

Richard Olney, Farming and society in north Lincolnshire: the Dixons of Holton-le-Moor, 1741-1906 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018. pp. xvii+214. 2 maps. 16 plates. ISBN 9781910653050 Hbk. £30)

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The Dixon's were one of the most notable and influential north Lincolnshire landowning families of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Luckily for us, they were also prodigious and careful record keepers and because the family lived in the same house in Holton-le-Moor from 1795, the archive was kept safe. It consists of deeds and legal papers; estate records, including detailed farming accounts and papers; records of local office holding, and a range of personal papers, most notably those of William Dixon (1756-1824). Much of it was transferred from the family to the Lincolnshire Archive Office in the late 1960s, when Richard Olney, alongside his colleague Michael Lloyd, began the task of sorting and cataloguing the material, and other subsequent deposits. The archives have been known and utilized by historians but this is the first full study of the family. Olney has unmatched knowledge of the richness of the material and in publishing this history he has returned to and completed a project that has absorbed him, on and off, for decades.

The main aim of the book is to analyse the role of the rural middle class: how did the Dixons accrue their wealth and how did their increasing prosperity affect their standing in local Lincolnshire society? It is a social history that attempts to place the Dixon family within the themes of class, gender and status in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first chapters sets the scene with an overview of rural society, and the last two chapters focus on farming and landowning and class and community but most of the book is chronological, tracing the Dixon's through chapters that focus on the successive generations. This structure allows for a forensic study of the family but is not quite as successful in positioning them within the broader debates on the middling sort, on the role of women or the social and cultural place of land and landownership.

We begin with William 'the grazier' Dixon (1697-1781) who purchased a 90 acre farm and the lordship of Holton manor in 1741. He had deep roots in the area already, and through a series of canny purchases and investments this expanded to 1,750 acres in north Lincolnshire on his death. He also set up one of his sons Thomas (1729-1798), on a farm at Riby, the subject of the next chapter. Thomas' son William Dixon (1756-1824) took over affairs at Holton on his grandfather's death and on his marriage set about building a new house, Holton Hall, expanding his holdings and improving the estate. After this burst of energy, inertia set in and his business ambitions shrank. However, as chapter five shows, he was a voracious reader and writer, and his personal papers give us access to his views on community, poor relief, religion, labourers and philanthropy.

One of his sons, Thomas John Dixon (1785-1871), is the focus of the following two chapters. We see his progression from a partner in the Holton farms to their sole proprietor, a major landowner and a leading Lincolnshire agriculturist. By the mid 1840s his holdings totalled 3,600 acres, and he employed 44 men and boys, as well as local women and children. He undertook a range of improvements on the land and on the house, understood the opportunities the railway brought and together with his wife Mary Ann, embraced the trappings of their wealth without being ostentatious. On his death

this passed to his son Richard, who was troubled with a range of health difficulties and died in the same year as his father. In 1871 therefore the estate passed to Thomas John's daughter Ann Dixon, who in the 1880s became life-tenant of 4,500 acres. Ann and her sister Amelia were childless. Affected by the economic depression, the estate went into decline, the population of the village (always small) shrank and in 1906 the estate passed out of the hands of direct descendants, although it stayed within the wider family.

The study is an intricate family history, utilizing an exceptional archive. We learn of complex family machinations, the problems of inheritance, the use of the local marriage market to strengthen family networks, of the Dixon's participation in local affairs and impact on the village. They emerge as unpretentious and modest, landowners first and foremost, who enjoyed the prosperity this brought, but who had few social or political ambitions. There was no London season for the Dixon's and no hunting (save for Thomas John). Holton was not transformed into an estate village, and although as the only major landowner in the vicinity they had great local influence, this was not a gentry seat. They belonged, Olney argues, to a rural middling sort, a comfortable if moderate household. This book brings to life a group important to rural society who have been little studied or understood. With a few reservations over structure aside, this is a fascinating, accessible and lucid book and deserves a wide audience.

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