Ancestry of the Holmans of Canterbury

The earliest verified ancestor of the Holmans, millwrights of Canterbury, is John Holman, a cooper of Ramsgate, who married in 1693 and died in 1743. This article proposes a theory of the identity of his father and earlier family background.

Part 1: Captain John’s “book”

In 1800 Captain John Holman (1733-1816) wrote an account of the family history1 quoted below. I intend to make two points about it: that the account is flawed by adherence to a myth, and that Captain John is an unreliable narrator.

The ‘book’

Captain John’s account is typical of family histories told by aging relatives: it’s told with such gusto that it carries conviction, yet it’s a mix of myths, mistakes and truths.

Captain John begins by quoting research done by his brother Francis over 40 years previously:

Pedigree of the Holman’s Family taken from the Herald Office, 1758 by Francis Holman Herald & Painter. The Family came Originally from the City of Dorsett in to the Isle of Thanet, by the Name of Auther Holman, in the year 1564, who had A Son Richard from whome come William Holman, of St. Nicholas in the Isle of Thanet Gentleman, who had a son named Laurence, who Married Elizabeth Daughter of Lewes Dededore, Merchant of Canterbury in the year 1631, he left John, son & Heir an infant,

It seems that Francis had access to the College of Arms, and found out more details than appear on the published pedigree in the Visitation of Kent2, which doesn’t mention Arthur. Captain John must have been familiar with the published version too, where the pedigree signed by Lawrence Holman ends with his son and heir John. Captain John makes mistakes of names and dates here3, which indicates that he was relating the pedigree from memory rather than copying from a source. The fact that he could remember so much suggests that he’d read the pedigree many times, and that he cherished it.

By saying The Family he implies that there is only one Holman family, composed of descendants of these incomers from Dorset. I think this is a myth he had held dear for decades and didn’t question; it’s easy to see why Captain John and Francis made the comfortable assumption that Lawrence Holman’s pedigree was “theirs”. In fact evidence from wills and parish registers shows that Lawrence Holman’s line arrived in a part of Kent where Holmans had long been scattered4. There is no reason to suppose that Lawrence’s line was related to the native Holmans.

Captain John’s next statement jumps from facts (ratified by the Visitation of Kent) to fantasy:

John, son & Heir an infant, who was Married to Jane Brook, who left five sons, the Eldest was a Cooper at Ramsgate – He married Ann Wheeler of Sandwich
Apart from confirming that the John Holman who married Sarah Wheeler of Sandwich was a cooper of Ramsgate, as he stated on his wedding licence, this is fiction. Captain John uses John, son & Heir as the link to Lawrence’s line, unaware that John died as a baby. He inserts an extra generation with a marriage to Jane Brook, which is impossible given the dates: Lawrence Holman’s son and heir John lived 1663-1664; John, the cooper of Ramsgate was born in the same decade, according to his age at marriage, so there is no time for an extra generation. John the cooper stated that he was a bachelor when he married, so Jane Brook was not an earlier wife. I have found no name like Jane Brook in any Holman record, nor in the records of Captain John’s maternal ancestry. It seems he has plucked a name from somewhere in his memory in this invalid attempt to link Lawrence Holman’s family with his own.

a Cooper at Ramsgate – He married Ann Wheeler of Sandwich, from whome come Francis and John, Francis Married Ann Long of Ramsgate, and had five sons, of whome I am one (and only one living)

I hesitate to demur, since surely Captain John knew how many brothers he had, but I can only find four sons of Francis and Ann Long: Francis the painter, William the miller, and Nicholas^5.

– John Holman who had four sons, only one living, which is Francis Holman Dated Nov 1800 but two grandsons of mine living, Stephen Holman and William Holman –

These grandsons match the documentary evidence.^6 For the next part of his account, Captain John must have gone back to his records to transcribe Lawrence Holman’s arms, which don’t appear in the Visitaiton of Kent so must have been part of Francis’ research:

Family Arms Bear Three Cains or Arrow heads Argent Field Vert with a Chevron on Criss – a Hounds Head Argent Upon a Chapeau Azure up Ermine

Burke’s General Armoury does not include these exact arms, but does have arms for Holmans of London with similar elements. There is no reason to doubt that Lawrence Holman bore these arms. However there is also no reason to believe that John the cooper’s descendants had the least entitlement to them.

The next section of Captain John’s text shows such confusion that he cannot be seen as a reliable source of family history. He addresses his “book” to William Holman miller of Ramsgate who, he must know, is the son of his late brother, and therefore descended from John the cooper. These speculations make no sense:

Relation to you by me is, your Great Grand Father & my Grand Father was Brothers Children say first Cousins – or more likely your Great Grand Father & my Grand Father were Brothers – there being five of them –

The final part of the account seems to refer to Captain John’s childhood memories.

Brothers – there being five of them – Three I remember in Ramsgate and Two might be at St. Nicholas, which all the Holmans about that way came from, so I think they must be Brothers as there was only one son left who Married Jane Brook which had the five sons –
Brothers in Ramsgate: Captain John stated that John the cooper was the oldest of five brothers. No church registers of Thanet and district reveal a family of five surviving brothers. The closest I can find is a family in Ramsgate with four brothers including John, the youngest, who, I believe, was John the cooper. John’s brothers died before Captain John was born, but they all had adult sons in Ramsgate in Captain John’s childhood.

Brothers in St Nicholas: The St Nicholas at Wade registers show a single Holman family. They were the children and grandchildren of a John Holman who married a St Nicholas woman in 1696 and stayed there. Two sons of John of St Nicholas were alive when Captain John was a young boy, dying at around the same time as John the cooper. I don’t yet know how or if this John Holman of St Nicholas was related, but it’s clear that none of the St Nicholas Holmans were brothers of Holmans in Ramsgate. I’m also certain that they were not descended from William Holman of St Nicholas, the father of Lawrence Holman of Canterbury, as there is no evidence of a Holman family at St Nicholas prior to the 1696 marriage.

I suggest that as a boy Captain John was aware of nests of adult Holman males in both places, but didn’t know, or forgot, how they related to each other.

Conclusion

Captain John does not give any evidence at all of kinship with Lawrence Holman of Canterbury. He only gives evidence of wishful thinking, and attachment to his brother’s findings.

The only way that John Holman the cooper could be descended from Lawrence Holman is if Lawrence had a later son John, whose baptism has not come to light. This can happen when a church register is so badly written, or so damaged, that an entry can only be deciphered if the reader knows what to look for. I’ve examined all the images of registers of Canterbury parishes, apart from St Mary Bredin which is not online. All are impeccably written and preserved, with no undiscovered John son of Lawrence in the period 1664-1674. I imagine the St Mary Bredin register is equally clear and its transcripts accurate. Therefore John the cooper was not the son of Lawrence of Canterbury.

Part 2 looks at a plausible ancestry for John Holman.
Part 2: A father for John Holman, cooper of Ramsgate

According to John Holman’s marriage licence, he was a cooper of St Lawrence, the parish which included Ramsgate, and he was aged 26 on 17 April 1693:

I identify the John Holman who married Sarah Wheeler as the John Homans son of Stephen baptised at St Lawrence on 11 November 1666:

Birth in late 1666 means that he was aged 26 in April 1693. Baptism at St Lawrence means that he was born in the parish where he later traded. Moreover his father, Stephen, was also a cooper of Ramsgate. Other possible John Holmans were baptised at around this period, but none match as this does for date, abode and trade.

“John and Mary Sonne and daughter of Stephen and Joane homans was Baptise the 11 day of November”. It looks as though John and his sister Mary were twins; if so, John was lucky to survive, as the mortality rate for twins was appallingly high.

Stephen Holman, son of a husbandman of Wickhambreaux, was the first of his family to settle in Ramsgate. There he married Joan Ambrose from Monkton in 1650, and they had 11 children. John was the youngest of their four sons. John’s three brothers – Edward 1654-1690, Stephen 1658-1692, and Thomas 1663-1727 – all remained in Ramsgate, married, and multiplied the number of Holmans in St Lawrence parish.

Stephen Holman was buried at St Lawrence on the 15 January 1691/2:

The previous day, when the body can scarcely have been cold, two appraisers made a true and perfect Inventory of all and singular goods and Chattells of Stephen Holmans late of Ramsgate in the parish of St Lawrence in the Isle of Thanett in Kent, Cooper. This inventory
was made taken valued & appraised the fourteenth day of January Anno Dmi 1691. The original is inserted below. They listed all the items In the Hall, In a little Buttery which was apparently a kitchen, and In the Chamber. It seems a small dwelling for a family of eleven children.

Then the appraisers moved on to the items In the Shopp, where we get a glimpse of the cooper’s workshop: Also two joyntures, fifteene small tooles, halfe a [?] of rackes, and other goods in the shopp and the goods in the Backside with one grindstone, sixteene bundles of hoops and some loose hoops - £6 5s 2d. Also a pcell of [?] boards - £2 10s 0d.

Stephen’s property was valued at £103 6s 8d in total. Over half of this came from his part shares in sea vessels:

Also one sixteenth pte of the shipp whereof Mr John Pettitt is master - £39 6s 0d.
Also [?] from the said vessell - £18 0s 0d.
Also one twelfth pte of the fishing boate whereof Tho: Baily is master - £7 10s 0d.

This is the first inventory I’ve seen where the assets included fractions of boats!

At the end of the inventory is a largely illegible note added a few days later in a different hand in Latin, which seems to begin: 6 die Febr 1691 – scriptum fuit hunc inv p[er] Thomam Holmans et Joh[ann]em Holmans filios. While I’m not sure what the whole note means, it certainly refers to sons Thomas and John, and confirms that Stephen the cooper, deceased, was the same Stephen whose two youngest sons were Thomas and John.

Hence I propose Stephen Holman 1626-1691/2 as the father of John Holman the cooper.

Gillian Taylor, gillian@tcp.co.uk, July 2015.
3 Errors: The marriage in 1631 was not Lawrence’s, but his parents’. Lawrence’s wife was Mary Didier, not Elizabeth.

4 The earliest parish registers (pre 1600) record Holmans in various spellings baptised at Birchington, Canterbury, Margate, Wickhambreaux, Deal, Hernhill, Ickham, Petham and Preston. Several Holman wills predate the parish registers, especially in Deal. In addition, there were property-owning Holmans along the Sussex/Kent border (who are unlikely to be related to those in or near Thanet and Canterbury) at this early date.

5 I have seen “Richard, birth unknown, d1761” given as the fifth son. In fact, there were three Richards in the family who could have died at that date, none of them brothers of Captain John: Richard born 1684, his son Richard b1721 and his cousin Richard b1690. I haven’t seen evidence of a Richard brother of John.

6 William born 1792, and Stephen born 1785, sons of Captain John’s son Stephen.

7 The birth, parentage and death of John Holman of St Nicholas are not known. His two sons who survived into Captain John’s childhood were Stephen 1700-1742 and Edward 1716-1741.

8 From Canterbury Marriage licences series 5.

9 From parish register of St Lawrence in Thanet.

10 There are two in Kent and one in London. John Holman born 1665 in Newington next Hythe seems to have died there in 1711. A John Holman was baptised in 1665 in Leysdown, which is in Kent but not in the Thanet area. The London John Holman was born in 1667, which is an appropriate date but geographically unlikely.

11 Information about Stephen’s father Edward Holman 1577-1626 of Wickhambreaux, and the previous generation, available on request.

12 From St Lawrence parish register.

13 Inventory images from Canterbury Cathedral Archives, PRC/27/32/238.