

THOMAS PARROTT *of Shillington*

by Margaret Lewis (1177) in association with Wayne Parrott (775) and Harald Reksten (522)

Born around the time of the English Reformation, during the reign of Henry VIII, Thomas Parrott of Shillington, Bedfordshire, was to live through the turbulent times of the succession of Henry's children, and then the golden age of Elizabethan England. Although spending most of his life in Shillington, Thomas was probably born in Luton, around 1535, based on the marriage date of his eldest son (1574). It has been suggested that he is one of the sons of Thomas & Agnes Parrot of Luton. This Thomas signed his will in 1558 at which time his son Thomas was aged less than 21 years, so it is a possibility.

Whatever his origin, Thomas was obviously a man of means, and is frequently referred to as gentleman in documents, as were his sons. He managed to acquire quite a range of property during his lifetime. As well as holding property in Luton, Shillington and Upper Stondon in Bedfordshire, he also had land and farms in the parishes of Old Weston, Brington, Bythorn, and Leighton Bromswold in Huntingdonshire. It is believed that he was the builder of the present day Model Farm in Old Weston.

Thomas married some time before 1570 when he first appears in the Shillington register. Based on his will he had four children before this time – namely Thomas (who married 1574), Robert (married by 1592), Mary (married in 1590) and Abraham (also married in 1590). These children may have been born in Luton, as at the time of his death Thomas senior held land in Luton, which was bequeathed to his eldest son and heir, Thomas junior. There is such a long gap between the marriages of Thomas junior and his siblings, that it must raise the possibility that Thomas had in fact 2 wives, the first dying some time after the birth of Thomas junior in the mid-1550's. Thomas mentions Margaret as his wife in his will dated 1613. We can deduce her maiden name from the mention of 'Peter Ashton my wife's brother' in the will. Peter received a legacy of five Pounds and was also one of the witnesses to the will. Margaret is believed to be the daughter of Mr. Richard and Mrs. Dionis (or Dyonis) Ashton, of Shillington.

Richard was the fifth and youngest son of Mr. Peter Ashton of Old Weston, Huntingdonshire. In the 1634 Visitation of Bedfordshire, the family claimed descent from the Asshetons of Middleton, Lancashire. Presuming this to be true, Peter Ashton is likely to be a grandson of Sir Ralph Assheton, the Black Knight, the first of the Assheton family to live in Middleton. Whatever their origins the family certainly had a strong connection with Shillington, as two of Richard's brothers spent time as the rector of Shillington. Peter Ashton junior was rector there from 1531 to 1547, at which time he held 4 parish livings (Shillington; Houghton, Hunts; Tillingham, Essex; and the Chapel Royal).

Peter was followed by his younger brother John who was rector from 1547 until at least 1556. John was involved in the new religious reformation and was the first recorded English Anti-Trinitarian when in 1548 he made a recantation to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.



Model Farm, Old Weston, in 2012

Thomas Parrat had a large family of thirteen children with at least eight reaching adulthood. His son and heir was Thomas junior, who, as mentioned above, seems to be much older than the rest of the children. He was probably born in Luton in the mid-1550s and moved to Shillington as a child. On 6 December 1574 he married Audrey Welles at Shillington. Thomas and Audrey had eight children christened in Shillington from 1577 to 1592. The wills of both Thomas senior and Thomas junior mention a youngest son John, who is likely to have been born in Luton (where the registers start in 1600) as Thomas junior was living there in 1613, at the time of his father's will.

Thomas later moved to King's Walden, Hertfordshire, where some of his children married. Thomas Parratt, gentleman, of Kings Walden, signed his will on 6 August 1618, expressing a desire to be buried in Luton, which occurred on 15 October the same year. In his will, his youngest son John, was listed as 'outside England', and he would only inherit his legacy of property in Luton if he returned to England to claim it within two years. It is unknown if he made it back to England, but his absence created legal arguments amongst his siblings regarding the property.

The second son appears to be Robert, who was also probably born in Luton. By 1592 he was married to Elizabeth and they had a family of at least 12 children. The first nine were christened in Shillington (1592 – 1603) with the youngest three christened in Old Weston, Huntingdonshire (1604 - 1610). At the time of his father's will (1613) Robert was living in Old Weston but he inherited land in the neighbouring parish of Brington. Eventually Robert moved to Meppershell, Bedfordshire, where Robert Paratt, gentleman, signed his will in January 1637/8 and it was proved the following month.

Abraham Parrat was Thomas's third son. He is listed as Mr. Abraham Parret, Gent, when he married gentlewoman Mary Farren on 19 December 1590 in Molesworth, Huntingdonshire. Their first child Bridget was christened in Molesworth in 1591, then the family appears to have moved back to Shillington where the next six children were christened from 1592 to 1598. Abraham then moved to Graveley, Cambridgeshire,

where another four children were christened – 1599 to 1607. Abraham died soon after and was buried on 18 January 1607/8 in Graveley. The family then appears to have moved back to Shillington with his eldest daughter Bridget marrying Edward Fowler there on 10 February 1612/3.

Abraham's unmarried children are mentioned in their grandfather's will with Abraham's four sons inheriting land in Shillington. The eldest two, Thomas and Abraham junior, remained in Shillington, bringing up their own families there. While it is not certain what happened to his two youngest sons, Lawrence may have moved to Swineshead, Bedfordshire, where he died in February 1635/6.

Thomas's eldest daughter, and probably the last of his children born in Luton, was Mary. She married Thomas Smyth (or Smith) on 4 May 1590 in Shillington. Thomas the son of George Smyth, Esquire, of Bickleswade (aka Biggleswade), Bedfordshire, was mentioned in the 1634 Visitation of Bedfordshire. The first six of their children were christened in Shillington, from 1591 to 1605. It is unknown at present where their youngest daughter, Mercy, was christened. By 1629 Thomas and Mary had moved to Biggleswade where Thomas made his will in 1629 and it was proved in January 1630. His widow Mary moved to Potton and unfortunately died soon after. She was buried in Potton on 1 February 1630/1. In her will she mentions her three surviving brothers – Robert, John & Richard Paratt. Also mentioned is Richard's wife Elizabeth. Both Richard & Elizabeth witnessed the will.

The first of Thomas' children to be christened in Shillington was Abigail who was christened on 2 April 1570. Unfortunately Abigail was not to survive childhood, dying when she was just four years old. She was buried in Shillington on 28 December 1574. This was the start of a time of sadness as Thomas' next child was stillborn, being buried on 9 April 1571. Next followed a son John, who presumably was born prematurely and died soon after birth as he was baptised and buried on the same day, 28 November 1571.

Another son named John was born 15 months later and christened on 6 February 1572/3. John survived to adulthood and went on to study at Cambridge University where he obtained a B.A in 1592-3 and a M.A. in 1596. He was ordained a deacon in Lincoln the following year and a priest on 26 March 1599. He then took up the living of Shillington, which was presented by Trinity College. He remained rector at Shillington until his death in January 1644/5. John married Mrs. Elizabeth Monoux, daughter of Humphrey Monoux, Esq, of Wootton, Bedfordshire, on 4 February 1604/5 in Shillington. They had nine children, all christened in Shillington, between 1605 and 1615.

The next son was Lawrence who was christened on 7 March 1573/4 in Shillington. At present, it is not known what happened to Lawrence, but he is not mentioned in his father's will dated 1613.

A daughter was born next – Judith, who was christened on 23 October 1575, also in Shillington. She married Robert Dawson, gent, by 1594 and they had two children christened in Shillington – Thomas & Margaret. The couple held some land in Over Stondon, a neighbouring parish to Shillington, until at least 1602. Judith is not mentioned in her father's will by name, but it is presumed that the following bequest refers to her – “I do will give and bequeath unto the children of Robert Dawson who married my daughter twenty pounds of lawful money to be equally divided amongst them and to be paid as they shall come to the age of one and twenty years.” Perhaps Robert & Judith also moved to Potton, as a Robert Dawson was buried there on 5 December 1635.

Peter Parrat was the next son, christened on 12 January 1576/7 in Shillington. Peter moved to Cambridgeshire where he married Joan Russell in 1604 in the parish of St. Peter, Cambridge. Their first child was christened at the same church in 1606 and then the family moved to nearby Little Thetford where their remaining six children were christened between 1608 and 1621. Peter was buried at Thetford on 7 May 1626, just 11 months after the death of his wife.

The youngest surviving child of the family was Richard, who was christened on 15 March 1577/8. Richard was executor of his father's will in 1613 together with his brother John. It seems that he was not married then, or at least did not have any children by that date. Richard inherited land in Old Weston, Huntingdonshire, from his father. Richard is mentioned in his sister Mary's will dated 1630, along with his wife Elizabeth, so it seems that he married Elizabeth Godfrey, daughter of Mr Henry Godfrey, of Potton, in Potton in 1619. Richard probably had nine children and was buried on 20 August 1655 in Potton. Richard's eldest child, a daughter Mary, was christened in Potton, but was buried in Shillington on 13 July 1621. His eldest son Henry was baptized in Shillington on 11 February 1621/2. This Henry survived to live as a gentleman at Old Weston & establish a branch of the family there. The remaining 7 children, namely Ann, Thomas, Richard, ?John (died young), Abraham, John & Elizabeth were all christened in Potton.

Thomas' final and thirteenth child was still born and was buried on 1 August 1580 in Shillington. With this event his family comes to an end. Interestingly most of Thomas' children and grandchildren moved from Shillington. Only two of Abraham's sons remained there, inheriting land in Shillington from their grandfather in 1613. The last family member in Shillington was Matthew Parratt, a great-great-grandson of Thomas, who was buried on 23 November 1733.

Thomas Paratt, gentleman, of Shillington, signed his will on 20 May 1613. He was buried in Shillington on 8 October the same year and probate was granted on the estate at the PCC the following month. It seems that Margaret survived her husband by two years and is probably the Widow Paratt who was buried in Shillington on 9 June 1615.