In January 1576 Dr David Lewis, a prominent lawyer from Abergavenny and a baron of the Admiralty Court, complained bitterly to Sir Francis Walsingham, the Secretary of State, about the condition of parts of the old marcher lordships in central and south-east Wales, forty years after the passing of the Tudor legislation of 1536–43. He expressed anxiety about the situation because of the persistence of some practices that he considered to be damaging to good government in those lordships. His letter relates chiefly to such customs and, among other matters, he referred specifically to arddel and cymortha, and concluded that ‘contempts and disorders must be severely punished and the better the man offender the greater the offence, and the punishment ought to be the more, which must be rather in body by imprisonment than in the purse’.

Lewis was obviously disillusioned and his observation echoed Rowland Lee’s opinion on an earlier occasion. In his mind there were far too many deficiencies and incompetent officials allowed to exercise their authority. The Council in the Marches had lost its grasp of affairs. A year earlier the queen directed the Council to reform itself and to attend to the task of abolishing bad customs. Sir Henry Sidney was not able to attend to these matters immediately and Walsingham summoned Lewis and Sir William Gerard, chief justice of the Brecknock circuit, to advise him further in the matter. In response, Lewis’s strictures were harsh and uncompromising
and referred to specific deficiencies among prominent officers, particularly the sheriffs, justices of the peace, mayors and bailiffs, and drew attention to the inability or reluctance of officials to perform their services efficiently.

Dr David Lewis’s comments are more important in view of his unfriendly relations with Sidney and the precarious political situation developing in England following the queen’s excommunication. His letter reveals the poor social condition of the Marches and the failure to maintain law and order. Lewis doubtless was prejudiced but his strictures indicated that Tudor policy had not succeeded to the extent that, after almost half a century, the country was not well governed. This type of evidence does arouse suspicions as to the effectiveness of Tudor institutions in Wales, and it raises the issue as to what extent had the Welsh gentry, in view of the charges brought against them, succeeded in keeping a firm hold on the localities. Moreover, it may be asked how influential the gentry were as administrators and to what extent Thomas Cromwell’s policies released to them the full power required to control the situation.

The Role of the Council in the Marches

There is evidence to show that, in the sixteenth century generally, the Council in the Marches was regarded as being an effective instrument of administration. In his office as deputy lord president, Gerard considered it sufficient to reduce the country to law and order and an institution well established on the foundations laid by Rowland Lee. George Owen also applauded the Council, and drew attention to its central role in government, its aim to ‘civilise and pacify’ the people, and its responsibility to maintain royal power and public administration in Wales. So essential had it become by the closing stages of the century, he observed, that its abolition would lead to anarchy: ‘let that House or Council be dissolved but for a few years and no place erected to seek redress in adverse of those things, those that live now most