Ann Payn, 'Harvey, William (d. 1567)', *Oxford DNB*. In the same year Harvey appears to have owned or had a copy made of Benolt and Wriothesley's controversy in 1530 (Bod. Ms Rawlinson D807, fo. 210; NA (PRO), SP1/73 fo. 200). William Flower, Norroy, complained that overseas duties meant he could not furnish himself with his predecessors' heraldic works at their deaths, books he needed to carry out visitations in the north (Bod. Ms Ashmole 840, p. 603; *Visitations of the North* (Surtees Soc. pubns. 122, Durham 1912), p. 204 – not dated but about 1565).

castles, houses and other places to survey arms; to record the arms and pedigrees of those registered along with their style or dignity; to reform and deface unlawful arms; to disclaim those wrongfully using the styles esquire or gentleman; to monitor and control mourning apparel according to status; to monitor and control the heraldic activities of painters and other artisans; to prohibit sheriffs, local officials and writers ascribing the titles esquire and gentleman where inappropriate; to stop other offices of arms interfering in the visitation; to seek the aid of local officials; to appoint deputies; and finally to bring persons and problems before the Earl Marshal.

All four factors – new home, new generation, new hierarchy and new commission – contributed to a virtual renaissance for visitations. Firstly, there was a dramatic revival in their number (**Figure 3**). Between 1563 and 1585 William Flower and his deputy Robert Glover visited practically the whole of the northern province. As Clarenceux, William Harvey visited in person or by deputy fifteen southern counties, ‘an extensive campaign continued by his successor Robert Cooke’.⁴⁶ He is even supposed to have died on visitation.

The second result was a series of major revisions in the organization and procedure of visitations, many of them set out in a series of standard precepts issued specifically for these occasions. These contained a number of instructions. Local officials such as bailiffs were now required to direct visiting heralds to every gentleman within their particular tax district or ‘hundred’.⁴⁷ This meant that heralds no longer had to rely solely on their own records but could tap the knowledge of local officials as to which persons were considered gentry or potential gentry. Secondly, gentry were instructed to appear before the visiting herald at a certain ‘place of sitting’ (usually an inn) at a specified time. This virtually ended the tedious practice whereby visiting heralds had to go from one gentry home to another in order to register arms and descents. The earliest known such warrant to this effect is dated 1569.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ This was despite the fact that in June 1565 the Earl Marshal temporarily prohibited Harvey from visiting his province (*Oxford DNB*).

⁴⁷ BL Mss Harl. 69 fo. 54 and Add 6297 fo. 4, dated August 1563, for Harvey’s visitation of Devon.

⁴⁸ Bod. Ms Ashmole 798 fo. 18 and A. W. Vivian-Neal, ‘The visitations of Somerset 1573, 1591’, *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society* 84 (1938), p. 59-99 at 62f.; cf. 1583 version in *The Visitation of Staffordshire made by Robert Glover [...] 1583*, ed. H. Sydney Grazebrook (William Salt Soc. pubns 3, 1882), pp. 2-3, and 1591 version in BL Mss Harl. 69 fo. 54 and Add 6297 fos. 4v-5. Clarenceux Harvey may well have summoned local groups of gentry to common registration points on his 1561 visitation of Suffolk: cf. *The Visitation of Suffolk 1561 made by Willam Hervy: Parts 1 and 2*, ed. Jane Corder (Harl. Soc. pubns, n.s. 2, London 1980), part 1, pp. vii-viii. By the mid-1580s the names of those styled knight, esquire or gentleman were being taken from the county sheriff or undersheriff’s book or from tax records: BL Ms Harl. 1077, fo. 94v; *Visitation of Staffordshire 1583*, pp.1, 17-20, and see *Visitation of Shropshire [...] 1623*, edd. G. Grazebrook and J. P. Rylands (Harl. Soc. pubns. 28, London 1889), part 1, p. xx. Heralds still, however, visited the homes of the most important gentry or those who could not bring their evidences: Vivian-Neal, ‘Visitations of Somerset 1573, 1591’, p. 65; Bod. Ms Rawlinson D807 f. 20. For an early ‘chase-up’ warrant see *ibid* f. 23.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISITATIONS

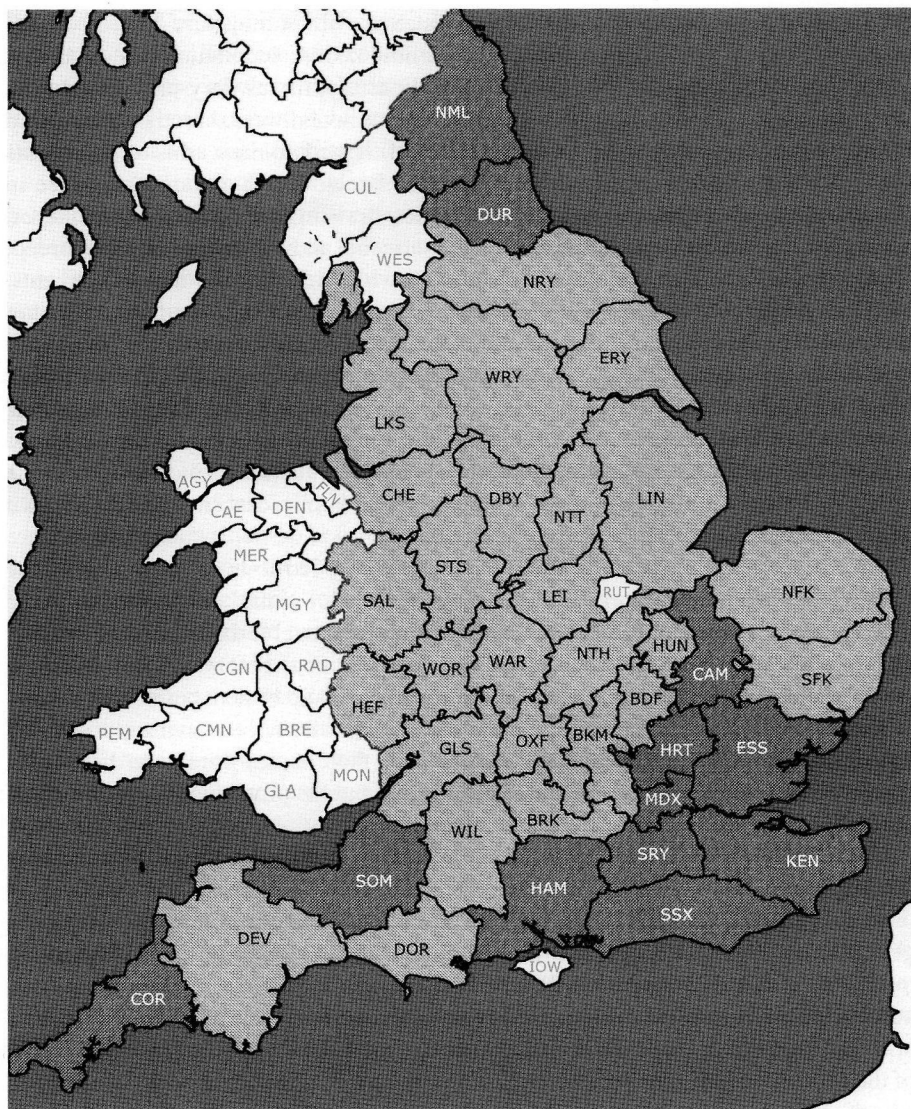


Figure 3: The counties of England and Wales. Lightly shaded counties were visited in the period 1560-9. Heavily shaded counties were visited in the period 1570-5.

Thirdly, non-appearance was now threatened with a monetary fine or formal summons before the Earl Marshal.⁴⁹ The earliest known such summons, again set out in formulaic terms, is also dated 1569.⁵⁰ Fourthly, it was very probably during the 1560s (and certainly from 1575) that those summoned were directly commanded to bring with them any evidences as proof of entitlement to their arms or statements made in their pedigrees. This resulted from the late 1560s in a marked increase in the inclusion of references to, and sometimes drawings of, charters, indentures, seals, and church monuments supporting the descents and sometimes arms recorded. It also resulted in church notes – separate drawings of ecclesiastical monuments, inscriptions, windows, and so forth – becoming a regular feature of the visitation material deposited in the College. Such notes began in earnest from the late 1560s with those of Robert Cooke, Clarenceux king of arms, who was himself a competent artist. The practice was perfected in the 1570s and 1580s by Robert Glover, Somerset Herald, who between 1570 and 1588 visited several northern counties as deputy to his father in law, William Flower, Norroy. His last three visitations include transcripts of old charters recorded both as evidence to prove family descent and for his own general interest.⁵¹

Fifthly, the commission of 1561 almost certainly led to a tightening up of the process whereby those falsely using arms or the titles ‘esquire’ or ‘gentlemen’ were disclaimed. From at least 1564 local officials were given twelve days to warn offenders not to use these titles until they could prove entitlement before the Earl Marshal within the next three months. Otherwise their names would be sent periodically to the judges of the assize and to every justice of the peace within their area and to certain other local officials.⁵² From at least February 1565 their names were to be disclaimed within ten to fourteen days of the visitation by public proclamation in the chief market town of the hundred.⁵³

A sixth consequence of the 1561 commission was the use of deputies who were not officers of arms. Heralds like Glover had deputized as marshals for visiting king of arms since 1530; even then no provincial king of arms could hope to visit every gentlemen in every county in his province. But recent commissions had added greatly to this workload by conferring police powers upon the kings of arms to monitor such activities as the wearing of mourning apparel at funerals and curbing the activities of arms painters and engravers – activities that did not necessarily take place at the time of the visitation itself. Thus even more men were now required. The 1561 commission was the first to include a clause giving power to appoint as many deputies or attorneys

⁴⁹ 1569: Vivian-Neal, ‘Visitations of Somerset 1573, 1591’, pp. 64f.; 1575: Bod. Mss Ashmole 840 p. 631 and Rawlinson D807 fos. 21, 22; 1583: *Visitation of Staffordshire 1583*, pp. 11f.. See also Ashmole 840 p. 637.

⁵⁰ Bod. Ms Ashmole 798 fo. 18v; Vivian-Neal, ‘Visitations of Somerset 1573, 1591’, p. 65. See also G. D. Squibb, *The High Court of Chivalry* (Oxford 1959), p. 35.

⁵¹ Bod. Ms Ashmole 840 p. 631. *HE*, p. 207. For church notes see *ibid.*, p. 226 and Wagner, *Records and Collections*, pp. 61-3.

⁵² Bod. Ms Ashmole 840 p. 629.
⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 647; *HE*, pp. 186f.; Vivian-Neal, ‘Visitations of Somerset 1573, 1591’, p. 66, and *Visitation of Staffordshire 1583*, pp. 12-17.

as necessary. The important difference here was that such men need not be existing officers of arms. The earliest known appointment appeared in 1564, although an earlier one for the whole of Wales may have just preceded it.⁵⁴ Initially these deputies were local agents appointed ad hoc to help out with funerals and the functions of visitations such as constructing pedigrees and pursuing those who did not obey the visitations summons. By about 1580 it appears that some were called to carry out actual visitations on behalf of the heralds,⁵⁵ and from 1585 full-blown deputy heralds appear with power to exercise the police functions of a king of arms.

The seventh innovation in the visitational process following on from the 1561 commission involved the recording of the pedigrees and arms themselves. Until now pedigrees registered in the visitations tended to be in the form of a narrative account. Henceforth, pedigrees were set out in a diagrammatic form, at first using curvilinear lines and then from the mid-1560s using rectilinear lines as in a modern family tree.⁵⁶ Dates were added and from about 1570 pedigrees were signed by a member of the family as a true statement of what was known and agreed between the two parties.

The eighth and last innovation has already been alluded to. This was the use of various precepts written up beforehand in standard formulaic terms, which could be easily duplicated and issued and which came to be used on all subsequent visitations. They were almost certainly introduced by William Harvey, Clarenceux, and William Flower, Norroy, and date from 1563. They include writs of aid issued by the county sheriff to the local bailiffs to assist the visiting heralds, warrants for the issues of summonses to meet the herald at a specific place, summonses before the Earl Marshal for non-appearance, and standard proclamations of those disclaimed.⁵⁷

All these innovations not surprisingly resulted in more regular, more sophisticated, more comprehensive, and more accurate visitations. For example, whereas the 1532 visitation for the county of Berkshire included only seventeen families, that of 1566 boasted fifty-four.⁵⁸ In the early 1530s a visiting king of arms might have taken just one servant assisted by a local guide, but on 20 July 1561, for example, Clarenceux Harvey set out with Hugh Cotgrave, Rouge Croix pursuivant, and five servants dressed in his livery and badge.⁵⁹ Cotgrave had previously been an arms painter, and toward the end of the century visiting heralds brought with them professional artists to create individual certificates of escutcheons (signed by the herald) or even new letters patent granting arms.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Anthony Wagner and George Squibb, 'Deputy heralds', in *Tribute to an Antiquary*, edd. Frederick Emmison and Roy Stephens (London 1976), pp. 229-64 at 233; Siddons, *DWH*, 1, p. 314.

⁵⁵ Wagner and Squibb, 'Deputy heralds', p. 233; CA Ms Heralds 2, fo. 29.

⁵⁶ Wagner, *Records and Collections*, pp. 16, 58, 79f.

⁵⁷ For examples see notes 47-50, 52-3 above.

⁵⁸ W. Harry Rylands (ed.), *The Four Visitations of Berkshire [...] 1532, 1566, 1623, 1665-66* (Harl. Soc. pubns 56-7, two vols., London 1907-8).

⁵⁹ *Visitation of Suffolk 1561*, ed. Corder, part 1, p. vii.

⁶⁰ The first known such artist to go on visitation was Richard Scarlett who accompanied Richard Lee, Richmond Herald, on his visitation of Lincolnshire in 1592; see L. Campbell and F. Steer, *Catalogue of Manuscripts in the College of Arms* (London 1988), pp. 245f., 492f.

THE COAT OF ARMS

For the next twenty years many of these reforms and refinements were successfully put into practice, particularly by Robert Glover, Somerset herald. However, in April 1588 Glover died young and Robert Cooke, now Clarenceux king of arms, succumbed to financial temptations brought about by all this increased heraldic activity. In the 1580s and 1590s officers of arms spoke openly of the office of arms dissolving as they acted independently of each other and without regard to the Earl Marshal's orders.⁶¹ The Earl Marshal's own office was put out to commissioners and the new head of the College, Dethick's son, William, was accused of having tricked a clerk of the signet to add the words 'to visit' in his letters patent of appointment as Garter.⁶² Once again arguments raged over who could go on visitation and who could grant arms. Cooke in particular appears to have given arms to all and sundry in making many profitable visitations, which Garter chose to represent as all very dangerous to the Crown, nobility and gentry.⁶³ Even the queen despaired of her heralds.⁶⁴ The probability is that Cooke and others (including, it is alleged, 'private gentlemen') went round the country on unofficial visitations granting arms and producing pedigrees for anyone with the right cash, and in at least one case a bogus herald toured the country taking money from unsuspecting gentry.⁶⁵ The records of these visits, often no more than updates of previous visitations, were not always deposited in the College of Arms. The 1590s witnessed no new commissions and officially recognized visitations virtually ceased.⁶⁶ Garter actually tried to stop Richard Lee, Richmond herald, going on visitation and physically assaulted his accompanying arms painter.⁶⁷ To judge from the official record new grants of arms dramatically declined. Heralds were now very rarely employed as messengers and even the fashion for heraldic funerals decreased; both afforded a serious blow to College income.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, it remains true that the 1560s had witnessed a dramatic reorganization of the visitational process and when regular visitations did eventually

⁶¹ BL Ms Cotton Faustina E1 fo. 260. For Glover's astute comments see NA (PRO), SP14/132 fos. 166-70; BL Ms Stowe 568 fo. 74v; Bod. Ms Ashmole 858 pp. 291-5; *Catalogue of Mss in the College of Arms*, p. 273.

⁶² NA (PRO), SP14/132 fo. 181.

⁶³ BL Mss Cotton Faustina E1 fo. 263 and Lansdowne 108 fo. 179; NA (PRO), SP12/233 fo. 140. Dethick in turn was accused of granting arms to aliens, bastards, tavern keepers even a dead man (BL Ms Harleian 1530 fo. 32-34v). See also NA (PRO), SP14/132 fos. 180v-183v and Gwynn-Jones, 'Tudor enigmas', pp. 82f.

⁶⁴ BL Ms Cotton Faustina E1 fo. 262v.

⁶⁵ *HE*, pp. 237f.; Wagner and Squibb, 'Deputy heralds', p. 233; CA Mss Vincent 431 (*Catalogue of Mss in the College of Arms*, pp. 449f.) and Arundel 40 fo. 40; BL Ms Cotton Faustina E1 f. 197.

⁶⁶ BL Mss Lansdowne 108 fo. 179 and Cotton Faustina E1 fos. 260, 262v; Bod. Ms Ashmole 840 pp. 19-21, 37-9; CA Ms Arundel 40 fos. 29, 40; *HE*, pp. 215, 217.

⁶⁷ CA Ms Heralds 3 fos. 1203, 1205; NA (PRO), SP14/132 fo. 181; Bod. Ms Ashmole 840 pp. 22-23; *HE*, pp. 209f. Dethick believed that only he had the ultimate authority to make or allow visitations (CA Ms Arundel 40 fo. 41).

⁶⁸ BL Ms Cotton Faustina E1 fo. 97.

resume in 1610 (undertaken by a new cohort of officers of arms) the wording of the royal commission remained virtually the same, as also did the practical arrangements of the visitation itself.

Between 1450 and 1600, and especially in the half-century between 1530 and 1580, the gentry of England underwent something of a transformation not only in numbers but also in social awareness and self-consciousness. *Arrivistes*, keen to differentiate themselves from the common herd they had left behind, readily sought out new arms – the one officially recognized visual statement supposed to provide legal definition to their new status. But if these symbols of family pride and social importance were to have any semblance of credibility or acceptance, then they had to be recorded and monitored, policed and protected. These responsibilities fell upon the heralds, by now the recognized arbiters of matters chivalric and the official guardians of the armorial and genealogical record. This in turn required a proactive, authorized, and centrally organized response on their part to tour the country and to set down, and if necessary, to reform these jealously guarded ensigns of honour.

Whatever the long term armorial and genealogical value of the resulting record, the purposes of the heralds' visitation, as defined in the medieval oath of a king of arms and as later revised and expounded in regular royal commissions, do to some extent reflect a wide variety of contemporary developments. These include a heightened interest in genealogy, heraldry, topography and antiquarian studies; the increasing aspirations of a rising gentry eager to define its role and permanently to record its place in society; the heralds' own determination to protect their armorial and genealogical monopolies; and finally the concern of those in power at the centre to maintain order, preserve the existing social hierarchy and gather information necessary for running a military-fiscal state. In all these respects the heralds' visitations between 1450 and 1600 act as a useful barometer to the wider social and sometimes political climate of that ever-changing and sometimes stormy society.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ This article first appeared in French translation in *Revue du Nord* 88 (2006), nos 366/7, pp. 659-79; I am grateful to the editors of that journal for agreeing to its republication here. I am also grateful to Dr Clive Holmes for having read a draft of this paper and making several suggestions.