

WILLIAM BALDOCK

1748/9 – 1812

Smuggler, Property Tycoon and Gentleman.

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To avoid confusion, the subject of this article will be referred to as William or William Baldock while his nephew William Henry Baldock will be referred to as W. H. Baldock.

In the space of just sixty years, this allegedly dirty, uncouth cowhand on the Seasalter Marshes had amassed an estate said to be worth £1.1m and was building the largest private house in nineteenth century Kent at the time of his death. When Petham House passed out of the family in the mid 1840's the next owner demolished parts of it to make it more manageable.

J. R. V. Thompson in his House on the Hill, a study of Petham through the centuries, states that the Baldock family had farmed there for generations This seems a little strange since the name first appears in the baptism register in 1793, the parents being Henry and Sarah Baldock, almost certainly not related to our Baldocks.



William Baldock of Petham near Canterbury by T Dinsdale

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BALDOCK THE SMUGGLER

William was born in Elham in 1748/9 the second or third son of Richard and Eleanor Baldock, Richard being the licensee of the Chequers Inn in the village. William's brother Richard born a year earlier, joined the Customs service and was appointed Riding Officer at Herne in 1785. If William had been a cowherd on the Seasalter Marshes, this would have given him an unrivalled knowledge of the marshland topography which would have been very useful in his smuggling career.

Between his baptism and an advertisement which William placed in the Kentish Gazette in June 1772, there seems to be no documentary evidence for those early years. This advertisement could be significant in pinpointing the transition away from the marshes. In it he advertises for sale 20 bats of maiden ash, each bat weighing half a ton and lying in the parish of Elham and inviting enquiries to the Chequers Inn, Elham. A bat is a quantity of wooden lathes or battens used for hanging tiles on roofs.

In 1776, William purchased two hoys and was advertising in the Kentish Gazette that he was sailing to London from Whitstable regularly and had a large storehouse at the harbour for the storage of hops. Wallace Harvey in his account of the Seasalter Company wondered what these hoys were used for when not sailing to London with a legitimate cargo!

The Seasalter Company had been founded by Dr Isaac Rutton of Ashford who had leased Seasalter Parsonage Farmhouse from the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury, Lord of the Manor of Seasalter. The farmhouse may still be seen in Genesta Avenue, off Joy Lane. Although he never lived at Seasalter, various people were appointed to mastermind operations. Contraband was brought ashore at the Blue Anchor and transported across the marshes through Yorkletts, Hernehill, and Faversham where one of Dr Rutton's sons owned the large house on the corner of Brogdale Road; thence to Whitehill and across the Downs to Blue Cross Farm high above Lenham. Dr Rutton's other son Matthias, as Vicar of Sheldwich and Rector of Baddlesmere and Leaveland, was ideally placed to monitor movements of Customs Officers in the area. From Lenham the contraband was transported towards London.



Parsonage
Farmhouse

Dr Rutton died in 1792 and his sons alienated the remaining term of the lease to William Baldock, JP., owner of St. Dunstan's Brewery and living in St. George's Street, Canterbury. Various people came to occupy the farmhouse, especially from Dover and they returned much better off and became respected citizens in the town. The success of the Company was in large measure due to the distinction between poacher and gamekeeper being distinctly blurred. This probably explains why the shoot-outs and captures which occurred around the Kentish coast with other gangs never happened at Seasalter. William's other nephew William Hobday Baldock who followed in his father's footsteps, had been appointed coast waiter at Herne in 1799 and Riding Officer at Herne, Whitstable and Reculver in 1800. The occasional capture of contraband seems to have been arranged to fool the authorities rather than to stamp out the trade. The Kentish Gazette reported on 4 August 1795 that "On Tuesday last was seized between Faversham and Herne by Mr Richard Baldock, (William's brother), and another officer of the Customs 13 casks of brandy." No record of a consequent prosecution can be found.

William Baldock made a substantial change to the Seasalter operations. He had amassed sufficient money to purchase the St. Dunstan's Brewery in Canterbury and contraband was now re-routed into the city where, presumably, it was distributed around East Kent in the brewery drays without suspicion. He instigated a warning system along the Whitstable Road. When the Customs Officers or the Dragoons rode through the city in the direction of St. Thomas' Hill, a house at the top of the hill would hoist a broom up a chimney. This would be seen by the next house in the chain and repeated until the information reached Seasalter. Wallace Harvey has estimated that this took seven minutes. For contraband already on the road, the topography was such that there was plenty of woodland cover in which to hide until the danger had passed.

During William's tenure of the parsonage farmhouse, various Whitstable inhabitants had become wealthy overnight. Many of them had earned small salaries as coast-watchers but built large houses in the town. The Kings and the Adleys spring to mind. A thriving property market had developed between the members of the Company, the property being conveyed by a Dover solicitor Edward Knocker, who had lived at the farmhouse previously. A possible consequence of this was that in the 1840's the Attorney General ordered a number of locals to appear before him to disentangle the ownership of various land and properties held in trust for the poor of Whitstable including the Hoy public house. These locals included Thomas Foord a solicitor from Chestfield, William's step-daughter-in-law Harriet and William Hyder, the last director of the Company who lived at Court Lees. In answering the Attorney General, Foord stated that he had leased the Hoy Public House in Whitstable High Street to William in 1791. Later Foord was to use the Hoy as the headquarters of his illegal repatriation of French prisoners of war - an occupation as lucrative as smuggling!

In 1798, William Baldock alienated the remaining lease on the farmhouse to one of the King family although this did not signal his withdrawal from smuggling. In order to facilitate the passage of contraband along the Whitstable Road to Canterbury, he unlawfully enclosed land belonging to the Lord of the Manor of Whitstable in 1801 and built a substantial house and stables at the top of Fox's Cross Road. He was defended in the magistrates' court by his old friend Thomas Foord and was let off with a caution. In 1806, he repeated the process on the opposite side of the road and again appeared in court ably defended by Foord with the same result!



BALDOCK THE PROPERTY TYCOON

As the century drew to a close Baldock turned his attention to property using his ill-gotten gains to purchase the site of St. John's Chapel and burial ground in St. John's Lane from the Council in 1798. In 1810, he advertised two houses in the High Street to rent. A large number of deeds in the cathedral archives give substance to his appetite for buying and selling properties sometimes in association with William Delmar or John Rigden, a Faversham brewer. Perhaps the most prestigious estate was Elmstone Court which carried with it the advowson of Elmstone Church and which passed into the Delmar family after his death. Land at Ospringe also carried with it the patronage of Ospringe church valued in his will at £9,100. Poldhurst Manor in Upper Harbledown passed to his nephew W. H. Baldock. During the 1790s he built

houses in St. George's Place and the lower end of the New Dover Road. Four houses in Wincheap were purchased in 1798 which were utilised as a barracks and furnished with berths, tables and forms. He is recorded as owning 1, St. Margaret's Street in 1800.

However, William Baldock is best known for the building of the infantry barracks at Northgate which he let to the government at the rate of 6d. per day per soldier. About 2,000 soldiers could be accommodated there. However, there are discrepancies in the sources as to the chain of events. Hasted records that the government purchased land from Sir Edward Hales to erect a cavalry barracks in 1794. Catalogue notes in the Cathedral archives suggest that William purchased the land known as St. Gregory's Estate in about 1793 from Stephen Bradley and Henry Irons for £1,175 and that by 1804 he had completed the barracks on five acres of land.

After his uncle's death, W.H. Baldock sold off parcels of land for development in the Military Road/Ruttington Lane area suggesting that William had purchased more than 5 acres originally. Extracts from probate documents suggest that the land was purchased in small lots from the Hales Estate by various agents on his behalf.

Whatever the chain of events, it is beyond doubt that early in 1812, William Baldock sold the infantry barracks to the government for £25,500.

BALDOCK THE GENTLEMAN

By the early 1800's William was a JP and an overseer of the poor in St. Dunstan's parish presumably by his ownership of the brewery in St. Dunstan's Street. He was becoming respectable at least on the outside. Whether he entirely disassociated himself from smuggling in his later years is not clear. His last appearance in court over the construction of another house on the Whitstable Road suggests that as late as 1806, he still had interests in that direction.

He married a widow, Elizabeth Jackson, at St. Mary Breadman Church in July 1781. They had no children but he gained a step-daughter-in-law Harriet Jackson. He appears to have taken her to his heart. She married into the Delmar family in St. Andrew's Church in 1784. Her husband Charles Delmar was from a third generation Huguenot immigrant family. This marriage did the Delmar family no harm financially. Charles, a Freeman of the City by patrimony, acquired a third share in the Beercart Lane/Stour street brewery in addition to his profession as a perfumier. He also featured in various property deals with William Baldock and Rigden the brewer. Harriet and Charles' six children were provided for in William's will. James inherited the share of the brewery on his mother's death and carried on a beer and spirit outlet in St Margaret's Street where he lived. He is credited with becoming the first Conservative member of the City Council.

Following the alliance between the Baldocks and the Delmars, some Delmar children were named after William Baldock. Harriet's fifth son, Baldock Delmar born in 1800 became a lawyer. William Baldock Delmar born two years after William Baldock's death, was the scion of a collateral branch of the family; his father William Delmar had acquired Elmstone Court from William's trustees. After W. B. Delmar took Holy Orders, his father appointed him Rector, a position which he filled until his death. Another of Harriet's sons, Jackson Delmar, appointed to Swalecliffe Vicarage by his mother, married a Patty Baldock Godwin from Kingsnorth who may well have been a niece of William Baldock who left her £3,000 in his will.

To complete this dynastic alliance, William's step-grand-daughter in-law Elizabeth Delmar married his nephew W.H. Baldock in 1814. After Elizabeth Baldock's death they moved into Petham House. She bore him four sons and a daughter.

William Baldock had taken up racing and regularly raced horses on the Barham Downs. He had become respectable and this is underlined by the fact that the trustees of his will were Sir Edward Knatchbull MP of Brabourne and Nicholas Toke of Godinton House, Ashford.

There is a portrait of William Baldock in the ownership of Canterbury City Council although some doubt its attribution.

Exactly when he had bought the Petham estate is not known but he had begun building a massive house on three sides of a courtyard. The estate also comprised a number of tenanted farms. Although not finished until nearly two years after his death the impression is given that he was living there with his wife Elizabeth. According to his will, there was a well-stocked cellar along with bequests to his gardener, bailiff and servants past and present. As noted above, the next owner demolished part of it and, according to Thompson, the remainder of the original mansion was demolished in 1985. The present but smaller Petham House was built on the site. Just before his death he had built a schoolhouse for the village children.

His will shows a generosity to those less well off than himself. As if to underline his Elham roots he had left 120 guineas to the poor of Elham. The medieval Canterbury Hospitals were given £25 each with the stipulation that the bequest be shared equally between the residents rather than go into the common purse. The Sea Bathing Hospital at Margate and the Kent and Canterbury Hospital were remembered as were the Widows and Orphans of clergy in the Diocese of Canterbury.

There were some eighty bequests in the will which with copious legal jargon ran to 40 pages! In round figures he had made bequests amounting to £72,800 and had granted £3,900 in annuities. He had been at pains to state that his estate would pay all taxes due which initially amounted to £2,560. However, the annuities would have attracted tax on each payment into the future and the total tax is difficult to assess. The Revenue file was not closed until 1850 which must mark the death of the last surviving annuitant.

His widow Elizabeth had been granted a life interest in the house at Petham. On her death in 1813, it had passed to his nephew W. H. Baldock as did other property not specified in the will. Some 700 acres had been placed with the trustees. Lands and tenements at Blean had been left to William, another nephew. A house in St. Paul's was left to George Delmar and a house in Seasalter to his other nephew Richard.

As early as 1816, the trustees informed the Revenue that the amount of the legacies was so great that real estate would have to be sold.

We need to ask two questions: (1) 'Was William Baldock a millionaire on his death?' and (2) 'Where did his fortune go?'

In framing the answer to (1) a problem arises. We know from the Revenue file that his money and personal effects had been valued between £100,000 and £125,000. This accounted for the £0.1m leaving £1m. to be found. In 1812 inheritance tax was only levied on cash and personal effects; land and property were exempt. Solicitors would have taken months to compute the value of his estate but, as real estate was not taxable they had no reason to do so. If the £25,500

which he received for the infantry barracks was a market valuation then he must have owned land and property equivalent to 39 barracks! That the Observer could have reached a meaningful estimate of his wealth within ten days of his death seems highly unlikely.

With regard to question (2) some commentators have suggested that the entire fortune was swallowed up in the collapse of the Canterbury Union Bank in 1841. It is true that W. H. Baldock was the major beneficiary of his uncle's will and he was one of the partners in the bank. Almost certainly the equity tied up in Petham House was realised to meet his debts. By 1843 he was living at Godmersham having retired from public life. He suffered a major stroke in 1844 and died the following year before the bankruptcy case had concluded.

However, W. H. Baldock was not the only beneficiary. William Baldock left £10,000 to W. H. Baldock in tail-male for any great nephews. In the event there were four and so each received £2,500 after their father's death. In total he left over £45,000 and property to members of the Baldock family who were not connected with the Canterbury Bank.

CONCLUSION

During the course of this work I have sometimes wondered whether there were two William Baldocks. How could a dirty, foul-mouthed cowherd become a wealthy, generous family man accepted by the county gentry? I had assumed that he came from an agricultural labourer's background until I checked out the Elham connection. The family tomb in the churchyard is not the resting place of a labouring family. A large table tomb with quite delicate carving on the corner pillars and enclosed with iron railings contains seven members of the family in the vault beneath. His grandfather Richard had built a cottage in 1744 which still stands in the Rows behind the High Street..



The Baldock family tomb at Elham

I have concluded that he was a clever young man who assumed the guise of a dirty foul-mouthed cowerd to get onto the marshes and observe the *modus operandi* of the Seasalter Company without arousing suspicion. His offer for sale of 20 bats of maiden ash in the Kentish Gazette in 1772 seems to indicate that his centre of activity had shifted away from Seasalter marshes and that he had been accepted by the Company.

As regards his estate, for the reasons stated above, it is unlikely that he could have left £1.1m. although that he was very wealthy is beyond dispute.

Perhaps the epitaph on his tombstone in Petham Churchyard should have the last word. It is the largest memorial in the churchyard, a table tomb with marble panels in lanceolate iron railings. Wildly overgrown, it is impossible to get close enough to read the inscription which I have taken from a pamphlet in the Cathedral Archives:-.



William and Elizabeth's tomb at Petham

“In the vault beneath are deposited the remains of William Baldock who died 21 December 1812 in the 65th year of his age. His mild and unassuming manners gained him respect from all ranks in society. By a persevering industry and most excellent judgement he accumulated a large fortune which was liberally devoted to the interest of his family and to all who required and solicited his assistance. The many good qualities of his heart will render his loss severely felt and universally regretted. Also the remains of his wife Elizabeth wife of the above William Baldock Esq. who died 22 June 1813 in the 81st year of her life.”

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