

## The Mead Family of Elmdon - an interim statement

Precise references to source material are not included in this report but these are fully recorded in the original research notes. Primary sources have been studied at the Essex, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Norfolk Record Offices and at the Public Record Office and other repositories in London. Secondary sources drawn upon include Essex histories by Morant, Wright, Salmon etc and others published works. Access has been given by various incumbents to parish records in their care and archival material in the Library of the Essex Archaeological Society has been consulted.

It is stressed that this paper must be considered as an interim report only and that much work remains to be done, particularly with regard to the Mead family in London, from the seventeenth century onwards and the various kinship groups which were present in other parts of Essex and adjoining counties over considerable period of time.

### Somerset - the family background

Several sources quote the origins of this family as being from Somerset and it is stated that they had a country house at Feyland in the parish of Wraxall called Meads Place. It is certain that two merchants of Bristol held public office in the fifteenth century. Thomas Mede was Bailiff of Bristol in 1439 and Sheriff in 1453. Philip Mede was Bailiff in 1444, Sheriff in the following year, three times Mayor, in 1458, 1461 and 1468. He was also Member of Parliament for Bristol in 1460. The tombs of both persons bear their arms but it is not clear when or why they wereknighted, both are buried in the church of St Mary Redcliffe in the city. Thomas died in December 1475 and his monument is against the north wall of the north choir, Philip died about 1476 and his will was proved at Canterbury in March. He is commemorated by a tablet on the wall of the north aisle. He was married twice but his first wife is the only one traceable by name and then only by her forename, Isabel.

They had two children, Isabel and John and it is possible that their son was the John Mede of Bristol who's will was proved in 1496. However, it is the daughter who proves to be of most interest as she provides the only definite link between Somerset and the east of England. In 1465 she married Maurice, the fifth Lord Berkeley, of Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire. The marriage caused a severe upset in her family as she was considered to have married 'beneath her Station' and certainly many parallel situations can be discovered in other aristocratic and rising gentry families of the period. It was considered that both sons and daughters should seek a match from the same level of society or even to 'better' themselves by rising a degree. However, the latter course was viewed differently by the two families concerned and in this instance the Berkeley's displeasure was amply indicated by the disinheritance of Maurice by his elder brother William. He lost the west country estates and was granted the manor of Great Chesterford in Essex and lived there until his death in 1506.

Isabel's father and probably her brother died in Bristol but it is possible that she and her husband saw prospects for other members of the family in the area of their Essex home. Great Chesterford is in the north west corner of the county on the border with Cambridgeshire, where the Berkeleys held further estates. The merchant class in England at the close of the fifteenth century was wealthy as a whole and members of that class would have been anxious to improve their fortunes by moving into the landowning ranks of the rising gentry.

### The first Essex Meads

Stapleford is about eight miles north of Great Chesterford, in Cambridgeshire, and in this village the first occurrence of a connected Mead is found. In his will of 20 September 1557, Thomas Mede, a yeoman of Stapleford, bequeathed his property, lands in Cambridgeshire and Essex. His sons Reginald and Thomas received estates in Elmdon. Reginald, who held the manor of Piggots, married and had several sons but they inherited property in neighbouring parishes. Their father's manor returned later to the descendants of his brother.

Thomas, the eldest son of Thomas Mede of Stapleford, was born at Elmdon about 1530 and was educated at Cambridge. After leaving the University he entered the Middle Temple, London, to commence his training in the Law. A reference from Athenae Cantabrigiensis states, "In 1562 he was autumn reader of the Inn. On 10 October 1566 he was constituted one of the standing council for the town of Cambridge, and in Lent 1566/7 was again reader of the Middle Temple. In Easter term 1567 he was called to the degree of serjeant at law and he was constituted one of the justices of the common pleas in or about November 1577."

Involvement in the law and the consequent high level of remuneration, opportunity to make contact with "the right people", and day to day dealings within the higher levels of society provided him, no doubt, with both the desire and the material benefits to further his position at home.

During his life he was concerned with many substantial purchases of property in and around Elmdon and in the adjacent counties. He either built or substantially enlarged the hall at Wendon Lofts and work on this was completed in 1579. He married Joan Clampe [née Crawley], a widow from Huntingdonshire, and they had three children, Robert, Matthew and Thomas to add to her two daughters. These two daughters became wards of court to Thomas and from this he received an annual income, charged to their late father's estate, and from their mother, property in Huntingdon. Robert and Matthew both died unmarried and it was to Thomas that the estate passed on the death of his father in May 1585. In his will of 18 June 1584 he is described as being of Guilden Morden in Cambridgeshire but he wishes to be buried in the chancel of Elmdon church and it is there, close by the north side of the altar, that his tomb stands.

It must be said that his son Thomas was born into an already established environment of wealth but his father had fully prepared him for this by seeing that his education followed a similar pattern to his own. He matriculated from Queen's College, Cambridge 1581/2 and was admitted to Gray's Inn 30 October 1583. He was Justice of the Peace for Essex, was knighted and became Sheriff for the county in 1600. An established position in local government undoubtedly brought further opportunities for him to rise in social stature and by gradual purchase he acquired the greater part of Elmdon and the linked parish of Wendon Lofts and was lord of the manors of Elmdonbury, Rockells, Piggotts, Leebury and Wendon Lofts. He married well, the daughter of Sir John Brograve who held considerable estates in Hertfordshire. Bridget bore him a family of eight; Thomas, who died before his father, John his heir, Charles, George, Robert, Joan, who married into the family of Penruddock of Wiltshire, Barbara and Dorothy.

After the death of Sir Thomas Meade on 18 September 1618 his son John succeeded to the estates. He too had been educated at Cambridge, this time at St John's, and matriculated in 1608, entering Gray's Inn like his father. He was knighted in March 1622/3. He and his wife, Katherine Corbet of

Sprowston in Norfolk, enjoyed the wealth which had been accumulated by his father and grandfather, but little if any additions were made in his generation.

Two years after receiving his knighthood his eldest son and heir Thomas was born. He attended the Newport Grammar School under his tutor Mr. Lee and went up to Cambridge as a fellow commoner to Christ's College on 27 June 1636. He was nearly seventeen and was there for two years, for part of that time being taught by his cousin Joseph Mede of Berden in Essex. Joseph has left his mark as an academic and is mentioned in several sources as being of some note in the University of his day. He died at the age of 52 on 1 October 1638.

Thomas followed the family tradition of education in the law, entered the Middle Temple and received there a grounding which was considered all important for a person of gentry rank, concerned as they were with the running of an estate and the consequent legal knowledge required for that purpose. Again like his father he sought and found a wife from a good Norfolk family. He married Margaret Debny and his sisters Jane and Elizabeth also found matches in the same county. Jane became the wife of Thomas Talbot of Gonville Hall, Wymondham, and Elizabeth married into the Windham family of Felbrigg Hall. Thomas and Margaret had nine children and his only son John was heir. Thomas Meade died at Wendon Lofts on 13 May 1678, aged 59, and was buried in the church there.

John Meade, born at Wendon Lofts in 1651, attended the school in neighbouring Elmton, being taught by Mr Howorth. At the age of fifteen he went on to his father's old Cambridge college, Christ's, on 23 July 1666. He took his degree of MA in 1669 and was admitted to Gray's Inn on 14 June in the same year.

Little did he know when he married Jane, the daughter of William Wardour of Westminster, that he would be the last of the Mead family to live in Lofts Hall. When his son Thomas was born on 6 July 1674, "between one and two a clock in the morning" he must have felt pleased to have secured an heir. But, though he was baptised on 12 July, hopes were dashed when he died in August of the following year.

Jane was again pregnant and must have wished for a boy as she stood in the church at the firstborn's funeral but, a little more than two weeks later, she gave birth to a girl, Jane. The parson records that she was born "on Thursday August 26th 1675 within a quarter of an hour of twelve a clock at noon." She lived and was followed by the birth of her sister Margaret, but no son and heir. It is probably that Margaret was born at London, as her father seems to have been more involved there than in Essex, and there is some indication that the estate was taking second place to business interests.

When he died on 24 June 1715, at the age of 63, the Essex property passed to Jane and Margaret, to be equally divided. Jane had married a London merchant, John Whaley, but Margaret had reversed the position of her ancient Somerset kinswoman, Isabel Mede, by marrying a man of lower rank: William Pytches, a joiner from nearby Chrishall. He signed himself Gentleman on the indenture of sale in 1720 when the estate was sold to Richard Chamberlain, a London mercer, but no doubt, after sharing the proceeds of the sale, he then felt the right to do so. Who can deny that the Meads before him had attained their social position through the acquisition of wealth?

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