

THE GAGE FAMILY AT BENTLEY

by

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The name Bentley is derived from the Old English 'BEONET LEAH', LEAH meaning clearing or glade and BEONET long course grasses or rushes. BEONET survives in the Sussex dialect name 'Bennet', meaning long grass that bends in the wind (1).

Bentley lies in the south east corner of the parish of Framfield, not far beyond the Ringmer boundary and adjoining the northern end of the Broyle. Framfield, like Ringmer, was part of the Archbishop of Canterbury's giant manor of South Malling, and is included in the 1285 custumal of the Archbishop's Sussex estates. There is a customary virgate of 80 acres called Benetle, held by a William de Benetle who also held 30 acres of freehold land and two shops in Uckfield, and a separate ferling (quarter virgate) of Benetle, divided between Peter de Benetle and Alice de Parco (2). The customary land, held by the Archbishop's villeins, represented the areas cleared for agricultural use early in the medieval expansion into the wealden forest, probably before 1200 (3). Thus by the 13th century Benetle, later to become Bentley, was already on the map. In the 1327 subsidy we find Agnes de Benetlegh paying the relatively large sum of 6s 0d in tax, while in 1332 she pays 3s 10d and John de Benetlegh 1s 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ d (4).

The earliest records linking the Gage family to Bentley date to the reign of King Henry VIII, in whose service Sir John Gage of Firle achieved fame and fortune, but some of the oldest connections noted are rather suspect. One of the first entries in the Framfield parish registers records the burial there of Edward Gage, gent, on 26th March 1539, but his relationship to the Gages of Firle and Bentley has not been established. Viscountess Wolseley tells us that James Gage 'of Framfield' obtained the rectory of Hailsham in 1531 (5), and Comber's 'Sussex Genealogies' says that James Gage of Bentley in Framfield married Joan Bellingham widow, the daughter of John Delve, at Little Horsted in 1542 (6), but in both cases the original sources cited by these authors omit any reference to James Gage's residence. In fact the Gages' acquisition of Bentley is most plausibly accounted for by Letters Patent issued to Archbishop Cranmer in 1546 that enabled him to grant as freehold a long list of Framfield lands that had previously been held by copyhold or assart tenure to John Delve,

with reversion after his death to James Gage esquire and Johan his wife (7). This land included the entire first virgate of Bentley, three ferlings of the second virgate, a cottage and garden at Coopers Hatch (the name of the farm near the present gates to Bentley) and three acres taken from the Broyle Park. Some of the land granted was described as 'late Bentleys' or 'sometime Peter Bentleys'. Three years earlier, in 1543, James's father Sir John Gage had acquired the nearby Plashett Park from the Archbishop, along with Ranscombe and other lands (8). This was a period in which the archiepiscopal estates suffered almost as much from the depredations of Henry VIII and his friends as those of the monasteries (9), and the Gages were amongst the greatest Sussex beneficiaries of this privatisation of the lands of the Church. The first clear records of James Gage as resident in Framfield are an entry in the Memoranda Rolls of 1560 that recites an indenture made in 1556 concerning the Hailsham rectory, and a 1560 deed that records a financial transaction between James Gage and his elder brother Sir Edward and refers to a grant to James by Letters Patent of the Manor of Horsted and Mote Park in 1556 (10). The names Gage and Bentley were then firmly linked until 1904.

James Gage may have built the house at Bentley, although perhaps not as we see it today. The Rev. Henry Rosehurst Hoare, a past vicar of Framfield, maintained that Bentley once possessed a large mansion and a very extensive park but that a farmhouse was all that then remained, and many of the 17th century deeds referred to below describe the area around Bentley as 'the warren'. Tradition has it that there was also once a chapel on the Bentley estate, and there are still some old stones with carvings of possibly an ecclesiastical nature, but only an archaeological excavation could settle the matter (11).

James Gage died in 1573 owning, in addition to his mansion at Bentley, the rectory of Hailsham, the Sussex manors of Borham, Rockland-Blatchington, Wartling, Little Horsted (with the Park of Mote) and Tilton, and Stratford Tonye in Wiltshire (12). The bulk of his estate was left to his eldest son Edward, who added further land nearby purchased from his cousin Sir John Gage (13). However, the Gages of Bentley, like their more prosperous relatives the Gages of Firle, remained loyal to the Catholic faith throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, and both they and their estates suffered in the regular persecutions of Catholics. Edward in particular was one of the most active and prominent Sussex Catholic recusants. In early August 1580 he was one of nine recusants brought before the Court of High Commission,

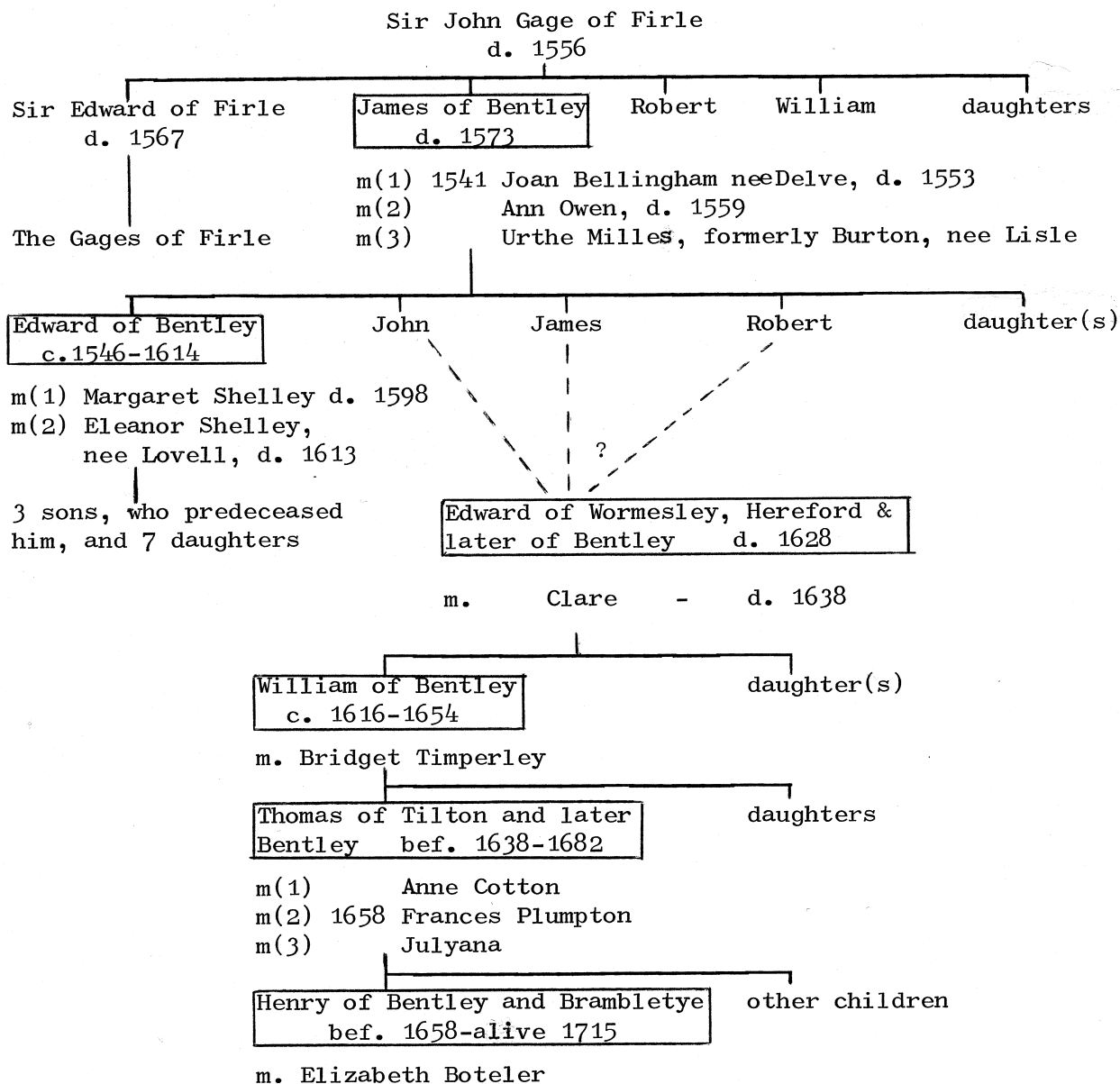
and by 11th August he, John Gage of Firle, Richard Shelley and William Shelley (relatives of Edward's wife) were lodged in the Fleet and Marshalsea prisons. In May 1581 many imprisoned Catholics were released upon bond, but these four were excepted. Lord Montague finally managed to secure Edward's release in December 1581, but by March 1583 he was again residing in the Marshalsea. Edward and Bentley both suffered from the fines and extra-ordinary taxes levied on recusants, which became ever more severe (14).

Spies were posted to watch for Catholic priests who were known to be harboured at country estates, and Bentley was believed to be a link in one of the busiest routes from the continental seminaries to London and the north. In 1590 a government spy reported that there were always three priests resident at Bentley (14). In the grounds there is a culvert or narrow passageway which once ran from the house out, underground, to the fields, and this is presumed to have been used by priests in particular as an emergency entrance or exit.

Edward died at Bentley in 1614 (15). Under the terms of his father's will, confirmed by a settlement drawn up in 1610 (16), part of his estate was his absolutely, and on his death was divided between six daughters and their descendents. However, the remainder of his property, including Bentley and the manors of Little Horsted (adjoining Bentley) and Tilton (near Firle), was entailed to his male heir, his nephew Edward Gage of Wormesley in Hereford.

This Edward took up residence at Bentley, but his reduced estate could barely support the continual penalties to which he and his retinue were exposed (17), and by the 1620s he was in serious financial difficulties. In 1625 he leased most of his land in Framfield, Little Horsted, Ringmer and East Hoathly (Bentley itself excluded) to John Stansfield of the Cliffe, Lewes, and Thomas Lusher of Little Horsted for a term of 15 years at the low rental of £30 p.a. This lease was 'in consideration of the payment of the debts of the said Edward Gage' which amounted to £720 (18). It was also in all probability a political move, for John Stansfield, the builder of South Malling church and grandfather of the diarist John Evelyn, was a leading protestant and Edward perhaps thought this would provide a measure of protection for his estate from the fines. By 1626 two thirds of Edward's estate had been sequestrated, and leased to a John Wright for a term of 41 years 'if the premises were so long in the king's hands by reason of the recusancy of Edward Gage' (19).

THE GAGES OF BENTLEY



The names of owners of Bentley are boxed.

Edward died in 1628 leaving the estate to his son William, then aged 12 years. William had married by 1638, and in 1640 when he made a marriage settlement Bentley, Tilton and his other lands were apparently back in his hands (20). He too, however, did not escape persecution. In 1641, for example, he and his wife headed a list of 30 Framfield residents, the majority probably his household and his tenants, prosecuted for recusancy. With the commencement of the Civil War life became even more difficult for Catholics, and in October 1642 William requested a licence to go to France until times were quieter. In fact he may have spent the next three and a

half years in the King's service. The royalist prisoners despatched to London in January 1643 by the Mayor of Chichester after the defeat of their short-lived attempt to garrison that town for the King included an Ensign William Gage, and he was certainly amongst the royalists who surrendered to Fairfax in March 1646 when the King's western army finally disintegrated at Truro. As a Catholic who had taken up arms against Parliament his estate was sequestrated, although one fifth of its value was allowed to a Mrs. Barber who had the care of his two daughters. He only narrowly avoided its outright confiscation, and never regained control of it during his lifetime (21).

William's son Thomas was the heir to the Bentley estate, but just when he regained possession is not clear. It may not have been until after the Restoration. In a 1657 settlement on his marriage to his first wife, Anne, Bentley is still at the head of the list of his property, but he is described as 'Thomas Gage of Telton, Sussex, esq'. By the following year, 1658, Anne had died, possibly in childbirth, and the estate was resettled, first on her son Henry and then on any sons of Thomas and his second wife, Frances (22). The Framfield parish registers record the burial of Frances Gage in 1667, the baptism of a William Gage, the son of Thomas and a third wife, Julyana, in 1669, and the baptism of a daughter called Juliana in 1670. Thomas Gage himself was buried there in 1682. An inventory of his goods was drawn up after his death, describing him as Thomas Gage of Bentley, so presumably the Gages had returned to their main seat by this date. The inventory lists the rooms of the house, their contents, the livestock and the grain in store (23). Such documents provide a valuable insight into the lifestyle and the use to which land was put in the past, but unfortunately this is too long to reproduce here.

In 1682, the same year as young Henry succeeded to his father's estate in Framfield, Little Horsted, Tilton, Hailsham and some outlying lands in Kent, in total well over 500 acres, he began to take out a series of mortgages which progressively encumbered the estate, and led to its final sale in 1711 (24). The initial charge, on the Tilton farm, was only £1,000, but this rose to £2,000 the following year and £5,000, secured on the whole estate, by 1689. By this date the loans were all in the hands of Thomas Medley of Southover, who in 1687 insisted on a resettlement of the estate to bar the dower of Henry's wife and the entailed rights of his heirs, presumably because he foresaw that it would prove necessary to sell the estate to redeem the mortgage. After that the debt, at least to Medley, grew more slowly, but a further £1,300 was added in 1705 and 1708. In 1711 Bentley, its lands in Framfield and Little Horsted and the Tilton farm

were sold for £12,250 to John Middleton of Muntham, who acted on behalf of Sir Thomas Gage of Firle (later the first Viscount Gage). Initially Henry Gage retained a £4,500 mortgage on the property, but £2,000 of this passed from his hands over the following three years. In 1736 legal ownership was transferred from Middleton to Viscount Gage's eldest son, Sir William Gage, and thereafter it remained in the ownership of the Gages of Firle until 1904.

According to the Rev. Henry Hoare, via notes from the Rev. W. Budgen in 1936 (25), Lucy Gage, the daughter of one John Gage and heir of the Bentley Gages, married a certain William Herrick, esq., grandfather of William Herrick of Beaumanor Park, Leicester. Bentley, he said, thus passed into the hands of the Herricks until the Gages of Firle purchased it back sometime between 1780 and 1826. Whence he derived this information is unknown, and as the Land Tax lists Lord Gage as the landowner from its start in 1750, it seems likely that there is no substance to this account.

There seems no reason to doubt that the Gages themselves occupied Bentley from at least the 1550s until the time of the civil war. Thomas Gage may have lived at Tilton in the 1650s, but apparently returned to Bentley prior to his death. John Foord was his tenant there in 1677, and probably remained so until 1681. Whether Henry Gage lived there is more conjectural. In the various deeds relating to his financial affairs he is sometimes of Bentley, at others of Brambletye, near East Grinstead, while the mortgages he obtained were often negotiated in London. In the 1687 settlement of the estate Bentley House and its lands were let to a tenant, Richard Hart, as they had previously been let to John Foord, while in 1705 a 21 year lease of the mansion and its surrounding land was granted to John Payne of East Grinstead. Tilton and the Mote in Little Horsted were also leased. Under the Gages of Firle Bentley was always occupied by tenant farmers, their names being determinable from the Land Tax records after 1750 (Table 1).

It was one of these tenants who purchased Bentley in 1904, Mr Richard Pratt whose grandsons are still alive and living locally today. It is thanks to them that we have been able to build up a picture of what life was like at Bentley at the beginning of the 20th century - details can be obtained from the exhibition at Bentley Wildfowl.

Table 1: Tenants of Bentley

Date	Tenant	Reference
1677	John Foord*	ESRO/ADA/214
1687-1703	Richard Hart*	ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/20 & 24
1705 (21 yr lease)	John Payne*	ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/24
1737	William Read	ESRO/GBN/18/2
1750-1757	- Reed*	Land Tax
1758-1778	Thomas Jones	" "
1779-1786	Thomas Stevens	" "
1787-1809	John Holman	" "
1810-1817	William Holman	" "
1818-1822	James Holman	" "
1823-1835	Anthony Morris	" "
1836-1838	Thomas Jenner	" "
1839-1858	not recorded	" "
1859	Thomas Jenner	" "

*John Foord of Framfield was buried 13th February 1681 at Ringmer; Richard Hart was buried 12th February 1703 at Framfield; John Payne, gent, of Bentley was buried 16th February 1721 at Framfield; William Read of Bentley was buried 17th March 1757 at Ringmer.

Richard Pratt retired in 1929 and sold Bentley, according to the deeds, to Mr. Bell, who in turn sold it to G.N. Graburn esq. in 1937. Mr. & Mrs. Askew then bought Bentley from Mr. Graburn in 1938 and began the transformation of the house and grounds into what we can see today. However, even at this recent stage in the history of Bentley there is still a certain amount of uncertainty for according to Mr. Frank Thomas, one of Richard Pratt's grandsons, his grandfather sold Bentley to a Mr. & Mrs. Vaughan, who in fact resided at Bentley prior to the Askews. The Viscountess Wolseley mentions in her article (26) that Mrs. Vaughan's father bought the property from Mr. Pratt, but that in 1936 Mr. & Mrs. Vaughan owned it. Any solutions to this problem gratefully received!

References

- (1) J. Glover, 'The Place Names of Sussex' (1975) pp. 14-15
- (2) Sussex Record Society(S.R.S.) Vol. 57, pp. 66-83
- (3) P. Brandon, 'The Sussex Landscape' (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1974) p. 97
- (4) S.R.S. Vol. 10, pp. 198 & 307-308
- (5) Viscountess Wolseley, Sussex County Magazine, Vol. 10 (1936) pp. 446-451, citing L.F. Salzmann, 'History of the Parish of Hailsham' (Farncombe, Lewes, 1901)
- (6) J. Comber, 'Sussex Genealogies, Lewes Centre' (Heffer, Cambridge, 1933) p. 8, citing the parish registers of Little Horsted
- (7) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/6
- (8) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 8/9a
- (9) F.R.H. DuBoulay, 'The Lordship of Canterbury' (Nelson, London, 1966) pp. 317-329
- (10) Salzmann, op. cit., p. 110; ESRO SAS/G/Box 12/9
- (11) Rev. H.R. Hoare, Sussex Archaeological Collections (S.A.C.) Vol. 4, p. 298; Wolseley, op. cit.
- (12) Inquisition Post Mortem in S.R.S. Vol. 3, pp. 81-83, number 62
- (13) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/11
- (14) R.B. Manning, 'Religion and Society in Elizabethan Sussex' (Leicester University Press, 1969) pp. 136, 141, 156 & 157
- (15) Inquisition Post Mortem in S.R.S. Vol. 14, p. 98, number 451
- (16) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/12
- (17) J.S. Cockburn, 'Calendar of Assize Records; Sussex Indictments, James I' (H.M.S.O., London, 1975) pp. 66, 121 & 140; Sussex Family Historian, Vol. 1, No. 8, p. 244
- (18) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/13
- (19) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/14; Salzmann, op. cit., p.51
- (20) ESRO/SAS/Box 12/15
- (21) Sussex Family Historian, Vol. 3, No. 5, p. 142; A. Fletcher, 'A County Community in Peace and War' (Longman, London, 1975) pp. 284 & 101; Sussex Notes and Queries, Vol. 3, pp. 91-92; S.A.C. Vol 19, pp. 92-115; Salzmann, op. cit., p. 51
- (22) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/16 &17
- (23) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/18
- (24) ESRO/SAS/G/Box 12/19-23 & Box 15/1-28
- (25) Viscountess Wolseley's notes, Hove Library, Vol. 24 (Framfield); published in part in Sussex County Magazine, Vol. 10 (1936) p. 513 and also in reference (11) above
- (26) Sussex County Magazine, Vol. 10 (1936) pp. 446-451