This study explores the relationship between the Leicestershire gentry and their shire landscape, comprising both the natural and built environment. It uses an interdisciplinary approach to investigate the impact of the landscape on the gentry and vice versa. It challenges the perception that this relationship was a simple matter of absentee possession void of affinity or influence. It pays particular attention to the gentry’s creation, consolidation and expression of identity during a period of political, religious and economic change.

Research is undertaken with these key research questions in mind, using the approaches outlined below:

- How did the expression of gentry identity manifest in the landscape?
- What role did the county landscape play in the formation of gentry agenda?
- To what extent did the local social network facilitate or restrict self-expression?
  - What was the most common incentive for land accumulation?
  - What do the findings reveal about gentry self-perception?

The litigation and landed interests recorded in documentary evidence are mapped digitally using GIS to reveal geographical clusters of gentry interest, which are then examined. Possible explanations include ideal topography for agriculture, proximity to trade routes, land value, familial affinity and the influence of the local social network. Case studies are taken from the courts of equity and common law, supplemented by land conveyance records and subsidy rolls.

Attention is given to the impact of space and place on gentry interaction and the symbiotic influence of gentry agenda and power. The landscape was used by the gentry for profit, recreation, and travel, which could cement or aggravate local allegiances and rivalries. Methods of land management such as emparkment or enclosure were particularly provocative. Manorial estates and parks, the King’s highway and the royal forest of Leicester are amongst the case studies used here.

The role of architecture in gentry self-expression is particularly revealing. This approach uses both surviving and documented evidence from the archaeological and antiquarian record. Manor houses and their chapels, parish churches and religious houses are used to explore themes of architectural style and the influence of fashion, the impact of the Reformation, the significance of physical location and the methods of sourcing building materials, e.g. quarrying and mining.

This approach argues for the importance and significance of physical location in gentry self-expression and self-perception postmortem. Predominantly using wills, it demonstrates that the location of a tomb or monument in a parish church, and the location of that church in the county, can reveal more about the person than the objects themselves in terms of religious or familial affinity. Gentry interaction with these tombs, such as removal or sale post-Dissolution, is also analysed.

By treating the gentry in isolation from the landscape, historical enquiry is at risk of contextual displacement and limitation. In the realm of both gentry and landscape studies this relationship should not be ignored. The economic value of land to the gentry is clear, but the extent to which the landscape influenced gentry identity was intimate, profound and enduring; which was the custodian? It is hoped that this investigation illustrates the merits of this approach, in turn making this branch of society – and their local landscape – better understood.