

## A Story about 'Puritan Troublemakers and President F. D. Roosevelt'<sup>1</sup>

*by Henny Shotter*

Thomas Reader originally from Lenham, a Thomas Hunt from Canterbury and Robert Couchman from Rolvenden were sent to West Gate Prison<sup>2</sup> in Canterbury for libel. This was in 1603 and their libel had not been of famous people but of the church. Thomas Reader, his brother Hilkiah<sup>3</sup> and Robert Couchman had pinned libelous corruptions of the phrase, "God have mercy", on various church doors in Canterbury. Robert Couchman wrote later about prison: "many lie there and are poisoned by the ill ayre and usage, and besides one knoweth



*The Westgate, scenic today but not so scenic then!*

not whether they will hang one or not, they are so violent and merciless to all opposites...'

Helchea got away very lightly because this was possibly his first offence.

Thomas and Robert, however, had been in conflict with the authorities for quite a while. As early as 1597 they were accused of 'refusing to receive the holy sacrament at our ministers hand being contrary to her majesties laws'.

Thomas Reader and Robert Couchman first lived in the Parish of St. George, The Martyr in Canterbury. The area was not one of the best because of the stench of animal dung and blood which hung in the air. Being apprenticed in Canterbury would give the young men good prospects of eventually becoming Freemen of the city of Canterbury.

In the libel case<sup>4</sup> Thomas Reader is named a 'servant' to Adrian Nicholls, a mercer and Robert Cushman as servant to George Master, a grocer. Helkiah as domestic servant to a Samuel Ferrier. This is for us today surprising as Thomas and Hilkiah were the sons of a wealthy yeoman in Lenham.



*The Tower is all that's left of the former parish church St George, the Martyr*

Their father, Paul Reader farmed in Lenham. He died in 1597 and left his estate<sup>5</sup> to his wife and subsequently, once the children came of age, to Patience (1578 – ?) Thomas (1580 - 1632) Hilkiah (1583 - 1637) Sara (1585 - 1616), Margaret (1588 - 1610) and (Mary 1593 – ?). Each of the girls were to inherit £40, which was a small fortune then; Thomas would inherit the family home, a Hall House and land in Lenham; and Hilkiah a house in Boughton Aluph. According to the description in the inventory<sup>6</sup>, the house in Lenham had the hall in the centre with the Parlour on one side and the Buttery and the Pantry on the other. Above the parlour and the 'lower end'; the buttery and pantry, were two chambers. There were also outbuildings: a bread house, a milk house, a kitchen, barn, and barnyard. It is likely that the floor of the house was clay. The archive holds a document<sup>7</sup> from 1594 in which two men were accused of entering Paul Reader's property and taking up the clay floor. Theft of building materials seems to have a long tradition!

The hall was a rather prestigious place, with even a painted cloth as a wall hanging. It contained a cupboard, a long table, two benches, four chairs, five joined stools and twelve cushions. The parlour, which was part of the family's private quarters, was similarly furnished but without wall hangings.



*A "joined" stool gets its name from the fact that proper "joints" were used in making the stool.( image: W&A)*

The chambers upstairs had comfortable beds, with feather bedding and bolsters. One of the beds had a trundle bed (a bed under the bed) which traditionally could be used by a servant attending to the master in the night when needed. The family had dinner ware made of pewter, 23 sheets, ten tablecloths and 30 table napkins, which are all indicators of a very comfortable lifestyle. On the farm were three cows, thirteen ewes, a ram, four lambs, six hens and four chickens. At the time when the inventory was taken, wheat was

growing on nine acres. The Reader family owned goods to the value of £222. According to information in the book by Michael Zell "Industry in the Countryside", the Reader family was in the top 10% of society in terms of the value of their household goods. However, by 1664 there was only one person with the surname Reader living in Lenham and she was too poor to have to pay Hearth Tax<sup>8</sup>

So what happened? The answer is that we don't know. We think that Hilkiah, the younger son, took up his inheritance in Boughton Aluph because many years later his death was registered in the neighbouring village of Kennington. It seems that Thomas, the main heir, never came back to Lenham. However, he, the rebellious young man with Puritan views, became a churchwarden at St. Andrews in Canterbury. Both sons had families of their own and prospered. It seems their brotherly bond lasted their lifetime, as they made each other's children beneficiaries of their wills.

Most important in history is their sister Sara. She was 12 when her father died. At the age of 21, possibly after receiving her inheritance, she too lived in Canterbury in the Cathedral Precinct. As she was financially independent, we can assume that she fell for Robert Couchman, the troublesome friend of her brothers, and they tied the knot in 1606. Robert Couchman was by then a Freeman of Canterbury and had his own shop in what is today number 13, The Parade, in Canterbury. They had a son just a year later, who was baptised Thomas (just like Sara's older brother) at St. Andrews Church in 1607. Life could have been comfortable for the family, and they could have settled down, but they didn't.

In the years before his marriage, Robert Couchman was excommunicated several times <sup>9</sup>and, in 1606, he was witness in a trial against the master Thomas Brome, who had mistreated his apprentice. It is unlikely that this stand made him friends! However, the main reason for Robert's decision to leave Canterbury was his Puritan beliefs. In his book, which was published after his death, he complained about injustice and insincerity in the church. He felt persecuted in England and, together with other Puritans from Sandwich, the family emigrated to Leiden in Holland where many English Puritan families had gone and found religious freedom and work in the flourishing industries of the town.



*Grading the Wool*

In 1611 Thomas Couchman bought a house next to the university. Sara and he had more children, but only Thomas survived childhood.



*Pieterskerk, Leiden*

Sara died in 1616 and is remembered on a plaque at the Pieterskerk.

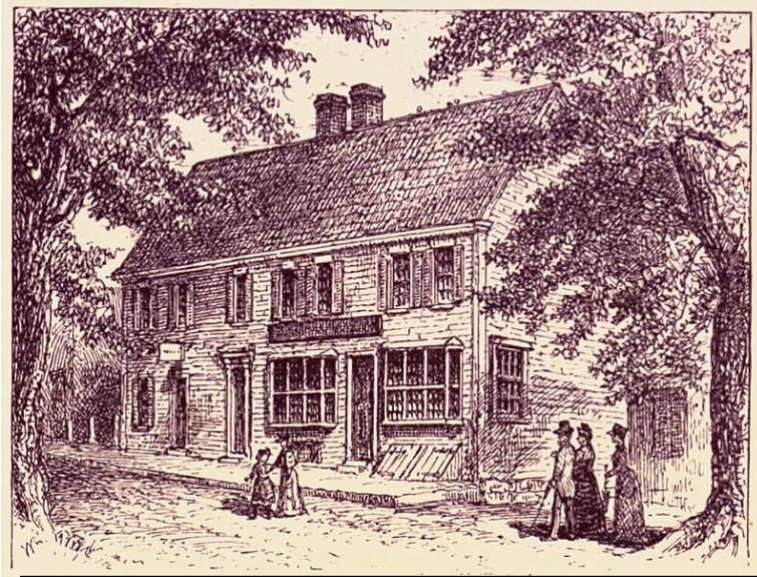


Some years later Robert Couchman helped organise the crossing of the Mayflower. He and Thomas were on the Speedwell, which took in water as she attempted to sail in convoy together with the Mayflower to America. Both ships returned to port. The overcrowded Mayflower finally set sail on 16th September 1620. Robert and his son stayed in England, eventually sailing in the autumn of 1621 on board the "Fortune".



*A difficult voyage due to overcrowding*

However, Robert soon returned to England and entrusted Thomas to William Bradford, a religious leader, with the words: 'Have a care of my son as of your son'. In London, Robert Couchman acted as agent for the commercial interests of the New Plymouth Colony in England for the rest of his life. Perhaps he intended to return to America but he died in 1625 in Benenden while visiting the widow of his brother, Richard and their children.



*Governor Bradford's House*

Thomas Couchman, the son of Robert from Rolvenden and Sara, the Lenham girl, eventually became a leader of the Plymouth Colony. He married Mary Allerton and they had 50 grandchildren. Among their many descendants are President Franklin D Roosevelt and President Zachary Tay.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the outstanding research by Michael R Paulick and Robert Cushman published in: The Register, Journal of American Genealogy, New England Historic Genealogical Society (Winter 2018) 'The 1625 Death of Pilgrim Robert Cushman in Benenden, Kent' by Michael R Paulick and Robert C Cushman. By the same authors, 'Robert Cushman, Mayflower Pilgrim in Canterbury 1596-1607' (Mayflower Quarterly Vol 79 No 3) and 'The Probable Origins of Sara Reader, First Wife of Robert Cushman' (Mayflower Journal vol I No II Fall 2016) – both refer to Canterbury and to Canterbury records.

<sup>2</sup> all Images courtesy of Wikipedia

<sup>3</sup> This unusual name biblical name was a major clue for the American researchers in finding the Reader Family in Lenham

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Michael R Paulick for his corrections

<sup>5</sup> Paul Reader Will PRC/17/50/396 in Kent Archive

<sup>6</sup> Paul Reader Inventory 1597 PRC/10/25/220 in Kent Archives

<sup>7</sup> see QM/SI/1594/5/5 in Kent Archive

<sup>8</sup> The Hearth Tax online [https://gams.uni-graz.at/o:htx.Kent#head\\_292](https://gams.uni-graz.at/o:htx.Kent#head_292) accessed 30.1.2024