

THOMAS family, of Coed Helen (or Alun) and Aber, Caernarfonshire

RICE THOMAS (died 1577)

the founder of this family's fortune in Caernarvonshire, was a son of Sir WILLIAM THOMAS, Llangathen, Carmarthenshire, sheriff of Carmarthenshire in 1541-2. Rice married Jane, daughter of Sir John Puleston of Caernarvon and widow of Edward Gruffydd of Penrhyn, who had died at Dublin in 1540. He was appointed by Roger Williams, the surveyor of crown lands in North Wales, to be his deputy in the counties of Anglesey, Caernarvon, and Merioneth; this doubtless helped him to acquire, in 1551, leases of the valuable manors of Aber (Caernarfonshire) and Cemaes (Anglesey). In 1553 he and his wife acquired for themselves and his heirs the grant of these two manors (*Cal. Pat. Rolls.*, 1553, 121). His first appearance in extant records as a justice of the peace for Caernarvonshire occurs in 1552. He was sheriff of Anglesey in 1563-4, and of Caernarvonshire in 1573-4.

WILLIAM THOMAS (1551 - 1586)

his son and heir, was born at Caernarvon. As a boy he was page to the duchess of Somerset, and is said to have been brought up under the same tutors as her son, lord Edward Somerset, and to have learnt three languages, Latin, Italian, and French (Sir John Wynn of Gwydir, *Memoirs*). A soldier of distinction, he served in Ireland and later in Flanders. He made his will in 1584 ' by reason I am employed in her maiesties service in Flaunders ' (*P.C.C., Spencer 2*). Sir John Wynn states that he was captain of 200 men from North Wales who went to the Low Countries with the earl of Leicester, and that he was killed at the battle of Zutphen (1586); he married Ellen, daughter of William Gruffydd of Caernarvon, a son of Sir William Gruffydd of Penrhyn, by whom he had nine children. He was a justice of the peace for Caernarvonshire from c. 1575, sheriff in 1580-1, and Member of Parliament for the county in 1574 and 1584. In January 1581, he was a purchaser from the earl of Leicester of lands in Llyn, which had formerly belonged to the abbey of Bardsey. At his death he left lands in Carmarthenshire, as well as his estates in Anglesey and Caernarvonshire.

His eldest son and heir, Sir WILLIAM THOMAS (knighted in 1603), was born in 1572 and educated at Christ Church, Oxford (matriculated 24 May 1588, B.A. 28 January 1592). He became a justice of the peace and deputy-lieutenant for Caernarvonshire, sheriff in 1607-8, and was admitted a member of the council of the Marches in 1617 (*Hist. MSS. Comm., 13th Report, App.*, iv, 254). He was a prominent and constant ally of Sir John Wynn of Gwydir. In 1605 he took steps to acquire ' Koydalen,' Caernarvon (which eventually became the family's seat) and in this project enlisted the aid of Sir John Wynn (*Cal. Wynn Papers*, 343). The family already owned property within the borough of Caernarvon, and Sir William ' principal mansion was always in that town, although he built, c. 1600, a new house at his manor of Aber, near the site of an older house, probably built by his father or grandfather. Sir William ' house at Aber, a modest Jacobean mansion with a tower, still stands. It has been known as ' Pen-y-bryn ' at least since 1672. In 1609, under the king's commission for confirming defective titles, Sir William was obliged to pay £56 13s. 4d. to the Crown for a grant of the manors of Aber and Cemaes. He died at Caernarvon in 1634, leaving a widow, six sons, and two daughters. For some undiscovered reason, he had disinherited his eldest son, John, in 1618, entailing most of the estate on his second son (*P.R.O., C142/534/112, inq. post mortem*); but in his will he left to John the moiety of the tenement called ' Y Fferme Vawre,' in the manor of Cemaes, and the remainder of other lands in Anglesey that should be unsold after the portions of his (Sir William 's) daughters and four younger sons had been paid, provided that John did not attempt to disturb his father's settlement of the estates. Sir William appointed his wife, Gaynor, his sole executrix (*P.C.C., 113, Seager*).

His second son, WILLIAM THOMAS, succeeded his father in the possession of all the family's estates in Caernarvonshire, consisting of the manor of Aber and various land and property in Caernarvon and elsewhere, including ' Coed Alen,' and also, possibly, of some specified lands in Anglesey. In 1618 he had married Catherine, daughter of Richard Parry, bishop of St Asaph. At the time of his father's death, William had two sons, Richard and Gruffydd. He was admitted a student of Gray's Inn in the year of his marriage. He was the first of the family to be identified chiefly with Aber, and so must have made his home at Pen-y-bryn. A justice of the peace for Caernarvonshire, and sheriff in 1637-8, he sat for Caernarvon borough in the Long Parliament and made some stir by his speech against deans and chapters and by other speeches. In July, 1642, however, he left to join the king, and in February 1644 was disabled by Parliament for deserting the service of the House, being in the king's quarters and 'adhering to that party.' In the same month he was rewarded by the king with the appointment of groom of the chamber to the queen (*Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series*, 1644, 14). His estates were sequestered by Parliament. In July 1650 he referred in a letter to what he had endured ' from both parties, not only since the last rising in Anglesey, but for many years before it,' and spoke of his ' extreme want of necessaries ' (N.L.W., Llanfair-Brynodol, 150). In 1651 he was able to compound for the sum of £780, the fine being later reduced to £646. He died in March 1654, leaving his eldest son and heir,

RICHARD THOMAS

an estate heavily encumbered. The family suffered a serious setback as a result of the part which William Thomas played in the Civil Wars, and it never recovered its former position. Richard, who had also compounded in 1651 for delinquency in the first and second wars, ' being an infant in the king's quarters ', seems to have been continually in financial difficulties; in 1659, he was asking his aunt, lady Grace Wynn of Gwydir, for money and complaining that his wife would allow him none (*Cal. Wynn Papers*, 2208). Richard married, in October 1654, Dorothy, eldest daughter of Edward Williams of Wig. He died without issue early in 1666; in his will he had asked to be buried in Aber church. He was succeeded by his brother

GRUFFYDD THOMAS

who, like Richard, was evidently familiar with 'pressing occasions for money' during his tenure of the estate (*P.R.O., C7/339/71*); he died without issue in 1676. The estate then passed to

JOHN THOMAS

'next in kin expectant upon the death of the said Gruffydd Thomas, the tenant for life' (*ibid.*). He would seem to have been a first cousin, the eldest son of Robert Thomas, Gruffydd's uncle. He married Gruffydd's widow, Jane, c. 1678. There is evidence which indicates that he lived at Eglwys Gwynn in Carmarthenshire before succeeding to the Thomas estates in Caernarvonshire (U.C.N.W., Garthewin MS. 2077); and that he found himself in financial difficulties very soon after entering upon his inheritance. These difficulties led him, in 1678, into transactions with the Bulkeley family of Baron Hill, Beaumaris, transactions which involved the advowson of Aber and land within that manor (U.C.N.W., Baron Hill MS. 3133). Lord Bulkeley acquired possession of the advowson, and in 1680 appears to have even gained possession of the manor, though only temporarily, for John Thomas was certainly lord of the manor of Aber from at least 1686 until his death. A partial recovery of the family's former prosperity is suggested by the fact that John Thomas was appointed sheriff of Caernarvonshire for 1693-4. Like Richard and Gruffydd before him he appears to have lived chiefly at Pen-y-bryn, Aber. He had a son, William, who matriculated at Jesus College, Oxford, in 1698, aged 18, but the son must have died before him. When John Thomas died in 1705 he was succeeded by his brother,

JOSEPH THOMAS, a cleric

Following the death of John Thomas, the manor of Aber appears to have passed out of the possession of the Thomas family. By 1715 it was certainly in the ownership of Richard, viscount Bulkeley of Baron Hill. Thereafter the Thomas family was associated with Coed Helen, Caernarvon.

Joseph Thomas is stated to have died in 1708. He was succeeded by his eldest son,

RICE THOMAS

who was admitted to the Middle Temple in 1714 and called to the Bar in 1720. He died in 1722, and was succeeded by his son, WILLIAM THOMAS, sheriff of Caernarvonshire in 1746. In 1753 William brought, unsuccessfully, an action in Chancery against Thomas James, lord Bulkeley, claiming the advowson of Aber (N.L.W., Llanfair-Brynodol MSS.; U.C.N.W., Baron Hill MS. 4590). He died in 1763 and was succeeded by RICE THOMAS (1746 - 1814), sheriff of Caernarvonshire in 1771, who was in turn succeeded by his son, also named RICE THOMAS (1771 - 1850), sheriff of Caernarvonshire in 1831-2, a quiet country gentleman, who was the last of the family in the direct male line. His sister, Elizabeth, had married, in 1792, Sir William Bulkeley Hughes of Plas Coch, Anglesey. The second son of this marriage was the Rev. Rice Robert Hughes (1800 - 1850), and it was his eldest son, RICE WILLIAM THOMAS (1841 - 1892), who inherited the Coed Helen estate, assuming the name of Thomas.

Author

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Y Cymmrodor, 1948

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