

## The Daces of Wethersfield

The earliest of my Dace ancestors I can trace is Thomas Dace, born in 1797. The 1841 Census records he was living in Blackmore End, a hamlet within the parish of Wethersfield (Essex), and he is described as a farmer.<sup>1</sup> Wethersfield was, and still is, a parish mainly given over to agriculture, and is about five miles north of the small town of Braintree. In earlier times Braintree had been a cloth producing town but by the 1840s it was largely turned over to silk manufacture. Thomas was also engaged in the production of potash, used as a bleaching agent in textile production, as well as an agricultural fertilizer.<sup>2</sup> Thomas had a wife called Mary, also aged fifty in 1841, and they lived with four sons, a daughter, a daughter-in-law and a nine month old grandson. Thomas was a member of the Congregational (non-conformist) church in Wethersfield, and the births of several of his children are recorded in the records of that body.

I have been unable to identify Thomas's parents but there were Daces living in the parish much earlier. Katherine Dace of Wethersfield was a witness at court case concerning the theft of a ram and lamb in 1639. Two paupers broke into the house of John Dace in Wethersfield and stole some bread and bacon in 1649. Another John Dace married Martha Crabb in Wethersfield church in 1681. Yet another John Dace married Rachel Brown in 1719.<sup>3</sup> Several other Dace births and deaths are recorded in the parish records in the later eighteenth century but I have not been able to link any of these earlier Daces to Thomas. There are some even earlier references to Daces elsewhere in Essex: a Richard Dace was in Colchester gaol in July 1587, but was (perhaps fortuitously) acquitted and freed.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1851 Census Thomas Dace was still alive and living in Blackmore End with his second son Charles (b.1821). Thomas was a now widower, his wife having died in 1847, and was described as a journeyman bricklayer. Charles, described as an agricultural labourer, was married to Hannah Carder (b.1823), described as a straw plaiter. Straw plaiting was a useful source of income for the rural poor of Essex, introduced into the county in the late eighteenth century by the Marquis of Buckingham, who lived at Gosfield Hall, a mansion just to the north of Wethersfield,. The straw was used in the making of hats and bonnets.<sup>5</sup> Four daughters and a younger brother, Thomas junior, were also living with Charles.

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<sup>1</sup> UK Census records download via [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk). All subsequent references to the census are from the same site. There was another contemporary family of Daces who farmed in Wethersfield but the connection with my ancestors, if any, is unclear. Samuel Dace, the patriarch of this family, was a wealthy farmer and one the twenty seven residents who voted in the 1847 general election.

<sup>2</sup> *Essex Field Club*, vol.9 (1896) p.128.

<sup>3</sup> Essex Records Office, Q/SR 306/94, T/A 418/134/9, D/P 119/1/1.

<sup>4</sup> Essex Records Office, T/A 418/47/7.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.foxearth.org.uk/blog/2005/06/strawplaiting.html>

The other two of Thomas's sons, the eldest James and the youngest Peter, were living elsewhere in Wethersfield, in Gittings Lane and Somers Lane respectively. Both were described as agricultural labourers and their wives as straw plaiters. Henry Dace, the illegitimate son of Thomas's daughter Mary (d.1847), was a six-year old pauper living in the Braintree Union Workhouse. Mary Dace had died of Phthisis – a term usually associated with pulmonary tuberculosis – shortly after giving birth. The impression is that if Thomas had been a modest tenant farmer in 1841, things had gone downhill for the family by 1851. Thomas died in 1853.

In the 1861 Census the position for the family of Thomas's eldest son James had got worse still. James and his wife had died in the preceding two years. The two eldest children, now in their teens, were still living in Wethersfield in the hamlet of Beazley End and were working as an agricultural labourer and straw plaiter respectively, with their uncle Thomas resident as a lodger. The remaining four children, aged 13 to 4 were in the workhouse at Braintree.<sup>6</sup> By contrast the youngest son, Peter, was now also living in Braintree, with his wife and young family and working as brewery porter.<sup>7</sup> Charles, still living in Blackmore End, now had six daughters, all straw plaiters like the mother, except the youngest who was just two weeks old. He also had two sons, the youngest of whom aged two, was my great-grandfather Charles.

In 1871 descendants of Thomas Daces still living in Wethersfield were now all residing at Blackmore End. Charles and Hannah's family were living in Widleybrook Lane. Charles's brother Thomas was living nearby, lodging with the Choat family who ran a beer house as well as a farm. Charles's nephew Henry was lodging at The Bull public house (now a decent gastro-pub) and was working as a thatcher. Charles and Hannah had at least ten children.

In 1881 Charles's younger sister Eva, then twenty, is described as a silk weaver. There were two silk manufacturing companies in the Braintree area, founded by the Warner and Courtauld families. Possibly she worked for Samuel Courtauld & Company which had silk mills at Braintree, Bocking and Halstead, employing three thousand people, over 90% of them women. Samuel Courtauld (d.1881) was very successful industrialist who pioneered mechanisation to produce mourning crêpe, popular with Victorian widows. A religious non-

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<sup>6</sup> By 1871 James's eldest son Charles had moved to Bocking with his family and his younger brother Peter, now out of the workhouse, lodged with them. He was still an agricultural labourer at this date but later became a groom and for a few years either side of 1890 ran the Spread Eagle public house in Bocking.

<sup>7</sup> Peter was a drayman in 1871 but died soon after this but his wife was still alive in 1901. Some years ago I logged into an on-line forum and came across postings by an Andrew Dace. I got in contact and it turned out that we shared a common ancestor, Thomas Dace. From Andy I found out that Arthur Dace, Peter's eldest son, was a regular soldier. He joined the 56<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, which later became 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Essex Regiment, in 1870 and was discharged in 1890. He served abroad for much of his service, in India, Aden and Egypt, where his battalion were part of the Nile expedition that attempted to relieve General Gordon in Khartoum. Towards the end of his military service he married a Braintree girl and after his discharge he became a baker. Later he moved to Harwich where he worked on the docks. His eldest son Leonard, born in 1896, was a hairdresser in Harwich for most of his life, but he also served with the Essex Regiment as a volunteer in the Great War. He joined the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, a Territorial unit, of which more below.

conformist and political liberal, he was an enlightened employer by the standards of the time. As wealthy businessmen do, Samuel bought a country estate, Gosfield Hall, whilst his son George, a justice of the peace, lived at nearby Cut Hedge. As we shall see, the Courtauld family played a major role in the lives of my grandfather, grandmother and great uncle.

In 1881 Charles Dace was twenty two and is described as a bricklayer. He was living at Readings Cottage in Wethersfield with his wife Sarah, née Palmer and born at Writtle, with their two year old daughter Alice. A decade later he was living at Four Ash Green near Halstead. Alice had died young, one of ten offspring of the marriage that did so, but another daughter, Ethel, was now aged six. Charles was now a gamekeeper, working for George Courtauld at Cut Hedge. My father wrote of him that he “was something of a rogue. He liked a drink, and was prone to lord it over his sweet little wife”. There is a photograph of him which probably dates to c.1910 which shows a rather stern looking individual. By 1901 there were two further children Alfred born in 1892 and Sydney born in 1895. Ethel had already moved out, she was a live-in servant in Halstead, and I was told that my grandfather recalled very little of her so it would appear that she did not have much contact with her family until her early death from influenza in 1918.



*Figure 2: Charlie and Alf Dace c.1905*

After Samuel Courtauld died Gosfield Hall passed to Colonel and Mrs Lowe. Louisa Lowe was born Louisa Harris in Rayne (Aberdeenshire) in 1845 and was an adopted daughter of Samuel. Her husband, twenty years her senior, was a Nottinghamshire gentleman, a militia

colonel and a keen amateur meteorologist. After moving to Essex in 1881 he became a JP but died 1888. In her long widowhood - she died 1939 - Mrs Lowe was a pillar of the local community. She founded the 1st Gosfield Baden Powell Scout Troop in 1909 and my grandfather Syd was one of the original recruits. In 1918 she published a wonderfully affectionate memoir of the early years of the troop called "My Scouts" although there is a touch of melancholy about it as several former members had been killed in the Great War, and Syd is mentioned several times, both as a young scout and as a soldier on leave. Gosfield was a good place to shoot and in the course of several visits in the years immediately before the Great War, Mrs Lowe's friend Sir David Gill, a fellow-Scot and a notable astronomer, bagged nearly two thousand pheasants. The gamekeeper at Gosfield was Jim Rowson, and from 1909 his apprentice was my grandfather Syd.



*Figures 3: Syd Dace 1910 and 1917*

Alf Dace was working as a gardener but also joined the local Territorial Force battalion, 5th Essex, on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1909. He was sworn in by Captain S. A. Courtauld of 5th Essex, the son of George Courtauld. He signed up for an initial four years, like many others for the additional money as much as anything else. He re-engaged on 13th March 1913 for a year and again on 13th March 1914, presumably for two years which equates to seven years in total which fits his eventual discharge date of 6th April 1916. 5th Essex was mobilised at the beginning of the Great War and Alf was serving in 'C' Company, as his younger brother's attestation papers notes when it names him as next of kin after their parents. In 1912 Syd applied for and was accepted for the post of underkeeper on the estate of William Knox

D'Arcy near East Dereham in Norfolk. He was separated from his family but seems to have thoroughly enjoyed his new independence. When the war broke out in August 1914 Syd was keen to join up, which he did at Billingford near Diss on 11th September 1914, and became 15176 Private Dace, S.A. of the Norfolk Regiment. He was two weeks short of his nineteenth birthday, legally too young to enlist, so gave his age as nineteen and two days. He was sent in a draft to Shorncliffe Camp, Kent, and joined the newly founded 8<sup>th</sup> (Service) battalion of the Norfolk Regiment.

Alf's military career was fairly brief. His battalion was split into two and Alf joined 1/5<sup>th</sup> Essex, made up of those prepared to serve overseas. He was soon promoted to sergeant, and his battalion eventually arrived at Sulva Bay, Gallipoli, on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1915. His unit spent just over three months there, mostly within range of Turkish artillery and snipers, but battle casualties were few. Instead the battalion was reduced to about a third of full strength by sickness, mainly dysentery. The battalion was evacuated on 2<sup>nd</sup> December and sent to Egypt. By February 1916 Alf had completed his term of engagement and was sent home. His discharge papers indicate there had been two reprimands during his time at Gallipoli but describe his military character as "Very good". After his discharge in early 1916 Alf Dace returned to gardening in Braintree. Although conscription was introduced that year he was never forced back into uniform.

In August 1921 Alf joined the Imperial (now Commonwealth) Graves Commission, working in France on wages of £2 10s per week. In February 1925 he was promoted to Sub-Foreman Gardener, on £3 per week, but he resigned in March 1927 and returned to Braintree<sup>8</sup>. He married and had one son, always known as Sonny, who died a bachelor. My father recalled Alf as an uncomplicated countryman who counselled him in a thick north Essex accent not to take on a job that entailed responsibility. It seems likely that his experiences at Gallipoli, and perhaps in France afterwards, jaundiced his view of life.

SAD too was promoted to sergeant and 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolks arrived in France on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1915. His first major action was the First Day of the Somme and he remained with the battalion until late 1917, fighting in all the major actions the battalion was committed, to including Passchendaele. He won the Military Medal twice, was wounded twice and was one of the battalion scouts that ventured out into No Man's Land at night to carry out reconnaissance and silently kill German's doing the same thing. After a period at a military school during the winter of 1917-8 he was posted as a reinforcement to a different unit, 8<sup>th</sup> Londons, as an acting company sergeant major. This unit was almost immediately overwhelmed by the German attack on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1918, and joined the disorderly retreat towards Amiens. SAD survived this but was badly gassed at Villers-Bretonneux on 18<sup>th</sup> April. He was evacuated to hospital in England and operated on to remove half of his stomach. He was not expected to survive but confounded the doctors and was sent to recover at a military hospital in County Durham.

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<sup>8</sup> Sadly the CWGC could not tell me where in France he was working during this time.

Syd Dace was discharged from the army on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1919 as no longer physically fit for service, assessed as thirty percent disabled and awarded a pension of 9s and 9d for twenty six weeks. A picture of him taken in the early 1920s suggests he was physically much recovered by then, although he had regular reoccurrences of trench fever and my father recalled that the healed shrapnel wounds in his back were big enough to put his fingers into. He also suffered from night terrors and sweats, which were probably psychological rather physical in origin. Alice "Rose" Lingley, a former housemaid at Cut Hedge, had lost her fiancé in the influenza pandemic of 1918-20 and married Syd instead. They had two children, my aunt Joan and my father Ken (b.1928). It was a volatile relationship because they were both strong personalities and their rows occasionally led to broken crockery.

Syd became a successful chicken breeder and managed a poultry farm in Silver End near Braintree. This was a model village created in 1926 by the industrialist Francis Crittall whose factory there produced the eponymous metal window frames. During the Second World War Syd commanded the local company of the Home Guard which guarded the factory, now turned over to vital war work for the Norwich-based Bolton and Paul aircraft company. In the 1950s the poultry business took him to Hampshire, where he succumbed to stomach cancer, perhaps related to his war injuries, in 1963.

### **Postscript**

My father began work after leaving Braintree Grammar School at sixteen. He followed his father into the poultry business but ended his career as company treasurer for a large foods conglomerate handling currency movements on worldwide basis. In a deservedly long retirement he researched and wrote up the Great War service of his father, material from which I have used freely above. He married Manda Bulling (b.1933) in 1954 and they were together for very nearly fifty years. I came along in 1959, and my brother a couple years later. Our comfortable upbringing - which included a grand house in Leamington Spa, varied holidays, exotic food and educational opportunities - was a world away from the rudimentary one of my grandfather, let along the poverty of the earlier generations of the Daces.

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## Appendix – the Dace surname

In the later nineteenth century UK Censuses the surname Dace occurred in two distinct clusters, in south Staffordshire and in north Essex. There were a fair few in London too, but the Census records suggest that many were migrants, born outside the metropolis, and drawn in by the economic opportunities available there. In a roundabout way I am one of these migrants too, having moved to London in the early 1980s to work. As far as I can tell the two major groups were already established in their respective areas well before the later nineteenth century, and if there was ever a connection between them it is not clear when this was. The various UK Censuses suggest that within Essex there were in turn localised groups of Daces, at Witham, Danbury and Wethersfield. These places are not more than twenty-five miles apart and some connection seems probable.

Probably the best known Essex Dace is James Dace, son of the parish clerk of Witham and 'professor of music' in Chelmsford in the 1860s. This is not quite as impressive as it appears the title seems to have been self-bestowed and his main area of expertise was harmoniums and barrel organs. However he was a well-known local teacher and founded the musical instrument shop that still bears his name in Moulsham Street, Chelmsford.

There are several theories about the derivation of the surname. One suggests it is a corruption of Dacre but since this is an aristocratic surname firmly associated with Westmoreland this seems highly unlikely. Rather more persuasive is the idea that it is an Anglicisation of *dacus*, the Latin word for Dane, and not unreasonable given that Essex was once part of the Danelaw. However the Dace, *Leuciscus leuciscus*, is a small freshwater fish of the carp family which was once common in the River Pant that passes through Wetherfield. I'd like to think we are named after it.

