

MEET THE ABROOKE FAMILY

When Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, Dorney was a thriving little community. During the 1550s, sixteen couples tied the knot in Dorney church and seventeen families brought 35 babies to be christened. For most of these residents, we have no information beyond the parish registers, but sometimes wills and other sources offer us the chance to learn a little more about them. That's the case with the Abrooke family.

On 26 April 1551, Thomas Abrooke married Joanna Culverhouse in Dorney. Thomas came from Bray and Joanna was a widow. Born Joanna Carter, no doubt part of the extensive Carter family in Dorney, she had married widower Richard Culverhouse in June 1549, acquiring four stepchildren. Richard had died seven months later, leaving her pregnant with son John. Life could be short in the mid-16th century, but now Joanna had another chance at family life with Thomas.



The couple settled in Dorney, and their family grew and flourished. First came four sons – Henry, William, Robert and Richard – and then two daughters, Margery and Joanna. All except the last child are known to have reached adulthood, which was quite an achievement. Thomas was a farmer, almost certainly renting from Dorney manor, but he also bought an acre of arable land from Abraham Carter. This land was described as being part of a field in Dorney, beside the Thames and opposite Water Oakley on the Bray side of the river. It sounds as though this was in Thames Field, one of the village open fields, now occupied by Dorney Lake.

The eldest son, Henry, married and his first child, a first grandchild for Thomas and Joanna, was born about 1578. Two more children followed. Then, after over 30 years of marriage, Joanna died in 1581. Daughter Margery married John Willis in 1587 and they had two children. Robert too married, settled in Bray and had four children, his wife pregnant with a fifth when he died in 1593. In 1592, Thomas remarried, to widow Margaret Milland.

Thomas died in 1595 and was buried in Dorney churchyard. We don't know how old he was, but he would have been at least 65 – a good age. He had made a good life, raised a family and earned enough to make provision for them in his will. Henry was settled somewhere outside Dorney, in a property leased for £4 a year by Thomas, who left this to him. William, who remained in Dorney, was left the acre of land by the river. Thomas bequeathed varying amounts of money, livestock and barley to his children, grandchildren, godchildren and servants. There were three servants – a male farm worker and two maids who would have helped on the farm as well as in the house. One of these was Alice Milland, no doubt a relative of William's wife Margaret.

Thomas's will illustrates some interesting features of contemporary life. He specifically provided for his wife to keep the goods and chattels which she owned before she married him, which had been her dower in her previous widowhood. At that time, a woman's possessions became those of her husband when she married. It was also common for a pre-nuptial settlement to set out financial arrangements in case the woman should be widowed. This had obviously been the case for Margaret in her earlier marriage.

In the 16th century, and indeed for a good while afterwards, there were no banks, and so if you wished to borrow money, you had to find someone able and willing to lend it. Often this transaction would be recorded in a bond. Thomas had lent £10 to his son Robert, who had not repaid this before he died. In his will, Thomas asked Robert's executors to pay the £10 to his son Henry.

William was the executor of Thomas's will, but he also asked two friends to be overseers of it. This was another common practice, designed to help with any difficulties that might arise and to provide advice to the executor. One of the witnesses to the will, Thomas Frend, had married Jackaman Abrooke in Dorney in 1565, no doubt a sister or other female relative of Thomas.

Thomas hoped that his widow Margaret would remain living in his house with his son William. It looks as though she did, as she was still in Dorney when she died in 1600 and left most of her possessions to William. In her will, she was particularly concerned to pass on the best of her clothing, to her sister and to the eldest daughter of Henry Abrooke. Margaret's wardrobe was

typical of a countrywoman in 1600. She had a russet gown, a best petticoat and a red petticoat. Aprons were habitually worn and she left several, including one made from coarse linen and another from canvas. To protect her skirts from dirt while riding, she had two saveguards, a kind of overskirt. Several kerchiefs might be used to cover her hair or across her shoulders, while the neckerchiefs were tied round her neck. Margaret's attire was finished off with a hat and shoes.

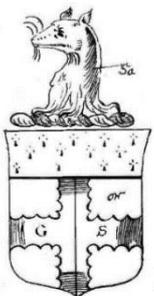
William now took over as head of the household in Dorney, and in 1598 he married Alice Milland. He was 44 and she was 17. They had 5 children – first a daughter, Elizabeth, and then four boys, William, Thomas, John and Richard. However, William did not live to see his family grow up. On 22 April 1612, he made his will; four days later he was buried in Dorney. His will set out detailed arrangements for the maintenance of his wife and support of his young children, aged from 2 to 12. He owned a farm called Bean Readings in Oakley Green, Bray, which he left to Alice and after her death to their son William. When William junior reached the age of 23, he was also to inherit the rented farm in Dorney where the family lived and the riverside acre of land opposite Water Oakley. Meanwhile, revenue from these properties was to be used to bring up the children and to provide each of them with a nest egg for adulthood. The two friends William appointed as overseers – Rowland Hind of Dorney and William Mountague of Boveney – were asked to look after these savings and “put out” the money, in other words lend it out at interest.

The most interesting feature of William's will is the detail it offers of the family's lifestyle. William parcelled out the contents of his house between his children, with the greatest part going to William junior, then Elizabeth and so on down the ages. The rooms mentioned were the hall, chamber, malthouse and loft. There were two feather beds, which were the most comfortable type available, and plenty of sheets, blankets and coverlets. In the hall was a long table and a great cupboard, and the family had a surprisingly large number of tablecloths and napkins, pewter platters and dishes. There was another table and two chairs, including a “great joined chair”. Additional storage took the form of seven further chests or presses. For cooking, there were spits for roasting meat, and pots of all kinds, including long-legged pots which would have stood over the fire. Some items were clearly heirlooms – the Milland furniture (unspecified) which must have come from his wife or stepmother, and “the great cawdron that was my grandfathers”. This all suggests a significant degree of comfort in the home.



With the need to provide for his immediate family, William made few other bequests. He left 20s to his servant John Culverhouse, who is likely to have been his stepbrother or relative. He also remembered his brothers Harry (Henry) and Richard, Harry's daughter and a relation of his sister.

Six months after William's death, his widow Alice remarried, in a small church in the City of London, to George Cleave, a vintner who was five years younger than her. It is believed that he came from Somerset and later ran an inn in Shrewsbury where he remarried in 1618, before emigrating to America in 1630. If this is so, then Alice must have died by 1618. There is no indication what happened to her children. The records are silent on whether they went to London or Shrewsbury or remained living with family in or near Dorney.



The Abrooke connection with Dorney was nearly at an end. Richard Abrooke – probably William's brother – died in 1616. Elizabeth Abrooke – perhaps William's daughter? – gave birth out of wedlock to a daughter who lived only a few days. By 1657, when Sir James Palmer drew up his will, he referred to a farm on the estate “called the Outhouses lately Abrooke Farm”. The family had gone.

There was one last link. In 1672, a coat of arms was granted to William Abrook, a London merchant, whose roots were in Dorney. There is no indication who he was, but he was proud that his family had come from Dorney.

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