

MESSRS. BEST, BREWERS OF CHATHAM

By ROSEMARY A. KEEN, B.A.

IN these days when large firms of brewers with country-wide businesses are common it is interesting to contrast with them the beginnings of the small family firms now engulfed by them. The papers of one such family, the Best MSS.,¹ have been deposited in the Kent Archives Office. The Best brewery grew and flourished in the eighteenth century and was eventually taken over in 1851 by Winch and Winch, who later, as Style and Winch, were themselves merged with Courage and Barclay.

The Best family were established in Chatham from at least the mid-seventeenth century. Among the papers are the probate inventories of Thomas Best, who died in 1666, and his wife Dorothy Lott. Both owned brewing implements and probably they were the parents of the Thomas Best whose marriage to the daughter of John Mawdistley, a rich man, founded the family fortunes. It was this Thomas who "converted some small tenements, part of Dame Agrippina Bingley's house [in Chatham High Street] into a brewhouse and set up the business of a brewer in a small way". He married Elizabeth Thurston (*née* Mawdistley) whose father provided the money for rebuilding and expanding the premises, replacing the small tenements by a capital mansion house of brick ornamented with stone.

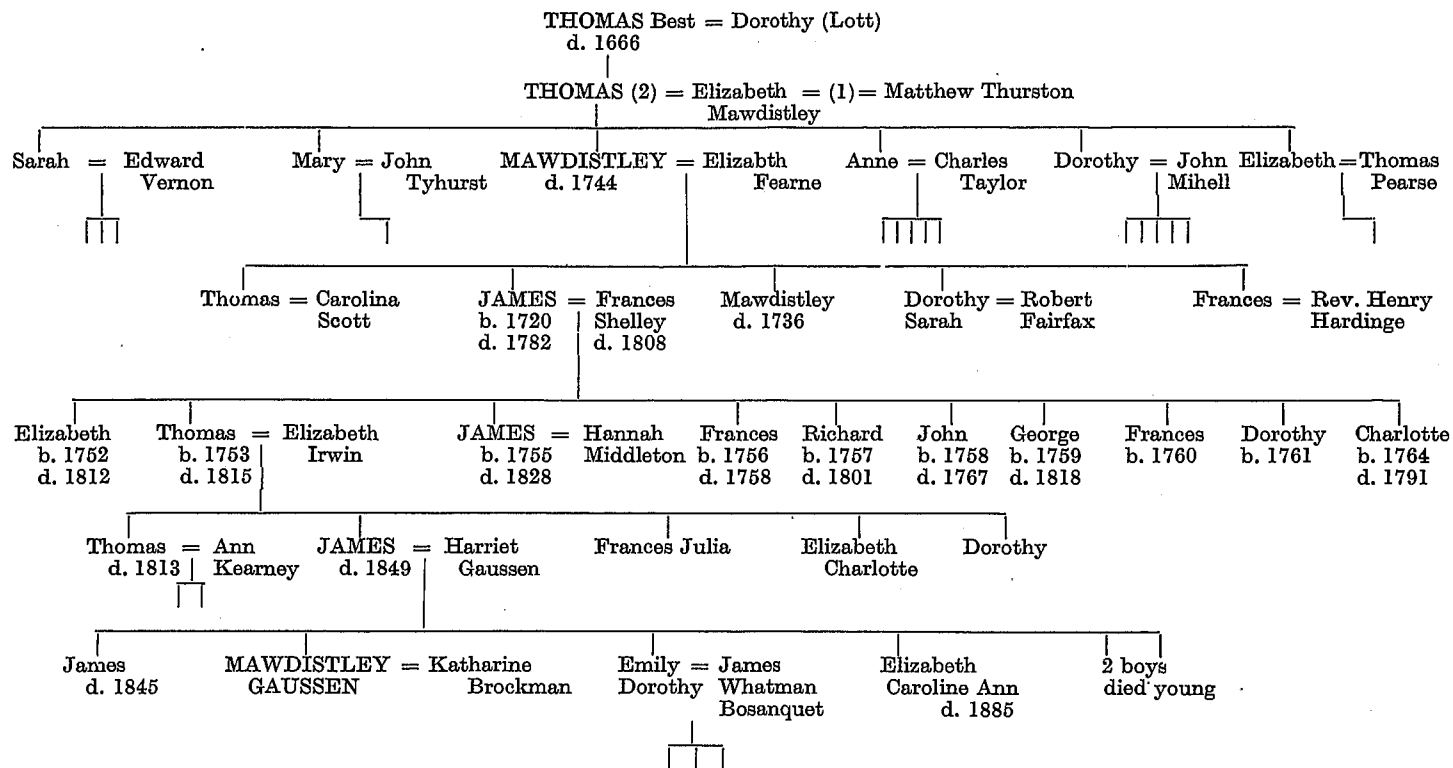
Thomas had one son, Mawdistley, who inherited the business, and five daughters, one of whom, Sarah, married Edward Vernon, the hero of Porto Bello and the Cartagena campaign. Mawdistley was head of the firm for only a few years for he died in 1744 leaving James, his younger son, to carry on.

It was during the eighteenth century, under the rule first of James Best and later his son James that the firm prospered most. James senior, second son of Mawdistley, was born in 1720. He had two sisters, Dorothy Sarah, and Frances, and two brothers, the elder of whom, Thomas, married Carolina Scott and lived at Chilston, the younger, Mawdistley, died as a boy. James must have been very fond of his young brother for there are some handwriting exercises and other papers, carefully kept, on which, in later life, James wrote "my dear brother Mawdistley wrote this".

Very little survives to tell how James passed his childhood. One might guess that business affairs were in his blood, for a small account book methodically kept, gives details of how he spent his pocket-

¹ K.A.O. Ref. U480.

THE BEST FAMILY OF BOXLEY AND CHATHAM



NOTE.—Some details omitted. Names in capitals show descent of business.

money from Whitsuntide to Chatham fair in 1728. The entries are almost entirely for pennyworths of cherries, walnuts, or other eatables, according to the season, though once he bought an inkhorn and in September lavished twopence on some whipcord.

It is possible that he went to school in Chatham. Certainly letters from his school friends never come from far afield. One from George Peters in 1739, when presumably James had started work in the brewery, reminds him of how one of their friends, Lee, had "broke one of the beacons jumping over the furzes" while they were surveying at Bromley. He adds a sketch of himself and James laughing at Lee's misfortune.

James was blessed with a very happy marriage. As a young man he had fallen in love with a Miss Bartholomew, "my dearest Molly." Their engagement was apparently announced but the marriage was broken off. Judging by the copies of his letters which he kept it is probable that the lady's dowry was not sufficient. However, James' heart was not broken, for a few years later, in 1751, he married Frances, the daughter of John Shelley. This happy event came at the end of an exciting and costly year for him. He notes at the end of his accounts for 1751/2, "the occasion of my expenses being so high is this—part of the year I was sheriff, the other part I was married."

His accounts, indeed, reveal much not only about his personal taste and his family, but the effect which the growth of the business had on him. He was a man inclined to extravagance. Shortly before his marriage he had new-furnished his house at Chatham, in a style intended to be lavish. Thomas Gardner sent "an account what it will cost you furnishing your house in the most fashionable and Genteelst Tast as can be (Sparing no Cost which was your Orders to me) . . . [I] have included Plate China and all other things you may want". The estimated cost for furnishing the fifteen rooms was £1,174 5s., the best parlour alone being over £200. Everything was of the latest fashion, even to the "two curious and carved flatt candlesticks with snake handles" costing £8 10s. 9d. The wallpaper was very lovely. There was a fine yellow embossed damask with a gilt leather border, a printed sprig paper in a chain pattern, a fine crimson mohair embossed, and a fine blue on white Dutch tile paper. "I need not tell you," Gardner wrote, "Paper hangings are greatly in Taste and if you fix them a great Deal of money will be saved." James agreed with him. "The house may be furnished in a genteel Taste for half the sum," he continued, and James decided to economize, at least a little. He used some of his own furniture, had eight instead of ten "walnuttree large arms french chairs richly carved with Eagle claws stuffed up covered brass nailed backs," and ordered fine crimson worsted damask instead of Genoa for the sets of window curtains for

the dining room. This reduced the cost to £1,084 4s. and with this he was content.

A bundle of James' annual statements of accounts survive for the period 1748-1779. They reflect his gradual change of taste and standard of living as his business increasingly flourished. In 1751 his extraordinary expenses included not only money spent at the Assizes and on a present for his Chaplain during his term as sheriff, but also £80 on a new coach, £48 17s. for Mr. Whitby the cabinetmaker and £119 6s. 9d. spent in London, perhaps on his honeymoon. Then he notes "£1,000 for jewels not reckoned". Gone are his bachelor days when he would spend £4 14s. 6d. on a pair of buckles or £3 4s. 6d. for the freight of his waistcoats. On 11th June comes the first entrance for Frances. "Paid my dear wife £5. 5s.", though ever afterwards she was always "my dear Fanny". The following year expenses were again much larger as he furnished Boxley house. Fanny had a satin gown and other new clothes, amounting to over eighty pounds worth, and then there was the christening of his first child. It was in this year, too, that he started to pay for the schooling of six poor boys. With an increasing family there was no real chance for economy and from 1750 James' annual expenses increased fairly steadily and regularly, do what he could to prevent it. There was a trip to France in 1754 and new stabling in 1755. The number of servants increased and as the children grew older there were payments for their education. The boys graduated from Chatham to Eton and were also sent to France. His son James, who wanted a career in the army, needed £400 for his commission in 1776. James senior notes this as "an extraordinary charge" but despite equal expenses in later years he never mentions any further special expenses. Since his expenditure had risen from £1,500 to £2,600 per annum he had, perhaps, given up hope of economy.

James had almost certainly been bred up to the business, and when his father Mawdistley died in 1744 leaving the young man to carry on the firm alone he took up the task with relish and determination. During his headship profits from the firm almost doubled, his landed estates both private and business vastly increased and he was able to note with satisfaction that from 1765 to 1772 he paid more duty than all the other brewers put together.

James' gift lay partly in his willingness and eagerness to learn, and to use the most up-to-date methods. He was interested in every detail of the business and wrote for advice to people in many parts of the country. One of his most-valued correspondents was Mr. Combrune, a London porter brewer, who answered James' questions concerning his method of brewing "as I must suppose them to have been dictated by a spirit of curiosity, perhaps temptation, rather than

want". James also had from him many notes and examples of how to keep his accounts, his method of striking a balance at Christmas and Midsummer, and notes on the brewing of his "gyles"¹ (giving the days of brewing, the quantity of malt used, the details of wort and hops, etc.). He even sent printed examples of his delivery notices, his vatts and butts' accounts and his method of reckonong his rough balance.

Mr. Combrune was not the only person whom James sought out. He prepared "six questions to ask a London porter brewer" and had them answered by J. Brest in 1772 and Isaac Jackson the following year. He wrote to men at Cambridge and Lowestoft, as well as near neighbours such as Mr. Baker, brewer at Rochester, who was a cooper at London. The last sent useful recipes on how to cure sour, ropy, or musty beer, to colour beer, cider or wine, to make mild beer stale, and to fine red port. James' method of approach is perhaps best illustrated by his dealings with Mrs. Ann Whitenhall of Faversham "who was a Yorkshire Woman and was used to brewing a great deal there, lived in many Gentlemen's familys and had always great Success. She brewed a great deal of good Beer in her small way, at her house at Faversham, where I first tasted it, and saw her; and after some Conversation upon brewing, and finding her quite expert in it: I got her to come over to Boxley and teach me her Method. My Lord Sonds and all the Gentlemen of the Neighbourhood used to stop, and drink some of her Beer; which She kept by her of all ages; It used to be extreemly fine and clear of the colour of a wheat straw, and well flavoured; it never used to be stale nor Stummy² but always drank mild and creamed".

One of James' most important contacts was with a Mr. Henry Goodwin at Deptford. James brought away from Mr. Goodwin two small exercise books crammed with notes of "an account of several Brewings and the Methods made use of, by Henry Goodwin of Deptford Esq., given me by himself and with whom I went & stayed a week & saw his manner & Method of Brewing, and went to the Copper Side with Mr. Pycraft his Brewer, and saw the whole Process and made several Brewings of Porter myself, which turned out very well and was much approved of". This was in 1764 and it is noteworthy that Mr. Goodwin used a thermometer. The scientific brewing of beer was then in its infancy and the use of a thermometer was very up to date. Evidently it was some years before James made up his mind concerning its qualities as it was not until 1773 that two thermometers were sent from London, one for taking the liquors, the other for cleansing.

I have said that James was interested in all aspects of the business.

¹ gyle; the quantity brewed at one time: a brewing. *O.E.D.*

² Cf. "stum", wine that has never fermented, *Blount* (see Halliwell, *Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words*).

His bundles of brewery notes include papers concerning casks. The choice of casks, both for the type of wood used and the size, was most important. "Mr. Jackson of Norwich" noted James "has got three more large casks made & finds them very useful—his observation upon them is to avoid filling them in very sharp weather & if compelled to it then start with more stomach—to have the Staves well seasoned or soiled before they are made, to take care the Piers are very stout to support them . . . never draw off in cold or frosty air." One opinion was not enough. Mr. Stewart considered "great casks are very useful for those who export beer and likewise for all returned Beers, always have the largest end of your cask uppermost like a churn".

There is also amongst these papers a small bundle of recipes for killing rats, a perennial nuisance in a place where so much grain was kept. These had been collected by James from many places. There is a printed advertisement of 1774, by Mrs. Mary Smith of 77 Dean Street, Soho, for "Swain's paste for rats and mice to be had of Mr. Davis bookseller, Sackville Street, Piccadilly". In 1764 Hudson the waterman provided a recipe which he had from the ratcatcher of Sheerness yard. Another recipe was that of S. Read, butler to the Duchess of St. Albans.

The business expanded considerably throughout these years. In 1751 Mrs. Waites brewhouse was purchased by James Best. Three years later he went into partnership with Samuel Waring, who was one of the senior clerks in the office. This was intended to last for twenty-one years but was dissolved in 1763 since Waring felt himself too old to be able to continue to share the responsibility. From that time to his death James continued alone. He bought Colonel Frederick's trade in 1767, apparently the last time that an actual merger occurred until Best himself sold to Winch in 1891.

In 1782 James died. He left a thriving business, a prosperous and extensive landed estate both at Chatham and Boxley, and a large and flourishing family. One of his sons, Richard, was to inherit the firm, as he thought. The future, however, did not turn out to be as bright as might have been expected.

James, Richard and George inherited the business jointly on their father's death, though George withdrew from it in 1795. Richard and James continued in partnership, though James probably had little hand in it as he was an Army officer and "wanted nothing to do with it". The early partnership was not very successful. In 1784 the brothers commissioned the building of a brig *Concord*. She was to be used presumably to increase their overseas commerce. The surviving bills and correspondence give every detail of her building and fitting out as well as the costs of meals, wages and mooring expenses. With her gilded Medusa figurehead with its green snakes

and blue draperies, the festoons of barley, leaves and flowers for the stern and badges, and the "blue ensign with the brewers arms painted on it both sides" she must have been a fine looking ship. The captain, Mr. Dove, took the *Concord* to Madeira and Antigua, but the venture was not a success. The beer went stale in the hot climate, Captain Dove was in debt to an Irishman for the ship's stores and landed up in prison, and in 1786 the ship was sold. Despite this disaster the brothers apparently made no effort to recoup their losses. For many years they drew far more than their allowances from the business with dire results.

In January, 1801, the blow fell. William and Edward Twopenny, the family solicitors, wrote a respectful but stern letter to the heads of the firm. They had had meetings with the brothers both together and individually and it had been suggested that Messrs. Twopenny should take over the business "from such investigation and a consideration of your affairs in general" they continued "we conceive the difficulties under which you now labour have in a great measure arisen from the various means that have been continually adopted by you all of withdrawing from the Estates and the trade divers sums of Money and a variety of articles purchased in the trade to apply to your respective uses instead of defraying the charge of them out of your own pockets. Some of these that particularly strike us are as follows vizt—

Cash taken over and above the annual allowances you were entitled to under your father's will.

Cash drawn from the Landed Estate Account as net produce of it when a great if not the major part of the Expences of buildings etc. in it were borne by the trade.

Cash drawn from the farm account under the idea of profit when in fact the major part of the Expence of it was born by the trade and charged in that account.

Articles consumed in your respective families & in the keep of carriages, pleasure Horses, Hounds & in various ways such as Beer, Coals, Hay, Corn, Rent, Taxes, etc. provided by & at the charge of the trade.

And sums expended in various articles of fancy about your respective Dwellinghouses.

What may be the amount of Cash & its value thus consumed in the period of now about 18 or 19 years we cannot precisely say but from the best judgment we can form it appears to us alarmingly large & sufficient to have not only prevented your present difficulties but to have enabled you advantageously to carry on your trade & your affairs and to have placed them and you at this time in a very commanding situation of trade".

The suggested solution was for the family to confine itself to its

allowances. In addition " a present Sum of money is essentially necessary to be thrown into the trade We lament the necessity of using language so strong as this may appear to be but the importance of the subject & the friendship and attachment we have for you and various branches of your family & the sincere & earnest zeal which we feel for you for them & for your concerns require us to act the part of true friends in thus stating to you the result of our investigation and your real situation in their true light and without reserve".

The immediate result of this sharp reproof was that Messrs. Twopenny took over the business and until 1807 ran it in trust for the brothers. It is possible that some gaps in the series of records are caused by this and that some books were retained in the solicitor's office after the business was returned to James.¹ Certainly many surviving series start in 1807, and the entire method of book-keeping becomes more careful and detailed after that date.

Very little information survives to give insight into James junior's career as a brewer although there is an amusing note by him in the front of the stock account book for 1818-23. For some years he had been unable to balance his stock and eventually one of his men was caught in the act of stealing beer, by tapping the casks with an elder-tube which he nicknamed a "pony". He confessed that it was a regular practice with the men and that to avoid detection they would afterwards fill the barrels again by mixing stale beer with the good. James decided that since all the men had taken part in the fraud they should all be equally punished. He therefore reduced their beer allowance to one pot a day and cut their wages by two shillings a week.

James died in 1828 when the business passed to his only surviving nephew James (the son of his brother Thomas), who was later better known as Colonel Best. There is an interesting document in the collection dating from the 1840's concerning the desire of Colonel Best's tenants to sell London porter. In this Colonel Best is described as "one of the most Considerable Land Proprietors in the County . . . and the owner of a large Brewery Establishment at Chatham, which has no Competitor in the County". It is ironical in view of recent developments that he was advised to open negotiations with Messrs. Barclay!

After the death of Colonel Best in 1849, despite the firm's prosperity, it was decided to lease the business to Messrs. Winch and, although the actual sale did not occur till 1891, the family relinquished personal interest in the firm from 1851. The series of business records come to an end, and even the family and estate papers dwindle in bulk and variety. Indeed, it might be said that as the Best brewery had come

¹ Richard died in 1801. James was not left alone in charge of the business till 25th March, 1809.

to the height of its fortunes with the first James as its head so it came to an end on the death of the third James.

NOTE ON BUSINESS RECORDS

The earliest surviving business papers date from the time when James was head of the firm. Probably the first series to be kept were the ledgers, grand cash accounts, and the corresponding brewhouse vouchers.

The ledgers include accounts for all aspects of business, besides the customers' accounts and tradesmen's bills. There are details of hops, with the names of the suppliers, and accounts for isinglass, malt and coals needed for the actual brewing. Freight expenses and excise dues are included, as well as oats and beans for the horses. There are also all kinds of taxes, due not only for the brewery site but also for the inns and other premises acquired as the business grew in size, church and poor cess, land tax, gaol rate (from 1818) and highways and lamps tax.

The earliest ledger also gives many more details for items, which are either no longer mentioned in the later ledgers, or, like yeast and yeast stores, become a separate series on their own. Some of these items may be included because of rebuilding or expansion of the premises, for there are details of bricks, lime, timber and lathes, sand, stone and tiles.

The earliest surviving cash account, like the ledger, is not the first of the series, and there are some gaps in the series during the eighteenth century. Some of these can be filled by recourse to James's private accounts, where business and personal items are intermingled with a note "brewing," beside the business entries.

The series of order books was begun in 1811 and runs complete to 1851. The entries are almost entirely for beer, etc., though some orders for hay are included. After 1843 the entries are arranged in columns, giving customers' names, quantity of beer or amber, date of delivery and the name of the carrier.

The petty cash accounts were made up weekly. The entries are mainly for wages, extra labour, letters and parcels, turnpike dues and payments for the starting of beer at $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per barrel. There are occasional entries for the watchman, who was paid one shilling per night to watch the beer during the brewing of a guile. Some pierage dues are also included, and amongst the vouchers are rent receipts, and bills for stationery, iron work and the teaching of six poor boys. This last had been begun by James senior privately. Many entries are replaced in later years by separate accounts which were begun as the business grew. Extras accounts begin in 1823 and postage and letter

accounts in 1827. Winch's allowances, 1d. per barrel, survive from 1829. No explanation is given for this allowance but probably he had a share in the firm. It is possible that he was a relation of the firm who eventually took over the business. There is also a book labelled "pots of beer," an account of the men's beer allowance, including bread and cheese for the men at Boxley, when extra workmen went over at harvest and other busy times.

Two of the most interesting volumes give details of the goods bought for the brewery. In one, 1801-45, the information is set out in columns, giving the name of the person or firm from whom the goods were purchased, the method of delivery (generally by wagon, sometimes by hoy or more rarely by barge) and the article purchased. Naturally this was usually hops and malt, but there were also butts and coals, isinglass seed, fodder, straw, cinquefoil and saintfoin. In the other volume, 1807-51, the entries are chronological and partly duplicate the entries in the first volume except that sometimes the names of the hoyes and their owners are given. In this book purchase of equipment was entered, strakes for the wagons, tire nails, butt taps, barrel bungs, hose and old leather pipe. Some complaints are noted, though usually complaints were added in the order books. Much equipment was brought from London and a new back, needed in 1817, was ordered from a firm in Broseley, Shropshire. Agreements for employing men were also included, either to work in the brewery itself or as odd men at Boxley or Chatham.

Finally in the main series are the stock and general rest accounts. These, though interesting, contain nothing unusual. The general rest give customers' names with the number and value of barrels in their possession and a brief summary of the debts due to the firm and owing to the tradesmen and excise, with the amount of stock and utensils in trade. The stock accounts were made up weekly. The number of the storehouses is given till 1818, though only a few appear to be used. There is an interesting development in the type of drink brewed. From 1807 beer and amber were the only drinks until 1818 when ale was introduced. This was dropped again in 1838 and in 1849 porter and stout were introduced and the stock of beer and amber was gradually used up.

The minor series of accounts include items which would only be found in a brewery business. There are malt accounts, giving the names of the maltsters and the number of the lofts in which the malt was stored, a note of the date when the malt and hops were used in the brewing and the quantity taken. Accounts for the finings were entered in the petty cash. They were sold to inn-keepers and others at one shilling a pailful. The books list the names of the men with the number of pailfuls supplied daily. One volume of length accounts,

giving details of the guiles, survives for 1807-14. Lastly there are the grains accounts which give the date of brewing, the quality (whether porter or amber, etc.), the quantity, amount paid and, until 1814, Messrs. Best's share. After 1829 only the names of the purchasers with the dates and the amount paid are given. A register of certificates for the delivery of beer, etc., was kept from at least 1827. These give details of the delivery rounds and divisions, the number of casks and quantity of beer and the officers or traders signatures. The system was discontinued early in 1830.

NOTE ON BEST ESTATES

The Best estates centred on Chatham and Boxley though for many years Chatham was more important because of the business interests and Boxley was used as a country residence and useful source for supplies of produce for the business.

Thomas Best had lived in his capital mansion house next door to his business. In 1735 he obtained a mortgage on Rome House which he settled on his son-in-law, John Mihell. His son, Mawdistley, had plans for building a new house. In fact he went so far as to write to his step-sister, Elizabeth Thurston, offering her the chests and pictures from his home that presumably would not fit the new house. His death in 1744 prevented his seeing the fruition of his scheme, but his plans were inherited by James senior who in 1750 commissioned Thomas Gardner to furnish the house, which, known as Chatham House, was finally completed in 1758, and which remained the family home until 1820 when it was burnt down. In 1774 James was able to pay off the mortgage on Rome House but did not make it his home until 1820. It was at this time, too, that the acquisition of business premises was at its height. There is an extensive series of rentals and rent books for the estates leased from or by James Best and the parishes covered include Frindsbury, Gillingham, High Halstow, and Rochester.

The Boxley estate developed earlier though not so swiftly as the estate at Chatham. Mawdistley bought Park House in 1720 and made it his home. There is some confusion over the exact site of the house. Old Park House which was occupied by Samuel Athawes and owned by John and later Pawlet St. John was probably somewhere near the present Park House farm. The house in which Mawdistley lived was south of the modern Park House and before the highway diversion of 1884 fronted the road. The last Park House, which has only recently been pulled down, was originally called Boxley Lodge and was purchased by Mawdistley Gaussen Best from George Rashleigh in 1838.