

Childhood

Tradition states that the seventh son is the child on whom all fortune falls. Robert was not destined for worldly riches but he was destined to a happier life than most of his family.

Robert was born in the spring of 1727 in Margate, a fishing and farming town on the Isle of Thanet in Kent. His father, also named Robert, was forty-two and his mother Elizabeth was thirty-eight. The couple had been married for almost fifteen years and Robert was their sixth son. An earlier son had been born to Robert in 1710 by his first wife but that child had only lived five months; Robert's first wife had followed their son to the grave shortly afterwards. Robert senior must have hoped that life would improve with his second wife but although they were to have seven sons of their own, only two survived: John born in 1715 and Robert born in 1727.

Although Robert would not have had any brothers or sisters to play with as a child – his older brother would have started work before he was born – he would have

had cousins. His father's two sisters both lived in Margate with their husbands. Aunt Elizabeth Romney had four girls ranged from four years older than him to five years younger whilst Aunt Sarah Browne had a daughter six years younger than him. He would also have known his paternal grandmother Sarah who lived in the town and died when he was 19. Not many children at this time had the opportunity to know their grandparents due to low life expectancy.

When Robert was ten, his father died. If Robert was not already at work, he would have started at this point. His mother did not remarry but it is uncertain how she supported herself. She may have received poor relief from the parish at first. Widows often went to live with married offspring to help care for their children but this was not an option for Elizabeth as neither of her sons was married. It would have been almost impossible for her to go into service if she had Robert with her and employment opportunities for women were otherwise very limited. She may have worked making and mending fishing nets and drying herring. Whatever she did, she survived until 1764.

*Robert's baptism
recorded at
Margate*



Somewhere to Live

Robert would have begun his working life as a boy helping out on local farms. As he got older, he would have wanted to secure steady work both for himself and because he was probably trying to support his mother. Although later in the eighteenth century Margate was to achieve fame and a degree of fortune with the fashion for sea bathing, in Robert's youth, Margate was in a very bad way. John Lewis, who lived on the island, wrote in 1736:

The trade of this poor town is now so small... The shipping trade which once was pretty considerable before the harbour was so much washed away by the sea and ships built too large to lay up here is now all removed to London... Malting is also now gone to decay.

The fact that the town's expenditure on poor relief rose by 450% between 1663 and 1703 is evidence of the distress. It is not surprising therefore that Robert chose to move away. He did not go to Ramsgate which was the neighbouring town to the south and which was booming economically at this time. Instead, he went to Birchington, the village immediately to the west of Margate. His choice of farming

village over bustling port suggests that Robert was an agricultural labourer. He may also have gone there because his older brother John had settled there in 1743.



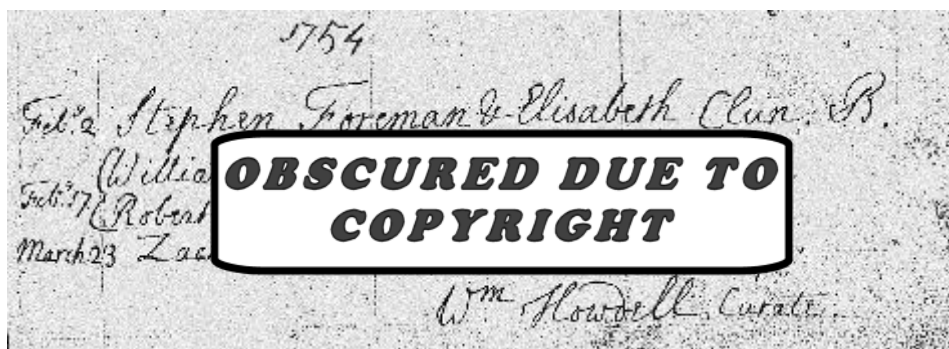
Birchington

Marriage and Family

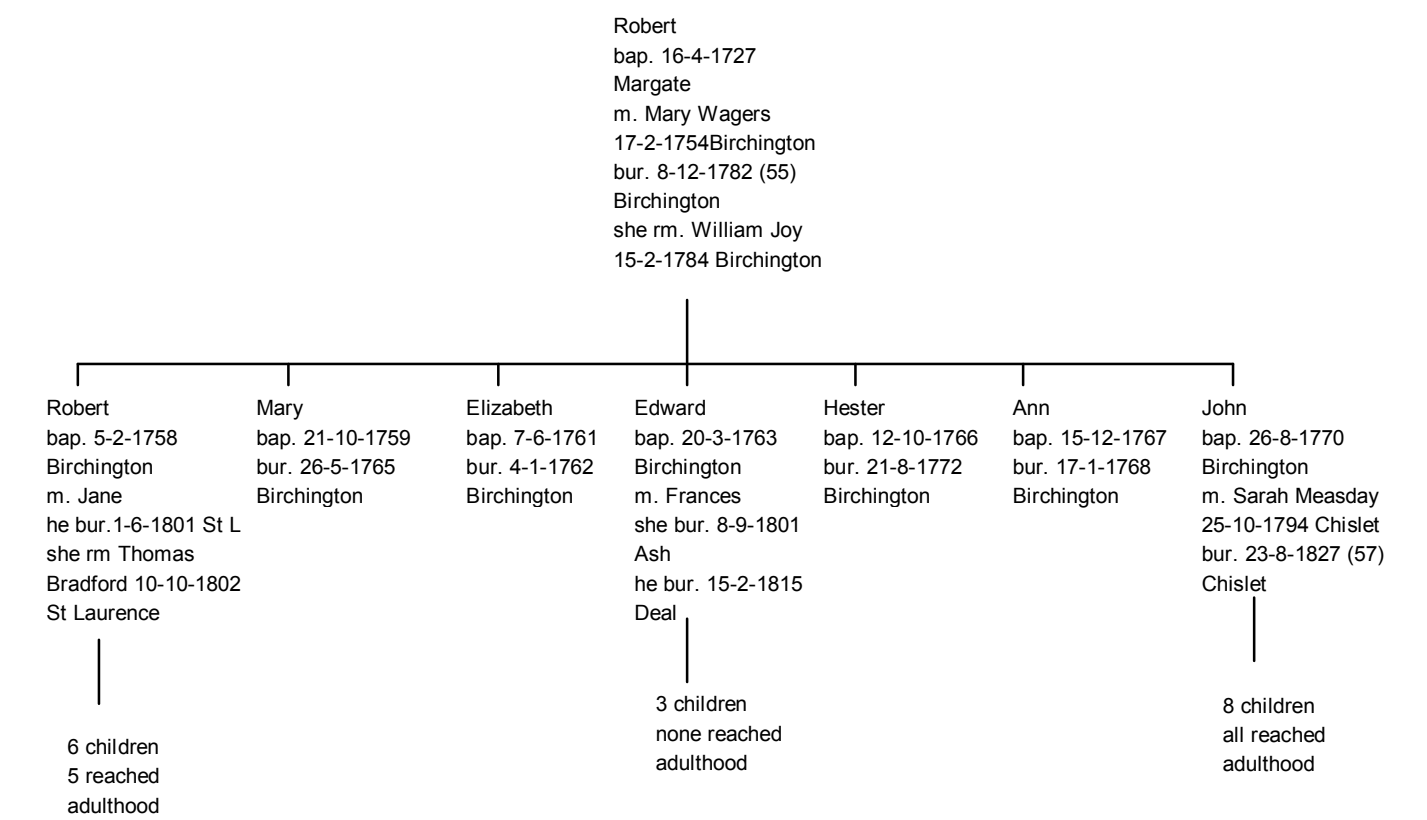
On Sunday 17th February 1754, just before his twenty-seventh birthday, Robert married Mary Wagers at Birchington. The fact that he married relatively late and on a Sunday are both indicative of the fact that Robert was a serious young man. He worked long hours and did not have time off on a Saturday to get wed. He had saved up so he could provide for his wife. This was no shotgun wedding for it was to be four years before they started a family.

Robert and Mary had seven children over a space of twelve years, four girls and three boys. The last was born in 1770. As was common at the time, they named their children after other family members. Robert named two of his children after his own parents and another after his wife. His youngest was named after his brother. The other three children were named after his wife's family. Hester was her mother's name and Ann and Edward were siblings.

Robert's wedding entry at Birchington



Family Tree



Children

Although Robert and Mary had four daughters, none of them survived childhood. Ann died at six weeks old, Elizabeth at seven months, whilst Mary and Hester both died within a few weeks of their sixth birthdays. The causes of death are not known but babies often failed to thrive because the mother was malnourished and young children frequently fell victim to smallpox, measles or scarlet fever, particularly in the summer when both Mary and Hester died.

Their eldest son Robert grew up, married Jane, and settled in the village having three sons and three daughters all baptised at Birchington. In 1800 the couple moved to Ramsgate. A combination of sea bathing, increased maritime trade and the presence of thousands of soldiers

had made Ramsgate very much the boom town of the period so it may be supposed that Robert moved there in search of work. Sadly, he died suddenly in June 1801 and his wife started a relationship with Thomas Bradford, a widower about ten years her senior whose wife had died of consumption. Jane had a baby whom she had baptised back in Birchington as if nothing had happened, then departed back to Ramsgate to marry Bradford.

It is possibly because of the Bradford marriage that Robert and Jane's youngest son secured an apprenticeship, the only member of the family known to have done so. This third generation Robert became a blacksmith and lived at Minster for almost seventy

years. His son, yet another Robert, became a tailor but also an historian.

Another curious fact relating to Robert and Jane's children is that two of their daughters married the same man. Jane married James Hughes in 1806 and gave him two children. She died in 1812 and two years later he married her younger sister who gave him five more. It was totally illegal for a man to marry his wife's sister which is no doubt why they travelled almost twenty miles away to marry in Deal, staying with her uncle Edward whose parish priest would not have known of the relationship

Edward, the second son of Robert and Mary, married Frances and the couple had three children in Deal. Frances died in 1801 and there is no evidence of any of the children growing up. Edward himself died in Deal Poorhouse in December 1815.

John, the youngest son of Robert and Mary grew up to marry Sarah Measday. The couple settled in Chislet where they had eight children, all of whom survived and married presenting John with sixty-one grandchildren. A farm labourer, John died in 1827 at the age of 57.

Later Life and Death

1782 was a miserable year for many people, especially farm workers. Spring came late with the ground being hard with frost as late as May. From July to the end of October it rained almost incessantly, apart from a two week break in early September. November was the coldest on record with temperatures scarcely ever venturing above freezing. It was inevitable that the harvest would fail and food prices increase. Farm workers did their best but toiling outdoors for hours in heavy wet clothes before going home to houses that were cold and damp meant that illness was common. With no form of unemployment insurance, that created further hardship for if the family breadwinner could not work, the whole family went hungry. Even if Robert had been able to save a few shillings over the years,

he could not have afforded to see a doctor. A doctor's visit would have cost almost a month's wages and Birchington almost certainly did not have such a professional nor anywhere to buy medicine. Robert died at the start of December 1782. Burials in the later part of that year were a sixth up on average with people in their fifties and sixties being most prone to perish from "decay." Robert was fifty-five years old. He left a wife and three sons aged twenty-four, nineteen and twelve, though only the last would have been at home. He was laid to rest in Birchington churchyard on Sunday 8th December, the funeral probably taking place after morning service with his two eldest sons carrying the body.

The Joy Connection

Just over a year after Robert died, his widow remarried. The marriage licence states that the groom was a bachelor and a mariner and that both of them lived at Wood which is to the south of Birchington village itself. Both were in their mid fifties. William Joy was a famous name in the area because a century before, a local ship's carpenter of that name had gone to London and made his fortune as a strong man. Joy had performed many amazing feats before the royal family as well as touring with



fairs and carnivals. His brother had also been part of the act. Exactly how Mary's husband was related is uncertain but he received a bequest in the brother's will of 1738 so he was either a cousin or son. Whether Mary's William Joy was also a smuggler is unknown but a sailor giving an address at Wood would have raised eyebrows.

William Joy in a 1699 print

The Life of a Farm Labourer

According to an account of a farm labourer's life in 1720s Thanet:

Farm servants and horses go to plough at six in the morning when they can see to do so and return home at ten. They go out again at two in the afternoon and leave off at six, At both these times of coming out of the field it is usual for the servants to eat a bit of bread and cheese and drink a draught of beer....The Ploughman or his mate be almost always with the horses day and night.

Life would have changed little during the century although there were a number of agricultural improvements made, not least the introduction of the seed drill. When Robert began his working life, seed would have been sown by hand but by the time he grew up, a horse drawn drill would have been used for beans and corn. Hoeing continued to be mostly done by hand and was hard work. Many hours were also spent manuring the fields with dung and seaweed. As a labourer, Robert would have earned around 1/4 a day.



In Their Lifetime

1727	Death of Isaac Newton
1739	Foundation of Methodism by Wesley
1739	Execution of Dick Turpin the highwayman
1742	First performance of Handel's <i>Messiah</i>
1746	Bonnie Prince Charlie defeated at Culloden
1755	Publication of Dr Johnson's <i>Dictionary of the English Language</i>
1760	Accession of George III
1766	Discovery of hydrogen
1776	America declares its independence from Great Britain
1782	Introduction of Sunday Schools

That every day has its pains and sorrows is universally experienced, and almost universally confessed: but let us not attend only to mournful truths; if we look impartially about us, we shall find that every day has likewise its pleasures and its joys

Dr Johnson

Generation 3

John and Sarah

Childhood

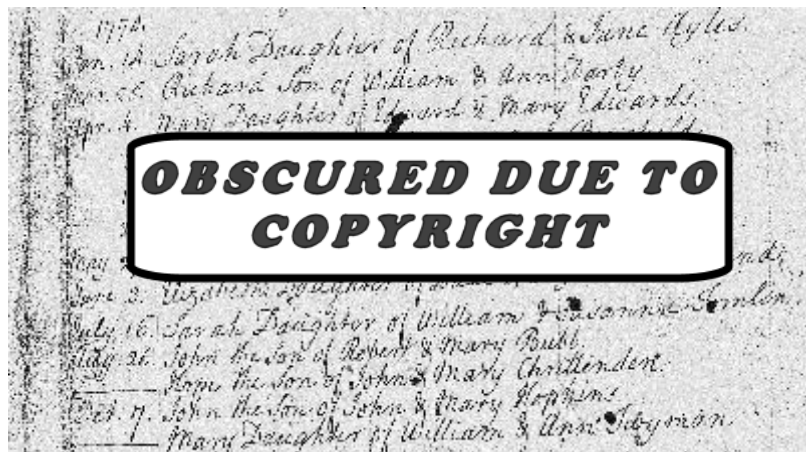
John was born late in July 1770 at Wood in the village of Birchington on the Isle of Thanet in North East Kent. He was baptised in the parish church on Sunday 26th August that year. He was the seventh child of Robert and Mary who were then aged forty-nine and forty-three respectively. The couple were to have no further children.

Although John had two brothers and four sisters, by the time he was born only two brothers and one sister were still alive. His sister Hester died in 1772 when he was still a toddler so he would not have known her. His eldest brother Robert was twelve when he was born and would have been already out at work. Edward, aged seven, would have joined him when he was ten. John clearly attended school for at least a short while because he was able to write his name. It is unlikely that he would have qualified for the Crispe Charity School so he probably went to a dame

school, a private school set up by a widow who would have charged a penny or two a week to teach a child to read and write and to count.

When John himself was twelve, his world was shattered by the death of his father aged only fifty-five. Since his eldest brother by then was on the verge of marriage, this would have left John as the sole breadwinner for the family. As a boy, he would have expected to earn only a couple of shillings a week which would have been insufficient. His mother may have taken in sewing or washing to try to make ends meet but it would have been hard. Fourteen months after John's father died, his mother remarried a mariner named William Joy. John probably left home at this point moving to nearby Chislet, a parish of around 800 people which was twice the size of Birchington and with more opportunities for work.

*John's baptismal entry at
Birchington*



Marriage and Family

On Saturday 25th October 1794, twenty-four year old John married twenty-three year old Sarah Measday. It is impossible to know how they met, though it is likely that Sarah was in domestic service in the area, but what is certain is that the bride was heavily pregnant. Their first child David was baptised five weeks later and since children were normally baptised at a month old, it is quite likely that Sarah had her baby barely a week after the

wedding. Whilst it was not unusual for brides to be pregnant, the fact that they married quite so close to the birth suggests that John may have been reluctant to take responsibility.

Seven more children followed: Mary in 1796, Robert in 1797, John in 1801, James in 1803, Edward in 1805, Hester in 1808 and Ann in 1811.



John's wedding entry at Chislet

Chislet

In 1800, the time at which John and his family were living in Chislet, the historian and traveller Edward Hasted gave the following account of the village:

THIS PARISH lies both unwholesome and unpleasant, in a lonely unfrequented part of the country, excepting where the high road from Canterbury to the Isle of Thanet runs through the southern part of it, on which the hamlet of Upstreet stands; southward of which it extends over the marshes as far as the river Stour, next to Stourmouth. Northward from Upstreet, on a hill, stands the street, or village of Chislet, in which are the church, court-lodge, and vicarage on the road leading to

Reculver. Eastward of which this parish extends over a level of marshes, called North and South Chislet levels, between Reculver and the Isle of Thanet, as far as the sea shore; and north-eastward beyond the manor of Grays, alias Ores, as far as the ancient south wall of Reculver castle. It extends westward to the road from Sturry to Herne common, which it crosses, and takes in a considerable quantity of the archbishop's woods on the other side of it. The upland of this parish has much hill and dale in it, the soil of which is various, and for the most part but poor and wet; yet there is near the village, some tolerable kindly and fertile land. There is a fair held here yearly on the 29th of May.

The Measdays

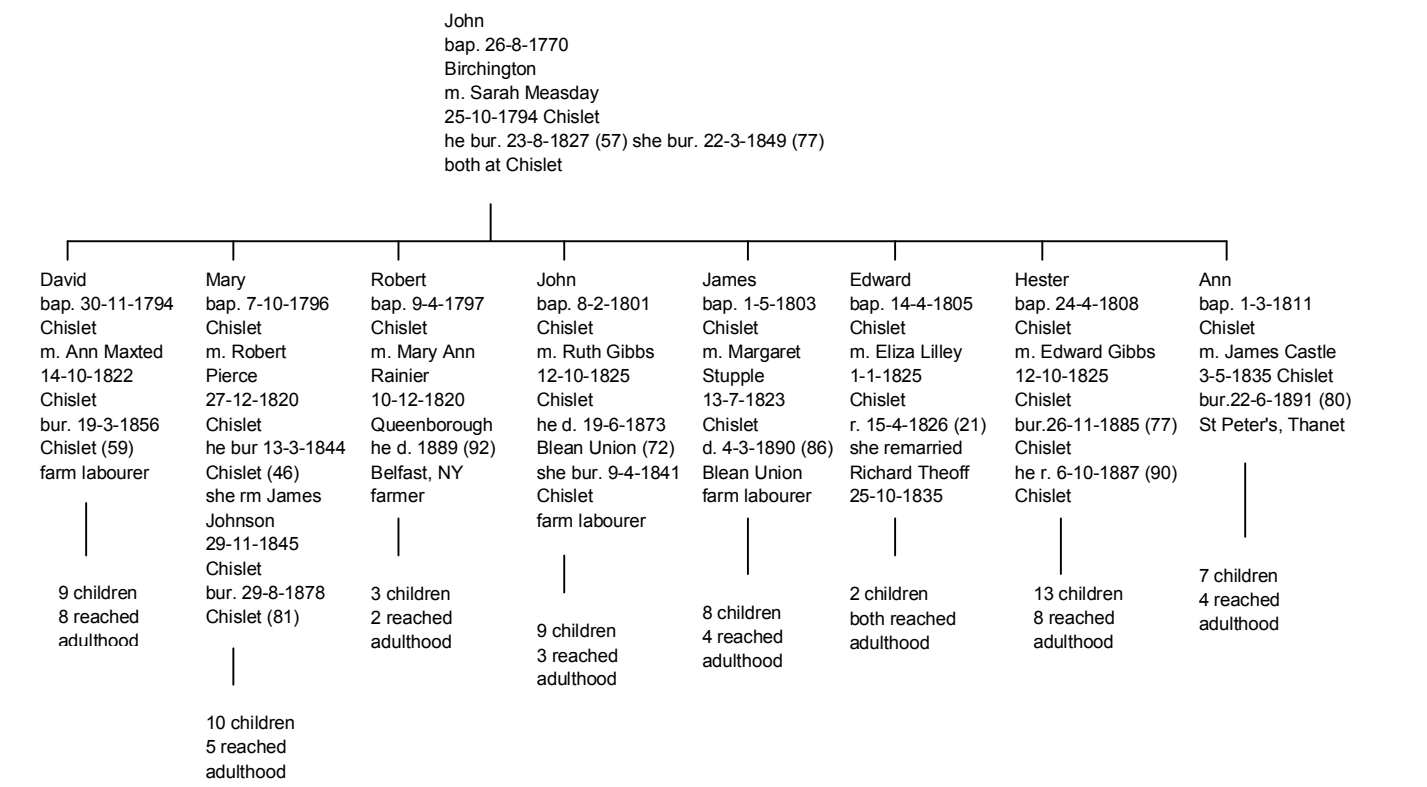
Sarah Measday was born in the small village of Wickhambreaux close to Canterbury in the summer of 1771. She was baptised on Sunday 11th August. Her parents were Robert and Ann, both in their early forties, who already had five children.

Sarah's mother died in 1774, possibly as a result of trying to have another child, and since Robert never re-married, she grew up in a single parent family. It is probable that her eldest sister Ann, twelve when Sarah was born and

fifteen when their mother died, became housekeeper and had to bring up the younger children.

Sarah's father died at the end of January 1795, three months after her marriage. The winter of 1794-95 was the coldest on record with temperatures going down to -22C that week. Across East Kent, parishes were distributing coal and food to those most in need but three years of poor harvests had left people vulnerable to infection.

Family Tree



The Children

John and Sarah’s eldest son David grew up and married Ann Maxted, who came from Monkton. They had seven daughters and two sons, all born in Chislet. The first child, named after his own sister Hester, died in infancy but all the rest survived. By the time of the 1851 census, David was living at Highstead with his wife and four youngest children. He was a farm labourer. David died in the spring of 1856 at the age of 61. His wife never remarried.

Mary, eldest daughter of John and Sarah, married two days after Christmas in 1820, a farm labourer named Robert Pierce. They had nine children but four of them died as babies including Robert junior who lived only two days and William who died at six weeks. Another daughter died in her teens. Robert died in the spring of 1844 but Mary remarried twenty months later. Probably to the surprise of her neighbours, Mary’s new husband - the labourer James Johnson – was ten years younger than her. Even more surprising, Mary was pregnant at the time. She had her last

child Robert in May 1846 when she was forty-nine years old. Like her brother David, Mary lived her entire life in Chislet passing away in 1878 just before her 82nd birthday.

Robert, the third child, was the only one of the family to move away. A farm labourer like his father, he went to live on the Isle of Sheppey, an area off the Kent coast and about thirty miles from Chislet. There he married Mary Ann Rainer just before Christmas 1820. The couple settled in Eastchurch and had a daughter named Ann plus two sons named Edward and Isaac. The latter died at the age of nine. The 1840s were a very difficult time for the family with farming in crisis. Attracted by the prospects of a better future elsewhere, the family emigrated to America. Edward married Susan Brown in New York and the couple had three children in the Belfast area of the city. Robert became a farmer and after his retirement settled with his son in Caneadea, Allegany. In 1880, Edward owned twelve

acres of woodland, fourteen acres of arable, seventy-six acres of pasture and three acres of orchards plus four milk cows and sixteen chickens. His main produce was butter, eggs and apples though he also grew some oats barley and potatoes. His son Albert went on to become a farmer as well. Robert died in 1889, his son in 1896 and both were buried in the cemetery at Belfast, Allegany, New York.

John, the fourth child, grew up and married Ruth Gibbs at a joint ceremony in Chislet church with his sister Hester who married Ruth's brother Edward. John and Ruth had nine children and Edward and Hester thirteen. Ruth died six months after giving birth to her last child at the age of 35 and John never remarried. He was no stranger to tragedy for four of his nine children died in infancy and two in their teens. A farm labourer at Busbridge Farn, Chislet John died in Blean Union Workhouse in 1873 when he was 72. His sister Hester, lived until 1885 whilst Edward Gibbs reached 90. Although Edward and Hester did not lose any of their children as babies, they lost one daughter aged two and four more children aged between ten and sixteen. Such a high loss amongst older children was unusual as most children who survived infancy went on to grow up.

James married a local girl named Margaret Stupple in 1823 and they had eight children. James' wife died in 1847. By then the family had moved to the neighbouring village of Herne where James continued to work as a farm labourer until he was over eighty. For many years he lodged with the Widow Cox, afterwards with Henry Webb. James died in Blean Union workhouse aged 86 in 1890.

Edward, the youngest son, married when he was just nineteen. His bride was by then eight months pregnant. Their first son Robert was followed by another eighteen months later but by then Edward was dead. He passed away a month short of his 21st birthday leaving his wife Eliza to care for a year old child with another on the way. It is unknown how Eliza coped but she did not remarry for another ten years. Her second husband Richard Theoff was also a farm labourer. The couple lived in Chislet before moving to Chapel Row, Herne. They had five sons of their own. Eliza died in 1889, Richard in 1885.

Ann, the youngest child, married a shepherd named James Castle. After five children at Chislet, they moved to Margate but two years later they settled in St Peter's where they lived out the rest of their lives. Ann died in 1891.

In Their Lifetime

1770	Marriage of Marie Antoinette to the future Louis XVI
1788	Cricket is given formal rules
1793	War between Britain and France begins
1796	Trials begin of a new medical process called vaccination
1805	Britain defeats France at Trafalgar
1807	Abolition of slavery by British parliament
1811	Publication of <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
1815	The war with France is ended by Britain's victory at Waterloo
1819	First crossing of the Atlantic by steamship
1827	Death of Beethoven



Georgian high society

The Family Budget

A 1795 study showed that the average farm labourer earned between seven and eight shillings a week. He would only be paid when there was work available and when he was fit and able to carry it out.

The same study gave a breakdown of the expenditure of a labourer who had a wife and three children. John had eight children, though the eldest two boys would have started work by the time the last was born.

The fact that the whole family survived in apparent good health strongly suggests that John must have been a skilled worker and therefore able to command a higher pay rate than the average. He may have been a waggoner or a shepherd or a cowman. This would have enabled him to purchase sufficient food to provide for his family's nutritional balance and for some heating in the winter.

	s	d
Bread and flour	3	6
Meat and fish		10
Rent		9
Clothing and work tools		5
Tea and sugar		4
Milk		4
Candles		3
Soap		3
Fuel		3
Cheese		2
Salt and yeast		2
Beer and gin		2
Thread		2
	7	7

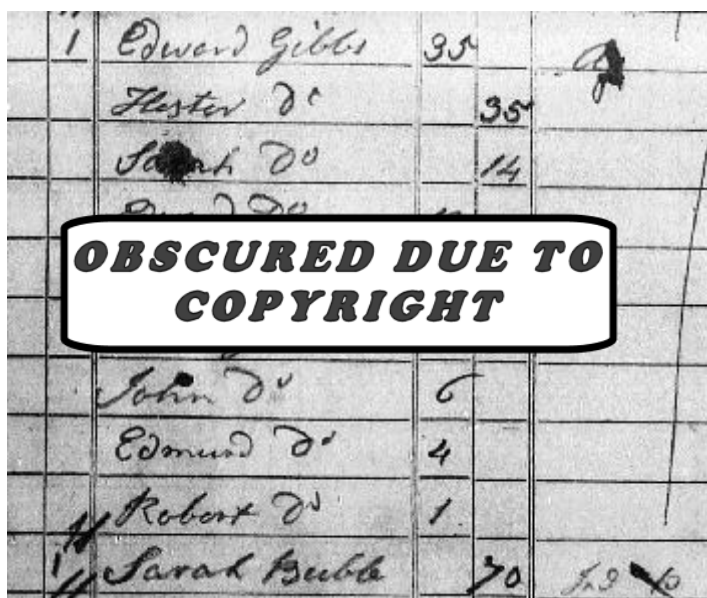
Later Life and Death

By the summer of 1827, John had reason to feel quite proud of himself. He had seen all eight of his children survive to adulthood though one son had died in the spring of the previous year. All but one of his children had married; just Ann age sixteen was still at home. He had fourteen grand-children, the last born in mid August and another expected in a month or so. Sadly for John, he was

not to be alive to see this for he died at the end of August and was laid to rest in Chislet churchyard on the 23rd of that month aged 57.

His wife Sarah survived him by over twenty years, passing away in 1849. She was buried at Chislet on March 22nd aged 77. Without a breadwinner, she would have had to leave her cottage and move in with one of her children. On the 1841 census she is shown as living with her daughter Hester and son-in-law Edward Gibbs. Sarah is listed as being of independent means which indicates that she was not working. Most likely this means that she was kept by the Gibbs in return for housekeeping and child-minding duties.

*Sarah Bubb on the 1841 census for Chislet.
On this census, ages were rounded for all adults.
Hester was actually 33 and Sarah 69.*



1	Edward Gibbs	35	
	Hester D.	35	
	Sarah D.	14	
	John D.	6	
	Edmund D.	4	
	Robert D.	1	
	Sarah Bubb	30	