

TOWN CLERK OF SANDWICH, 1768-1785

By COLIN MATSON

JOHN MATSON (1746-1805) was the eldest son of Charles and Judith Matson of Wingham Court, Wingham. His earliest known paternal ancestor was James Matson (c. 1550-1593) of Sibertswold (otherwise Shepherdswell), an Officer in the Queen's Service, who married Alice, considered to have been the eldest daughter of Henry Philpot (1544-1603) of Folkestone. His grandfather was John Matson (1671-1731), Yeoman Farmer and landowner of Sibertswold, who had married, as his second wife, Anne the youngest daughter of Robert Boys of the Home Farm at Betzhanger and the early widow of her cousin Thomas Boys, Rector of that parish. His father was the second son of these two ; and he succeeded to the farm at Wingham Court, to which his parents had retired in about 1723. Charles Matson had married Judith, elder daughter and co-heir of John Nelson, Jurat and Mayor (1737) of Sandwich. It will be appreciated that the subject of this article and his ancestors on both sides were very thoroughly Men of Kent.

Our future Town Clerk received his early education at The King's School, Canterbury, where he was a King's Scholar during the years 1757-1761. On the 15th January, 1762, John Matson was articled to Samuel Simmons, attorney and Town Clerk of Sandwich. His career had started. The articles were for seven years : but there were to be major interruptions to this term of service. After holding the appointment of Town Clerk for eight years. Simmons died in office during the year 1766. His immediate successor was Henry Wise (1707-1769), haberdasher of Sandwich and a jurat who had been Mayor in 1759. His appointment seems curious. At that time Wise was fifty-nine years of age ; and it is considered that his tenure as Town Clerk was intended to be of a stop-gap nature. John Matson was then barely twenty years old and not much more than half way through his articles of clerkship ; and, although it is suggested that he was already under consideration as a future Town Clerk, the time was not yet ripe for his appointment to that office. On the 12th February, 1767, John Matson was admitted on the Roll of Attorneys ; and it would appear that the outstanding two years of his articles were waived on account of representations creditable to him. He had then come of age ; and it is considered that for a while he worked at the Guildhall, nominally under the Town Clerk, but actually as his right-hand man.

PLATE I



At the Assembly Meeting of the Sandwich Corporation held on the 23rd April, 1768, " Henry Wise prayed for, and was granted, permission to surrender and yield up his place of office of Common Clerk. At the same time John Matson was by an Unanimous Assent chosen Town Clerk of this Corporation . . . And to have the accustomed Salery of Ten pounds per annum And all Fees, Profits, and Commodities incident thereunto ". Our youthful attorney was then but twenty-two years of age ; and he was to hold the responsible appointment throughout the following seventeen years. During this period John Matson was actively engaged in the corporate life of the Cinque Port ; and, in addition, there is evidence of his private practice. It seems clear that, at an early age, he cultivated the qualities of industry, ability, integrity, and conciliation, which were to mark his career throughout. In 1770, at the age of twenty-four years, John Matson was appointed to the responsible post of King's Bailiff of Sandwich by Land and by Sea. This was an office of some distinction, as witness the names of some previous holders of it—Sir Edward Ryungeley in 1514—Richard Boteler in 1534 and 1540—Sir Thomas Cheney in 1554—and John Phillipott in 1623. On 19th February, 1768, John Matson had been made a Freeman upon payment of £20 to the Land Treasurer : in 1772 he was made a Common Council Man : in the next year he was elected a jurat ; and in 1777 we read of his election as Mayor of the Borough Town. The list of jurats at the particular Assembly Meeting includes such interesting names as Dr. William Boys, Admiral Robert Keeler, Captain John Harvey, and Collector of the Customs Benjamin Sayer. Among the names of the Common Councillors present these are noted—John Nelson, a maternal relation of the newly-elected Mayor—John Matson, a first cousin—and Henry Matson a younger brother. In 1779, and again in 1780, our much occupied and still youthful Town Clerk acted as Deputy Mayor. All the available evidence points to an able and energetic official, and a responsible and public-spirited burgess. In the Mayor's Parlour at the Guildhall in Sandwich hangs a painting of John Matson, with an inscription referring incorrectly to his years as Town Clerk and correctly to the year of his mayoralty. This portrait hangs in good company, the others present being those of Captain John Harvey, Dr. William Boys, and Richard Emerson.

On the 2nd April, 1785, John Matson resigned his appointments as Town Clerk and Jurat for the reasons about to be stated ; and thus, at thirty-nine years of age, ended what we may properly consider as the first half of his career. The second half was marked by greater responsibility and distinction on a higher level : but it seems fitting to remark that the twenty-three years spent in the Cinque Port and Borough Town—were particularly and peculiarly suited as a preparation for his fifteen years of higher appointments in the British West Indies.

Before the scene of our story is changed from Kent to the Caribbean Seas, some mention may be made concerning the private and domestic life of our present interest. In 1768 John Matson was married to Mary Roberta, youngest daughter of Richard (1714-1798) and Elizabeth Harvey of Barfrestone Court. Her father was a member of the well-known East Kent family, the pedigree of which starts with Richard (d. 1472) of Barfield (Barville) in the parish of Tilmanstone. Her eldest brother Richard (1735-1821) was the Vicar—in plurality, it is assumed—of St. Laurence, Thanet, and Eastry; and, two years before the marriage of his sister, he was wedded to Judith Matson, the eldest sister of our John. Her other brothers were Admiral Sir Henry (1737-1810)—the famous Captain John (1740-1794)—Thomas (1742-1823), Customs House Officer of London—and Samuel (1746-1813), Brewer and twice Mayor of Sandwich. John Matson had two brothers and four sisters: of these, Henry (1749-1815) was a haberdasher and four times Mayor of Sandwich—Charles (1750-1828) settled down at Wingham as a Yeoman Farmer—Mary married Admiral Robert Keeler—and the husband of Anne was Benjamin Sayer, Collector of Customs at Sandwich and Deal. The residence of John and Mary Matson is not known: but it seems definite that they were parishioners of St. Peter's in Sandwich. Eleven children were born to them, ten of whom were baptized in the parish church. Some short mention of them will be made in a later paragraph.

The importance of Sandwich as a Cinque Port had begun to decline in about 1500: but, in spite of this, the borough town was still a place of some importance during the years which have been under discussion. In 1785 John Matson was only thirty-nine years old: his performance had been considerable and his career creditable; and it can properly be assumed that his reputation for efficiency and integrity had extended to responsible authorities beyond the circles of his immediate surroundings. And so, it has not been surprising to learn of his appointment at this time as Chief Justice of the Bahamas Islands in the West Indies. In May 1785 he sailed for Nassau in the Island of New Providence, where he took up the duties of his office. The Governor then was the Hon. James Edward Powell, who died in the following year and was succeeded by the Earl of Dunmore. In spite of some sickness involving leave of absence, John Matson continued to hold his post for three years. In April 1788 he returned to England as the bearer of confidential despatches from the Governor to the Secretary of State, with which was included a most creditable report on himself. As a result of this John Matson was soon re-employed; and this time his appointment was of a similar nature as Chief Justice of Dominica, now the most northerly of the Windward Islands in the West Indies.

It is well known that a genealogist must be possessed of unlimited patience and be prepared for disappointments of a major and minor nature. In return for all this he can hope for a steady reward from his research and, perhaps, some outstanding pieces of good fortune. And so it has been in connection with the genealogical labours concerning the subject of this article. As an example of the trials which beset the searcher, it may be mentioned that, during the years which have been under consideration, there were no less than three John Matsons living in Sandwich at one and the same time! After some initial confusion these identical namesakes were sorted out: one was our Town Clerk: another was a Hoyman and Common Councillor; and the third was a Tallow-Chandler and Freeman of the Borough. Numbers one and two were first cousins and are well known to the writer: but the position of the other in the family picture has not yet been revealed to him. Two generous aids can now be quoted. In the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1797 (Vol. 67) there are long verbatim reports of speeches made by John Matson as Acting Governor and Commander-in-chief of Dominica to the Legislative Council, and by the President of that body in reply at a critical period in the island's history. In the same publication for 1805 (Vol. 75) is a two-page obituary "account of the late John Matson Esq", which contains valuable information about him and was obviously written by a man who knew his subject well. Much of what is to follow has been gleaned from these genealogical windfalls.

In May 1789 John Matson arrived at Roseau, the capital town of Dominica, and there took over his duties as Chief Justice of the island. In addition to this main appointment he was soon engaged as Judge of the Vice-Admiralty Court and as President of the Legislative Assembly. He was to hold these responsible positions during the following eleven years. The Chief Justice ranked next after the Governor in the rule and administration of the island; and twice during this period, each time for one whole year, John Matson was to undertake the senior duties and responsibilities—on the first occasion because of the illness and death of the Governor, and on the second during his absence in England on long leave.

Those years were momentous times for the Mother Country and her Colonies on account of the unsettled conditions due to the French Revolution and the subsequent state of war with France during the years 1793-1815. The history of the British West Indies during this period must be considered against this background. It is also helpful to appreciate the fact that the Island of Dominica was originally settled by the French in 1632. Like many other islands, it fell into our hands during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), though it was not definitely ceded to Britain until 1805. During the years now under review

there was a considerable number of French 'adopted' subjects, who owned a quarter of the occupied acreage and nearly half the total number of slaves. Of the 600 or so 'White persons capable of bearing arms', more than half were 'adopted' French. When we further consider the geographical, political, and military fact that the immediate island neighbours of Dominica were the French possessions of Guadeloupe and Martinique, we can begin to appreciate something of the problems which confronted those who were responsible for the government of this island.

"In 1792 John Matson spent a year in England for the recovery of his health, which had again been impaired by an intermittent fever, after which he resumed his station at Roseau with his usual ability and zeal." In July 1796 the Governor fell ill and died; and from that time until September of the following year the Chief Justice was the Acting Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the island. "By his very able and upright administration of the affairs of the Colony, and particularly by the salutary and very striking reforms he introduced in the public expenditure, Mr. Matson obtained the fullest approbation of His Majesty's Ministers at home, as well as the cordial esteem of all ranks of people in the Colony." We are especially fortunate in the material relating to this period as Governor, as the *Gentlemen's Magazine* published full reports of the speeches made at the assumption of office—the speech delivered by "His honour John Matson, Commander-in-Chief of the Island of Dominica, Chancellor, Vice-Admiral, and Ordinary of the same", to the House of Assembly, and those made by the Speaker of that body and by the President of the Council. In May 1799 the Chief Justice was again called upon to act as Governor, and again for a period of just over twelve months. Once more we can read about the public acknowledgement of his zeal and ability, together with a recommendation by the Council that the Acting Governor should receive "a special allowance of £875 for his services rendered to this Colony and Commander-in-Chief."

It is not proposed to make any further comments upon the duties of John Matson's several appointments. Those who may wish to indulge their interest are referred to the particular issues of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. At the end of his second period as Acting Governor of Dominica, "John Matson obtained leave of absence and sailed for Liverpool where he arrived in October 1800, after an absence from England of more than seven years, with a constitution much impaired by so long a residence in the West Indies." In England, in common with others who had suffered from the excesses of a hot climate—and it will be appreciated that living conditions in the West Indies then were very different to those of the present day—he tried the waters of Cheltenham, Bath, and Tunbridge Wells; and then, after a temporary

residence at a house in Denham, Bucks., he settled down for the remainder of his days in Great Quebec Street, Portman Square, London.

At this stage it seems to be fitting to draw attention to another piece of biographical good fortune. At the library of the Genealogical Society in London the writer was directed to a publication entitled *Caribbeana*, which was first produced in 1910 and consists of four large volumes dealing with the history of the British West Indies and paying special attention to leading families and prominent personalities in the various islands. Volume I proved to be a treasure-store for our present interest. It contained an account of a collection of 190 "Matson" Letters, and quoted 60 of them in full. This correspondence extended from 1800 till 1805; and most of it was formerly in the possession of John Matson sen. The letters had been exchanged between himself, his son John jun., and various friends in Dominica and England. "These letters, besides many of a private nature, give much naval, military, and local social news. The Chief Justice had three sons in the West Indies during that period, viz. Richard, then a Post-Captain, R.N.; Henry, then a Commander, R.N., both busy capturing prizes; and John jun., his father's favourite son and chief correspondent, who held the Office of Waiter and Searcher of the Customs, and was Private Secretary to Governor Prevost. The son's handwriting was bad." So wrote the Editor, Dr. Vere Langford Oliver in 1910, when he had the advantage over the present writer in being able to study the whole Correspondence. The introductory paragraphs were followed by a family pedigree and editorial comments, all of which information has been of value to the writer. From these letters it is easy to learn much about the friendships and other private affairs of John Matson sen.; and it is not proposed to now make more than a passing reference to such matters.

It seems that he continued for some time—perhaps until early 1803—to draw the 'Home Salary' of his main appointment as Chief Justice and a proportion of the fees relating to the Vice-Admiralty Court; and not until about that time was the matter of his resignation finally settled. A persistent deterioration in his health determined the issue and continued until he died in 1805 at the comparatively early age of fifty-eight years. Until the end John Matson retained his keen interest in the affairs of Dominica—"Send as much History of the Island as you can: write down anything as it occurs without any attention to form", he writes to his son John. Many representatives of well-known families in East Kent were serving in the Armed Forces during those stirring days; and some of them were to be found in the Caribbean Seas. In the Matson Letters we find references to John Matson's own sons, Captain Richard and Commander Henry; Captains Thomas Harvey, William Harvey, and John Boys; and

Admiral Robert Keeler. Throughout the period of the correspondence John Matson jun. held the appointment of Secretary to the Governor, so that he was in an excellent position to supply his father with news of interest.

To the present writer the selected letters have proved fascinating to a degree : so that he has conceived the desire, not only to read the remainder, but to obtain a sight, and perhaps possession, of the originals. Considerable efforts have been made to trace them without any sign of success.

Eleven children were born to John Matson and Mary Roberta his wife. Of these, five died in their early stages and left little or no interest for our story—one boy lived for but a few months—one girl fell a victim to yellow fever in Dominica at the age of 15 years—one son died at 18 years—the eldest daughter passed away as the result of a fever in England at the age of 30—and the only information about another son is that he died in India as a bachelor during the year 1816. Charles (1770-1856) was the eldest son : at first he was articled to his father in Sandwich ; and then, with the departure for the Bahamas and a further unaccounted period, he turned to the Royal Navy to become a Paymaster and Purser, and serve in that capacity for fifty years. Richard (1771-1848) entered the Royal Navy as a First-Class Volunteer at the age of twelve, and served with some distinction to eventually become an Admiral of the Blue. John (1773-1858) the third son has already been introduced as the Customs Officer and Governor's Secretary in Dominica, who was to retire and live in Regent Street, London, as a wealthy bachelor. Henry (1775-1827) became a Post-Captain in the Navy and died without issue. Of the two surviving daughters, Mary married Thomas Hutchinson, Fellow of New College, Barrister-at-Law, and Clerk in Holy Orders ; and Jane was wedded to the Reverend Fraser, to whom she bore the six children who most suitably became the chief beneficiaries under the will of their rich uncle.

Charles Matson had an only son, Henry James (1810-1852), who was a Post-Captain when he died of the yellow fever and was buried in Trinidad with full military and civil honours, leaving behind him his parents and one daughter. Richard had an only son Melville Gore (1805-1846), a Captain in the 59th Foot, and the father of an only son who died as a bachelor. It will thus be appreciated that, within the space of three generations, the Direct Male Line of John Matson sen. became extinct. Within the limitations of the available information vouchsafed to the writer, it seems probable that he alone has been privileged to make some attempt to appreciate the life and career of his collateral ancestor.

After suffering from continuous ill-health in his later years, John Matson died at his London home on 22nd January 1805 ; and he

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was buried in what is now described as the Old Burial Ground in Richmond, Surrey. Mary Roberta lived on in Sandwich as his widow for a further seven years, and proved to be the last residential link between her husband's family and the Borough Town. "Of the person of Mr. Matson, it may be observed that he was of a slender make, middling stature, and well-proportioned, and that his features were pleasing and animated. Of his very able and honourable conduct in the different stations he filled in the West Indies, we have already had occasion to speak. In private life his mild and gentlemanly manners, his strict integrity, and his truly liberal and friendly disposition, secured to him the respect and esteem of all who had the pleasure of being intimately acquainted with him." With this extract from the obituary account of our present interest the writer is well content; and he ventures to suggest that John Matson the Town Clerk of Sandwich and Chief Justice of Dominica may properly be considered to rank among the worthy citizens of the Borough Town and the distinguished Men of Kent.

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PORTRAIT

JOHN MATSON—Town Clerk, Sandwich, 1768-1785.
Chief Justice, Dominica, 1789-1800.

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