

Mary Honeywood

Benefactor, Matriarch and Activist

By Amy Myer

Mary Honeywood was a remarkable lady. Born in 1527 she had a long life, not dying until 1620. Her memory is enshrined in the Lenham of today by the almshouses, the Grade I listed Honeywood House in the High Street and the farm that all bear her name. The retirement



Honeywood House
Photo © [pam fray \(cc-by-sa/2.0\)](#)

homes in Faversham Road carry her maiden name of Atwater, and St Mary's church has benefited from her bequests, which include the pulpit. The tombstone to her grandson Robert Thompson near the altar bears testimony to her role as matriarch and today Mary Honeywood is chiefly known for her appearance in the Guinness Book of Records. Her

est number of living descendants – a her 90th birthday party,¹ wrote her

grandson, the Dean of Lincoln Cathedral.

Mary was the younger daughter of Robert Atwater of Royton Manor in what is now Lenham Heath. The Atwaters had owned Royton since the fourteenth century. At the tender age of sixteen, Mary had enthusiastically embraced marriage with Robert Honeywood² of Postling not far from Folkestone who was only a year older than she was. Enthusiastically? Not only do their 16 children leading to those 367 descendants bear witness to that, but Mary was one of life's activists who in later times might have become a leading suffragette.

¹ Robert Honeywood, 'The Posterity of Mary Honeywood', *Honeywood Evidences*, 1612

² The name Honeywood is thought to be derived from the earlier Henewood, lands in the parish of Postling. *The Baronetage of England*, 1771.

She and her husband were committed Protestants at a time when the Roman Catholic Mary Tudor was on the throne and death was the punishment for following the Protestant religion. Mary Honywood visited prisoners incarcerated for their beliefs and, on 1st July 1555 at Smithfield, she attended the burning at the stake of John Bradford, prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral. She had to make a speedy escape from the violence of the crowd, losing, so it is recorded, her shoes as she ran for safety.³

Despite her piety, the tale is told of her⁴ that at a time of deep depression she declared loudly that her soul would be damned as surely as the Venetian glass she held would shatter as she threw it to the ground. It remained intact. The photograph – a reversed etching from her portrait which hangs at Oriel College, Oxford – shows her pointing to the Venetian glass itself.



Mary inherited Pett Place in Charing from her father, but died at the great age of ninety-three in another Honywood property in Markshall Essex. There is a memorial to her in St Peter's church in nearby Coggeshall, transferred there from its original site in the Markshall church demolished in 1933. She was not buried in Markshall, however. She died 'on 'Tewesday ye 16 day of May 1620... and according to her desyer was buried in Lenham Church in ye County of Kent, upon Saturday then following.'⁵ Exactly where is not known, but the tombstone of her grandson Robert Thompson near the church altar refers to its being nearby and to her remarkable record.

Mary's Protestant beliefs carried on down the family for generations. Four of Robert Thompson's sons emigrated to New Haven, Connecticut, in 1637 when the state was first colonised,⁶ and the monarchy was threatening Puritanism. They were far from being Mary's only descendants to carry her religious fervour onwards. Her husband Robert had died in 1576, but his forename was carried on in the Honywood family to great effect. Their son

³ Thomas Fuller: *The History of the Worthies of England*, London, 1662

⁴ Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, *Ibid*

⁵ *Honywood Evidences*, *op cit*

⁶ *The Story of St Mary's Lenham*, edited by Annette Tomarken, Friends of St Mary's, 2017

(Robert number 2) continued to live in Pett Place and lived to a ripe old age for that time. He recorded family history including an eye-witness account of the fire that destroyed much of Charing church, which was begun accidentally by a gentleman called Mr Dios who discharged a 'birding peece' at a target 'in ye shingells' but succeeded in setting fire to the roof instead.⁷

Robert number 2's son, Robert number 3, bought the Charing archbishop's palace, carried on the Protestant tradition and became a member of the Kent county committee for Parliament⁸, defecting in 1643 when the Civil War split the nation between royalists and parliamentarians.

His son Robert number 4, had a dramatic career in the army, being made a colonel in his younger days after he 'vigorously espoused' the cause of Frederick, king of Bohemia who was trying to thwart the plans of Catholic Philip III of Spain to grasp the Palatinate, a German state in the Rhine Valley. He then spent much time serving the exiled King Frederick and his queen Elizabeth, who was the daughter of James I and who deemed Robert 'honest and faithful'.⁹ Thereafter he became a roving diplomat in Europe. His reward was a knighthood in 1627¹⁰ and the future looked rosy. So it proved, but much later in 1660 he was caught on the hop when Charles II was restored to the throne, which was tricky given Robert number 4's political sympathies with the Republicans. Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary that he had despatched an order for a ship to be sent to bring Sir Robert back to England. Luckily Charles II had no issue with him, but worse was to follow when five years later his son, Robert number 5, ignored the royal mandate for Englishmen serving in the Dutch forces to come home.

Not a good idea! He was accused of treason, all his property was seized including Pett Place and poverty struck. His father, Robert number 4, sought solace in translating an Italian history of Europe lamenting in his dedication 'the circumstances of an uncomfortable old age and ruined fortune brought upon me rather by public calamity than vice or domestic prodigality'.¹¹

⁷ *Honywood Evidences op.cit.* and *A History of Charing*, Charing and District Local History Society, 2011

⁸ *A History of Charing*, Charing and District Local History Society, 2011

⁹ *The Correspondence of Elizabeth Stuart Queen of Bohemia*, ed. Nakine Akkerman, OUP 2011

¹⁰ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

¹¹ *Restituta: or Titles, Extracts and Characters of old Books*, vol 3, Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges, 1815

Better days lay ahead for the Honywoods but there was no Robert number 6 in the direct line. But Mary's descendants still carried the Honywood name forward, and for Lenham she remains a very special person.