SEVEN CENTURIES OF DEBENHAMS

July 2/68

Dear F. J. Debenham

It was nice to hear from one of the Australian descendants of the Debenham Dozen. I am sorry you are not in the Family Tree. I had your father down but could not get information about his family.

I have a few copies of the book and Tree left and I am sending one to you by parcel post, which will take some time.

In return I would like to hear something about you and your immediate relations. I am far too old to do the Tree over again but I could enter up fresh information for a grandson to take on the job in years to come.

Yours very sincerely

Frank Debenham.

Antaretic pioneer dies at 81

Professor Frank Debenham, the last surviving Australian member of Scott's Antarctic expedition, died in hospital at Cambridge, England, on Tuesday night.

Professor Debenham, 81, had been in hospital for about a month.

His funeral will be held at Cambridge at the weekend.

Professor Debenham was born at Bowral and educated at The King's School, Parramatta, and Sydney University.

As a geologist, he was one of two Australians in Scott's last Antarctic expedition which took place between 1910 and 1913.

He was in the shore party and was concerned mainly with the geology and mapping of McMurdo Sound.

In 1914 he went to England, became a major in the British Army, and served in World War I until 1919.

Later, he went to Cambridge University where he studied his Antarctic findings.

He was foundation director of the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge from 1925 to 1946 and Professor of Geography at the university from 1931 to 1949.

SEVEN CENTURIES OF DEBENHAMS

by
FRANK DEBENHAM, O.B.E.
Professor Emeritus of Cambridge University

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‘I confess to an old-fashioned belief in the profound importance of great-grandfathers. Whether they were Dukes or Dustmen is of relatively minor interest. The real interest consists in finding out what manner of men they were and to what extent their qualities have emerged in their descendants.’

BERESFORD

Foreword

IT HAS BEEN my great privilege to watch the progress of this family chronicle, as the author has painstakingly worked upon it, month after month; to read and reread the manuscript, and to contribute some small items of interest to help it on its way.

Now it is my still greater privilege to express the thanks of our family to the author for his labour of love. The Chronicle and the Tree may truly be described in these terms.

Of labour there has been no stint, so characteristic of the man who has invariably put his best into whatever he had in hand, whether in geological research in the Antarctic, in the Department of Geography at Cambridge, or in his later literary achievements.

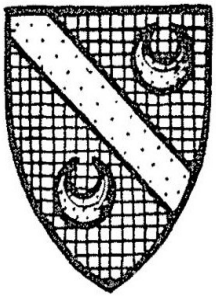
He has left no stone unturned; careful study of old letters, crossed and in faded ink, ceaseless correspondence with scattered members of the family all over England and also in Australia, hundreds of miles covered in visiting those who were best approached by personal interviews and inspecting the Suffolk homes of our ancestors, and making the charming sketches which add so much to the attraction of the book.

But the chief feature in that attraction lies in the fact that he has enjoyed the job.

He has told me that as he followed the fortunes of our ancestors, their ups and downs, their romances, successes and failures, he had grown to know them and love their company in a way which surprised him. It is our turn now to share this enjoyment. Yea, we have a goodly heritage, and we owe a great debt of gratitude to Professor Frank Debenham, whose scholarly and untiring research has made us more aware of it.

PHILLIS DEBENHAM
Cheshunt Park, Herts

May 1957



Arms of the Wenham Hall Debenhams

THE HOUSE OF DEBENHAM undoubtedly centres on Suffolk and it is difficult not to associate it directly with the pleasant little town of that name on the River Deben.

It is true that at least one antiquarian has asserted that a de Benham came over from Normandy with William the Conqueror, but it would be a very odd coincidence that this de Benham, if he ever existed, should come and settle in the region of the far more ancient Danish settlement of that name in Suffolk. It is to be suspected that the number of families alleged to have 'come over with the Conqueror' is as elastic as the number of pilgrim families claimed to have sailed on the Mayflower.

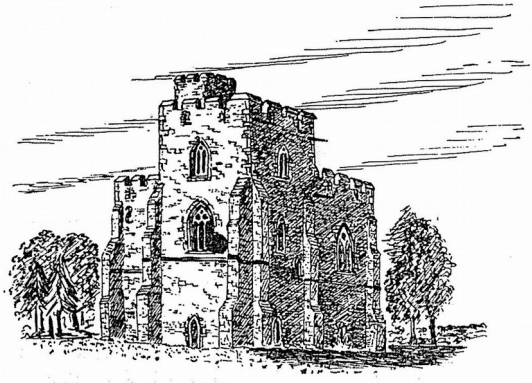
In any case, surnames are a slender guide to lineage before the eleventh and twelfth centuries since they were hardly used before that period. As the word itself implies, they were super- or added names to specify an individual more fully than his given or Christian name allowed. The surname often came from his trade and gave us the Smiths and Bakers and Millers of today, and nearly as often from the father so that Jack the son of Robin became Jack Robinson. Still more frequently a man was described by the place whence he came and, at first, with the preposition 'of' or 'de' in front of the place name.

Thus the first Debenham to whom we can find a reference was of knightly estate and listed as 'Lucas de Debenham' in 1165. He was recorded as the holder of two knights' fees in Suffolk, that is to say, he held enough land to furnish two knights for the king's service in war. Lucas cannot be claimed as a shining light to his descendants as he was reported, in Latin of course, to his king, Henry II, because he 'neither went to Ireland nor sent money', and a little later he had to pay forty shillings as scutage, the fine or monetary alternative for not attending in person.

The name simply means that Lucas came from Debenham, where he would have been called Sir Lucas, or Lucas the Knight. It is significant that where the name occurs in State papers up to the fifteenth century it always has the 'de' in front of the Debenham. This complicates the task of the genealogist a good deal

since the name alone does not prove, for instance, that Peter de Debenham was any relation to Thomas, his son; it merely hints that they both came from Debenham. In fact we shall require additional evidence besides the name itself if we are to prove that the different groups of Debenhams we shall meet with in this review of the family were ever related at all.

Such additional evidence is hard to come by except in deeds relating to property which have been preserved, and these of course concern chiefly the lords of the manors or high dignitaries of the church. The commonalty would rarely appear by individual name; they were lumped together as the ‘men’ of, or the ‘servants’ of the lord. So it is not surprising that the first Debenhams we hear of are a knightly family in the southern half of Suffolk, and we can follow them till it died out for want of heirs in the male line about 1500.



Wenham Hall, 1957

We are not told where Lucas held his two knights’ fees, but they were probably in the Vicinity of the town of Debenham, especially as the next reference is found in the deeds of that town. These record that a Jocelinus de Debenham and a Walter, son of Gilbert de Debenham, were making grants of land in 1276. It seems likely that in that year this Walter’s father was undergoing detention, for three years later there is ’mention of the delivery from Norwich gaol of ‘Gilbert de Debenham, taken and imprisoned there for the death of William Woolecock and other trespasses’. Nor was he the only homicide of the name, for in 1307 a Robert de Debenham was pardoned at Carlisle, where a Parliament was being held, ‘for the death of Michel de Carleel, in consideration of service in Scotland’. We may fairly presume that this Robert had been in the army against Robert the Bruce and was successful in some camp brawl with a citizen of Carlisle. These were hardly auspicious beginnings for the family we are tracing.

In the meantime a Peter de Debenham was building a stronghold of a kind at the Village of Little Wenham, some six miles from Ipswich. The date assigned to the building of Wenham Hall is 1260 and it is regarded as a very early instance

of the use of the modern size of brick, more reddish than the usual Suffolk brick, which is commonly a dull white. The same Peter is recorded as owning land at Acton, twelve miles away, near Sudbury and Long Melford; he could have been the father of the Robert of the too— ready sword at Carlisle.

In defence of the family reputation we must here record that there were no less than five beneficed clergy of the name in the succeeding century, all being rectors of villages in Norfolk, though that does not prove relationship with the two successful duellists.

Peter died in 1309 leaving his possessions to his son Thomas who may have been born about 1280. Of him we know nothing except that he had a son named Gilbert who married a lady named Mary. There is a distressing habit in the records of those days of omitting the surname or origin of the wives unless they happened to be the daughters of nobility. This Gilbert is the first of a run of five Gilberts, the name passing from one generation to the next with an embarrassing reiteration, so that it is difficult to distinguish the doings of one from the next, and their deeds had enough notoriety to get into the records of the time, not always on the creditable side. The easiest way of distinguishing them is by attaching their wives' names, which fortunately are different in each case.

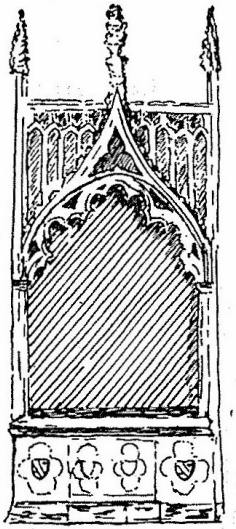
Of Mary's Gilbert we know that he was a Justice of the Peace and there is a note that he was to be paid 'his wages of five shillings a day' – no mean salary for those days – and a later entry that he was given £10 for 'the wages of himself and his clerk'. Nevertheless he got into financial difficulties, because in 1359 he acknowledges a debt of £500 'to be levied, in default of payment, on his lands and chattels in Suffolk'. He had the excuse of the times being difficult for landowners, as the bubonic plague of the mid-fourteenth century—the Black Death—had removed up to two—thirds of the population of England and labour was very scarce. The polltax levied in 1381 came as a cumulation of burdens, and justice was hard to come by. In the mouthing words so beloved of the chroniclers of the time, 'the county was full of champerties and embraceries, confederacies, deceptions and other falsities'. In modern English these were illegal bargainings, suborning of juries and conspiracies to defeat justice.

In spite of these embarrassments, Mary's Gilbert was a man of consequence in Suffolk. He received several commissions of Oyer and Terminer, which were temporary courts to hear and adjudicate on complaints of robbery and violence. One of them relates to an inquiry into the dearth of labour due to the 'deadly pestilence'. In 1351 he acted as agent or attorney for the wealthy Earl of Suffolk while he was overseas.

He appears to have had relatives of some consequence in Ipswich as there was a Thomas de Debenham, merchant, who owned a ship which was 'arrested for the king's service' in 1337, though this may well have been his father.

Gilbert's Mary produced a son for him, probably about the middle of the century, While Gilbert himself died about 1361. In his will he directed that,

having bequeathed his soul to God his body should be laid in the Church of All Saints at Wenham Parva, in pariete australi' (in the south wall) of the said church.' There to this day is the rather plain tomb, with his shield carved but no wording. His son became the first of at least three Sir Gilberts. He was for a time High Sheriff of Suffolk for Richard II, that is to say the official who looked after the king's property in the shire and administered justice, or more correctly, saw that it



Tomb of Gilbert Debenham, A.D. 1361

was administered. It must be a moot point whether he was knighted as a reward for his services to the king or because he was a man of substance. The fact is that royalty had discovered that its power of conferring knighthood could be a lucrative one. Thus, only three years before Gilbert became High Sheriff his sovereign had decreed that every citizen of London whose property was worth £40 a year should take upon himself the honour of knighthood. If you accepted the honour you paid the knightly fees, if you declined it you were heavily fined. It was a precursor of the famous Morton's Fork of Henry VII, whereby if you kept a large retinue you were clearly able to stand a capital levy, and if you kept a small one you had obviously been saving and could spare of your savings.

Sir Gilbert had married into this questionable aristocracy by choosing as his wife Jane, the daughter of Sir Jothernegan, whose centre was near Lowestoft.

There is no doubt that by the beginning of the fifteenth century the Debenham name was prominent in the Ipswich region of Suffolk. Gilbert of Wenham Hall held many manors, some of them as far afield as the district of Lowestoft. For the first half of the century one Gilbert Debenham or another represented Suffolk in the seven parliaments that were held. It is not clear which

of the Gilberts it was who was knighted in person by King Henry VI at Leicester in 1426. It could have been the one who had been Sheriff of the County in 1395, that is Jane's Gilbert, though he would have been aged by then. More probably it was his son, who was High Sheriff in 1427.

In the same half-century William Debenham, presumably a younger brother of one of the Gilberts, was carving a career for himself in Ipswich as a merchant. He was in six parliaments, representing the borough of Ipswich, and he was a bailiff of the town in 1430 and 1441. He owned ships and had a licence to export grain. It is just possible that he was the same William who, in 1394, was appointed by the King's Chief Butler as his deputy in the ports of Ipswich and Colchester. His duties in this office were probably merely to see that customs dues were levied and that all goods were properly 'cocketted' (the medieval equivalent of our modern marking with a cross in chalk) before they were released. This was just a few years too late for him to have been a junior officer under the poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, who had recently lost the appointment of Comptroller of the Petty Customs. There is another faint link with the poet in that a Robert de Benham was Clerk of the Works at Windsor Castle in the reign of Edward III, 1350. He was succeeded in this office by the famous William of Wykeham, founder of Winchester College and of New College, Oxford, and he in turn was succeeded rather later by Geoffrey Chaucer in 1390.

Such slender links with our first truly national poet are of interest mainly because it is only through him that we can conjure up some kind of picture of the Debenhams of that day, who, as we have seen, included knights, yeomen and merchants. The band of pilgrims in his *Canterbury Tales*, painted perhaps a little too lavishly to represent their type with accuracy, include all these. We shall see later that we can hardly claim for one of the Sir Gilberts that he

> 'fro the tyme that he first bigan
> To ryden out, loved chivalrye,
> Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisye.'

No amount of bias could make him out 'a verray parfit gentil knight', but we may be permitted to borrow his clothing for our Gilbert to wear:

> 'Offustian he wcred a Gipoun (doublet, dose fitting)
> A1 besmothcred with his habergcoun.' (coat of mail)

The Yeoman, his armed servant as well as his tenant,

> 'Was clad in cote and hood of grene:
> A sheefe of pecock arwes bright and kene
> Under his belt he bar ful thriftily (carefully)
> And in his hand he bar a mighty bowe.'

For William, the merchant of Ipswich, we may accept with reservations an

equally flattering description:

> ‘A Marchant was ther with a forked berd, (beard)
> In motelee, and hye on horse he sat
> Upon his heed a Flaundrish bever hat
> His botes clasped faire and fetisly.’ (neatly)

Of the franklins, or freeholders, that growing body of middle-class people, of Whom in the next century we have several Debenham representatives, we hear that they could be well-to-do, for Chaucer’s Frankeleyn was what we would call a *bon-viveur*:

> ‘Withoute bake mete never was his hous
> Of fish and flesh and that so plentevous
> It snewed (snowed) in his hous of mete and drink.’

But he had duties of importance:

> ‘At sessionns ther was he lord and sire
> Ful oft tyme he was knight of the shire
> A shirreve hadde he been and a countour (auditor)
> Was no—wher such a worthy vavassour.’ (a vassal next in dignity to a baron)

Of the tradesmen, haberdashers, weavers, dyers, etc., Chaucer gives us a picture of stout burghers strongly entrenched behind their guild, all fitted to become aldermen. Lastly, to complete the picture of the countryside of those days, the Plowman, who

> ‘hadde y-lad (laid out) of dong ful many a fother (cartload)
> A trewe swinker (toiler) and a good was he
> Living in pees and parfit charitie.
> His tythes he payed ful faire and wel.’

Altogether we have a more glowing picture of the times than we can credit, but then Chaucer was describing people who would have enough leisure to go on a pilgrimage to the shrine at Canterbury. Returning to William of Ipswich, who may have been a youthful deputy—butler for the King’s customs and certainly became a baihg of the town, he survives the inquiries of historians with no real stain on his name. He died in 1461 and was buried in the Chapel of St john, at the Buttermarket in his town.

They must have been men of energy and resource to attain to these honours and wealth, but whether it was all honestly come by we cannot be sure. For instance, in 1401 a Thomas Debenham, who could have been the father of Butler William, was named in a complaint by the Countess of Oxford for being one of a party (which included two monks and a chaplain) who ‘went armed to

her mansion at Earls Colne', only twenty miles from Ipswich. There they 'tooke her close, park and certain chests, entered her free warren, hunted in her park, besieged her in her mansion and threatened her with arson and other evils so that for a long time she dared not leave it'.

Not content with those indignities, they 'fished in her stews, carried off fish, deer, hares, rabbits, pheasants and partridges, as well as charters, writings and other muniments concerning her right and inheritance'. As a sort of afterthought the indictment ends by stating that they 'assaulted, bound and ill—treated her men and servants, threw some of them in ditches and detained them until they delivered up six horses of hers worth 20L and goods and chattells'.

This sounds like a major foray, and a great wrong to a noble lady, but one might echo Hamlet's mother and say, 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.' In other words, we should have to know what went before the raid on the Earl of Oxford's side if we are to pass judgment. Certainly such besiegings and robbings and reivings of cattle were common enough in the period, and we hear much of them in the famous *Paston Letters*, the papers of a family in Norfolk of much the same sort as the Debenhams of Wenham Parva, though it is not often that illegal seizure of rabbits appears as part of the complaint.

Moreover, false accusations and false witness were part of the game in that century. Thus in 1439 a general pardon by privy seal was granted by the King 'to Gilbert Debenham (Jane's Gilbert presumably) of Lytelwenham, indicted of felonies, whereof he is innocent, in the county of Lancaster, where he has never been, and in divers other counties of England'. Possibly this complaint only erred in overstating the case against him, because the very next year a Commission is granted to nine people 'to arrest Gilbert Debenham, Esquire, and to bring him before the King in Chancery to answer certain charges brought against him'.

The fact is that the weak government of Henry VI, his bouts of insanity and the Wars of the Roses that followed brought upon the country a period of lawlessness in which local might was apt to be right and inter-family feuds were the rule.

Curiously enough it was not the law itself that was at fault so much as the power lacking behind the law. There was almost a surfeit of law in the land, and in the Paston Letters, a true mirror of the times, there is endless litigation of a sort, charge and counter-charge, beseechings for justice and bitter complaint of raids such as the one already mentioned.

Reading these letters one gains the impression that the landed gentry were ceaselessly worried in a way that could hardly happen to their tenant farmers. The gentry, having acquired land, sometimes by industry (as was the case with the early Pastons), sometimes by sharp practice, had to defend their possessions either by the processes of law, of which they had to have more than a smattering, or else by recourse to lance and sword. The Pastons themselves had to use both and so did the Debenhams, though, as we shall see, the latter laid less emphasis on the

law.

With the help of the Paston papers, which cover the period from 1402 – 1509, we can outline a dim picture of at least three of these Gilbert Debenhams, even though we never quite escape from the confusion of the repeated name, so that father and son have to share in the honours and dishonours that came to them through their deeds.

We can be pretty sure that it was Jane's Gilbert who, in 1439, was pardoned for felonies he could not have committed, and interest centres then on his son Gilbert, who married Margaret, the daughter of Sir Edward Hastings, a Norfolk knight.

The star of England was decidedly in the descendant at the middle of the century. Twenty years earlier we had burnt the Maid of Orleans in the market place of Rouen, whose last cry to 'Jesus' caused an English soldier a moment of second sight as he muttered, 'We are lost – we have burned a saint.' In another twenty years the English had been driven out of France, except for Calais, but war or threatenings of war continued and every now and then the gentry of East Anglia, including the Gilberts, were summoned to prepare for invasion, or to take sides between the Red and the White Roses;

In the scanty records for the story there appears to be a superfluity of Gilberts and the quickest solution is to telescope two of them into one, which we can do by causing one of them to marry twice. The choice for this operation falls upon Margaret's Gilbert who, in a faulty genealogy, is said to have died in 148I, the same year as died the Gilbert who married Elizabeth, daughter and heir of Sir Thomas Holbrook. If we can assume he is one and the same Gilbert, many inconsistencies disappear and we will call him 'Old Debnam' as is done in the *Paston Letters*.

There is a picturesque account of him and his son, the last Gilbert of the line, written by Miss Winifred Haward and printed in History, the journal of the Historical Society, in 1929. Being a Debenham, the present writer cannot go all the way with Miss Haward, or at least he would claim that there might be another side to her story and that Gilbert was not the only rascal in Suffolk at the time. She shows her feelings clearly enough in the title of her paper, 'Gilbert Debenham: a medieval rascal in real life', and states her case in a forthright manner in her opening paragraphs:

'His appearance is a signal for an outburst of complaints either of him as a pernicious evil-doer or from him as an injured innocent grievously vexed by the unfounded charges of his enemies. It is impossible to resist the conclusion that he was an exceptionally able and unscrupulous villain.'

The 'Old Debnam' does not appear to have been knighted, though he is given that doubtful honour in the inaccurate pedigree already mentioned, taken from M88 in the British Museum. He seems to have been associated in the forties with Tuddenham, the Villain of the Pastor; Letters, whose haunt was in Norfolk,

but by 1461 he had attached himself to the then powerful Duke of Norfolk, whose steward he became in that year. Miss Haward allows that he was ‘soon to the fore as one of the most energetic gentlemen in Suffolk, and he was several times a Member of Parliament’. His doings and misdoings soon become entangled with those of his son, who was certainly knighted at some time. It is ‘Old Debnam’, who is the rascal of her story.

He was probably the principal in one of the many quarrels with Sir John Fastolf, that stout old warrior of the French wars who was never permitted to enjoy fully his retirement with riches in the great castle he raised at Caister on the coast near Yarmouth. That in these inter—family quarrels it was usually a case of six of one and half a dozen of the other is clear from a fairly detailed account of the differences between Fastolf, backed by Paston, and one Jenney, backed by the Gilbert Debenhams, father and son. As early as 1455 Sir John Fastolf sees the way the wind is blowing, for he writes to young John Paston, ‘Wentworth has got Debenham, Radclyfl: and others in my Lords house (Oxford) against us.’

In 1461 there is a two-sided flare-up. There was trouble over a court (a meeting of tenants to pay their dues and recite complaints) held at the manor of Cotton belonging to Fastolf, and not far from the Rickinghalls of which we shall hear more later, and ‘young John Paston next day, to requite the enemy for the trouble they had occasioned, took with him thirty men, and rode to Jenney’s place, where he carried off thirty—six head of neat, and brought them into Norfolk’. This reads very like strong provocation to Jenney, though he did not take action himself apparently. Instead he employed the Debenhams, by whose encouragement a body of unknown men took possession of the manor of Cotton and garrisoned it against all comers. The *Paston Letters* say that Jenney had sold his interest in the capture, ‘hath sold the lyflod (livelihood) on to Debynham and that hys son the knyth (knight) shall dwell there’.

The whole incident was very typical of the times, but whether it was just tit-for-tat or sheer rascality it is not for us, or Miss Haward, to say. It at least tells us that the younger Debenham was a knight by 1461, or soon after. There is some inconclusive evidence that one or other of the Debenhams lived in the manor for some years, while the inevitable law-suits were being prosecuted. Margaret Paston, the wife of the John Paston in the incident, mentions ‘Sir Thomas Brews, Debenham the fadre and the knyt his sonne’. This Sir Thomas Brews married Elizabeth the sister and heir to the last Sir Gilbert, the ‘sonne’ mentioned.

In spite of these acts of violence, Sir Gilbert had not lost face with royalty, for the same year he was one of a Commission to fit out a ship, the *Barge of Yarmouth*, for service in the King’s fleet, and the *Paston Letters* tell us of a difference between father and son over the matter. ‘Old Debnam’ wanted to sell 100 bullocks to the Paston party for provisioning another ship, but ‘young Debnam’ objected as he wanted them for ‘le Barge of Yernemath’.

In fact, though there is no lack of petitions and complaints against these

two Gilberts, there are counter-petitions on their behalf and even pardons given to them. Thus in 1469 a pardon came by privy seal to the younger and to Katharine, late wife of Sir William Zouche, for marrying without licence.

Rascals or not, these two Debenhams were evidently picturesque and much in the limelight so that we are apt to forget there were other Debenhams in Suffolk of a yeoman or tradesman class. Such mention as can be found of them relates to the northern half of the county, which is suggestive because that was, in the next century, the district of the branch of the family we are chiefly concerned with. The Gilberts, as we have seen, resided for a time at Cotton, and one of them had a messuage or dwelling house at Mendelsham nearby. In 1461 there is mention of a John Debbenham, late of Eye', a town eight miles north of Debenham, who was a draper. In 1470 a Stephen Debenham, yeoman of Hoxne near Eye, had a debt of 4 marks to the Bishop of Norwich.

It is fair to assume that some of the younger sons of the Gilbert line were in the district pursuing less doubtful careers than those of the knights. Under the feudal system the eldest son was set sofar above his brothers that in default of the Church, the younger ones had to become yeoman farmers or local tradesmen such as maltsters, millers or weavers.

In this case the two Gilberts went on amassing properties by marriage Or by less legal methods. Thus, through his marriage to the widow of Lord Zouche, Sir Gilbert, in 1472, named as 'one of the King's Coroners', acquired certain manors in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Dorset. By a curious coincidence it is in Dorset, at the present day, that members of two later branches of the family now live not far from each other, Sir Piers Debenham, Bart, of one line, and Horace Debenham, Esquire, retired estate agent, of the other line, since deceased.

In acquiring property the Gilberts certainly acquired enemies as well, and there seems to be no doubt that they were stern landlords and, maybe, unjust masters. That this was so there is some evidence in an incident in 147 5 related as follows by one authority. It seems to relate to 'Old Debnam', then a fairly old man, as knighthood is not mentioned.

'Gilbert Debenham, having visited the Ipswich Cheese—market, was returning home with his purchases consisting of tribulas or showls (shovels) when he was suddenly attacked, at 3 pair, by five men, three of whom were clergy holding benefices in the neighbourhood. He placed his back against a wall and valiantly defended himself striking out vigorously with a showl. The bailiffs were summoned to quell the disturbance and arrest the miscreants, who quickly dispersed at the sight of the law officers, some seeking refuge in "le White Hert", while the rest took sanctuary in the church of the Carmelite friars.'

The story as thus stated is rather biased in favour of the one assaulted yet presumably the three beneficed clergy were moved to the assault by some wrong or other. We cannot judge between them but we must be intrigued at the picture of a wealthy and elderly landowner purchasing shovels and carrying them home on

foot himself.

By the time of this incident ‘young Debnam’ had outpaced his father in honours if not in misdeeds. He had been knighted in the years between 1461 and 1465, perhaps in the latter year at the Queen’s coronation. Before that he had been ‘clerk of the markets of the Household’ and it is safe to say that the duties of that office were more lucrative than menial. According to the *Paston Letters* he had a blustering manner and there was an occasion in London when John Howard, afterwards Duke of Norfolk, lost his temper with Gilbert at his ‘Bragging’ and the two were only separated from Violence by John Paston. This Gilbert was a retainer of the Duke’s in 1469 when he took part in besieging Margaret Paston in Caister Castle, near Yarmouth.

He was a Yorkist and his wife was a Plumpton of Knaresborough in that county, so he went into exile with Edward IV and was evidently trusted by that monarch of changeable fortunes. He was one of the two knights sent over in 1471 by the King to see if he could expect support from Norfolk in a new attempt at regaining his throne. Honours and emoluments came thick and fast. He was King’s Carver in the same year, a Justice of the Peace for Suffolk and was made a Knight of the Body, which meant that he had to attend the King’s person in battle. He must have been closely associated with the King as his duties at the Royal funeral in 1483 imply. The body was borne into Westminster Abbey beneath a rich canopy of cloth imperial fringed with gold and blue silk and at every corner a banner: ‘The fourth baner of Saint Edward was borne by Sir Gilbert Debynham. Ther was a great wache that night by great lordys, knights, esquiers for the body and gentilmen usshers.’ Amongst the names of these watchers is that of Sir Gilbert Debenham.

Gilbert had rendered other services to his King. In 1474 the King’s ‘discreet servants Norris and Debenham’ were sent to Ireland. Debenham mustered with 400 archers at Chester and he was made Chancellor of Ireland and Steward of Meath. In that century of frequent changes of sovereign and of kingmakers it was not only the crowned heads themselves that lay uneasily. Sir Gilbert remained Yorkist but he had to sing small when Richard III came to the throne and he no longer assisted at the carving of the king’s meat at a banquet. He regained favour, however, and was sent to defend Harwich while his sovereign went to his defeat and death at the battle of Bosworth.

Sir Gilbert was naturally under suspicion, and though he was given a formal pardon by the new sovereign he lost his high offices. He was sent to Ireland with the somewhat bogus office of Surveyor of Mines (there being no mines to survey) in 1491.

Four years later he was indiscreet enough to welcome the pretender to the throne, Perkin Warbeck, when he landed there with a few ships. As a result Gilbert was attainted by the Parliament of 149 5 and thrown into prison where he was either executed or died in 1500.

It is on that gloomy note that we say goodbye, in our little footnote to history, to these picturesque Gilberts who had played their modest part in the history of East Anglia. They had their rascally moments no doubt but they must have been stout—hearted men and ready enough to spring to the defence of town or sovereign. At this distance of time we can scarcely pass judgment on the last of them, and perhaps the depth of his fall atoned for the misdeeds credited to him. To have descended from being Chancellor of Ireland to attainder and trial for treason was a humiliation matched only by the downfall from being pall bearer at a king's funeral to the. scant notice accompanying his own death– 'to Sir William Tyler from the King's Privy Purse: £1 for the burying of Sir Gilbert Debenham'.

His sister, Elizabeth, had married Sir Thomas Brewse, one of Gilbert's boon companions in his earlier adventures with the Paston family. By 1500 she was a widow with at least one daughter, Margery, who married John Paston the younger. This marriage should have healed the breaches between the two families, but in her letters to her husband Margery does not speak with any enthusiasm of 'myn Unkyll Syr Gylberd Debnam'.

The Brewse family had been based on Fressingfield, a historic village on the northern border of Suffolk, but on Gilbert's death his sister was granted 'all such lands as were Gilbert Debenham's, Kt, and do or ought to come to his handes at any time by reason of the outlawry or attainder of the sd Gilbert'. For this reversal of the attainder she paid the King £500 and she settled the lands on her son Robert Brewse. He and his descendants occupied Wenham Hall for many years, quartering the Debenham and the Brewse Arms on their shield.

Except in the case of Elizabeth Brewse history has recorded very little about the wives of these county families. At first sight one is apt to regard them as chiefly of value for the dowries they occasionally brought to the husband, and as agents to look after the manor while their lords were away warring or litigating. Certainly they were more subservient to their husbands than they are today and their marriages were usually arranged above their heads by their elders. Nevertheless the *Paston Letters*, on careful reading, suggest that their function and their attitude was not vastly different from that of the present day. As witness we may quote a letter from Margery Paston to her husband, away in London:

'Right reverent and worshipfull syre, in my most umbill weysse I recomaunde me to you, desiring to here of our welfare. Syr, I thank on for the venyson that ye sent me. As for your tippet of velvet it is not here, an sey the (could it be) that ye put it in your casket at London. . . .'

In spite of that stilted language, and extraordinary spelling, can we not parallel that letter today, in one from any wife to any husband away on a holiday, as

'Dear Tom, I must drop you a line to keep you up to date and hoping to hear from you. Thanks for the chocolates. Your grey scarf isn't here, it's probably at the bottom of your suitcase. . . .'

In a later letter Margery is less formal and more affectionate:

‘Myne owyn swete hert, in my most humbyl wyse I recomaund me to you. . . .’

Before we finally leave the Debenhams of the Ipswich district, we should mention that there was a branch at East Bergholt, now chiefly known for its connection with the landscape painter, John Constable (1776—1837), who was born there. These Debenhams were surely connected with the Wenham Hall branch, and the fate of one of them is somewhat similar to that of the last Sir Gilbert.

The record is in two forms.

‘Robert Debenham of East Bergholt (and three others) in 1533 was hung in chains at Dovercourt (near Harwich) for removing the rood of the parish church and burning it to ashes.’

In Froude’s History of England these four men are referred to in complimentary terms as ‘the first Paladins of the Reformation’. The History of Essex gives a somewhat different account of the event, thus:

‘Robert Debnam was hanged at Cataway Causy (causeway). The Vicar of Waltham was accused (of the burning of the Rood) and three persons, one of them named Debnam, were executed rather than inform against him.

However we interpret the action, it was at least somewhat high handed to burn what was believed, by the majority of the parish, to be a portion of the Holy Cross. In what was, for him, a better cause, this Robert showed the same force of character as his ancestors the Gilberts of Wenham.

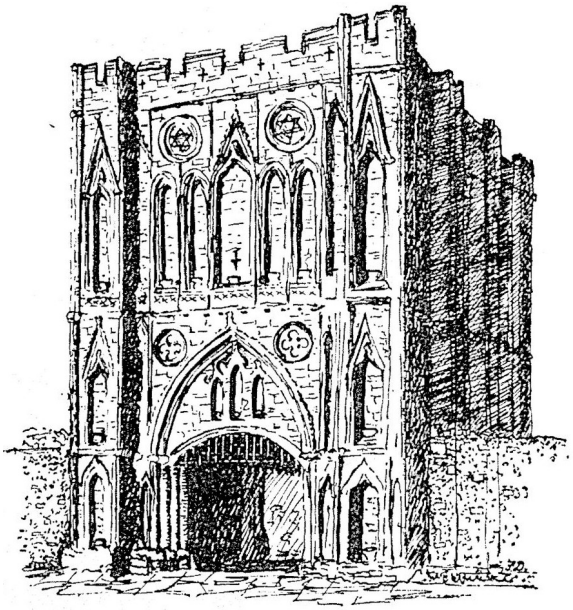
The senior line of the Debenhams having thus come to a rather inglorious end in the Wenham Parva district, we are left with the task of finding Where the junior line Of some younger son had established itself in the county. So far this has proved impossible to do with certainty, in spite of the prolonged and skilful search of the late Mr Reginald Ledgard and his wife, Phyllis Debenham Ledgard (nee johnson).

Yet, out of the many districts which contained lands or manors in the possession of the Gilberts, we can pick two which are promising, since there were families of the name occurring there as yeomen or tradesmen in the succeeding century. These are (1) a few miles to the north-east of Bury St Edmunds which we will refer to as the Sapiston area, after the Sapestuna which appears in the Domesday Book, but stretching as far east as the Cotton over which the Pastons and the Gilbert Debenhams had their feud. (2) The second centre for a clan of Debenhams we may call the Bradfield area, after a central village, but it stretches from Bury St Edmunds to the famous wool towns of Lavenham and Long Melford and includes such euphonious village names as Thorpe Morieux, Alpheton and Bradfield Combust. The territorial link with the Gilberts lies in the fact that the original Peter de Debenham held lands close to Long Melford.

These two districts merge into each other near Bury St Edmunds and indeed that thriving and ancient town was the real centre for Debenhams for generations, though only a few of them lived there.

In the early years of the fourteenth century, when we first find record of Debenhams in the neighbourhood, the Great Abbey of St Edmundsbury was still the temporal as well as the spiritual ruler of all that corner of Suffolk, and we may almost take it for granted that these early Debenhams were tied to the Abbey by ‘sac and soc’, i.e. occupying their land in return for certain services, which could have included anything from catching eels for the monks to taking up arms under the fifty knights which the Abbey had to supply to the King.

In the stirring days of Richard Coeur de Lion the Abbey had reached its peak of power under the Abbott Samson, ‘that personable man, stout-made, standing erect as a pillar’, who was brave enough ‘to cross the Lion himself in his path and take him by his Whiskers’, as Thomas Carlyle describes when the King attempted to take a wealthy heiress, an infant, into his charge, who was rightly a ward of the Abbey. At that time the Abbey was ‘owner and indeed creator of the town itself, its lands were once a county in themselves’. Carlyle’s century-old description of the town and the Abbey ruins may still stand:



The Abbey Gate, Bury St Edmunds, 1957

‘The Bury or Burgh of St Edmunds is still a prosperous brisk town. The grim old walls of the Abbey buildings are an earnest fact, not peopled with fantasms but with men of flesh and blood.’

Under the care of the townsfolk, once the serfs and menials of the Abbey, the history of its palmy days is now kept bright by reconstruction and repair of walls and a well- tended garden beyond the huge Abbey Gate, still standing with its oaken portcullis and bowmen’s loopholes, of which Carlyle wrote: ‘How like a broken blackened shin-bone of the old dead Ages this black ruin looks out, not yet covered by the soil: still indicating what a once gigantic Life lies buried there.’

The shadow of the vast buildings reached far beyond the little town, therefore, when we can first discern some Debenhams in the district. There were doubtless certain advantages in being the tenants of an Abbey rather than of a warring knight, and the private bickerings of families such as the Pastons and Debenhams do not occur on the Abbey lands.

However that may be, we have been able to find several instances of Debenhams in the parishes within the area of Abbey jurisdiction. They are isolated, that is to say, we cannot prove connection with either the Gilbert line or'with the family trees we are about to follow up; nevertheless they are worthy of mention if only because they indicate reputable, if undistinguished, people who were of sufficient substance to have wills made in Latin on parchment and

because they had Christian names with which we shall become very familiar later on. The earliest found is a will of Thomas Debynham of Stradeshall (ten miles to the west of Bradfield) made in 1446. In it he directed that his wife Emma should have all his goods, moveable and immoveable, some of which she was to dispose of 'for the help of my soul and my benefactors' souls: to the high altar of the said church for tithes unpaid 12d: for the repair of the said church 6s. 8d.'

In the Sapiston district there is an interesting early will of a Margaret Debynham of 1478, of Weston, about three miles from Sapiston: interesting because of the utensils she bequeaths to her sons Stephen and Thomas and her daughters Joan, Maude and Ellen, from which we can make a vague guess at the occupation of her late husband John. Incidentally it shows them to have been successful at whatever the occupation was.

The will is in Latin of course, of a very doggy variety, and it opens with the pious directions common with well-established people of those days. Thus, 40d. is due to the high altar of the church for tithes unpaid and ten shillings is to be paid to the Friars of the Old House in Thetford for a trental, i.e. a set of thirty requiem masses to be said for her soul. A further 8 'marks' are allotted to a chaplain to celebrate masses in the parish church of Weston for a year 'for my soul and the soul of John Debynham my late husband and the souls of all my benefactors'.

Son Stephen has to be content with 13s. 4d. and UNUM YETYNG' FAAT', which seems to signify in the two languages used either a large ladle for melting lead or a vat for casting cheese. Son Thomas had another 138. 4d, a red and white coverlet and one chest. This seems to indicate that the sons were already provided with their own careers and that it was daughterjoan who was to carry on the parents' business. To her, in addition to 'the residue of my utensils unbequeathed', went a list of things named individually.

There were four PATELLAE (large dishes or pots, probably of metal) containing 8, 3, 2 and 2 gallons, two OLLAE (pots or jars of earthenware) containing 5 and 3 gallons. To Joan also there went 'le brewyng tubbe', a utensil which was obviously beyond the Latinity of the clerk who wrote the will, 'a large sheet, my great chest and a candlestick'.

Three more PATELLAE go to Margaret Howys, probably a granddaughter, so there was evidently a collection of large and valuable containers, too many to be simply cooking vessels. The choice of what they were used for seems to lie between dyeing, since it wasia weaving district, or cheese making. The word PATELLA means strictly a dish rather than a Jar, which favours cheese, but on the other hand there is no mention of a cheese press so perhaps dyeing has it.

All the lands and tenements were to be sold in order to carry out this will, 'except that my daughter Joan shall have the occupation of the said lands and tenements until Michaelmas '.

One of the executors of the will is John Hobert, and we should note that a John Hoberd was the executor of the will of a Stephen Debenham of ‘Rykynghall’ proved in 1458 at ‘Bodysdale’ (Botesdale) with ‘power being reserved to John Debenham executor when he should come’.

We are at liberty to guess whether this Stephen may have been the father of John of Weston and, with less probability, that he was possibly the grandfather of the unnamed Debenham with whom we begin our continuous tree in succeeding pages. The terms of the long will, not fully quoted here, do at least show that the family of John and Margaret were of some consequence in the Sapiston district and that they set a high value on their duty to church and family ties.

The details of Margaret’s will are a clear indication of the great importance of actual property in those days as opposed to cash. For one thing, though money had to be passed in buying and selling, there was no safe place to keep it in and even had there been such, it would have been a temptation to the King’s Treasury to take it. In fact most wills of the period had to direct which pieces of property, whether land, stock or utensils, were to be sold in order to raise the 6s. 8d. for church repair and the 13s. 4d. for son Stephen.

We have now reached a period at which, by careful study of parish records as well as of wills, we can begin to construct a continuous family tree of Debenhams which does not require guesswork or faith to confirm it. Such records were kept in West Suffolk at an earlier period than the sixteenth century, but many were lost, so we only find fragmentary evidence such as the will of Margaret of Weston Just quoted.

The family tree with which this review is chiefly concerned is only one of several which could be followed up in this way, and before we begin it we must make reference to two others, also in West Suffolk.

One of them is that which culminates in what the author’s family has been wont to call the Freebody Debenhams. It would be more gracious to call it the Baronet’s line, since the present chief representative is Sir Piers Debenham, Bart, already mentioned. That line has already been described by one of its members, Mr Alfred Debenham Sweeting, in a book, privately printed, entitled *The Debenham Family of Suffolk*. It does not trace the line as far back as we can now do, but this later research does not carry us farther than the sixteenth century, beyond which scattered evidence in the Bradfield area, such as the will of Thomas Debynham of Stradeshall, merely leads to guesswork.

In the Sapiston district there were two centres of Debenhams in the sixteenth century, one at Sapiston itself and one at Redgrave ten miles to the east. It must be supposed that these two groups, only a long walk apart, had common ancestors in the district, but we have not been able to trace them. Those at Redgrave were yeomen farmers like the Sapiston group and seem to have been like them in character and outlook.

Redgrave is a typical Suffolk village of small thatched cottages clustered round an inn with a somewhat distant church and a still more distant Hall, then belonging to the Bacon family and lived in by the step-brother of the great philosopher and statesman, Sir Francis Bacon. The church still has its 6oo-year-old baptismal font at which the earliest Debenham traced would have been christened. As he died in I 562 he may have been christened by the future Cardinal Wolsey who was the parish priest in 1498. The will of this William Debenham is most enlightening and rather typical in its detailed list of items. It is dated I 562 and in it William Debenham, husbandman, left

> 'To my wife, Agnes, 9 milch neat of the best I now have, my best gelding, grey mare, 2 swine of the greatest and one shotte (young pig), IO hens, 2 geese, 3 ducks, 4 combs malt; also a featherbed, 3 mattresses, 6 pillows, 2 feather bolsters, one other bolster, 2 sacks of feathers, 5 pillow beers (stretchers for pillows), 6 pr sheets, 2 pr blankets, 3 coverings, 2 great brass pots, one less brass pot, one possenet (3-legged boiling pot), one cauldron, one lesser pan with ears, one great hanging kettle, 3 steled pans (handled pans), IO other kettles one bigger than another, 2 changings for beds, 16 pieces pewter, two platters, 6 dishes, 5 saucers, one pewter pot, 2 pewter salts, 4 latten candlesticks (brass candlesticks), my coffers (strong-boxes), milk bowls and ale vessels, all of which household utensils were hers before.'

The last phrase is a neat reminder that in those days the wife, rather than the husband, endowed her partner with all her worldly goods, and if she wanted them back again they had to be so specified in the husband's will.

That this array of utensils was necessary appears when we consider her family, which consisted of five sons and five daughters, the last unborn at the time of the will but provided for, somewhat meagrely, with the sentence, 'To wife Agnes 20s. and 20s. to bring up the child that she is now withall.'

The size of the family speaks well for the fertility of the Debenham stock and for the district of Redgrave, Botesdale and the Rickinghalls. It was no flash in the pan, for her son Edward, having married a Tomasina Saunder at Redgrave, had a round dozen of children, eight sons and four daughters. We shall see that two centuries later James Debenham of Rickinghall also had eight sons and four daughters, though he belongs to the Sapiston line.

As these groups were living only a few miles apart, the confusion of Christian names is profound. Thus in 1588, the year of the Armada, there were in Redgrave at least four Robert Debenhams, two Thomases, two Williams, two Johns, two Edwards and an Edmund. Over in Sapiston there were two Thomases, two Edwards and an Edmund.

EARLY DEBENHAMS OF REDGRAVE

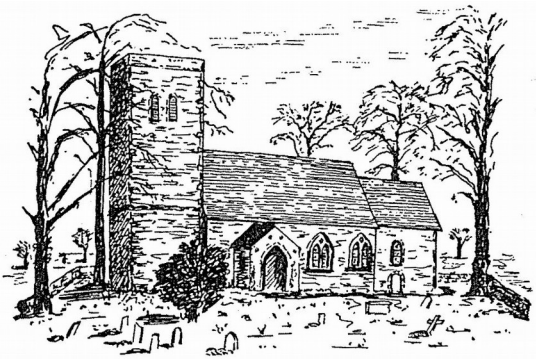
WILLIAM DEBENHAM
b. *c.* 1500 d. 1562
married Agnes?—
to whom he left '9 milch neat of the best I now have etc.'

—WILLIAM 1536
—ROBERT 1537
—THOMAS 1538
—JOHN 1541
—EDWARD 1545–91 married Tomesina Saunder
—Agnes 1543
—Elizabeth 1548
—Margaret 1551
—Joan (Johan) 1561
—unborn 1562

—ROBERT 1566*
—Margaret 1567*
—Margaret 1568
—ROBERT 1570
—THOMAS 1571*
—WILLIAM 1575
—Mary 1577
—EDMUND 1580
—THOMAS 1581
—EDWARD 1583
—Thomasina 1585
—JOHN 1588

* Presumably died in infancy.

We must now focus our attention almost entirely on the Sapiston group. From evidence already quoted we can say that the tiny village of Sapiston, on the northern border of Suffolk, was a centre for Debenhams as early as the fifteenth century, though whence and when they came there is as yet undiscovered. As already mentioned, the choice of origin would be between the Debenham family of Little Wenham or the vil— lage of Debenham itself. That is to say, the first Sapiston Debenham may have been a younger son of the Wenham line or he may simply have been a man who came from the Village of Debenham, twenty miles



The Church of St Andrew at Sapiston, in 1957, where so many of our ancestors were buried

away, and was therefore called de Debenham until it became a surname. '

However that may be, we begin our tree with an unnamed Debenham of Sapiston who was probably born about I 520 and died before I 580. We know of him only from his wife, Anne Debnam, whose name appears in the parish registers as having been buried there, a widow, in 1580, but her gravestone has either disappeared or is undecipherable. There are many very old headstones to the graves in this remote and quiet little churchyard, but the earliest readable one now is dated 1720.

Sapiston is a small scattered village of some forty cottages to the north of a Vicarage and a church, in gently rolling country sloping down on either side to the vale of the stream known as the southern Thet. It is now all the property and manor of the Duke of Grafton of Euston Park a few miles to the north.

The village of Madingley near Cambridge has put forward claims for being the ori— ginal churchyard of Gray's Elegy, but as far as atmosphere and environment are concerned, that of Sapiston would be more suitable; for here there are the rugged elms and yew-tree shading the mounds beneath which the rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. It is all very far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife and the View beyond the church over the little valley with its sleepy stream summons at once the picture of a 'cool sequester'd vale of life'. The church itself has character but little beauty, with no attempt to rival the classic

style of the handsome ‘wool’ churches of this county, renowned for their fancy flintwork and their chequered patterns of black and white. This church of St Andrew where so many of our ancestors were baptized and buried is chiefly remarkable for a fine Norman doorway ornamented in an unusual way and with two scratch—dials for telling the time. The thirteenth—century font over which the Debenhams were christened is still there, but with a seventeenth century cover. One fifteenth—century bell is still in the tower inscribed NOS THOME MERETIS MEREAMUR GAUDIA LUCIS , which we might freely translate: ‘By the help of Thomas (the bell) we may deservedly deserve the delight of eternal light.’ It also has a fine Norman doorway with an old carved stone face which the young Debenhams for a century or two doubtless found names for. The adjacent Honington, just across the brook thickly fringed with rushes, is now a little larger, with a more preterifious church, but waorth Thorpe, another mile away, is even smaller, while its church has but a thatched roof and a squat wooden tower.

All three villages may well have been larger in medieval times when East Anglian wool was clothing much of western Europe, and the shrinkage is possibly continuing to this day. For instance, the little town of Debenham boasted a population of 1,500 in 1830 but the figure had sunk to 1,200 by the end of the century.

It was in this little group of settlements that the Debenhams of our branch dwelt for at least five generations and where they continued to hold property for ten. Their expansion in status and worldly wealth was slow and unpretentious and they have left little sign of their occupation beyond headstones in the churchyards – no stately mansions or monuments.

We might say of them, with Oliver Goldsmith, who knew the district,

> ‘Their best companions, innocence and health,
> And their best riches, ignorance of wealth.’

Of this shadowy Anne Debnam afore-mentioned we know next to nothing and less still of her nameless husband, but we can begin to form a pictureof her sons and daughters from the information in the will of her eldest, Thomas.

Thomas was a maltster, probably a moderately skilled and fairly profitable busmess in that region, famed for its barley. He must have been a man Of some substance, for, besides the capital sunk in his malting floors and drying kilns, he was possessed of numerous small pieces of land, variously described as ‘closes’ and ‘pightles’, in and about the twin villages of Sapiston and Honington: He died in 1611 and was buried at Sapiston. His wife, Anne Martyne, survived him for eight years, having borne him two sons and two daughters.

At this point we may remind ourselves that Thomas was roughly a contemporary of William Shakespeare and, if the most careful research by genealogists cannot get farther back than Shakespeare’s grandfather, it is little

wonder that we can do no better than an unnamed father for a maltster in an obscure village in Suffolk.

Thomas left his ‘tenement with edifices, lands and pastures in Sapiston’ to his wife for life, she to pay various sums to other beneficiaries. These show him to have been a solid man and a careful one, duly mindful of his duty to God and to his kith and kin. Thus, his daughter Anne (Howe) was to receive ;.510, a handsome sum in those days, while other members of the family were not forgotten:

‘Anne Knight, daughter of my daughter Elizabeth	20s at 21
John Howe, son of my daughter Anne	the same
Child unborn of my daughter Anne	the same
My sister Agnes	2/6
Every one of the children of my brother Andrew by his last Wife	12d'

Other items are slightly reminiscent of Shakespeare's will:

Son Thomas	poster bed now standing at my own house, flockbed, 1 pair sheets and my second cauldron after the death of my wife.

A man who owned an iron cauldron 1n those days had a definite Standing in the community, since an entire dinner for the family could be cooked 111 it, in earthenware Jars placed in it, and it supplied the hot water for washing up afterwards. It was in some degree a forerunner of the pressure cooker of today '

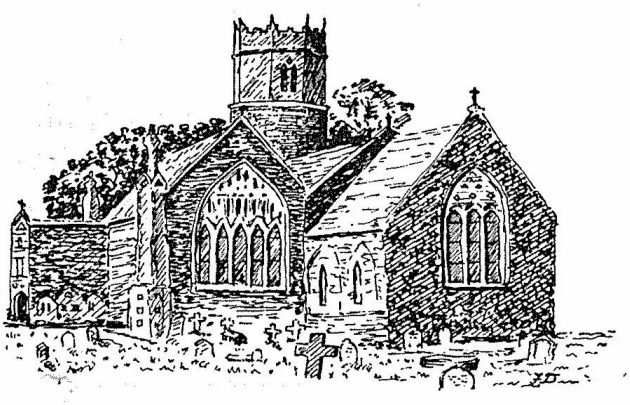
Thomas was married in 1570 at Honington, and his wife was buried at Sapiston, as Ann Debnam, so the final 'e' was optional then as now, not that we need pay any particular attention to medieval spelling'

The younger brother of Thomas – EdWard – was a tailor at nearby Knettishall and had no children, while sister Agnes married a Robert Gent,another East Anglian name of some antiquity. Small sum bequests were, as we have seen, a feature of the period, for we find tailor Edward in his will has the items:

‘To Temperance Satterfat 10/-
To Susan Hawstead, 5/-, the year after her sister Temperance be paid.
To my godson, Matthew Woodrow, 12d
To Unica Timothie, one pewter dish’

Passing on to the next generation, we find that the eldest son, Edward, of Thomas and Ann, did not take over the malting business; he is described in his will as a linen weaver of Sapiston and a churchwarden, dying in 16 3 3 , aged 61, and survived by his wife Mary for another five years. Both their Wills are brief and dutiful, that of Mary being:

‘Mary Debnam of Sapiston, sick in body,
To son Thomas, all my leases to me belonging
All my children, equally, my moveable goods and chattels.’



Church at Rickinghall Inferior, 1957

Edward and Mary had five sons and one daughter, all of whom grew up and, with the possible exception of Thomas the eldest, married. Thomas is recorded as ‘occupied in parts beyond the seas’ both in 163 3 and 1638 as his brother had to execute their parents wills in his stead. We hear no more of this wanderer from the family fold and are left to guess whether he had taken to the sea or had become an emigrant to America. He was of the right age to have sailed in the Mayflower, but there is not a shred of evidence to that effect. We know little more of the three younger sons except that they stayed in the district, while the daughter married a Mr Winter.

The second son Edmund appears to have taken the place of the absent eldest and possibly succeeded to all the leases to his mother belonging, as he is described in his will, of 1650, as a husbandman, freeholder and copyholder of Sapiston. His wife, Thomasine RiX, survived him for nearly 50 years and must have been a prominent member of the family. She brought up the whole of their family, all of whom were under age at the time of the father’s death, three sons, three daughters and one unborn, and all are mentioned in the father’s will. This bequeathed all the property to his wife Thomasine, ‘for life towards bringing up my children’. It seems Probable that the mother settled the two elder sons on the Sapiston lands because we find that the third son, Thomas, became a ‘Lynnen weaver’ at Upper Rickinghall, ten miles to the east.

This move was to affect later generations considerably since, while retaining property at Sapiston and occasionally farming it, they henceforward made the Ricking— halls their centre.

The two Rickinghalls, with Botesdale, are an instance of three small

Villages which expanded till they formed What is really a small town, but which, for tradition's sake, keep their individuality and jealously retain their separate names. This independent spirit was no doubt bolstered by the fact that the boundary between East and West Suffolk passes right through the three villages. There has, of recent centuries, if not farther back, always been a certain amount of jealousy between East and West Sufiblk, the more industrial East viewing the West as backward, while the West no doubt retaliated by regarding the East with a certain amount of hauteur as money—grubbing.

To an outsider the three villages now, and for a century or so past, appear to be continuous, one long street splitting the Upper and Lower Rickinghalls and passing through the middle of Botesdale, which was once a centre for Roman pottery. All three settlements still have ancient houses and churches of considerable character, as well as old inns. One house in particular, at the west end, could be a show-piece if the owner wished, as it has been proved to have been built about I 360 and still has the grooves above and below the windows in which the wooden shutters of the pre-Window—glass days were made to slide.

The Church of Lower Rickinghall is older still and is one of the round-towered churches of Sufiblk, a form of tower which was enforced on a community which lived in a district in which flint and chalk were abundant but good building stone available only from a great distance.

We have already seen that there was a rather large colony of Debenhams centred on the village of Redgrave, a bare two miles from the Rickinghalls. Though we have not established as yet any direct link between the Sapiston and the Redgrave families, it seems fair to suppose that there was some link and that the move of Thomas was prompted by it. He died in 1694, in the same year that a John Debenham of Rickinghall, also a linen0weaver, died. Thomas could either have been a partner of this John or a competitor, probably the former, but he had no sons old enough to continue the business, which stayed with the other family since John's will contains the item

> 'To my son John my loombs and sluyes immediately after my decease,'

and no doubt the son carried on With the looms and battens bearing the shuttles thus handed down to him. Though Thomas only lived to be just over fifty, he died possessed of the Sapiston lands, so possibly his elder brothers had died before him. More precisely, Thomas' will states that he leaves

> To my eldest son John the reversion (upon death of my Mother Thomasin Debenham of Sapiston) of the headhouse With land in Sapiston.

'The house known by the Sign of the Bell,' Botesdale (after D. Maxwell)

It would seem that old Thomasine (Rix) outlived all her sons and lived until 1699 at the 'headhouse'. We cannot establish just Where this headhouse or homestead in Sapiston was, but the evidence of some very ancient oak trees would suggest that it was on the site now occupied by Grange Farm, a Georgian building of great charm which is ringed by oaks at least four or five centuries old and only a hundred yards from the walled churchyard where Thomasine was buried.

It was during her lifetime that the incident of the Fakenham Ghost occurred within a mile of her house. This was an event which impressed itself so vividly on the memories of successive generations of the family that it was told to the author by his father two centuries later, on the other side of the world, unimpaired and unembroidered.

It has been related so much better in rhyme by Robert Bloomfield, the poet of Honington, that we may use parts of his version.

A Village woman, employed up at the: big house in Euston Park, was late in walking home one night to her house in Little Fakenham,

'Dark er it grew, and darker fears
Came o'er her troubled mind,
When now, a short quick step she hears
Come patting close behind

She turned; it stopt—nought could she see
Upon the gloomy plain
But, as she strove the Sprite to flee,
She heard the same again.

Yet once again, amidst her fright

She tried What sight could do;
When through the cheating glooms of night,
A MONSTER stood in View.

Then on she sped, and Hope grew strong,
The white park gate in View;
Which pushing hard, so long it swung
That Ghost and all passed through.

Still on, pat, pat, the Goblin went,
As it had done before:
Her strength and resolution spent,
She fainted at the door.

Out came her husband and daughter, much alarmed, and

The Candle's gleam pierced through the night,
Some short space o'er the green,
And there the little trotting Sprite
Distinctly could be seen

An Ass's Foal had lost its Dam
Within the spacious park;
And, simple as a playful lamb
Had followed in the dark

Full many a laugh went through the Vale,
And some conviction too:
Each thought some other Goblin tale,
Perhaps was just as true.

When we small children used to take walks in the dark in the back-blocks of Australia we tried to calm any fears with this story. Nevertheless, though we knew perfectly well that those grey shapes were only browsing sheep and those sharp thuds were merely the hoppings of a harmless wallaby, our steps quickened and we were apt to arrive home somewhat out of breath.

Whilst on the subject of goblins, sprites, monsters and witches, whether real or fancied, we should mention that it was soon after Thomasine Rix married her Edmund Debenham that the great puritan witch hunt was at its height in England, when there were more witches executed than the number of Protestants burned at the stake in any one year of Queen Mary's reign a hundred years earlier.

It was in 1645, at the Ipswich Assizes, that an Alice Debnam or Denham was indicted for witchcraft, one of the informers against her being a William

Nunn. The brief court record reads:

> Alice Denham, widow, for felony, witchcraft and for feeding of 1mps, was found guilty. IDEO SUSPENDETUR. (Therefore let her be hanged.')

Back at Rickinghall, Mary, the wife of weaver Thomas, had survived him with three sons, and it seems likely that she had apprenticed the eldest, John, to a currier or manufacturer of leather goods, since that is the occupation given in his will in I743. His younger brother Thomas seems to have moved back to Bardwell, two miles from Sapiston, since the parish register of that church records the birth of three children of a Thomas Debenham and his wife Mary between 1715 and 1723.

That, however, is merely surmise and not proof, for the whole district was becoming so populated with Debenhams that parish registers alone are little guide. There is a faint clue in that the Redgrave Debenhams seem to have favoured the names William and Robert, while the Sapiston group prefer Thomas and Edward, but no genealogist would place much reliance on that.

The only sound evidence is that of wills, and fortunately we have that in the case of John the currier who married Frances Rockhill in 1695 by whom he had two sons and three daughters.

Of these we must be particularly interested in the eldest, John, because he was the first of the line to break away from both the district and the occupations of his forbears. He became a 'chirurgeon' or barber-surgeon, for which in those days one served an apprenticeship, and he chose the little town of Debenham for his practice, where he had a family of four sons and two daughters. It would be an interesting branch to follow up, but it is off the direct line with which this family tree is concerned so a few notes only must suffice as well as the partial entries in the tree.

John the surgeon died two years before" his father John the currier, but passed on to his sons the reversion of Sapiston property which was to come from his father, so it is evident that the families kept in contact. He was followed in his profession of surgeon by both his eldest sons, John Yull and Thomas, and the latter was distinguished enough to have been mentioned in a paper given to the Royal Society for having performed a most unusual operation. These three were to set the fashion of medicine as a career for Debenhams, later generations usually having at least one doctor in their ranks and recently one surgeon who was decorated for his distinguished war-time work under field conditions.

Going back to Currier John, we know little more of his three daughters than is shown in the tree. His fourth child and second son, Edward, died when he was 39 and before his father, but in 1732 he had married Martha Nottle and there were four sons, and one daughter who died young. Their grandfather, having survived both of his sons, was saddled with the welfare of no less than seven

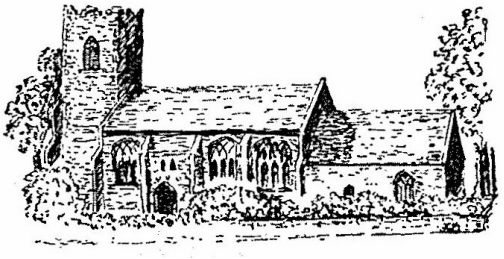
grandchildren, all of whom, except the eldest, John, are mentioned in his will. His first wife, Frances Rockhill, had died in 1739 and he had married again Ann, of surname unknown, and to her he entrusted the care ‘of my grandchildren Edmund, Charles andJames, the three elder children of my son Edward till they be of age to shift for themselves’.

The will discloses a considerable amount of property, some of which can just be identified to the present day. Thus Thomas, the clever surgeon of Debenham later on, received ‘a tenement called Bishop’s House in Rickinghall Superior abutting on the Common Street N, the Lord’s Pound & Patlott Way, 8’. He was also to have ‘Farrow’s Pightle in Rickinghall Superior conditioned upon his renting Pound Close, adjacent to it, to my wife for life’. The four grandchildren, sons of Edward, were to receive £50 each at the age of 21. Their mother Martha Nottle (probably the same name as the modern Nuttall) married again in 1741,James Dunn, but her Aunt, a Mrs Elizabeth Barnes of Rickinghall, left £300 for the four small boys ‘equally between them at their ages of 21 years’.

From these legacies we may perhaps fairly deduce the existence of a strong family spirit, a determination to stand by each other, which was to show itself still more prominently two generations later.

It is in James, the third of the grandsons, all under seven when their father died, that our chief interest lies, but we know something about the two elder ones. Edmund was apprenticed at the tender age of ten to a local barber-surgeon and, presumably, became one himself in due course. He married Sarah Andrews and had three sons and a daughter. Charles, the second of the quartet, lived till he was 64 but we do not know what his occupation was. He married first a Mary Andrews, probably the sister of his brother’s wife, rather a habit in the Debenham family, and secondly a Lydia Watson, giving him a total family of nine, five boys and four girls. If, as seems to be the case, both Edmund and Charles remained at Rickinghall, we have the engaging picture of no less than thirteen young Debenhams growing up there, a riot of cousins to which the third brother James added another eight.

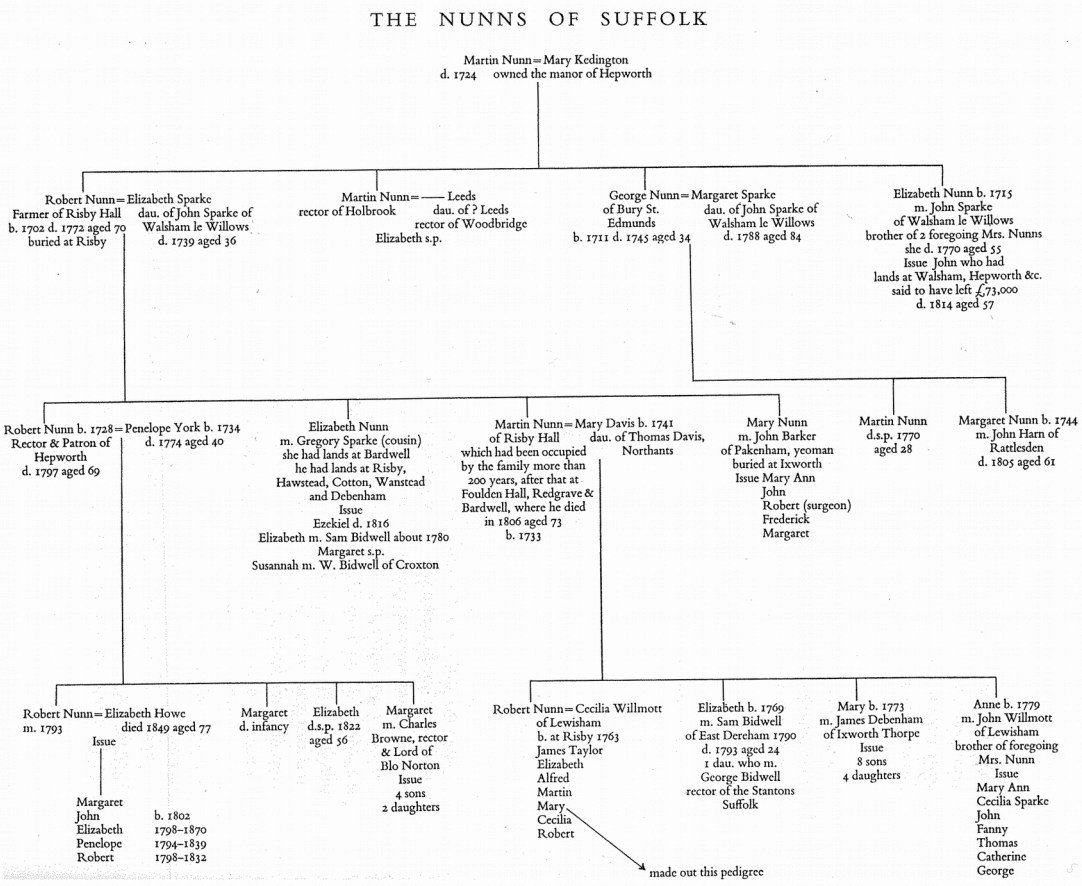
James was only three years old when his father died Though he shared with his brothers in the bequests of his grandfather and his great—aunt, he doubtless had to carve a career for himself. In his will he is described as a baker but he was clearly a landowner, a mill owner and a farmer as well. It is more than probable that he grew his own corn, milled it and then baked it as his final product. Of the last of the four grandsons we know little beyond the fact that he, Edward, was apprenticed at 14 to a currier and that, later, his brother James lent him money.



The Church at Rickinghall Superior

James married Mary, the daughter of Christopher Slapp, an attorney of Rickinghall who lived at 'the house known by the sign of the Bell in Rickinghall Inferior with the millhouse, outhouses and gardens, orchards and lands'. James married Mary Slapp with— in a year or two of the marriages of his two elder brothers and, over a period of nineteen years Mary added no less than eight children to the tribe of Debenhams at the Ricking— halls. Nevertheless the male line of the Debenhams whom we are following all but died out in that generation. There were three boys and five girls, but of the boys the first one, James, died in infancy, and the youngest and last child died young. Only the middle boy, also named James, survived to manhood to carry on the line. This he did in a most decided manner as he not only lived to the age of 84 but, as we shall see, he had a round dozen of children, including eight boys, all of whom grew up and all except two girls married.

Since it was this James and his wife Mary Nunn who saved the family for posterity by producing the DEBENHAM DOZEN, as we might nickname them, we may digress for a moment to show that the Nunns were also a Suffolk family, rather similar in degree and antiquity to the Debenhams and no doubt alike in tastes and occupations. Their centre was at Walsham le Willows, equidistant from Sapiston and the Rickinghalls, and later on at Risby on the other side of Bury St Edmunds. Some were farmers and some were parsons and, like the Debenhams, had the interesting habit of marrying in pairs, two Nunns to two Sparkes, two more Nunns to two Willmotts and so on, which at least argues a similarity of taste and, possibly, a certain restriction of choice. The Bidwells of East Dereham in Norfolk also seem to have shown a decided preference for Nunns and one of them appears to have married first a Sparke and then a Nunn, both of them Elizabeths. The attached shortened family tree gives as much information as we can afford space for.



Though the family of James and Mary suffered from early deaths there is no doubt that their fortunes had swelled. The Will of this James mentions many properties and messuages (dwelling houses) at Rickinghall and also what must have been a considerable farm at waorth Thorpe. This farm may have been the final form of the Sapiston property amassed during several generations, and it was large enough for his son James to inherit and make his permanent home for the dozen children who were to be born there.

We have not succeeded in finding the date when James the younger (1764-1848) moved into the farm at Itworth Thorpe, but, as they were of the same

age, he probably met Robert Bloomfield, the cobbler-poet of Honington already mentioned. In the latter's poem, The Farmer's Boy, we can glimpse the life on a farm of that day, while the reference therein to the church at Ixworth Thorpe holds good to this day:

> 'Mean structure; Where no bones of heroes lie.
> The rude inelegance of poverty
> Reigns here alone: else why that roof of straw?
> Those narrow windows with the frequent flaw?
> O'er whose low cills the dock and mallow spread
> And rampant nettles lift the spiry head,
> Whilst from the hollows of the tower on high
> The greycapped daws in saucy legions fly.'

But the 'mean structure' has been there for seven centuries and still has its low Norman doorway. During the long sermons of those days the little Debenhams must have rejoiced in the wooden zoo on the bench-ends, carved 500 years ago.

Bloomfield himself turned the inelegance of his poverty into most elegant verse in a way that remains unique in literature. He could not afford ink, pens or paper and he composed that poem of 1,800 lines bit by bit while working in a garret in London with six other journeyman shoemakers. He committed it all to memory, together with the corrections he made from time to time. When at last he had pen and paper he said with delightful simplicity, 'Now I have nothing to do but write it down.'

This says a good deal for the son of a tailor of Honington and his wife, a schoolmistress, who was left a widow to bring up six small children.

In the wills of the different generations we may observe the slow amassing of property carefully passed on to the rising generations. In Plantagenet times it consists mainly of utensils—cauldrons and dishes—in Tudor times small pieces of land creep in, as 'pightles' and 'closes'. In the Jacobean period the feudal system having quite gone and there being more security of tenure, the importance of freehold land is emphasized and the Georgian Debenhams were setting out to own the land they farmed. Cash legacies were still small by modern standards, the real value was in the farms, the messuages and the leases 'to me belonging'. The shrewder people of each age—and the Debenhams usually appear to have been shrewd—recognized that property was the best security. They were the East Anglian equivalents of Tennyson's Northern Farmer:

> 'Dosn't thou 'ear my 'erse's legs as they canter away?
> Proputty, proputty, proputty—that's What I 'ears 'em say.'

Not for them the exciting ventures of South Sea Bubbles, nor the doubtful advantages of a Varsity education, nor indeed the lure of political life with its pickings. One thing they did know as fixed and reliable, for

‘Proputty, proputty sticks and proputty, proputty graws.’

The same idea of satisfaction with landed property and no ambition beyond is ex — pressed by an earlier and less polished poet than Tennyson. James Bird of Yoxford in Suffolk wrote, about 1800, the verse

‘Hurrah for the Yeoman
That careth for no man
Excepting so far as to make him more blest
Rich be his garnered store
Flourish for evermore
Peace in his house – give ambition the rest.’

Two other impressions emerge from a study of these wills. One is that the Deben hams, if not all deeply religious, were at least good sound churchmen. They may have been of the stricter fraternity in the pious majority of England but there is no sign of extremes in either direction in the Sapiston clan. In the absence of actual letters, and judging only from the wording of the wills, this is hardly more than a guess, and we must remember that the phraseology of last wills and testaments is apt to be humble and worshipful. Nor is it only in wills that the language is moderate and courteous. In the *Paston Letters* the writers will accuse a man of ‘disworship’ rather than of blasphemy, and call a man a villain but add in parenthesis ‘whom God assoil (pardon)’. Nevertheless the medieval Debenhams were nearly always anxious to have their children baptized in their local, church and to have themselves buried in the churchyard with such headstones as their resources permitted.

The second impression is that the Debenhams were clannish, or family-minded to a remarkable extent. Perhaps that was natural as they lived in a rather secluded corner of Suffolk, sheltered by inaccessibility from the more stirring of the political events and the inter—family feuds. These found their chief expression in the larger towns and amongst the more aristocratic gentry. Where the latter stood firmly for Church and State the Debenhams seem to have sworn rather by Church and Family, with State coming in a poor third.

However shrewd the Debenhams were about acquiring landed property there had to come a time when the land available and the large number of sons to share it were incompatible. The Debenham family seems to have met this difficulty in two ways, both of them consequent upon the advances in economic and social evolution which were so marked during the eighteenth century. One of these advances was in the facilities for travel. The appearance of the stage coach early in that century, and the general increase in wheeled traffic as opposed to the universal riding on horseback of earlier times meant that members of a family Could move farther afield and still keep in touch with their kindred. The other advance was that the professional class, formerly represented mainly by the

church, had risen in social status so that the law and medicine were now proper fields for the younger sons of well-to-do farmers.

The tendency for Debenhams to wander from their home "district and to enter the professions began when the John of about 1700 became a chirurgeon and went to Debenham to practise there, but his example was to be followed at an increasing rate in the next three or four generations. It was in fact somewhat of a revolution from the hitherto steady sequence of yeoman after yeoman in each generation. We shall see the first effect in the Debenham Dozen which we are about to study, for they dispersed to London and to other counties, and in place of owning land themselves they took to the two professions which had most to do with the land, those of the solicitor and the estate agent. Some of their sons, in their turn, dispersed almost as far as was possible – to Australia in fact – and their careers included medicine, law, industry and even University appointments. A small nucleus still persists, possessing and farming land, but they are in a decided minority, the swing to trade and professions is almost complete.

We can therefore regard the farm at Ixworth Thorpe as the last stage in which this line of Debenhams was closely knit, always remembering however that there must have been a legion of cousins in the district and three families in particular, those of the Nunns, the Kerseys and the Willmotts, with whom their fortunes were to be closely intertwined.

The Willmotts were not originally a Suffolk family, having come from the Midlands via Hertfordshire where they lived at Kelshall near Royston. Their tree is more traceable than that of the Debenhams and the surname seems to have been derived from Guillaume, which argues a Norman origin. One branch seems to have come to the Sapiston district late in the eighteenth century as landholders and farmers of the same status as the Debenhams.

The Kerseys on the other hand were entirely Suffolk and took their name from the village near Hadleigh, which later gave its name to a coarse ribbed cloth made there, and introduced a word synonymous with rustic honesty for Shakespeare to use in Love's Labour's Lost. After the mad scene where the gallants dressed as Russians try to flirt with the princess and her court ladies, one of them, Biron, repents of his duplicity and says,

> Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed
> In russet yeas and honest kersey noes.

The parent parish of the Kerseys was Framsden, four miles south of Debenham, where the Hall has been in continuous occupation of the family from 1763.

It was some collateral of this family which produced the two daughters, Sophia and Harriette, whom the two elder sons of the Debenham Dozen married early in the nineteenth century. Their father, Thomas Kersey, was a farmer at Barnham, some six miles north of Ixworth Thorpe, who was described as short and of fair complexion with blue eyes. He was of an easy happy disposition, fond

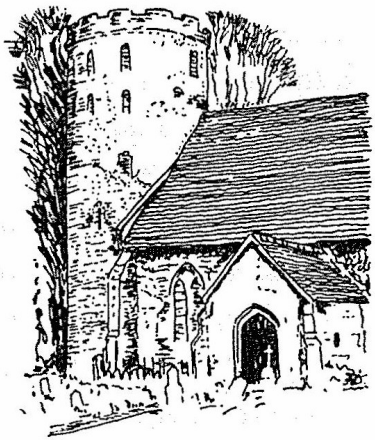
of fun and practical jokes, so his household was probably a pleasant port of call for the young Debenhams. One of his thumbs was deformed and, by one of the oddities of heredity, a similar deformity came out in two of his great-nieces and a great-great-great-grandson. His wife Mary (Gissing) was small and dark, with an olive skin and a slightly Spanish appearance.

JAMES DEBENHAM 1764–1848
Father of the Dozen

MARY DEBENHAM (NUNN) 1773–1862
Mother of the Dozen

Fortunately a description of James Debenham who, with Mary Nunn, re-established the male line of Debenhams, has come down to us. He was about 5 ft. 10 in. in height, Which is slightly above the average for Debenhams, and had fair hair and grey eyes. He was very delicate in his youth but made up for his lack of physical robustness by having a most determined character. He is described as daring and restless, self—assertive and ambitious, determined to excel in anything he took up, a bold rider and a good shot. For the benefit of present-day Debenhams who may find a resemblance, we should add two physical peculiarities from this (unknown) source, that he had an unusual length of arm for his height and a notch on the upper part of the helix of his ear. It is said of James that he was so proud of his notched ear that he declared he would not acknowledge any of his children as his own unless there was at least some semblance of the same notch. His wife Mary (Nunn) lived until she was nearly 90; she was rather tall, dark with soft brown eyes. In contrast to her husband, she

was even-tempered, and in addition she was ‘an excellent housewife, amiable and very good’. The few letters of hers to her children that are extant usually contain a reference to a ‘package’ of good things from the farmhouse at Ixworth Thorpe that



The Round Tower of the Church at Risby, home of the Nunns and the Sparkes

are coming to them by coach or train.

We are now ready to piece together such information as has come to hand about the twelve children of James and Mary whom we have irreverently called the Debenham Dozen.

They were all born at Ixworth Thorpe, spread over a period of 22 years, so the house must have reeked of children of all ages to adulthood. There is a story of the whole twelve sitting round the room, all with one knee cocked over the other and all swinging the right foot – a family trait. It could hardly be the whole twelve considering their varied ages, but it illustrates a fact which appears from other evidence, that there was great unity in the family, and a strong tendency to stand by each other.

The Debenham Dozen grew up in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century in this secluded district of Suffolk and in a farming community. It may have been for this reason that they were a closely knit family,but more probably it was because of the care and wisdom of their mother who seems to have been a very remarkable woman. It was doubtless at this time that they adopted the pleasant but pharisaical piece of family doggerel that was handed down to later generations in the form

‘I thank the goodness and the grace
That on my birth have smiled,
And made me, in this desert place,
A happy Debenham child.’

They certainly were blessed in their parents' wisdom and in sharing in the adequate but not excessive profits of a successful farm.

It is interesting to note the details of an East Anglian farmer's domestic life at this time, especially in an isolated parish like Ixworth Thorpe. We can do so by reference to the Diary of a Country Parson, James Woodforde of Weston, some thirty miles to the north—east of Ixworth. His period, the latter half of the eighteenth century, covers that of James and Mary Debenham, whose twelve children began to arrive in 1798. We may take it that for the farmer Debenhams as for Parson Woodforde, 'the keynote of their life was tranquillity; they did not move in the great world.'

They made the best of an England very different from that of today, an England governed by Aristocracy and the King, for whom rotten boroughs would usually return docile Members of Parliament at their bidding; an England in which criminal law was savage in the extreme, there being 160 capital offences, thefts of 40 shillings and over being punishable by death; an England where smallpox carried off some eight per cent of the population and consumption still more; an England to which slavery still appeared to be a fairly respectable institution and where the press-gang was almost a normal form of recruitment for the Navy.

With such alarums all round and a country locked in a deadly struggle with Napoleonic France, the family we are concerned with were lucky to be in a quiet corner of Suffolk. Like Parson Woodforde, but probably with less than his gusto, they would breakfast early and dine at 3 in the afternoon, while at 6 or later they might take 'a dish of tea' if there were callers, and often a light supper later still, but usually early to bed. Most of their food came from their own or neighbouring farms, where they killed and cured their own meat, baked their own bread and brewed their own beer. Dinner was a mighty meal, and the Norfolk parson detailed its constituents for almost every day. A normal one was: 'Had for dinner a Pig's Face and Greens, a leg of Mutton rosted and a plumb Pudding,' but when there were visitors a typical one was: 'We had a most elegant dinner, a whole Salmon, 3 boiled chickens and a Ham, a Neck of Mutton boiled with Capers, a green Goose tested and Peas, with Plumb Puddings and a Gooseberry Tart.'

The greatest contrast with the present day was perhaps the domestic help that was always available, most of it living on the premises. Parson Woodforde paid his manservants £10 a year and his maidservants from £3 to £6, with, curiously enough, an additional allowance for tea and sugar, which were not 'on the house'. There were a good many perquisites, even in cash, for the servants, and the maidservants in particular were regarded somewhat as a junior part of the family and protected, or admonished, as such. The maids were not always of high moral character and, as Woodforde found to his cost, were occasionally too generous with their favours to relations or visitors.

From the women's point of view the worst disadvantage, as we moderns would View it, was being tied to the house. It was not quite the thing for them to ride on horseback so they were dependent on the family chaise or carriage if they were asked out to dinner. They could not go far afield without male company and much of their shopping had to be done via the men who rode often to the market town with a long list of feminine requirements.

In that day too the standard of morals, the code of behaviour, was curiously different in the well marked strata of society. The labouring class could perhaps hardly afford to indulge in such a luxury and, as Charles Dickens saw it, in London they brought themselves up somehow in an atmosphere of gin, pickpocketing and loose living generally. At the other end of the scale the aristocracy were no better. Farmer George the Third's impeccable domestic life had perhaps sickened his sons of conventions; at all events they and their associates threw such awkward things over the fence and lived a life compounded of hard drinking, heavy betting and bare-faced keeping of mistresses, varied by shady politics. It was only in the gentlemanly pastime of duelling that there was a strict code of conduct. But the solid middle class, both in town and country, tended to observe rules of behaviour which were all the more rigid because of the slackness above and below them, and it was chiefly the girls of the family that felt their rigour.

It was well-nigh impossible for a marriageable daughter to see a young man alone except by some stratagem such as showing him the garden in broad daylight. She was expected to sleep with her sisters or a maid, for it was not only Queen Victoria who had never had a bedroom to herself until as sovereign she put her foot down. She was always expected to be dainty and delicate and to put on a ladylike faint or" a fit of the vapours if too much tried. It would seem that languid glances or skilled work with a fan were her only means of signifying her feelings towards a gentleman visitor. Insistence on such conventions was probably less rigid in a large farmer's family, especially where there were eight brothers to chaperone four sisters. Nevertheless it was one of the Debenham daughters who insisted on being accompanied on her honeymoon by her bridesmaid, more as companion than as chaperone perhaps, and one's sympathies must lie with the gooseberry bridesmaid.

For education the children had a school at Bardwell, two miles away, and some of the boys may, later, have gone to the Edward VI Grammar School at Bury. However their schooling was managed they all wrote a good band, in the copper plate cursive style then the fashion, and were able to express themselves adequately in their letters.

Such letters as have been preserved show the indirect and circumlocutory style, which no doubt was taught then at school, and which seems so stilted to us, so wasteful of time and paper, so long in getting to the point. Thus, in a letter from the mother to one of the elder daughters concerning the proposal of a

younger son that he was going to marry a woman not approved of by the parents, the matter is approached as follows:

> ‘My dear Margaret,
>
> I am about to address you on a subject that will doubtless surprise and annoy you for a time but flatter myself upon reflection you will think with me that of the two evils your Brother has chosen the least. . . . Shortly after all had left he began by saying Dear Parents I hope and trust I have neither done nor said anything to diminish the pleasure of either you or your children, and now it is useless to keep the secret any longer, I have made up my mind to marry.’

This style of writing letters, still prevalent in diplomatic circles we believe, was almost the rule in that period, and may have been sedulously passed on by Mary, who was born in 1773, to her daughters who were using the same phraseology a century later, as witness a letter from the eldest daughter in 1871. It was to ask that someone should take out a parcel to the author’s father in Australia and runs:

> ‘My dear cousin,
>
> Will this find you at home when it reaches your door. I scarcely think it will but in case it does it will be a considerable satisfaction to your Aunt Nunn’s mind if she can know whether your young friend when he sails in the early part of next month can take charge of a small box which she will be very happy to send by him if he will take it as far as Sydney. . . .’

We are accustomed to refer to the ‘spacious days’ of the early nineteenth century and their letters were indeed spacious, yet postage dues were heavy and writers were liable to cross and even re-cross their one-page letters rather than use a more direct style in stating their needs or their news.

The family at Ixworth Thorpe seems to have been deeply religious to judge from their letters, and no doubt the whole dozen, or at least all those who were in their ’teens, were marched to the tiny church on the hill several times every Sunday. Its thatched roof and wooden tower were kept in better repair in those dayswhen the parson could usually call on his parishioners for a certain amount of voluntary work of that kind. On the other hand it was a period of low water in the character of parsons, who were frequently absentee holders of a living, or were of the type known as ‘sporting’. The local doctor was usually more dependable than the parson, he at least could not be an absentee, so the bodies of the villagers had better attention than the souls.

The feat of bringing up the whole dozen without loss was an unusual one, and the honour of accomplishing it may be shared between the mother and the

doctor. There was indeed a great deal of sickness even in rural communities especially in young children. Malaria (called ague) was common in the summer and chest complaints carried off many in the winter, a sufferer being said to be 'in a decline'. On the other hand those who survived the perils of youth became very tough and, as we see with the Debenhams, lived to a great age.

The first of the Debenham Dozen, MARY ANNE, born 1798, was also the last, since she survived all her younger brothers and sisters, though a full twenty years senior to the youngest. As so often is the case with a large family, she, as the eldest daughter, took much of the responsibility of bringing up the family off the shoulders of her hard— pressed mother. She evidently had a very strong sense of family and with it a very sensitive, emotional nature which was not always approved of by the brothers. For instance, her brother Robert describes her, on the occasion of her sister Louisa's wedding, as 'running out of the room every five minutes to have a good cry'. A year later when he is arranging for his own wedding he writes, with brotherly candour, 'It would be folly for my sister Mary Anne to think of coming home (from East Dereham) for the wedding, she would be as miserable as she was at the last one.'

She was for some years at East Dereham managing the household for her uncle-by- marriage, Sam Bidwell, whose second wife, Elizabeth, sister to Mary Nunn, the mother of the Dozen, had died at the age of 24.

Mary Anne must have become inured to her sisters' and brothers' weddings as there were nine more to come after Louisa's, though she was probably not present at most of them. Notwithstanding the brotherly remarks quoted, it was Mary Anne who, in a sense, remained the central figure of the whole family, always writing on their birthdays, always ready to help in family crises as we shall see.

She had a small patrimony when her father, James, died in 1848, but her financial resources were slender all her life. In her later years she was helped in this respect by her nephews and nieces, who settled her in a house at Theydon Bois (Essex) with her widowed sister Louisa, where they are referred to as 'the wonderful old ladies at Theydon Bois'. There is a touching letter from her to her favourite nephew Charles Bullen, written in I885, a year before she died, where she speaks of her increased deafness excluding her from general conversation but adding, 'I am surrounded by comforts beyond expectation.' After a long life of caring for others the grand old lady was being cared for by the younger generation, particularly the nephews from Cheshunt Park nearby. In a photograph taken in the sixties Mary Anne, in her frilled headdress and voluminous shiny skirt of black bombazine, looks exactly what she evidently was, tender-hearted yet determined to do right by God and the Family, whether the Family appreciated it or not, strong minded and unselfish, absorbed in the cares of others.

Of ELIZABETH NUNN DEBENHAM we know but little as she died in 1826 when she was only 27. That little comes from a single letter to her younger

sister Margaret written in 1823. Nevertheless it is a revealing letter worthy of mention. She had just gone to stay with her aunt Mary Willmott (née Nunn) at Lewisham, London 5.13., in the temporary capacity of helping with the younger children. These included the three Willmott sisters who afterwards married three of Elizabeth's brothers, Cecilia, then aged 12, who married William Henry, Fanny aged 8 and Catherine (Kate) aged 5, who married respectively George and Arthur. Her own younger brothers Robert and George were then in their early jobs in London and George had met her at the coach. The letter is that of a capable, understanding and practical girl looking forward to her new duties, full of concern for her brothers' wardrobes: 'George is distressed for nightshirts, there is some stuff at Ixworth which would make some', and yet sorry to leave the large family at home: 'Many kisses for dear Alfred,' the youngest, then aged 5 or 6. From the letter one would judge Elizabeth to have shared the qualities of the sisters just senior and junior to her, with as unselfish an outlook as Mary Anne and the sturdy commonsense of Margaret.

The third child and eldest son was JAMES and he took after his father in being a farmer to the core, content only with the countryside and its simple life and with fishing and shooting as relaxation. It is not clear whether he owned or only rented the farm at Felsham, but he lived there all his life. His one long excursion, as far as we know, was when he took his bride, Sophia Kersey, for a long honeymoon on the continent in 1828. The Kerseys had a farm at Bardwell, where he and his brother Robert found it easy to meet with their future wives.

The wedding breakfast was held at the old Pickerel Inn at Ixworth, and as other matches were in the making at the time it was probably a very convivial one. Remarks in a courting letter from Robert to Harriette Kersey a month later convey that meaning for he says, 'Please tell Sophia (when she comes back from the honeymoon) that I think I deserve a kiss for acting the part of Bridesmaid,' and later on, 'respecting Mr Barsham's attention to dear Louisa, I wish I was as near Bardwell as he is to Thorpe.' He ends with the revealing remark, 'This is the first letter I ever had the pleasure of directing to a Female outside our Family.'

James seems to have been a successful farmer, living in comfort though not in affluence, and there is some evidence that he and his father, fifteen miles apart, were friendly competitors and occasionally partners in their stock-breeding activities. His youngest son Ernest also farmed at Felsham but he died eight years after his marriage; thereupon James took on the task of bringing up his three granddaughters and his grandson on the home farm.

MARGARET DEBENHAM, the fourth child, seems to have been a cheerful as well as a sensible girl, very devoted to the family. Her younger brother Arthur speaks many years later of her as 'the peacemaker and tender friend of the younger ones', i.e. the last four sons. Being so practical she was the natural selection to go to London to housekeep for Robert, George and Charles when they were beginning their careers there. She usually was the first 'to be told of their

hopes and fears and even of their affections. She was obviously a great favourite with the Willmotts too and saw much of them during her time in London. Family nicknames are in a measure a guide to the character of the re— cipient and in their younger days Margaret was always referred to as ‘Peggy’ or ‘Madge" Her granddaughters were like her in temperament and disposition and they too are hardly ever known by their formal names, even now in their eighties.

It was in talking to one/of these, Mary (Molly) Bullen, about her grandmother and great-aunts that I realized to the full the charm of spanning the centuries which is the privilege of the genealogist. The dear, sprightly old lady of 85 was telling me of the Sunday afternoons she used to spend with her grandmother as a little girl-long readings from the Bible and Prayer Book till tea, and then games, but very decorous games, after tea. It suddenly occurred to me that I was hearing a first-hand account of one who was born while the Reign of Terror was at its height in Paris, and had Just left school when she read in the papers of the Battle of Waterloo. It is by meeting such old people with keen memories that one finds it possible to draw back, for a brief space, the curtain and have a fleeting glimpse into ‘the dark backward and abysm of time’. Or, in lighter vein, to imagine the wrapt expression of those still lively eyes as she listened to her grandmother telling her of the rite of preparing for market day: how farmer James, her father, obedient for the nonce to his wife Mary, was made to stand on a sheet spread on the floor, then covered to the neck with another sheet to have his hair powdered before he went off on his horse to the market at Bury with his small samples of corn tied to his saddle bow.

It was during Margaret’s stay in London that a prominent and jolly young citizen of Bury St Edmunds, Thomas George Bullen, paid his court to her, the beginning of which is recorded by her brother Robert in a letter to his intended, Harriette Kersey, in April 1829:

> ‘Mr Bullen called here yesterday and again this morning and persuaded Margaret to take a walk with him, and a very long one it must have been, for she left about II and did not return till past four.’

‘Mr Bullen’ was doing things the right way and had made journeys over to Ixworth Thorpe to make the acquaintance of the family there and there is a charming letter from Mother Mary to her ‘dear Peggy’ still in London, which tells how he ‘blew the gaff' to the parents after being very discreet for some time. The mother said that they and, she thought, ‘Mr Bullen’ himself, had not been quite sure which of the two sisters (Margaret or Louisa) he preferred. His formal request for permission to marry their daughter was apparently interlarded between ‘a call on business with James’ (the father) and sport. ‘All was hurry and bussle to swallow their tea and go after the rooks.’ One can imagine the restless and impatient James saying to the young man, ‘Yes, you can have the girl, my boy, but

GEORGE DEBENHAM
1807–1883

ARTHUR ALEXANDER DEBENHAM
1818–1885

ROBERT DEBENHAM
1803–1864

MARY ANNE DEBENHAM
1798–1886

MARGARET DEBENHAM
(Mrs T. G. Bullen)
1802–1881

hurry up and drink your tea, the light is going and we shan't be able to see the rooks.' Anyhow, it was left to his wife to write, 'Your dear father as well as myself gives free consent to our darling child.'

So Margaret left the country for her new home on Market Hill, Bury, to be the hostess of a man well known there for his charm and public spirit who, like his youngest son, was so busy helping his friends that his successful business as auctioneer and head of a cabinet-making firm never brought him wealth, but earned for them both the deep affection of all the Debenhams. In later years, when dear old Aunt Mary Anne was rushing from one brother's house to another's whenever distress fell upon them, it was her nephew Charles Bullen ('Char' to her) who volunteered for all the unpleasant jobs. One adventure of his in that capacity was when the husband of John Martin Debenham's eldest daughter died suddenly in Holland. It was Charles who crossed over to Holland to bring back the body of Harry Burt to be buried in England, in 1871. He found that none of the regular ships would take a corpse, even for the brief crossing, because of the superstitution of the sailors, so he had to charter a small sailing vessel. When he arrived in the Thames he had the greatest difficulty in avoiding the attentions of the police, who naturally wanted full explanation from a young man in a yacht bringing ashore a corpse with nothing to prove how the death had been caused except a bit of paper written in Dutch. Only the intervention of his doctor cousin Robert Debenham and a lawyer cousin prevented him from being arrested forthwith.

Margaret survived her kindly, jovial husband for 31 years so the Bury household continued to be a pleasant port of call for all Debenhams and Nunns and Willmotts and Kerseys passing from their varied residences near—by to and from the London relations. The debt of the Australian branch to the Bullen family is great, for when John Willmott Debenham (the author's father) went to the famous old Edward VI Grammar School at Bury he was too delicate to be a boarder so he stayed with his Aunt Margaret and his cousin Charles Bullen, and often told his own children of the happy group at Bury. The name Bullen is the modern form of Boleyn.

We have already met ROBERT , the next on the family list, writing in brotherly fashion of his elder sisters, and the author has been privileged to read his courting letters to Harriette Kersey which, of course, are not for publication, kindly lent by his grand-daughter Phillis Debenham, now in her eighties.

His brother James having taken to farming, Robert, either by desire or from urgency, elected to go into business, and in his early twenties we see him learning the job of wholesale drapery in London, having a rather hard time of it under different firms and some difficult masters. With a sister and a brother living with him in lodgings, there was much to-ing and fro-ing from Suffolk, always by night coach so as not to waste daylight. In case the present generation of jet aeroplanes and fast cars wishes to savour the delights of coach travel in the days

of the Regency and of Mr Pickwick, here is an extract from one of Robert's letters to Harriette on the subject:

> 'I passed an unpleasant night of it in the coach, it was quite full inside. Opposite me sat an old Nurse with a child in her arms about a fortnight old. Next the Nurse sat a Gent who seemed to think he was riding in his own carriage and every one must give place to him. Opposite him, on the seat with myself, sat a Gent who was the greatest annoyance of all I had not been in his company a minute before I found he was afflicted with *Stinking* Breath. What can be worse than being shut up in a coach with such a companion.'

His letters at this time (1828-9), besides being infused with his devotion to his fiancée, betoken a man determined to succeed, cautious over. his business but perhaps too honest in his trust of fellow businessmen, and ready to overwork himself, to the detriment of his health, in order to provide comfort for the family to come. When, with support from his father and from a connection of the Kerseys, he was able to be co-partner in a firm of wholesale drapers, the scene seemed set for marriage and financial stability as the newly-weds settled down in a house in Hackney and later in Cheapside. At this time his brother Charles, his junior by ten years, appears to have been an apprentice or learner in his firm.

The only one of his touching letters before marriage that we feel we can be excused in quoting from is one in which he discusses his prospects and ends by summing them up in a parody of a song of that day:

> 'I cannot boast nor wealth nor birth
> Hey Harriette, pretty Harriette.
> Think you these alone have worth
> Pretty Harriette, tell me.
>
> Surely health and heart that's true
> And hand that can protect you too
> Are gems, and these I proffer you
> Dear Harriette.'

Nothing whatever went wrong with the marriage but success eluded the business, chiefly, it is rumoured, because one of the partners did not keep to the same standard of honesty as Robert. He and his wife were a deeply religious couple as their letters show. There is no real reason why religion and success in business should not go together, as others, especially Quakers, have shown. But to ensure that result it is necessary - to parody Cromwell's advice - 'to trust in the Lord and keep your powder dry' - to trust in the Lord and keep your eye on your partner's accounting.

So there were hard times while their four boys were young and three at least of them spent their early years at the house of their Aunt Louisa and her husband Thomas Barsharn, at Norton, near Ixworth. There are some charming letters from the two elder ones, Horace and Frank, then aged 8 and 6, to their parents in London. Beautifully written in the old pot-hook style, they relate the doings of small boys of 120 years ago, which are very little different from those of today.

> ‘Uncle Tom has made us a kite which is taller than he is. . . . ‘
> 'We have begun to learn to dance, of Mr Nunn of Bury. . . .

Of the general celebrations for Victoria’s coronation in 1838 Horace tells us:

> ‘We went to a party at Mr Nunn’s at Ixworth, there were 120 persons to tea there in a booth. I rode on cousin Henry’s pony and fell off but I got on again.’

Whatever the full facts may be it is certain that when the four sons were all at school there had to be the greatest economies in the family budget, extending even to taking one at least of them, Frank, away from school to make his own way in life, which in the end he did so brilliantly as to ensure ample comfort for his parents in their old age.

Of Robert and Harriette the following notes have come down to us, obviously written by someone who knew them well. Robert was about five foot ten inches in height, with very broad shoulders and dark closely curled hair. He had one leg bowed, he ‘walked wide’ in fact, and he ‘snored perpetually when asleep, very loudly’. A series of adjectives are used to describe his character. ‘Truthful and honourable - very industrious - determined and resolved-liberal to lavishness but objected to the slightest waste - strict and methodical - could be opinionated and obstinate.”

From the same source we hear that Harriette was small and slight, becoming very stout in middle age, her fine straight black hair turned very white rather early. Of mannerisms she is credited with the habit of raising her eyebrows, of putting her head on one side and using a rhythmical movement of her thumbs. The accompanying adjectives include ‘of a cheerful and happy nature—inclined to be extravagant and proud’.

Next to Robert came the last of the daughters, LOUISA. We have already heard of her being courted by the young local doctor, Thomas Barsham, Whom she married when she was 23, in 1828. That being long before the days of photography we have no idea of her appearance, but we can deduce from letters that both she and Margaret were good—looking. In her earliest portrait, in the sixties of last century, she has the rather long face that seemed to be the rule in that generation of the family, with a firmer chin than most of them. Wearing two long ringlets of her black hair hanging down in front of her ears and gazing

fixedly at a book in her hand, she looks somewhat stern. We should remember that most portraits of that day were apt to be libellous as far as expression is concerned as the victims had to sit absolutely still for the long exposures necessary, often with a clamp behind the head to aid them.

Her husband continued in his profession as a doctor, and two of his learner-students of medicine were his nephews Horace and Robert, who went back to waorth for their preliminary training. But in later life he gave up medicine and took to farming, having a small property at Theydon Bois on the outskirts of Epping Forest. There were no children and when he died, leaving Louisa a moderate income, the elder sister often stayed at Theydon Bois and finally moved there permanently. The two old aunts did not always see eye to eye over social matters, but appear to have agreed to disagree quite happily, being very busy in helping to bring up various nephews and nieces.

Aunt Louie, or Aunt Barsham as she was referred to in letters, was a devoted gardener almost to the last and at times her bedding-out plants seem to have been a close second to her nephews in her affections and were far more easily controlled. As she was deeply religious, like Mary Anne, but in more militant fashion perhaps, her household was not altogether an easy one to fit into. At all events my father and one or two of his cousins used to speak with some awe of Aunt Barsham. From her own letters one can easily see she had a heart of gold but was apt to cloak it with a sheet of steel.

Of all the brothers, GEORGE was the only one to take to the profession of Law, and we have already heard of him in London with his brothers Robert and Charles, when he was presumably a junior solicitor's-clerk. There he saw a good deal of the Willmott family in Lewisham at the week-ends. He set the fashion for the younger half of the Debenham Dozen by marrying a Willmott daughter; they, one gathers from contemporary letters, were lively and, to the country-bred boys, rather dashing. They were first cousins of their husbands.

George married Fanny, the third of the four Willmott girls, when she was 25, and a little later settled down to a law practice at St Albans, founding the firm of Thompson and Debenham, which has persisted ever since. His large family and their successors became known to the rest of the family as the 'Ivy House cousins' since they lived in a beautiful old house of that name designed by Sir Christopher Wren, right in the centre of St Albans. It abutted on to a main street but had a large and beautiful garden at the back, of which the centrepiece was an ancient walnut tree reported to have been planted by Wren himself.

Ivy House became another port of call for all the London and Hertfordshire Debenhams, and for Australian Debenhams as well, until the late twenties of this century. George may be called the founder of the St Albans branch of the family which still flourishes, and he was described as 'absolutely reliable and dependable and kind' by Mary Bullen who knew him when she was a little girl. In his photograph he fits exactly that description, with the long

Debenham face, bearded but with shaven upper lip. The little grand-niece found him also a little slow and ponderous when he took her on his knee and took a quarter of an hour to play an old trick on her with his watch. Would little Mary like to see a picture of a beautiful lady? Yes, she would, but doubted the possibility whilst seated on his knee. Slowly he produces his beautiful gold watch with much flourish and descriptive anecdote. Then a pressure of the thumb and the back flies open to show a mirror surface, and, 'There's the beautiful lady, can you see her ?' 'No, Uncle George, there's nothing there.' Long explanation from Uncle George, who no doubt was crestfallen when she answered shrilly, 'But that's not a beautiful lady. That's only me.'

JOHN MARTIN DEBENHAM, the eighth child, became a farmer at Ixworth Thorpe and it seems likely that he took over his father's farm when the latter moved to Bardwell. We have heard of him already as being determined to marry a girl against the approval of his parents. He did so and possibly that cut him off from the elder brothers and sisters in some degree. At all events we hear very little of him in the contemporary letters, even though he lived within two miles of his ageing parents. Nevertheless he must have had an engaging

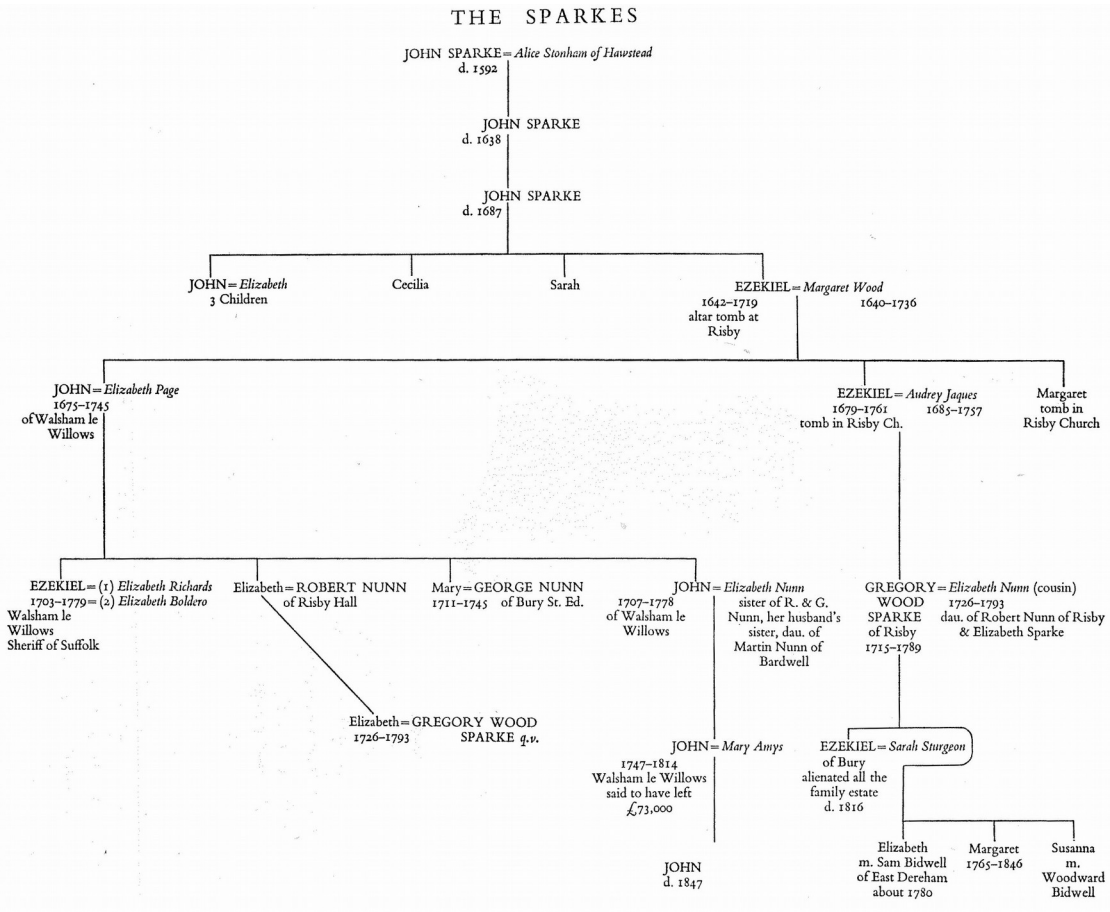
John Martin Debenham 1808 - 1867

personality as his nephew, Charles Bullen, always described him as the nicest of all his eight uncles.

Four out of his family of eight went to Australia and their fortunes there are outlined in the Family Tree. Of the others our chief attention is focused on his eldest daughter, Elizabeth, who married the engineer Harry Burt, who died suddenly in Holland. Of their four daughters, Bessie Harriet (Hattie) reunited any broken links in the clan by marrying her cousin, Edward Percy Debenham of St Albans.

John's second son was named Arthur Gilbert and that seems to be the first renewal of the name Gilbert in this particular branch of the Debenhams. Most of the decendants of John Martin are in Australia and nearly equal in number those of all the rest of the Dozen.

The author regrets to have to say that he has discovered even less about



the next brother, WILLIAM HENRY, who also took to farming but without any marked success. He was the second son to marry a Willmott, Cecilia Sparke, who unfortunately died two years later. Her name recalls the thorough mixing up of relationships by marriage between the Willmotts, the Nunns, the Sparkes and the Debenhams. The Sparke name comes from the fact that her mother Ann Nunn was granddaughter of an Elizabeth Sparke, one of three daughter Sparkes who married three Nunn sons in the early eighteenth century. The Sparke family seem to have distributed themselves between the village of Risby, with its picturesque church, and that of Walsham le Willows with its picturesque name.

The fragmentary genealogy of the Sparkes, lent to me by Celia Debenham, was made out by Margaret Sparke early in the last century. The run of Johns and Ezekiels is curious and we may trace some despair on Margaret's part when she entered under the last Ezekiel, her brother, the remark that he alienated all the family estate.

To complete the picture of these intermarriages we add a partial tree for the Willmott family, which shows the part they played in affairs of State and Church in the middle of the seventeenth century. It also shows what the Willmotts could do in the way of large families, two of them having no less than 16 children, with runners up of 15 and 14 apiece.

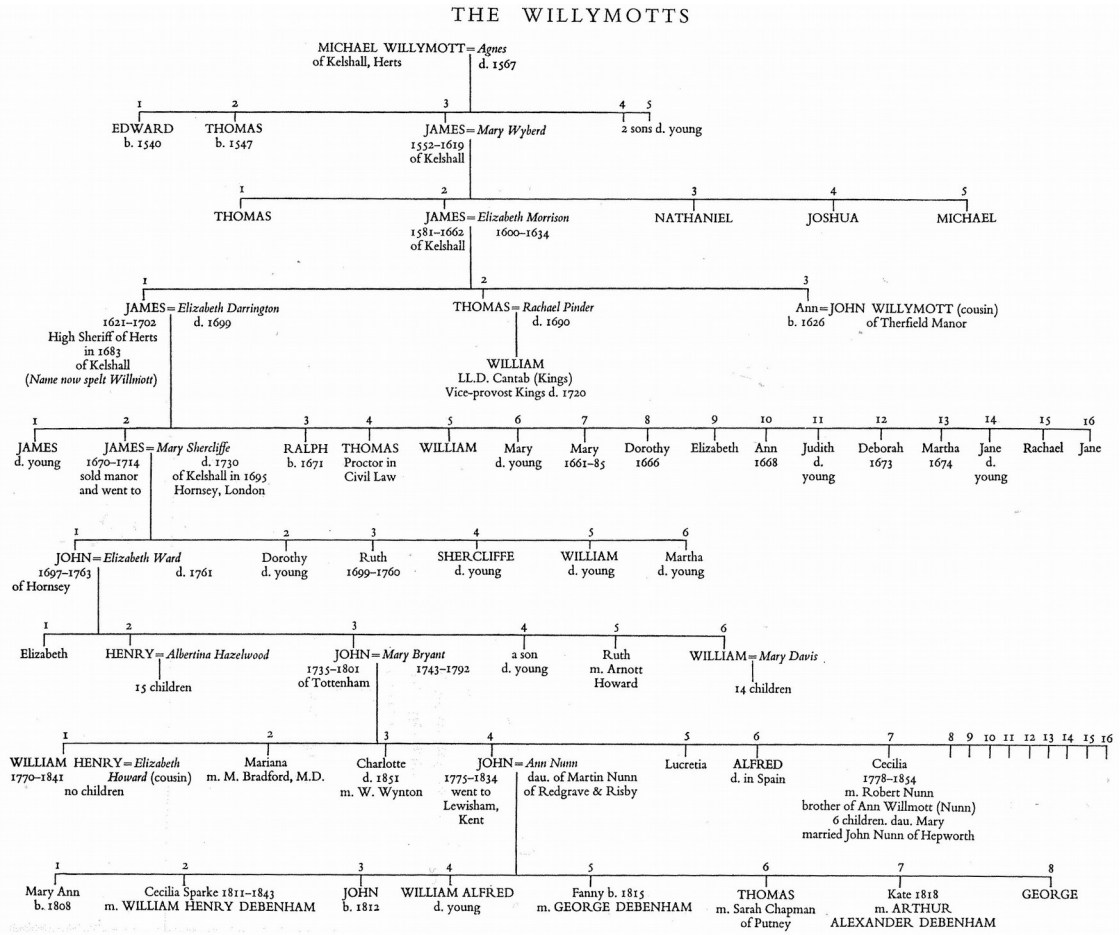
William married again after Cecilia's death but there were no children.

The last three children of the Debenham Dozen were spread over eight years. Whether it was that Mother Mary (Nunn) was overworked or Whether the economic pressure on the family budget had increased, it seems that the three younger sons were left to themselves more than the earlier ones. At all events they all had hard times and how far it was just bad luck or lack of worldly wisdom who shall say.

CHARLES, the next in the list, was apprenticed in London when in his early 'teens, probably in the drapery trade, but he evidently never quite got the secret of success in trade. He seems to have gone from one business to another, on a downhill progress as far as finance was concerned. He was also rather delicate, and the dictum of his brother George of St Albans was that 'poor Charles was physically and mentally unfitted for business'. He had a shop at Clapton which might have kept him going, but he added to his difficulties by marrying a widow with at least one child, to which family were added four of his own. Brothers and nephews came to the rescue from time to time but failure was inevitable. Brother George was right, Charles had no business sense.

Somehow a much smaller shop was started at Wickford in Essex and his more practical wife might have pulled the family fortunes round if Charles' health had stood the strain. There are melancholy letters of his last weeks of a very painful illness to which of course the gallant old Mary Anne rushed to give assistance and found the family in abject poverty. One would not tell the tale were it not for the sequel, in which the family unity, headed by the two old aunts at Theydon-Bois and their nephew Frank, showed itself at its best in providing for the widow and children.

The eleventh child, ARTHUR ALEXANDER, was the grandfather of the author, so rather more is known, about him. He and Alfred, two years younger, were rather apart from the others and, though they may have been looked after by the elders, they could hardly have been boon companions with them. One of the great advantages of a large family - almost a saving grace as far as the parents are concerned - is that the children tend to bring each other up, rubbing each other's corners off automatically. Arthur and Alfred may have missed some 'of that invisible discipline and got more direct training from their now ageing parents. Nevertheless they gravitated towards the rest of the family, chiefly to George at St Albans, but Arthur in particular was constantly at all the other family centres. He trained for farming to begin with, and without much reward, which may have been the reason for his not marrying the third of the Willmott sisters, Kate, until



Their farming did not prosper; perhaps he was too ambitious, or was not hardy enough to stand the strain of heavy outdoor work, but for some such reason he gave up farming and tried other things. At one time he was partner in a firm which manufactured buttons from horn and bone on the outskirts of London.

Meanwhile, four children were born, but only the eldest, John, and the youngest, Jessie Kate, survived the perils of infancy. Buttons evidently did not pay and Arthur took to farming again, and apparently dairy farming, the most exacting of its forms, at the age of 63. It was at Woodford, then still outside

London and Only four or five miles from Theydon Bois where, there was a gathering of Debenhams. Long before that his only son, John, instead of entering Cambridge, was forced by threatened T.B. to take a voyage to Australia, on the advice of Dr Robert, his cousin. Misfortunes have a way of piling up on top of each other. Arthur was trying to help the unbusinesslike Charles, his daughter Jessie had a dangerous operation and a long and expensive convalescence, and then cattle disease visited his dairy farm.

Meanwhile, his son John had mended his health in sunny New South Wales, had taken his degree at the University there with honours in Classics and Mathematics, and had married Edith Cleveland, who was of another Suffolk family. When, in 1882, he Visited England with his wife and baby son, he found his father and mother hard put to it. Dairy farming at the age of 64 can certainly be called 'hard, uncongenial employment' as his wife Kate wrote to her nephew Charles Bullen at that time. It is the only one of many of her letters seen that has the least murmur of complaint in it. She feels that her household has fallen out of the family circle and wonders if there could be any truth in the words of an old song: 'Poverty parts good company.' The rest of the family soon proved that it did not apply to Debenhams, for it must have been at the instance of the more successful cousins and nephews that Arthur, Kate and their daughter Jessie moved to the house at Theydon Bois and lived with Mary Anne after Louisa had died, having let their Woodford house furnished. It must have been a strange household since both Mary Anne and Arthur were excessively deaf in their old age. They died within a year of each other, he, the last survivor of the sons, in 1885, and she, the first to come and last to go of the whole dozen, in 1886.

The few photographs of Arthur show him as full-bearded but with no moustache, rather benign of expression. He wrote a very good letter and his broad high brow would imply an intellectual habit of mind which his career never allowed him to exercise.

For some reason undiscovered the parents of the twelve decided that after the seventh had arrived all the rest of the family should have two Christian names. The last arrived when the mother was 47 and was named ALFRED EDWARD , often referred to in early letters as 'little Ben', the Benjamin of the family. He grew up at the Bardwell home, and when he was 19 a letter from his mother to Margaret refers to his not yet having found a job. It was probably through George, the St Albans solicitor, that he was apprenticed to a brewer there and rose steadily on the staff. He married Mary Ann Theobald who visited the parents in 1843, to be inspected perhaps. They had one child James (Jimmy) who was lame but became a successful stockbroker, living at Barnes.

Alfred died at 41, long before the proper span of life for the twelve Children, which was over 60, and his widow never seems to have recovered from her loss. She came to a tragic end in the house at Woodford belonging to Arthur

and Kate.

So ends the tale of that large family of Debenhams, for the many descendants of whom this review has been written.

The author blames himself for not having undertaken the work some twenty years earlier, when he could have got first hand accounts of them from a number of people, and before the shortage of housing space forced many a family to destroy letters and documents for which there was no longer room.

It is, as some of the relations have pointed out, the record of very ordinary people, of interest to none but those who bear their name. We return to Thomas Gray, who wrote his elegy when this roll of common men were pursuing 'the noiseless tenor of their way' at Sapiston. We can conjure up from them no

> 'Village-Hampden that with dauntless breast
> The little tyrant of his fields withstood.'

Ordinary, solid, dependable yeomen they seem to have been, but

> 'Let not Ambition meek their useful toil,
> Their homely Joys and destiny obscure. '

Their graves lie scattered about in many a Suffolk churchyard, where, after life 3 fitful fever, they should sleep well. They have passed on after playing their little part in the background history of our realm. Their mouldering headstones tell us little of their deeds, yet if we seek an epitaph for these, our kith and kin, it might read:

> 'They sought nor fame nor meed of praise
> But they shall have remembrance.'

This brief record of their lives is part of that remembrance and so is the large Family Tree being published at the same time. All the early-Victorian Debenham Dozen have long since passed on, and so have their mid-Victorian sons and daughters. It is tempting to review some of the doings of these latter, but we must be brief.

We might begin in the West and take a glimpse at old Dr Horace Debenham of Presteigne going his rounds in his smart gig, with top-hatted and liveried footman to hold his glossy-coated pony. Is he pondering over which reach of his pet trout-stream he will fish next day or is he wondering why his nag is pecking with his off fore? Or is he, perhaps, puzzling over why his nephew-locum, young athletic Horace, is so anxious to stay on there and whether it has anything to do with his daughter Maude? He has scant time for such thoughts, however, as he is so well known and popular that every cap is tipped to him as he bowls along.

For a more senior branch we might Hit up to the old Abbey Farm at

Thetford and visit Mary Sophia Debenham and her farmer husband John Johnson. We could see at least some of their twelve children, all the girls beautiful, all the boys athletic, the whole family musical and one at least to-win fame thereby. The Johnson family were very mindful of their Debenham origin and to this day the name appears as a Christian name in their descendants. Without the help of one of them, Phyllis Debenham Ledgard (née Johnson), this record would be very incomplete.

Now south to the old town of Bury St Edmunds, to visit Charles Bullen, the friend and stand-by of all Debenhams in his day, son of Margaret Debenham. He is immensely busy with his auctioneering, his cabinet-making establishment and his many civic activities. Too busy, really, for one day he overdoes it and, as he goes off to bed, he hands his keys to his daughter Molly and says, 'Good-bye' instead of 'Good night'. If we went there in the early eighties we might strike the day when, peeping in at the window, we could see his three jolly little daughters at a game of their own invention. They have taken out the portraits from a family album and are playing cards with them, the ugliest taking the trick! Though Bullens by name those three personified the Debenhams in affection, hospitality and merriment, and these pages owe a great deal to their memories and keen sense of family.

Now south again, to the outskirts of Greater London, to a still more prominent centre of Debenhams, the large but homely houses at Cheshunt Park and Theydon Bois. There the central figure is that of 'old' Frank Debenham, second son of Robert and Harriette, and brother of old Dr Horace. Small in stature but very alert of mind he is always busy, whether he is planning the next family holiday in Scotland, complete with coach and coachman, butler and maids, or whether he is scheming how he can help some less successful Debenham Without any one being the wiser. The day to choose for Cheshunt would be when young Frank and young Horace have their Oxford friends there for a tennis-week, or when the family is having its annual cricket match against the Village.

On such a day we could see the ancient game at its homeliest and most social, when the local by-laws as to teams and boundaries were like the laws of the Medes and, Persians. Thus, the village policeman was always deemed to be a Debenham for the day and played for the Park, the score was always kept by the girls of the family, and it was customary for the Village schoolmaster to lead their team while the family was captained by the senior Debenham present, for as long as he could hobble to the wicket.

For another Debenham locality we must go from the country to the city and thread the mean streets of the East End of London till we find Heath House in Stepney. It was here that 'old' Dr Robert, the third son of the still older Robert lived and looked after his patients almost as much for love as for money, so poor was the district. There he raised his large double family and from there he would often harness up his horses in tandem and drive dangerously along London tram

—lines to visit his relations at Cheshunt. There could be exciting times in such a neighbourhood and one story should be told lest it become too garbled in other hands. Robbery was a common offence and one night Dr Robert surprised a burglar in his house who ran away down the garden to climb the wall there and escape. The doctor called on him to stop and fired his pistol over the man's head when to his horror he fell dead at the foot of the wall. The pro— cesses of law had to take their course even when it was a kindly and philanthropic doctor who was concerned. Fortunately a smart policeman found the mark of the bullet high on the wall whence it had ricocheted down on to the burglar's head so the doctor's intent to frighten and not to wound was fully vindicated.

It was from Heath House that there issued such a galaxy of professional talent as the family had never before known; two doctors, a solicitor, an estate surveyor, a director of an oil combine and a leader in Fine Cotton Spinning.

For more legal representatives and another group of hospitable Debenhams we may slip over to The Ivy House at St Albans, where successive members have been solicitors for over a century and have been prominent in the civic life of the community. There we might single out Edward Percy, the youngest son of George of the Dozen. From his many activities we can choose between seeing him looking very personable as City Clerk in wig and gown, or in carefree dress on the cricket ground, or ringing complicated changes on the bells of St Peter's with the peculiar ardour of the devotees of campanology. For a last glimpse at this generation we shall have to journey half way round the world to Australia, where three sons of John Martin Debenham and one son of Arthur Alexander found their way. At the little township of Bowral, 2,000 feet up in the mountains of N.S.W. and since famous as the birthplace of Sir Donald Bradman, we could see John Willmott and his wife, Edith (Cleveland) in their little parsonage, in the eighties. With its large garden, its glebe and its church and churchyard hard by, bordered with pine trees instead of elms, its pattern is not unlike that of the original Sapiston. The district itself is in great contrast to East Anglia, however, dominated as it is by a striking rocky hill called the Gib, because of a resemblance in shape and size to Gibraltar, but clothed in tall gum-trees and tree-ferns to its summit. Up that hill the small children from the parsonage would adventure on holidays, being frightened at times by real snakes or fancied Fakenham ghosts, to gather flannel flowers and waratahs instead of buttercups and daisies. Their father,.wrestling with ill-health, and their mother, their sole support after his early death, did their wonderful best to keep them aware of their cousins in far-away England and to preserve the bonds that linked them still with Suffolk.

One only of that generation is still alive, Mary Elizabeth (Peck), daughter of the unlucky Charles. From her the author was privileged to hear memories of kind old Mary Anne, of austere Aunt Barsham and of the jolly Bullen family, not to mention his own grandparents, Arthur: and his, beautiful wife Kate, with all of

whom Mary had stayed when she was a small girl. It was from such memories that the Debenham Dozen came alive to the author to give a picture which he has done his best to draw for their many and far-flung descendants.

THE DEBENHAMS OF THE BARONET'S LINE

WE HAVE already mentioned that besides Ipswich in the South and Sapiston in the North there was a third district in Suffolk which harboured Debenhams from at least as far back as the thirteenth century. This was a few miles south of Bury St Edmunds and has been called the Bradfield district after the three villages of Bradfield St George, Bradfield St Clare and Bradfield Combust, all within a mile or so of each other, the last of the three owing its specific name to the monkish grange there being burnt down when the citizens of Bury stormed the great Abbey and killed its Prior, in the fourteenth century.

They were, and still are, tiny villages like Sapiston, from which they are distant eight or ten miles, and we find many instances of the name in parish registers of those and neighbouring villages throughout the sixteenth century. One might say that within ten miles of Bury there were Debenhams galore as early as 1500. Yet from scores of parish entries, one can piece together very few sequences of Debenhams which can be regarded as authoritative, or acceptable to genealogists.

In examining these piecemeal records one is impressed by the absence of any link with the Wenham Hall branch. There is one Gilbert Debenham in the Bradfield district, about I 530, but, as we have already seen, a similarity of name is a poor guide to kinship, and easily outweighed by an undoubted dissimilarity in character. The lords of Wenham Hall, even if not all rascals, were very diiferent from the solid yeomen of the Sapiston and Bradfield groups.

In following back the Baronet's line there is a striking likeness of character and mode of life to the sapiston groups. They are farmers or craftsmen, they are good churchmen, their wills prove their devotion to their children in exactly the same terms as we have read about in the other family, as well as the same exasperating repetition of Christian names. In fact the articles named in a will are often a better guide than the name of the person to whom it is left. The author followed up a 'drawne table' and a 'bowlicke' for three generations in wills without any real understanding of what the articles were but with full confidence that he had found a sequence in the family tree thereby.

Again, there is special mention in wills of two generations of 'a field called Syselies' and when I found there was actually a daughter in the Baronet's line named Cycile or Sysely I felt I was hot on a promising scent. It faded later when it was proved that this Sysely was only 5 years old when the field is first mentioned and one could only guess whether the field was named after the baby or had nothing to do with her.

Recent research by Cecilia Debenham of St Albans has established that

the first alternative is correct. Baby Sysely, of the second marriage of her father, arrived after a will had been made distributing the land to her step-brothers and sisters. A new will was drawn up excepting a certain field from the former provisions and therefore named after the baby. So enduring is village tradition that Syselie's field is still identifiable after 400 years.

Nevertheless that same field led the author astray as from its mention he constructed a sequence in the early Baronet line which was faulty. When suggested to the present Baronet, Sir Piers, he kindly pointed out the mistake and gave me the correct sequence which heads the tree here printed.

No link has yet been found between these two branches of Debenhams, but it is only reasonable to suppose that there may have been a common ancestor in the Bury district long before parish registers appeared.

The story of the Baronet's line has been told fully in Mr Alfred Sweeting's book, The Record of the Family of Debenham of Suffolk, already mentioned. For that reason the line receives only brief mention here, with a skeleton tree linking Sir Piers with his ancestors. Of the names mentioned therein, it was a grandson of the Thomas of Alpheton, named Thomas Makin Debenham, who founded the firm of auctioneers, later known as Debenham, Storr & Sons. It was another grandson of his, William, who married a Freebody and founded the firm which became known as Debenham, Son and Freebody, and now as Debenhams Limited, of which Frank Debenham was the first Chairman. His son, Ernest Ridley, was the first Baronet. There was a strong connection of this line with Trinity College, Cambridge, whereas the Sapiston line tended to oscillate between Oxford and Cambridge.

The Bradfield branch had representatives both in Australia and U.S.A., whereas the Sapiston group favoured Australia only, but curiously enough the only time I ever met one of their Australian members was when I found myself a fellow—patient with him on a hospital ship in the Mediterranean. Keith Debenham, wounded in Mesopotamia, unfortunately did not recover, whereas I, wounded at Salonica, survived to compile this family record.

THE BARONET'S LINE

Anne d. about 1570 = John Debenham of Bradfield St George, d. 1598, yeoman = Amy d. 1588 Cycile

Robert b. 1563 of Little Whelnetham = Mary Innold

Thomas b. 1592 of Thorpe Morieux = Elizabeth Crouch of Great Whelnetham

William 1634–1688 of Long Melford, yeoman = Ann

Robert of Melford, yeoman, 1669–1737 = Margaret Clarke

Robert of Alpheton 1697–1733 = Susan

Thomas of Alpheton, farmer, 1728–1778 = Mary

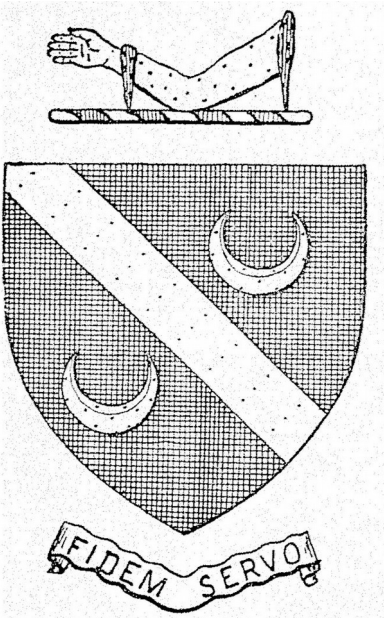
Robert of Depden 1755–1818 = Elizabeth Bigsby

William 1794–1863 = Caroline Freebody

Frank J.P. 1837– 1914 = Emma Folkhard Ridley

Sir Ernest Ridley 1865–1952 Baronetcy in 1931 = Cecily Kenrick

Sir Piers Kenrick 1904– = Angela Sibell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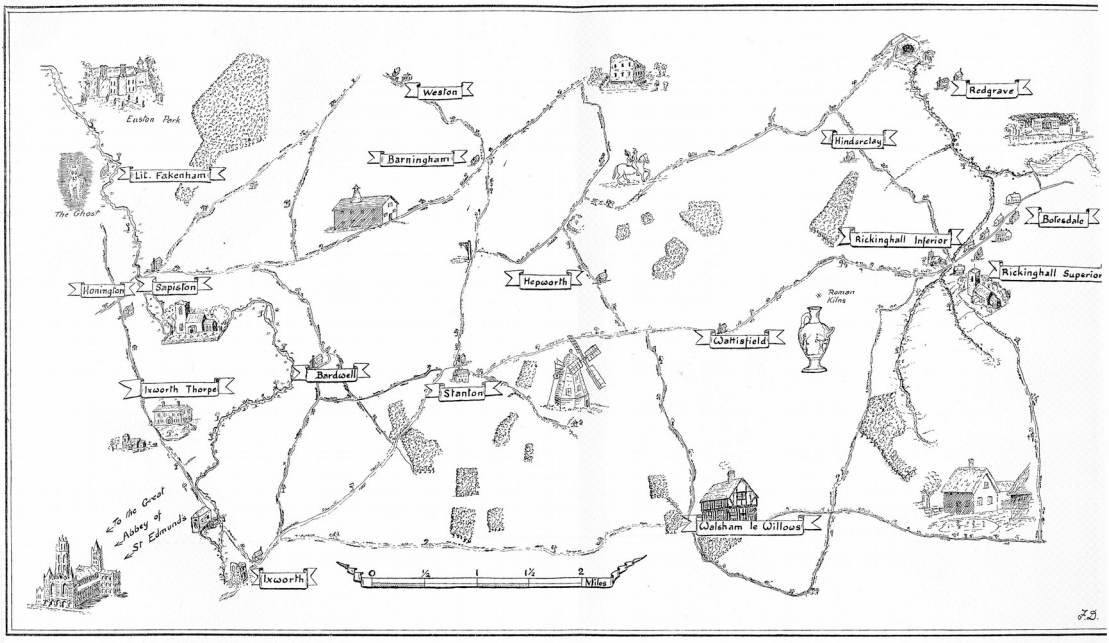
Euston Park
Lit. Fakenham
The Ghost
Weston
Barningham
Honington
Sapiston
Ixworth Thorpe
Bardwell
Stanton
Hepworth
Wattisfield
Roman Kilns
Hinderclay
Redgrave
Rickinghall Inferior
Rickinghall Superior
Botesdale
Walsham le Willows
To the Great Abbey of St Edmunds
Ixworth
0 ½ 1 1½ 2 Miles
F.S.