

DARTMOUTH & LOWESTOFT

Robert Puckle the stonemason did not apprentice all his sons to the Merchant Taylors' Company, his second son Gabriel, born in 1548, was apprenticed to the Fishmongers', an even more prestigious company, ranking fourth in precedence. Gabriel does not appear to have shared the combative attitude of his elder brother, Robert. There is no surviving litigation involving him & the only records mentioning him are both posthumous: his will & an Exchequer document requesting payment by his estate of a ten pound tax on his goods because he had been alive & living in the parish of St Mary Abchurch at the time of the assessment for the recent Lay Subsidy.

Gabriel had married late in life, probably in 1592, at the age of 44. His wife's name was Agnes & their married life did not last very long as Gabriel died in August 1593, & was buried in St Mary Abchurch on 23 August. His will was made on 18 July 1593 & surprisingly says that "he is in perfect healthe of bodye & quiet in mind". Gabriel may have had Puritan sympathies, like his nephew Arthur & many London citizens at this time, as he leaves money for the minister who will preach the sermon at his funeral & was sure that Christ would make intercession for him & he would be saved. He stated his intention that "the house plott with garden & orcharde in Laystoffe in Suffolk shalbe for the sonne or daughter my wyfe now goeth with" & made his brother Samuel Puckle his executor.

Samuel, who had been apprenticed to his elder brother Robert, received his freedom of the Merchant Taylors' Company on 21 July 1578, when he was 24. He was probably living in Lowestoft in Gabriel's house, from at least 1582. Lowestoft may have been chosen by Gabriel because of its proximity to Great Yarmouth, then undergoing a rapid expansion as a result of the herring fishery.

During the fifteenth century, perhaps because of climate change, the herring shoals disappeared from the Baltic & as Camden wrote in his "Britannia": "now in our time, by the bounty of Providence, swim in great shoals round our coasts every year". The East Anglian fishing fleets were particularly well placed for, as Thomas Nashe, who was born in Lowestoft, wrote "on no coast like ours is [the herring] caught in such abundance". In 1596 it was estimated that 200 of the inhabitants of Lowestoft, then not much more than a village, were employed in the herring industry. Nashe, who was the son of the Vicar of Lowestoft, published his "Lenten Stuffe" a tongue in cheek eulogy of the Yarmouth red herring, in 1599. He described Yarmouth as the "supereminent principal metropolis of the redde fishe". Nashe claimed that 80 ships from Yarmouth were employed in the herring fishery apart from those from other ports. These came from as far away as Brighton & Shoreham, as can be seen from a document of 1579 describing the "customs" of the Brighton fishermen who usually spent September to November in Yarmouth. Many of the herrings caught in the North Sea were salted & cured in the smoke houses of Yarmouth & Lowestoft & thus preserved, were exported to Catholic Europe to be eaten during Lent.

A plan of Lowestoft drawn in 1586 shows the Deans (as the area near the shore was then called) with the "fish houses" grouped around it. They were tall, narrow buildings often built of wood with vents at the side to allow the smoke to escape; often they were attached to dwelling houses. The process of curing the fish was probably largely the same as that described in White's Directory for Norfolk in 1854;

“After remaining in salt a sufficient time, they are washed in vats, then spitted through the gills, & hung up in tiers reaching to the top of the building; after which fires of oakwood are kindled under them, but extinguished two or three times during the operation, to allow the oil or fat to drip from the herrings until they are properly smoked”.

Lowestoft coasters, assisted with the export of the herrings, by taking them, now packed in barrels each containing a thousand fish, down to Harwich where they were transferred to bigger craft. Lowestoft itself did not participate in the cross-channel trade &, in fact, was frequently accused by Yarmouth of covertly dealing with merchants who were buying for export & hoping to avoid customs duties. Between 1500 & 1650 twenty testators leaving wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury described themselves as “merchants of Lowestoft” so perhaps the suspicions of Yarmouth were not without foundation. One of these merchants, Thomas Arnott, left money in his will of 1578 for the first school in Lowestoft. Yarmouth & Lynn were the headports of the whole East Anglian coast from the Wash to the river Debden at Woodbridge. These two ports & the subsidiary harbours they supervised, known as “creeks”, controlled the foreign trade of the whole region as they were the only places with customs houses. Lowestoft was not a creek & so, unfortunately for local historians, was not obliged to keep records of her trade which was restricted to coasting vessels. Therefore we have no means of proving whether Gabriel Puckle bought fish in Lowestoft, & later used his brother Samuel as a factor, buying for him. It seems the obvious explanation for Gabriel’s ownership of the Lowestoft house. Despite being only a “landing place” Lowestoft was clearly quite prosperous & many of the vessels which carried the herrings from Yarmouth to the French or Spanish ports, were Lowestoft vessels, owned by local men, whereas in other East Anglian ports like Dunwich, Aldeburgh & even (King’s) Lynn the majority of the vessels were owned by London merchants.

Thomas Shotsam of the Merchant Taylors’, Edmund Puckle’s master, features twice in the London Port Book of 1568: on both occasions he was importing salt from La Rochelle or “the Bay”. The Baie of Borgneuf was the area around La Rochelle & sea salt from this area was prized above mined salt from places like Droitwich in Cheshire. The term however was often applied to salt from the Biscay coast. It was written in the Ordinances of the Fishmongers’ Company that only bay salt was to be used for salting fish, & fines were laid down for those who broke this rule. It is possible that Thomas Shotsham, who still had relatives in Lowestoft, was buying salt for the herring industry. Edmund Puckle, Gabriel’s uncle, would have known of the prosperity of Yarmouth & Lowestoft & their potential as a market for goods of every kind through his connection with Thomas. In fact Edmund’s name appears twice in the Yarmouth port book. In 1577 he sent jerkins, petticoats, doublets & stockings to Yarmouth from London as well as “cottons” & “friezes” & “rugge” (all types of woollen fabric) & also canvas for which there would have been a ready market in a coastal town. In 1582 he again sent various types of clothing & cloth such as “northern dozens” from London as well as scoops, shovels, vinegar & lanterns. No doubt Samuel’s primary role was to act as a factor for Edmund and Robert, receiving & selling their cargoes & returning goods to them. Samuel appears in the Yarmouth Port Book in January 1581/2 sending to London wool hats, a “truss” of “made wares” (clothing such as stockings & doublets) & four “pieces” of kerseys (a type of woollen cloth woven in Suffolk). The other cargo included butter, wheat & 8 lasts of red

(smoked) & white (salted) herrings. These were the property of John Walker & must have made Samuel's woollen cloth smell rather pungent.

Samuel settled in Lowestoft & on 9 May 1583 he married Anne/Agnes Payne, a local girl, who had been born in Lowestoft in 1565. The couple had 8 children but only Richard, Samuel, Gabriel, Mary, Joan & Anne survived to adulthood & Gabriel remained single. Gabriel is probably the Captain Gabriel Puckle who appears in the Calendar of State Papers Domestic as commanding a vessel called the "Transport" in the Earl of Morton's squadron in September 1628. The Earl of Morton was the Vice Admiral of the English fleet assembled at Plymouth for the second unsuccessful expedition to La Rochelle to assist the Huguenots there against Louis XIII. In fact the starving Huguenots surrendered to the French king on 28 October 1628 after a siege lasting over a year. The Earl's squadron set out without Captain Gabriel Puckle because his ship, which was carrying 15 soldiers, had sprung a leak, forcing him to return to port & request billeting for the soldiers. Captain Puckle features again in the Calendar of State Papers in 1630 when he applied for Letters of Marque for the "Exchange of London" of which he was one of the owners. Letters of Marque authorised the holder to equip an armed vessel to be used in the capture of the merchant vessels of an enemy - a legal form of piracy. The enemy in question may have been the French or perhaps the Spanish as Charles I was keen to get his hands on the Spanish treasure-ships bringing gold from the Americas. Gabriel died abroad in 1647 & the widow of his nephew, Francis Mallory, was granted administration of his goods. Thus it appears that either Joan or Mary married a husband with the surname Mallory. Anne married Leonard Gleane, a gentleman from Saxlingham Nethergate near Norwich. They had three daughters & Anne lived to the age of 74, dying in 1670.

Samuel the Elder died in 1596, at the age of 44, making his wife sole executrix of his will in which he left money to his family (including 20 shillings a year for his father's maintenance) but no property. The eldest of his six surviving children was still only eight & like most young widows at this period, his wife remarried shortly afterwards. She married Robert Bransby at St Margaret's Lowestoft on 16 July 1597. He was probably the brother of Thomas Bransby whose children were born in Lowestoft & who witnessed Samuel Puckle's will. As for Richard & Samuel, her two other sons, Anne & her new husband realised the importance of an apprenticeship for them, but chose neighbouring Norwich instead of London. Richard, the elder of the two, was apprenticed to Giles Cozen of the Tailors' Company of Norwich & received his freedom on 3 May 1611. He appears to have made his living as a hosier, like his brother Samuel, who was apprenticed at a slightly younger age: he was granted his freedom on 9 June 1610 as a member of the Grocers' Company. Samuel junior is described as a dealer in woollen stockings in several Chancery cases later in the century.

Samuel Puckle the elder mentions in his will money left to his children by his brother Gabriel in 1593. His death meant that Gabriel's widow Agnes, who had also remarried, had to apply to take Samuel's place as a trustee for the property left to his unborn child in Gabriel's will. Agnes had married William Bannister in August 1594, a year being considered a decent time to allow to elapse before remarriage. Her child, baptised on 16 January 1593/4 at St Mary Abchurch, was a son, named Gabriel after his father.

Gabriel the younger has left more of a mark in the historical records than his father has & he seems to have been a fairly determined character, even perhaps hot-headed, like his uncle Robert. He began life with more advantages than his father, since he inherited property & spent some time at Balliol College, Oxford as he is recorded as matriculating on 6 July 1613 although there is no mention of graduation. He also retained links with Sussex since in 1617 he & his second cousin, Thomas Puckle of Lewes were involved in a property dispute in the Archdeaconry Court over tenements in Tortington & the Rectory of Madehurst, property which may well have been bought for them, since Thomas could not have been more than 11. In 1619 Gabriel was again a plaintiff in a case about the Madehurst Rectory & in 1622 he was one of the signatories to a deed of sale of Madehurst parsonage & church in which Caleb & Thomas Morley were the other parties (& probably the buyers). It may have been about this time that he married Elizabeth Morley, as his friendship with her brothers Thomas & Caleb emerges from the two Star Chamber cases he was involved in, where he is described as a brother in law of Thomas Morley, citizen & woodmonger. He & Morley are also described as “brethren merchants of great wealth”.

The protracted legal dispute in the first case began in about 1616 when Gabriel was persuaded by Richard Bower, a haberdasher of London, to lend him the sum of £100 & Bower signed a bond for half of that sum which was to fall due on a certain date. By 1618 Gabriel brought a case in the Court of Common Pleas as none of the money had been repaid. Gabriel was granted a writ to levy £100 with £3.10s damages on the goods & chattels of Richard Bower who was then committed to prison. The Sheriff of London & Southwark was unable to find lands or chattels belonging to Richard Bower in his bailiwick so Gabriel got another writ directed to the Sheriff of Surrey. He managed to raise £3.10s from the sale of Richard Bower’s goods but was obliged to seize land in Peckham & Camberwell which Bower had acquired on a 21 year lease. The essence of the suit which Bower brought in the Star Chamber was that the goods & chattels had been undervalued, especially a gelding which he claimed was worth £5, & that Gabriel Puckle, Thomas Morley & others had conspired with John Middleton Esquire then High Sheriff of Surrey, his undersheriff & deputy & bailiffs to acquire the land at a very low valuation. It was suggested that Puckle & Morley had used bribery to further their “wicked & malicious intent & purposes” & also molested & threatened Bower’s tenants. Various other people involved in the dispute brought writs in the Court of Exchequer & the King’s Bench making the case extremely complex, & of course only a few documents survive. Gabriel & Thomas Morley & their associates denied conspiracy & Gabriel asserted his right to have his debt settled, & admitted “as he had wit enough [he had] refused to accept” a belated offer of £50 & no more from Richard Bower. It does not seem very likely that Gabriel & his co-defendants would go to such lengths, bribing such a large number of officials in order to get their hands on land which does not seem to have been very valuable. On the other hand one does get the impression that Gabriel junior was rather a hard-headed business man, who was determined to let no one get the better of him.

The second Star Chamber case involved Caleb Morley, Thomas’s brother, who was an ordained clergyman & asserted his right to the Rectory of Stalbridge in Dorset over Alan Bishop who had been presented to the Rectory by the George Audley, Earl of Castlehaven in 1609. Caleb claimed that nearly 50 years earlier an ancestor of Melvin Touchett, the present Earl of Castlehaven had illegally acquired the right of presentation to the parish & the right to the tithes & rents, from a previous incumbent,

Charles Bragg, who was a man “of very mean gifts & worse behaviour” & who had received a large sum in recompense. Caleb claimed that he was the true incumbent of the parish, having been presented by the King. (Foster’s “Index Ecclesia” records his presentation to the parish of Stalbridge in 1616.)

In May 1617 Caleb Morley decided to take matters into his own hands & assembling a group of friends & sympathisers which included Gabriel Puckle, he set off for Stalbridge. Alan Bishop also joined the group, perhaps in the hope of retaining the parsonage and regaining the tithes & the glebe land which the Audleys had appropriated. The Star Chamber case was brought by Melvin, the present Earl of Castlehaven who claimed that Morley & his group arrived in Stalbridge “bearing armes weapons & arrayed with swords daggers longe pikes & staves & other horrible & unlawful weapons” & “did forcibly & unlawfully break open the Church of Stalbridge aforesaid & enter thereinto & also in & upon the said Rectory & parsonage”. The group “did with great fury & outrage forbid the parishioners of the said parish to pay their tithes any longer to your said subject [Melvin Earl of Castlehaven] or to acknowledge him to be the patron of the said church”. As a result of this visit the parishioners stopped paying their tithes (no doubt they did not need telling twice), but Caleb did not succeed in installing himself as Rector. In July of the same year “not contented with their former misdemeanours” the party assembled again & breaking into a meadow on the glebe land “endeavoured forcibly to carry away certain hay”. Castlehaven sought the assistance of the parish constable to little avail, as he claimed the men “did with more force & violence insolently demean themselves, threatening with horrible oathes to kill maim or wound all such as would hinder them”. Castlehaven’s bill had been brought in response to an earlier bill by Caleb Morley (which has not survived) which accused the Castlehaven family of “slandorous reproachful & ignominious inventions” with respect to their acquisition of the advowson of the parsonage & their attempts “to divert the glebe land & profits belonging to the said church to lay & unlawful uses”. Morley also claimed that Castlehaven had threatened him vowing that “if the said Morley should continue parson of Stalbridge [someone] would do him a mischief”. Morley claimed that the present Earl’s father, George Audley had actually had “old Gerrard” murdered. Castlehaven sought damages both for property & for the “imputations against your said subject & his ancestors to his great disgrace & discredit”.

Of course the outcome of the case is not known but the respective merits of both sets of evidence can perhaps be judged from a notorious case brought against Melvin Touchett, Earl of Castlehaven in 1630. He was tried for sodomy, aiding & abetting the rape of his wife & keeping a disorderly house. As a result of the evidence of his son, wife & various servants & workers on his estate, he was convicted & executed on Tower Hill. Alan Bishop became vicar of Frampton on Severn, Gloucestershire in 1622 & Caleb Morley presumably remained as Rector of Stalbridge. Gabriel Puckle’s part in this case was quite small & if he was armed, as Castlehaven claimed, no doubt he thought it was in a just cause. The fact that ordained ministers could resort to violent means of settling disputes shows how different their age was from ours. After his appearance in these two cases Gabriel Puckle disappears from the record. I have not been able to find the baptisms of any children of his, nor do I know where or when he was buried. The Sussex Puckles do not feature in London records again until the second half of the seventeenth century when William, the eldest son of Samuel Puckle junior married & had children in London.

There is still one other descendant of the Sussex Puckles that has not been dealt with: Edmund the second son of John Puckle the merchant of Lewes. He was born about 1565 & by the time he was in his early twenties he was probably working with his father as a merchant: he features several times in the Lewes Port Book, always in connection with vessels either going to or coming from Dartmouth in Devon. Several of John Puckle's associates in the Fellowship of the Twelve traded with Dartmouth. In 1588 Edmond Puckle sent iron, malt, [dried] peas & canvas to Dartmouth; in 1589 he sent iron, barrel boards & malt. In 1598, by which time he was recorded as living in Dartmouth, he again sent malt & also hops. It is important to remember that in the days when roads were often impassable in bad weather, transport by water was much more efficient & less expensive, & Dartmouth's sheltered harbour made it a rival to Plymouth. Several of the great voyages of exploration of the Elizabethan age set off from Dartmouth & most of the leaders of these expeditions came from the Dartmouth area.

Dartmouth at this time was undergoing a rapid expansion largely fuelled by the Newfoundland cod fishery. From 1580 onwards the Danish king imposed increasing restrictions on the Icelandic cod fishery which until then had been the focus of English fishermen. This led to the development of the fishery of the Newfoundland Banks, first discovered by John Cabot in 1497 but until the 1580s relatively unimportant to the English trade. In 1583 the explorer Sir Humphrey Gilbert, born near Dartmouth & a half-brother of Sir Walter Raleigh, laid claim to the Newfoundland coast on behalf of the English Crown, & in 1585 Sir Bernard Drake took prisoner 600 Spanish & Portuguese fishermen at the harbour of St John's in Newfoundland. As a result of this & of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 & of domestic problems affecting the French, the Continental fishermen's share of the Newfoundland trade declined & it came to be dominated by the English. Unlike the fish trade of Bristol or London, entry to which was restricted by companies of merchants, the Devon trade relied on free enterprise. Anyone with sufficient money could fit out & man a ship, & share the profits with the crew on their return. After the cod was caught it was split, lightly salted & dried on shore by the fishermen & then packed into barrels. The oak barrel boards & iron from the Sussex Weald which Edmond Puckle sent to Dartmouth may well have been intended, not for the brewing of beer, but for the packing of salt cod. On return to the West Country ports most of the fish was exported to Catholic France, Spain & Italy. At its peak between 1610 & 1630 Dartmouth was supplying more than 80 vessels & two to three thousand men to the Newfoundland fishery in some years. Shipbuilding was flourishing & an enormous variety of goods were flooding in from the Continent. Sir Walter Raleigh described the Newfoundland Fishery "the mainstay & support of the West".

Dartmouth's period of greatest prosperity lasted about sixty years, from 1583 to 1643. In the 1580's the New Quay was built in front of the parish church of St Saviour's & the area behind it filled in, thus creating extra land for houses. Those built on the New Quay itself were soon inhabited by the wealthiest merchants in the town, who liked being able to see their ships in harbour from the windows of their houses. Many other beautiful half-timbered houses were built in the town, some of which survive today. With the constant threat of an attack from Spain, Dartmouth castle & the chain were repaired. This massive chain could be suspended between Dartmouth & Kingswear castles preventing any vessels from entering the River Dart. It was repaired again in

1626 when there was a fear of attack by the French. The parish church of St Saviour was provided with a beautifully carved Communion table in 1588 & in the 1630s the body of the church was almost completely rebuilt & the south door was provided with its decorative ironwork in the form of two leopards amid sprays of leaves. The chapel of St Petrox next to the castle at the mouth of the harbour was also enlarged.

It is difficult to say how much Edmund & his family shared in the growing prosperity of Dartmouth: he left no will & the surviving taxation records for the period do not list individuals. He only appears twice in the port books for the town, but in both cases the cargoes were quite valuable: in 1604 he was sent from Lewes 19 tons of iron & a small number of "utensils" probably made of iron. In January 1611 28 coils of rope, 1 cable, 4 lasts of pitch & tar, 10 pieces of Ipswich canvas, 2 bars of starch, 1 hogshead of alum, 7 bags of hops, 8 tons of board & 4 runletts of acquavite arrived from London. From this it would appear that Edmond was not directly involved in the fishery but did supply goods to the shipbuilding industry & also imported goods from the Kent & Sussex Weald like hops, malt, iron & oak.

It was in St Saviour's church on 23 November 1590 that Edmond Puckle married Richoard Lydstone, the daughter of Gilbert Lydstone of the neighbouring village of Stoke Fleming. She bore him 8 children, the first being named John, after his father & the next two Barbara after his mother. Two of the children probably died in infancy: the first Barbara & a son Edmond, of whom no more is heard. Edmond was baptised in All Saints, Lewes on 1 March 1602, & his sister Lucie on 7 Oct 1604 at nearby Buxted. These baptisms are an indication that Edmond still retained links with his birthplace & perhaps visited Lewes on business, as his father & two brothers were still alive at this date. Edmond's daughter Joan married Thomas Terry at St Petrox on 2 January 1614/15. Thomas came from Charleton (about 8 miles from Dartmouth) & the couple's first child, named John after his paternal grandfather, was christened there, two more were christened in St Petrox & two in St Saviour's. Joan was buried in St Saviour's on 20 July 1627. Her sister Barbara Puckle married John Whittick on 20 April 1621 at Kingswear. The Kingswear register is missing from the 1620s to about 1660, so I have no more information about the Whittick family. Lucie Puckle may have married Richard Purlevent on 13 July 1630 at St Katherine by the Tower in London, but I can find no children for this couple. Lucie's brother Richard went away to sea & on 12 July 1624, while he was one of the crew of the ship "Dyiamond" & was "extreame sicke in body", he made a will leaving twenty pounds to his brother William (of whom nothing more is known) & the same amount to his sister "Densey" Puckle. He must have been away for some time because he was unsure if his brother & sister had died. The will was proved by Lucie Puckle on 14 November 1627 so it seems that "Densey" was a pet-name or perhaps a clerical error. Richard also mentions his sister Joan Terry & leaves £12 to "the parish church in Dartmouth where I was christened" & the residue of his estate to the poor of St Saviour's. He also mentions his books, platts [maps] instruments & clothes, so he obviously was not an ordinary seaman, but probably an officer.

Richard's elder brother John was the only one to continue the Puckle line into the next generation. He married Mary Trehweller on 29 June 1613 at Kingswear. The baptisms of two daughters, Barbara & Richoard are recorded in the Kingswear register before the missing pages; Barbara married Nicholas Treworgy on 17 Aug 1634. Two more Puckle marriages took place in St Saviour's: Martha Puckle married

John Pentecost on 9 October 1649, & Elizabeth married Leonard Edgecombe on 17 Feb 1651/2. These are probably both John's daughters but he did not live to see them married as he died in 1638. From the grant of Administration to his daughter Barbara Treworgy we learn that he was mariner like his younger brother, Richard, & his second cousin, Gabriel.

The marriages of John Puckle's daughters are the last Puckle entries in the Devon records & that branch of the family died out in the male line, but far away on the other side of the country other members of the family were becoming prominent in the civic life of Norwich.