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A SEAL AND A SEARCH

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Investigations into a personal seal, discovered in 1992 on farmland north-west of the village of Southfleet in Kent, inspired the writer to embark on a search for information on the family to whom it related. The seal which may be (roughly) dated to the thirteenth century bore the family name: BARIS, and so a preliminary search was made in local libraries for any occurrences of that name.

In Edward Hasted's *Survey of Kent* (1797) the following entry occurs under the heading of Southfleet:

'Pole or Pool, is a manor here, which was antiently estimated at one suling or plough-land. It formerly was the inheritance of a family, called Berese one of whom, Richard de Berese, gave the tithes of his lands in Southfleet to the Church of Rochester . . . it afterwards gave name to a family who were possessors of it.'¹

A tentative identification was made of *Baris* with *Berese*, and an investigation was therefore begun into that family's history. Although these enquiries are as yet inconclusive with regard to the seal, they have identified the siting of the (now lost) place-name of Pool, and cast light on the decline of a minor Kentish knightly dynasty.

Identification of the geographic position of Pool was the first task, since the site does not appear on modern O.S. maps. The place-name itself most probably derives from the old English 'pol' meaning 'pool, deep place in a river'² and was therefore likely to be found in proximity to a pond or on the banks of the Ebbsfleet which: 'formerly came up as high as this parish (of Southfleet)'.³ Edward Hasted noted that: 'Pole or Pool is a manor here',⁴ thus indicating that it survived into the last

¹ E. Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent* (12 vols, Canterbury, 1797), ii, 432.

² E. Ekwall, *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names* (Oxford, 1936), 369.

³ E. Hasted, *Survey of Kent*, ii, 422.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ii, 432.

decade of the eighteenth century as a recognisable place-name. Hasted related that a 'Mr John Colyer is the present owner of most of the farm and demesne lands',⁵ whilst the 'Rt. Hon Charles Lord Romney'⁶ is the present owner of the manor and 'the other moiety of the farm and demesne lands.'⁷ A search of the maps in the Kent archive discovered a 1763 survey of the: 'Estate of the Rt. Hon the Lord Romney and John Colyer.'⁸ This map clearly shows that the estate lay west of Southfleet and south-east of the village of Betsam, its total acreage was given as 238 acres, which equates well with Hasted's reported estimate of one sulung. At its southernmost extent it encompassed Pole Wood and Pole Field, with a pond (Soel pond) lying nearby. The estate can, therefore, be identified with the manor. The wood has now gone and modern farming methods have amalgamated the fields into vast prairie-like areas with a consequent loss of field names. Of the manor house no trace existed even then. The three houses that did lie within the estate are long gone. Thus, although the very name of Pool is now lost, its geographic position on the modern map can be identified accurately (Fig. 1).

The next stage of the search involved investigation of the De Berese family beginning with an examination of the name itself. Hasted stated that: 'There was a manor in (Cuxton), called Beresse alias Beresh, which in the reign of King John was owned by a family of that name'.⁹ The name survives today as Upper and Lower Bush. It was derived from 'Barley stubble field (OE *bere ersc*)'¹⁰ and was spelt variously as *Berese*, *Beresse*, *Bersese* and *Beresc*. Its English etymology demonstrates that the family took its name from the manor and not vice versa. There is no mention of this manor in the Domesday survey, but this is by no means surprising. It was probably a result of the complicated nature of Kentish estates. Kent was divided into large districts known as Lathes, whose origins can be dated to the time of the 'Jutish' kingdom of Kent. The Lathes ran from north to south, beginning in the marshlands of the Thames estuary, crossing the rich arable lands astride Watling Street and finishing in the Wealden forest. The organisation of the manor mirrored that of the Lathes. The Kentish manor was not a compact estate, but an amalgam of marshland, woodland and arable often separated from each other by some distance, subordinate holdings might in time become estates in their own right.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ W. Bergess, *Kent Maps and Plans* (London, 1992), 227.

⁹ E. Hasted, *Survey of Kent*, ii, 396.

¹⁰ J. Glover, *The Place Names of Kent* (London, 1976), 35.

This complex organisation did not fit readily into the structure of the Domesday survey, and thus many place names are absent from the latter, despite having clearly documented pre-Conquest origins. Within the Kentish village more than one family might hold land. There might even be more than one manor. The village of Southfleet is a good example of this, for besides the eponymous manor (which was a demesne manor of the priory of Rochester cathedral) there existed the manors of Scadbury, Hook and Pole. The complexity of the Kentish estate makes any investigation into landholding in the medieval period a difficult but not impossible task.

The earliest reference to the family is the '*Carta de Ricardi de Beresse*',¹¹ addressed to either John I or John II de Seez (Bishops of Rochester), and therefore dating from between the dates 1125–1142.¹² In this document '*Ricardi filii Jocii*',¹³ gave 12 dayworks on his manor of *Beresse* to the Bishop of Rochester. *Joce de beresse* may have been an eleventh-century owner of the manor, thus giving a high probability of a Norman origin for the family. There are, however, good grounds for treating this charter with caution, for in 1138 and 1177 two disastrous fires ravaged the city of Rochester. During the thirteenth century the city was twice the scene of sieges. In 1216, King John besieged the castle, and in 1264 the adherents of Simon de Montfort unsuccessfully attacked the city. The cathedral and priory did not escape unscathed from these disasters, and it is extremely likely that charters were destroyed during that time. The extant charters of Rochester in the Kent County Record Office are not free of forgeries. It is possible that in the face of these disasters the monks reconstituted their cartulary by an extensive programme of forgery. However, until a more thorough examination of the charter is possible its contents are accepted for the purposes of this present study as authentic, since there is a likelihood that a forgery might still reproduce a substantially accurate text of the lost original.

Nothing is known of the family between 1142 and 1198. This is not surprising, for the knightly tenants of the Bishop of Rochester are poorly represented in the corpus of records dating from before 1200. The Domesday survey does not name a single tenant of the bishop, indeed the earliest list of knights of Rochester we possess dates from the reign of Henry I,¹⁴ none of the knights on that list bore the toponym

¹¹ *Registrum Roffense*, (Ed.) J. Thorpe (London, 1769), 322.

¹² Le Neve, *Fasti ecclesiae anglicanae: Monastic Cathedrals* (London, 1971), 76.

¹³ *Registrum Roffense*, 322.

¹⁴ *Textus Roffensis*, (Ed.) T. Hearne (Oxford, 1720), 223.

Beresse. A comparable list does not appear until 1210–12.¹⁵ The lack of documentary evidence can be partly explained by the loss of records concurrent with the aforementioned sieges and fires. The main reason, however, has more to do with the status of the bishop in the feudal hierarchy. The bishop of Rochester was not a tenant in chief. Since the time of Bishop Gundulf (1076–1108)¹⁶ the diocese of Rochester had been dependent on Canterbury, as a direct result of Gundulf's friendship with Archbishop Lanfranc. Gundulf was happy to serve Lanfranc in the greater task of reforming the English church, but to his successors he bequeathed a dependent relationship – in feudal and ecclesiastical matters – that, try as they might, they could not break. What this meant, with regard to the documentary evidence, was that returns to royal inquests were drafted by Canterbury scribes, and are thus bare of detail concerning the tenants of the Bishop of Rochester. This is best shown by examining two documents used by Du Boulay in his study of *the Lordship of Canterbury* (1966).¹⁷

The Domesday survey names many knights of the archbishop and is complemented by a list of knights in the *Domesday Monachorum* dating to the years 1093–6.¹⁸ This list describes the Bishop of Rochester as owing ten knights towards Canterbury's quota of sixty, but without giving any detail. In 1166, an enquiry of Henry II into knight's fees produced the *Cartae Baronum*,¹⁹ an excellent document for the study of knight's holdings in England, except that the Archbishop of Canterbury's return is missing. This omission is made up for by the existence of a list of knights of Canterbury compiled in 1171.²⁰ This repeats that Rochester owes ten knights but notes that the bishop claimed to owe only one. Both the above lists give detailed information for the knights of the archbishop, but virtually nothing on those of the Bishop of Rochester. Thus, the early history of the tenants of Rochester is shrouded in obscurity, and it is not until the thirteenth century that sufficient records were created and survive for us to begin to create a fuller genealogy of the *Beresse* family (Fig. 1).

Its next known member was another Richard, enumerated here as Richard (II). This man was demonstrably active up until 1212, and

¹⁵ *Red Book of the Exchequer*, (Ed.) H. Hall (3 vols, London, 1896), 474.

¹⁶ Le Neve, *Fasti: Monastic Cathedrals*, 76.

¹⁷ F.R.H. Du Boulay, *The Lordship of Canterbury: an Essay on Medieval Society* (London, 1966).

¹⁸ *VCH, Kent*, (London, 1932), 269.

¹⁹ *Red Book of the Exchequer*, ii, 469–73.

²⁰ H.M. Colvin, 'A List of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Tenants by Knight Service in the Reign of Henry II', *Kent Records*, xviii (1956), 1–40.

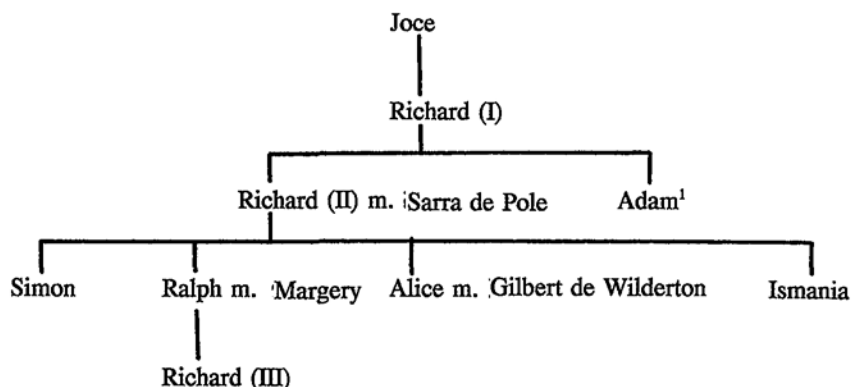


Fig. 1. Genealogy of the *Beresse* family

therefore could not possibly be the same person as 'Ricardi filii Jocii'.²¹ Richard (II) is first recorded in 1193,²² when he appeared four times as a witness to acts of Bishop Gilbert de Glanville (1185–1214);²³ he afterwards made regular appearances as one of twelve knights summoned to the *Curia Regis* in John's reign for cases involving Kentish landholders. His name appears in 1199,²⁴ 1200,²⁵ 1201,²⁶ 1203,²⁷ 1206,²⁸ 1207,²⁹ and 1212.³⁰ The latter represents his only recorded appearance outside of Kent and the last documented reference to him as still living. Richard (II) was certainly dead by 1223 when his son Simon appeared on the rolls of the *Curia Regis* in his place. There is also a single reference to one Adam de Beresse, who witnessed a grant to Richard de Clare at sometime between 1185–1214.³¹ Unfortunately, the lack of a precise date makes it difficult to fit him into the genealogy of the *Beresse* family. He could have been

²¹ *Registrum Roffense*, 322.

²² *Registrum Hamonis Hethe: Diocesis Roffensis 1319–1352*, (Ed.) C. Johnson (2 vols., Oxford, 1948), 5–11.

²³ Le Neve, *Fasti: Monastic Cathedrals*, 76.

²⁴ *Rotuli curiae Regis*, (Ed.) F. Palgrave (London, 1835), 130.

²⁵ *Curiae Regis Rolls* (18 vols., P.R.O., London, 1922), i, 353.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, i, 401.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, ii, 165.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, iv, 97.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, v, 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vi, 270.

³¹ *Registrum Hamonis Hethe*, 171.

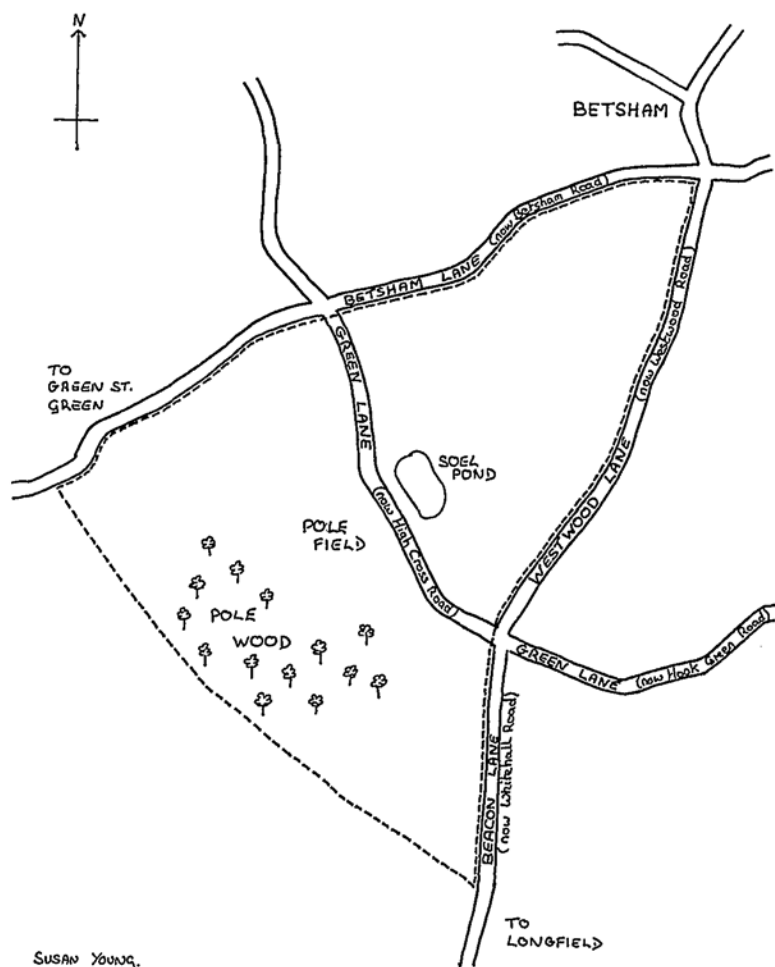


Fig. 2. Landholdings of Richard (II) along the Medway valley

Richard's (II) father, or his son. However, the likeliest relationship is that of brother to Richard (II).

Richard's (II) landholding consisted of a collection of small estates along the Medway Valley (Fig. 2). In 1210–12 he was recorded as holding half of one knight's fee from the Bishop of Rochester.³² The

³² *Red Book of the Exchequer*, ii, 474.

records of the Dean and Chapter of Rochester reveal the dispersed nature of his holdings. Other than his demesne manor of *Beresse* and associated lands in Cuxton, he also held land in Strood for which he gave half a mark.³³ The '*Carta Ricardi (II) de Beresse*'³⁴ mentions holdings in Frindsbury, Wouldham and Southfleet; the latter two held by sub-tenants. All these villages were manors of the Bishop of Rochester, as was Hoo, where in 1243 the heir of Simon de Beresse held one quarter of a knight's fee from the bishop.³⁵ It is likely that the *Beresse* holding in Hoo dated at least as long ago as Richard's (II) lifetime. Richard's lands in Southfleet included the manor of Pool, for in 1252 Richard's daughters quitclaimed from themselves the lands: 'which Sarra late the wife of Richard de Beresse held in dower of the said Richard in *Stanes* [another manor of Rochester] and *Suthflete*'.³⁶ In the *Liber Feodorum* it is stated that Sarra de Pole held two parts of one knight's fee in Southfleet,³⁷ the cognomen – de Pole clearly identifies these lands as including the manor of Pool.

There is a further gap in recorded information from 1212 down to 1223. This is partly accounted for by the hiatus in royal records resulting from the Civil War during King John's final year and the first of his son Henry III. 1216 must have been a difficult year for the family of Beresse, for Rochester Castle, indefensible as a result of the damage inflicted by King John, opened its doors to Prince Louis. There is, however, no mention of the family in the '*Rotuli de Finibus*'³⁸ which records many rebels as having sued for peace. Nor is there any surviving evidence of land losses which might have resulted from rebellion, although in 1223 a mill worth 20s. in Cuxton was described as formerly held by Simon.³⁹ In 1223⁴⁰ and 1231,⁴¹ Simon de Beresse took Richard's place as a juror in Kentish lawsuits on the *Curia Regis* rolls. Although it is not certainly stated that Simon was Richard's son, this is likely. In 1242, Simon granted by charter to the Priory and Convent of Tonbridge his lands in Speldhurst. This village is far from Medway Valley, but had formerly been a woodland *denn* of the manor

³³ *Registrum Roffense*, 118.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 644.

³⁵ *The Book of Fees* (2 vols., P.R.O., London, 1920), ii, 666.

³⁶ *Calendar of Kent Feet of Fines*, (Ed.) I.J. Churchill *et al.* (Kent Archaeological Society, Ashford, 1938), 245.

³⁷ *The Book of Fees*, P.R.O., ii, 669.

³⁸ *Rotuli de Oblatis et Finibus Temp. Regis Johannis*, (Ed.) T.D. Hardy (London, 1835).

³⁹ *Kent Feet of Fines*, 81.

⁴⁰ *Curiae Regis Rolls*, xi, 77.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

of Halling. The charter reads as that of a dying man. The lands were given '*pro salute anime*'⁴² and Simon's description of himself as '*quondam Miles*',⁴³ i.e. 'formerly knight', suggests that he was no longer active. He was possibly under the medical care of the priory, perhaps even in monastic garb. The air of mortality is strengthened by the fact that Simon is not subsequently recorded; in the following year (1243) it was Simon's heir who is mentioned as holding the *Beresse* lands in Hoo.⁴⁴

The heir of Simon was his nephew Richard (III) de Beresse, the last of his family to hold the manor of *Beresse* in its entirety directly from the Bishop of Rochester. In 1252,⁴⁵ Richard (III), son of Ralph de Beresse, sued for and won recognition of his right to the lands in *Beresse* and Stone held by Alice and Ismania (daughters of Richard (II)) and by Simon, son of Simon de Herbertinger. In return he granted back to them those lands to be held by yearly money from him. By the same agreement Alice, Ismania and Simon quitclaimed from themselves the lands held by Sarra, widow of Richard (II), in Southfleet and Stone. Richard (III) in turn quitclaimed all his rights to lands in Upchurch and Stone which Alice, Ismania and Simon had given to John, son of Robert de Wadeton. This recipient may have been a son-in-law of Simon, for in a charter granted in 1265 to the Kentish Abbey of Lesnes he requested prayers for the souls of his mother, father, and that of Simon de Beresse. Meanwhile in 1253⁴⁶ in a plea of covenant, Richard (III) de Beresse granted that the dower lands of Sarra, widow of Richard (II) would fall to Reginald de Cobham on her death. That this agreement was honoured is shown on the Feudal Aids (1346) when John de Cobham was registered as holding '*IJ partibus* (of one fee) *quas Sarra de Pole tenuit in Sufflete*.'⁴⁷ Richard also gave homage to Reginald for his own lands and granted the homage of Alice, Ismania and Simon for those lands held from Richard. In return, Richard and his mother, Margery, received a cash gift and an annuity for life from Reginald. By 1265, the manor of *Beresse* itself was in the possession of John de Wadeton (the recipient of the 1252 grants of land in Upchurch and Stone), for John granted the manor to the Abbot of Lesnes to be held by the Abbot in Frankalmoign.⁴⁸

⁴² *Registrum Roffense*, 608.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *The Book of Fees*, ii, 666.

⁴⁵ *Kent Feet of Fines*, 245.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 248-9.

⁴⁷ *Feudal Aids 1284-1431* (5 vols., P.R.O., London, 1899), iii, 49.

⁴⁸ *Registrum Roffense*, 319.

In 1199, Richard (II) had various smallholdings and an income that allowed him to support in comfort his position as a knight of the Bishop of Rochester. By 1265, those lands were in the hands of others, notably the families of Cobham and Wadeton. This was not seemingly through failure in the male line, for a Joce de Beresse was a witness to John de Wadeton's charter of 1265. Effectively the *Beresse* inheritance had been sold, although it is likely that individual family members lived on as sub-tenants on portions of the old estate.

Richard (II) de Beresse was a member of a relatively small class of knights. These men 'were the lords of the villages'.⁴⁹ Richard's (II) demesne manor of *Beresse* might have been small – being but an offshoot of the village of Cuxton – but it was complemented by other holdings. His son Simon was able to maintain his position as a knight, but his grandson Richard (III) could not. This is shown by a list of Kentish knights drawn up in 1253 on the occasion of the knighting of the eldest son of King Henry III.⁵⁰ The list includes both John de Wadeton and Simon de Herbertinger, but not Richard (III) de Beresse. The fate of this family was certainly shared by many minor knightly families. A thirteenth-century 'decline of the gentry'⁵¹ has been postulated (and rejected). The holders of one knight's fee or less may have always teetered on a knife edge economically. The boon in the economy postulated for the twelfth or thirteenth centuries may not have been entirely beneficial towards small estates. Edward Miller demonstrated that alongside economic growth the thirteenth century witnessed overpopulation that reduced many peasants' holdings to a level that barely supported their subsistence, a situation that no doubt was reflected in manorial incomes. The situation may have been particularly severe in Kent, where many lands were held in *gavelkind*, a tenure that was partible among all heirs. The numerous small portions of land held by Richard (II) indicate that he had acquired land in addition to the knight's fee he held from the bishop. There is no doubt that some of this land was held by *gavelkind* with its attendant problems.

In addition to a worsening economic situation many knightly families such as the *Beresse* were suffering the gradual loss of control over their lands. All families experienced a leaching of their lands to the church, as witnessed by Simon's grant of Speldhurst. This was a national phenomenon, a form of personal spiritual insurance, or a filial

⁴⁹ E. King, *England 1175–1425* (London, 1979), 44.

⁵⁰ J. Greenstreet, 'Holders of Knight's Fees in Kent at the Knighting of the King's son, ANNO 38 Henry III (AD 1253–4)' *Arch. Cant.*, xii, (1878), 226.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

duty that was not checked until the promulgation of King Edward I's statute of *Mortmain* (1280). The granting of lands to the church was a continuous process but a relatively slow one. In the thirteenth century a more pressing concern for holders by knight service appeared, one which threatened their control over lands which – many of them – had granted to sub-tenants. It consisted of a reaction by the greater lords against sub-infeudation, a reaction which culminated in the statute of *Quia Emptores* (1290), which forbade the practice. Where sub-tenants already existed the greater lords sought to deal directly with the tenant, cutting out the middle man as it were. The result was that from the late twelfth century: 'The land which a family occupied became more clearly separated from lands over which it had a form of control, through rents and services.'⁵² It is likely that something similar happened to those lands in Wouldham and Southfleet which are recorded as being held from Richard (II) by sub-tenants, for they are not subsequently mentioned in the documentary record.

We cannot talk of a decline of the Gentry, but we can perhaps talk of a thirteenth-century crisis afflicting the descendants of the original knightly enfeoffments. The loss of lands discussed above went hand in hand with a natural tendency for knight's fees to morcellate, most commonly by the endowing of marriage portions. The speed of this process was of course entirely dependent on accidents of birth and death. However, by the thirteenth century the majority of knight's fees had existed for more than two centuries, long enough for the process to have been well advanced. The process may have been particularly acute in Kent, for the widespread nature of partible holding may have affected attitudes to other forms of tenure. There are indications of a 'confusion of tenures',⁵³ creating a climate in which there was pressure within the family for some form of partition among heirs. As well as loss of lands there was a loss of authority, as revealed in Du Boulay's study of Canterbury. The military role of knights had begun to decay from the moment of the original enfeoffment, a 'society based on [knights] was becoming a thing of the past'.⁵⁴ By the thirteenth century the greater lords, especially ecclesiastical ones, showed preference to a new class of educated estate managers, whose expertise allowed their patrons to take full advantage of the favourable economic climate.

By 1253,⁵⁵ the lands of the aforesaid Richard were divided among no

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵³ Du Boulay, *The Lordship of Canterbury*, 72.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁵ *Kent Feet of Fines*, 245.

less than six people, four of which were probably holding marriage portions. Sarra de Pole as Richard's (II) widow, Alice as the widow of Gilbert de Wilderton and John de Wadeton and Simon de Herbertinger from marriages to *Beresse* females. Richard (III) was forced to resort to legal action to assert his control over at least some of these persons' holdings, before selling his rights to Reginald de Cobham in return for the security of a pension. The rapidity with which Richard's (II) estate was dismembered suggests a crisis for the family. It is dangerous to extrapolate too far from the experience of one family, but there are suggestions that many families may have suffered similar problems. This investigation has produced (as so limited a study should) more questions than answers. It does provide the basis for a more detailed study of local families, limited perhaps to the Bishop of Rochester's knightly tenants, to see if there really was a crisis afflicting the ancient knightly families, or whether varying consequences simply reflect the turning of the wheel of fortune.

This fate of the *Beresse* family begs the question of how far could a family fall? Is it possible that the later rise of the yeomanry could have been a two-way process? With the rising yeoman meeting and merging with military families on the way down, uniting status with wealth and blurring the divide between French and English that characterised the Norman settlement.

This study has demonstrated that Hasted was correct in assigning the manor of Pool as a possession of the *Beresse* family, the geographic position of that manor has been identified. Additionally, a genealogy of the *Beresse* family has been deduced as accurately as possible from extant records. In the process the search has raised some questions about the struggles of minor Kentish landholders.

So far, it has not been possible to link the seal exclusively to the family under investigation, but, neither has a better candidate emerged. Investigations are continuing.

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