

INTRODUCTION

This book of family history tells the story of our ancestors, Stapleys and Strangwayes, who, in the course of six centuries, migrated step by step from their places of origin to London where George Maitland Stapley married Lucy Jane Strangwayes. Their family then moved from the centre of London to the suburbs, and on to Essex, as did so many, and their later generations are now dispersed round the country and abroad. The story is a microcosm of the social history of England over those centuries. The earliest of our ancestors who are recorded here lived only two generations after the terrible Black Death, which devastated the country in 1348. They would have heard of the victory of Henry V at Agincourt as ‘the latest news from the war against the French.

The Stapleys have been traced back to farmers in Sussex in the early fifteenth century, yeomen who owned their farms, before a younger son, in the eighteenth century, moved into a business life servicing Tunbridge Wells, which was then becoming a spa town to rival Bath. In the early nineteenth century, one son, the oldest, set off to London and, mid-century, became part of Britain’s worldwide commercial network, trading with America.

When the business closed, his son joined the newly-organised Civil Service, and, in the following generation, George Maitland, the pivot of this history, joined another London trading company, which provided administrative services to entrepreneurs in the Far East and owned its own businesses there. From clerk, he rose to managing clerk. He served, too, in the new lay Office of Reader in the Church of England. He and Lucy had nine children, one daughter and six sons surviving to adulthood: three of the sons took part in World War One and one of them was killed. Their oldest son became a missionary, three went into banking, one teaching and one in to commerce and their surviving daughter married a manufacturer. The story since then is in the lifetime memory of current family members.

The Strangwayes, originally Strangwish of Strangwish Hall near Manchester, were, about 1400, among the leading servants of the King in the North-west, fulfilling the roles of the present judiciary and Civil Service. They were judges and tax collectors, lords of many manors, legal advisers to, and friends of the nobility. They were among the 15th century ‘Northern Knights’ in Parliament, one becoming the Speaker.

Official records of the Strangwayes start with Henry and his family. His oldest son was our ancestor who moved to Yorkshire and became one of the three senior judges in the country. (A nephew of his married Eleanor Talboys, a descendant of Rollo, of the family of the Dukes of Normandy.) He was knighted and built a castle. Professional, marital and friendship connections to the nobility led to divided loyalties during the Wars of the Roses, in which one of the Strangwayes fought but survived.

Eventually, the senior member of this widespread family lost his wealth when he had no son to inherit and the husbands of his three daughters benefited. (Henry VIII took the castle.) Still, for two centuries the Strangwayes maintained their position and wealth as a ‘County Family’. By the late 1700s though, our own Strangwayes ancestors, being descended from younger sons,

were farmers in North Yorkshire, until the youngest of three sons left for London in the 1830s, became apprenticed to, and then partner of a wholesale draper. His older daughter, Lucy, married George Maitland Stapley, the Far East merchants' clerk.

This book has its origin in two sources. The first is a handwritten family tree of the Strangwayes, prepared in the nineteenth century, and passed down through Lucy Stapley. It goes back to Henry Strangwish and is almost devoid of dates: a small section of it is reproduced in this book. The second source is the research into the Stapley line back to the late eighteenth century that had been carried out by Patrick Stapley and was sent to me in 1995. Since then, many other sources have been involved in the research, individuals, and the staff of libraries and various organisations, both public and private, who are acknowledged below.

In addition to copies of this book being produced for the family, copies, without the sections starred in the index, have been sent to the British Library to sit with the earlier 'Stapley Papers', to the City of London's Guildhall Library and to those other libraries that have been most heavily involved and helpful in providing information: the County Archives at Lewes, East Sussex, and Northallerton, North Yorkshire, and the Town Library in Tunbridge Wells.

Footnotes, printed at the bottom of the relevant page of the narrative, are indicated by superscript letters and contain information that may be of interest but does not carry forward the family story. Endnotes, printed at the end of each 'chapter', are indicated by superscript numbers and give details (day, month and year), when known, of the year-dates that appear in the main body, and give my sources of information. Where possible, the primary source has been found, by a variety of helpers, including members of local family history societies.

I am indebted to two cousins, Patrick, who provided many of the pictures and diligently edited the penultimate edition - I have tried to avoid introducing new errors - and Malcolm, who processed the photographs and maps and organised the trees. I am indebted, too, to the staff of John Brailsford for their help and patience. Above all, I must thank Audrey, my wife, who has lived for several years with a lodger called 'The Family History'.

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