

CHAPTER ONE.

THE EARLES OF SOMERSET.

The Earle family, as the name indicates, is of English origin. The earliest ancestor of the family of whom we have any knowledge is John de Erlegh, who lived at Beckington, Somersetshire, England, about A. D. 1150.

A member of the London Genealogical Society writes: "The family of Earle is of very ancient origin, and can be traced back, most probably, to a Saxon ancestor, prior to the Norman Conquest; but certainly I find evidences proving that, at the time of Henry the Second (who was crowned A. D. 1154), they were of Beckington, in the County of Somerset."

The name John de Erlegh is a mixture of French and English, and it is possible that its bearer, or an ancestor of his, may have entered England with William the Conqueror in 1066. Or, as the London genealogist suggests, there may have been a Saxon ancestor, but the name may have been colored by the powerful Norman-French influence in English life. Names are not very stable, and we shall find this name undergoing various changes at that early date, as also in our own day.

It has been customary to derive the family name from the word "earl," meaning "a man," "a noble." This word is found not only in the Anglo-Saxon, but, in its various forms, "eorl," "erl," and "jarl," in the Norse languages as well. Webster connects the word with the Greck "arseen," a male, and the Zend "arshan," a man.

But the family surname, as Collinson informs us in his History of Somersetshire, was derived from the name of the town of Earley or Early, near Reading, in Berkshire. The member of the family who first came into Somersetshire was lord of Earley in Berks, and hence was called de Erley, or, as the name was variously spelled, de erlegh, de Erleigh, de Erlega, de Erleia, and even Hurlei or Hurley.

Surnames first began to be used in England about 1050, and those of nobles or landowners were derived from their estates. John de Erlegh was therefore John, owner of the estate of that name. This is unquestionably the origin of our family name, whose orthography is now Earle. The French "de", meaning "of", indicates that the word following is the name of an estate, just as the Dutch "van", or the German

“von” points in the same direction. The word earl, as a title, may be the origin of the surname of some families that bear that patronymic, but it is not the origin of the name Earle. For de Earl would have no meaning, and how could it acquire the final “e”? The tendency is not to add letters, but to drop them. That final “e” is the survival of the second syllable, with which the name was originally pronounced.

But granting this, what is the etymology of the name of the Berkshire town? Of this we are not at all sure. It may be from the Old English “erli,” “erliche,” Anglo-Saxon “aerlice,” from aer-lic. It would seem, from the earliest spellings of the name, that this is the case, though many will be loath to give up the noble English word “earl” as the original of the family name. The facts, however, remain as given above, viz., that the family was so called from a town near Reading, in Berkshire, of which they were the lords. The first modes of spelling the word would seem to show its identity with the Old English “erli” or “erliche.” In any case, the word is English and not Celtic.

There would seem to be little doubt that Berkshire was the earliest home of our race in England, so far as can be ascertained, but there is just as little question that they soon after settled in Somersetshire, and that the latter became the family seat for centuries. All the Earles of England are possibly, not certainly, descendants of this Berkshire-Somerset family. It would not be safe to state positively that they were, for the great difficulty, and in many cases impossibility, of connecting the various branches with this main stem, suggest the possibility of different origins. We like to think, however, that all have sprung from a common stock, and it is entirely within the range of possibility, notwithstanding the difficulty of now showing the connection.

We shall now quote from Collinson’s “History of Somersetshire” his account of the de Erleighs and their holdings in that county. The first is

BECKINGTON.

“A village between Bath and Frome, ten miles from the former and three from the latter. Its most considerable possessors, after the Conquest, was the family of Erleigh or de Erlega, so called from a lordship near Reading, in Berkshire, who had large possessions in this county, viz., the manors of Beckington, Durston, Babcary, Michael’s-church, the manor and hundred of North-Petherton, and the manor of

Somerton-parva, denominated from them, Somerton-Erle, or Erleigh.”

“The first of the name that appears in this county is

A—(1) JOHN de ERLEGH,

who, in the seventh year of Henry II., paid five marks for the scutage of his lands in this county. This John died in the eleventh year of Henry II. (A. D. 1165), and in the same year Adela, his widow, paid the same scutage. He was succeeded by his son,

B—(2) WILLIAM de ERLEIGH or ERLEIA,

who is certified to hold a knight's fee *in capite* of the King, and that by his fee he had a right to be his Chamberlain. This William was the founder of a priory at Buckland, in this county, to which, (among divers other property) he gave the church of Beckington.”

“Among the principal Barons in this county (Somerset) in the time of Henry II. were William de Erleigh and others.”

“In the time of Henry II., William de Erleigh held Mansel in North Petherton. In the same reign William de Erleia certified to the King that, by virtue of his tenure of North Petherton, he had a right to be the King's Chamberlain.” Collinson, Vol. iii., pp. 54, 72.

C—(3) JOHN de ERLEIGH,

son and heir of William, in the sixth year of Richard I., paid scutage for his lands in this county and Berkshire, and in the first year of John's reign, he held the manor and hundred of North Petherton, at an annual rent to the King of one hundred shillings. His eldest son,

D—(4) WILLIAM de ERLEIGH,

in the first year of John's reign, paid scutage for lands he had in Berkshire and Somersetshire, in his father's life-time. He left two sons, John and Henry. His son,

E—(5) JOHN de ERLEIGH,

married Isolda (who survived him), and died without issue, in the twelfth year of Henry III., whereupon his brother,

E—(6) HENRY de ERLEIGH.

became his heir. He was sheriff of this county and Dorset that same year (1228). This Henry married two wives: 1. Egelina de Candos, by whom he had a son Philip; 2. Claricia, by whom he had John and Bartholomew.

F—(7) PHILIP de ERLEIGH.

died soon after, in the eighth year of Edward I. (1280), leaving issue by (1) Rosa, his wife, daughter and heir of Peter de Marisco; and (2) Maud, his wife, lady of the manor of Babcary, sons, John, Philip and Roland; and a daughter, married to Richard de Acton. His wife survived him and had to her second husband, Sir Geffrey de Wroxall." The eldest son of Philip,

G—(8) JOHN de ERLEIGH.

was in the Scottish wars in the reign of Edward I. In the ninth year of Edward I. (1281) and also in 1288 he was Sheriff of the counties of Somerset and Dorset. In 1308 and 1313 he was Knight of the shire for Somerset.

"In the 8th year of Edward II. (1315) John de Erleigh bore on his seal three escallops—which arms were used by his descendants—with in a bordure engrailed, and tinctured gules and argent." This is the first reference, so far as we know, to the Earle arms. He died in 1324 and was succeeded by his son John, leaving another son called Roland.

H—(9) JOHN de ERLEIGH.

This John died in the eleventh year of Edward III. (1338), being then seized of the manors of Beckington, Somerton-Erle, Durston, Babcary, Michael's-Church, the manor and hundred of North-Pether-ton, and several other lands in this county (Somerset). He left by Elizabeth, his wife, John, his eldest son, then four years old, Richard, and three daughters, viz., Catherine, prioress of Buckland; Elizabeth, wife of Sir John Stafford, and Alice, wife of Sir Nicholas Poinés, Knt. His son and heir,

I—(10) SIR JOHN de ERLEIGH (b. 1334; d. 1410),

was known as "The White Knight." In the fortieth year of Edward III. (1367) he attended the Black Prince into Spain, and was present at the battle of Naziers and several other engagements in that kingdom,

in one of which he was wounded and taken prisoner, and, being put to a great ransom, was forced to sell the best part of his ancient inheritance. By Margaret, daughter of Sir Guy de Brien, Knight of the Garter, he left issue: John, Robert, Richard, Philip and three daughters. His eldest son,

J—(11) SIR JOHN de ERLEIGH (d. 1442),

succeeded him in this manor of Beckington. He was also a knight, and married Isabel, daughter of Sir John Pavely, by whom he left one only daughter, Margaret, his heir. She married three times, first to John, second son of Richard St. Maur, Knt., second to Sir Walter Sondes, Knt., and thirdly to Sir William Cheney, Knt. She died in the twenty-first year of Henry VI.

K—(12) MARGARET de ERLEIGH (d. 1442?),

daughter and sole heir of Sir John de Erleigh (J 11), married first John St. Maur, and had a son,

L—(13) JOHN ST. MAUR (d. 1438),

who married Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Thomas Brooke.

M—(14) SIR THOMAS ST. MAUR.

N—(15) JOHN ST. MAUR.

O—(16) SIR WILLIAM ST. MAUR.

P—(17) MARGARET ST. MAUR.

We have thus followed the line of succession under the head of Beckington through sixteen generations, to the apparent extinction of the line with Margaret St. Maur. But, as we have seen above, Margaret de Erleigh (K 12), grand-daughter of "The White Knight," married three times. There was issue from each marriage, giving rise to other lines. Her descendants by her last marriage, to Sir William Cheney, Knt. (d. 1402), we do not purpose to follow further, but from her marriage to Sir Walter Sondes, Knt., originated two lines which are of exceeding great interest to us. Their daughter, Margaret de Sondes, married John Erle of Ashburton and Culhampton, Devonshire, becoming the ancestress of the Devonshire Earles, whose fortunes we shall follow later.

Margaret de Sondes, who we shall designate as L 1, was a great-

grandchild of Sir John de Erleigh, "The White Knight." So was her husband, John Erle (d. 1484). They were therefore second cousins, and the lines originating with them were doubly descended from the Earle stock. They had two sons, John of Culhampton, Devon (d. 1508), and Robert of Compton, Somerset (d. 1517).

Before tracing the Somerset family further, we shall quote a passage or two from Collinson, and give some account of other manors in the county belonging to the family.

"The possessors of land in this county of most note in the time of Edward I. were John de Erleigh and others.

"The feudal system being, in its improved state, introduced into this country by the Normans, the lands which had heretofore been possessed by thanes and vassals of the Saxon court, were now condensed into large baronies, each comprising a great number of estates, held under the respective lords, as they themselves held under the crown, by military service. On the principal estate or head of each barony, castles were erected, and the several owners were by their tenure obliged to support the outrages of ambition and the madness of crusades."

This quotation from Collinson would lead us to think that the founder of the Earle family in Somerset was not a Saxon but a retainer of William the Conqueror. William's policy seems to have been to deprive the original Saxon holders of their lands and bestow them on his Norman followers. He created large baronies, comprising a number of estates, which were held under the crown by military service. Is not this the very state of things which we find in the case of the de Erleighs of Somerset? We read concerning William de Erleigh, the second of the above succession, "Among the principal Barons in this county in the time of Henry II. was William de Erleigh." This barony comprised, in addition to Beckington, a number of estates which will be mentioned presently.

As to the tenure of these estates we are not qualified to pronounce, but we read concerning one of them, North Petherton, that this same William de Erleigh held a knight's fee *in capite* of the King, and that by virtue of his tenure of this estate, he had a right to be the King's Chamberlain.

We also read that John de Erleigh and some of his descendants paid scutage or shield money on their lands, which we understand to have been a money commutation for military service. There are other references in the history of the same nature, as that Somerton-parva

was held by grand sergeancy of being the King's Chamberlain, and pouring water on his hands on his birthday.

It will also be noted that the family intermarried with the nobility. This will be observed through the history of the other branches, when we come to trace it. As Hutchins says, and Burke after him, "The Erles were a very ancient and knightly family." This social position, together with the facts just given, with the form of the name, would seem to indicate the Norman origin of the family.

Another fact which looks in the same direction is, that William the Conqueror had a survey made of the lands of England, about 1086, "containing a complete and minute account and description of all Saxon lands, leasings, holdings, possessions, together with the names of owners and holders thereof." This formed the celebrated "Domesday Book." And so far as we are aware, the name Earle, in any of its forms, does not occur as a patronymic, though the word occurs as a title in the form of "yarl," the equivalent of "earl." If there had been a Saxon ancestor before the Conquest, as some think, we should expect to find the name in the "Domesday Book." Though it is but fair to say that this argument is not conclusive, as surnames were not in general use till after William's day, the Conqueror himself not possessing one. A Saxon ancestor there might have been, with no patronymic to distinguish him.

Still the question remains, "Would William have made a Baron and large landed proprietor of this Saxon ancestor?" So far as the evidence goes we are inclined to think that the founder of the family in England came across the Channel with William in 1066. But we must remember that these were Normans and not Frenchmen, although they spoke French. In either case, Norman or Saxon, the family is of Teutonic and not Celtic origin.

We may now quote Collinson's account of other estates held by the family in Somersetshire.

NORTH-PETHERTON.

"The manor of North-Petherton, had after the Conquest, for its possessors the ancient family of de Erlega, or Erleigh, so denominated from the lordship of Erleigh, near Reading, in the County of Berks. In the time of Henry II., William de Erleia (for so was his name then written) certified to the King that, by virtue of his tenure, he had a right to be the King's Chamberlain. This manor, after having been possessed by the Erleighs for many successive generations, passed

at length from them to the family of Beaupine." Collinson, vol. iii., p. 54.

"This church (North-Petherton), though it can now boast of few curious or ancient memorials, has been the burial-place of the Erleighs."

DURSTON.

"The Erleighs were, soon after the Conquest, possessed of this manor, and held it till the time of Henry VI. (1422-1471), when it was transferred by an heir female (K-12) to the house of St. Maur."

"To the east of Durston is the priory of Buckland-Sororum, founded about the year of our Lord 1167, by William de Erleigh (B-2), lord of the manor of Durston, for the health of his own and his wife's soul, and for the souls of Henry II. and Eleanor, his Queen, for canons of the order of St. Augustine." "As an endowment of this priory William de Erleigh gave the church of Petherton, with all its members, chapels, and appurtenances, viz., the church of Chedzay, member thereof, with all the right the brethren of the hospital have or ought to have thereby in the church of Pawlet; the chapel of Huntworth; the chapel of Newton-Comitis; the chapel of Thurloxtan; the chapel of Shurston; the chapel of Newton-Regis; the church of Beckington, with all its appurtenances; the church of Kilmersdon; and the church of Shirston."

Collinson, vol. iii., pp. 95-98.

ST. MICHAEL'S or MICHAEL-CHURCH.

"In process of time this land became incorporated with the other possessions of the Erleighs, lords of Petherton and Durston. Henry de Erleigh, by his deed without date, granted to the Abbot and Convent of Athelney, all his right in the patronage of the chapel of St. Michael's-Church, with all his lands lying at Ridene, and other appurtenances, to hold to the said Abbot and Convent, and their successors in the said Monastery of Athelney, forever."

Collinson, vol. iii., p. 99.

"SOMERTON-ERLE or ERLEIGH,

sometimes also called Somerton-Parva, was so named from its possessors and residentiary inhabitants, the family of Erleigh. They held this manor by grand serjeancy of being the King's Chamberlain,

and pouring water on his hands upon his birthday. In the time of Edward III. (1327-1377, John de Erleigh sold the manor of Somerton-Erle, with the advowson of the chapel of said manor, to Richard Brice." Collinson, vol. iii., p. 185.

The John de Erleigh referred to was probably "The White Knight," (I-10), who was compelled to sell a large part of his estate to procure his ransom from the Spaniards.

BABCARY.

"This manor was very anciently held by the family of D'Erleigh or de Erlega, lords of Durston, Beckington, Michael's-Church and North-Petherton." Collinson, vol. ii., p. 60.

MANSEL.

"In the time of Henry II., William de Erleigh (B-2) granted it (Mansel) to Philip Arbalistarius, in free marriage with Mabil, his daughter, to be held by the payment of two young pigs every Whitsuntide, at his court of Durston; which grant Ancilia, widow of the said William de Erleigh, confirmed to Philip de Maunsel, son of the above-mentioned Philip, who was the first of this family that assumed the name of Maunsel or Mansel." Collinson, vol. iii., p. 72.

This is an example of the derivation of the family name from the name of an estate.

The following may be quoted here, as it relates to members of the Somerset family, whose names will appear in the next chapter:

BLAGDON or BARTON.

"Smart Goodenough, Esq., Sheriff of this County (Somerset), died about the year 1720, when this estate came to William Earle, Esq., Serjeant-at-law, who married a daughter and co-heir of the said Mr. Goodenough, and who, at his death, left this manor of Blagdon, Barton, or Grange of Barton, and other estates in Pitminster, to his son, Goodenough Earle, Esq." Collinson, vol. iii., p. 285.

WEST-HARPTREE-TILLY.

"William Earle, serjeant-at-law, by his will, dated May 17, 1739, gave 50 l. to the parish of West-Harptree."

"Another ancient house, the property of Goodenough Earle, Esq., who inherits the manor of West-Harptree-Tilly."

At the east end of the fourth aisle (of the West-Harptree Church) is a handsome mural monument of stone, and on the tablet this inscription:

“Hic juxta jacent Henrietta, uxor Willielmi Earle, arm. filia Smart Goodenough, arm. de Barton prope Taunton; nata 6 Martij, anno 1676, denata 31 Januarij, 1703. Robertus Earle, gent., filius natu tertius Wilhelmi Earle, arm. natus 22 Januarii; denatus 7 Februarij, 1703. Willielmus Hall Earle, gent., filius Natu secundus Willielmi Earle, servient ad legem, natus 6 Julii, 1700; denatus 28 Julii, 1721. Willielmus Earle, serviens ad legem, filius natu quartus. Tho. Earle equitis aurati de Crudwell in agro Wilton, obiit 10 die Martii, anno aetatis 78, Dom. 39.”