

THE ISHAMS OF NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

THE FAMILY HISTORY TO THE BEGINNING OF THE LINE AT LAMPORT

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Introduction

The fact that there is a line of Ishams at the present day can be traced back to one man born in the year 1525. As inheritance depended upon primogeniture (i.e. inheritance of the eldest son); to consider this child, a fourth son, as a 'saviour' of the family line, seems unlikely. His Grandfather Thomas Isham was, however, head of the Pytchley branch of the family, and his father Euseby was his heir.

PRESENT DAY LAMPORT HALL



SOUTH WEST FRONT



SOUTH WEST VIEW



SOUTH EAST FRONT



Isham origins

The name Isham has a long and interesting history. It originates from the location of a small settlement, called Isham, near Kettering, in Northamptonshire, with the same name today. The Old English/Saxon meaning of the name is "the manor house (or small village), near to the River Ise". It is generally accepted that the Ishams are Saxon in origin. The Domesday Book implies that they are descended from one, Azor, who had freely cultivated land there since the time of King Edward the Confessor. The genealogist Oswald Barron asserts that, "they are the only one [family] which takes its surname from lands in the county, and to have dwelt therein longer than any of the landed houses whose origin for the most part can be traced to sources without [outside] its boundaries". Whatever the truth of their origins, it is known that there was a family of de Ishams that tenanted lands there after the Norman Conquest. One of them, Henry de Isham, opposed King John, but was pardoned after the King's death. Undaunted, his son, Henry, later sided with Simon de Montfort, and was captured by the Royalists when



THE PRESENT DAY ISHAM COAT OF ARMS

they took Northampton in 1264. The lands at Isham were lost when they passed, through an heiress, to the Luffewick family. However, by 1310, a cadet branch of the Ishams, from which the present family descends, had established itself, at nearby Pytchley. By 1378 the “de” had been dropped from the name and Robert Isham was then using a similar coat of arms as today’s family, and the swan crest has been found on a seal from the reign of Henry V (1413-1422). The family prospered through the C15th when Edward IV took a Northamptonshire wife, Elizabeth Woodville. Robert Isham was the attorney to both her and the King’s sister. William Isham lent King Richard III £40, not the best of financial transactions! His son, Thomas, married Ellen Vere of the de Vere family (the Earls of Oxford). Their eldest

son was called Euseby. So we return to our child and his father, Euseby.

Euseby brought up his large family of twenty children, in Ringstead, on a leasehold farm of his wife’s wealthy relatives, the Mordaunts of Drayton. He died in 1546, never succeeding to the Isham legacy, so his family never lived at Pytchley. This situation may have been a salutary lesson to his male heirs. They learned what it was like to live on family

favour and to survive on low income and your own labour. Their father did his best for his sons in his straightened circumstances. There was a problem to find the money to educate all five sons in a decent profession, as well as to provide marriage portions for his daughters. His eldest son, Gyles, was educated enough to become a lawyer in the Middle Temple and a Member of Parliament for Peterborough under Queen Mary Tudor. Similarly, his second son, Robert, attended Christ’s College Cambridge and matriculated in 1537. Later, he took holy orders, becoming a prosperous churchman. He was Rector of Grafton Underwood, and of Pytchley; held the Prebendaries of Peterborough and Windsor and was one of the chaplains of Queen Mary who “willingly accepted him and was the cause of great countenance to him during his life”, as recorded by his nephew, Thomas Isham. He resigned his stalls at Peterborough and Windsor on the Queen’s death, but remained the Rector of Pytchley for the first few years of Queen Elizabeth’s reign. At his death in May 1564, he left small bequests to everyone in the parish of Pytchley. We can surmise that he was resistant to the ecclesiastical changes introduced by Queen Mary’s successor. The three youngest brothers, Gregory, John and Henry, were not quite so well provided for. Each of them was, however, shrewdly apprenticed to the Mercer Company in London, so they could make their own ways. On his death, Euseby could only bequeath “a mourning gown, or alternatively, a heifer” to Gregory; John was left the sum of £5 in cash; and Euseby had assumed that £5 would secure Henry’s apprenticeship in London.

Gregory was something of a financial genius, likened to Sir Thomas Gresham. Unfortunately, he died in September 1558 before he was forty years old. Even so he already possessed an estate in Braunstone, Northamptonshire, bought from the Earl of Rutland. This passed to his son Euseby (named after his grandfather), who also inherited Pytchley the next year, from his uncle Gyles who died in 1559 leaving three daughters (no heir), and later, the estate of his celibate priest uncle, Robert, in 1564, being the Isham Squire (winner takes all). With these considerable fortunes, Euseby built a magnificent Hall at Pytchley, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. He was knighted by James I, having helped to finance the royal coffers. Sir Euseby was succeeded by

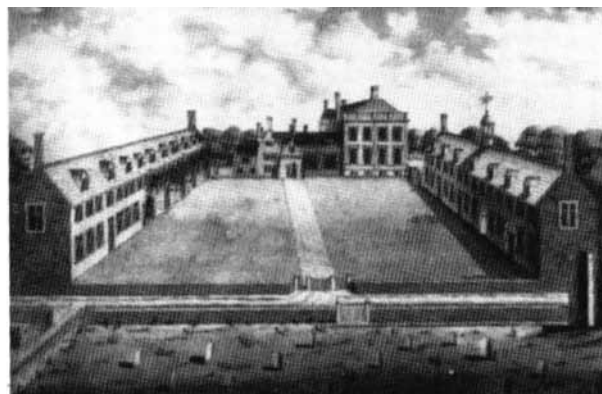


THE SWAN CREST

two sons, John and Thomas, but the costly upkeep of the enormous house caused them to sell it to the Downes family in 1632; so they were the last Ishams to hold Pytchley. (The Hall passed in succession to the Washbournes, Knightleys and finally to George Payne of Sulby, who apparently gambled away the lead on the roof which, in addition to a serious fire, resulted in the demolition of the Hall in the 1830's. Only the gates survive, and are re-erected at Overstone). The last Pytchley heir drowned in 1678, on a return voyage to his home in Virginia, having journeyed to England to make claim to his legacy. However the blood of the Ishams flowed, from his sisters, to many famous Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd President; Chief Justice John Marshall and Robert E. Lee; but the Pytchley line of Ishams had come to an end.



THE OLD PYTCHLEY HALL



THE OLD LAMPORT HALL

John Isham (1525-1598)

So to the forth son of Euseby and Vere Isham, who we now know, was called John and was brought up as a typical countryman. It seems he was not academically inclined, able to write only in English. This is evident from his accounts, and confirmed in the diary written by his eldest son Thomas. This biography, and the portrait of him hanging in the vestibule of Lamport Hall, gives us some idea of the man himself. The Isham family has always been very diligent in keeping, not just the usual legal papers, but also many private family correspondences, the estate matters and the expenditure on it. (Should you feel like spending a few hours getting to know the family better, there are a mere 10,651 documents held in the Northampton Record Office you could start with, in addition, that is, to the family papers held by the Trust and members of the family). Some academics have already done so, concentrating mainly on the Merchant business, and later on agriculture or sheep rearing, from the John Isham account books, and have published their findings. As a great deal is known, and written about him, only his involvement in the founding of Lamport Hall will be singled out for attention here.

In 1542, John went to London, and was originally apprenticed to Otwell Hill the Mercer, who died the following year. He then transferred to Thomas Gigges, who was established in Antwerp and this association lasted until 1551. It was in Antwerp that John learned how to keep accounts, and to deal in the luxury materials, from Italy, of silk and satin. He also learned about buying and selling property. He married a wealthy widow, Elizabeth Baker, and was guardian to her son, who was his father's heir; (they also had their own family of 6 sons and 2 daughters). The assets and income from the Bakers gave John a good start in his business, once he gained the freedom of the Mercer's Company. He was a steady and careful investor and shrewd businessman. He prospered, becoming the Warden of the Mercer's Company on three occasions, Governor of the Merchant Adventurers in Flanders, and a Freeman of the City of London. When his older brother, Gregory, died in 1558 not yet 40 years old, he was left with his younger brother, Henry, to continue the family 'firm'. It may have been the early death of Gregory, only 5-6 years his senior, which, while not looking to retirement immediately from London,



PORTRAIT OF JOHN ISHAM C. 1567,
IN THE ROBES OF THE WARDEN OF THE
MERCERS COMPANY, ON ONE OF THE THREE
OCCASIONS ON WHICH HE HELD THE OFFICE.
THE ARTIST IS NOT KNOWN BUT IT IS PROBABLY
BY AN ENGLISH FOLLOWER OF HOLBEIN.

prompted him to begin making plans for this eventuality. In spite of his success in London, it seems that John remained a country man at heart. In the 1560's he had begun to farm the tithes and buy land in Tottenham, a small village within a short ride of the City, and as such was something of a rural retreat, where he and his family could escape the summer heat. He rented, and then bought, a small house there. He sold the tithe produce in London and raised crops of hay and oats, as fodder for the horses he rode. It was a place of convalescence for his delicate son Robert in 1571-2. Consequently, when John heard that the Parish of Lamport was for sale, he set his heart on buying it, as he knew of the high quality of the land, it being close to Pytchley. Most of John's capital and profits were bound up in his stock, or lent out, so he had little ready cash. However, by this time his brother, Robert, was no longer involved with priestly duties and was at a loose end at Pytchley. So they collaborated, with each buying a half share in Lamport. Subsequently, Robert helped his brother to buy more land in Northamptonshire, collected rents and generally looked after their interests.

Lamport

The name Lamport derives from Langport, or long village. The Domesday survey shows that, Walter the Fleming, in Bedfordshire, was then overlord of Lamport, with the Malsor family holding it for him. In the C13th Sir Peter Malsover held the avowson, but in 1242 Guy Wake and his wife, Isobel, held it, and appointed Richard Trussel to the living. The Trussel family held the manor and the avowson until 1500. Elizabeth Trussel, the heiress, married John de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who thus inherited the estate. On the 7th May 1559, John de Vere sold it for £530 to Sir William Cecil of Burghley, who, six months later, sold it for £610 to John and Robert Isham of Pytchley, in whose family it remained until 1976, when it became owned by a Trust; and remains so until the present day.

Robert died in 1564, so John became the lord of the manor of Lamport and the founder of a new line of Ishams. In 1568, John started to build a manor house, where it stands today. Ever frugal, John apparently used the original Lamport rectory and enhanced it, rather than building from scratch, which is more expensive. The Hall was described as "built round a courtyard as a typical manor house of its period, of some extent, but modest and unpretentious". John continued to trade in London and, a year after Robert died, announced "Robert Bradshaw my Servande and baylye of my rents" would oversee Lamport. During the next 10 years the Lamport estate was improved, extended and converted to a profitable business concern, in particular to the rearing of sheep. This required complete enclosure of the common lands. Robert knew of this proposed scheme and being a 'humane and generous cleric' was unwilling for it to cause hardship. He therefore made provision in his will that if "John or his heirs inclosed this property within 40 years, so depriving the inhabitants of any of their present common, or if they increased rents except for demesne lands, then Euseby, his brother Gregory's eldest son would inherit the [Robert's] land"[instead of John]. John nevertheless commenced the process in 1570 but he entered into an agreement with seven freeholders, assuring them of land of an equal value to that enclosed, valued at £100; presumably in deference to Robert's concerns.

In 1572, John sold his properties in London, although still keeping in touch with the Wool markets, through Henry, and returned to Lamport to live the life of a country squire. This is summarised by his son Thomas as "at length, he having gotten some good store of substance with good credit and honest report he came and dwelt.....

upon his land at Lamport, which before he had purchased. Here he applied himself to plantinge, buildinge, making pooles, including of groundes and all other works of good husbandry as though he had been brought up to them from his infancy..... He was a wise man although unlearned, writing and reading Inglish only excepted". He participated in the county affairs, becoming High Sherriff in 1581, and stayed at Lamport until his death in 1596. His grandson, also John, was knighted by James I and created a Baronet by Charles I in 1627. The Ishams regained, therefore, the status as titled gentry from descendants of John Isham; and because he had decided to retire and become a country squire. Lamport Hall has been the Isham home for sixteen heads of the Isham family, fourteen as baronets, over the past four and a half centuries. It has been enhanced and altered by the successive generations and today is a Grade 1 listed building. Although no Isham lives in it now, the family take interest in its well-being as trustees in the Trust that owns it; and the title continues. The succession is assured, by the sons and grandsons, of the current Baronet, Sir Norman Isham OBE. So, we are indebted to John Isham for his foresight and the privilege to be able to visit his fascinating house and for setting an example to his heirs, that so much of their past, and our history, are accessible from their document collection.



Armorial stained window glass, of the early Ishams, which was rescued from the fire-destroyed Pytchley House, and presented to Lamport Hall to keep for prosperity. The Coats of Arms show the alliance of the Ishams through marriage. They are now set in the windows of the Lamport Hall stairwell.

Acknowledgements to:

The Lamport Hall Preservation Trust Ltd. which has allowed us to use their copyright pictures.

For opening dates and times please consult their website www.lamporthall.co.uk

Tel: 01604 686272 Fax: 01604 686224 E-mail admin@lamporthall.co.uk

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Publisher PHILLIMORE.