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The Cressy Family of Rothamsted

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IN the north (Rothamsted) transept of Harpenden Church there is a mural tablet surrounded by a framework of stone carried out in low relief. Within this framework are brasses of a gentleman and his wife kneeling at *pries dieu*. Above the figure of the man there is a shield of arms thus:—Quarterly of four. I and IV, argent, a lion rampant queue fourchee sable for CRESSY: II, three bars or, on a chief of the first two pallets between as many gyrons of the second, an inescutcheon argent (charged in the dexter chief with what is erroneously described by Cussans as an estoille)¹ for MORTIMER: III, ermine, three bars gules for HUSSEY; with a blank impalement. Above the figure of the woman there is a lozenge uncharged, and in the centre is a larger shield bearing the Cressy, Mortimer and Hussey quarterings with a blank impalement and surmounted by a helmet with this curious crest: an unclothed man, his head wreathed with ribbons which hang down his back, holding in his left hand a shield (argent) charged with a Cross of St. George and poising a lance in his right hand. The figure is standing in, or arising from, a kind of palisade.

Beneath the figures of the man and his wife appears the following inscription in black letter:—

Here under lyeth buryed ye body of Willm Cressye, Esquier, wch. Deceased ye 24 Daye of Octobre in ye

¹ *History of Herbs*: Vol. 1. Dacorum Hundred. p. 361. This charge is of great interest. It is slightly different in the two shields: in the first it resembles a serpent's head about to swallow a small bird-like figure, and in the second (larger) shield the serpent's head is more like the form of a bird. The charge is singularly curious—perhaps unique in English heraldry. In a most interesting article in *Notes and Queries*, 1934, Vol. CLXVI, pp. 255-6, Mr. H. C. Andrews, F.S.A., suggested that it is meant to represent the arms of the Visconti family, Dukes of Milan, viz.: argent, a serpent wreathed in pale azure, crowned or, swallowing a human child. The article suggests that Hugh de Mortimer (of whom hereafter) attended the marriage of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, with Violante, d. of Galazzo Visconti, at Milan in 1368. A large retinue of Englishmen attended Clarence among whom may well have been Hugh de Mortimer, whose great-grandmother, Gladys, was the d. of Llewellyn, Prince of Wales. As a recipient of one of the Visconti jewelled badges bearing the Visconti arms it is suggested that Mortimer adopted these arms on an inescutcheon on his own coat in memory of the occasion. It is unfortunate that the charges on the inescutcheon on the Harpenden brass are very small and considerably worn, but the small bird-like figure about to be swallowed by the serpent (?) may in fact be meant to represent the body of a child, as in the Visconti arms.



[Photo: F. & H. Thurston.]

MEMORIAL TO WILLIAM CRESSY AND HIS WIDOW, GRACE JOHNSON, IN
HARPENDEN CHURCH.



ffirst yere of Quene Elizabeth. Grace Johnsō his wyfe Died ye 14 Daye of February, 1571, and was one of ye doughters of Robt. Darkenall of Pensharste in ye Countie of Kente.

The family of de Creçi, Creçi, or Cressy, as the name is variously spelt, first emerges in Harpenden in 1348 when Ralph de Creçi was a witness to a grant of land in "Kyniston in the parish of Whethamsted"² by Thomas and Matilda de Haulton to Roger and Alice Kyniston.³ The date of this deed (4th February, 1347-8) is significant as being only two years after the battle of Creçi, a fact which led Cussans to suggest that Ralph de Creçi may have been present at that famous action and have adopted his surname therefrom. If this supposition is correct the crest of the family as shown in the armorial achievement of William Cressy in Harpenden Church may be in allusion to the military service of the founder of the family fortunes, who no doubt had some considerable opportunities of enriching himself with plunder during the campaign. In the thirteenth century one Roger de Cressie married Isabel, daughter and co-heiress of Hubert de Rie (or Rye), lord of the manor of Studham on the Herts and Beds border,⁴ but from the printed pedigree of this family it does not appear to have been connected with the Harpenden Cressys. It may, however, be noted that the family to which Roger de Cressie belonged became the ancestor of the Nottingham, Lincoln and Yorkshire families of that name.

About the year 1355 Ralph de Creçi became the owner by purchase of Rothamsted having already obtained other property in Harpenden. He seems to have become a personage of some local importance as his name appears as a witness to Letters Patent of 38 Ed. III (1365), which are recited in Edward IV's Charter to the Abbot and Convent of St. Albans.⁵ He died (presumably) in 1382, as in that year his son,

² I.e. the manor of Annables (so called from the family of that name) or Kingsbourne Hall, Harpenden. Until 1859 Wheathampstead and Harpenden were one parish.

³ Cussans. *History of Herts*: Vol. III. Dacorum Hundred. p. 355.

⁴ Clutterbuck. *History of Herts*: Vol. I, p. 492.

⁵ *Ibid.* Appendix, p. 11.

Edmund de Cressy, paid relief at the court of the Abbot of Westminster for the lands of his father.⁶ Edmund held his own courts at Rothamsted from 1382 to 1397.⁷ He married Matilda, daughter and heir of Lawrence Ayote (or Aiete) of Ayot St. Lawrence, Herts; lord of the manor of Dodford, Northants; which he inherited from his father, William Ayote, who married Lettice, daughter and heir of the original owner, Sir Robert de Keynes.⁸ Lawrence Ayote had married Joanna, daughter and eventual heir of Hugh de Mortimer, lord of the manors of Chelmarsh, Shropshire and Luton, Beds; and had thus become lord of these manors in addition to Dodford.⁹ In right of his wife, Matilda (Ayote) Edmund de Cressy succeeded to the manors of Dodford, Chelmarsh and Luton. By his marriage Edmund's descendants became entitled to quarter the arms of Mortimer and Ayote,¹⁰ but it is curious that they appear to have used the former and omitted the latter.¹¹

Edmund de Cressy was succeeded by his son Edmund, whose name occurs several times as owing suit at the Abbot of Westminster's court. In 1412 he¹² was a witness to a grant by Thomas at Boure of Harpenden

⁶ *Victoria County History (Herts)*: Vol. II, p. 303.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Bridges. *Hist. & Antiquities of Northants.* Vol. I, pp. 51, 52.

⁹ Eyton. *Antiquities of Shropshire*, Vol. III, p. 11. Baker. *Hist. of Northants.* Vol. I, p. 355. C.f. also Austin. *Hist. of Luton.* Vol. I, p. 150.

¹⁰ *Vert.*, on a chevron argent three pheons sable.

¹¹ *Vide* the brass to William Cressy at Harpenden. I am unable to account for the 3rd quartering, Hussey, on William Cressy's achievements which also appears on the tomb of Sir John Cressy (of whom hereafter) at Dodford. A possible explanation would be the marriage of the second Edmund Cressy (whose wife's name is unknown) with a Hussey heiress. A Sir Robert Huse (the older form of Hussey) of Sempringham, Lincs (will proved 1491) may have been related to this conjectural heiress.

The omission of the Ayote arms may have been because Lawrence Ayote's only son William (brother of Matilda) was a Clerk who was outlawed for felony. *Vide* Inq. p. m. of 28 Ed. III, taken after the death of Lawrence Ayote in 1353 (quoted by Cussans. *Hist. of Herts*: Vol. II. Brodwater Hundred. p. 232). It may be that this outlawry extinguished the family's right to bear arms, or that Matilda's (Cressy) descendants were averse to perpetuating the arms of a family whose heir had been outlawed.

¹² Clutterbuck's pedigree (*Hist. of Herts*: Vol. I, p. 407) gives three Edmunds, but from the probable dates of birth, etc., I am inclined to think that there were only two generations of that name.

for lands known as Battersfordfield in the parish of Wheathampstead.¹³ At Edmund's death his son John succeeded to his estates. He married Christina, daughter of William Wylde and his wife Cecilia.¹⁴ William Wylde was perhaps a member of the family of that name which supplied several incumbents to Hertfordshire parishes in the 14th and 15th centuries.¹⁵ John Cressy and his wife were buried at Dodford. They had two sons, Thomas (who died without issue) and John. The younger son John distinguished himself in the French wars under John of Lancaster, Duke of Bedford,¹⁶ was knighted, and became a Privy Councillor in France and Governor of Lycieux, Orbef and Pontiesque in Normandy.¹⁷ He married Constance, daughter of Reginald Baron Grey de Ruthyn, by whom he had two sons, John (who inherited Dodford) and Thomas, both of whom died without issue. Sir John was buried at Dodford where his tomb with his effigy thereon is extant.

On the death of John (Sir John Cressy's elder son) in 1453 the Manor of Dodford passed to Isabel, wife of Sir Thomas Chaworth, and her sister Eleanor, wife of Sir Humphrey Stafford, the descendants and eventual heirs of Sir Robert de Keynes.¹⁸ Sir John Cressy predeceased his wife who resided at St. Albans after his death. A list (compiled *circa* 1480) of Hertfordshire residents who could spend forty shillings yearly includes "Constance Cressy, widdow, of St. Albans."¹⁹

¹³ Cussans. *Hist. of Herts*: Vol. III. Dacorum Hundred. p. 355. The district, now known as Batford, is on the Luton-Harpenden-Wheathampstead road.

¹⁴ *Vide* inscription on their tomb in Dodford church.

¹⁵ *I.e.* William Wylde, Vicar of Sawbridgeworth, 1374; John Wylde, Rector of Aston, 1449; Robert Wylde, Rector of Little Gaddesden, 1488. Cussans. *Hist. of Herts*.

¹⁶ Bridges. *Hist. & Antiqs. of Northants*. Vol I, p. 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, and inscription on his tomb.

¹⁸ Bridge. *Hist. of Northants*: Vol. I, pp. 51, 52. *C.f.* also Lipscombe. *Hist. of Bucks*: Vol. IV, p. 243. The late Mr. Austin, in his *Hist. of Luton*: Vol I, gives a William Cressy, brother of Edmund Cressy. I am doubtful if this is correct; William was more probably Edmund's younger son. Mr. Austin makes this William's grandson, a John de Cressy, sell the manor of Luton to John, Lord Wenlock, in 1467. I am unable to reconcile the abridged Cressy pedigree there given. (*C.f.* pp. 150 and 169.)

¹⁹ Cussans. *Hist. of Herts*: Vol. I. Introduction. p. 24. It is curious that Matthew Cressy above mentioned was not included in the list as he was presumably of affluent means.

Constance Cressy died in 1486 and Rothamsted then came to her husband's cousin, Matthew, son of Nicholas Cressy who was a younger son of Edmund Cressy.²⁰ It is conjectural that Nicholas Cressy married Alicia (surname unknown) who was buried at Wheathampstead and left legacies to the churches of Harpenden and St. Stephen's, St. Albans. It would appear from the date of her will (1433) that her son Matthew and her daughters (named in her will) must have then been young children.²¹

Matthew Cressy married Joan, daughter of Edmund Perient, lord of the manor of Digswell, Herts, and sister of Thomas Perient who became Sheriff of Essex and Herts: in 1498.²² Matthew had two sons, Edmund and William, the latter being the subject of the memorial in Harpenden church. He also had a daughter, Alicia (named after his mother?), who married Richard Rainshawe of St. Albans²³—described in his will as “one of the Sergeaunts of armes of our Sovereign Ladye, Queen Elizabeth”²⁴—who served on several occasions as one of the Royal Commissioners for the collection of Subsidies in Hertfordshire.²⁵ A second Matthew Cressy, who is mentioned as purchasing a moiety of a messuage and garden in Wheathampstead and Harpenden in 1550,²⁶ was perhaps another son of the first Matthew.²⁷ This (second) Matthew may have married Margaret (surname unknown) described in her will as “Margaret Cressy, widow, of Waltham Cross,

²⁰ *Vide* Inq. p.m. of 2 Hen. VII (1486) quoted in *Herts Genealogist*: Vol. II, p. 186. It is from this source that Nicholas Cressy is known. He is not given in any of the printed pedigrees.

²¹ Abstract of Alicia Cressy's will. (*Herts Genealogist*: Vol. II, p. 44.) One of her executors was William Cressy, who I assume to have been a brother of Nicholas. He married Emma, sister of William Ward (owner of Heron's Manor, Wheathampstead), and had a son, John. *V. Victoria County History (Herts)*: Vol. II, p. 303. This John may have been the John Cressy, Clerk, living in 1508. *V. Feet of Fines, 1508. Herts Genealogist*: Vol. I, p. 10.

²² Cussans. *Hist. of Herts*: Vol. II. Broadwater Hundred. pp. 252, 253.

²³ *Vide* Will of William Cressy. 1559. *P.C.C.* 52 Chayney.

²⁴ *Vide* Will of Richard Rainshawe. 1569. *P.C.C.* 9 Lyon.

²⁵ *Herts Genealogist*, *passim*.

²⁶ Feet of Fines. 1550. *Herts Genealogist*: Vol. I, p. 205.

²⁷ I can find no will of the first Matthew, which might have proved the relationship of the second Matthew.

Essex."²⁸ Her son, William Cressy (named in her will), is described as "Gentleman, of Little Baddowes, Essex."²⁹ He married Anne Wentworthe by whom he had a numerous family, of whom the eldest, Edmund, died in 1615.³⁰

To revert to the senior (Rothamsted) branch of the family: the first Matthew Cressy died in 1501 and was buried at Harpenden. A memorial to him and his wife Joan (mentioned by the historian Salmon in 1728,³¹ but not extant when Clutterbuck visited Harpenden) recorded the lady's death as having occurred in 1478. Matthew was succeeded in the Rothamsted manor by his eldest son Edmund. This Edmund died in 1525 and in 1552 Rothamsted came to his daughter and heir, Elizabeth, and her husband, Edmund Bardolphe, being handed over by Edward Brocket, junior, and Nicholas Brocket who were (presumably) Elizabeth's trustees.³²

William Cressy, Edmund's younger brother, never owned Rothamsted, but he possessed considerable property in the neighbourhood of Harpenden.³³ In 1548 he acquired by purchase with Robert Stepneth of St. Albans a messuage and lands in Aldenham.³⁴ In the Subsidy Roll for Hertfordshire in 1545 we find him assessed on his goods at thirteen shillings and four pence.³⁵ The memorial to him and his wife Grace in Harpenden church was erected at the wish of the latter as thus expressed in her Will:—

"To be buried in the Church of Harpenden by my first Husband, William Cressie Esq. I will

²⁸ Will of Margt. Cressy. 1544. *P.C.C F. 9. More.* A partial corroboration of the 2nd Matthew marrying Margaret is shown by his (presumed) eldest grandson, Edmund, having the same name as Matthew's (presumed) own eldest brother and great and great-great-grandfathers.

²⁹ Will of William Cressy. 1554. *P.C.C. 16 More.* It may be noted that Edmund Bardolphe, father of the Edmund Bardolphe, who married Elizabeth Cressy (of whom hereafter), married a Wentworthe. *V. Clutterbuck's pedigree Hist. of Herts: Vol. I, p. 407.*

³⁰ Will of Edmund Cressy pr. 1615. *P.C.C. 92 Rudd.*

³¹ *Hist. of Herts.*

³² Feet of Fines. 1553. *Herts Genealogist: Vol. I, p. 209.*

³³ *Vide* his will. 1559. *P.C.C. 52 Chayney.*

³⁴ Feet of Fines. 154. *Herts Genealogist: Vol. I, p. 200.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 28.

that mine EXECUTOR shall put a Monument of marble with the representation of the said William and me."³⁶

The executor, Edmund Bardolphe, varied the testator's wishes by erecting a memorial in brass. It may be mentioned that the lady had married as her second husband Thomas Johnson of Harpenden, whom she out-lived.³⁷ Her own family the Darkenalls (or Dartnolds) descended from Walter Darkenall who owned property in Penshurst, Kent, in 1491.³⁸ It would seem that this family was not armagenous which explains the blank impalements of William Cressy's shields of arms and the uncharged lozenge over the figure of his wife. Apart from the curious taste of her executor in thus recording the non-possession of coat-armour by the lady's family, the blank impalements on her husband's achievements are heraldically incorrect: a coat-of-arms cannot be impaled or quartered with *nothing*.

A pedigree of the Cressy family is appended.³⁹ I am aware that some of the entries appearing therein are suppositious (as mentioned in the text) and for this reason they are given in italics. In compiling this article I am greatly indebted to Mr. H. C. Andrews, F.S.A., for his courtesy in permitting me to refer to his valuable notes on the descent of the manor of Rothamsted.

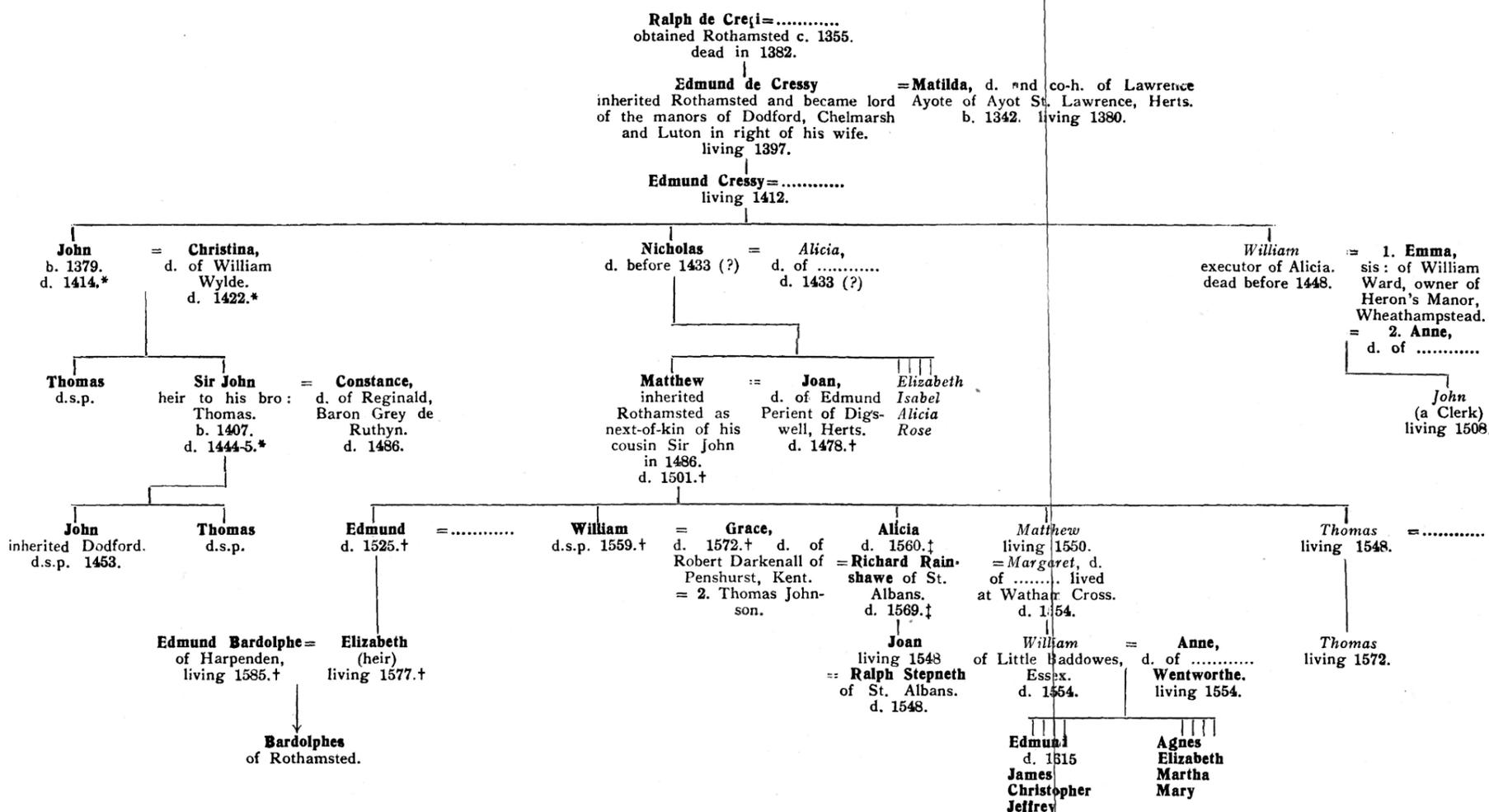
³⁶ *Vide* her will. 1572. P.C.C. 16 Daper.

³⁷ In the Subsidy Rolls for Herts: 1566-7, Thomas Johnson, Gentleman of Harpenden, was assessed at 26s. 8d. *Herts Genealogist*: Vol. III, p. 52.

³⁸ For notes on the Darkenal family, see Hasted. *Hist. of Kent*: Vol. I, pp. 417, 420, 555.

³⁹ The pedigree is not exhaustive, but I am mainly concerned with the Rothamsted branch. In the 15th century there was a Thomas Cressy, merchant of London, who had two sons, William and Thomas. *Vide* his will. 1423. (P.C.C. 1 Luffernam.) A John and a Rafe Cressy, citizens and mercers of London, died in 1507 and 1544. The latter mentions his "cousin Thomas Cressye and his children" in his will (P.C.C. 9 Pynning), and is almost certainly the "Rauffe Cressy, of London, mercer," of whom William Cressy (d. 1559) purchased lands at "Cowtrsende, called Bowyers in Herts and Beds" (probably Cooter's End, Harpenden, near the Beds border), as stated in his will. A Thomas Cressy mentioned in the will of Raph Stepneth (married Joan, d. of Richard Rainshawe) as being his (Stepneth's) uncle, was conjecturally a younger son of the first Matthew Cressy and father of the "servant" Thomas Cressy mentioned by Grace Johnson (widow of William Cressy) in her will. The elder Thomas Cressy may have been the "cousin Thomas Cressye" of Rafe Cressy's will.

PEDIGREE OF THE CRESSY FAMILY.



*=buried at Dodford.
†=buried at Harpenden.
‡=buried at St. Albans.

