

A Bedfordshire Armorial

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LXXXVI—Hillersden of
Elstow, Eversholt and
Colmworth



Arms

*Argent on a chevron within a border engrailed
sable three bull's heads caboshed of the field.*

WE FIRST MEET this family in 1558 when Thomas Hillersden of Membland in Devon married in Toddington, Joan, one of the two daughters of Ralph Potts, squire of Chalgrave.

Thomas (I) Hillersden was admitted to Gray's Inn in 1594 and beyond that we know very little of him. He and his wife Joan seem to have settled at Little Park, Ampthill, and had two sons, Thomas (II) and John, and two daughters, Alice who died in 1587 and Mary who married Reynold Horne in 1589. The younger of the two sons, John, 'of Battlesden and Stoke Hammond, Bucks.', married at Chalgrave 1602-03 Frances Bellay and had three sons and five daughters. We do not know when Thomas I died but it must have been before 1613 in which year he acquired the Wakes Manor of Eversholt. Thomas II married Elizabeth Harding at Chalgrave in 1598. He was styled 'of Little Park, Ampthill' where his wife died in 1616. She was the grand-daughter of the sister of Joan Potts, Thomas I's wife. They had two sons and two daughters. The eldest, Thomas, born 1608, died two years later when the second son, also Thomas, was born. Joan, the elder daughter was born in 1613 and married Thomas Baker; Elizabeth, born at Aspley Guise in 1600 married Thomas Rouse of Caxton (Huntingdonshire).

Thomas II set about building up a family estate. In addition to the Eversholt estate, in 1616 he purchased from Sir Edward Radcliffe and John Cheke, the Elstow Abbey estate (BEDFORDSHIRE MAGAZINE, X, 216) - or much of Elstow, Wilstead, Kempston, Cardington and some land in Bedford for £700 and he claimed to be lord of the manor of Hockliffe. Such possessions placed him among the gentry upon whom King James I, at Theobalds Park, conferred the honour of knighthood. He left numerous charitable bequests and money for the restoration or 'new framing' of the old houses at Elstow and the demolition of the less useful ones. He appointed a relative, the Rev Andrew Denny to be his son's tutor. Among his interesting bequests is 'Nicholas Welked to have meat and drink if he choose for six years at the testator's expense'. He 'desired the manor of Elstow to be purchased in his son's name' and, in fact, his son did obtain recovery of all the Elstow estate in 1631.

This son, Thomas III, born 1610 and baptised at Ampthill, sought further to increase the family fortune and estates. In Elstow he set about building a large house on the site of the Elstow Abbey buildings, but died while the project was still in hand. He also purchased a house and grounds at Caxton, Huntingdonshire, which he bequeathed, free of rent, to his sister Elizabeth Rouse. His own marriage took place at Knebworth in 1628 to Margaret, daughter of Sir

William Lytton, a great grand-daughter of Oliver, Lord St John of Bletsoe. She was born in 1613 and survived him fifty-seven years, having re-married Sir Thomas Newett. Thomas and Margaret had a son, Thomas IV and a daughter, Katherine, born and died in 1632. Thomas III died in 1632, short-lived like most of the Hillersdens. In his will he bequeathed £20 towards the erection of a monument to his old tutor 'Uncle Denny's' and that memorial can still be seen in St Paul's, Bedford where he was, for a time, vicar. He showed his love of hawking by bequeathing an annuity to his old falconer and giving him, 'as a token of his love', his favourite hawk.

Like his father and grandfather he made many charitable bequests in Elstow and Bedford. His son and heir was Thomas IV, born at Knebworth in 1630 and so he was only two years old when his father died. On reaching 21 years of age he married Elizabeth, the eldest daughter of John Huxley, of Eaton Bray. Thomas IV also died relatively young at the age of 27 years in 1657 and three years later his widow Elizabeth married Sir William Becher of Howbury. Thomas IV had two sons, Thomas V and John, and two daughters, Margaret and Elizabeth. The girls were never married. John, born in 1675 lived until 1684. By his father's will he received all his lands in Hockliffe and in Battlesden with, after his aunt's decease, lands in Buckinghamshire and Huntingdonshire. The elder son, Thomas V, born 1653, matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, and entered as a student of the Inner Temple in 1670. During the Commonwealth he was fined £9 10s as a delinquent in 1675. Twenty years later he married Mary, daughter of John Forth, an alderman of London and she bore him a son William in 1676, a son John, 'of Stoke Hammond', a son Richard and two daughters Elizabeth and Susannah. In his will he mentioned another son John. This John, born 1678, died at Elstow in 1719, owned estates in Colnworth once the property of Sir Ludowick Dyer, whilst Richard married Elizabeth Haselden of Goldington and settled there. He inherited his brother John's Colnworth estates and at his death he bequeathed them to his friend, Dennis Farrer of Cold Brayfield and his land in Eaton Socon and Wilden to his niece Margaret Hillersden. Thomas V's eldest son was the first to break the Thomas tradition.

Thomas V figures in parliamentary history for in 1689 he and Thomas Christy were returned to Parliament for the borough of Bedford and the following year Sir William Franklin petitioned Parliament on the plea that he had been duly chosen by the proper officers of the borough. He claimed that double returns had been set up to nullify his election. On the plea of being referred to the committee of privileges the verdict went against Franklin and the 'proper officers' namely the mayor and under-sheriff were placed in custody for their misdemeanours, namely tampering with the returns. The mayor was fined and, of course, Christie and Hillersden were declared elected. Hillersden held the seat until his death (BEDFORDSHIRE MAGAZINE, X, 173). Thomas V's eldest surviving son, William, was the first to break the succession of Thomases. Born in 1676 he studied at Wadham College, Oxford, and followed the family tradition of entering the Inner Temple. He, too, took up a parliamentary career sitting for Bedford Borough from 1707 to 1710 and then for the county 1715-22. By his marriage to Elizabeth Farrer of Cold Brayfield, the Hillersdens again joined a well established family though they themselves as a family were on the way out. William died, aged 49, in 1725 and was buried at Elstow beside his wife who died in 1709. She had borne him four children, Thomas,

Elizabeth, Mary and Margaret. Mary died in infancy, Margaret married Major-General Parslow, and Thomas, or rather Thomas Farrer died at the age of 12. There was now no male heir and it was for Elizabeth, born in 1705, to carry on the family by marrying a relation, Dennis Farrer of Cold Brayfield. He died aged 48 and she died in her 33rd year, both being buried at Cold Brayfield.

Of their four children, both the eldest, William Farrer, born in 1726, and his younger brother Thomas, died in infancy and a similar fate befell their daughter Mary. The one survivor was Dennis, born in 1732. By royal licence he assumed the name and arms of Hillersden in the vain hope of perpetuating the name of Hillersden but by his first wife, Anne Faure, whom he married in 1756, he had two daughters and by his second wife, Sarah Gee, he again had no sons but two daughters so the Hillersden line ceased at the end of the 18th century.

They derived from the Hillersdens of Devonshire, first recorded in Henry III's assize roll and took their name from the manor of Hillersdon in that county. A branch settled at Stoke Hammond, Buckinghamshire and then the elder branch was formed by John Hillersden, the junior by his brother Thomas – the Sir Thomas of Amphilh. Their original arms did not have the engrailed border – that seems to have been added to distinguish the junior branch although it was not consistently borne. For example, Thomas Hillersden, 1686, did not show the border on his monument nor is it shown on the hatchment of Dennis Farrer's widow. On the façade of the house built at Elstow by Thomas III the arms were carved in a cartouche without the border but with a motto 'Now in rising' typical of the Hillersden rise in society and wealth. We do not know the date when the arms, with border, were granted but they were confirmed by the heralds in 1596 when the squirrel crest was granted, namely a squirrel sejant proper cracking a golden nut.

The arms of Farrer which became quartered with Hillersden are *Argent on a bend sable three horseshoes of the field*.

The silver horseshoes are a punning reference to the name Farrer or ferrer, a farrier.



'The Royal Oak' at Potton