

BREDE PLACE, ITS HISTORY and FAMILIES



Brede is undoubtedly a very old settlement and a church on its present site may pre-date Domesday, although the existing church may 'only' have developed from 1140 – 1180. Of this Norman church only the pillars of the south arcade remain and these have been dated to c.1180. But it has been deduced that a church at Brede must have been one of the five churches described in the Domesday Book of 1085 as being within the manor of Rameslie^{1,2}. The first mention of Brede (*Bretða*) itself in charter records is 1028 (see below).

The manor of Brede is inextricably involved in the large and valuable estate of Rameslie belonging to the Norman abbey of Fécamp recorded in Domesday. This ownership overlaps with the first families to be discussed and makes in itself an interesting prelude. Before Domesday to this a very first mention of Rameslie that can be found is hidden in a charter issued by King Aethelred II in 1005³:

King Æthelred to Eynsham Abbey; confirmation of its foundation by Æthelmær, with endowments including Rameslege (Rameslie) bequeathed to Eynsham by Wulfin (Wulfwynn), Æthelmær's kinswoman, who was a 'property holder in Sussex'.

Æthelmær 'the Ealdorman or Earl' must have started creating (probably re-creating) Eynsham Abbey some considerable time before 1005 as Aethelred's charter of confirmation implies that the abbey was already functioning⁴. He eventually retired there dying in 1013. Æthelmær was a kinsman of Æthelred and 'Rameslege' had been bequeathed by Wulfwynn (who may have been abbess of Wareham, a nunnery dispersed by Danes in 876 but probably re-founded in 915 [traditionally by Æthelflæd, oldest daughter of King Alfred] and incidentally the first burial place in 978 of King Edward the Martyr killed by supporters of his half-brother Aethelred II) to her own kinsman at her death in 982, presumably dedicating it to endow the new abbey. By deduction this would date the existence of Rameslie to sometime before 982. A mystery remains about how Rameslie was endowed to Wulfwynn/Wareham in the first place.

At some point, possibly as part of the marriage agreement, Æthelred had promised his new Queen Emma (of Normandy) that he would give 'Rameslegh' to Fécamp Abbey and would compensate Eynsham Abbey, but he failed to do so before his death. Emma was not to forget this. Soon after Aethelred's death she married England's new Danish King Cnut, who had decided to make a political marriage. He was already married 'in the Danish way' to Ælfgifu of Northampton, whom he was prepared to 'put aside', and he made a formal arrangement to marry Æthelred's widow, Emma. So a deal was done. Cnut '*had her fetched*' from Normandy to which she had fled in 1017.

Emma played an active role in the signing of royal grants and charters and she took steps to make sure that 'Ramesleagh'/Rameslie was granted to the Norman abbey of Fécamp, a favourite abbey of the Norman court. Emma signed the grants that Cnut made to the abbey in 1017 by which Fécamp was given the estate together with its harbour, 'as promised by Ælthelred'. Some of present day Hastings (including what is now the 'old' town and the West Hill) was included in the grant of Rameslie to Fécamp which also included Rye and Old Winchelsea and covered virtually all of the hundred of Guestling.

In or just after 1028 a further charter or charters confirmed by Harthacnut and also signed by Emma added to Fécamp the manor of Brede (which extended the estate of Rameslie into the eastern part of the hundred of Gostrow) plus the revenue from two thirds of the tithes of Winchelsea. Overall, although there is one charter it appears to contain two documents which refer to three⁵. Haskins says that the cartulary of Fécamp 'is not free from forgeries'. But we can presume that Brede, with its dual royal and abbatial connections and as a centre of a hundred, would have had an early church which was replaced by the present St George's Church whose 'building of a new church' was funded by Fécamp.

During repeated warfare with France later in the Middle Ages, Fécamp's strategic coastal holdings were regularly taken over by the Crown. Rye and Winchelsea were eventually removed from Fécamp's possession in 1247 by King Henry III, being exchanged for inland manors, and finally in 1416 the manor of Brede was granted by King Henry V to the community of Bridgettine nuns of Syon Abbey, which retained the lands until the abbey's dissolution in 1539.

Syon managed Brede from afar, and leased much land to members of the Oxenbridge family. At the dissolution of Syon Sir Anthony Browne, who had taken over Battle Abbey and all its lands in 1538 also received the neighbouring lands at Brede which had been held by Syon. The Brede manor also included considerable rentals in Hastings.

Austen⁶ records that an early owner of a house on the site of Brede Place was Robert atte Forde (taxed at 12s in the Lay-subsidy roll of 1297, and taxed again in 1327). The site is to be found on the side of a hill about 1 ½ miles from Brede village overlooking the river Brede. This used to be called Ford Place (as it stood near a place where the river Brede could be forded at that time).

Thomas atte Ford started to build a stone house in the late 14th century to replace a pre-existing wooden house and this was probably continued after the marriage of Margery atte Ford to John Oxenbridge during the reign of Richard II, then by Robert Oxenbridge and later members of the Oxenbridge family, with extensions in brick in the 16th century. The house remained with the Oxenbridges for 225 years or so until the middle of the 17th century, when a later Sir Robert disposed of all Brede property.

The house included a chapel with a priest's room above, and as the Oxenbridges remained catholic after the Reformation it must have continued for private services. Until the reformation the family had occupied positions close to the throne: Sir Goddard Oxenbridge

(whom the locals believed ate naughty children) was a courtier to Henry VII, dying in 1531, and his brother was John a canon of St George's, Windsor. Appropriately, Sir Robert was an MP for Sussex during the reign of the catholic Mary I. Another Oxenbridge, William, was MP for Rye in 1542 and later mayor of Winchelsea. Like so many others they were ironmasters, owning Brede furnace. And like all landed gentry they performed a multitude of roles about the county.

A later Sir Robert Oxenbridge sold all his property in Brede in 1619. The largest portion was purchased by John Porter, then by Stephen Frewen c.1676. The smaller part including Forde/Brede Place was bought by Sir Thomas Dyke and on his death in 1712 his family sold the estate to Sir Edward Frewen of Brickwall at Northiam, where his family had lived since at least 1666. He and his successors appear to have had little need of Forde/Brede and the house was used as a farmhouse then lodgings for labourers and fell into some disrepair until the early 19th century. However it continued in the possession of the Frewens for more than



two centuries as a junior house to Brickwall, being occupied later by various members of the Frewen family, although in 1872 it was let on a long lease to Benjamin Marriott of London, who proceeded on a restoration, but unfortunately soon died although his widow continued in residence for five or six years.

Tomb of Sir Goddard Oxenbridge in St George's Church, Brede. *Note: d.1531 but date on tomb 1537*



Brede Place (ESRO)

The Frewens never quite reached the peak of society, never being ennobled, but they were close to it. They were certainly wealthy, at least until late in the nineteenth century, and parts of their clan had lands in the south-west, the east Midlands and Ireland. In fact the last book by their best-known modern scion, Moreton Frewen, was titled *Melton Mowbray and other memories* (1924), referring back to the east Midlands. Unlike some other Sussex families they were slow to produce MPs, providing only three, well-spaced out through the centuries.

In 1898 Colonel Edward Frewen sold Brede to his brother Moreton (1853-1924), a man of great ability and connections but of spectacular financial failure, who was sometimes known as Mortal Ruin. Brede had been empty for over a hundred years and was falling to pieces, but Moreton's wife Clara saw the possibilities. The deeds of property were put in Clara's name to forestall creditors. The house was in a very bad way, not having been occupied for some time, and a priority of Clara was to bring it up to a habitable standard. This took some time and meanwhile she leased the house for a while to the American author Stephen Crane who entertained many from the literary world. When the latest restoration was complete at the start of the 20th century the owners began to reside there permanently.

Moreton's wife Clara, whom he met in New York, was the sister of Jennie Jerome who had married Lord Randolph Churchill and so he became the uncle of Winston Churchill. He was soon commissioned by the young Churchill to edit one of books, which he appears to have done very badly.



Moreton's story is one of constant over-investment and failure – when he died in 1924 he left less than £50 – but of great hospitality and a lasting marriage even though he appears to have been a serial adulterer. Moreton started out well enough in the conventional way – Cambridge and the Inner Temple – but he could never keep still. A ranching venture in the western USA brought in money for a time but then failed; when he was left a house in Ireland with a good income he invested heavily again and lost again. The Irish house was burned down in 1912, presumably by more extreme nationalists than he was.

Clarita (Clara) Frewen, née Jerome

From this account he sounds very much like a failure. In fact Frewen was a most intelligent, analytical and positive man, with his own very independent views. He wrote well and copiously. His obituary in *The Times* declared:

There was no more interesting raconteur, and with Mr [Maynard] Keynes he must be accounted one of those Cambridge economists who write as brilliantly as novelists.ⁱ

According to Kipling, he lived

in every sense, except what is called common sense, very richly and wisely to his own extreme content, and if he had ever reached the golden crock of his dreams, he would have perished.

Frewen knew most of the literati of his age, including Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling and H G Wells, and as noted above the American Stephen Crane author of '*The Red Badge of Courage*', unfortunately dying of tuberculosis, lived briefly at Brede Place. Moreton also moved in circles near, if not actually close to, the throne. He was at almost every wedding, funeral, memorial service or ceremony. In 1913 he was part of the 'peace delegation' sent to the USA to celebrate the century of peace following the 1812-14 war between the two countries.



His first letter to *The Times* was in 1884, when he was heavily involved with attempts to open the British market to beef imports from the USA. The last was not long before he died. They were on a range of subjects – not only beef imports but salmon hatcheries, relations with the USA, the currency of India and the constitution of the UK (for which he championed a federal arrangement of five states – presumably England, Scotland, Wales and two parts of Ireland). In December 1910, to general surprise, he was elected unopposed as MP for North East Cork, standing as an Independent Nationalist.

Moreton Frewen

At that time there were two Irish nationalist parties in the Commons – the majority, led by William Redmond, and the independents, led by William O'Brien. Redmond wanted a fully united Ireland; the latter favoured concessions to the North, to be included in an Ireland that would give powers to its devolved provinces.

Frewen did not last long in the Commons. As soon as he was elected he was saying that he wanted to resign and make way for Tim Healy (who later became Governor-General of the Irish Free State) but the moment did not come until July 1911. An argumentative parliamentarian, he tended to disagree with any party line, and wanted to oppose the Bill then being debated on the future of the House of Lords. Instead of limiting its powers, he

wanted it replaced altogether by his federal body; but he was almost alone in this view, certainly among his immediate colleagues. (It is a view that still has some traction, but not noticeably among members of Parliament.) He would have been pleased that Healy was indeed elected in his place, unopposed.

Earlier in the century he had been a leading light in the Tariff Reform League in the debates on the future of free trade that led to the Conservative Party splitting and the great Liberal victory in the general election of 1906, by way of writing articles and touring the country making speeches.

Frewen had three children. The eldest, Hugh, joined the army and served in the First World War. Marrying in Rome in 1914, he deserted his wife, who finally obtained a divorce and custody of their two children; he then remarried and went to Australia, where he spent the rest of his life, dying in 1957. The second was Oswald, who joined the Royal Navy but after 1918 trained as a barrister and practised for a long time; he died in 1958. The third was the best-known – Clare, who under her married name of Sheridan became a very well-known sculptor and wrote an autobiography (*Naked Truth*, 1927) which is said to vividly portray life at Brede Place.

A modern historical anecdote^{7,8} concerns ‘The Sheephouse’ as in 1929 Oswald Frewen converted an ancient sheep barn on 100 acres adjacent to Brede Place into a timber-framed home. Oswald was a friend of Herbert Leigh Holman, Vivien Leigh's husband, and in 1936 Oswald accompanied Vivien to Capri where they met up with Olivier and his then wife, Jill Esmond. Laurence Olivier's subsequent love affair with Vivien Leigh was one of the most notorious scandals of its day. Olivier has been said to have actually proposed to Vivien at ‘The Sheephouse’. This private property today advertises itself as a venue for film making, but also has a small converted barn rented out for short stays.

When Moreton died in 1924⁹ Brede Place was passed to his second son Oswald, who in turn sold it to his nephew Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Clare Sheridan's son, in August 1936. Richard sadly died a few months later in December 1936 from peritonitis whilst on a trip to Algeria. Moreton's long suffering wife Clara had lived until January 1935 and is buried at Northiam. On Richard Sheridan's death the house was sold out of the family. The house had been owned by the Frewen family since 1712.

A devastating fire in 1979 caused extensive damage and only the outer walls and chapel and chapel extension survived. The fire revealed that the house stonework was a casing over original timber framing. An imaginative restoration took place 1979 – 83. One of the architects who worked on the restoration stated:

The main house was burnt out and the roof destroyed although outside it is much the same. This was replaced with a modern structure to the original shape and a ‘great hall’ formed more like its early use, [which had been] later floored over. New larger windows were inserted on west and east sides and a new high level gable window facing south, the stone walls were lined inside. Fortunately the chapel was virtually untouched...

Now reconstructed and extended it remains in private hands but not those of the Frewen family.



Brede Place in 2007

**George Kiloh and Keith Foord
November 2017 © BDHS**

See also Collectanea articles: 'Clare Sheridan' (in preparation at time of writing) and 'Eastern Sussex from 900' in Section A.

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