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# **Cheshire Life, 1934–39: the birth of the modern county magazine**

Andrew Hobbs

## **Abstract**

*This article describes the birth of one of Britain's most successful regional magazines, Cheshire Life, in 1934, in the context of the economic and social changes of the times, analysing it as a media product and historical source. Cheshire Life is part of a publishing genre – the county and regional magazine – which includes some sixty-five titles across England, with a monthly readership in the millions. This significant readership alone makes it worthy of academic study. But magazines like Cheshire Life can tell us about county identities and their history, attitudes to the countryside, the relationship between social class and sense of place, the changing role of the country house, countryside and nature writing and publishing, landscape photography and the broader regional media ecology. The magazine began as the mouthpiece for an economic development council during the Depression, but came under new ownership in 1935, leading to rapid and significant changes in its content and fortunes. The new publisher, Christopher Nicholls, had a huge influence on Cheshire Life and on county magazines as a genre, setting a template which is still in use today. Nicholls successfully created an advertising vehicle which grew fat on the 1930s' consumer advertising boom, filled with photographs and other editorial benefiting from the cachet of the county set. The decline of the gentry as political and economic leaders can be seen in the magazine, but their social world of 'county society' lived on, eagerly adopted by a segment of the rising middle class.*

## **Introduction**

*Cheshire Life* magazine is one of the most successful county magazines in the United Kingdom, part of a popular genre with readership in the millions.<sup>1</sup> But in 1935, a year after its launch, it was in trouble. The monthly was losing money and its publisher, an economic development body, was keen to get rid of it. There seemed to be little demand from readers or advertisers for its dry mix of industrial news, archaeology and nature writing. Eventually a Manchester printing company took it on, and transformed it. Wordy treatises on industrial strategy and the history of salt-making were replaced by photographs of debutantes, society weddings and hunt balls, and the magazine became a commercial success. This new-look *Cheshire Life* (influenced by national publications such as *Country Life*, *Countryman* and *Tatler*) became a template for county magazines across England.

Magazines by their nature are a responsive, opportunistic type of cultural product, making them a useful index of trends and worldviews. They are consumer products which bring together other consumer products, through advertisements and editorial features such as fashion and motoring pages; they are 'brand communities' in

the terminology of twenty-first-century marketers, creating ‘imagined communities’ of readers, and are therefore valuable historical sources for identities based on consumption, social class and place.<sup>2</sup> The 1930s meant unemployment and economic depression on one hand, but shopping, motoring and new home luxuries for a growing middle class on the other; *Cheshire Life* began as a magazine to tackle the former, but soon switched to the more lucrative mission of serving the latter. In its new guise it offered images of the county’s upper-middle classes, gentry and aristocracy at leisure, seemingly untouched by the Depression, expressing their class identities through hunt balls, shopping in Manchester and Liverpool, trips to London and foreign holidays. *Cheshire Life* arrived in the same year as J.B. Priestley’s *English journey*, in which he identified three separate Englands; the magazine went on to exemplify two of these: the gentry, still following country pursuits; and a new type of people who owned their own house and car, lived in suburban ribbon developments and worked in new types of white-collar jobs.<sup>3</sup> The magazine also captures perceptions of the connections between urban and rural, the past and the very modern present, struggles over who rules the county, and countryside preservation versus development and progress.

But *Cheshire Life* deserves study as a media product in its own right, and not only as a historical source. This article is a contribution to media history, identifying the place of county magazines in the broader ecosystem of countryside writing, book authorship and publishing, regional broadcasting, landscape and portrait photography, and local and regional newspapers. An examination of the magazine’s first six years (1934–39) enables us to witness the consolidation of a new genre, and to analyse its appeal, based on much older associations with the county. I begin by introducing the ancient, complex and diminishing identity of the county and some relevant features of the 1930s, before examining the wider genre of countryside and regional magazines of which *Cheshire Life* was a part. The birth and transformation of the magazine is described, the county magazine formula developed by *Cheshire Life* is outlined, and some of the editors and contributors are analysed. This context enables us to explore tensions represented in the magazine.<sup>4</sup>

In inter-war England, the county was both an administrative unit and an idea, with powerful cultural associations. Cheshire was an Anglo-Saxon shire from at least the tenth century. By the 1930s it was an administrative and ceremonial county, with a county council administering most services outside the large towns.<sup>5</sup> County councils were introduced in 1889, within living memory in the 1930s – the aim was to provide more democratic governance than the previous quarterly meetings of county magistrates and their committees, and assizes (courts), all of which had been dominated by unelected aristocrats and gentry.

The regular meetings of these older institutions, in the county town and other administrative centres, had generated a social life of balls, assemblies, concerts and a marriage market.<sup>6</sup> These gatherings, portrayed in the novels of Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell (Gaskell’s *Cranford* is based on the Cheshire town of Knutsford), helped to create an enduring myth of an elite group known as the county set, county

society or simply the county, comprising the aristocracy, gentry and select members of the upper-middle class. Alfred Hitchcock’s 1941 film *Suspicion* and Stella Gibbons’s 1932 novel *Cold comfort farm* capture this world of provincial country houses, hunt meets and balls. Other influences included the use of the county as an organising structure for writing on history (from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and the countryside (in interwar book series such as Batsford’s *Face of Britain* and the *Shell Guides*), in which each volume covered a different county.<sup>7</sup> These images of the county were current in the 1930s and continue today, creating ‘a geographical boundary that is hallowed and prestigious’ in magazine publishing. The inclusion of a county magazine, *Borsetshire Life*, in the long-running BBC radio drama *The Archers* confirms the institutionalisation of the genre. A description of *The Archers* by a 1970s’ programme editor could equally apply to most county magazines: ‘the voice of the Shires, conservative, sensible and not particularly egalitarian’, expressing English identity.<sup>8</sup>

*Cheshire Life* was launched in 1934, in the middle of a decade of rapid change, when structural adjustment in the economy and an international recession led to the paradox of millions of unemployed workers while a million private cars were driven by others untouched by the Depression.<sup>9</sup> The number of agricultural workers fell, replaced by white-collar commuters. Cheshire, ‘perhaps Manchester’s equivalent of Surrey’, had 13.2 percent of its population in white-collar occupations, far higher than any other northern county.<sup>10</sup> For this growing middle class, and the majority of the working population untouched by the Depression, life became more comfortable and enjoyable than ever before, as the cost of living fell by a third.<sup>11</sup>

Magazines about particular localities and counties have been published since the early nineteenth century, for example the *North Devon Magazine* (established 1824) but the county magazines of the 1930s had additional influences, particularly two national magazines, *Country Life* and *Countryman*. The weekly *Country Life*, launched in 1897, described itself as ‘the Journal for all interested in *Country Life* and Country Pursuits’, and featured architecture, particularly of country houses, natural history, art, sports such as polo and sailing, history, walking and gardens. The quality of the writing, photography and illustrations was high. It was ‘aimed at both a country and an urban readership [...] who would be enabled to enjoy English country life vicariously’.<sup>12</sup> While the *Country Life* of the 1930s seemed almost timeless, *Countryman* (launched in 1927) was very much of its time, ‘a quarterly review and miscellany of rural life and progress’, with an emphasis on progress. Its talented editor J.W. Robertson Scott wrote much of the early issues, in an engagingly opinionated, irreverent and optimistic style. It was progressive and left of centre, campaigning for policies and improvement rather than laissez-faire, and reporting on evening classes, libraries, and indoor toilets for agricultural workers.<sup>13</sup>

The first significant county magazine, the *Sussex County Magazine*, predated the *Countryman* by a few months, launching in 1926. Its editor Arthur Beckett was the chairman of T.R. Beckett Ltd, local newspaper publishers, and a conservationist, journalist and author of books about Sussex. His manifesto in the December 1926

launch issue promised ‘all the usual features of a monthly miscellany, except that all its contents will have a Sussex flavour, either ancient or modern’ (p. 5). A spate of other county magazines soon followed in the early 1930s (Fig. 1), many of them connected with the national movement of rural community councils (RCCs), co-ordinating bodies set up in each county in response to a perceived crisis of the countryside after the First World War. Most RCC county magazines were published by Charles Wood, a Leeds-based publisher of parish magazines. However, some county magazines such as the *Sussex County Magazine* had no connection to RCCs, while some RCC magazines (*Nottinghamshire Countryside*, for example) were not published by Wood.<sup>14</sup>

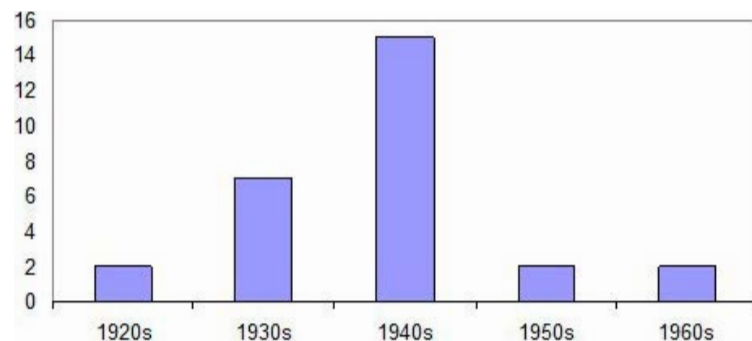


Figure 1: County magazine launches, 1920–68. Sources: *Willing's Press Guide*, *Waterloo Directory of English Newspapers and Periodicals: 1800–1900*; Northamptonshire County Libraries catalogue; interview with Barrie Wood (3 May 2011)

### The birth of *Cheshire Life*

Unlike most county magazines of the 1930s, *Cheshire Life* was not connected to a Rural Community Council, nor was it published by Charles Wood. Instead it was ‘the Official Journal of the Cheshire Publicity and Industrial Development Council’ (CPIDC), set up in 1933 to attract new industries to Cheshire which would reduce unemployment, although this was already falling. The only academic study of the CPIDC concludes that it was ineffective.<sup>15</sup> The magazine was started by a group of Middlewich friends, led by 24-year-old solicitor Norman H. Hignett (1912–56), who was also secretary to the Development Council, and three women, journalist Katherine Lawrence (1900–65), and two others recalled by Lawrence in 1948 only by their first names: Barbara, the magazine’s secretary, and Edith, described as the magazine’s ‘muse’, suggesting that she was Hignett’s girlfriend. According to Lawrence, the magazine ‘had its beginnings in the social circle in which I moved at that time’. The magazine’s ‘editorial and publishing offices’, also the development council’s address, Central Chambers, Middlewich, was in fact a room behind a butcher’s shop.<sup>16</sup> Hignett appears to have persuaded the development council to underwrite the new magazine. He was a newly qualified solicitor, the son of an assistant stock-keeper at a chemical works near Weaverham. He later went bankrupt, became the Chichester coroner and served four years in prison for defrauding elderly clients.<sup>17</sup>

The first issue of *Cheshire Life* appeared in May 1934, printed by the Edgeley Press, Stockport, price sixpence. It was thin (thirty-six pages, in contrast to the plumpness of *Country Life*, which reached 300 pages in one interwar issue), black and white, and its contents were worthy but dull. The articles were short essays rather than journalism (that is, no quotes from interviewees, a single viewpoint in each article) and there were seven-and-a-quarter pages of advertising, a modestly healthy ratio. *Cheshire Life* was soon in financial trouble, and was offered to the *Warrington Guardian* newspaper group.<sup>18</sup> A year after its launch it was passed on to a printer, Christopher Nicholls (1882–1957), owner of the Philips Park Press, Manchester.

### New owner, new magazine

Nicholls had a wider vision than the *Warrington Guardian* and a more modern understanding of advertising, so could see the potential of the magazine. He had huge influence on *Cheshire Life* and county magazines as a genre. Growing up in the back streets near Piccadilly in Manchester, he became a printer’s travelling salesman and then set up his own company, C. Nicholls & Co Ltd (the Philips Park Press). A 1933 brochure boasts how the company produced more than 150,000 catalogues a day, for clients such as Halfords, Pifco, Kendals, Great Universal Stores and Affleck & Brown, from its huge works in north Manchester. Nicholls’s travels in the United States and Europe brought ‘new ideas in the realms of printing and advertising throughout two continents’ while his son, Bernard, had studied American advertising methods in the 1920s; the brochure’s samples of modernist design suggest that he had learnt from the international ferment in magazine and advertising design of this time.<sup>19</sup>

Nicholls remade himself as a country gentleman, with a big house in the country and membership of the local hunt. His upward social mobility was emblematic of the new-style *Cheshire Life*. By the early 1930s he was renting Cloverley Hall near Whitchurch, which was big enough to accommodate 125 evacuee pupils plus staff from Manchester’s Lancasterian School for disabled children (the headmistress was Nicholls’s big sister Grace Nicholls).<sup>20</sup> His *Manchester Guardian* obituary describes ‘a man of strong character with a colourful and attractive personality [...]’. He had a remarkable memory for poetry, and could produce an apt quotation, usually from Shakespeare, for any occasion.<sup>21</sup>

The June 1935 issue was the first under new ownership, and the contrast with previous issues is striking. However, a proposal by Hignett, the original editor, six months earlier, that the magazine should widen its scope to cover the ‘sporting and social life of the county’, suggests that some of the radical changes were his idea. This may explain why he was kept on as editor.<sup>22</sup> The May 1935 issue was the last under the old regime, and featured a serious study of poultry rearing, and four pages of business and industrial news, alongside history, folklore, archaeology, country walks and fashion, all totalling twenty-eight pages. The following issue, June 1935, included an announcement, buried on page thirty-two, of the change of ownership, which promised that the policy of the magazine will remain unchanged, and it ‘will continue to support the objects and work of the Council, whose Secretary (Mr N.H. Hignett)

still co-operates in an editorial capacity [...]. Many new features have, however, been introduced, and publication upon this wider basis will, it is believed, enable the magazine to fulfil its purpose of presenting, month by month, a picture of the social, sporting, industrial and agricultural activities of Cheshire and the adjacent areas’.

In reality, the concerns of the development council were sidelined and new features made up most of the thirty-six-page issue, such as three pages on the grand Capesthorpe Hall, two pages of gardens, two pages on a new country club in a converted Victorian mansion, a page of photos from the Border Counties’ Otterhounds’ recent hunt, a page of portraits of debutantes and heiresses, a centre spread of ‘this month’s fashionable Cheshire Weddings’, and a page each on polo and motoring. The cover was also of the Otterhounds, while inside there was a full-page portrait of Sir William Bromley-Davenport of Capesthorpe Hall, and president of the doomed development council (the magazine continued ‘under the auspices of’ the council until February 1936; it was disbanded soon afterwards). While the country house feature, the gardening, polo, hunting and motoring mimicked *Country Life*, the photographs of debutantes and society weddings were staples of gossip magazines such as *The Sketch*, *The Tatler*, *Queen* and *The Bystander*. The magazine was now much more visually attractive.

This new, showy, elitist, consumerist *Cheshire Life* can be interpreted as the death throes of the traditional county elite and the rural life they controlled, and also the birth of a new middle-class consumer society. Lee sees the magazine’s abrupt change as emblematic of the end of ‘noblesse oblige’, previously seen in the traditional gentry’s willingness to serve as magistrates and county councillors. The new inhabitants of the country house were not willing to take on the responsibilities of governing, and *Cheshire Life* ‘by 1936 had become a gossip journal for the “smart set” who considered themselves above the normal level of suburban manners’.<sup>23</sup> Compared to other county magazines of the 1930s, the new *Cheshire Life* is certainly more consumerist and less serious; while the *Somerset Countryman* and *Gloucestershire Countryside* (both Rural Community Council magazines) have articles on hunting, polo and a dog show, the *Kent County Journal* (another RCC organ) and the *Sussex County Magazine* (non-RCC) did not. None of these comparator magazines included weddings, social events, motoring or fashion. This distinctiveness is partly because it was published as a commercial concern rather than as a mouthpiece of a Rural Community Council, but also because of the nature of Cheshire. It was a wealthy county and a commuter area for people who made their money in Manchester and Liverpool. Perhaps the magazine was now genuinely reflecting the county from which it took its name.

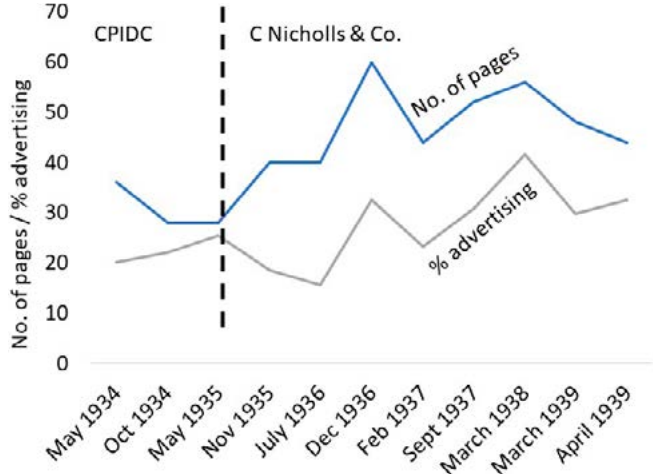


Figure 2: Pagination and proportion of content taken up by advertising, 1934–9. The vertical line marks the change of ownership from CPIDC to C. Nicholls & Co Ltd

Nicholls probably saw the potential of *Cheshire Life* as an advertising vehicle, and perhaps as a voice for the county society into which he had moved. Whatever his motivations, the magazine appeared to make money under its new guise. No business records survive, but pagination (number of pages) and the number and type of advertisements are usually reliable guides to a publication’s financial health, and both improved under Nicholls (Fig. 2). Pagination was in decline until Nicholls took over; it then increased, reaching a high of sixty pages for the December 1936 issue. The proportion of advertising also increased, from around 20 percent in the launch issue to double that (41 percent) at its 1930s’ peak in March 1938. Growth in advertising is to be expected in almost any 1930s’ publication, as disposable income grew for the majority, and home electricity spread, increasing the demand for electric irons, vacuum cleaners and wireless (radio) sets.<sup>24</sup>

Changes in the type of images in advertising and editorial demonstrate the rapid changes in *Cheshire Life*’s personality. Advertising is an important visual element of any magazine; in the eleven issues analysed, there were slightly more advertising images (156) than editorial images (152).<sup>25</sup> However, these numbers can only show crude trends, especially as the size of images has not been taken into account. Table 1 shows how advertising in *Cheshire Life* moved rapidly from a focus on industrial and agricultural development, targeting business readers, to focusing on the county’s social and sporting life, aiming at the old, new and aspiring middle classes and above. Maps appeared in early adverts, typically showing areas covered by electrification and therefore suitable for building factories. Similarly, pictures of buses and trucks appeared in adverts emphasising good transport infrastructure or selling diesel lorries to businesses. There were no adverts featuring maps, commercial vehicles or factories after 1935. Instead, adverts for consumer goods appeared in greater numbers, particularly clothes (expensive shops in King Street and St Ann’s Square, Manchester were common), furniture, houses and cars.

Table 1. Advertising images: change in selected categories

	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Map	5	3				
Bus, truck	5	4				
Factory	3					
Houses for sale		3	10	8	16	2
Fashion, beauty		1	3	11	20	12
Furniture		1	1	2	8	6
Cars			7	7	14	9

Topics of editorial images changed equally rapidly. There were more photographs in general, as the layout became livelier, but also as the number of pages increased, and entire pages of multiple photos, typically of social events, weddings or hunts, began to appear. The range of images increased (Table 2); the two 1934 issues had images only of industry, historical buildings and objects, landscapes and village scenes, farming and agriculture and a portrait. Five years later, in 1939, there was no industry or history and only one landscape photograph. But there were more than a dozen images each of social events such as hunt balls, and sports such as horse racing, golf and rowing. There was more farming and agriculture, more portraits, and new genres of consumption, such as wedding photographs, fashion, motoring, and previews of theatre and film. There was also natural history, local government, the armed forces, and empire.

Table 2. Editorial images: change in selected categories

	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938 <sup>26</sup>	1939
Industry	5	1		1		
History, inc. country houses	5	8	9	1		
Cars		4	1	2	4	7
Fashion		3	3	2	6	4
Weddings, engagements			9	5	12	11
Social events				4	8	27

Figure 3. Portraits of Cheshire beauties, similar to *Country Life*'s 'girls in pearls', became a regular feature of *Cheshire Life* after its commercial take-over in 1935. This photograph was taken by E. Chambre Hardman in his Liverpool studio. (Used by permission of *Cheshire Life*)



The county magazine formula

By 1939, if not before, *Cheshire Life* had established a formula for county magazines which still endures today. None of the elements was original, being taken from nineteenth-century local magazines, from *Country Life*, *Countryman* and metropolitan gossip magazines such as *The Sketch*, *The Tatler*, *Queen* and *The Bystander*; but the combination was original, and was adopted by other county magazines after the Second World War. As with any genre of local, county or regional media, the same formula, applied in different places, produces distinctive results. Visual elements included photographs of well-known beauty spots (ideal destinations for the local tourism of the Sunday drive); portraits of county celebrities, typically young and female (Fig. 3), such as debutantes, newly engaged heiresses, or titled women; photographs of country houses, mansions and palaces; social events such as hunt balls, field and equestrian sports; and county institutions such as agricultural shows and maps delineating what was included and excluded. Seemingly generic content such as fashion pages gained a county accent when the photographs were supplied by shops in Wilmslow or Manchester. Advertisements effortlessly expressed county identity, for example line drawings of the familiar Cheshire vernacular of half-timbered bank branches; property advertising, showing the latest hard-to-heat hall up for sale; and local products appealing to county patriotism, such as the regular quarter-page adverts for Hovis bread: 'As Cheshire is the birthplace of Hovis, so Hovis is the source of all that makes for health' (Fig. 4).



Textual elements included the magazine title (naming the territory), the use of ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’, boosterism and the personification of natural features, linking people to landscape. A July 1935 article, ‘The philosophy of Cheshire’, argues that

the peculiar character of each county will have its effect upon the lives of the people and will give to them distinctive characteristics [...]. If we ask ourselves what is the philosophy of Cheshire, we shall find a summary answer in a few words: doggedness, glad content and width of vision [...]. The natives of the plain are always dogged.

The article was illustrated by a photograph of a smartly-dressed ploughman with horse-drawn plough. History and literature were easily turned to patriotic account. County traditions, superstitions, customs, architecture and history were featured, while the literary county included poetry, fiction, biography and reviews. ‘Cheshire’s contribution to English Literature’ (July 1935) was typical, while book-review pages offered a unique service in bringing together the latest publications on the county. County magazines employ ‘othering’ only rarely, preferring to accentuate the positive aspects of their own territory, rather than criticising others. A rare example is an April 1939 theatre preview by ‘Pagliacci’ of Walter Greenwood’s new play, *Only mugs work*, about London spivs: ‘I fancy that here the North will get its own back. London sniggered at our queer ways in [Greenwood’s] *Love on the dole* and now we will be able to snigger at London’s paltry ideas of slickness and adventure in this play, written after three years of residence in the Metropolis.’

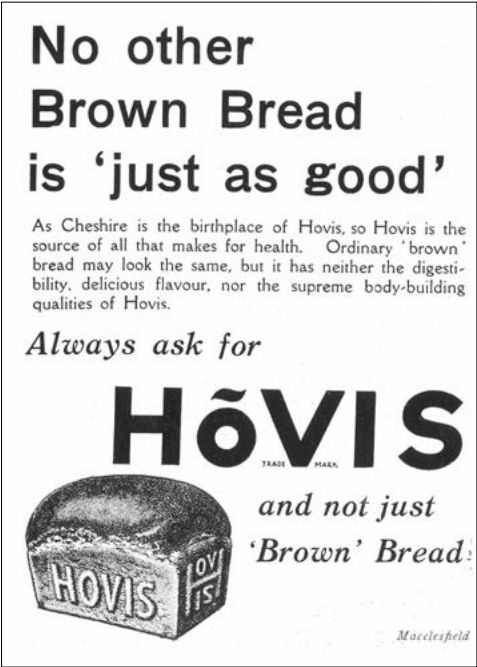


Figure 4. An advertisement appealing to county patriotism: *Cheshire Life*, October 1934, p. 164. (Used by permission of *Cheshire Life*)

**The fall of the gentry and the rise of the middle classes**

*Cheshire Life* became overwhelmingly middle class when a commercial publisher bought the magazine, revealing two aspects of the 1930s: the growth of a professional, technical class; and the new, conspicuous consumption of a section of the middle class. The list of contributors to the first issue demonstrates the first aspect: while the foreword is by a leader of the Cheshire gentry and the county set, most of the contributors are professionals and experts, a group which grew significantly as a proportion of the population in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> The foreword was written by the chairman of the Publicity and Industrial Development Council, Brigadier-General Sir William Bromley-Davenport of Capesthorpe Hall, lord-lieutenant, KCB, CMG, CBE, DSO, TD. The other contributors also had initials after their names, but theirs were qualifications rather than awards – fellowships of professional institutes and scholarly societies, university degrees and professorships, and job titles. Bromley-Davenport’s type of county leadership – unpaid, motivated by duty – was disappearing, to be replaced by experts and officials. In the three issues analysed from the magazine’s first year, before its takeover, it is a relatively classless publication, with most content having no obvious class associations, such as photographs of historic buildings, industrial developments and an advert for Crosville buses. Only thirteen items could be categorised according to social class (Table 3), split almost equally between upper class, defined as aristocracy and gentry (three), middle class (five) and working class (four). Examples from each category include, respectively, a photograph of the county president of the Girl Guides, Miss Mary C. Royden (sister of Sir Ernest Bland Royden, 3rd baronet and high sheriff of Anglesey); a feature on agricultural progress led by scientists; and a photo of salmon fishermen in the Dee at Handbridge, Chester.

**Table 3. Social class of writers, subjects and advertisers’ targets, before and after takeover of *Cheshire Life* by a commercial publisher**

	Published by Cheshire Publicity & Industrial Development Council (1934–5)		Published by C. Nicholls & Co Ltd (1935–9)	
	No. of items	% of items	No. of items	% of items
Working class	4	31	6	3
Middle class	5	38	172	74
Middle/upper class	1	8	36	16
Upper class	3	23	18	8
	13		232	


Under the new regime, *Cheshire Life* became firmly middle class, emphasising the showy, hedonistic and consumerist aspects of this class, rather than its professional and technocratic side. Many county magazines associated with Rural Community

Councils, such as *Nottinghamshire Countryside* and *Leicestershire*, continued to publish rather dry articles on important topics. But when Nicholls took over *Cheshire Life*, such compilations of semi-official reports by experts and officials almost disappeared, to be replaced by a more journalistic product, about people rather than issues, and written by professional writers and journalists. This change in writing style makes comparisons difficult, but quantitative content analysis (Table 3) confirms the impressions of a change in topics. Little attention was now paid to working-class subjects (only six of 232 items classified by social class), with three quarters of the content now devoted to middle-class subjects (172 items). There was a shift from social responsibility to display, from middle class, as technical and managerial, to hedonistic.

There were still glimpses of Cheshire's aristocrats and gentry. The Duke of Westminster, one of the world's richest men, is snapped next to an equally glum Lady Delamere at the Cheshire Hunt Ball (Fig. 5); there is no mention that the duke was on his third wife, among many other affairs, nor that he looked favourably on the Nazis and their hatred of Jews. County magazines avoid controversy. The monthly round-up of gossip – 'County Notes' by Margaret Roberts – often featured knights, ladies, dukes and duchesses, and photographs from events such as 'Miss Barbara Churton's coming-out dance' (March 1938), celebrating her presentation at court as a debutante.<sup>28</sup> Roberts gives the impression that she is part of the county set, apologising that her July 1936 jottings were late because she had been on the maiden voyage of the *Queen Mary* to New York. Things were quiet at home, she reported, as 'most of the members of Cheshire society are in London at the present for the season', meaning racing at Ascot, yachting at Cowes, tennis at Wimbledon, and other sporting events offering opportunities for display. This was the high point of the British gossip column, in *Tatler* and the other illustrated weeklies, and in daily newspapers such as the *Daily Express* and *Daily Sketch*, which created a cast of well-known characters.<sup>29</sup> This idea is echoed in the heading, 'People we all know', in the first issue of *Cheshire Life*'s new regime, June 1935, on a page of portraits of young women with aristocratic connections: Lady Priscilla Willoughby, a sister of Lord Stanley of Alderley, the fiancée of Lord Cairns's son; and various debutantes.



Figure 5. The Duke of Westminster and Lady Delamere at the Cheshire Hunt Ball: *Cheshire Life*, December 1936, p. 29. (Used by permission of *Cheshire Life*)



**FOXES**  
DON'T LIKE  
GETTING WET,  
NOR DO  
FOXHUNTERS

A day when foxes  
won't leave cover.  
Never mind how  
long a wait, you'll  
always keep dry in a

**"W. R. C."  
HUNT MACK**  
Ladies' and Gentlemen's  
**45/- to 4 gns.**  
Grooms' Coats from  
25/-

**WILLIAMS  
(CHESTER) LTD.**  
8 St. Werburgh St.  
**CHESTER**  
Phone : 200

Figure 6. Advert for hunting coat, *Cheshire Life*: December 1936, p. 4. (Used by permission of *Cheshire Life*)



As the gentry declined, aspects of their way of life were adopted by the upper-middle class, who liked to read about themselves in *Cheshire Life*, along with greater numbers of lower-middle-class readers who might aspire to such lives, aided by the power of a magazine to communicate dreams and desires. One sign of the gentry's decline shortly before the magazine's launch was the end of the annual Cheshire County Assembly, held for the last time in December 1930, at Arley Hall. Bromley-Davenport led the organising committee for this ball, attended by more than 200 members of Cheshire's 'principal families'.<sup>30</sup> About 1,300 landed gentry around Britain sold up in the interwar years, and the majority of gentry families who owned land in 1914 no longer did so by 1950. But the world of lavish balls and dinners, hunting (see Fig. 6) and house parties continued, now with members of the upper-middle class too, and pictures and reports of these events became a staple of *Cheshire Life*.

Articles and adverts about, or aimed at, the middle classes, confirm that the rise in real incomes for this part of society, due to the fall in the cost of living, created 'a kind of golden age' when 'middle-class consumption [was] a striking aspect of interwar England'.<sup>31</sup> Editorial content included fashion pages devoted to fur coats (November 1935), or a Christmas gift guide recommending 'hankys in silk muselin-de-soie, embroidered in gold thread' (December 1936). Two months after the Jarrow hunger march, the article notes that 'our feet – like the poor – are ever with us' before suggesting a pair of satin dancing shoes and ending with the announcement that 'This is to be Prosperity Christmas'. The adverts capture a new culture of shopping and spending even more powerfully, offering HMV refrigerators, bespoke furniture from Waring & Gillow, ball gowns from Madam Arthur of Manchester or Conrad Oram ('court dressmaker and ladies' tailor'), watches, diamonds, membership of Mere Golf & Country Club, and more. There are Rolls Royces, Bentleys, and more modest cars, suburban villas and the occasional ancient country house in the estate agents' ads, and the glamorous wonderlands of department stores such as Browns of Chester, Kendal Milnes of Manchester and George Henry Lee of Liverpool (Fig. 7). The *nouveau riche* had arrived.

Figure 7. Advert for ball gown from Liverpool department store George Henry Lee: *Cheshire Life*, December 1936. (Used by permission of *Cheshire Life*), p. 45



## Conclusion

This article describes the birth of one of Britain's most successful regional magazines, *Cheshire Life*, in 1934, in the context of the economic and social changes of the times. The magazine began as the mouthpiece for an economic development council during the Depression, but came under new ownership in 1935, leading to rapid and significant changes in its content and fortunes. The new publisher Christopher Nicholls was an advertising and marketing expert whose rise from the back streets of Piccadilly to a Shropshire country mansion epitomised the new-look magazine. Nicholls had a huge influence on *Cheshire Life* but also on county magazines as a genre, setting a template which is still in use today. Nicholls successfully created an advertising vehicle which grew fat on the boom in consumer advertising of the 1930s, filling it with photographs and other editorial benefiting from the cachet of the county set. Content analysis of a sample of magazines, whilst not claiming to be scientific, does point to certain trends.

In particular, the decline of the gentry as political and economic leaders can be seen in the magazine, but their social world of ‘county society’ lived on, eagerly adopted by a segment of the rising middle class.<sup>32</sup>

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## Endnotes

- 1 A search in the marketing database BRAD (9 December 2022) for magazines in England, with a county or region (e.g., Cotswolds, Isle of Wight) in their title, found sixty-five magazines, with a combined circulation of 997,000; current estimates of magazine readership reckon on seven or eight readers per copy. Full runs of county magazines are available in the British Library and in county archives across England, plus the Richard Roberts Archive based in Stockport has good holdings.
- 2 Laura Davidson, Lisa McNeill, and Shelagh Ferguson, ‘Magazine communities: brand community formation in magazine consumption’, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 27:5/6 (2007), p. 219; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006); Mark Tomlinson, ‘Lifestyle and social class’, *European Sociological Review*, 19:1 (2003), pp. 97–111.
- 3 A.J.P. Taylor, *English history, 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 301. Only the third, England, of the working class, was excluded from the magazine.
- 4 *Cheshire Life* is discussed briefly and perceptively in J.M. Lee, *Social leaders and public persons: a study of county government in Cheshire since 1888* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 102–3; the only other academic studies of this genre are Andrew Hobbs, ‘Lancashire Life magazine, 1947–73: a middle-class sense of place’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24:3 (2013), pp. 398–423; and Clare Cook and Catherine Darby, ‘County magazines: pride, and a passion for print’, *AJE Journal*, 2:1 (2013).
- 5 Alan Crosby, *A history of Cheshire* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1996).
- 6 David Neave, ‘The identity of the East Riding of Yorkshire’, in Edward Royle (ed.), *Issues of regional identity: in honour of John Marshall* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 186, 198.
- 7 Nigel Goose, ‘Regions, 1700–1870’, in Roderick Floud, Jane Humphries, and Paul Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge economic history of modern Britain: industrialisation, 1700–1870*, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 152; Catherine Brace, ‘Finding England everywhere: regional identity and the construction of national identity, 1890–1940’, *Ecumene*, 6:1 (1999), pp. 102–3.
- 8 Guy Consterdine, *How magazine advertising works* (Woking: Guy Consterdine Associates, 4th ed., 2002), p. 19; Stuart Laing, ‘Images of the rural in popular culture, 1750–1990’, in Brian Short (ed.), *The English rural community: image and analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 148.
- 9 Taylor, *English history*, cited in David W. Gutzke and Michael John Law, *The Roadhouse comes to Britain: drinking, driving and dancing, 1925–1955* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 1.
- 10 Alun Howkins, ‘Death and rebirth? English rural society, 1920–1940’, in Paul Brassley, Jeremy Burchardt, and Lynne Thompson (eds), *The English countryside between the wars: regeneration or decline?* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 17–18.
- 11 J. Stevenson and C. Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 12.
- 12 R.M. Healey, ‘Country Life’, in Sam G. Riley (ed.), *Consumer magazines of the British Isles* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 24.

- 13 J.G. Noam Asher, 'Books, libraries and backs to the land', *Library Review*, 26:2 (1977), p. 105.
- 14 Interview with Barrie Wood, son of Charles Wood, 3 May 2011.
- 15 Lee, *Social leaders and public persons*, p. 86.
- 16 K. Lawrence, 'Cheshire Life', *Winsford Chronicle*, 11 December 1948, p. 5.
- 17 *Daily News*, 13 December 1949; *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 4 May 1956.
- 18 Geoffrey Nulty, *Guardian Country, 1853–1978: being the story of the first 125 years of Cheshire County Newspapers Limited* (Warrington: Cheshire County Newspapers Ltd, 1978), pp. 87–8.
- 19 *The Philips Park Press of C. Nicholls & Co. Ltd* (Manchester: C. Nicholls & Co Ltd, 1933). Thanks to Graham Greer of the Newberry Library, Chicago for providing a copy.
- 20 'The late Christopher Nicholls', *Cheshire Life*, November 1957, p. 40; Sue Wheatcroft, *Worth saving: disabled children during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 64.
- 21 *Manchester Guardian*, 21 October 1957.
- 22 Editorial, 'Future plans', *Cheshire Life*, October 1934, p. 151.
- 23 Lee, *Social leaders and public persons*, pp. 102–3.
- 24 Taylor, *English history*, pp. 17, 306–7.
- 25 Every advertisement, article and image in eleven issues (701 items) was analysed. Two issues per year were studied, apart from 1938, in which only one issue was analysed.
- 26 The number of images has been doubled for 1938 in Tables 1 and 2, when only one issue was analysed, to make that year comparable to all other years for which two issues were analysed.
- 27 Ross McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918–1951: a study of a democratic society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 46.
- 28 I have been unable to find any information on Roberts.
- 29 McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p. 34.
- 30 'Cheshire County Assembly', *Chester Chronicle*, 20 December 1930, p. 12; 'No County Assembly: condition of national finances', *Alderley & Wilmslow Advertiser*, 4 September 1931, p. 3.
- 31 McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, pp. 59, 61.
- 32 Roy Strong, *Country Life, 1897–1997: the English Arcadia* (London: Boxtree, 1996), p. 29.