

WILLIAM ROLFE
A NOTED SANDWICH ANTIQUARIAN

By COLIN MATSON

IN the Council Chamber of the Guildhall at Sandwich hangs the portrait of a good-looking man in his early middle age. The inscription at the base of it reads "William Rolfe, Esqre.—A noted Sandwich Antiquarian". It might well have added that the subject was also a noted citizen and thrice Mayor of the Borough Town and Cinque Port. The purpose of this article is to introduce this man by way of his Kentish families, paternal, maternal, and by adoption : and then to continue with some account of his individual life.

William Henry Rolfe (1779–1859) was the only child of John and Elizabeth Rolfe of New Romney. The family of Rolfe is recorded as having been established in East Kent throughout the last five centuries. Here we are concerned with those branches which were to be found in the area of Romney Marsh during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, in particular, with those families which were established in the parish of St. Mary-in-the-Marsh and in the Borough Town and Cinque Port of New Romney. The family vault was in the country church ; and from that fact it can be assumed that the domestic base was within the district of the scattered parish : though, at the same time, it is manifest that the civil activities of family members were very much associated with the Cinque Port and Town.

Nicholas Rolfe (1676–1749) was a Jurat of Romney Marsh for 47 years ; and his second son, John, an attorney-at-law, was Town Clerk of New Romney during the period 1750–1789, and was also Mayor of the borough for five separate years. The youngest son of Nicholas was Charles (1731–1811), described as Gentleman and Freeman of New Romney. He had one son John (1755–1781) who, after serving articles of clerkship with his uncle the Town Clerk, duly became an attorney-at-law. This young solicitor married Elizabeth, daughter of Dr. William Boys of Sandwich : and these two were the parents of William Henry Rolfe the subject of this article—but, sadly enough, only for a very short time. His mother died within ten months of the son's birth ; and his father survived her only until the following year. At the tender age of two years the orphan boy was adopted by John and Mary Matson of Sandwich. John Rolfe jun. was buried in the family vault at St.

Mary-in-the-Marsh : but the body of the young wife was returned to Sandwich to be interred near to her mother and her maternal grandparents.

Elizabeth Rolfe (1760–1780) was a member of the ancient and distinguished family of Boys in East Kent. Her father was Dr. William Boys of Sandwich ; and her mother was Elizabeth, daughter of Henry Wise of the same town. This group of the Boys family had an authentic lineage dating back to 1385 in the reign of Richard II, and a traditional line of descent tracing from John de Bois at the time of William the Conqueror. The chief seats of this family were at Bonnington in Goodestone-by-Wingham, Fredville in the parish of Nonington, and Betteshanger in the hundred of Eastry. Many distinguished men sprang from this family and the temptation to expand upon them in this account must be sternly resisted. We will be content with a brief mention of these four men of definite distinction : Sir John Boys (1535–1612), an eminent lawyer ; Recorder for the City of Canterbury ; Judge of the Chancery Court for the Cinque Ports ; Founder of Jesus Hospital, Canterbury :—Doctor John Boys (1571–1625), distinguished cleric ; Rector of Betteshanger for 28 years ; Dean of Canterbury 1619–1625 :—Sir John Boys (1607–1664) of Bonnington, the heroic defender of Donnington Castle, near Newbury, during the Civil War :—and John Boys (1749–1824) of Betteshanger Home Farm, the noted agriculturist, breeder of South Down sheep, and author of “A General View of Agriculture in the County of Kent”, published in 1796. Dr. William Boys (1735–1805) himself, Surgeon and Topographer, was a man of distinction. He was author of several publications on antiquarian subjects and, especially, of his famous “History of Sandwich” which was published in 1792 and is a mine of information concerning the Cinque Port. He made exhaustive explorations at Richborough Castle and records some of the results at the end of his book. The list of Subscribers at the beginning of it is a fascinating nominal roll of many interesting inhabitants of East Kent at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1767 and again in 1782 William Boys was Mayor of Sandwich : his portrait can be seen hanging in the Mayor’s Parlour at the Guildhall, together with those of Captain John Harvey, John Matson (1746–1805), and Richard Emerson. He was born at Deal as the son of Commodore William Boys who had once been Lieutenant Governor of Greenwich Hospital : qualified as a surgeon ; and maintained his practice from his home at The White Friars, an excellent example of a Flemish gable building in New Street, Sandwich. His first wife died in 1761 at the early age of 23 years and after having produced two children. The son was William Henry Boys (*b.* 1761), who became a Colonel in the Royal Marines and married Elizabeth, daughter of Admiral Sir Henry Harvey. The daughter was Elizabeth

who married John Rolfe jun. Dr. Boys died in 1805 at the age of 70 years and was buried in St. Clement's Church, Sandwich.

John Matson (1741–1817) was a member of a yeoman farmer family which is recorded as having been established in East Kent since the fifteenth century. He was the elder son of Thomas Matson (1711–1781). Farmer and Land-owner of Wingham, Worth, and lastly Sandwich. His earliest known ancestor was James Matson (c. 1550–1593) of Sibertswold (otherwise Shepherdswell), an Officer in the Queen's Service. His grandfather was John Matson (1671–1731), Yeoman Farmer and Land-owner of Sibertswold and lastly of Wingham, who had married, as his second wife, Anne, youngest daughter of Robert Boys (1624–1705) of Kingston in the Elham Valley and later of The Home Farm at Betteshanger. The subject of this paragraph was a Hoyman or Ship-owner ; and he was also the owner of Each End Farm in the parish of Woodnesborough. At the same time he was a Common Councilman of Sandwich for many years and a Churchwarden of St. Peter's parish in that town—clearly a worthy citizen and a pillar of his local church. His home was at the house in New Street, now numbered 52, which he had inherited from his father and where he lived until the day of his death. In 1763 John Matson was wedded to Mary Wise : their union was not blessed with children : but they were not to miss the joy of parentage when it came their way. When John Rolfe jun. died in 1781 John Matson was 40 years of age and his wife was six years older. Mary Matson was aunt to the mother of William Henry Rolfe, so that he was her grand-nephew. It was a generous and unselfish act of this woman in middle age to undertake the care and responsibility of the two-year-old babe, as she and her husband decided to adopt it as their own. We have it on record that these two foster parents performed their duties right nobly. In the church of St. Peter is a white marble tablet to the memory of John and Mary Matson with an inscription at the base of it which reads, " This monument was erected by their grand-nephew William Henry Rolfe as a tribute of gratitude and affection." At the age of 56 the grand-uncle became a widower ; and we can feel sure that during the following 20 years of his life he continued to derive both pride and pleasure from the company of his adopted son. Under the terms of his will John Matson made certain pecuniary bequests to relatives, and then left all the residue of his real and personal estate—including his house in New Street and his farm at Each End—to William Henry Rolfe.

At this stage it seems advisable to point out that this particular John Matson of our immediate interest should not be confused with his first cousin John Matson (1746–1805), the Town Clerk of Sandwich and Chief Justice of Dominica, who was the subject of an article in Vol. LXXIV of this Journal. We can safely assume a cousinly and friendly



William Rolfe.

relationship between these two namesakes during the Sandwich days and afterwards when an exchange of correspondence was maintained between the Cinque Port and the West Indian Isle. Another genealogical pitfall can be avoided by noting carefully the separate identity of a third John Matson (*d.* 1790) who was living at Sandwich in those days. He was a Tallow-Chandler and a Freeman of the Borough, by virtue of his marriage with Elizabeth, daughter of Abraham Buxell, an ancient Freeman. Some relationship with the other two namesakes is considered to be probable : but it has not been established.

Mary Matson (1735–1797) was the eldest daughter of Henry Wise (1707–1769), Haberdasher and Jurat of Sandwich, and Mayor of the Cinque Port in 1757. No special research has been made concerning this family : but it is considered to be most probable that it was well established in Sandwich during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that the male line of his particular branch expired with Henry Wise. His wife seems to have been Mary Solly ; and these two had four daughters, of whom we have already considered Elizabeth who married Dr. Boys. On the 27th day of September, 1763 there took place at St. Peter's Church, Sandwich, a triple wedding of much local interest and individual character. The three nuptial pairs were John Matson (1741–1817) and Mary Wise—Odiarne Coates of New Romney and Sarah Wise—John Harvey (1740-1794) of future naval fame and Judith Wise. It is suggested that Henry Wise and his wife had good reason to be well satisfied with these three men as prospective sons-in-law : but they must have felt a lonely couple at the end of the eventful day. It will be appreciated that Mary Matson was maternal grand-aunt to William Henry Rolfe ; and it speaks volumes for her warm heart and generous nature that, at the age of 46 years, she rose to the occasion and became the foster-mother of the two-year-old babe. Mary had become a woman of property on the death of her father ; and under the terms of her own will grand-nephew William Henry Rolfe received a one-fourth share of certain real estates. It was left to her husband to make the main material provisions for the adopted son. Mary Matson died at the comparatively early age of 62 years : but not before she had achieved her benevolent task of rearing her sister's grandson to man's estate.

We have considered the birth of William Henry Rolfe, the early death of both his parents, and the adoption of the child by John and Mary Matson when he was but two years of age. It is fair to assume a sound and happy upbringing by the worthy foster-parents ; and the adopted boy was indeed fortunate in this respect. It is also most probable that the boy and young man came under the direct influence of William Boys his maternal grandfather, whose home in New Street,

was no more than 100 yards distant. We can take it for granted that an interest in local antiquities was fostered in the boy and encouraged in the young man by the capable expert until the time of his death, which did not occur until the grandson was 26 years of age. At the same time William Henry Rolfe had before him always the priceless examples of character and citizenship set by both his grand-uncle and his grandfather. "Mr. Rolfe always maintained a most grateful regard for the memory of his uncle Matson, to whom, as he said, he owed everything."

It is not known—but it is considered to be most probable—that William Henry assisted John Matson at the Each End Farm ; and it is suggested that, on coming of age, the young man took over the active management of it. Doubtless, the foster-father took proper steps at the right time to arrange that a settled income should be available to the adopted son. Our first official information on this is an entry in the Sandwich Year Book for 1806 which reports upon a "Resolution to (i) oppose any reduction of Tolls, and (ii) to put into effect improvements to the Road etc. from Ramsgate to Sandwich". The Subscription List included these items : "The Mayor (Edmund Fowle), £100 ; John Matson Esq, £100 ; Mr. W. H. Rolfe, £50." These were useful sums in those days. In 1814 Rolfe is first noted as a Common Councilman ; and, presumably, before then he had been admitted as a Freeman. Presently his name is noted in a list of Jurats ; and he was Mayor of Sandwich during three separate years—1827, 1839 and 1841.

After the death of his uncle in 1817 Rolfe continued to farm at Each End until his decision to sell the property and sink the proceeds in an annuity. By this time he had shaped his life in two main directions as he prosecuted his labours as an enthusiastic antiquarian and an active member of the borough council. With the example of his grandfather before him Rolfe became an expert on the antiquities of East Kent and more especially of Sandwich. He amassed a collection which was sold later to Mr. Joseph Mayor of Liverpool who, in his turn, disposed of it to Mr. John Evans of Hemel Hempstead. Rolfe had become the owner-occupier of the house in New Street ; and there he continued to live throughout the remainder of his long life under the domestic care of a housekeeper. He died as a bachelor at the age of 80 years and "as a much beloved and respected citizen of the ancient town he was buried in the new cemetery at Sandwich". Before we take our leave of William Henry Rolfe we can emphasize our tributes to him as a worthy citizen and a noted antiquarian ; and we can also add our commendation of his good looks. Mr. James Craig, for so many years the efficient and friendly Town Sergeant of Sandwich, has informed the writer that women visitors to the Guildhall invariably pause for a long lingering look at the portrait in the Council Chamber ; and the author's wife is

insistent that it bears a remarkable resemblance to Sir Laurence Olivier, the distinguished present-day actor. Under the terms of his will Rolfe left £50 to his friend George Farndon ; and to " Miss Hannah Mugwell Barber, now residing with me as my housekeeper " he devised and bequeathed " All Household and Personal Effects. All Real Estate including my dwelling-house in Sandwich and All Residue of Real and Personal Estate ". Probate was duly granted to the two executors named. Miss Barber was presently to become Mrs. Young ; and under the terms of her will she left the New Street house to her daughter Mrs. J. A. Jacobs for life, with remainder to her two children. Alderman J. A. Jacobs was Mayor of Sandwich during the years 1887, 1900 and 1903.

Family history is often concerned with the ownership of property ; and the writer has found entertainment—even within the limits of this short article—in noting the successive owners of No. 52 New Street, as Thomas Matson, John Matson (1741–1817), William Henry Rolfe, Miss Hannah Barber and Mrs. J. A. Jacobs. When a call was made at this house some years ago, it was in the ownership and occupation of Mrs. C. Mole and was on the market for sale with vacant possession. Since then, the writer is informed, it has passed into the ownership of Mr. Roberts, the present Town Clerk, who resides there. It is also interesting to note that the portraits of John Matson the Town Clerk and William Rolfe the Antiquarian, which hang at the Guildhall in the Mayor's Parlour and the Council Chamber respectively, were both presented by Mrs. J. A. Jacobs. The author of this article has been entertained with his speculation as to just why and how the portrait of the Town Clerk was left at the New Street house of his cousin John Matson the Hoyman, so that it eventually came into the hands of the lady who presented it to the Council. Genealogy is full of entertaining puzzles ; and therein lies much of its undoubted fascination.

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