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The Howcott family at Shearsby

Shearsby is a village about nine miles south of the centre of Leicester and contained about 41 householders in 1670 according to the hearth tax returns. The Shearsby parish registers survive only from 1658. However, the earliest reference found to the Howcott family in the parish is dated 18 March 1607/8, when John Howcott was one of the witnesses to the will of Richard Tillye, a yeoman of East Brent, Somerset. The will was proved at Leicester in 1614, when a note was added to say that Richard had died at Shearsby.

George Howcott (born about 1595)

George, son of John Howcott (who was described as a butcher of Shearsby) was apprenticed to William Harvie on 24 August 1610 (1). He was admitted to the livery of the Company during the year beginning November 1618. This step could not take place until the apprentice was 24 years old, indicating that George was not born later than November 1595. Apprenticeships normally started when the lad was about 14 years old, which suggests that George was not born much earlier than 1595. William Harvey was apparently only about seven years older than George, as he had only completed his own apprenticeship shortly before taking George on, his "ingresse money" of 3 shillings and 6 pence and a white spoon having been paid to the Butchers' Company during the year commencing 1 November 1609. The Warden's account book confirms that William's own apprenticeship to Robert Grundy started on 20 January 1603/4 and that William's father was Thomas Harvy, a butcher of Coventry. It is not known whether the Harvy/Harvie and Howcott families were related.

George was presumably at Shearsby on 24 March 1618, when he witnessed the nuncupative (i.e. verbal) will of William Marshall of Shearsby.

When he was an apprentice, George would not have been allowed to marry, so his marriage presumably took place between November 1618 and 1622, when his first known child was christened.

The surviving bishops' transcripts for Shearsby include the baptisms of the following children of George Howcott:

- Katherine (1622-
- Mary (1625-1638)
- Lucy (1626/7-
- William (1628-1701)
- Frances (1630/1-
- Elizabeth (1636-

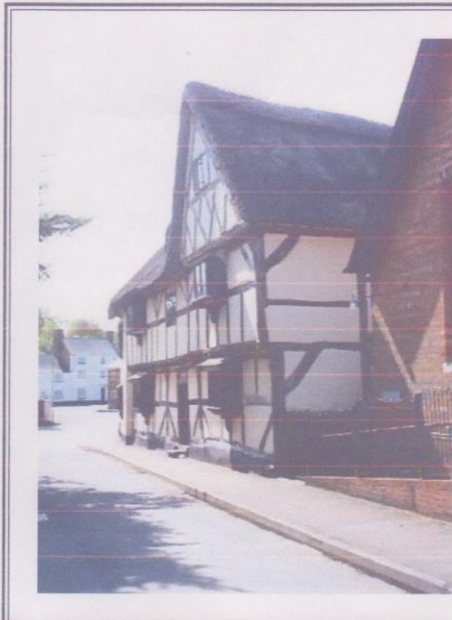
Bishops' transcripts for Shearsby cover only 20 of the years from 1600 to 1639 and do not survive at all for the period between 1639 and 1660. Therefore, it is likely that George had other children baptised during the missing years. When Robert Seale of Shearsby made his will on 20 July 1629, he left 5 shillings to be equally divided between "George Howcoat's children"; the number and names of these children are not stated in the will, but the size of the gift may indicate that by then George already had five living children.

When Elizabeth's baptism was recorded, George was described as a butcher. The same entry is the only one to name the child's mother - Mary. On 2 December 1665, Mary Howcut, a widow, was buried at Shearsby. It is probable that she was the mother of all six children and that George had died before the surviving parish registers began in 1658.

William Howcott (1628-1701)

William Howcott of Shearsby married Anne Garrett at Willoughby Waterless on 31 May 1658. Their children who were baptised or buried at Shearsby were:

- Joanna (1660-
- Elizabeth (1663-
- Ann (1665-
- Mary (1668-
- William (1670/1-1713)
- Ann (1673-1702)
- Lucy (buried 1675)



Yeomans Cottage, Church Lane, Shearsby

The tie-beam of the half-timbered house opposite Shearsby parish church and which is now known as Yeoman's Cottage, Church Lane bears the date 1669 with the initials "WHAH".

This without doubt refers to William and Anne Howcott - when William paid tax on three hearths at Shearsby in Michaelmas 1670, he was the only householder (either liable or exempt from payment) in the village whose surname began with an "H".

It is not clear if the date carved in 1669 indicates that the house was built or extended or merely occupied by the Howcott family in that year; the Michaelmas 1664 hearth tax list also shows William Howcott as having three hearths at Shearsby and it may refer to the same building.

In 1673, William was a churchwarden and served as "register" of Shearsby. The two copies of the Shearsby bishop's transcripts for that year are in his fluent handwriting, as are the entries in the portion of the parish register from which they were copied.

In 1680, Israel Elkington, an apprentice of "William Holcot", butcher of Shearsby was made free for market day at Leicester - clearly William's business took him at least that far from the village.

Anne Howcott was buried at Shearsby on 28 October 1675. However, William had left the village by the time of his death. His daughter Anne married "Will Linfield" at Shearsby on 9 February 1692/3 and on 15 December 1701 "William Howcoate" was buried at South Croxton, administration being granted to his daughter, Anne Linthwaite. The Bond describes William as "of South Croson lately S", with the last "S" crossed through. Presumably, the clerk had intended to mention Shearsby but changed his mind. William Linthwaite, farmer of South Croxton, and Andrew Tilley, farmer of [...?...], signed as sureties for the bond.

The inventory was taken on 16 January 1701/2 by Leonard Stevenson and William Linthwaite. It listed William Howcott's goods and chattels as:

	£	shillings	pence
His purse & apparel	0	13	4
Fifteen sheep	3	0	0

His book being Desparted Debts	5	8	0
All the rest of his goods seen & unseen	0	1	6
Total	9	2	10

William Howcutt (1670/1-1713)

William and Sarah Howcott (or Howcutt) had three children baptised at Shearsby:

- William (1695-1696)
- Susanna (1697-1697)
- James (1698-1742/3)

In 1697, "William Howcot" served as churchwarden and signed the bishop's transcript for that year, but the text of the record itself is not in his handwriting.

No record of William's burial can be found at Shearsby but there is an indication that he may have met with an early death. On 27 September 1704, the overseers of the poor for Shearsby issued a settlement certificate acknowledging their parish to be responsible for Sarah Howcott and her son James, should they require poor relief. This was addressed to the parish officers of Market Harborough where they were presumably going to live. The certificate does not mention William, implying that he was no longer present.

On 26 January 1712/3, James, son of William Howcutt was apprenticed from Shearsby to Henry Drake, a weaver of Foxton, Leicestershire for a term of 7 years from the date of the indenture. The consideration was £5 and duty of 2 shillings 6 pence was paid on 28 January 1713/4 (2). From the available circumstantial evidence, it is almost certain that this James was the same person as "James Haucote" of Oxendon who married Mary Ward of Brixworth at Oxendon on 28 August 1720 - which is seven months after the apprenticeship was to expire. Oxendon is only about six miles from Foxton.

When William is noted as James' father in the apprenticeship duty register, his name is not qualified as "late", which appears in the records of some other apprenticeship payments. This suggests that William was still alive at the time of the apprenticeship.

On 10 December 1713, William Howcot of Poplar, Middlesex was "weak of body" when he made his will. After legacies of 20 shillings to Robert Guy and 10 shillings to John Guy (who was Robert's brother), William left the residue of his estate to be equally divided between his wife Sarah Howcott and his son James Howcott. Although Poplar is some 90 miles from Shearsby, because of the rarity of the surname it is almost certain that the man who made his will at Poplar was originally from Shearsby. Moreover, it may well not be coincidence that the duty on James' apprenticeship was paid shortly after William died at Poplar. The will was confirmed by a mark rather than signature, although William of Shearsby has signed his name in 1697. This discrepancy can be explained by William's poor health; he died only five days after his will was made. "William Howcott of Poplar" was buried on 18 December 1713 at St Dunstan Stepney. William had appointed Mrs Jane Guy as his executrix and she obtained probate on 15 February 1713/14.

One or the other of these references may relate to William's widow:

- 19 August 1716 - "Sarah Howcoale" of Magpie Yard, which ran west from Fetter Lane, was buried at St Andrew Holborn (about four miles from Poplar)
- 1 December 1719 - Sarah Howcutt married John Sanderson at Arnesby Baptist chapel (about one mile from Shearsby).

Notes

(1) Guildhall Library: Butchers' Company, Warden's account book: CLC/L/BI/D/003/MS06440/002/001.

(2) The National Archives: IR1/2, page 157.

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