

A Visit to England 1992

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In 1683 a Jon. Roper (John?) arrived in New Kent County, Virginia as a "transported person" on a deed for some land. The person who "transported" him received 50 acres of land because of it. The implication is that John arrived from another country, probably England, since all others in that list also had English names. A John Roper appears as a vestryman in St. Peter's Parish of New Kent County in 1685. Another John Roper (John?) was a transported person in Charles City County in 1690. Charles City County is directly south of New Kent County; they are separated by the Chickahominy River. (New Kent County is about 20 miles by 11 miles and is bordered on the north by the Pamunkey River. Charles City County is about 21 miles by 11 miles and is bordered on the south by the James River, which was much used for transporting goods.) The question exists as to whether these two John Ropers are the same person, or if the second is the son or another relative of the first.

The name Roper is quite common and well known in England. (There is a German Roper name, with an unlauded o, but it is a very rare name in Germany. There also is a German Ropers name.) The major counties in England for Roper families are Kent and Derby. Kent was the county of origin, as it was for many families as they migrated from mainland Europe to England. Most family historians in England believe that most Roper families in England originated from a Hasculphus Musard (there are several variations of the spelling) who came to England with William the Conqueror in 1066 or shortly thereafter. (The Battle of Hastings was in southern Kent County.) From a title the surname of Roper evolved after a few generations. Some family historians state that some Roper families got their surname from the fact that the progenitor was a rope maker. (The name Raper had the same origin.)

The best known Roper family, which is probably connected to all other Roper families in Kent County, is the family that was first known in the late 14th century to be seated near St. Dunstan's Church in west Canterbury about 1/4 mile from Canterbury Cathedral. A Roper Chapel was established in 1402 and still exists in St. Dunstan's Church, where William Roper and his wife Margaret More Roper are buried. They are well known in England because Margaret is the beloved daughter of Thomas More, a close advisor to King Henry VIII (1509-47). The King beheaded Thomas More in 1535 because Thomas, then Archbishop of Canterbury, would not agree to the King's divorce from Catherine of Aragon in order that he could marry Ann Boleyn. After his head hung on London Bridge for two weeks, Margaret put it in a small lead casket and it eventually was placed in the Roper tomb in St. Dunstan's Church. The original large front door to William and Margaret Roper's house is on St. Dunstan's Street in Canterbury, between Roper Road and the Church.

A later member of that Roper family, John Roper, became quite rich in the Teynham Hundred district, which is about twenty miles west of Canterbury, and was created the Baron of Teynham in 1616 because of his service to Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, his paying 10,000 pounds for it and his relinquishing a lucrative government position he had held for many years. The first and second (Christopher Roper) Lords Teynham are buried in tombs in the St. Peter's and Paul's Church in Lynsted, a village in the Teynham Hundred, This baronage is one of the oldest in England that has continued in the same family to today. The current holder of the title (20th Baron Teynham) is John Christopher Ingham Roper-Curzon (see below), who lives near Lymington, Hampshire. (Five generations ago the 14th Lord Teynham adopted the name Curson and then the hyphenated name Roper-Curzon after he received an inheritance from his mother's Curson family.)

Dr. Richard Samuel Roper, a noted Roper family historian in the United States, believes that the Roper family that came to New Kent County originated from Kent County in England, because of the facts that many immigrants to New Kent County did, that they married people who immigrated from Kent County, and that place names around them in New Kent County were the same as in old Kent County.

Canterbury Area Visit

A visit to England in order to visit Roper family sites must begin in Kent County near Canterbury. Chronologically the first visit would be to Canterbury, but we chose to go to Lynsted first since it was closer to Headcorn where we were staying for four days (14-17 June 1992). We arrived in Lynsted from the south where the Church and Lynsted Lodge, an early family seat, are located. We saw a small sign for Lynsted Park but passed it by and soon reached the church. We walked around the church, but no doors were unlocked. A neighbor, Fred Smith, saw us and came over. When I told him my name he said, "Your family is an important family in Lynsted; let me get the key and show you the church."

Inside in the southeast corner is the "Roper Chapel," where the Barons Roper worshiped behind a screen away from the eyes of the other worshipers. They even had their own entrance, so that others did not know for sure whether they were there or not. Several generations of this Roper family were "recusants," which means that they clung to the Catholic faith while most of England was forced to switch to the Church of England. On opposite sides of the Roper Chapel are statues of the first two Barons Roper and their wives above their tombs. They have been restored recently; the one of the second Lord Teynham was done by a well-known sculptor Evesham and is highly regarded in the art world. We were not able to get in the Roper Mausoleum, which is a small extension to the church on the southeast, because the man with the key was not in town. I purchased A History of the Three Villages of Kingsdown. Lynsted and Norton in the County of Kent in the church. This book discusses the Roper family and describes the Roper Chapel. We came back the last full day we were in England (29 June) and drove to the site of Lynsted Lodge, now called Lynsted Park, and saw the ruins of the Lodge (it once had 100 rooms) and the palatial mansion that now sits near it.

Fred Smith invited us to his house for refreshments after the church visit. We then drove on to Canterbury, where we first went to Canterbury Cathedral for the second time (the first was in April 1974). I then went to the Heraldic and Genealogical Library on Northgate Street north of the Cathedral (just past King's School), to learn that they have no books on the Roper family but do have many of the records of the churches and villages. I vowed to return on a later trip to spend a few days at that library. I then walked to the west gate of the city and shortly beyond, crossing Roper Road, to St. Dunstan's Church. The Roper chapel is in the southeast corner of the Church. There are several plaques about the Roper family and a floor stone over the Roper Vault underneath. I purchased there a book The Parish Church of St. Dunstan, Canterbury. Kent, A General History and Guide, which discusses the last opening of the Roper Vault in 1978 and the William and Margaret Roper family. It shows several pictures of Roper items, including the lead casket that contains the skull of St. Thomas More. The book states that it is now believed that Edmund Roper, a great-grandfather of William Roper, was buried there in 1433. Edmund-father, Ralph Roper, and Edmund established the Roper Chapel in 1402. It seems probable that Ralph is also buried there.

A Visit with the 20th Baron Teynham

I had written the 20th Baron Teynham, John Christopher Ingham Roper-Curzon, a few months before we left for England and asked if it would be possible to visit him in England. He wrote back and graciously invited my wife, Thelma, and I to visit him at his home called Pylewell Park near Lymington in Hampshire. We exchanged one more letter and he asked me to call him when we arrived in England to settle on a date for the visit. We called him on 14 June and settled on 19 June for the visit. He said that his wife and children (he has 10) would not be able to be there. We drove down from our lodging place, Lydlinch, Dorset.

The entrance to his estate is marked by a large gate house and large columns with lanterns on the top. After about a 1/4 mile drive on a somewhat rough road we arrived at a large four-story mansion with a Jaguar parked in front. The grounds were cared for but not manicured. His 19-year-old daughter, Hermione Marie Hilda Edith, walked around the side of the house just before Lord Teynham opened the front door. (I had asked previously what I should call him.) He invited us into the drawing room at the back of the house, which faced toward the Solent (the channel of water between mainland England and the Isle of Wight). (The estate has 2000 acres with two miles of waterfront.) He told us about his family and showed us two books that contain information about his Roper family. (One book is Teynham Manor and Hundred. I later was able to purchase this book. The other book is The complete Peerage, published in 1896. Lord Teynham later sent me a copy of the relevant pages from this book.)

Then he brought out the 1616 document with King James large (about 6 inches in diameter) wax seal that created the Baronage Teynham. I took a picture of it. Then he unrolled the well-known "Roper Roll", which the Lord Teynham had made in 1627, that showed the family genealogy and coats of arms back to 1282. (There was one possible royal connection.) It was about 4 feet wide and 8 feet long on what appeared to be sheep skin. I took pictures of the Roll and Thelma took a picture of him and me standing above the Roll. He took us to the top floors and showed us the carefully scripted books about the family history and the proof book for the Roper Roll. On the top floor balcony we had a lovely view of the Solent and the back lawn and gardens.

He told us about his eldest son, David Henry Ingham, who is a sculptor in London (he will be the 21st Baron Teynham, if he outlives his father) and his son, Peter Michael Alexander (twin of Hermione), who is living in Australia. He said that they had ten children because his wife had ten dolls when she was a child. He mentioned that one of his sons had attended the Cathedral School in Salisbury and one was there now.

Then we went into a lovely dining room in the back of the mansion where his butler served us a delicious and sumptuous meal. (His daughter could not be there for the meal.) During the meal he received a telephone call from his son David about a bust of him that David had sculpted.

After the meal we walked out into the back lawn about half way to the Solent and then sat on the back lawn while we showed him pictures of our houses in Virginia and Florida. Thelma took some pictures of him and me. He said that he is currently going to London two or three times a week for sessions of the House of Lords, of which he is a life member.

Back in the drawing room he said that he would send me photocopies of the pages that mention the Roper families of the two books that he has. We told him that we were going to drive on to Salisbury to see the Cathedral, so he suggested that we attend evensong there at 6:30 to hear his 10-year-old son, William Thomas, sing in the Cathedral school choir. Thelma mentioned to him that his and my large noses are a trade mark of our Roper family in the U.S.; he said that that convinced him that we are related.

We did hear his son sing in the 12-boy (and a few adults) choir at evensong in Salisbury Cathedral that evening.

A Final Visit to the Canterbury Area

On our last full day in England, 29 June, we went back to the Canterbury -London road area of Teynham Hundred. We tried, but failed, to get into the Roper Mausoleum. We then drove to Lynsted Park where the old Lynsted Lodge of the Lords Teynham was. A large and beautiful mansion sits close to the old ruins of the Lodge, which is surrounded by a wall. We took some pictures.

Then we drove to Teynham and went into Jackson-Grant Antiques store, hoping to find information on the Roper families. Indeed, there were original land documents dated from 1797 concerning the Barons Teynham, some of the oldest of which I purchased. He told us that Roper relatives are still living in the area. He also told me where to buy a copy of the Teynham Manor and Hundred book in Rainham, where we were scheduled to stay that night. I did buy the book.

Possible Future Visits

The next time we visit England we hope to spend most of the time at one place in the Canterbury-Teynham-Hundred area, so that I can do some extensive work in the libraries there. Also, I want to go to London to check out the Genealogical Society Library there. On that visit or a subsequent one I hope to visit the county of Derby to find information on the Ropers who move. who moved there from Kent County.