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**The Connexions between John Knight, Junior, and the Jennings,
Latch and Gorges families, 1641-1653**

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THE CONNEXIONS BETWEEN JOHN KNIGHT, JUNIOR
AND
THE JENNINGS, LATCH AND GORGES FAMILIES
1641-1653

THE JENNINGS FAMILY

My account of John Knight, junior, and his sugar refinery at the Great House, on St. Augustine's Back, gave some account of his financial relations with three people—Thomas Jennings, John Latch and Richard Gorges.¹ I wish now to trace their relations outside the sugar house, with the object of defining the social background of the men who established the great trading and industrial ventures of Bristol in the 17th century.

Thomas Jennings came of an ancient family which had provided lords of the manor both in Hertfordshire and Somerset for at least three generations. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Ralph Jennings² strengthened his connexion with the west country by a marriage with a Wiltshire lady³ by whom he had a family of two sons and two daughters. His second son John raised the family status when he was knighted by James I in 1603 on his way southwards to London. This was an honour which compensated the family for the loss of Vann, which the elder brother inherited and later sold. Sir John married twice, and the hereditary lands passed on his death in 1611 to the elder branch. The Hertfordshire and Somerset manors fell to that side of the family which later went into politics, sending

¹ See *Trans.B.G.A.S.*, LXVIII, 1949, p. 159.

² For the genealogy of the Jennings family see, *Miscellanea Genealogica et Heraldica*; Vol. VIII, pt. 4, pp. 88-108 (Ralph died in 1572).

³ Joan, dau. of Henry Brouncher of Melksham, Wilts., by whom he had two sons Thomas and John and two daughters, Anne and Elizabeth. Thomas sold Vann in 1590; *d.s.p.* 1595.

two members of the family (father and son) as M.P.s for St. Albans. These two also succeeded to the Churchill manor, which the son eventually sold to Sir John Churchill, Recorder of Bath and cousin to John, Duke of Marlborough. This elder branch of the family flourished in Somerset until the middle of the 17th century when, on account of its royalist sympathies during the Civil War, it suffered from Parliamentary exactions from which it never recovered. The last Jennings at Churchill, the father of the famous Sarah Jennings, wife of the first Duke of Marlborough, had to sell the property and retire to St. Albans. The younger branch was left to fend for itself; and this was the group to which our Thomas Jennings belonged.

The junior branch struck out for themselves, first at Hayes, Middlesex, as farmers, then in the Fen country as administrators, and the rest at Bristol and in the West Indies. In so doing, they displayed the same characteristics as business managers which the elder branch showed as lords of the manor and public servants. Both sides of the family vied with each other for distinction, but the junior branch was, generally speaking, one generation behind in achievement. In the end the latter group won honour as the Jennings of Bottisham Hall, Cambridgeshire, and achieved a place amongst the landed gentry of England.

The history of the younger branch shows how strong a hold the land had on the Englishman of the 17th century. Thomas Jennings I, the father of Thomas II of sugar house fame, and the eldest representative of the cadet Jennings, took to farming for a living and settled down in Hayes, Middlesex.¹ Here he took his wife Vere, the eldest daughter of a knight, Sir James Palmer of Hayes and Dorney, and here they laid the foundation of the family position. His possessions in Hayes did not root him to the soil there, for he spread his wings with the call of opportunity and moved to the Fenland in the middle years of the

¹ See Burke's *Landed Gentry*—'Jenyns.' Here the reference to Thomas, son of Sir John Jenyns, having only one surviving son Roger, should not mislead one into thinking that 'the others who died without issue' are not worth tracing. In actual fact, they are the heroes of our story—Thomas, Philip and James.

century. It seems more than a coincidence that Thomas Jennings I arrived there at the same time as John Latch II and John Knight, but whether Jennings went there on his own initiative, or whether he was attracted there by John Latch, it is difficult to decide. A consideration of date¹ shows that they both met around the committee table in London in the year 1649. By 1651, Thomas Jennings I is mentioned by name as present at a business meeting at Peterborough² on behalf of the Adventurers of the Fens Drainage Scheme, and so he appears to have been one of the original members of the Commonwealth body.

So, like the elder branch of the Jennings family which held land in both Hertfordshire and Somerset, this younger branch also preferred to spread its interests in Middlesex and Cambridgeshire.

Thomas Jennings I of Hayes (born 1607 d. 1656) and of the Fenland, left a family of six sons, of whom we are interested in Roger, the eldest, and the three younger brothers, Thomas II, Philip and James. All of these, like their father, were destined by their economic position to fend for themselves. Roger's career has long been known but hitherto nothing has been recorded of the others, for, until now, no one has traced them to Bristol and the sugar trade, to the Great House, St. Augustine's Back; to the West Indies as the manager of a Bristol sugar house, and as the overseas agent and owner of slaves and sugar plantations in Nevis.

Roger of Hayes (born 1636) advanced steadily and progressively in the directions marked out for him by his father. At Hayes he became lord of the manor, and in the isle of Ely, an Adventurer of the Fens Corporation. It is interesting to note that it was here he came into contact with John Latch in an administrative capacity, perhaps in consequence of his marriage to Latch's daughter Sarah. The Latch influence in the Drainage

¹ Wells' *History of the Bedford Level*, Vol. 1, p. 158. 'Mr Jenyns and others were present at Lord Whitelock's house at Temple Bar, 1649'.

² *Ibid.*, p. 172. 'Thomas Jenyns was present at the Committee Meeting at Peterborough, 1651'.

Scheme is much more evident in his career than that of his father. In 1663, he was chosen a Conservator of that body; in 1679, as bailiff, and from 1686–93, the date of his death, he served as Surveyor-General. He supported his elevation to office by the purchase of a local estate known as Bottisham Hall. With him began the rise of this junior branch to a fame and fortune equal to the elder branch, though, as the genealogical table shows, a generation in arrears.

The story of the next three members of the family—Thomas II, Philip and James—hangs together. On the death of their father they realized that Hayes would probably fall to Roger's immediate descendants, and so they looked for their opportunities elsewhere. Luckily they ran into John Latch II, whose daughter Mary had recently married John Knight as his second wife (c. 1650). By Latch's offices, Thomas Jennings II was introduced to Knight, who was contemplating setting up his sugar house in Bristol, and required a reliable works manager and a couple of efficient clerks in his office. Here young Jennings and his two brothers fitted into the scheme of Bristol's new industry as envisaged by Knight and his father-in-law John Latch. The pattern was repeated in the next generation, for Thomas II and James Jennings married Knight's daughters. It looks as though the Jennings, lynx-eyed in business, had seen how they could acquire, to the exclusion of other rivals, the key positions in the new organization. Thomas II became the works-manager, Philip perhaps and James¹ certainly, the overseas agent of the firm in Nevis. Thus they helped to integrate Bristol's new industry on both sides of the Atlantic from its earliest stages.

John Latch of Upper Langford (c. 1580 to 1644).

The eldest and seemingly the most colourful character of this triumvirate of friends was John Latch of Upper Langford,

¹ In the St. Augustine's Assessment, (dated 23 April 1690) Bristol Archives Dept. 'James Jennins,' gent, was living on Stony Hill, apparently in his late brother Thomas' house, and since it was customary to add reference to a wife and to children in this document, their absence in the case of Jenyns would suggest that his wife was dead.

Somerset, barrister-at-law of the Middle Temple, Adventurer, Participant and later Expenditor General of the Fens Drainage Scheme.¹ He gained his fatherly position within the group by reason of his superior age and his administrative experience in the Fens project.

The impression of administrative energy associated with his name is, in some measure, due to a confusion between two John Latches, both associated with the Langford and Churchill districts and the Fens Drainage Schemes, who, until now, have not been distinguished one from the other.

That there were two John Latches can be proved by reference to the records of the Middle Temple, which state that the elder John Latch I, second son of the late Thomas Latch of Churchill, was admitted to membership on 30 June, 1609;² and that twenty years later, on 26 October, 1629, another John Latch II, son and heir of Thomas Latch of Langford, Somerset, gentleman, was also admitted. Eventually on 19 May, 1637, he was called to the Bar.

These two references to a John Latch and their parentage make the two Latches related to each other as uncle and nephew. Their blurred identities have also confused their connexions with the Jennings family in general and with John Knight in particular. It is the purpose of this section of my paper to unravel the story.

The elder Latch undoubtedly met John Knight at Ely and Peterborough in the thirties of the century. Before that, he had already set the compass of his life by entering the Middle Temple, and though he appears never to have finished his training as a lawyer, he had gained sufficient qualifications to enable him to hold administrative office in the County of Somerset. By 1627 he had attained the dignified position of High Sheriff,³ and at some time in the thirties he climbed to office as Expenditor General for the King's work in the Fens Drainage Scheme. He

¹ *Somerset Archaeological Society Trans.* Vol. 31 (1885), p. 54.

² I am grateful to Mr H. A. C. Sturgess, Librarian and Keeper of the Records, Middle Temple, for the two entries.

³ Collinson's *Somerset*, Vol. I, p. xxxviii.

displayed his loyalty to the royal cause by fighting during the Civil War. In 1644, after the second battle of Newbury, in which he had taken part, he met a tragic death. Local tradition in Somerset has it that, on returning home, he found his wife lying dead, a sight which so overcame him that he too died on the spot. This story is commemorated on a painted mural tablet in Churchill Church, Somerset, where, since its recent cleaning,¹ one can see the figure of John Latch, in scarlet uniform, with buff-coloured boots, lying recumbent beside his wife, whose winding sheet he has just lightly lifted. Under the figure of Latch kneel his family of seven sons and four daughters. This then is the characteristic figure of John Latch I (the uncle), lawyer and administrator, who lived both in Somerset and Cambridgeshire, and served as a royalist soldier.

John Latch II (c. 1609-1668).

Though there is no monumental effigy to attract public attention to his death, we can nevertheless identify him by his administrative career in the Fen country, and by his posthumous charity to 33 poor people of the parish of Churchill, to each of whom he left 12 pennies in money and 12 pence worth of bread for distribution on Christmas Day for ever. This gift is dated to 1668 in the list of benefactions of Churchill Church. We therefore know him to have flourished in the middle third of the 17th century.²

Except for the circumstances of the Civil War, his life and that of his uncle were cast in the same mould. Both were trained as lawyers and both entered the Middle Temple: both sought service in East Anglia, and both gained executive office. In spite of their active lives in the Cambridgeshire Fens, both rooted themselves as landowners among their family in Langford and its neighbourhood; and, finally, they bestowed their goods in the county and the family. The elder John Latch I, set his hopes on Thomas Jennings the elder, I, and the

¹ See notices in the *Bristol Evening Post*, 6 August 1947, and the *Bristol Western Daily Press* and *Bristol Mirror*, 6 January 1948.

² Collinson's *Somerset*, Vol. III, p. 581.

younger John Latch II on the younger Thomas Jennings, by introducing the three brothers (Thomas II, Philip and James) to John Knight who brought them to Bristol and established them in managerial capacities in his sugar concern. When, in 1653, Thomas Jennings II sought citizenship in Bristol, it was under John Knight's guardianship, and with John Latch II's backing. Latch stood surety for young Jennings to the extent of a £2,000 bond, a figure ten times greater than the normal demand from prospective merchants at that period in Bristol.¹ At nearly every turn, therefore, the two careers reproduced each other, but with the rewards falling in heavier measure on the younger Latch II, owing to the advantages which accrued to a good family name.²

Undoubtedly John Latch II's major interest lay in the Fenland, where he advanced in office from Adventurer and Participator to resident engineer. Twelve years after leaving the Middle Temple he took his first appointment as overseer in in 1649.³ From this time he never looked back. Can this have had anything to do with the committee meetings in London where, in 1649, the Middle Temple was chosen as the meeting-place? Was he instrumental in its choice as a place of venue? Throughout the next seven years he prospered exceedingly. In 1649 he received the handsome salary of £240 a year, and in 1651 he participated in a plan to set the Scottish prisoners at Dunbar to work on the Fens. Further recognition for devising

¹ Apprentices' List. Bristol, 10 September 1653. 'Thomas Jennings son of Thomas, late of Hayes, in Co. Middlesex, Esq. decd. was apprenticed to John Knight, junior, merchant: £2,000 bond on John Latcham of Middle Temple, Esq. for service and truth.' Also 1 January 1656 'Philip Jennings, son of Thomas, late of Haies in Co. Middlesex, decd. was apprenticed to John Knight, junior, merchant and Mary his wife for 7 years.' For James Jennings, see note 1, page 191.

² *Proc. Camb. Antiq. Soc.*, Vol. 38. 'The Fen Office Documents,' paper by W. M. Palmer (1939) pp. 91-92. Failure to realize the separate identity of the two Latches has led Mr Palmer to confuse their activities in his brief account of the life of 'John Latch'. p. 152.

³ Wells' *History of the Bedford Level*, Vol. 1, p. 190. In 1649 the company passed a resolution to the effect that they must appoint two resident managers to stay on the site near the operations, and to pay £20 per annum to each for his services.

schemes to drain the lands and to earth the banks of the rivers resulted in extra payments to him beyond the recognised salary. In 1656, he capped his successes by replacing an aged servant as resident engineer. This brought him into direct touch with Lord Gorges, a figure of great importance both in the eyes of the authorities and in the much smaller sphere of the story of the Bristol sugar industry.

To provide a job for young Thomas Jennings II, his step-son, seems to have been the self-imposed task of John Latch II, when about 1612 he married Dorothy, the young widow of Sir John Jennings. His insanity had left her in tragic plight a year before. Dorothy was living as Latch's neighbour at that time, for their estates in Somerset were contiguous. Her exit from the Jennings manor at Churchill about 1612 therefore meant the exchanging of her late husband's house and lands for others no less agreeable over the manorial boundary. It looks as if John Latch I, her new husband, found a farm for young Jennings in Hayes on his coming of age. This uprooted him from his Somerset countryside; and so prepared the way for another move, this time to the Fenlands, where John Latch himself had also settled down as an Adventurer. John Latch II and Thomas Jennings I were inspired by the same ambitions and left their west country homesteads for East Anglia.

The Latch-Jennings link, however, was drawn closer still with the march of time. The other Thomas Jennings I, who married Vere, had a family whose sons too sought situations, if not at Hayes, then somewhere else. Their lot was to wander afield at a time when England was in the throes of war. In a measure, the nomadic habit of this lesser Jennings group developed out of their circumstances. Thus it fell again to John Latch II to exercise his influence on behalf of the Jennings brothers: a duty made easier by Roger Jennings' leanings towards the Latch family, for he too had married Sarah, daughter of John Latch. Roger followed his father's and John Latch's advice and entered administrative service under the Fenland authority, with outstanding success. By the middle of the century Thomas Jennings I, the father, had died, and

Roger's three brothers were stranded for a situation; their branch of the family was always the less lucky.

It was at this juncture that opportunity opened its door to John Latch II. His daughter Mary had just married John Knight (c. 1650) who was still living in the Fenlands. Thomas Jennings II, too, fell in luck's way. He was introduced by John Latch II to John Knight, who had just made up his mind to leave his Fenland acres and go west again to Bristol to establish a sugar house. Knight quickly appreciated the situation. Here was a chance to take the Bristol Challoners—his cousins—by surprise. Moreover, by introducing a stranger (Thomas Jennings II) into the management of his new undertaking, he could maintain secrecy in his sugar business.

The deal was sealed: Thomas Jennings was taken to Bristol (1653) and introduced to the Mayor and the rest of the Puritan Councillors. All was settled at the Bristol end of the negotiation when the kindly John Latch II, the barrister of Middle Temple, administrator of the Fenland scheme, and father-in-law of John Knight, backed young Jennings' claim to citizenship with a £2,000 bond for service and truth. On 10 October 1653, citizenship was granted to Jennings; and burgess-ship as well, on the payment of the legal fee of four shillings and sixpence. So John Latch II was instrumental in forging the link between John Knight and his new manager—a circumstance which arose through his daughter's recent marriage to John Knight, as well as through his own family relations with the Jennings. Whilst all three groups were living in the Fenlands, John Latch II had a hand in the transfer of John Knight and Thomas Jennings again from East Anglia to the west country.¹

We have still to explain the connexion of the Gorges family with this triangular relationship.

Richard, Lord Gorges (1619-1712).

The third of the three friends whom Knight met during his sojourn in East Anglia was Richard Gorges, an influential

¹ I am much indebted to Dr J. W. Walker, O.B.E., F.R.C.S., F.S.A. (President of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society) for looking up all references to the Latch and Jennings families in the Churchill records.

man of affairs in those parts, and one whose ideas, like those of his family, were cast in a national and even a colonial mould, on another scale than those of his other two companions. Compared with John Latch, a barrister-at-law, and with Thomas Jennings, a descendant of a Stuart-created baronet, Richard Gorges ranked higher in the social scale, for he possessed a genealogy going back to the 14th century. His aunts and uncles not only ran west country estates, but also figured as courtiers and attained notoriety and even celebrity as early colonial adventurers. In the eastern counties, where Richard climbed to the offices of Surveyor-General and Conservator of the Fens Drainage Scheme, he gained his initial advances through his father's early participation in the 1631 project. Such was the cohesion within the Gorges family that it seems certain, even without documentary evidence, that it was Richard who introduced John Knight to his aunt Elizabeth, who, as the relict of Sir Hugh Smyth, possessed the Great House on St. Augustine's Back in Bristol and who, as the second wife and widow of Sir Ferdinando Gorges, could supply Knight with first-hand information about trade in the West Indies and about life in general in North America. It was strange indeed that the pioneer Bristol sugar refiner should have come to settle down in the eastern counties to draw inspiration for his sugar venture from Richard Gorges, when his own immediate ancestors had lived and thriven in an atmosphere of colonial endeavour and overseas adventure.

The Gorges came of a lineage ancient and distinguished. In the time of Edward II, they claimed an M.P. in the person of Sir Ralph de Gorges of Wraxall, Somerset, and their activities at the Tudor Court gained them knighthoods at fairly constant intervals. In 1591 Ferdinando, who began life as an adventurer by land and sea, received knighthood at the hands of Queen Elizabeth. He prospered under the first Stuart and ultimately won the title of 'father of English colonization' by writing his *Briefe Narration of the Original Undertakings of the Advancement of Plantations into the Parts of America*. His younger brother, Sir Thomas, also knighted by the Queen, was the husband of

Queen Elizabeth's chief mourner, Helena, Marchioness of Northampton.¹ Sir Thomas' three daughters married knights. One of them, Elizabeth was the wife and widow of Sir Hugh Smyth of Long Ashton, Bristol.² A further honour came, according to Collinson, the Somerset historian, to another of Sir Thomas' sons, Edward, who is reputed to have received the barony of Dundalk. He was the father of our Richard Gorges who, on his father's death, about the middle of the century, succeeded to his dignity. Richard Gorges, of one branch, became the advocate of the aims of the other branch, by introducing John Knight to his aunt Elizabeth, since in consequence the Great House passed out of the Gorges' hands into those of the Knights.

Richard Gorges, born in 1619, belonged to the younger branch of the family, the descendants of Sir Thomas of Longford Castle, Wiltshire and his wife Helena, Marchioness of Northampton. They had a family of eight children, of whom Elizabeth, and eldest child, and Edward, later Lord Dundalk and the father of our Richard, come into the present story. Richard Gorges took his cue from his father, who had joined the Fens Scheme as an original Adventurer in 1631, and became interested in East Anglia early in his career. After a short session at Clare College, Cambridge, in 1637, and after entering the Long Parliament in 1641, he became a member of the Fens Office five years later. The documents of this corporate body show the meeting of our three characters at Lord Whitelock's house near Temple Bar in 1649, when they, together with others, put their heads together to facilitate the course through Parliament³ of the Bill for draining the Fens. This may have been the beginning of the friendship which sprang up between the Latch, Jennings and Gorges families, and so perhaps the origin of the sugar project that was to link Bristol with the West Indies. This meeting at Temple Bar, however, had

¹ C. A. Bradford: *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton*, p. 61.

² 1653 property deed of Great House on St. Augustine's Back, Bristol.

³ Wells', *History of the Bedford Level*. I am indebted to Professor H. C. Darby, M.A., of Liverpool University, for much guidance amongst the Fen Drainage Scheme literature.

further significance for Richard Gorges, as it marked the beginning of a social and administrative advance which gathered momentum decade by decade, during his long life. On his father's death in 1650, he inherited the title of Dundalk; this and his useful friendships facilitated his official progress under the Corporation which was created as a result of the 1649 Act. From 1663 to 1686 he served as Surveyor-General, and as such was intimately associated with both the Latch and Jennings groups and, from his sixty-seventh year to his eightieth, he acted as Conservator, having relinquished his former post to Roger Jennings (1686-1693). He died at the age of 93 and was buried in the church of his manor of Stetchworth, which he had purchased from the Earl of Bedford.

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HALE OF ALDERLEY

The family of the future Sir Mathew Hale presented no claim to armigerous status and pedigree at the Heralds' Visitation of 1623. At their visit in 1682 the pedigree did not go back further than Sir Mathew's parents. For a lawsuit on succession which ran from about 1820 to 1837, genealogical data were collected and pedigrees prepared: these added paternal grandparents, and of course later generations but with some ambiguities; they have not been published, but the papers were deposited in the Gloucester Public Library.¹ Now the Hale archives have been deposited in the County Records Office,² and from these Miss Margaret Holmes compiled a pedigree. The accompanying pedigree has been compiled from all the above, some further research, and up to date information from the family.

Sir Mathew's father and grandfather both being named Robert, there is an earlier Robert not noted before who is a

¹ *Glos. Collection* SV 9.7

² Hale papers not yet catalogued.