

Aristocracy, Gentry, and Elite Society

Aristocratic family history is inextricably entwined with that of country houses and estates. But the local understanding of a house and its collections and landscape rests within the wider picture of aristocratic participation in the political, economic, cultural and social affairs of the nation; not forgetting that the idea of Great Britain was also defined in terms of empire. Thus families might have a role in affairs both at home (locally and nationally) as well as in other areas of the globe.

Aristocratic power was enshrined in wealth, status, land ownership, political life, and duty. The definitions for each of these change at different moments, and in the course of the nineteenth century increasingly admit and recognise the role of women in public affairs. Aristocratic families and their grand houses were only one part of the mechanism of society; the role of the gentry, less visible perhaps than their grandee neighbours, offers a different narrative about the engagement with public affairs.

This section should be read in conjunction with the lists on Estate Management, Houses and Families, Women, Heritage, and Historical Background.

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