

# *Barnet & District Local History Society*

Bulletin No.22  
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November 1982  
Recast 1999

## THE RAVENSCROFTS (Barnet Branch)



The busts of James Ravenscroft & his wife Maria are now in Ravenscroft Lodge, Union Street, Barnet.

The founder of the Barnet branch THOMAS RAVENSCROFT (1563-1630) was born at Killings in the parish of Hawarden in the county of Flint (now part of Clwyd.) As his dates show, he was a contemporary of William Shakespeare (1564-1616.)

Thomas' father and mother, George and Margaret, left wills which were proved in 1595. George's will begins:

"In the name of god, amen. I, George Ravenscrofte of Killings in the countie of fflint yeoman....." : *Will of George Ravenscrofte, 1595, National Library of Wales.*

The senior branch of the family lived at nearby Bretton. Thomas Ravenscroft came from a cadet or junior branch. Thus, although distantly connected with the gentry, his father's actual status was that of yeoman

farmer. It was Thomas' achievement to accumulate enough wealth and property to enable his sons and grandsons to enjoy the rank of gentlemen.

The family home in North Wales was a farm, once a small village, near the River Dee. It was a mixed farm. The inventory attached to George's will (1595) mentions cows, calves, two oxen and two bullocks, two colts, twenty ewes and lambs and crops of barley, rye, wheat, peas, hay, hemp and flax. There was an iron-bound cart and two cartwheels, a barn with wood above and wood and coals below (there is surface coal in the area). In the house he had thirteen pairs of sheets with other linen, wainscott round the walls, two brass pans, three pots, a bow, arrows and other furniture including chairs and beds. Since Thomas' father also held leases on three other properties, it is evident that although far from wealthy by contemporary standards he was a man of some substance. Thomas' elder brother John took over the property on his father's death and when he, in turn, died in 1612, the value of the items in his inventory was £290 8s 0d. Yet George Ravenscroft of Barnet and Alconbury, one of Thomas' grandsons who died in 1683, was able to leave cash bequests totalling over £2000. Even allowing for inflation and changes in money values, this indicates a substantial turn in the family fortunes. [See *"A Ravenscroft Bibliography"* R. Walker, 1978 in *Hertford County Record Office and the Borough of Barnet's Local History Library, Egerton Gardens, Hendon. This needs to be supplemented by articles by R.Walker in the Ravenscroft File in Barnet Museum (particularly for recent research into the Ravenscroft Chancery cases).*]

### **How The Ravenscrofts Came To The Barnet Area.**

A number of lawsuits brought in Chancery and held now in the Public Record Office and some conveyances held in the Huntingdon Record Office indicate that it was the Thomas Ravenscroft, whose effigy forms the centre-piece of the Ravenscroft chapel in Barnet Church, who acquired the properties which raised the family's social standing.

A conveyance of 1622 [*Conveyance 13 Nov.1622 between Sir Oliver Cromwell and Thomas Ravenscroft and Peter Phesant and Thomas Brickenden, Huntingdon Record Office.*] describes Thomas as "Thomas Ravenscrofte of London, Esq..... situated and beeing in ffewter (Fetter) Lane neere ffleetstreet, London." This was a lawyers' residential area (the name Fetter coming from 'faitour', an idle fellow!) part of which was situated in the

parish of St Andrews, Holborn. This was to be the main London house of the Barnet Ravenscrofts for most of the seventeenth century. It is evident that Thomas, who paid £116 13s 4d "of lawfull Englishe money" for the property in Huntingdonshire mentioned in the conveyance above, had early abandoned the desolate county west of Chester and made a prosperous legal business for himself in London.

In the year following, 1623, Thomas signed an agreement with Thomas Coningsby (son of the Ralph Coningsby of North Mimms and J.P. of the Barnet area). He loaned Coningsby £200 on the security of the property of 'ffould in the parish of South Mymes' [*Conveyance of Ffould Park to Thomas Ravenscroft 1623/4, Greater London Record Office.*] The loan plus £20 interest was not repaid by the date due, 14th March 1623, so the house in Galley Lane together with over a hundred acres of land became Ravenscroft property. It remained in the hands of Thomas' direct descendants until 1716.

Besides the London and South Mimms (Barnet) estates, Thomas left his heirs properties at Alconbury, Hunts., at Shadwell and Little Thurrock in Essex and in English Newton, Monmouthshire. Thomas died in 1630. When the Ravenscroft tomb in Barnet Church was moved during the 1875 restoration, his body was found beneath it (according to Cussans) embedded in the south wall of the old chancel.

### **JAMES RAVENSCROFT, the 'Great Benefactor' of Barnet (1595-1680).**

According to the inscription on his tombstone in Barnet Church, James was 'Natus Londini' (born in London). most probably at the house in Fetter Lane in the parish of St Andrew, Holborn.

He was possibly educated at Westminster School which he mentions in his will. In 1613 James was admitted to Jesus College, Cambridge. graduating B.A. In November 1616 he was admitted at the Inner Temple to study Law. When called to the Bar in 1626 he was thirty one years old.

James married Mary Pecke of Spixworth, Norfolk, on January 1st 1627. His first son, Thomas, was born in 1628 and Thomasine, his first daughter, the following year. In 1630 James' father died so he became the heir of the Ravenscroft properties. For the bringing up of his young children James chose the Alconbury estate in Huntingdonshire. Like the Fold Farm property



near Barnet, it was close to the Great North Road. It was also removed from the stench and diseases of the capital city where he had much business. It was at Alconbury, in the Church of St Peter and St Paul, that most of James' children were baptised (Thomasine, George, James, John, Francis and Edward). Mary Ravenscroft gave birth to seven sons and four daughters.

In 1633 and 1637 James appears in three suits brought in Chancery [*For this and other sources for the life of James Ravenscroft see the Ravenscroft File in Barnet Museum.*] concerning his estates in Essex. James' business interests have not been researched yet but he was a qualified lawyer and may have practised on behalf of others as well as for himself. A letter of Charles II to the Doge of Venice in 1666 indicates also that he was engaged with his sons in trading 'beyond the Seas'.

In 1638 (Aug.6) James appears in the Calendar of State Papers Domestic as a J.P. for the town of Huntingdon, a position held for a time by Oliver Cromwell. When the Civil War broke out in 1643 this was a strongly pro-Parliamentary area and it is no surprise therefore to find James holding a minor post as a member of the Parliamentary County Committee for Huntingdon. But James' father had come from Royalist Flintshire; he followed the old loyalties and the old faith, Roman Catholicism. And so did James. But he was prudent. He had no intention of parading his religious and political loyalties: that could end in loss of property, business and even of life itself. His Harwarde cousin George and his sons certainly suffered for their open support of the Crown. James preferred to be on both sides. It seems likely that James, through his brother John who was resident in Brussels, supported the King in exile with money grants. The evidence is circumstantial, but how else may we explain Charles II's generosity to James in 1666 when the King wrote personally to the Doge of Venice on behalf of the Ravenscrofts?

In 1643 James sent his two eldest sons, Thomas aged 14 and George aged 10, to the Roman Catholic English College at Douai, a town in the Spanish Netherlands which became a French possession in 1668. This had the double advantage of protecting his immediate heirs from the vagaries of war and of bringing them up in the Catholic Faith. The Douai College Diaries record most of the Ravenscroft boys. Young James was ultimately ordained as a Catholic priest in 1659. In his will James mentions with great

affection his daughter Thomasine 'whose chose to live a single life'. At sixteen she became a Franciscan nun.

James probably spent most of his latter years at Fold Park in Galley Lane where the moat of an old manor house still exists (1979). The Ravenscroft almshouses in Wood Street date from 1672 'a permanent memorial of thankfulness to God and of Love for the needy'. He was engaged in litigation, however, almost to his death in 1680. He died on December 10th 1680 and lay at Fold Park for four days while his family gathered to pay their last respects. He was buried as he wished next to his father in the Church of St John the Baptist, Chipping Barnet. It was his son George who put up the memorial we see to-day in the Ravenscroft Chapel:

'Cum Generis humani et Patriae suae Mutationes Longum  
Vidisset.'

'Over a long period he saw many changes both in humankind  
and in his country.'

**GEORGE RAVENSCROFT  
OF THE CITY OF LONDON, MERCHANT.  
(1632-1683)**

The interest in George, James' second son, stems from the fourth chapter of Thorpe's "History of English Glass" 1929. On pages 118 and 119 of this chapter, entitled "The Ravenscroft Revolution", Thorpe identifies the originator of Ravenscroft fine crystalline glass tableware, the few survivals of which are of great interest to collectors, as "the second son of George Ravenscroft of Sholton (Shotton) in the parish of Hawarden."

It is now clear that the 'glassman' was the George Ravenscroft buried in Barnet Church and not his Hawarden cousin (once removed).

It was a nun, Sister Francis Agnes Onslow, using Franciscan sources. [Rosemary Rendel "The True Identity of George Ravenscroft, Glassman" *Recusant History*, Vol.13, 1975], who first suggested that Thorpe had wrongly identified George Ravenscroft, glassman. Her work was followed up by Patrick Knell and Rosemary Rendel, both Catholic historians. Proof that they were on the right track came from comparison of signatures and



from some Chancery cases held in the Public Record Office. The signature on the will of George Ravenscroft of Barnet and that of the George Ravenscroft who wrote to the glass-sellers in 1678 were obviously written by the same hand. [R.Walker 'George Ravenscroft of the City of London, Merchant' 1978. Ravenscroft File, Barnet Museum.]

We left George Ravenscroft at the beginning of his education at Douai in 1643 at the start of the Civil Wars. He did two years of the ordination course and obviously thought of becoming a priest but relinquished the idea and left Douai in May 1651. He returned to England but, having decided to become a merchant, he followed the then common practice of sending aspiring merchant sons to 'factories' (import and export warehouses) overseas and was soon installed in Venice, the glass-making capital of Europe. For some years he traded in looking-glass plates as well as fine tableware but in the early 1670's he decided to stop acting as a middleman and to go into glass production in England on his own account. In 1673 he took out a patent for the making of a "sort of crystalline glass resembling rock Chrystall" and, using the skills of imported Italian workmen, he set up workshops at the Savoy in London and at Henley. From 1675 until his death in 1683 he also ran the Duke of Buckingham's glassworks at Vauxhall (visited by the diarist John Evelyn in 1676). The Vauxhall works made looking-glass plate and coach glass.

Lawsuits recorded in Chancery Proceedings in the Public Record Office [1673 *Ravenscroft v. Turfrey and Rois*; 1674 *Ravenscroft v. Yate*; 1675 *Ravenscroft v. Eaton*; 1680 *Ravenscroft v. Burroughs*; 1682 *Ravenscroft v. Bellingham*.] reveal that George also traded in "Needlework Lace or points" and currants. After his return from Venice, George handled the London end of the family business (his brother John took over in Venice) and was to be found on Turkey Walk, Exchange. This was on the site of the present (1979) Royal Exchange which dates from 1842, though the Turkey stone pavement has survived from the building that George Ravenscroft knew. It seems probable that, just as George tried to set up manufacture of glass, so he attempted to create English sources of needlework lace. This may account for the Ravenscroft's interest in properties at Colston Bassett near Nottingham, though the business connection has not yet been clearly established.

George had dealings not only with Venice but also with Hamburg and other places 'beyond the seas' and he imported not only through London but through Bristol as well. The Bristol connection is mentioned in the case of *Ravenscroft v Yates* (1674) which quotes figures of trade worth over £3,000 in 1669 (multiply by at least 20 to get a very rough modern equivalent). It was the glass business, however, which appears to have brought about George's downfall. His connection with Italian workmen and the Roman Catholic area of the Savoy precincts led him into trouble during the hysteria created by the Titus Oates anti-Catholic plot in 1678 and his participation in the Savoy and Henley works came to an end, the works being taken over by a business partner, Hawley Bishopp.

His interest in the Vauxhall looking-glass plate works continued, however, but as the very interesting case of *Ravenscroft v. Bellingham* (1682) indicates, he was even here engaged in a serious dispute with a business rival, the strain of which probably killed him. A suit brought by his younger brother, Edward Ravenscroft, the restoration playwright, in the Court of Arches in 1685 reveals that George was taken "by a palsie which seized him and continued strong upon him till his death." This sounds like a stroke and it was probably brought on by the angry interchanges he had with Bellingham. He was 51 years old and was buried in Barnet Church. His memorial may be seen to-day in the Ravenscroft Chapel.

There is a mystery connected with the name of George Ravenscroft which has still not been resolved. The George Ravenscroft described above died in 1683 yet there is an entry in the burial register of the Savoy Chapel for a George Ravenscroft which is dated 1681. Attempts to shake the authenticity of this entry are not convincing. The most probable explanation is that the Savoy Chapel entry refers to Barnet George's cousin once removed, that same George Ravenscroft of Hawarden whom Thorpe wrongly identified as the founder of the Ravenscroft glass business. There seems to have been some glass-making at Killings, the Ravenscroft's Flintshire home and Hawarden George may have been working for his 'cosin' at the Savoy works until the Titus Oates conspiracy broke out.

See also "The Story of Jesus Hospital Charity in Chipping Barnet 1672-1993" by Laurie Adams, Clerk to the Visitors of the Charity 1970-1992.

THE HAWARDEN (Killings) and BARNET RAVENSCROFTS (Simplified)

GEORGE RAVENSCROFT = MARGARET FOWLER

(yeoman)  
ob. c.1595

