

THE BRAEMS FAMILY :

RELIGIOUS REFUGEES

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In the second half of the 16th century many religious refugees from across the Channel fled to England to escape persecution and settled in and around Kent coastal towns and villages, particularly Sandwich, where they were well received. Some of them built their own dwellings, some evidence of which still survives. They were given permission to hold their own religious services in St. Peter's Church in the middle of the town.

As the flow of refugees continued, it became necessary for some of them to move further on to seek a living and, some of them, a fortune. One of these was Jacob Braems (though some old documents spell his name Breams) a hard businessman, as indeed were many of his compatriots. Jacob moved to Dover, attracted by the possibilities of the harbour, where he set up as a trader, becoming farmer of the Customs, and building up a steadily increasing holding of wharves and quays on the dockside.

To Jacob, in 1595, was born a son, Arnold, who was baptised in St. Mary's Church, the family place of worship, on 3rd October 1602. Arnold grew up in Dover and joined his father in the family business. Between them they greatly increased their holdings of wharves on the dockside, eventually controlling a length of no less than 276 feet, behind which they built great warehouses, parts of which in later years became known as "The Old Buildings," and which were destroyed by fire in 1808.

They also built a new custom house near the pier at a cost of £126 in 1623.

Much later this building, called "The Old Custom House," a good Renaissance style building, was demolished in 1806.

Arnold Braems married Jane, the daughter of Walter Harflete, who was a descendant of the ancient family of Sepotvans, Kentish gentry with a recorded pedigree stretching back into the 12th century.

It is a vivid illustration of the way in which the son of a rich trader or merchant, even one not of English extraction, could become part of an old privileged social strata. The reason of course was that many a local squire or scion of an ancient privileged family, already living at, or far beyond, their existing means, could not have provided for the large families of the time, especially if they were females. So the son of a rich merchant was welcomed as a husband for a poor daughter. Local people often looked very warily at the arrival of a young rich merchant as their new squire, and there was an old, well used, country saying that "The lady brings the class and the man the brass."

Jane however died in 1635 and was buried in the family church, St. Mary the Virgin, Dover.

Arnold decided to do what many a prosperous businessman, before and since, have done, to enjoy his considerable wealth by buying a country estate and settling down as the local squire. He purchased land in the Manor of Blackmansbury, alias Bridge, just south of Canterbury, from Sir Edward Partherich, though whether he bought the whole manor is not clear.

He demolished the old court lodge there and built a large mansion, Bridge Place, where he lived with his son Walter, and his second wife Elizabeth, also from Dover. She died in 1645 and was buried in Bridge Church, where Arnold set up a memorial to his two wives, having lost both of them in ten years.

Arnold was a committed Royalist during the struggle between king and Parliament, holding the rank of major in the East Kent Force. Later he was a member of the Kentish Royalists which tried to take over Dover Castle with two thousand men and guns in 1646. It, like an earlier attempt four years earlier, failed, and Arnold had to go into hiding for a time.

However he was present on the beach at Dover as a member of the party which welcomed Charles the 2nd on his return in 1660. The king knighted him and he also became one of Dover's two members of Parliament, but he only served in one Parliament, the attractions of business in Dover, and of his Bridge Place mansion being more to his taste. He died in 1681,

aged 85 years, and was buried in Bridge church, near his memorial to his two wives.

The parish registers recorded that "no affidavit was brought (within the limit) that the body of Sir Arnold Braems Kt. interred November 21st. inst. in the east chancel of the church of Bridge, was wrapped in woollen only according to the Statute made and provided".

This statute stipulated that bodies should be buried in woollen as a defence of the wool industry which was then fighting a losing battle against linen. Since Sir Arnold's body was wrapped in the newly fashionable linen and not in wool a fine of £5 was imposed, half to be paid to the "minister" (the parish priest) and the other half to be distributed among the poor of the parish.

His son Walter continued to live in Bridge Place and to be interested in the wharves and other family business interests in Dover. This Walter was a member of the five man committee under the mayor of Dover, Capt. William Stokes, R.N., appointed on 20th January 1676, "to report on the limits of the Port of Dover, seaward, and the wharves and quays in the harbour".

Walter died in 1692, but the great house proved to be too expensive for his descendants to run, so they sold it to John Taylor in 1704. He pulled down most of it, leaving only one corner standing and this part survives today as a very substantial property a little to the south-west of Bridge Church. It is at present used as a club. Δ