A very great deal has been written about Isaac Newton by scholars of the history of science. I cannot compete with them; I am no scientist or mathematician. But they do not share my one advantage; I lived for ten years in the Lincolnshire village where Newton was born in 1642. Information drawn from village records tells us something about his mother’s family, about which we have heretofore been almost totally ignorant, and it expands and somewhat alters our view of the influences that helped to shape Newton as he grew up.

This is, then, a story of small villages. Figure I shows how near they were to each other. The hearth tax records show that in Newton’s native Colsterworth there were, in 1665, 64 houses (47 of them with one hearth only) with 5 houses too poor to be rated. There were, in all, 113 hearths. In 1671 there were 11 fewer houses but with 117 hearths between them. Between 1665 and 1671, one third of the villagers had moved in to or out of the village. In the nearest village of Burton Goggles there were, in 1665, 43 houses, of them too poor to be rated.

More directly, it is the story of two families that lived in the villages; the Newtons of Woolsthorpe by Colsterworth whose name Isaac bore, and the Ayscoughs, the family from which his mother came. The Newtons were only yeomen, although they had rich cousins based in Grantham, a sizable town eight miles to the north. As for the Ayscoughs, Isaac’s grandfather, James Ayscough, presented himself as a gentleman of Market Overton; his wife Margery was the daughter of a rich gentleman, William Blyth of Stroxton. It appears from the local records, however, that in contradiction to James Ayscough’s pretence, the Ayscoughs were in fact yeomen like the Newtons.

The Newtons were fairly prosperous yeomen whose home boasted five hearths. In 1928 Canon C. W. Foster published a thorough study of the family of Isaac’s father (i)*. My interest has been in his mother’s family, the Ayscoughs. Foster published the wills of Hannah Ayscough and of her two husbands, Isaac Newton (father to the great Isaac) and Barnabas Smith. To these I can now add the wills of Hannah’s father James Ayscough (appendix I) and her brother William Ayscough (appendix II).

* Numbers in this form refer to notes at the end of the text.
Many yeomen sought to become gentlemen, and the Newtons were no exception. Neither were the Ayscoughs. Isaac’s grandfather, Robert, had prospered and was pleased to discover that the second farm that he bought for himself in 1623 included the Lordship of the Manor of Woolsthorpe (known as the Manor of Mortimer), even though the Lordship existed only on paper (2) and Woolsthorpe was in fact a part of Colsterworth. Minor offences committed by the Newton yeomen were tried by the Manor Court of Colsterworth.

Robert sought a good marriage for his son Isaac and found one in Hannah, daughter of James Ayscough and granddaughter of William Blyth of Stroxtor. The Blyths were gentry with 14 hearths. The Ayscoughs were more doubtful.
When Newton was knighted in 1705 he had to produce for the Heralds an ‘affidavit for knighthood’ (3) to show that he was a gentleman. He there recorded that his mother’s father was James Ayscough of Market Overton, ‘gentleman’. This does not seem to have been true. The parish records of Market Overton (a village in Rutland) show only one Ayscough baptized (4) and none buried there. Nor do the hearth tax records show any Ayscough owning property in Market Overton. It was the custom of gentlemen and yeomen to leave money in their wills for the poor of villages with which they had been associated. James Ayscough left £40s. each for the poor of Colsterworth, Sewstern and Great Ponton. His son, William, left money to Colsterworth, Sewstern and five other villages. Neither of them mentioned Market Overton.

Moreover Hannah’s mother, Margery, was suspicious of family claims. In his ‘affidavit for knighthood’ Isaac reported the following of his grandmother: ‘she when her daughter considered marrying Isaac Newton’s father, might learn the kindred, and that his grandfather Newton to promote the marriage might be forward to speak of it representing him to be cousin once removed and next heir to the said Mr Newton at that time six or seven years under age afterwards father to Sir John Newton.’ (5) It is interesting that it was Hannah’s mother rather than her father who investigated the Newton family. Perhaps Margery was worried because her own husband, James Ayscough, was not strictly accurate in calling himself a gentleman.

There is a clue about Margery’s husband in several wills of yeomen from Great Ponton. In particular one Thomas Ayscough, in his will of 1622 (6) arranged that if his only son died, his daughters were to have half his property and the other half was to be divided between six of his brothers and sisters. Excluded from this arrangement was his brother James Ayscough. James had lent Thomas £100 to buy an annuity for their mother. He clearly did not need the £5 that Thomas would otherwise have left him. Where did the younger son of a yeoman find £100? It is a fair guess
that he was the James Ayscough who in 1609 had married Margery, daughter of William Blyth, Lord of the Manor of Stroxton, which adjoins Great Ponton, and who either before, or more likely after, the marriage put about the story that he was a gentleman of Market Overton. This would explain why, in his will of 1652, James Ayscough left 40s. to the poor of Great Ponton but did not mention Market Overton.

In his will of 1652 (proved in 1657), James Ayscough left his widow Margery as sole executrix, an unusual arrangement because he had two sons. He left to William, whom he mentioned first as if he was the elder son, a mere £10. To James (7), his other son, he left £400, and to Hannah, his daughter, £100 saying that 300 Marks of the £400 and 100 Marks of the £100 had come from William Blyth, his wife's father. Apparently Blyth had not mentioned William. One possibility is that William was not born until after Blyth's death. This seems improbable both because William graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1633-34 and because he was appointed by the King to be Rector of Burton Goggles in 1642, the same year in which his sister married Isaac Newton the elder. All the indications are that William was nearly 30 years of age when his sister married, and thus was born too soon after the marriage in 1609 to be a third child. Another possibility is that William was the son of an earlier marriage of James Ayscough and therefore not a grandson of Blyth. It may be relevant to note that James, the father, and William both left money to the poor of Sewstern, a hamlet in which they are not known, from existing evidence, to have lived. Sewstern did not have a parish church and kept its records at Buckminster; such a marriage is not recorded at Buckminster, however (8). An even vaguer possibility is that Blyth was a Roman Catholic, as his nephew and heir probably was, and did not approve of a rector of the Church of England.

Let it be said in passing, as further evidence about the Ayscoughs, that William, for all his mere £10 from his father, was not poor. He left to his son, also William Ayscough, land and houses in Colsterworth, Sewstern, Buckminster, Gunby and Stainby. In later years one of his daughters sent begging letters to Sir Isaac, but in 1707-08 his son's son, James, graduated at Christ's Cambridge (where he boasted of his relationship to Isaac's mother).

One other item of some significance for Newton’s relations with the Ayscoughs emerges from this material. Heretofore James Ayscough has entered the Newton story solely as the putative gentleman from Market Overton who was Hannah’s father. Local records establish that he lived until 1657 and hence that he was probably living in Woolsthorpe with his wife, Margery, and with young Isaac, during the period of Hannah’s marriage to Barnabas Smith. James and Barnabas witnessed each other’s wills. In his affidavit for knighthood Isaac Newton did not mention his grandfather; he stated rather that he lived with his grandmother ‘until he was about 11 years old’. James Ayscough’s will suggests that he had equal affection for his grandson. Although Isaac later witnessed the will of his uncle, William, who called him my kinsman Isaac Newton’ and left him 20s., Isaac’s grandfather, James, rather pointedly did not mention him in his will at all. In a codicil he left £100 to be divided between Hannah’s other three children, Benjamin, Mary and Hannah, whose father was Barnabas Smith. As a witness of the rich Barnabas’s will, James Ayscough knew
that those three grandchildren were already provided for. Nevertheless, to his grandson Isaac, 15 years old when his grandfather wrote the codicil, James left nothing. Isaac’s mother, Hannah, has been blamed for sending Isaac to Cambridge four years later as a sizar (servant) to other students, when she was a rich widow. Apparently she was imitating the behaviour of her father, James, toward her elder son.

As a boy, therefore, Isaac Newton was under the probably hostile influence of two old men—his grandfather, James Ayscough, and his stepfather, Barnabas Smith. As a young man, however, he experienced the more friendly influence of three clergymen, his uncle William Ayscough of Burton Goggles, William Walker of Colsterworth (9), and Humphrey Babington of Boothby Pagnall. It has been common to insist on the Puritan atmosphere in which Newton was reared. From 1642 to 1644, the first years of the Civil War that coincided with Newton's infancy, there were constant skirmishes in the vicinity of Colsterworth, but after 1644 and throughout Isaac's youth Puritans controlled Grantham. Henry Stokes, a Puritan divine, taught at the school Newton attended, and Sir William Ellis, Solicitor General to Cromwell, played a dominant part in the town. However, the influences bearing upon Newton were not exclusively Puritan, for the three clergymen mentioned above were all stout royalists and Anglicans.

Two of them came on the scene late, but William Ayscough lived near Colsterworth throughout Newton's youth. Appointed by the King to Burton Goggles in 1642, he managed to hold on to his village through the Civil War and the Commonwealth. He does not appear to have compromised as much as Barnabas Smith, who also held on to North Witham but began tactfully to call himself ‘Minister’ Ayscough signed every page in his register until an entry that referred to an Act of Parliament of 24 August 1653, which terminated the rector’s control of records. At that point a group of local representatives swore to keep the records. They used the same register book but entered the word born where Ayscough had written ‘baptized’. The representatives recorded the burial of William’s father, James Ayscough, who had therefore remained in the vicinity of Woolsthorpe, in 1657. At the end of 1659 they wrote ‘finis’, and William Ayscough began again to sign and to enter baptisms. His role in several important decisions concerning Newton’s education is well known.

William Walker became the rector of Colsterworth in 1661, just as Newton was departing for the university. During the war and the Interregnum, the Puritans were in power in Colsterworth. Mr Hyde, who had the gift of the living, had fled to the King at Oxford. When the Rector, Mr Hewett, died the Parliamentary Committee for ‘Plundered Ministers’ sequestered the living in February 1646 ‘to the use of Frances Browne Minister of the Word ... a Godly and Orthodox Divine’. In 1660 John Castillion, Doctor of Divinity, another Puritan, succeeded him and restarted Church records, but in 1661 the Bishop reasserted his rights and appointed William Walker as Rector. Ten years later Walker became the master of the grammar school in Grantham that Newton had attended; the Puritan Stokes had been ejected soon after the Restoration. According to Stukeley, Walker was a ‘close acquaintance’ of Sir Isaac, but their relationship may have waited until the plague years of 1665-66 when Newton returned home from Cambridge.
Babington was the brother of Mrs Clark, the friend of Isaac’s mother, with whom he had lodged in Grantham and whose three Storer children (by her first husband from Buckminster) were his contemporaries. The theologian, Robert Sanderson, ousted in 1642 by Parliament from the rectorship of Boothby, which he had held since 1619, did not return after the Restoration when he found himself appointed Bishop of Lincoln. The King named Humphrey Babington, another keen royalist who had been ousted from his Fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, during the Commonwealth, to replace Sanderson. Babington may well have made Newton's acquaintance at his sister’s home in Grantham at an earlier time. He obtained a special licence from the King that allowed him to be at once a Fellow of Trinity and Rector of Boothby, and Newton knew him well in both locations. Newton later recorded that, during the plague years, his so-called ‘annis mirabilis,’ he calculated the area under a hyperbola to 52 places at Boothby. The method of making the calculation, though not the 52 places, was an important step along his path to the method of fluxions, which we call the calculus.

All his life Isaac Newton was secretive about his religious views. This did not prevent him from coming out strongly against the attempt of James II to admit Catholics to Cambridge University, and he was of course a member of the Convention Parliament that welcomed William III, but he had no more sympathy with religious toleration than had most of his contemporaries. He owed his place at the Mint to the Whigs, and after so many changes of government, men of principle ‘had given way to men of interest’. Perhaps it was the experience of living, when young, alternatively under the influence of Puritans and Anglicans that taught him to seek a public middle road and to keep his real beliefs to himself.

There is also information pertaining to Isaac Newton himself in the local records, and the codicil that William Ayscough added to his will in 1669 suggests a rather dramatic speculation. William had originally made his will in 1665, and his sister Hannah made hers in 1672. They both had the same witnesses, William Walker, Rector of Colsterworth, and Robert Price. The 1669 codicil is in the handwriting of Robert Price, who was the only witness. William Ayscough was on his deathbed and died four days later. Ten other villagers died within a fortnight. There was a plague in the neighbourhood.

William Ayscough left smaller bequests to children who were nearly all relatives: £10 each to two grandchildren in his will and £5 to two other grandchildren (whom he called godchildren) born between the will and the codicil. One of his other god-daughters was a daughter of William Walker (10s. in the will); another was a daughter of Robert Price (20s. in the codicil). Then in the codicil there is 10s. to ‘my Goddaughter Frances Newton’. She is difficult to identify. Except for Colsterworth, there was no Newton child in any of the seven villages to which he left money. In Colsterworth there was ‘Marie’ daughter of Isaac Newton and Marie his wife, who was baptized on 29 July 1666. (A ‘Marie’ whose surname was omitted was buried on 14 October 1666.)
There were in fact two Isaac Newtons in Colsterworth. The ‘other Isaac’ had a one-hearth cottage in the hearth tax returns of both 1665 and 1671. He was presumably the Isaac Newton pauper, reputed to be 95 years of age’ who was buried on 22 January 1703. In 1666 he would have been 58 years of age if the estimate in 1703 was correct, and thus might also have been the father of ‘Marie’, but would the wealthy Rector of Burton Goggles have made a cottager’s daughter his god-daughter? To be sure, ‘Frances is not ‘Marie’, but the names by which three-year-old children are known frequently vary, and the records do not reveal a Frances Newton. The great Isaac was Ayscough’s only Newton relation in Colsterworth, and he was in Colsterworth in 1666. Isaac himself had other Newton relatives, but they had no small children baptized during the relevant period. It is thin evidence that Isaac Newton was not the virgin he claimed to be when he was an old man, and thin evidence against his apparent antipathy for romantic attachments to women. Nevertheless it is not altogether negligible evidence, and it deserves to be put on the record.

There is another Colsterworth entry: ‘Anne Newton daughter of Isaac Newton and his wife was buried June 10th 1678’. This entry is less interesting. Anne could have been baptized any time between 1641 and 1660 when we have no records, and she could easily have been a daughter of the other Isaac’. The omission of her mother’s name is unusual, however.

Why did Canon Foster not chase these hares? Because he worked from Bishops’ Transcripts (as his manuscript in Lincs. Archives shows) and not from the parish originals. The Colsterworth Bishops’ Transcripts for 1666 and 1678 are both missing.

One man who had the originals was John Mirehouse, Rector of Colsterworth in 1874. His history of his church in 1902 shows how he used Newton’s name to collect money from churchmen all over England to pay for the rebuilding of part of his church, with which he exaggerated the Newton connection. In Victorian England he would have been unlikely to entertain, much less to publish, doubts about the morality of his hero.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for their help to the archivists of Leicester and especially to those of Lincoln. Professor Gale Christianson, the author of *In the presence of the creator*, has given me much help, and I am particularly grateful to Professor Richard Westfall, the author of *Never at rest*, who has most kindly redrafted some of this paper.
APPENDIX I

‘Will of James Ayscough

February the seventeenth one thousand six hundred and fifty two. In the name of God Amen. I James Ascough of Woolsthorp in the parish of Coulsterworth in the County of Lyncshire being in good and perfect remembrance thanks be to God for it doo make and ordain this my last will and Testament in manner and forme following. First I give my body and Soule into the hand of Almighty God my creator and Jesus Christ my most merciful redeemer by whose precious death I looke to have everlasting Salvation. My goods and chattells I give in manner following. I give to the pour of Coulsterworth and Woolsthorp forty shillings. Item I give to the pour of Great Penton forty shillings. Item I give to the pour of Buckminster and Sousterne forty shillings all these funds to be distributed by the Ministers and Overseers of the pour in each parish. Item I give to my sonn William Ascough Tenn pounds. Item I give to my sonn James Ascough Foure hundred pounds of which summ three hundred marks given unto my said Sonn by his grandfather Mr William Blithe is to be accounted a parte. And it is my will that these Legacyes shal be paid within one year after my death. The rest of my goods and Chattells unbequeathed I give unto Margery my wife whom I make sole executrix of this my last will and Testament James Ascough. Witnesses Barnabas Smith Symon Porter his marke.

Furthermore it is my will that the above said Margery my wife surviving [?] shall pay to my daughter Hannah now the wife of Barnabas Smith one hundred marks of Lawfull English monie due to the said Hannah by the last will and testament of Mr William Blyth her grandfather. And it also my desire that the said hundred marks should be made up one hundred pounds as a guilt to the three children of the said Hannah Benjamin Mary and Hannah. James Ascough Thomas Chamberlain Symon Porter his mark.

‘This Will was proved at London before the Judges for probate of wills and granting Administrations lawfully authorized the four and twentieth day of November in the yeare of our Lord one thousand six hundred and fifty seven by the oath of Margery Ascough the relict and sole executrix named in the said will to whome Administration was committed of all and singular the said goods Chattells and Debts of the said deceased, shee being first sworne by Comission truely to Administer the same on the 25th day one thousaand six hundred and fifty seven.’

APPENDIX II

‘Will of William Ayscough
[Religious prologue, partly illegible]
And first I give to the Cathedral) Church of Lincoln the summe of Ten Shillings. Item I give to the Poor of the Parish of Swafield Tenn Shillings. Item I give to the Poor of the Parish of Swinfield Twenty Shillings. Item I give to the Poor of the Parish of Corby Twenty Shillings. Item I give to the Poor of the Parish of Bitchfield Ten Shillings. Item I give to the Poor of the Parish of Colsterworth and Wolstrop twenty shillings. Item I give to the Poor of the Parish of Susterne in the Countic of Leicester Twenty Shillings. Item I give to the Poor of the Parish of Burton Coggles three Pounds.
And my Will is that these aforesaid summs be given to the Poor of the fornamed Parishes shall be paid by my Executor within one month after my death to be disposed according to the disposals of the Parish clerk and Churchwardens and overseers of the Poor of the respective Parishes. Item I give to my Servant George Bowring the summe of Forty Shillings. Item I give to my servant Alice Goffe five pounds. Item I give to Christopher Smithson my Godsonne Ten Shillings. Item I give to Elisabeth Walker my Goddaughter Ten Shillings. Item I give to Hazlewood Pilkington my Godsonne Twenty Shillings. Item I give unto Isaac Newton my kinsman Twenty Shillings. Item I give unto my cousin Benjamin Smith Twenty Shillings. Item I give unto my cousin Hannah South Twenty Shillings. Item I give unto Elizabeth Rashell my Grandchild Tenn Pounds. Item I give unto William Campyon my Grandchild Tenn Pounds. And my will is that all these aforesaid Legacies given to my Godchildren and my Grandchildren shall be paid within one month next after my death and that the Rceit and Acquittance of their several respective Parents shall be a sufficient Discharge to my Executor. All the rest of my goods and Chattells, whatsoever ungiven and undisposessed and allso all my Lands and Tenements whatsoever lying in Buckminster and Susterne Gunbie and Stainbie and Colsterworth or what place soever I do give and bequeath unto my wellbeloved Sonne William Ayscughe and his heirs forever, whom I doe hereby make and constitute sole Executor of this my Last Will and Testament, In Witness whereof I the said William Ayscough doe hereunto set my hand and scale the day and year above written.

William Ayscough

Sealed and signed and declared to be the Last Will and Testament of the above named William Ayscoghe in the presence of William Walker Robt. Price Isaac Newton

It. I Wm Ayscough does annexe this codicell to this my last Will and Testament to be performed by my Executor first I give to my Goddaughter Elizabeth Campion five pounds and to my Godson Win. Rashell five pounds. It. to my Goddaughter Elinor Price twenty shillings and to my Goddaughter Frances Newton ten shillings and I give to Rebeccah Capendale* twenty shillings these to be paid as the former legacies and that the receipt and acquitances of their severall respective parents shall be a sufficient discharge to my executor. In witness whereof I have set my hand and scale this second daye of November 1669

William Ayscough

Witness

Robt Price’

* Rebeccah was maid in the house of the widower Ayscough. She was among the villagers who died in the same week as he did in 1669.
NOTES


(2) It was Isaac Newton himself who tried to resurrect the Lordship. He brought a Chancery Court action in 1681-84 against Mrs Storey of Colsterworth—the widowed daughter of Robert Elston, Lord of the Manor of Colsterworth, whom he called ‘Pretending Lord of the Manor’—claiming for Woolsthorpe Manor from Colsterworth Manor rights over the Lings Commons. In his old age (12 May 1725), when negotiating with villagers the ‘stinting’ of cattle, horses and sheep on the common lands, he claimed the right to graze 80 sheep for each of his two farms and 120 ‘for ye royalty’, i.e. as Lord of the Manor.

(3) Affidavit for knighthood, Coll. of Arms MS 2 D14.

(4) ‘Lettis Askoughe’ baptized in Market Overton on 3 March 1632. Perhaps this was the Lettice Ayscough, daughter of Francis Ayscough, who was buried in Buckminster on 27 July 1633.

(5) The money of the richer Newtons came originally from Richard Hickson, childless moneylender from Grantham, who was High Sheriff of the County in 1621. He was originally a yeoman but left lands in some 19 manors to his nephew, John Newton, who continued his business. John Newton was the son of Hickson’s sister who had married Thomas Newton. John mortgaged the lands of another John Newton, of Barrs Court, Gloucester, who was no relation, and who had acquired a baronetcy by providing the King with soldiers in Ireland. The terms of the mortgage included a provision that when John Newton of Barrs Court, who was childless, died his title should ‘revert’ to John Newton of Grantham, although there was no previous connection between the two families of Newtons. The title did revert in 1661.

Sir (as he now was) John Newton’s son, also Sir John Newton, married well. The lands of his first wife, Abigail, daughter of the Earl of Devon, went as dowry to their daughter, Carey, who married Edward Coke of Holkham. The Wharton lands of his second wife, Susanna (who had already inherited the Badsworth lands from her first husband), went with the Newton lands to their son, Sir Michael (M.P. for one of Walpole’s ‘rotton boroughs’), who increased them by marrying Margaret Countess of Coningsby; but they died childless, so all the estates went to William Archer through his wife Susanna, Sir Michael’s sister. See Lines. Archivists report, 1951-52.

(6) Will of Thomas Ayscough, Lincs. C. C. Wills, 1622/ii/ 177.

(7) I have found no other information about the younger James unless he is referred to in Stukeley’s letter to Dr Mead on 16 June 1727 (Gentleman’s Magazine (1772), p. 520). Some of the Ayscough family remain in Cathorp in this county...and I remember one James Ayscough a surgeon who lived at my native place Holbeck and who came from Sustern near Colsterworth and was cousin to Sir Isaac’s mother, an ‘ingenious man’. He may have been Hannah’s brother and not her cousin. Description of relationship seems to have been imprecise. Thus William Ayscough, who left money to his niece and nephew, called them his cousins. Hannah left money to her ‘sister Sarah Cook’. Her father and brother referred to
no such sister. Possibly she was James’s wife, and possibly she was a contemporary of Hannah living in Easton adjoining Colsterworth, who had married John Cook, the son of Isobel Newton, Isaac’s aunt who in 1596 had married John Cook of Skillington. This Sarah Cook may have been a courtesy sister.

(8) Buckminster records are at Leicester archives.
(9) The will of William Walker is in the Public Record Office, Prob. 11/377.