

The a'Court Family and Heytesbury Estate¹

The a' Court family were living in Somerset in the early 17th Century. In 1705 Peirce à Court, a descendant of William à Court, married Elizabeth Ashe. Elizabeth was heir to the Heytesbury Estate, which had been bought by her grandfather, Edward Ashe, in 1641.

The Ashe family had become extremely wealthy in the early 17th Century from making woollen cloth in Somerset and selling it in London and abroad, which enabled Edward to buy the 'Manor and Hundred' of Heytesbury from Thomas Moore.

The Manor of Heytesbury had earlier been in the possession of the Hungerford family since at least the 13th Century. However, when Walter Hungerford (created First Baron Hungerford of Heytesbury in 1536) was executed at the Tower of London in 1540/1, it is believed that the Heytesbury Estates were confiscated by the Crown. The Manor of Heytesbury was granted to Henry Wheeler by the Crown in 1553. Wheeler later sold it to the Moore family.

Since Elizabeth Ashe had no male sibling she retained her maiden name on marrying Peirce, and hence the family surname became Ashe à Court. Peirce and Elizabeth had six children, one of whom was William Ashe à Court, born in 1708. William became an Army General and married Annabella Vernon in 1747

William and Annabella had a son William Peirce, who was born in 1747. William Peirce was a Colonel in the Army, and was made baronet in 1795. He married Laetitia Wyndham and their first child, also named Laetitia, died at birth. She also had still born twins in 1810 at the age of 31. A memorial to her resides in the family pew in Heytesbury Church.

Their second child was William, born in 1779, a diplomat who held a number of appointments, including Envoy to the Barbary States (1813), Envoy to Naples (1814), Envoy to Spain (1822), Ambassador to Portugal (1824), Ambassador to Russia (1828-1832), Viceroy of Ireland (1844-1846). He was created First Baron Heytesbury in 1828.



William a'Court 1st Lord of Heytesbury

¹ holmesacourt.org/hachistory/hac_history.html

The youngest son of William Peirce and Laetitia was Charles Ashe a'Court who was born on 20 June 1785. Charles joined the army in 1801 and saw much active service over 15 years, in the Adriatic, Egypt, Sicily, Spain and Italy and was at the surrender of Naples in 1815.

In 1818 he was made a Knight of the Hanoverian Order in recognition of his military services, and in 1831 was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath. He was also a Knight of St. Ferdinand and Merit of Naples, and a Knight of St. Maurice and Lazare of Sardinia.

Charles received the following commissions:

Ensign, 1801; Lieutenant, 1802; Captain, 1804; Major, 1811; Lieutenant-Colonel, 1813; Colonel, 1830; Major-General, 1841; Lieutenant-General, 1851; and General, 1856.²

In the 1830's Charles was one of the Poor Law Commissioners. He was considered a benevolent person in this role. However, he had been previously a very important person in the life of **Samuel Harford**. Charles had closely followed the activities of the rioters around Heytesbury in November 1830 and as a consequence was a major witness at the trial of Samuel.

Newspaper reports of the riots show that Charles did his best to caution the rioters and get them to disperse. It is also clear from these reports and the subsequent trial that Colonel a'Court knew Samuel and could readily identify him among in the large number of rioters that had gathered. This could have been because Samuel was a tenant in one of the many estate houses in the Heytesbury village and also it is very likely that he worked on the estate. We have identified a number of Harfords in later years who both rented houses and worked on the estate.

Charles had also been directly involved in the calling out of the Wiltshire Yeoman Cavalry that suppressed the riots and captured and jailed the rioters.



Colonel Charles Ashe à Court

Charles' older brother William (the 1st Lord Heytesbury) married Maria Bouverie in 1808. Maria died in 1844 in Dublin while William was Viceroy of Ireland.

² Based on Obituary The Times 20 April 1861

Their eldest son was the William Ashe à Court who married Elizabeth Holmes. The Holmes family had estates on the Isle of Wight and also in Ireland. These were passed down through a number of lines and eventually they settled entirely on the eldest daughter, of Sir Leonard Holmes, Elizabeth, who married William Ashe à Court in 1833 in Calbourne, Isle of Wight. This marriage created the Holmes à Court name.

William later became the 2nd Lord Heytesbury and succeeded to the Heytesbury Estate when his father died in 1860. Since Elizabeth had no male sibling, she kept her maiden name. Until 1860 the couple largely lived at Westover, Calbourne on the Isle of Wight.

After 1860 William Holmes à Court and Elizabeth lived mainly at Heytesbury House and had fifteen children. William died in 1891, aged 81, and outlived his eldest son, also called William. This meant that the title passed to his grandson, William Frederick who became the 3rd Baron.

William Frederick died from TB only 12 years after inheriting, aged 41, and his brother Leonard, became the 4th Baron. Although the title passed to Leonard the estates remained in the possession of William Frederick's widow, Margaret.

The Isle of Wight Estates were steadily sold off during the mid 1890's, and also around 1913, because of the rising cost of death duties and the cost of paying 'portions' of the estate to the large number of younger children of the family, together perhaps with some unwise investment decisions.

Heytesbury house and surrounding parkland was sold in 1926, by the executors of Margaret's estate. Several of the younger brothers of the family emigrated to Canada, South Africa and Australia during the 19th Century, presumably due to the lack of opportunity for them in England. The purchaser of the estate was poet Siegfried Sasson.

Siegfried occupied Heytesbury House until 1967, Siegfried's son the late George Sassoon lived there until 1994 when it was sold and divided into several apartments.



Heytesbury House

One of the descendants of the migrating Holmes a'Court family was Robert Holmes a'Court who was born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1937. Robert married a Western Australian and came to Australia. He died in 1990 and is survived by his wife Janet and children who have continued to run his considerable business interests.

Robert did not forget his roots in Heytesbury and named his company Heytesbury Holdings Pty Ltd and later Heytesbury Pty Ltd. Some of the family major interests today still bear the Heytesbury name, one being Heytesbury Cattle Company one of Australia's largest privately owned beef producers, which owns and manages six cattle stations, with approximately 150,000 head of cattle roaming freely across the vast open spaces of Australia's north. The other is Heytesbury Stud a leading Western Australian thoroughbred stud.

Robert's son Peter Holmes a'Court is the heir presumptive to the Baron of Heytesbury.