

LEAFORD Family History

It would appear that the Leaford family were of quite humble origins, although this is based on the status of the first clearly identified members in the early 17th century. We do not know the Christian name of this first Leaford (actually recorded as Leathat) but he would have been born around 1625, possibly in Little Downham, Cambridgeshire about 3 miles north of Ely. He had two sons that we know of, John and James born around 1655 and 1657 respectively. We will concern ourselves with the older son, as the younger son had only one child that we know of, also James, who died aged 28 with no known issue. John Leaford, born 1655 in Little Downham was living in the Fens at a particularly interesting time in local history. The first attempts at land drainage had begun in earnest during the 1630s led by Francis Russell, 4th Earl of Bedford along with some gentleman adventurers (venture capitalists). Two great cuts were made in the Cambridgeshire Fens to join the river Great Ouse to the sea at King's Lynn, known as the Old Bedford River and the New Bedford River (or Hundred Foot Drain). The work was directed by engineers from the Low Countries and would have provided considerable employment locally.

Following this initial drainage the Fens were still very susceptible to flooding, so wind pumps were used to pump water away from the affected areas. However, once drained the peat shrank and so the level of the land became even lower and liable to flooding, leading to further drainage projects in the 1650s. Still the opportunity for work may have attracted the first Leafords to the area, for we cannot find any living locally before this time. Whether these Leafords actually worked on the drainage projects we do not know, but John Leaford's son John Leaford, Gentleman born 1685 was initially a common labourer on the Fens. He was employed by the Company of Adventurers to repair the river banks and in 'drowned' years would provide for his family by killing wild fowl. He bought up plots of adventurer's land cheaply when he could, and by a fortunate succession of dry seasons became quite wealthy. He built a fine brick and sashed house near the bank of the Hundred Foot River at Oxlode and lived like a rural squire, gaining promotion in the Company. In 1733 the Denver Sluice collapsed and the South Level of the Fens was flooded, so in 1740 he proposed a scheme to repair the damage but ruffled feathers by addressing this directly to the Duke of Bedford. The Company instead brought in a Swiss civil

engineer, who despite adopting John's plan took the credit at the time and John resigned in 1753. By 1756 he was back in favour and was promoted as a Conservator, owned more than 200 acres (a requirement for the office) and was titled a Gentleman. Though some viewed him as a 'rich fool', as he could be arrogant and overbearing, he certainly left his mark.

His only son William Leaford born 1710 in Little Downham predeceased him as did his younger brother James Leaford born 1687. But James' only surviving son John Leaford, Yeoman born 1727 (his nephew) inherited the bulk of his estate in 1758. This included over 100 acres of land around Oxloode, and so he became a Yeoman Farmer as well as a Commissioner of the Littleport and Downham Drainage Board. Like his uncle, John lived into his seventies before leaving his estate to his only surviving son and heir James Leaford, Yeoman born 1760 in Little Downham. He was also a Yeoman Farmer and a drainage Commissioner, but he got into financial difficulties so that after he died in 1824 all his lands were auctioned off and his final total estate was worth less than £200. By 1837 his second wife Ann was living with her two teenage sons in a tiny cottage near Oxloode Farm rented for 15s/6p a year from the Corporation and by 1851 she was described as a pauper and both her sons were dead. James was succeeded by his son, another John Leaford born 1796 in Little Downham. We know very little about this John as he died in 1840 before the first census, but as he inherited little from his father, who died when he was only 28 years old, and as he already had four children by then, life may well have been a struggle. Indeed he died aged 44 having had nine children, eight of whom were still living, and must have left the family in difficulties.

In 1841 his widow Mary was still living with seven of their children, and the oldest of these James Leaford was largely supporting the family as an agricultural labourer. Mary's father Thomas and step-mother Susanna Waddelow were near neighbours in Main Street and her son John Leaford, aged 16 was recorded as their manservant. By 1851 she still had six of her children living with her, the four youngest boys who were all agricultural labourers (aged 20-24), her eldest daughter Mary who was already widowed had a son James aged six and her youngest daughter Charlotte who was 15. They lived in Mill End and John Leaford who was also now an agricultural labourer lived next door with his wife and baby daughter. James Leaford still lived in Main Street and worked as a labourer, but was now married with two children under two years. In 1861 Mary was living at 'the end of Hopkins Hill' and was

recorded as a Parish pauper, but her two youngest sons Uriah (aged 32) and William Sayers (aged 30) both agricultural labourers and both yet unmarried, still lived with her. Mary died in 1865 having survived a hard life thanks to the support of her children, who between them produced at least 46 grandchildren.

Mary's fourth son Thomas Leaford born 1827 in Little Downham married Harriet Dorling who gave him 13 children. He was mostly employed as an agricultural labourer and judging from the birthplaces of his children he had to move around the Fens quite a bit to find work. Nevertheless, he lived into his 77th year and most of his children reached adulthood, which was quite a remarkable feat for that time. He died in 1904 and Harriet in 1911, and both are recorded as dying at North Witchford, but whether this was the Union Workhouse I cannot confirm. Thomas' first born son was also a Thomas Leaford born 1860 in Sutton (near Little Downham). Aged 20 in 1881 he was an agricultural labourer and still living with his parents in March, Cambridgeshire. By 1885 he was living in West Ham, Essex having married Alice Sarah Whiskin at Islington, and was working as a general labourer in 1891 and then by 1901 as a dock labourer. He and Alice had nine children, but three of these died in infancy, and the oldest was Thomas James Leaford born 1886 in West Ham. He worked initially as a junior Commercial Clerk but by 1911 he was an Accountant for a Patent Agency, then in 1917 he married Lilian May Smith and they had four children. Thomas Stuart was born in 1920 in West Ham but Grace Alice born 1924, Inga Alice born 1928 and Lilian Doreen born 1929 all arrived after the family had moved to Harold Wood, Essex.

Stuart married Phyllis Joan Peperell in Essex in 1943 and after the war worked as a Customs Officer in London, Dover and Southampton before retiring to Sidmouth in Devon. They had three daughters, Patricia Mary born 1947, Susan Joan born 1948 and Catherine Vanessa born 1959. All three completed university degrees, held senior executive positions in their respective professions and married well. Patricia has a daughter Nicolette Elizabeth Leaford Fiddian born 1987 and Nessa has three daughters Emma, Claire and Naomi Faulkner born 1992, 1994 and 1998 respectively. Three of these four young ladies have already attended university and the fourth will do so in a couple of years. This branch of the Leaford family has therefore gone from rags to riches to rags to riches again in the past 400 years but the recent lack of male children means the name has now sadly died out.

Paul Fiddian – September, 2014