

## A KENTISH CLERICAL DYNASTY: CURTEIS OF SEVENOAKS

PART I: 1716–1861

NIGEL YATES, M.A., F.R.Hist.S.

A casual visitor to an English parish church who glances at the list of former incumbents frequently displayed in the building quickly becomes aware that, between the late sixteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was not uncommon for two or more generations of one family to be presented to the cure of souls in the same parish. Very often those so presented were related to the patron; the tradition of landed families encouraging their younger sons to take holy orders was one which has only begun to die out within living memory.

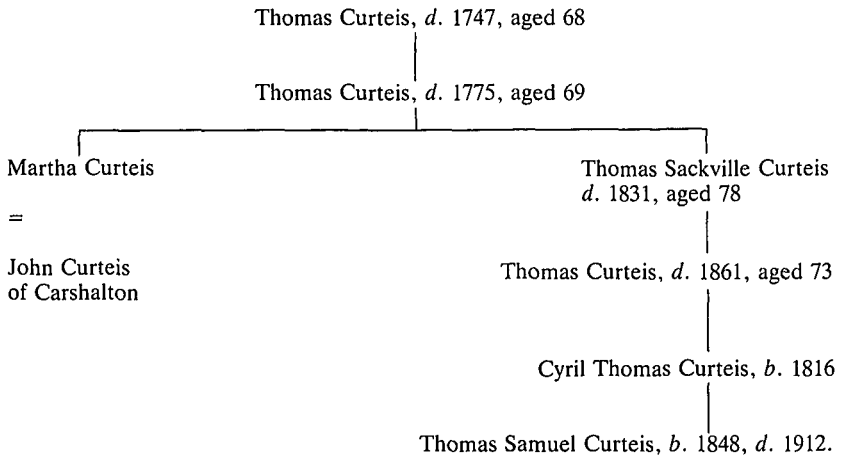
Occasionally one family's connection with an individual benefice could span two or even three hundred years. Such was the case in Kent at Sevenoaks, where six generations of the Curteis family were connected with one of the richer benefices in west Kent between 1716 and 1907. The benefice of Sevenoaks before the ecclesiastical reforms of the mid-nineteenth century consisted of a sinecure rectory and a vicarage, the former valued at £964, and the latter at £500, at the time of their consolidation.<sup>1</sup> Technically, the rectory and vicarage were separate benefices 'each requiring separate institution and induction, and a conformity, in every particular, to the Act of Uniformity'.<sup>2</sup> It was to the sinecure rectory that Thomas Curteis was appointed in 1716.

The Curteis family was settled in the Weald in the late medieval period and had by the early seventeenth century become active as jurats and churchwardens in both municipal and parochial affairs at

<sup>1</sup> S. Bagshaw, *Directory of Kent*, Sheffield 1847, ii, 652.

<sup>2</sup> E. Hasted, *History of Kent*, Canterbury 1797, iii, 102–3.

Tenterden.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Curteis was over thirty when he took orders, being made deacon in 1713 and priest the following year. Thereafter, his son, grandson and at least one representative of the next three generations were all in holy orders:



This paper will deal with the first four generations who held the rectory of Sevenoaks, and from 1750 the vicarage as well, with one brief gap of two years, between 1716 and 1861. A future paper will deal with the last member of the family to hold the rectory of Sevenoaks, the distinguished Tractarian, Thomas Samuel Curteis, rector from 1874 until 1907.

In 1715, the sinecure rectory and the vicarage of Wrotham, which had been held separately since 1402, were united in the incumbency of Thomas Curteis, vicar since 1714, who made considerable improvements to the parsonage house.<sup>4</sup> In 1716, Curteis was presented to the sinecure rectory of Sevenoaks and his combined income from his three preferments is likely to have exceeded £3,000 per annum. However, Curteis had no duties to perform at Sevenoaks. The vicarage continued to be held by Hugh Owen, who in 1746 was petitioned against by the parishioners on the grounds that he had 'by the decay of his health, and defect in his senses, become totally

<sup>3</sup> KAO, Te/S2 and P 364/1/1.

<sup>4</sup> Hasted, *op. cit.*, v, 29-31.

incapable of discharging any of the duties, or of appointing a proper person to supply his office'.<sup>5</sup>

At Wrotham Curteis was resident, though he employed a curate. By temperament he was a Whig, both politically and religiously. In 1729, he wrote to Bishop Edmund Gibson of London, advocating changes in the Book of Common Prayer calculated to encourage moderate dissenters to return to the communion of the Church of England and enclosing a list of his detailed proposals.<sup>6</sup> In 1733–34, he acted as one of the principal election agents to the Duke of Dorset who was endeavouring to secure the election of his son, Lord Middlesex, and Sir George Oxenden, to Parliament for the county seat in the Whig interest.<sup>7</sup> He was clearly very successful in attracting support from his brother clergy, apart from a former curate, then at Faversham, whom he describes as studying 'mischief . . . more than sermons'.<sup>8</sup> On 29 December, 1733, he wrote to the Duke: 'if the clergy only were to decide the election we should carry the point'.<sup>9</sup> In fact the Whig candidates were heavily defeated, the Tories, Sir Edward Dering and Lord Vane, being elected by a margin of over 800 votes in a poll of only 8,000. Curteis' connections with the Sackville family made him an important man in the county and increased his personal wealth. When he died in 1747, he left £1,000 each to his married daughters Esther and Martha and, to be divided between the both, his silver coffee-pots, castors, salvers and snuffers; his tea-tables with their kettles, lamps and dishes; his two best beds and chests of drawers; his 'buroes'; and such part of his pewter dishes and plates as agreed by his son Thomas who acted as his executor, to set up house with. After small bequests to other relatives Thomas inherited the rest of his estate.<sup>10</sup>

At some point between 1716 and his death the elder Thomas Curteis also acquired the advowson of the sinecure rectory and vicarage of Sevenoaks, which had passed through various hands after it was sold by the Earl of Dorset in 1661.<sup>11</sup> This enabled the younger Thomas Curteis to succeed his father in the sinecure rectory and, on the death of the incompetent Hugh Owen, to present himself to the

<sup>5</sup> KAO, U 269 Q 5/3.

<sup>6</sup> Lambeth Palace Library, Ms 1741, ff. 57–61.

<sup>7</sup> See B. Keith-Lucas, 'Francis and Francis Motley Austen, Clerks of the Peace for Kent', in (Eds.) A. Detsicas and N. Yates, *Studies in Modern Kentish History*, Maidstone 1983, 90–1.

<sup>8</sup> KAO, U 269 C 148/23.

<sup>9</sup> C 148/48.

<sup>10</sup> KAO, U 1015 T 56/1.

<sup>11</sup> KAO, U 269 T 5.

vacant vicarage in 1750. Like his father, Curteis was active in the service of the Sackville family. He acted as election agent in the county election of 1753–54, writing to the Duke of Dorset's secretary, the Revd. Sackville Bale, on 21 November, 1753: 'I am preparing, as fast as the nature of the business will permit, a sketch of the state of our interest in every parish in the western division'.<sup>12</sup> This time the Whig interest was victorious, with their two candidates, the Hon. Robert Fairfax and the Hon Lewis Watson, being elected over the sole Tory, Sir Edward Dering.<sup>13</sup> Sevenoaks was not Curteis' only preferment. In 1755, he was instituted to a prebend at Canterbury Cathedral, and in the following year presented to the rectory of St. Dionys Backchurch in the City of London.<sup>14</sup>

In 1748, Curteis made a socially advantageous marriage, which much increased his standing in the county, to Elisabeth, the daughter of David Papillon of Acrise. Her sister Mary, writing to their brother David on 24 August, 1747, noted: 'Sunday one Mr Curteis preached here. He came with Mr Halford and they all drank tea here afterwards . . . Mr Curteis is a great shooter'.<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth warned her brother of the likely marriage on 17 February, 1748: 'The Revd Mr Curteis lives about 15 miles from here at Sevenoak and is chaplain to the Duke of Dorset I believe. If you knew him you would have no objection but as everything is not yet settled I will say no more but write again very soon when they are'.<sup>16</sup> They were married at Greenwich on 22 April.<sup>17</sup> It was assumed that their son, Thomas Sackville Curteis, would succeed to the rectory and vicarage of Sevenoaks on his father's death, but this occurred very suddenly and before the son had reached the minimum canonical age for ordination. On 26 April, 1775, David Papillon, Elisabeth Curteis' brother who had succeeded to the Acrise estate, received alarming communications from another sister, Susannah Weaver, and Edward Hardy, the master of Sevenoaks school and vicar of Halstead. The former wrote:<sup>18</sup>

Dr Curteis came yesterday morn to Maidstone to the sessions and in the evening in court about seven was seized with a paralitick fit and was brought here speechless and is not yet come to his speech again, though he has said a few words to be

<sup>12</sup> U 269 C 149/14.

<sup>13</sup> Keith-Lucas, *op. cit.*, 91–2.

<sup>14</sup> KAO, U 1015 C 67/1.

<sup>15</sup> C 60/47.

<sup>16</sup> C 60/52.

<sup>17</sup> C 60/53.

<sup>18</sup> C 70/8.

understood and has not lifted his eyelids since and dost not at present seem to know any body . . . he has been blooded and vomited and has a blister on his head but that has not been on but a few hours yet. Mr Curteis came over today and has behaved as well on the melancholy occasion as could possible be.

Hardy noted that Curteis had been 'seized with a fit which was at first attributed to the heat of the court house but proved to be apoplectick or paralitick . . . The doctor returned this afternoon and gives some hopes of his recovery though I think no very promising ones at present, but we hope to have a better account sometime this evening'.<sup>19</sup> He died the following day.<sup>20</sup>

Curteis' sudden death presented his family with a serious problem over the succession to Sevenoaks. It was normal practice in such circumstances for livings to be 'kept warm' for a future incumbent, though this was far from satisfactory. On 14 June, 1755, Hardy informed David Papillon that the archbishop of Canterbury was prepared to allow him to hold Sevenoaks in plurality with Halstead without a dispensation.<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Curteis, however, was clearly concerned about her son's future prospects. On 23 July, 1775, she wrote to her brother about her son: 'I told him that I understood you intended the living for him sometime hence, on which he said you had never told him so nor his sister nor Mr Hardy; that he should go on much better with his studys and be much easer in his mind if he was satisfied of that'.<sup>22</sup> David Papillon declined to give a firm promise on this occasion, but on 19 December, 1777, the archbishop's secretary notified Papillon of Hardy's resignation and that the living was void.<sup>23</sup> Thomas Sackville Curteis, now in holy orders, was presented to the vacant rectory and vicarage, and his mother wrote to her brother to thank him for his favours to her and her children.<sup>24</sup>

Papillon's clear reluctance to guarantee his nephew ecclesiastical preferment was not surprising. Thomas Sackville Curteis was a much lesser man his father or grandfather. His extensive surviving correspondence shows him to have been pastorally lethargic, financially improvident, physically unhealthy and personally quarrelsome. According to the record of an early surviving service register, Curteis did not preach once at Sevenoaks between 1825 and his death in 1831, though the fact that he was by then well into his seventies may

<sup>19</sup> C 67/7.

<sup>20</sup> C 67/8.

<sup>21</sup> Q 15/1.

<sup>22</sup> C 67/9.

<sup>23</sup> Q 15/2.

<sup>24</sup> C 67/10.

have been a factor in this.<sup>25</sup> Much of his incumbency was dominated by mounting debts and an inability to maximise his income from tithes. Writing to David Papillon on 25 March, 1800, he calculated this at £800, but it was clearly insufficient, and he was thinking of selling the advowson and offering to give his uncle first refusal.<sup>26</sup> On 3 April, he pressed for a decision but Papillon prevaricated,<sup>27</sup> and the matter was never taken any further. Later that year he managed to pick a quarrel with the Duchess of Dorset over the tithes for Knole. He wrote on 30 September:<sup>28</sup>

Mr Curteis presents his most respectful compliments to Her Grace the Duchess of Dorset, acquaints her that he is very desirous of settling the tithes on amicable terms, wishes earnestly to know whether Her Grace will compound for sixty-three pounds per annum and an additional sum for all land ploughed up in Knole Park . . . The deer are titheable and have always been compounded for . . . He requests this very soon settled and will take it kind if Her Grace will order the payment in a week or two as he is rather distressed for money.

The Duchess replied that she understood the deer were not titheable and submitted a new statement of tithes and Easter offerings totalling only £54 0s. 6d.<sup>29</sup> Curteis agreed to submit to arbitration on the question of the deer but disputed other matters, writing again on 6 October:<sup>30</sup>

The herbage of Knole Park remains equally titheable whatever stock or cattle feed thereon, therefore Mr Curteis as vicar will expect the tithes thereof over and above what quantity can be fairly allotted to the cows and sheep. Bullocks and other stock are titheable, also all poultry of whatever denomination . . . Must also pay moreover for all additional hops, woad and flax.

The Duchess replied that she was taking counsel's opinion on the tithe of deer, but refused to pay on poultry as she did not keep any at Knole.<sup>31</sup>

On 17 February, 1802, Curteis complained to David Papillon that the payment of land tax, poor rates and income tax had taken half his income.<sup>32</sup> A year later, on 17 January, 1803, he estimated his total income at £890: £750 from tithes, £20 from fees and perquisites, £15

<sup>25</sup> P 330/1/59.

<sup>26</sup> U 1015 C 68/8.

<sup>27</sup> C 68/9.

<sup>28</sup> U 269 C 359/2.

<sup>29</sup> C 359/3-4.

<sup>30</sup> C 359/5.

<sup>31</sup> C 359/6.

<sup>32</sup> U 1015 C 68/11.

from Easter offerings, £80 from the parsonage estate and glebe lands, and £25 from renting out the vicarage house.<sup>33</sup> On 2 September, 1804, he wrote again to David Papillon: 'I think of the plan of our going into the vicarage house for a few years and letting the parsonage and premises. I think this will . . . cause a material reduction of expenses'.<sup>34</sup> A month later he had abandoned this idea as 'my stay in the parsonage house shall make little or no difference to the expence'.<sup>35</sup> He explained to Papillon on 30 October that his decision had been largely determined by his unwillingness to turn out the tenant of the vicarage: 'I shall continue where I am. I have reduced my establishment to 2 maids and the boy, and the day labourer. Without the last I can't do as long as I keep the glebe in my hands. I have parted with the chaise horses'.<sup>36</sup> The economies began to pay off. By 17 December he could write to Papillon that he had paid off several of his principal bills and most of the arrears and trusted by perseverance to put his affairs on a reasonable footing. He was endeavouring to sort out the collection of his tithes which he now reckoned were worth £1,050.<sup>37</sup> By 24 September, these efforts were beginning to bear fruit and he wrote again to Papillon:<sup>38</sup>

I expect to hear from Mr Hogben my surveyor every day with the new compositions I'm to propose to my tenants; am getting the papers ready to fill up with the sums, date and name . . . The new compositions will be proposed free from all parochial rates and assessments. I have had a great deal of trouble to get averages of the old tithes on crops on their grounds but have made them out pretty correct at last with most of them.

By 10 October he could inform Papillon:<sup>39</sup>

My surveyor has sent his return of my tithes and has made them near £1100 free from all parochial rates and assessments. I have sent out the proposals to each individual for their inspection and determination of acceptance and not allowed them a fortnight for that purpose.

The settlement, however, took over a year to complete, and it was not until 29 January that Curteis was able to inform Papillon: 'I have settled all my tithes at Knole and the respective occupations the Duchess of Dorset holds as guardian to her son during his minority

<sup>33</sup> C 68/12.

<sup>34</sup> C 68/25.

<sup>35</sup> C 68/26.

<sup>36</sup> C 68/27.

<sup>37</sup> C 68/28.

<sup>38</sup> C 68/31.

<sup>39</sup> C 68/32.

. . . I trust I shall now have no more trouble and anxiety with my parishioners during my time on earth'.<sup>40</sup> This improvement in his income enabled Curteis to begin to settle his debts. By 17 January, 1808, he had 'paid all the monies due to the late Mr Redford of Hawkhurst, principal and interest £600 due on bond and a note of hand', and his only remaining debts were those to members of his own family, 'so that everything is within ourselves and I hope to continue liquidating them all by degrees'.<sup>41</sup> However, Curteis' financial difficulties were no doubt a factor behind his response to the trustees responsible for the repair of Sevenoaks church in 1813 that he was only prepared to meet himself the cost of repairing the chancel roof, estimated at £65, and would not pay for any other alterations to the chancel. If the trustees wished to make such alterations they would have to meet the cost themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Curteis died in 1831 and was succeeded in the rectory and vicarage by his son Thomas who, unlike his father, preached regularly and was an active incumbent by the standards of the time.<sup>43</sup> From 1840, he was supported as curate by his son, Cyril Thomas Curteis, who might have been expected to succeed to the living on his death. It would seem, however, that Cyril Thomas Curteis was not felt capable of holding a benefice, and this is implied in his father's will, dated 10 July, 1858: 'I expressly declare that my reason for not naming my said son Cyril Thomas Curteis as an executor of this my will is not any want of sincere affection towards him but that I believe the course I have adopted is a better arrangement for him and that it will relieve him from duties which might harass him'.<sup>44</sup> In fact, he appointed his brother-in-law, Henry Lipscomb, and daughter, Charlotte Anne Coxe, as the executors of his will together with trustees to manage his estates and to pay the income therefrom to his son. Curteis bequeathed the advowson of Sevenoaks to Henry and William Lipscomb and to Philip Oxenden Papillon, and their heirs, on condition that if his grandson, Thomas Samuel Curteis, was not in holy orders or willing to be presented to the living, they should present the Revd. Phipps Champneys of Skellow, near Doncaster. If he died before the death of the testator, or was unwilling to be presented to the living, they could present any person over the age of 65, who was required, as was Champneys, to give a bond to the effect that he would resign

<sup>40</sup> C 68/34.

<sup>41</sup> C 68/35.

<sup>42</sup> P 330/6/50.

<sup>43</sup> P 330/1/59.

<sup>44</sup> U 1015 T 56/2.



when requested to do so in favour of Thomas Samuel Curteis. The trustees were also to convey the advowson to Curteis on his presentation to the living. If this presentation could not take place the trustees were to sell the advowson, giving first option to Thomas Papillon, or, if he was dead, to his son, Philip Oxenden Papillon.

Thomas Curteis died in 1861 when his grandson was only thirteen. The trustees presented Henry Francis Sidebottom who, having been made deacon in 1817 and priest in 1818, was over the minimum age specified in the will, and who moved to Sevenoaks from Holy Trinity, Halifax. He resigned at the request of the trustees in 1874 and was succeeded by the last member of the Curteis family to hold the living. His important Tractarian incumbency and its impact on Sevenoaks will be considered in a future paper.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> I am grateful to the staffs of Lambeth Palace Library and the Kent Local Studies Library, who provided me with information on both Sevenoaks presentations and Curteis preferments from the archbishops' act books and clerical directories, which corrects the substantially inaccurate entries in C.H. Fielding, *Records of Rochester*, Dartford 1910, 251, 378–9.