



The Family, Life and cruel Death of the Venerable Thomas Pilcher (*alias Pilchard*)

Thomas 'Pilchard' was a Catholic priest who was born 1556/7, brought up at Battle and died a martyrs death at Dorchester on 21 March 1587

The earliest record of Thomas Pilcher/Pilchard's family name in Battle is as PYLCHER.

His great great grandfather was almost certainly John PYCHER of Battle, who had a son Thomas¹ (b.1475, d.1525) who married Elizabeth FYNCH. Elizabeth married again soon after Thomas' death, to David LEWYS, but left a will giving some idea of the Pylcher's status (*see Appendices, where there is also a family tree*).

There is also a record from 1422² of one William PYLCHER receiving an abandoned tenement in Marley Manor from the Battle Abbey estate – although there is no definite linkage this suggests that there were Pylchers in Battle at least two generations before John.

Thomas and Elizabeth had five recorded children, Luke (b.ca.1501), Thomas (b. ca. 1503), Katherine, Anne and John. John became a monk at Battle Abbey and was still there at the Dissolution, signing the surrender of the abbey and receiving a pension of 10 Marks (£6 13s 4d) – he had taken the name John Benyng, which we find again in the Transcript of Sussex Wills³ *'and my body to be buried yn the chapepell of our blessed lady yn the sought yle of the paryshe church of battell, John Benyng, alias Pylcher, clerk'* .

Thomas was clearly one of the accumulators of real estate in Battle and the steward of Battle Abbey conceded him a plot of land 'in the marketplace' (that is the old marketplace at the junction of High Street and Mount Street) which measured 30 feet by 30 feet, on which to build a new house. Thomas went on to become an Inquest Juror and affeerr (a price fixer) for the abbey⁴.

Luke was a choirboy at the abbey (as presumably would have been Thomas and John) and would have been educated there and to prove this the abbey accounts show that Luke wore out three pairs of shoes in six months in 1510⁵. His was a worldly future and twenty years later he was a prominent High Street burgess and an inquest juror (in his own right although it should be noted that these positions were semi-hereditary). On top of this he was the abbot's rent collector and managed abbey property in London and Essex, as well as providing cattle to the abbey for 25s 4d a (£1.27) year. We also know that in 1527 he took the copyhold of 10 acres of pasture on the western edge of Battle and held a messuage on the High Street in 1547⁶, so he survived the local economic turmoil of the dissolution of the abbey in 1538 and was presumably a relatively wealthy layman. Pilchers were still living in

Battle when in 1662 Thomas Pillcher, '*gent. of Barrack Farmhouse*', was assessed for no less than five flues⁷.

For the family history we are indebted to an on-line study⁸: Luke married Alice (unknown surname) and they recorded eight children: Sons David - b. ca.1526; d. ca.1576 at Battle; Lawrence - b. ca.1527 who had a daughter called Alice; and Thomas - b. ca.1529; d. ca.1573. There were five daughters, Joan, Alice, Agnes, Mercy and Margaret.

David, Luke's oldest child, married a daughter of William HAYE of Robertsbridge and Joan TUFTON of Northiam, daughter of Sir Nicholas TUFTON and Margaret HEVER. Sir Nicholas held lands all around Battle, at Robertsbridge Ewhurst, Bodiam, Mountfield, Sedlescombe, Ore, Fairlight, Beckley, Peasmarsh, Udimore, Rye and in Kent. He served as coroner and steward of Hastings Rape, and was Justice of the Peace in 1532 and 1538, commissioner of sewers in 1534, and was a nominee for sheriff three times. Descendants of Nicholas TUFTON became earls of Thanet and Margaret HEVER was daughter and heir of John HEVER of Cranbrook, and a descendant of the Hevers of Kent, the founders of Hever Castle. This might indicate that the Pilchers were moving up in the world or the Hayes were on the way down or both. It appears impossible to determine which of the Tufton's five daughters married David Pilcher, but it may have been Joane.

It was David Pilcher and his wife who were the parents of the man who was called Thomas PILCHARD at his death. Thomas was the oldest child of David and was born in Battle ca.1556-7. He had two brothers Luke, who may never have married, plus John and three sisters Anna - b. about 1560; who married William FRENCH a tailor, ship-owner and merchant of Rye, plus Mercy and Constance who both also eventually moved to Rye. John moved to Burwash and married twice.

In the mid and late 1500s and into the 17th century Battle was a hotbed of Catholic recusancy (*See article about this in Section O*). The second Sir Anthony Browne, soon to become Viscount Montagu inherited Battle Abbey in 1548 and married the staunch Catholic Magdalen Dacre in 1554. In 1596 Lady Montague is known to have a resident catholic priest and school master⁹ and it is likely that Thomas may have had some education within the Abbey walls before he left Battle, particularly as this would have been only just after the reign of the catholic Queen Mary I (r. 1553-1558) and in the early catholic 'tolerant' part of Elizabeth I's.

The story of Thomas' life from this point forward is reasonably well recorded^{10,11,12,13,14}. He went to Balliol College, Oxford in 1574, and Oxford, particularly Balliol, at that time remained a '*strong centre of papistry*'. He had a distinguished time there, becoming a Fellow in 1576 and M.A. in 1579, when he served as Bursar. But this was the time when the

tolerance of Elizabeth I towards Catholics faded – eyes and ears were on him and he was suspected of being attached to Catholicism.

He confirmed these suspicions in 1580, going to Reims to explore how to become a Catholic priest. His departure was noted by a government agent, which record is in the National Archives¹⁵. Elizabeth's spies were on the lookout for Catholic priests as by now the practice of Catholic priesthood was regarded as high treason. After a short delay he arrived at the English College at Reims to start his training, the college diary noting that this was on 20 November 1581. The English College at Reims had been founded by Cardinal Allen, specifically to train English priests to work with English Catholics.

Thomas was ordained a sub-deacon at Soissons 9 June 1582, to deacon at Laon on 21 September 1582 and, also at Laon, with three others from the English College, to the priesthood on 4 March 1583 returning to Reims to celebrate his first mass. On 4 May 1583 he left for England. He worked in the West Country and may have adopted the name PILCHARD there to fit in better. He seems to have worked very hard, we are told regularly chastising himself and never sleeping in a bed. He quickly attracted the attention of the authorities and was arrested and imprisoned in 1585. He was fortunate that by an act of leniency 72 imprisoned Catholic priests were allowed to go into permanent exile and Thomas and 23 others made their way back to Reims. He left again on 20 January 1586 to be smuggled back to England, to face certain death if arrested.

Although he went back to the West Country he was actually detained in London after being recognised by an old Oxford acquaintance. He was sent to prison and trial at Dorchester. Whilst in prison he continued his work, helping, consoling and converting other prisoners. At the beginning of March 1587 he was committed to trial, which '*due to his constancy*' took nearly a fortnight even though it would move to the foregone conclusion that he was guilty of high treason. The penalty for high treason was hanging, drawing and quartering and the sentence was carried out an hour later.

The events of his martyrdom all appear to come from local witnesses and down the years may have become somewhat embellished but remain consistent. The description of the execution is of a difficult death, which those of a squeamish nature may wish not to read.

Thomas Pilchard was tied to a hurdle on 21 March 1587, a sympathetic Protestant minister said to him '*Oportet te gloriari in Christo*' (You must glory in Christ) and he was roughly dragged from the prison to the site of execution in Dorchester. By the time he arrived he was in a poor state and fainting, but was still able to speak on the scaffold, again showing his great piety. The regular hangman was not available and a 'cook' was hired to perform the sentence. Following Thomas' hanging the rope either broke or was cut too soon as he was still conscious enough to stand. At this point the cook had to be goaded to carry on and

due to his inexperience or possibly cruelty prolonged the process of disembowelling, at which the crowd cried out to him to rapidly finish the agony. Thomas was heard to utter the words 'Miserere mei' and one account suggests that he even cast out his own intestines. His body was finally quartered.

Various vivid stories of misfortune, apparitions and hauntings exist concerning those involved in Thomas' trial and execution, such as falling into adversity and premature deaths, as well as reports of prescient dreams by Dorchester folk which always ended in death or misfortune of some sort. Thomas Pilchard's terrible death was not easily forgotten in Dorchester. Thomas was declared a martyr by Pope Leo XIII on 4 December 1886¹⁶

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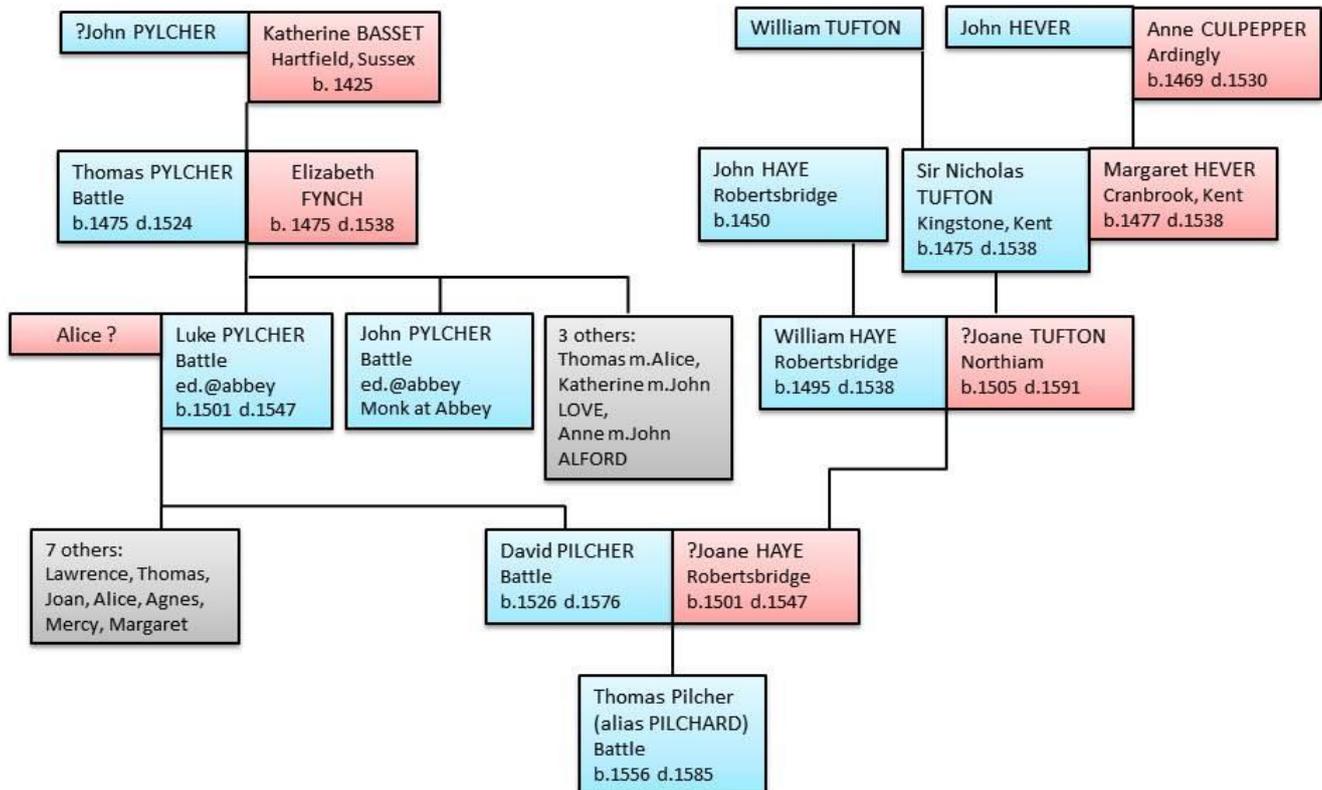
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Endnotes:

1. S W Lawson's website / Reed
2. Searle – Lordship
3. SRS wills
4. Searle – Lordship
5. Searle – Lordship
6. Searle – Lordship
7. Martin
8. S W Lawson's website / Reed
9. Foord – BABC
10. to 14. Challoner, Knox, Pollen, Wainwright, Whatmore
15. Whatmore
16. Pollen

Appendix 1

Basic family tree for Thomas Pilcher (alias Pilchard)



Appendix 2

Will of Elizabeth (Fynch?) Pylcher Lewys - January 13, 1538

The following is taken from "The English Ensigns," by Paul C. Reed. The spellings etc. were of the time

In the name of god amen yn the yere of owr lorde god M ccccc xxxiiij & the xiiij day of Januarye I Elyzabeth lewys of the p[ar]yshe of battell ... make thys my p'sent testament ... fyrst y bequeth my sowle to almythey god to owr blessyd lady saynt mary & to all the hly co[m]pany of hevyn my body to be buryed yn the chappell of owr blessyd lady yn the p[ar]yshe chrche of battell aforesayd nyght [sic] to the place where davyd lewys late my husband ys buryed ... [she gave 4d. to the high altar, gave a pound of wax to maintain the light before the blessed Trinity each year for eight years, she left 33s. for masses, alms and charitable works on the day of her burial, 20s. "all my monthys day" and another 20s. "att my yerys mynde"; she also stipulated that masses be said for her for three years after her death]

...It' I bequeth to Kateryn the Wyfe of John love a sylver salt vj sylver sponys & my grete carvyd chest

...It' I bequeth to Alyce the wyfe of luke pylcher my best furred gown & to the same luke vj sylver sponys

...It' I bequesth to Alyce the wyfe of Thomas pylcher my russett gowne purflyd wyth shankys [fur from the legs of animals used for trimming outer garments] & my ij best kyrtels [an outer petticoat]

...It' I bequeth to Johanne the doughter of luke pylcher my lytyll payer of corall bodys [bodices?] gawdyd wt sylver & a fyne shete

...It' I bequeth to Elyzabeth the doughter of kateryn love & to Thomas pylcher to eyther of they a fyne shete

...It' I bequeth to Thomas pylcher the fether bed that I lye yn yn the loft chamber over the hall wt all that belongyth therto & all the other beds yn the howse ... accept the grett fether bed yn the chamber next to the steyers the whyche I bequeth to Edward alford wt all thynghys that belongyth to ytt ... to be yn the kepyng of Thomas pylcher unto the tyme that the sayd Edward comyght to the age of xxij yerys ... & yf the sayd edward do happen to dye ... [it is to remain to] the other chyldren of chylde of Anne late the wyfe of John alford

... It' I bequeth to Johanne Alford a matteras a blankett a bolster & a cov'lett

It' I bequeth to John pylcher otherwyse callyd benyng an old nobyll

It' I bequeth to laurens pylcher an angell nobyll

It' I bequeth to the forsayd Edward Alforde iij sylver sponys

It' I bequeth to the forsayd Johanne Alforde my grett barred gyrdyll wt sylver & blewe corse & a great payer of bodys of corral gawded wyth sylver & iij sylver sponys

It' I bequeth to alyce the wyfe of thomas pylcher my best gowne lyned wt saynt Omerys wursted & my blake worsted kyrtyll

It' I bequeth to Johanne Symond wedow my other gowne lyned wt saynt omers worsted It' I bequeth to kateryn the wyfe of John love my second best furred gowne

It' I wyll that the goddys before bequethyd to the children of John Alford shall remayne yn the kepyng & bestowyng as ytt ys above rehersyd

... It' I Wyll that all the stufte yn the byggar chest yn the chamber wher I lye shall be bestowed to Edward Alford & Johanne Alford yndyfferently

... It' I bequeth to Rychard love sonne of the forsayd katyn love my second slyver cuppe It' I bequeth to keteryn smyth my rounde gowne purfyllid wt shankys

...It' I wyll that yf luke pylcher wyll nott delyver to Thomas pylcher all the evydend[e]s that he hath or any man for hym co[n]cernyng the howse wyth the appertenance[e]s that I now dwell yn yn battell wtyn one moneth next after my deth that the same luke shall have nothyng of the goodys to hym before bequethyd

...It' I wyll that yf Wyllyam pylcher do clayme or sue or vex or trobyll Thomas pylcher for any tytyll or untrest that he wold have yn the house that I swell yn then I wyll that the same thomas shall have lxxxiijs iiijd the whyche I have lent the same Wyllyam before thys tyme

... It' I wyll yt John love shall pay or cause to be payd ... to Thomas pylcher my sonne iiijli xvjd the whyche he become dettor to pay unto me or ellys he nor hys wyfe to have no part of the goodys & stufte before ... bequethyd

The resydue of all my goodys ... nott bequethyd ... I geve & bequeth to Thomas pylcher my sonne Whome I ordyn & make my sole executor ... & I ordayne the foresayd luke pylcher to be the overseer therof thys wytnessyth s[ir] John catyto p[ar]yshe preyst of Battell Robert trolloppe John aylard & other