

# The Earls of Winchilsea

The Earls of Winchilsea [sic] have not had a lot to do with Winchelsea, but the connection is often made.

The Earls of Winchilsea (also the Earls of Nottingham) are the Finch-Hattons. Their ancestor was Vincent Herberd, a merchant of New Winchelsea at its foundation whose name appears in the Rental List of 1292. The name of Finch does not appear in the records of Winchelsea until 1342. The Finch family subsequently claimed that a Herberd or Herbert married an heiress of the Finch family and the names were joined. Subsequently, the Finch name came to predominate. The Finches were MP's for Winchelsea until 1642.

The family came to prominence under Henry VIII, when William Finch was knighted for services in the wars against France. His grandson, Sir Moyle Finch, married Elizabeth Heneage, daughter of Sir Thomas Heneage, Vice Chamberlain to Elizabeth I. Sir Moyle Finch lived at Winchelsea House in Epping. Elizabeth Finch (nee Heneage) was jealous at her stepmother's title of Countess of Southampton and schemed to become a Countess as well. She agreed to give the property inherited from her father (Copped Hall in Epping) to James I's Lord High Treasurer, Lionel Cranfield, in return for which, he would secure a title for her by paying off the debts of the Duke of Richmond and Lennox, a royal kinsman and favourite. However, James reneged at the last minute and, in 1623, she had to settle for the title of Viscountess Maidstone. However, Charles I honoured his father's promise and, in 1628, she became the Countess of Winchilsea. On her death in 1633, the title passed to her eldest son (who sold Winchelsea House to his niece's husband, Lord Grey of Wark).

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl, Heneage Finch (1628-89), was appointed Constable of Dover Castle, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports and Lord Lieutenant of Kent by his friend, the Duke of Albemarle (General George Monck) in 1660. He served as ambassador to the Ottoman Porte from 1660 to 1669. It was said of him that "his contemporaries called him 'amorous', and in Turkey he was reputed to have 'had many women' and 'built little houses for them'". Upon his return to England, Charles II declared, 'My Lord, you have not only built a town, but peopled it too'. He also had 16 children by two wives.

The wife of the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl, Anne Kingsmill Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661-1720), was a respected poet, a friend of Pope and Swift. She was unusual in receiving a good education despite being female and in finding supportive patrons in later life. In 1684, she married Heneage Finch, grandson of the first Countess of Winchilsea, whom she met at the court of Charles II, where Anne was Maid of Honour to Mary of Modena, the wife of James, Duke of York, and Heneage was Groom of the Bedchamber to James. When James was deposed in the *Glorious Revolution* of 1688, Heneage and Anne became *nonjurors*, persons who refused to renounce their oath to James II. Heneage was arrested in 1690 after trying to join James in France, but the case was eventually discharged. The couple were given refuge at Eastwell in Kent, the home of Charles, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Winchilsea, and son of Heneage's elder brother). This was Anne Finch's most productive period as a poetess. Among other things, she wrote *The Petition for an Absolute Retreat* (not connected with Winchelsea but evocative, not least, as there is a well-known house called *The Retreat*).

*Give me O indulgent Fate!  
Give me yet, before I Dye,  
A sweet, but absolute Retreat,  
'Mongst Paths so lost, and Trees so high,  
That the World may n'er invade,  
Through such Windings and such Shade,  
My unshaken Liberty.*

After the death of William III, the climate for nonjurors improved and, in 1710, the Finches returned to London. In 1712, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl died without issue and Heneage became the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Winchilsea. However, life became more difficult after the succession of George I in 1715 and the Jacobite Rebellion. Anne Finch died in 1720 and was buried at Eastwell. Her husband's epitaph for her is the most eloquent testimony to her genius:

*To draw her Ladyship's just Character, requires a masterly Pen like her own (She being a fine Writer, and an excellent Poet); we shall only presume to say, she was the most faithful servant to her Royal Mistress, the best Wife to her Noble Lord, and in every other relation, publick and private, so illustrious an Example of such extraordinary Endowments, both of Body and Mind, that the Court of England never bred a more accomplished Lady, nor the Church of England a better Christian.*

The main line of the Earls of Winchilsea died out with the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl in 1729. He was succeeded by his cousin, Heneage Finch, who was descended from Sir Moyle Finch's third son. Heneage Finch prosecuted the regicides at the Restoration. He was created Baron Finch in 1673 and Earl of Nottingham in 1681. Heneage died in 1729, the same year that he succeeded his cousin as Earl of Winchilsea. Heneage was succeeded by his son Daniel, known as *Don Dismal*, who was First Lord of the Admiralty under Charles II, Secretary of State under William III and President of the Council under George I.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Earl (1752-1826), George Finch, was a keen cricketer and founder of the Marylebone Cricket Club. He is most remembered for offering in 1786, together with Charles Lennox (later 4<sup>th</sup> Duke of Richmond), a guarantee to Thomas Lord to cover any losses on starting a new cricket ground. Lord opened the ground that bears his name in 1787 (although it moved twice before reaching its current location). In 1793, he bet Lord Darnley 1,000 guineas (an enormous sum) on the result of an MCC cricket match. The 9<sup>th</sup> Earl also fought in the American Rebellion and was first President of the Royal Institution.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Earl died without issue and was succeeded by his cousin George William Finch-Hatton. The 10<sup>th</sup> Earl is famous for his duel with the Duke of Wellington in 1829. The 10<sup>th</sup> Earl was described by Lord Selbourne as "a man of frank, kindly, and generous character, but not wise". He was outraged by the attempts by the Duke of Wellington as Prime Minister to carry the Catholic Emancipation Bill through parliament. Following letters to the press accusing Wellington of planning to introduce popery into every department of government, the Duke challenged the Earl to a duel. They met at dawn in Battersea. Winchilsea was late. When he arrived, Wellington testily told his second "Now then Hardinge, look sharp and step out the ground. I have no time to waste. Damn it! Don't stick him so near the ditch. If I hit him, he will tumble in." Upon the order to fire, Winchilsea pointed his pistol at the ground. The Duke fired at Winchilsea's leg but just peppered his coat. Winchilsea then fired into the air. His second then delivered a written apology, which Wellington accepted after some discussion.

One of the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl's sons, Harold (1856-1904), was a famous explorer in Australia. He was painted by Sir John Millais when he was 6 or 7. He left his name to various locations in Australia.

An odd connection between the Earls of Winchilsea and Nottingham can be found on the A1, formerly the *Great North Road* and, in Roman times, *Ermine Street*. On the A1 in Nottinghamshire, there is an inn called the *Winchelsea Arms* but better known to travellers as the *Ram Jam Inn*. The latter name apparently relates to a drink brewed by a landlord in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from a recipe (now lost), which he may have brought back from India.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Earl, Henry Stormont Finch-Hatton (1852-1927) founded the London to Brighton car race in 1896. His son, Denys Finch-Hatton, became a famous white hunter in Kenya in the interwar years and was involved with Karen Blixen in a romance that became the basis for the film *Out of Africa*.

*Africa* (Blixen was played, with an appalling Danish accent, by Meryl Streep and, as Hollywood was unable to cope with a British hero, Finch-Hatton was Americanised by Robert Redford).

Like many aristocratic families of the Edwardian era, the Winchilsea dynasty formed an alliance with American money. The 14<sup>th</sup> Earl married the daughter of AJ Drexel, a founding partner of JP Morgan.

The 16<sup>th</sup> Earl, who died in 1999, was, like many of his ancestors, an eccentric. He is remembered mainly for selling off a family treasure, the foundation charter for Westminster Abbey, dated 28 December 1065 and bearing the seal of Edward the Confessor, and being a passionate supporter of independence from Morocco for the Western Sahara. It was to collect money for the latter cause that the Earl made his only visit to Winchelsea.

The current Earl of Winchilsea is the 17<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Nottingham.