JOHN SPREAT, STEWARD AT CHIPLEY, SOMERSET, FROM 1689–1720s

Bridget Clarke

John Spreat (1664–1733) spent over 40 years as the trusted servant of Edward Clarke, owner of the estate of Chipley, near Wellington in Somerset, his wife Mary and their eight children.[1] Clarke, a barrister and friend of the philosopher John Locke, and, from March 1690 until his death in October 1710, MP for Taunton, needed a reliable man to help his wife run his estate when his full time Parliamentary career kept him in London.

The 17th-century steward was a figure of considerable importance in promoting social harmony as he mediated between lord and tenant. While carrying out his main function of increasing the value of his master's estates, he had to defend the lands, collect rents, and act as clerk of works. Some of his duties were legal, as he presided over manorial courts, and he also worked as election agent and distributor of charity and patronage. All these tasks were revealed by Hainsworth in *Stewards, Lords and People*, where he noted that 'reports of stewards, however variable in quantity, however fragmentary or haphazard their survival, assume great significance'.[2] Thanks to the wealth of letters between Spreat and Edward Clarke in the Somerset Record Office, together with Spreat's own daily Journal for 1698,[3] Spreat's is one of the best recorded of all 17th-century steward's careers. Hainsworth cites Sir John Lowther's correspondence with his steward Thomas Tickell between 1666 and 1692 as an amazing survival because the steward drafted replies on his master's letters, but the Clarke/Spreat letters are even rarer because both sides of the correspondence survive individually, spanning the years 1689–1710. There are also letters between Spreat and Mrs Clarke and her children. As Hainsworth discovered, a steward was on particularly intimate terms with the family he served, and could advise the master and mistress about their children's welfare and be party to family secrets; the letters show that this certainly was Spreat's experience, probably to the detriment of his own private life.

Baptised at St Michael's Church in the market town of Milverton, Somerset, in 1664, John was the second surviving son of William and Joan's nine children, and received an education that enabled him to become an attorney and to use Latin phrases in his Journal, for example, 'mane' for 'in the morning'. He was at Chipley by November 1689 when he dealt with 'the unaccountable behaviour of Mr Ridgley and the steward of the manor of Puriton with respect of the inrolling his mortgage'.[4] Aged 25, he had achieved a position which promised him a good income and a status which reflected that of his master, 'for although the stewards shone by a reflective light they all, large and small, glittered in their places in the firmament of provincial society'.[5]

Clarke needed a growing income from his estate to maintain his family and finance a public career. Later, money he made from acting as legal adviser and trustee was invested in Bank of England stock and East India Bonds but in 1690 he was dependent on his estate. Because of the development of the strict settlement, which offered long term protection for the practice of primogeniture, proper estate planning could take place. Clarke was always prepared to pay extra to get land he wanted to improve estate farms, even though in the case of Lovelinch it took him 20 years, but gradually reduced the demesne land and only kept six oxen for the plough and a few cows.[6] With Spreat's help he managed to treble his father's annual income of £400, even at a time when tenants were in short supply.[7] The lands were let for a term

of years (rack rent), 'a very advanced estate practice', relatively uncommon in the South West.[8] None of the farms was large, the average being 26 acres; only Lovelinch was over 50 acres. Rack renting required a steward's care in the choice of tenants, for leases often came up for renewal, but the short lease prevented sub-letting and landlords could insist their tenants used the latest farming methods. Clarke was particularly interested in improvements, influenced by his education at Wadham College, Oxford, by his wife's uncle Buckland (who encouraged the planting of potatoes as a vegetable crop), and by Locke, who sent trees and livestock from Holland, including prolific Friesland sheep.[9]

Landlords competed for tenants with local agricultural knowledge who, aware of this, declined to pay the full rent, either paying at their own pace as Lady Day approached, when they could surrender the farm, or asking the landlord to be 'kind', which was code for reducing rents. If all else failed, they might abscond, leaving the owner to farm the land himself with little likelihood of profit. As Clarke wrote to Locke in October 1688,

> there has never been a time when sheep, cattle, corn, wool and everything else that the countryman should raise money by, sold at such poor mean rates as they now do, in so much that in many places the profits of the lands will hardly pay the workmen's wages that are employed to manure it.[10]

'The groans that punctuate the letters from distraught stewards ... to their masters witness to the extent of the agricultural depression'.[11] Although tenants could be hauled before the manorial court, presided over by the steward who could impound their beasts or evict, as he had to live among those tenants it was to his advantage, as well as part of his duty, to promote harmony and mediate between traditional customs and the innovative capitalist process of improving yields from land.

Those problems can be seen in Spreat's dealings with Will Trott who announced he would leave the day his lease expired; Spreat planned to distrain his goods but discovered that Trott wanted an abatement of 40s:

> but did hope you would permit him to live in the house until our Lady Day by which time he would clear the arrears (which are about 60£).

After negotiations Will said he

> would hold out the estate for this year and trust to your courtesy and would pay off the arrears by our Lady day next.[12]

Clarke and Spreat often had to compromise. In January 1695/6 they hoped to get £70 p.a. for Wood Farm:

> considering how well the ground is in heart at this time and how well dressed over it has all been by me lately, but rather than lose a good tenant, I will be content to take threescore and seven or eight pounds a year.[13]

No details about the estate were too small to be discussed, by post if necessary, with letters exchanged every day or two, Spreat having to ride to Wellington to post them. He had to purchase horses for the family's use, including one which Mary gave her husband as a wedding anniversary present in 1696.[14] Apart from everyday journeys round the neighbourhood, to Wellington (2 miles) and Taunton (8 miles), West Buckland and Holcombe (5 miles), which sometimes resulted in him being thrown by the 'young mare', he also had to travel long distances to deal with Mary's inheritance from her uncle at Sidcot, near Bristol, or to escort his master back to Chipley. In 1699, for example, Spreat had to ride to Salisbury, bringing oats and horse beans and hay for the coachman, plus Clarke's black mare and saddle, a journey involving four days solid riding.[15]

To boost the Clarke family reputation in the neighbourhood, Spreat regularly went to church, often to two different local churches in one Sunday, presumably to be seen by as many neighbours as possible.[16] Spreat also joined in local pastimes – he shot rooks with Clarke's nephew Gustavus Adolphus Venner in May 1698, went fishing for trout and eels and carp in the 'great Square Pond' in August, hunting at Fitzhead in September 1698 and 'ferretting in Bornhill woods' in November.[17]

Produce from the estate was required to be sent to the family in London: 'woodcocks heads and sows heads with 2 gammons' were sent in 1695, and in 1700 the estate provided:

> three dozen and half of this years cider and a little deal box with a gammon of bacon such as you use to love when you was here in the country and in the same box I have put up seven baking pears.[18]

Another thing that had to be sent to London for Clarke's use in town was money, 'without lining the pockets of footpads'; this was a perennial problem for stewards.[19] Bills of Exchange were safer than

coin, but it took time to get them accepted. For example, Clarke wrote to Spreat on 26 December 1696:

> Mrs Dare did send me a bill on Monday last, but it is dated the 2 January next and made payable ten days after sight it is not yet accepted under pretence ... you now advise tho I have already had the trouble of tendering it twice to Mr Sheppard a merchant on whom it is drawn. I have at last received the twelve pound from Mr Burgiss which he should have paid me at his first coming to town but the ten pound bill you sent me up in October last drawn by him on Michael in Smithfield is not yet paid, neither can I as yet get him arrested but I hope I shall have either the money or the man in a few days more.

Keeping the estate accounts was a vital part of Spreat's job. On journeys he noted what he had spent at every stopping place,[20] as for example at Sherborne in 1710:

For mutton broth and turnips	0	2	6
For a breast of veal	0	3	6
For 3 quarts and 2 pints of wine	0	10	0
For bread beer and tobacco	0	3	0
For firing	0	1	2
[sub-total]	1	0	2
Maids and manservant	0	2	10
[total]	1	3	0

One of a steward's most important tasks was to defend his master's lands 'against the depredations of a fuel hungry populace'.[21] Even the family at Chipley spent a lot of the time half frozen, though Mary noted the servants always seemed to have a good fire. By November 1696 wood was so short that Mr Trott and Spreat went to Lee Wood to see if it was worth the cost of taking up the roots of the trees in order to provide fuel for the house. Trees and hedgerows belonged to the lord even if on a leased farm, and if the steward was inactive, the manor could be denuded as timber stealing was not larceny but 'committing waste'. Tenants banded together to allege ancient rights of gathering 'winter fuel', and commoners asserted rights to snapwood, lops and tops, furze and bracken. Outsiders were a worse threat, and as E.P. Thompson points out, the poor used 'stealth, a knowledge of every bush and by-way, and the force of numbers' to counteract the landlord's monetary power.[22]

> The beggars of Wellington [are] impudently desperate they have got a horn which they sound at their appointed times for a general meeting and then they go out in bodies with hooks and other conveniencies at noon day and cut down the wood as if it was their own and nobody dares to control them, for if you touch one you as good touch them all for they all fall upon you.'[23]

Common rights to gather fuel could disguise entry to parks to poach rabbits, game, fish or deer, mainly for profit though sometimes to relieve hunger.[24] When 'Dick brought me word that one of the deer went out last night', Spreat had to organise its recapture.[25] But it was prudent to alleviate poverty; stewards had to work out who should benefit, giving pensions to old servants and ensure that sick breadwinners were helped, for if they died their family would have to be supported by the parish. E.P. Thompson points out that the gentry were not at this time seen in a directly exploitative relationship to workers, who in times of hardship blamed the middleman, and 'generosity to the community remained a major manifestation of gentility.' Indeed, Spreat and Mary started a manufacturing business to provide work for weavers.

> There is an necessity some course must be taken or else the poor will be too many for the rich for you cannot imagine what a multitude goes about begging everyday.

Fear of robbery meant that when Spreat was away, the mastiff lay in the house,

> for I find all the neighbourhood is upon their guard, for the number of rogues that robbed Mr Passens house was ten and none of them taken yet.[26]

It was worth their efforts as the Milverton beggars who had begun to attack the trees in Bornhill Wood stopped, though fears about burglars continued into the new century.

Although suspicious of the indolent poor, the Clarkes made provision for relief:

> at the door we served 18 in less than a quarter of an hour this day besides 18 more before it was night and none of them belonging to our parishes it is two or three folks work to thresh bake and serve them and there is no avoiding of it for we must give them to prevent them from stealing and other mischief.

E.P. Thompson cynically notes that 'a year of short commons can be compensated for by a liberal Christmas dole', which also helped the political interests of the landlord.[27]

Although the household side of a steward's work had decreased in the 17th century, Spreat still had to

organise the staff at Chipley who were a continual problem; they quarrelled amongst themselves, stayed just long enough to qualify for suits of livery or left to become milliners, and much preferred Mary to be in London so that she could not keep too close an eye on them. Spreat paid their wages every Saturday, and following instructions from Mary in London, told the maids how to bottle gooseberries and how to air the beds, and organised the making of sweetmeats.

With so many young maids employed, Spreat also had to deal with broken hearts, a difficult problem when the culprit was his brother Gabriel. When nurserymaid Nan fell ill, Mary suspected it was a ruse to get sent up to London where Gabriel was with the Clarkes.

> I believe a remove to be nearer him would be more agreeable to her though perhaps to the ruin of both, there is a strange fate upon my poor amorous nursery maids so successively to fall in love with the Spreats.[28]

He coped with handyman Isaac leaving to paint neighbours' houses and bigamously marrying Rose Palmer, but the battle of wills came in 1698 with John de la Roque, a Huguenot tutor, who felt himself superior to the staff at Chipley. The Clarkes had employed Huguenot tutors since 1687, with mixed success, but none had set the whole house in an uproar before. Unable to speak a work of English, he was met by Spreat at Taunton, Clarke writing he doubted 'not but you will be kind to him in regard he is a perfect stranger and I believe very poor'.[29] Nine months later Mary had to tell Spreat that if de la Roque:

> will not be thought a servant, though in effect he is so, let him be thought what he will, it is no great matter but for the children's supping with him that I don't think at all proper no more than a hot supper to be dressed on purpose for his worship.[30]

Mary's sympathies were with Spreat, but it was always so difficult to find tutors that de la Roque had to be placated. Clarke wrote to him, hoping they would live in charity together and 'pray let me hear no more of cutting throats in my family, it being what is very uneasy and unacceptable'.[31] He trusted Spreat to settle the matter 'without my writing any particular directions to you on that subject'.[32]

Part of the steward's remit was to supervise builders and pay their salaries, not too slowly so that they departed to other projects, or too quickly so they decamped before the work was done. The new house at Chipley had been built in the early 1680s, but beautiful though it was, it brought problems.[33] Spreat was asked 'carefully and nicely to observe the particular places where the rain does beat in, and set them down in writing'.[34] Then he had to supervise Mr Clutterbuck in mending the leak in the lead over the windows.[35] Spreat also had to ask Mr Watson, 'ye architect',[36] to visit Chipley, and then 'take in writing, his advice touching the manner and method of amending of them effectually'.[37] He also organised the building of barns on the estate, supervising the carpentry and the masons putting in the foundations.[38]

Although Clarke was a lawyer himself, he had little time to devote to Somerset business, so Spreat's legal duties involved the business of the estate, taxation and attending and recording manorial courts. He wrote in his journal on 18 April 1698 'to Buckland and kept a Court there' and in November he had to wait in vain for tenants to appear during the great snow. Stewards presided with juries chosen from chief tenants, whose duty it was to deal with commoners rights, and make decisions on matters of overstocking and trespass, as well as preserving the landlord's interests. Clarke accepted his advice ('I am well pleased with your intended method of proceeding against Starr') and relied on his judgment

> I think it not advisable to be too hard upon Starr by arresting of him, unless you have further cause to apprehend that Starr's promises for payment will not be performed.[39]

Legal actions seemed to go on for years, not always with good results for the landlord: in 1698 Clarke wrote to Spreat:

> I cannot be sorry for old Serles death, but have reason to be really sorry that the estate is left so naked; I fear I can have no remedy against them for any of the past injuries that have been done me.[40]

Marriage settlements also affected the estate. The market value of husbands with estates was enhanced between 1689 and 1714 and to compete with city dowries for daughters, landowners had to beggar themselves. As early as 1698, when daughter Betty was nearly 16 and her sister Anne nearly 15, Mary showed that a steward's advice was welcomed:

> I am entirely of your opinion that if they was both well married it would be the best way of disposing of them at this height and bigness; but as I told you before good matches are hard to be found.[41]

After various attempts to find a husband for Betty, during one of which Spreat accompanied her up to London, and after Locke had proved a broken reed in promoting a match with his nephew Peter King, she and John Jones became mutually attracted, and Spreat had to discover the worth of his estate.[42]

> I have not ceased my endeavors but cannot yet get success, the difficulties arising from the many different and distant places it lies in; he has [an estate] at Winterbourne in Gloucestershire about 5 or 6 miles from Bristol which I am told is entirely his of the gift of Mr Browne a baker in whose lifetime it was reckoned about £600 per annum ... but of this, what Mr Jones has had in his possession for some years past amount to but about £200 per annum besides contingencies, the rest being yet in jointure to Mr Browns wife, as far as I can yet gather the whole may now be computed at about £500 per annum, but all my enquiries upon this subject have been with the utmost caution as usual. Upon the whole I do believe the young gentleman has not misrepresented the whole valued in £600 per annum in general.[43]

Sporadically Spreat seemed to do legal work on his own behalf. The Bishop of Bath and Wells had calls on his time. In February 1698 he was at Feltham farm in Pitminster 'for my Ld Bishop', in April at Wells he went 'to my Ld Bishop about his Buckland business', and in June he went to wait on him in Taunton.[44] Mary occasionally got impatient:

> John Spreat is now at Ilchester about some of Buckland parish business he went yesterday morning and thought he should not return again till tomorrow. Your lease sealed to Goodman Dyer came too late I think it was a great neglect in John not to send it sooner, I suppose if it had been a lease of my Ld Bishopps he would have dispatched he says it will be no inconvenience to you but I am not of that mind.[45]

or in 1704,

> Spreat has not been at home one day since Monday last, and is now at Wilscome on public business, and I am very sure I can make it very plain to you, that he is not 3 days in a week one week with the other throughout the whole year employed in your business.[46]

In 1694 Spreat was an undersheriff, helping the sheriff with writs, fines, collection of dues, executions and bail bonds. At elections, sheriffs controlled the election of knights of the shire. At Quarter sessions, the meetings of county justices four times a year, the high sheriff and a deputy attended with the undersheriff, giving Spreat another opportunity to dine with influential voters.[47] Taunton Assizes involved Spreat in five days away from Chipley, and Wells was even further away. As well, Spreat had to organise Clarke's contribution to the militia.

> Prepare for the setting out Rich. Barber on your spotted horse, and [I] must desire your particular care in seeing all the furniture both for man and horse be clean and in good order so that no fault may be found with any of it, for it is to be expected that my man's horse and arms are to be more narrowly examined and inspected then any other.[48]

Spreat had to negotiate about taxes; in April 1690 he was at Taunton to meet the commissioners:

> we hope this will be the last day for we begin all to be tired with it for in truth it takes up his whole time so that he is able to mind nothing at all else they leaving the whole burden of the business on him and none of their meetings are broken up till twelve or one a clock at night.[49]

When the Land Tax was rated at 20% of rental income to help with war expenses, the day to day administration was carried out by local gentry and lawyers. In 1698 Spreat was appointed 'Assessor for the Land Tax' and in June was at the Red Lion in Wiveliscombe about appeals.[50]

Spreat's private life was not as successful as his career. He married widow Grace Stacy at Runnington on 21 October 1691. After the birth of John in 1692, Betty Clarke, aged nine and the cleverest of the Clarke children, wrote to Spreat (on paper with ruled lines to help her):

> I cannot believe that you and your wife can have made such a forward child but rather that it is your fondness and want of being used to the noise makes you think he cries so much.[51]

Robert was born in 1693 and Edward expected in 1695, but by January 1694/5 Mary spotted trouble ahead, due to Grace's extravagance; she suspected that Spreat's visit to London

> in this extreme cold weather is in order to get a place of 2 or 300 a year which I believe would agree very well with his wife's inclinations and way of living.[52]

Grace contracted many debts; in the end Spreat had to sell up his home to pay them and moved back to Chipley alone. It must have been embarrassing

for him when his wife, the 'most difficult and unreasonable woman to deal with as I ever yet met with,' continually turned up there drunk to create a scene. 'I think her a dangerous woman at all times especially when she is enraged, and one full of revenge'.[53] Mrs Spreat knew there was no possibility of a divorce (which was only available by Act of Parliament) but determined to obtain a judicial separation with the best settlement possible by taking her husband to the Court of Arches, usually known as Doctors Commons, and blackening his name to improve her alimony. Spreat always had Clarke's support, though Clarke had to admit

> I have not been able to do much in your affairs for your defence against the suit of your wife in Doctors Commons but will not omit anything that is either necessary or proper to be done for you.[54]

Canon law procedure was by using written documents, private interrogation of witnesses by examiners and decisions by the judge. The plaintiff gave the court a 'libel' drawn up by a proctor giving the gist of the accusation, followed by an answer on oath by the defendant. Responses and rejoinders could follow, but husband and wife did not give evidence. Cruelty was confined to the behaviour of the husband, and had to involve many episodes which posed a threat to the wife's life. If cruelty or adultery or both were proved, the amount of alimony depended on the husband's means, and not usually more than a fifth of his worth was granted to the wife. Evidence on Grace's side said that she brought between £1,000 and £2,000 in real estate, ready money, plate and linen to the marriage, though John's supporters disputed this, saying he received 'four hundred pounds or five hundred pounds at the most'. Grace's friends said that John Spreat

> by his profession is an Attorney at Law and Steward to the Bishop of Bath and Wells and to Mr Clarke, and by such earns £500 or at least £300 per annum

but his friends said her ill behaviour had lessened his chances of earning. The couple seemed to have acquired property at Buckland worth about £30 p.a. and another worth £10. Spreat's supporters also said she 'has by her ill management and extravagance run him in debt'. The judgement detailed Spreat's cruelty, beating Grace

> with his fist in a most violent and barbarous manner without any manner of provocation and with the force of such his blow bruised her face and head which made it black and blue at the same time calling her whore and bitch and other names and later throwing her out of bed, she being then big with child and within a month of her time, whereupon she cried or called her servant to her assistance, who coming with a lighted candle found her out of the bed naked and was afraid she would have miscarried not withstanding which the said John Spreat would not permit her into the bed again ... she was forced to apply herself to a Doctor of physic for his advice and was in great danger of her life.

On 4 May 1697 separation from bed and board, *a mensa et thoro*, was granted in Doctors Commons for cruelty.[55] This was not the end of Spreat's troubles, and Grace continued to be a nuisance. In February Clarke 'paid your wife another quarters alimony due yesterday by a waterman that she sent with a receipt to me for it,' and a landlady went to Clarke at the Excise Office to tell him that Mrs Spreat owed her money and had now disappeared. The fear that Grace would turn up and make a scene never left Spreat. In April 1700 he heard that his Aunt Comer had offered to have Grace to live with her. His aunt's championing of Grace may explain a journal entry 'My aunt Comer barbarously abused me in the evening and provok'd me to strike her', the only evidence (apart from suspect divorce evidence), of Spreat losing his temper and an event that resulted in him taking physic and being blooded the next day.[56]

Grace continually wrote to him asking for more alimony with 'the abominably false suggestion of her being disabled for work by my beating and abusing her,' and as Mary Clarke said:

> If John Spreat's wife did not mortify him a little some times with her letters, I believe he would begin to think himself too happy and marry again.[57]

His marriage was one aspect of life that did not conform to the accustomed pattern for stewards, or indeed most people at the time. He had no doubt made an unfortunate choice of wife, but perhaps Grace was jealous of his devotion to the Clarke family.

As Parliaments were summoned more frequently than earlier in the century, borough and county elections became real contests where landlords struggled for supremacy.[58] One of the most important duties of a steward was to act as election agent and promote his master's political fortunes locally. He had to know the voters and keep their loyalty, lead

them to the poll, keep taverns open for treats, and be quick to gather evidence if opponents challenged the result.

Clarke's 1694 appointment as Commissioner of Excise meant that he had the power of disposal of places in the Excise worth £100,000 p.a.; this patronage was of help to Spreat in maintaining Clarke's popularity in his constituency as these subordinate tax officials could affect local elections by their influence on inns. In November 1698 Clarke helped a Mr Bovett:

> I know you will not fail privately to make Bovett sensible of the kindness showed him in this point. Upon your request of me, I had had the good fortune to make Thomas Champion an officer in full pay.

Also in 1698 Mary persuaded her husband to find Gabriel Spreat a job, and told Spreat it was 'a foot walk as you desired and a very good business'.[59]

Gabriel proved a good officer but Clarke must have regretted helping Champion, a dubious character. He only produced half the excise money he received from a victualler and made a false survey of cider. Clarke told Spreat Champion 'deserves not your friendship, nor my favour' but managed to get his case reexamined.

> I have this day, by great good luck, and through abundance of difficulty, once more brought your friend Thomas Champion off, with only a severe reprimand from the Board; I have done this purely on your account.[60]

Even though Clarke as a Whig had strong support in Taunton which was one of the most Whiggish boroughs with a large electorate of shopkeepers, artisans and cloth workers, he still had to combat the attempts at bribery and intimidation by the Tory Portman family. In March 1690, Spreat was able to keep his employer abreast of local reactions by sending him an assessment of the town's feelings when William Portman died soon after the election:

> The Taunton people are not yet come to a resolution whom to choose to supply Sir Williams place. Some talk of Mr Speke, others of Mr Dyke, a third sort of Mr Frend and a fourth of such a person as you would be pleased to recommend to them, so that you may easily guess what a miserable distraction the poor giddy folk of that place are under.[61]

Spreat had to tend the 'interest', which was composed of tenants and tradesmen who served the estate, by means of giving dinners, finding favours and places for the faithful or distributing produce to neighbours to promote good relations.

> As to the increase of the fawns, I can only say it is absolutely necessary that most of them should be eaten when most in season, I would have you send one good one to Holcombe, one other to Mr Dyke, one other to Mr Musgrave.

In April 1698 Spreat took the Mayor of Taunton some asparagus, and fruit went to Holcombe on 21 June.[62]

Clarke always had to work hard on behalf of the tradesmen and serge makers to keep their vote. The Mayor of Taunton wrote to him on 30 October 1691 in

> the name of the whole town to acquaint you of the unavoidable ruin of our trade if the woolen manufacturers be not some way stopped in Ireland, every serge they make with like goodness with ours they can afford six shillings cheaper then we in England can, so that in time we shall not be able to sell any goods to be transported beyond the seas on which depends our main trade.

Although a believer in free trade, Clarke had to exert himself at Westminster on behalf of the specialised interest of the town.[63]

After an easy victory in 1695, the election in 1698 was closely fought. From the 20th to 22nd August Clarke and Spreat were continually visiting Taunton, Clarke staying with Mr Frend and Spreat at the Three Cups, meeting the Mayor, attending the sorting of the votes and going, as Spreat said, 'a shire knighting'. As Clarke told his sister,

> at Taunton I was opposed with all the malice and industry and by all the ill practises that the united strength and influence of all the gentlemen of these parts, appearing personal with Mr Portman and joining with what the ungrateful and scandalous corporation could invent, or the Devil himself could suggest, but notwithstanding all, had not the mayor been perfectly overawed and frightened by the presence of so many gentlemen, and allowed several that had no good right to vote for Mr Portman, and had I had justice done me, I had infallibly carried it against him.[64]

Elections were expensive, which Clarke asked Spreat to keep from Mary, though she played an important part in electioneering offering hospitality to neighbours and visiting local coffee houses. Clarke had quite a high minded attitude to electoral reform,

presenting a bill in 1691 to prevent false and double election returns, and was an oddity in that he shunned honours and status, but in spite of his attitude to electoral bribery, he heard from Spreat in January 1698/9

> the surprising news of Mr Frends having already received sixty pounds of you, and his opinion that sixty pounds more will be of absolute necessity to be expended, it is a great sum, and much more than I could have imagined my friends would ever have suffered to have been expended by me, considering all the public and particular services I have done for that ungrateful Town in general, and almost all the chief and leading men of the town in particular; but it seems those services are now forgotten, and I am now to be punished instead of being thank'd for them; pray write nothing touching this expence forc'd upon me by my friendship of Taunton to my wife, it is mortification enough to me already without having her diseased by it also.[65]

Spreat helped Clarke to retain his seat in 1701, 1702, 1705 and 1708 and Clarke's great victory for the town came when he presented the Navigation Bill for the river Tone which his constituents wanted; he finally emerged triumphant when it passed through the upper house and the bells that rang in Taunton as it received the Royal Assent must have been music to Spreat's ears. Almost too ill to care, Clarke attended Parliament for the last time and Spreat's role as agent ended.

Stewards were the 'trusted repositories of many confidences'.[66] As Mary Clarke often acted as Clarke's amanuensis, Spreat also had to be asked to be discreet about the cost of repairs to Chipley, showing how a steward was intimately involved with the nuances of his employer's marriage.

> There is hardly any letter you write to me that I can avoid showing my wife; neither is there indeed any letter whatever which I desire should be concealed from her, yet since she is pleased to enter into the consideration of my affairs in general, I desire you particularly to represent the necessity of a care of those defects in the stoneworks of the house that my wife may be the better satisfied in undergoing the trouble that will be necessarily occasioned in the curing thereof, and to the end there may be no other interpretation hereafter put on this letter of mine (in case it should fall into any other hands than yours) than is really intended by me I desire when you have read it over, I desire you to burn it.[67]

John managed a tactful answer, which rendered Mary 'easy under the trouble, difficulty and charge of curing the defects in the house'.[68]

From the start of his employment Mary Clarke had written to Spreat as a friend rather than employee:

> According to my promise I am to give you an account of the remaining part of my travels to London ... We had a set of musicke came to play to us and I wanted nothing but the company of my son John and the rest of my children and a sound knee to have made me dance.[69]

She was tolerant of the fact that he expected some life of his own and that he might go courting when she wrote to her sister in law in January 1691:

> I did leave orders that John Spreat should be Jacks constant bed fellow in my absence but those nights he did chance to lie from home upon business which I thought then would have happened very seldom but now the scene is changed and I am to believe I have no more reason to depend on him than I thought I should, for I fear he is faine to double his diligence a nights for the time he spends there a days, for I suppose the widow cannot be satisfied till she looks as big as you say the rest of her neighbours does.[70]

A steward often had to act as a surrogate parent to his master's children. When Spreat went up to town he was trusted to buy clothes for the family, including mourning after Queen Mary's death, and he also visited the children who were at school or wet nurse on the outskirts of London and checked their needs. 'John Spreat writ me word that nurse did begin to be in want of another coat for Jenny'. When Edward and Mary and the older children were in London, John looked after the little ones at Chipley, noting for example on 27 February 1697/8 in his journal that 'Mas Sammy was put into his breeches'.[71]

Sometimes Mary was quite skittish when she wrote to Spreat:

> I receved your last letter and communicated it to Mr Clarke who orders me to tell you that he would have you dispose of the sheep you mention to the first good chapman for that he is grown so fond of my company that he knows not when he shall part with me'.

Not even a possible pregnancy was a taboo subject**:**

> 'I assure you that the giddiness in my head does

> not proceed from breeding, for I thank God I am not with child; and I do wonder at anybody that can think one should get more when one have so many already that one can hardly step for them.[72]

As the years grew on she relied on him to listen to her troubles, particularly as her health worsened and Clarke grew more weary and subject to fits of depression.

> And I wish to God I could bring all my family and affairs together that it might be for the good and satisfaction of every body and the ease and quiet of my self, who some times am so weak and dispirited with the fatigue I am forced to put my body and mind into for them all that I can hardly support my self.[73]

Ward, the eldest of the Clarke children, had never been a strong child, suffering debilitating childhood illnesses and in April 1699 probably tried to commit suicide in London in a fit of depression, though people at Chipley were only told in May that he was desperately ill.

> Honrd Sir,
> Your melancholy and surprising letter by the last post has filled us all with the deepest affliction at the most unwelcome news of my dear young masters illness, which seems by yours to be very violent and extreme, and nothing can remain to us at this unhappy distance but our hopes that Eternal providence will yet restore him and raise him up, and comfort and support you, my Mrs and all yrs (in which number we here beg leave to be included).[74]

Ward's depression grew worse, ending in April 1705 with the terrible news that he had committed suicide; in June came the even sadder news that Jack, their second son, in Holland training as a merchant, had died of fever. By the end of the year Mary herself was dying, and Spreat carried out her last request in January 1705/6

> to perform for me your promise of seeing me laid in a leaden coffin in Chew [Magna] Church as near as with conveniency my father and mother.[75]

The children corresponded with Spreat all their lives and used his good offices to help with their requests as their father sank into depression. Jepp and Jenny wrote from boarding school, while even after her marriage Betty continued to write to Spreat.

In 1710 Spreat began the painstaking work of listing all Clarke's money, stocks, silver and jewellery and, after his death in October, arranged the funeral and paid bequests. Although Mary, like other employers of stewards, had occasionally criticised Spreat, saying he was sometimes too rash in his undertakings, she knew his true worth and believed he would venture his life to serve any of the family. With his own children dead in infancy, the Clarke children became his chief care and it fell to Spreat to keep meticulous accounts, pay maintenance for the younger children and to look after the capital until the trust was wound up.[76]

Spreat had stayed close to his own family; his journal is peppered with visits to his parents at nearby Luckham farm and meetings with his brothers. He died in 1733 in his 70th year but as his will had been drawn up in 1704, many legatees were dead. He left the income from a tenement in West Buckland to his mother if she were still alive, ten guineas each to Edward and Mary Clarke and 30 guineas to Nanny together with a little colt. The other Clarke children received a guinea each, while servants received 5s each. He did not want an extravagant funeral and his brothers were executors, inheriting his personal estate and his wearing apparel. In a nice gesture, despite 'how unhandsomely Grace my wife has done by me', he left her the sum of five pounds.[77]

The Clarke/Spreat correspondence provides a unique insight into the relationship of a steward and the family he worked for. John Spreat's career is a remarkable study in upward social mobility, for unlike some stewards, his life began humbly. He had been the eyes and ears and voice of his master in Somerset and carried out faithfully all the duties of a steward. His monument in Milverton church refers to him as 'Gentleman' – a status which in life had reflected his employer's rank but which he had earned by the way he had conducted himself.[78]

ENDNOTES

1 Edward Clarke of Chipley 1650–1710; Mary Clarke nee Jepp 1655–1705 and their children: Edward (Ward) January1681–April 1705, Elizabeth (Betty) October 1682–September 1712. Anne (Nanny) November 1683–1744, John (Jack) December 1685–June 1705, Mary (Molly) March 1688–May 1733, Jepp October 1691–1741, Samuel (Sammy) November 1692–May 1732 and Jane (Jenny) February 1693–June 1732.

2 Hainsworth, D.R., *Stewards, Lords and People* (London, 1992), 2.

3 DD/SF 290 and 3078.

4 Mary Clarke to Clarke November 1689 DD/SF

3833.

5 Hainsworth, *op.cit.*, 265, note 2.

6 In November 1697 he offered £40–£50 more than land was worth. DD/SF1774.

7 Priscilla Flower-Smith, 'Landowners on the Devon and Somerset Border 1660–1715' (unpublished thesis Exeter 1996). By 1710 his total income of about £1875 p.a. made him one of the richest men in the county.

8 Robinson, J. M., *The English Country Estate* (1988), 55. 'I would faine have had him take it for seven years but could not get [farmer Hurtnell] to alter his mind, so I have consented to his having it another year on the same terms unless Mr Trott and John Spreat can get him to do otherwise. I am of the mind a bird in the hand is worth 2 in the bush'. Mary Clarke to Edward Clarke 30 January 1696/7. DD/SF 3833.

9 Wadham College, Oxford, was the centre for experimental science and gardening during the Commonwealth. John Buckland MP was a member of John Evelyn's circle who were all interested in arboriculture. De Beer, *Correspondence of John Locke* (Oxford) no. 966: 'You have also increased my debt to you by your kind present of the Freezland sheep', Clarke to Locke 29 September 1687.

10 de Beer *Correspondence*, *op.cit.* note 9.

11 Heal, F., and Holmes, C., *The Gentry in England and Wales 1500–1700* (1994), 117.

12 Spreat to Clarke 3 January 1693/4. DD/SF 3825.

13 DD/SF 3357.

14 Mary Clarke to Clarke 13 April 1696. DD/SF 3833.

15 Clarke to Spreat, Ivychurch, 12 July 1699. DD/SF 3557.

16 During 20 Sundays in 1698 he went to Langford Budville morning and evening nine times, to Nynehead twice and once to Milverton alone, as well as to Holcombe and Langford twice, Langford and Milverton twice, Nynehead and Langford once, Langford and Oake once, Milverton and Nynehead once and Nynehead and Wellington once. Journal. DD/SF 290 & 3078.

17 Journal. DD/SF 290.

18 Mary Clarke to Clarke, Chipley 15 February 1694/5 and 30 March 1700. DD/SF 3833.

19 Hainsworth, *op.cit.* note 2, 107; Bettey, Joseph, 'The eyes and ears of the Lord' *Wiltshire Archaeol Natur Hist Mag* 96, 2003, 19–23. Lord Arundell's John Bennett hired guards and Sir John Nicholas's Thomas Greene paid drovers and merchants to take money.

20 DD/SF485.

21 Hainsworth, *op.cit.*, 187, note 2.

22 Thompson, E.P., *Customs in common* (Harmondsworth 1991), 103.

23 Mary Clarke to Clarke, 9 December 1696. DD/SF 3833.

24 Neeson, J., *Commoners, common rights, enclosure and social change in England 1700–1820* (1993), 161.

25 27 May 1698 Journal. DD/SF 3078.

26 Thompson, *op.cit.*, 43, note 22; Heal and Holmes, *op.cit.*, 372, note 11; Mary Clarke to Clarke November 1696. DD/SF 3833; Mary Clarke to Clarke 4 November 1696. DD/SF 3833.

27 Joseph Bettey, 'Development of watermeadows on the Salisbury Avon 1665–90', *Agricultural History Review* 51 (2003), 163–72; Thompson, *op. cit*., 47, note 22.

28 Mary Clarke to Spreat, 22 February 1697/8. DD/SF 3885.

29 Journal and Clarke to Spreat, London, 5 April 1698. DD/SF 3825.

30 Mary Clarke to Spreat, 24 January 1698/0. DD/SF 3885.

31 Clarke to M la Roque, 9 February 1698. DD/SF 3825.

32 Clarke to Spreat, London, 11 February 1698/9. DD/SF 3825.

33 Designed by William Taylor. Bridget Clarke, 'William Taylor new discoveries', Georgian Group *Journal* (1998), 1–11.

34 Edward Clarke to John Spreat, 31 December 1692. DD/SF3842.

35 Clarke to Spreat, Autumn 1697. DD/SF 3825.

36 Probably John Watson (died 1707) who made alterations to Melbury House, Dorset, where his portrait is preserved.

37 Clarke to Spreat, April 1699. DD/SF 3825.

38 1 March 1698 Journal. DD/SF 3078.

39 Clarke to Spreat, London, 22 November 1690. DD/SF 3842.

40 Clarke to Spreat, 16 May 1698. DD/SF 3842.

41 Mary Clarke to Spreat, 22 October 1698. DD/SF 3885.

42 Bridget Clarke, 'The marriage of John Locke's wife', *Locke Newsletter* (1991), 93–114.

43 Spreat to Clarke, Chipley, 4 January 1702. DD/SF 3825. Betty eventually married in September 1704.

44 Journal. DD/SF 3078.

45 Mary Clarke to Clarke, 1 April 1701. DD/SF 3864.

46 Mary Clarke to Clarke, May 1704. DD/SF 3864.

47 27 June 1698. Journal.

48 Clarke to Spreat, London, 8 June 1699. DD/SF 3557.

49 Mary Clarke to Clarke, 12 April 1690. DD/SF 4515.

50 13 April 1698 Journal. DD/SF3078.

51 Elizabeth (Betty) Clarke to Spreat, London, 30 September 1692. DD/SF 3837.

52 Mary Clarke to Clarke. DD/SF 3833.

53 Mary Clarke to Clarke, August 1696. DD/SF 3833.

[54] Clarke to Spreat, London, 26 December 1696. DD/SF3557.
[55] Lambeth Palace Library 'Grace Spreatt contra Johannes Spreatt de Chipley in parish of Ninehead in County of Somerset'.
[56] 2 June 1698 Journal. DD/SF 3078.
[57] Spreat to Clarke, May 1702. DD/SF1819; Mary Clarke to Clarke, 29 June 1700. DD/SF 4515.
[58] March 1690, October 1695, August 1698, January 1701, November 1701, July 1702, May 1705 and May 1708.
[59] Clarke to Spreat, London, 24 November 1698. DD/SF 3557; Mary Clarke to Spreat, 25 June 1698. DD/SF289.
[60] Clarke to Spreat, London, 20 February 1699. DD/SF 3557.
[61] Spreat to Clarke, 21 March 1690. DD/SF1819.
[62] Holcombe Rogus, home of the Bluetts; Thomas Dyke of Tetton, sheriff; Clarke to Spreat, 1 July 1699. DD/SF 290. Journal 16 April and 21 June 1698. DD/SF 3078.
[63] Information about Clarke's Parliamentary career from *History of Parliament: The Commons 1690–1715* (Cambridge, 2002) 576–97.
[64] Clarke to Ursula Venner, Chipley, 1 August 1698. DD/SF3838.
[65] Clarke to Spreat, London, 5 January 1698/9. DD/SF 3557.
[66] Hainsworth, *op.cit.*, 257, note 2.
[67] Clarke to Spreat, 28 February 1698. DD/SF 3842.
[68] Clarke to Spreat, 25 March 1699. DD/SF 3842.
[69] Mary Clarke to Spreat, London, 24 May 1690. DD/SF 289.
[70] Mary Clarke to Ursula Venner, 18 January 1691. DD/SF3085.
[71] Mary Clarke to Clarke, Chipley, 15 February 1694/5. DD/SF 3833 – i.e stopped wearing dresses at the age of five years. Journal.
[72] Mary Clarke to Spreat, 28 February 1698/9. DD/SF 289; Mary Clarke to Spreat, 14 January 1698. DD/SF 289.
[73] Mary Clarke to Spreat, 26 November 1698. DD/SF289.
[74] Spreat to Clarke, Chipley, 29 May 1699. DD/SF 3839.
[75] Mary Clarke to Spreat, 29 December 1704. DD/SF 3885.
[76] DD/SF 1846; on 26 March 1715 when the surviving children, plus John Jones on behalf of his children, signed their agreement to the accounts.
[77] DD/SAS[HV51]C795.
[78] Bettey, Joseph, *op. cit*. note 27; Hainsworth *op.cit.*, 23, note 2.