

The Genealogy of Sir W. S. Gilbert, Dramatist and Poet.

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The Authors of "W. S. Gilbert, his life and letters,"¹ state that the Gilbert family claim descent from Sir Humphrey Gilbert, the Elizabethan navigator, quoting certain striking resemblances which they possessed in common as affording proof of kinship. The Dramatist was, it is understood, under an impression that he was of Cornish descent and, as suggested, akin to Sir Humphrey; indeed, in that belief, he used the Crest, a squirrel, of his family. But it can be definitely said that he was uninterested and, as far as is known, took no personal steps to ascertain the real facts. While attempts to do this have been made from time to time, only recently has Sir William Gilbert's family been successfully traced. Below is given some account of the search and its results.

The county of Hampshire, not Cornwall, can claim Sir William Gilbert as one of its distinguished sons, for it is there that his early forbears have been traced. They lived for many generations in the picturesque village of Shipton Bellinger, which lies on the borderline between Hampshire and Wiltshire. In broad street is flanked by farms and old cottages, many with thatched roofs, while along it flows the Collingbourne stream, the course of which to summer time is now and again quite dry. The Gilbert family was still represented in this village in the last century. Some of its members were substantial yeomen, representative of that class in society known for its independence, conservative outlook and attachment to its own soil. While their primary interest was thus agricultural, in the course of time and under changing conditions other ways of obtaining a livelihood were turned to, either in the neighbourhood of their native village or farther afield. Sir William Gilbert's own immediate forbears, as will be seen presently, forsook Hampshire in the eighteenth century for the counties of Middlesex and Surrey.

The Gilbert family had been settled at Shipton Bellinger for centuries. It is vain to conjecture for how long: probably from time immemorial, as the old saying goes. Manorial records are often the only source from which genealogical data, both in and before the sixteenth century, is obtainable, and this was, to a considerable extent, found to be the case at Shipton Bellinger. In that village the tenements and lands of two manors accounted for a large part of its area. One of the manors belonged to the Dean and Chapter of Winchester, who had owned it since about 1500. The Court Rolls, such as have been preserved, are kept at Winchester in the Cathedral Library, where, through the courtesy and kindness of Canon Goodman, the Librarian, they have been searched for references to the Gilbert family. While their incompleteness impairs their value, the information acquired, coupled with that derived by the Subsidy Rolls stored at the Public Record Office, has enabled a little of the early history of the family to be traced.

¹ By Sydney Dark and Rowland Grey. Methuen & Co., Ltd.

The earliest member of the Gilbert family who can be identified at Shipton Bellinger is a Richard Gilbert, a customary tenant of the Parsonage Manor. The tenement which he held was practically a freehold, the continuity of its indefinite retention in the possession of his family resting more with its members than with the lord of the manor. By manorial custom it was granted on lives, such being replaceable or exchangeable on the payment of a fine. In this way invaluable evidence was provided for the genealogist.

This Richard Gilbert was, by virtue of holding a messuage or tenement of the manor, a member of the homage or jury. In that capacity he was present at a Court of the Manor held on the 9 October, 13 Henry VIII (1521). At the next Court of which there is a record, held on the 9 October, 35 Henry VIII (1543), he was replaced on the homage by a William Gilbert, possibly his son. In any case, his death in the interval is so likely that it can be assumed. In this same year a William Gilbert, no doubt the above, and a Richard Gilbert, described as his son, are assessed in a Subsidy Roll, in goods, at ten and four shillings respectively. The last-named Richard Gilbert must have been then of age, probably much older. On that assumption, here are three generations of the Gilbert family, two of whom, and to all likelihood the third, closely related. The birth of Richard Gilbert Senior can be put not later than 1470, and he may well have been the grandfather of his namesake.

At a Court held on the 11 April, 37 Henry VIII (1546), the above William Gilbert was granted a copyhold estate known as "Howsers"; the origin of the name has not been traced. It consisted of a messuage and four virgates of land, with considerable feeding rights in the common fields, and was to be held for the life of the said William Gilbert and that of his son, John Gilbert. This tenement remained for many years in the descendants of the said William Gilbert. The death of this William Gilbert was presented at a Court held in October, 5-6 Philip & Mary (1558). On the same occasion his widow, Anna Gilbert, was, in accordance with the custom of the manor, admitted to the premises for life or widowhood. It was also recorded that John Gilbert, son of the deceased, holdeth the copyhold in reversion by copy dated 11 April, 37 Henry VIII (1546). The will of this William Gilbert, assuming that he made one, is not in the Winchester Probate Registry and the early Church Register is lost; consequently, nothing more can be learned of this member of the Gilbert family.

The above John Gilbert, either at his mother's death or on the determination of her estate in the copyhold, would have become possessed of "Howsers." He had a new grant of the tenement at a Court held on the 21 April, 3 Elizabeth (1561). The next available reference to it is at a Court held on the 12 April, 18 Elizabeth (1576), fifteen years later, when a Richard Gilbert, being to possession, obtained permission to assign his life interest therein to his brother, John Gilbert, he paying twenty shillings. At the same time leave was given to the two brothers, jointly, to sublet. Here again the absence of any record necessitates the assumption that the above John Gilbert had died between the years 1561 and 1576 and had been succeeded at "Howsers," in accordance with the usual custom, by Richard Gilbert, his son. This Richard Gilbert was buried at Shipton Bellinger on the 5 February, 1580-1, and his death presented at a Court held on the 20 April, 24 Elizabeth (1582), when a herriot, a horse worth forty shillings, was reported to be

payable. The long interval between the dates, is explainable by the Dean and Charters Manorial Court sometimes being held only once in three years. The John Gilbert, to whom in 1576 "Howsers " had been assigned, was, at a Court of the Manor held on the 19 September, 35 Elizabeth (1581), presented for not repairing a part of his barn. At another Court, held on the 6 October, 37 Elizabeth (1595), John Gilbert Junior, his son, had a grant of the farm in reversion, to have and to hold on the death of John Gilbert, his said father, and that of Simon Gilbert, another life in the said grant, probably his brother, to whom, however, no thither references have been traced.

The date of the succession of John Gilbert junior to " Howsers " under the reversionary grant just quoted is unknown, there being no reference to his father's death either in the imperfect Church Register or existing Court Rolls. He married at Shipton Bellinger 28 September, 1600, Ann Spencer, who belonged to one of the old local yeoman families; she was buried there on the 21 December 1613. The baptisms of eight of their children have been found in the Shipton Bellinger Register, and an unfortunate gap therein between the years 1601 and 1606 no doubt explains the failure to trace those of their son, John Gilbert, who succeeded his father in the occupation of "Howsers," and the much more important one of his brother, Thomas Gilbert, from whom it is proposed to show Sir William Gilbert is directly descended, and through whom and his forbears his connexion with the county of Hampshire is established. But Thomas Gilbert's parentage cannot seriously be questioned. The absence of his baptismal entry from the Register is regarded as fully accounted for. Its date is too indirectly suggested, and the missing baptismal easily confirmed, in a local Chancery Proceeding, dated 7 April, 15 Charles I (1639), traced at the Public Record Office. (E. 134, Southton, 15 Charles, Easter 18.) Therein a Thomas Gilbert of Shipton Bellinger gave evidence, stating that he was then aged thirty-six, making the year of his birth to be 1604, one of the years of which the entries are missing from the Register Book of that parish. Moreover, in a Survey of the Dean and Chapter's Manor ordered in 1649 by parliament, a Thomas Gilbert is described as holding by a copyhold grant, bearing date the 20 September, 7 James (1610), a messuage and two yard lands for his own life and the lives of Richard Gilbert, his brother, and Margaret Gilbert, his sister, both of whom are identified as the son and daughter of the above John and Ann Gilbert. This copyhold tenement, it may here be noted, was repeatedly regranted to members of this branch of the Gilbert family until well into the nineteenth century.

The administration of the goods of the above John Gilbert, the brother of the said Thomas Gilbert, was granted at Winchester on the 28 January 1624-5 to his son, another John Gilbert, and his death was presented at a Court of the Manor held on the 29 August following. He was then stated to hold a tenement called " Howsers " Farm, to which John Gilbert Junior (his son), the next tenant, was admitted. As Sir William's descent is now continued through the aforesaid Thomas Gilbert it is unnecessary here to further trace the history of the senior line of the branch of the Gilbert family occupying " Howsers " Farm; which, however, is fully recorded in the family pedigree.

Thomas Gilbert, whose identity it is hoped can be accepted unquestioned, lived and died in his native village. He married there on the 20 January 1625-6, Dennis, dau. of . . . Gale, akin to

the Gale family long located at Shoddeston, in the parish of Kimpton, Hauts, and was buried there on the 10 September 1655. Likewise, also his wife on the 9 October 1670, the administration of whose small estate, valued at £11 14s. 4d., was granted at Winchester to Thomas Gilbert, her son, on the 30 April 1672.

Thomas Gilbert, the eldest son in the foregoing Thomas and Dennis Gilbert's family of ten children, was baptized at Shipton on the 10 December 1628. At a Court of the Manor held in September 1662, he had a grant of the family copyhold, composing the messuage and two virgates previously mentioned, then in the occupation of Dennis Gilbert, his mother, for her widowhood, for his own life and the lives of Thomas Gilbert and Francis Gilbert, his sons, to which, on his said mother's death, he was admitted. Thomas Gilbert was buried at Shipton Bellinger on the 13 November 1697, and, at a Court of the Manor held six days later, his death was presented and Thomas Gilbert, his son, admitted to the said copyhold. An inventory of his property, made by John Gilbert and Thomas Kent on the 15 of the same month and year, totalled £378 16c. His wife, Mary, predeceased him and was buried at Shipton Bellinger 13 July 1693; her family has not, at present, been traced. Five of their seven children survived them. Joseph Gilbert, a grandson, was Vicar of Collingbourne Ducis, in the county of Wilts, from 1737 until his decease in 1756.

Thomas Gilbert outlived his parents only a few months. He was baptized at Shipton Bellinger on the 23 September 1655, and buried there on the 24 April 1698. In his will, proved in the Court of the Archdeacon of Winton at Winchester on the following 13 February, he mentions his wife Rebecca and their four surviving children, Thomas, Henry, John and Rebecca. His estate was valued at £869 3s., testimony to the then increasing wealth of the country and of his own prosperity.

Rebecca Gilbert, his widow, whose family, with the date of her marriage are still untraced, also left a will, proved as above in January 1711-12. She bequeathed, among other legacies, to Thomas Gilbert her grandson, son of her son Thomas Gilbert, a broad piece of gold, and to her daughter, Mary, a little gold ring.

Henry Gilbert, through whom Sir William Gilbert's descent is now continued, was a younger son of the above Thomas and Rebecca Gilbert. He is named in the wills of both his parents, being also his mother's executor. This is fortunate for otherwise the same difficulty of identification as occurred earlier might have arisen in his case, his baptism being unrecorded in the Shipton Bellinger Register and untraceable elsewhere. His Marriage Licence, issued at the Bishop's Registry at Salisbury and dated 16 September 1712, states that he was then aged twenty-five, so he was born in 1687. He married at Idminton, Wilts, 22 September 1712, Mary, daughter of William Prewett of that village, who brought him several lifehold estates there. Their eldest child, Rebecca, was baptized at Idminton on the 27 July following, her parents then residing at Shipton Bellinger. Their other five children were baptized at Newton Tony in the same county, where Henry Gilbert possessed a small freehold estate which his son, Thomas Gilbert, disposed of after his father's death. Henry Gilbert died in 1777 at Sherfield English,

Hants, aged 90, having been blind for the last fifteen years of his life.

Thomas Gilbert, the eldest son of the above Henry and Mary Gilbert, was born at Newton Tony on the 1 October 1714. He made his home at Idminton, thus finally severing the connexion of his branch of the Gilbert family with Shipton Bellinger. Both he and his wife died there, and the Church Register contains their respective burial entries under the dates of 12 July 1778 and the 18 February 1782. In the churchyard is a memorial to them erected in 1799 by their son, William Gilbert, then of Westminster. Thomas Gilbert's wife was a member of the Selfe family of Heal Farm, Woodford, near Salisbury; they were married at Winterbourne Gunner, a parish close by, 1 August 1737. Thomas Gilbert died intestate, and the administration of his estate was granted in the Court of the Archdeacon of Sarum at Salisbury on the 26 February 1783 to his son, William Gilbert. Another son, Henry Gilbert, died on the 4 November 1782, on board the *Vengeance*, man-of-war, under Lord Howe.

The William Gilbert just mentioned is described as of Westminster, afterwards of Christchurch, Surrey, tea dealer. He was Sir William Gilbert's great-grandfather. William Gilbert was born at Upper Wallop, Hants, on the 14 April 1746, dying in 1805. He was twice married (1) to a lady unknown, and (2) to a member of the Whitmarsh family of Salisbury. By each marriage he had several children, among them, Thomas Webb Gilbert, who, after practising as a solicitor in London, lived in the Close at Salisbury, where in 1867 he died and was buried in the Cathedral Cloisters. He left no children, bequeathing the bulk of his large fortune to his widow and immediate relatives. He demised the leases of his two houses in the Close to his wife for life or widowhood and, afterwards, to his nephew, William Gilbert, the son of his half-brother, William Gilbert of London, the father of Sir William Gilbert, who lived and died there.

The William Gilbert, half-brother to Thomas Webb Gilbert, mentioned above, was a son of William Gilbert of Christchurch by his first marriage. He was born in London, but where and when is unknown at present. His wife's maiden name was Mathers, but little has been traced so far about her family. William Gilbert lived in Commercial Road, Christchurch, Surrey, and had three children, William, called after his father and grandfather, of whom presently, Joseph Mathers Gilbert, born in March 1806, who died at Streatham, Surrey, 20 November 1841, leaving two sons, and Jane Gilbert, who died at Merton in the same county in 1841, aged 32. William Gilbert possessed considerable freehold and leasehold property in London while his personal estate amounted to a large sum, all disposed of by his will proved in the P.C.C. (23 Oxford) by John Samuel Schwenck and his wife, Mary Schwenck, his executors and trustees. The testator bequeathed to his brother, Mr. Henry Gilbert, "his father's portrait" and to his sister, Mrs. Mary Ames, of St. Paul's Churchyard, the miniatures of her mother and brother George.

William Gilbert, eldest son of the above William Gilbert, the father of Sir William Gilbert, was born at Bishopstoke, Hants, on the 20 May 1804. He resided first in London and, later, as already stated, in the Close at Salisbury, where he died on the 3 January 1890. He had married on the 14 February 1836, Ann, daughter of Doctor Thomas Morris, of Southampton Street, Strand, in whose house Sir William Gilbert was born on the 18 November following. It

may be stated that Sir William derived his second name of Schwenck from his great-uncle, John Samuel Schwenck, whose wife was his godparent; he was, in consequence of the early decease of his parents, brought up by them. John Samuel Schwenck died at Brixton on the 3 January 1861, and his short will, leaving most of what he possessed to his wife, was proved in the P.C.C. on the 11th of the same month. His widow, Mary Schwenck, also of Brixton. died there on the 16 May 1865. Her will, proved in the P.C.C. on the 3 July following, mentions her great-nephew and godson, William Schwenck Gilbert, and other near relatives.

Sir William Gilbert died at Grims Dyke, in Harrow Weald, on the 29 May 1911. He had three sisters, Jane Morris, who married Alfred Weigall of Salisbury, and for many years lived with her family in the house in the Close there which Thomas Webb Gilbert formerly occupied, Florence Gilbert, and Ann Maude Gilbert, now all deceased.