

James Boots and the Catt connection

In my previous article (SFH Vol 21 No 1, March 2014 – “Nicolls and Boots, a Sussex Heritage”) I described my Sussex roots through the families of both my grandmothers. This piece expands the story of my maternal grandmother’s grandfather, and explores the history of William CATT, of Tide Mills, and his influence on my ancestors.

To recap the history of my great-great grandfather, James BOOTS – he was born in December 1821, at Brightling, East Sussex, the last of six children of John and Elizabeth (PARKS). His parents and older siblings were all born in Salehurst, and the family is traceable in Salehurst and area for several generations previously. After John’s death in 1824, in Brightling, he was buried in Salehurst, and I presume that Elizabeth and her younger children returned to Salehurst. Elizabeth died in 1833, and was buried in Salehurst, leaving James and his immediately older siblings as orphans. It is not clear where they would have lived, but James’ next older sister, Ann, was living with their older, married sister and husband William HOAD in Salehurst at the 1841 census. At that census, James was found to be living and working at Tide Mills, Bishopstone, Seaford. The mills were built up by William CATT, and information on the web suggests that he was given a farm in “Robertsbridge” (part of Salehurst parish) as a wedding present. Details from the Salehurst Rates book show that a William CATT paid rates on church house farm during the early decades of the 1800’s. The locations for the HOAD family during the 1830’s were on or near this farm, so I guessed that CATT may have known the family.

James BOOTS married at Tide Mills, to Charlotte TOWNER, in 1847, and they brought up a family there. Their son, John – my great grandfather, also worked and started his family there. On the demise of the mills circa 1883, John moved to Poplar, east London. However James and Charlotte moved to Lindfield, where he took up the post as gardener. They lived at Wallace Cottages, and in the original article, I assumed that he worked for the adjacent Chestnuts house. On his death in 1896, he was buried at Walstead cemetery; Charlotte moved in with one of her daughters and husband, in Preston, Brighton, and died there in 1902. Lindfield is the adjacent village to my present home in Haywards Heath.

This was basically the extent of my understanding at the time of my previous article. However, following publication of some articles about some of the larger properties around Lindfield, in “Lindfield Life” magazine, during 2017, I contacted the author, Richard Bryant of Lindfield History Project Group, to ask if he had any details of the Chestnuts estate. His response took me in a new direction. His understanding is that Wallace Cottages (or Lodge) were in fact part not of Chestnuts, but of Summerhill House (the current name of the private road – Summerhill Drive – should have given me a clue!) ¹ Significant as this was, the next fact was that Summerhill was built for Charles CATT, a son of William, from circa 1860. Further, another son, George CATT lived at Sunte House nearby during the same period; George took over Tide Mills on the death of WILLIAM in 1853 (not 1843 as incorrectly stated in my first article). Two other snippets were obituary notices for James and Charlotte, in Mid Sussex Times. That for James stated “...for over 60 years in the service of the late Mr. W Catt and family.” Thus confirming that James was working for Summerhill House at his death. Also that he must have entered the employment of William CATT by 1836. The obituary for Charlotte described how she died during the night, after complaining of being unwell the evening before. However, the new information was that, although she died at her daughter’s in Brighton, her burial was in Lindfield – and further research showed that her grave is adjacent to James. Was it possible that the respect of the CATT family for James and Charlotte led them to provide for them to be interred together? These thoughts suggested I should investigate the life of William CATT and his family more closely.

Sources on the web give some details of CATT’s life, and the history of the Tide Mills. However, his birth place has been given as various locations, and I stated Buxted previously. With the ability to search

¹ He also confirmed that the name of the occupant at Chestnuts in 1891 was Gertrude LYSONS – not LYDONS as shown in the census transcription for 1891. This led me on a short diversion to study her late husband, Rev. Samuel LYSONS!

census records, through one or other of the ancestry sites, and Baptism, Marriage and Death records in Sussex through SFHG, I set out to find a definitive answer.

The first piece of information was from the 1851 Census for the main house at Tide Mills. William CATT was noted as Head of the household, and he stated his birth place was Uckfield (the nearest major town to Buxted). SFHG Baptism database confirms the baptism of one William CATT at Uckfield Holy Cross, on 31 December 1776, which corresponds with his age at the census, of 74. (Because of the rounding of age to the nearest 5 years, at the 1841 census, William's date of birth appeared to be 1881, and the exact place of birth is not given).

I was therefore able to find his parents – John CATT and Elizabeth WILLETT. John was also baptised at Uckfield, 25 December 1739. Elizabeth was baptised at nearby Buxted St Mary the Virgin, 16 November 1739. They married 18 January 1770, also in Buxted. Three children preceded the birth of William, all in Uckfield.

William married Hannah DAWS, on 26 February 1797. She was baptised at Ewhurst Green in Sussex, St James church, on 20 December 1776. Ewhurst Green is an adjacent hamlet to Salehurst, where my story commenced. The marriage was followed by the birth of Elizabeth Willett CATT, baptised also at Ewhurst, on 8 April 1797! Their next child was Edmund, baptised in Buxted 16 August 1801.

The Tide Mills were founded around 1768, and completed by 1788. One Thomas Barton bought the site around 1791 and commenced the improvement and extension of the facilities. By the end of 1790's, he was in partnership with Edmund CATT. This partnership was, however, terminated by Edmund in 1801, whereupon he entered into partnership with his cousin, our William². Finally, William took sole ownership of the mills in 1807, and proceeded to build them up. William and family were living at the Mills by 1803, where daughter Hannah was baptised 11 April 1803 in Bishopstone St Andrew. She was followed by eight more siblings, up to Henry baptised at Bishopstone on 14 January 1823. Sadly William's wife Hannah died, apparently during or soon after childbirth, and was buried in the family tomb at Bishopstone, 20 January 1823. Thereafter Elizabeth Willett CATT ran the household for her father.

I mentioned two sons of William and Hannah – George and Charles. George was baptised at Bishopstone, 28 April 1813. He married Mary COOPER (b 1828) in 1850; she died 1856 apparently without offspring, and George remarried Emily SAXBY (b 1827) in 1858. They had six children, four of whom were born at Tide Mills, up to 1862. The last two were born in Lindfield, after George had taken possession of Sunte House.

Charles CATT was baptised at Bishopstone, 23 February 1817. He married Mary MEW, of Whippingham, Isle of Wight, in 1851 (Quarter 2). Charles was noted in the 1851 census (30 March 1851) living with Mary, and his sister Caroline was also there, suggesting they were preparing for the wedding. Both Charles and Mary are noted as occupation "Brewer". After the marriage, they appear to have returned to live in Middle Street, Brighton, where Charles ran his brewing business. They had five children, all born in Brighton. In 1871 census their location was Brighton, although records suggest that Charles had already completed his country house, Summerhill, in Lindfield. However, by 1881 census they were at Summerhill. As stated, the Tide Mills business folded in 1883, and this is when I assume James and Charlotte BOOTS moved to Charles' estate at Summerhill, where James was gardener. Charles died in Lindfield, and was buried 2 September 1885 there. Mary appears to have remained at Summerhill, and was therefore James' employer for the remaining time until his death in 1896. She died in 1898, in Lindfield.

² The information that Edmund and William were cousins indicates that Edmund was born in 1761 at Little Horsted, near Uckfield, the son of another Edmund CATT (b 1734) brother of William's father John.

Meanwhile, George CATT is recorded as having died in 1878, at Sunte House, Lindfield, but was buried in Bishopstone. His widow Emily, remained there until her death in 1900, and was also buried in Bishopstone.

Another of William's sons was John, born in Bishopstone in 1810³. The recording of John CATT in the 1841 and 1851 census' at Tide Mills appeared initially to be him. However, closer attention showed that this John's age was ten years too young, and the details in the 1851 census demonstrate that he was born in Salehurst, and was apparently "nephew" to William. This sent me back to Salehurst records, and sure enough, John CATT is recorded, born 29 April 1819, baptised 2 June 1819, to Edward and Philadelphia CATT. It was possible to trace the marriage of Edward CATT to Philadelphia SIMES (or SYMES) in Beckley 1 May 1806. They returned to Salehurst where eleven children were born (including John). It appears that Edward was also known as Edmund, and at the baptism record of one of their children, he is recorded as "Edward alias Edmund". There is a death record for Edward CATT in Salehurst 1 May 1832, at 50 years. This corresponds with a birth record in 1782 for Edward CATT in Salehurst. Unfortunately, the first names of his parents are not given in this record. If this John was truly nephew to William, I would expect his father, Edward, to be a brother to William. As stated, the three older siblings of William were all born in Uckfield, but could his parents John and Elizabeth have moved to Salehurst, and had a further son, in 1782? They were certainly still young enough. The name Edward or Edmund was popular in this branch of the CATT family, as witness William's uncle and cousin, and none of John and Elizabeth's earlier children had this name, so a younger son could have been given this name. This might also account for William being in the area in 1796/7 to father his daughter Elizabeth, and then marry Hannah! There is one other CATT birth at Salehurst in this period – Samuel CATT was baptised 30 June 1799, to William and *Sarah*. Was this an error for Hannah? As mentioned at the start of this article, William and Hannah were given Church Farm on their marriage, so it is consistent that they would be living in the area at this time. More research is required, but I have so far drawn a blank. [Update 2024: I finally found confirmation that Edward/Edmund's parents were indeed John and Elizabeth CATT, and he was therefore younger brother to William.]

This John CATT lived in Salehurst from 1819, and his father died in 1832 (Philadelphia died 1867). Compare this to James BOOTS, who was also in Salehurst, from about 1824, and orphaned in 1833. Could both young men have known each other, and have been invited around the same time to work for William CATT at Tide Mills?

James' wife Charlotte (TOWNER) was born in Bishopstone, baptised 6 October 1825. Her parents were both alive in 1841, and were working for William CATT at Tide Mills. However, at that census, Charlotte was present in the CATT household, as a "scholar" (along with two other young girls). Possibly she was being taught domestic service. Certainly for a period, she would have known William and several of his children. Once married to James, she is recorded only as "wife" with no occupation.

The village of Tide Mills degenerated after the demise of the mill business. For some time, it formed part of the Chailey Heritage for disabled children. Some people continued to live there in the 1900's. However, by 1936 conditions had become unsanitary, and an article in the Daily mail in 1937 described it as "The Hamlet of Horror". Seaford council evicted the inhabitants; nevertheless a few hardy villagers hung on, and one, Stanley Tubb, remained during WW2. Finally, the site was cleared after the war, and steadily returned to nature. However, a project to celebrate the history of Tide Mills was set up, and details are available at: <https://tidemillsproject.uk>. A celebratory week took place from 20th - 26th September 2021, where I joined with other volunteers to explain the history to the visitors!

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³ John, son of William CATT, later became a major farmer in the Lewes area. He (and others of his family) took the surname WILLETT after their grandmother's maiden name. He died in Brighton 19 October 1889, and was buried in Bishopstone.