Petitions offer a way of advancing understanding of rural social relationships, beyond the valuable range of scholarship discussed in the previous chapter. They are an expression of an established or desired relationship, drawn up when an individual or group lacked something which the recipient of their request had it in his or her power to grant. Petitions usually addressed a social and economic superior in terms of entreaty, providing information about the applicant’s circumstances and others relevant to the wish. They came out of a difference in status and assets, but sought to establish a moral and/or material bond between solicitor and solicited. In the context of a landed estate, written requests give the mediated voice of the tenant and sometimes sub-tenant or even labourer in a more-or-less public forum. They allow examination of the texture of relationships between an estate’s management and its inhabitants and, indirectly, between different types of inhabitant. The encounter between a supplicant and superior in petitions imparted dynamism to early modern social relations, which many other types of document leave inert. As historian Donna Andrew puts it: ‘The begging letter ... operated as a conduit of exchange; the exchange of dependence for obligation, of service for care, of need for succor.’¹ Power could be used to coerce and to exclude, but it could also accommodate reciprocity and exchange. Petitions allowed such interaction. This chapter looks at the practice and theory of petitionary letters, leaving their operation on particular estates in different time periods for discussion in subsequent parts of the book.

Petitioning has been a ubiquitous part of the social and political structure of Britain and Ireland for the last millennium. Medieval vassals had a right as well as a duty to offer advice to their lord about matters of mutual concern, since one aspect of the obligations that constituted service to a

lord was giving counsel. Handling petitions was a routine part of any lord’s business because they informed as well as asked. In the late Middle Ages councils of advisers managed certain great estates, including sometimes a ‘council learned’ of lawyers, for whom petitions were a major item of business. In the early sixteenth century the fifth Earl of Northumberland had a close household numbering 42 (his whole entourage was more extensive still), including a member of his council ‘for answering and ridding of causes when suitors cometh to my lord’.

The wording here suggests approaches in person, but even in medieval times written supplications were everywhere. The Chancery clerks who acted as receivers for fifteenth-century English parliaments did little except handle petitions, and those letters admitted were subsequently filtered by ‘triers’. Petitioning to parliament had become, by late medieval times, an elaborate and precise form whose format and content set the tone for later supplications of all kinds: what A.R. Myers called ‘a petitionary diplomatic’ and what Gwilym Dodd terms ‘a broadly recognised petitionary canon which acted as a template into which the specific details of a particular case were inserted’. Dodd finds that private petitions to England’s medieval parliament were shaped by dialectic between petitioner and recipient. They were ‘as much products of the “centre”, reacting and responding to a political discourse determined by the functionality and principles underlying government action, as they were products of the localities, articulating the problems and grievances faced by men, women, and communities living within the orbit of English royal authority’. Post-Restoration appeals to English Justices of the Peace, from former royalist soldiers seeking pensions, closely followed the wording of an Act of 1662 framed for their relief. Early modern monarchs had ‘masters of requests’ to handle the vast number of solicitations they received: 700–800 a year in the first decade of James I’s reign and perhaps 1,000 a year in the 1660s. The public image of monarchs