

Family Finder:

HOPTON FAMILY HISTORY GLOUCESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND PART TWO

The Early Hoptons

Many an English family lays claim to being descended from William the Conqueror, but the Hopton family can make a better claim than most. How many other families can claim a castle of their own? A Norman castle at that! Better than that - we Hoptons can boast more than mere family legend to support the claim of a connection with the Conqueror; there is also corroborating evidence in the form of an ancient manuscript. * * * *

* The castle in question is Hopton Castle in Shropshire, and it still stands.....just! It can be found near the junction of the Shropshire, Herefordshire and Powys county boundaries, some five miles north east of Knighton. It is best approached by the A4113 from the Ludlow direction, turning north at the B4367. The last mile or so from the village of Bucknell is by an unclassified road.

Even though little more than a ruin, enough of the battered keep remains to enable a visitor to classify the castle as Norman. Situated as it is only five miles or so east of Offa's Dyke - the traditional border with Wales - it might well have been one of the series of castles built by the Normans in their efforts to subjugate the Welsh. The positioning of the castle is curious though, not dominating the surrounding area as a castle should, but tucked quietly away in the middle of a field and overlooked by high ground nearby (quaintly named Hopton Titterhill!). Not an easy place to defend one would think!

A curious rhyme records the granting of the manor of Hopton castle to the family. It is quoted in Stow's Chronicle.

Hopton, Co. Salop.

To the heysr male of the Hopton family, lawfully begotten.

To me and to myne, to thee and to thine,
 While the water runs and the Sun doth shine,
 For lack of Heyrs to the King againe,
 I, William, King, the third of my reign,
 Give to the Norman Hunter,
 To me that art both Line and Deare,
 The Hoppe and the Hoptune, ✓
 And all the bounds up and downe,
 Under the Earth to Hell,
 Above the Earth to Heaven,
 From me and from mine,
 To thee and to thine,
 As good and as faire,
 As ever they myne were,
 So witness that is Sooth,
 I bit the white wax with my Tooth,
 Before Jugg, Marode and Margery,
 And my third son, Henry,
 For one Bow and one Broad Arrow,
 when I come to hunt upon Yarrow.

It sounds intriguing doesn't it! If the rhyme is authentic, the expression "To me that are both Line and Deare" seems to suggest that the Hoptons are indeed related to the Conqueror. Yet the wording is English, whereas William would surely have used Norman French. It was to resolve this problem that I set myself to find out about Stow and his 'Chronicle'. I found a lengthy reference to him in an encyclopedia in the local library. The following is an extract:

John Stow

Chronicler and Antiquary

1525 to 1605

From 1560 onwards his time was mainly spent in the collection of books and literary documents, in the transcription of ancient manuscripts and the like, all dealing with English history, archaeology and literature.'

In 1565 Stow produced his 'Summarie of Englyshe Chronicles, conteyning the true accompt of yeres, wherein every Kyng of the Realme.....began theyre reygne, how long they reygned and what notable thynges hath been doone duryng theyre Reygnes.'

Stow was the most accurate and business like of English annalists or chroniclers of the sixteenth century. He always boasted never to have written anything either 'of malice, fear or favour', nor to seek his 'own particular vainglory', and that his 'only pains and care was to write the truth'.

Clearly Stow was not just any old hack but a respected historian. He would surely not have invented the rhyme attributed to King William. Thus the Hopton claim to Norman and perhaps Royal ancestry is given some degree of substance after all.

Notwithstanding the supposed link with the Conqueror, the pedigree of the Hopton family has not been traced back farther than Sir Walter Hopton of Hopton Castle in King Stephen's time (fifty years or more after William's death.)

Two centuries later, in the reign of Henry VI, his descendant - another Sir Walter - died without marrying and with his death the *direct* line of Hopton of Hopton Castle ended. His sister Elizabeth married a Corbet and the Castle passed to that family.

The Shropshire Hoptons are believed to have left that county in the sixteenth century, one branch of the family settling in Canon Frome in Herefordshire, and another - described as a 'junior' branch - in Gloucestershire. The Canon Frome branch was a distinguished family, boasting Members of Parliament, Judges and Senior clergy among their numbers. They could trace their descent from the knights of Hopton Castle (or so they maintained!) but more than once the male line died out and the name was maintained only by the husband of a Hopton daughter adopting the surname of his wife. Now even that tenuous link has been severed and the last Hopton of that line (even one by adoption!) is dead. The family house at Canon Frome still exists though and is now occupied by some sort of 'New Age' community,

'Junior branch' or not, unlike their Herefordshire kinfolk, at least the Hoptons who settled in Gloucester have maintained a direct line to the present day. They were successful too - at first at any rate. As the family grew, however, and spread some of their fortunes varied - as we have seen in Part 1 of this narrative.

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But first, can we link the Hoptons of Hopton Castle to the Hoptons who first appear in Gloucestershire a hundred years after the ownership of the castle passed out of the family? Unfortunately there is no *proof* but there are a few pointers that add some degree of weight to the theory of continuity.

(1) The following figures, extracted from Baptismal Registers, chart how the number of Hoptons baptised in Shropshire was declining at the same time as the number in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire was growing.

Hopton Baptisms in Shropshire

before 1700	138
1700 to 1830	37

Hopton Baptisms in Herefordshire

before 1700	8
1700 to 1830	70

Hopton Baptisms in Gloucestershire

before 1700	77
1700 to 1830	174

(2) As late as the eighteenth century, Bigland's *History of Gloucestershire* refers to several members of the Hoptons of Berkeley as belonging to 'the junior branch of the Hopton family of Hopton Castle, Shropshire'. (The Canon Frome family of Herefordshire claimed direct descent and presumably considered themselves the 'senior' branch - but as we have seen, they are now extinct.)

* (3) The Coat of Arms as described in Burke's Landed Gentry and that featured on several Hopton tombs in Berkeley Church are similar.

(4) When viewed in an overall national context, the geographical distance between Hopton Castle in Shropshire and the Hopton settlements in Gloucestershire is negligible. (There were other Hopton families in Yorkshire and Suffolk, for example.)

(5) Frances Hopton of Cam, Gloucestershire (the last survivor of Tree 'A' below) left a lengthy will in 1737 in which Richard Cope Hopton of Canon Frome is named as a beneficiary. There is thus clearly a link between the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Hoptons - but what precisely?

No conclusive facts here maybe, but interesting pointers.

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Perhaps now is a good point at which to introduce various family trees that different family historians have compiled. I offer four for comparison with that of our own branch. I believe that each of these is in some way related to our own and that somewhere there must be a tie in with our earliest proven ancestor - Daniel (c.1684).

A point to observe is that they all originate in Bisley towards the end of the sixteenth century. (More particularly in Chalford which formed part of the Bisley parish at that time.) They are the very earliest Hoptons that I can trace in Gloucestershire, and it is reasonable to assume that they came to the county about that time - quite likely from Shropshire. There are various historical and armorial references in the case of some of the Berkeley Hoptons (Tree A) that refer to them as being "the younger branch of the Hopton Family from Hopton Castle, Salop." It is also interesting to note that the Canon Frome, Herefordshire, branch of the Hopton family, to whom I have referred earlier (who also claim descent from the Hoptons of Hopton Castle) also left Shropshire at that time. (I have in my possession a tree for that branch of the family which records the move from Shropshire to Canon Frome, but the document is too large and complex to reproduce here.)

There is strong circumstantial evidence that links those named in Tree 'C' with our Daniel of circa 1684 (although I cannot *prove* any such link). The most telling factor is the isolated and tiny (even today!) hamlet of Moreton Valence, where William of Eastington left land when he died in 1688 - as did our Daniel over half a century later. I do not believe that there could have been two *unrelated* families of the same name with connections in such a small and lonely location.

The names of Daniel's sons also suggest a link - Richard, Daniel, Samuel, William - these all abound in the Eastington family (Tree C).

If I am right about a connection; how does Daniel of circa 1684 slot in with Tree 'C'? I have a *theory* - it is no more - that the Richard baptised at Eastington in 1661 could be the father. He married Hannah Knowles in 1683 and the only child traced to the couple is Mary baptised at Whitminster (Wheatenhurst) in 1688. (Richard died in 1690, apparently before he could produce any more children.) A five year gap before a first child was unusual at that time. Could there have been an earlier child? The fact that we cannot trace a baptismal entry is annoying but not necessarily significant. The registers of that time are haphazard; not all have survived and many of those that have are illegible.

Another pointer is that the custom was to name one's first son after one's own father. Daniel named his first son Richard. Was this after his own father? If my theory is correct, the two who left land in Moreton Valence would have been the nephew and uncle. (i.e. Daniel would have been the son of William's older brother.)

A link between our proven ancestors and Tree 'C' would connect us right back to the sixteenth century and the village of Chalford (Bisley), whence the Hoptons of branches 'A' and 'B' also sprang. Two Hopton families in that small place at the same time surely suggests some kind of family connection. [Could the earliest William ('A') and the earliest Richard ('C') have been brothers?] There is another suggestion of a family connection in the following generation, when Daniel ('C') was a witness to the will of Ferdinando ('A') in 1614. If there is such a link, then also bear in mind that in Thomas Bigland's eighteenth century 'History of Gloucestershire', Branch 'A' is stated to be a junior branch of the Hopton family of Hopton Castle. The coat of arms of the 'A' branch also suggests the same line of descent. In addition, the will of Frances Hopton of Berkeley in 1737 suggests some kind of link between 'A' and the Herefordshire branch - who have a similar coat of arms, make the same assertion of descent from Hopton Castle, and have drawn up a family tree to substantiate it.

To summarise:

From Patrick there is a proven link to Daniel (1684)

From Daniel there is a link through property at Moreton Valence and family names to Branch 'C'

From Branch 'C' there is a link through Chalford origins and will attestation to Branch 'A'

From Branch 'A' there is a link through Frances Hopton's will to the Canon Frome branch.

Both 'A' and Canon Frome branches claim descent from the Hoptons of Hopton Castle. (Substantiated by Bigland's *History* and Armorial records.)

Hopton Castle was granted to the Hopton family by William the Conqueror. *

*'To me that art both Line and Deare,
The Hoppe and the Hoptune,'* (Stow's Chronicle)

Q.E.D. (Well - almost!)

So is our claim of descent from William the Conqueror that far fetched after all? * *

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^[1] That it was a difficult site to defend is borne out by an appalling incident in the English Civil War, fortunately long after all Hopton family connections with the castle had been severed. In 1644 a small Parliamentary garrison holding the castle surrendered to a vastly superior Royalist force. The commander of the defeated force was made to watch as his thirty three men were bound, hacked to death in cold blood and their bodies thrown in the moat. Was it my imagination or did I sense something of an uneasy air about this place even today? A lingering legacy of the massacre perhaps!

PART ONE

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