

Calne



The flaxen thread that binds Wiltshire to South America

by H R Henly

The town of Calne, between Chippenham and Marlborough, derives its name from the original name of the river Marden which still flows through the town and joins the Avon at Chippenham. In the past this river provided the motive power for one of the town's main industries- corn and fulling mills. In 1863 Calne was struck by a disaster when Swaddon's flax mill caught fire and was reduced to two storeys. The workforce of 50 lost their jobs and its under-insured owner, Thomas Large Henly, suffered a heavy financial loss. It was nearly three years before the mill reopened and Henly began to promote the cultivation of flax in Wiltshire once again.

Born in 1826, the son of Abraham Henly, a prosperous wine-merchant and Mayor of Calne, Thomas was apprenticed to the craft of paper-making. By 1856 he was working the Trevarno paper mill at Bathford in Somerset and had followed his father into public service, first as alderman and then Mayor of Calne. He was Worshipful Master of the Calne Freemasons' Lodge in 1856.

In 1860 Thomas purchased Swaddon's Mill for scutching flax, the process of reducing flax to pulp, before making linen or paper. He tried to grow flax on a farm at Horton near Bishops Cannings and to encourage local farmers to cultivate it too, but the experiment was a failure. The 1861 Census shows Thomas as a farmer of 1,150 acres at Bishops Cannings, employing 70 labourers and, as a flax scutcher, employing 50 men and girls.

In 1847 Thomas married Catherine, the daughter of Benjamin Bodman Baily, a prosperous local grain merchant. By 1861 they were living in a large house on the outskirts of Calne with their eight children, five servants and two governesses. Although he was back in business by 1865, in 1867 he was declared bankrupt. Henly paid his creditors and in due course received his discharge, but he had decided to try his luck elsewhere.

In August 1867 he and his family left Calne for Uruguay in South America. Two hundred miles from the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo, near Paysandú, he entered into partnership with the owner of a large estancia [estate] to cultivate flax. He returned to Calne to recruit labour and purchase machinery. Twenty-five labourers (with five wives and ten children) were selected. On 4 February 1868 a crowd of more than 1,000 saw these Wiltshire folk off at Calne railway station. The *Devizes Gazette* reported their arrival at Paysandú on 30 April 1868.

Imagine what they must have experienced! First the trip by sea in the sailing ship *Tycho Brahe* via the Portuguese port of Lisbon, to the Azores, on to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, landing at Montevideo in Uruguay, across the estuary

of the Rio [river] de la Plata from Buenos Aires in Argentina and then up the Rio Uruguay to Paysandú by steamer.

In this party was Henry Wiltshire of Caine and his wife Ann, nee Hall, They had married in Caine on the day before the party left; their first child was born in Uruguay a year later and baptized at the Anglican church in Salto. The birth certificate shows that their destination in Uruguay was the estancia Santa Kilda at Guairya, about 20 miles from Paysandú. Henry Wiltshire returned to Calne in 1869 as Thomas Henly's agent, to purchase machinery, and within a few months he was back in Uruguay, where another child was born.

In the Argentine press Thomas announced a meeting, at which he would explain flax production. He described how work had commenced in May 1868 and that 63 acres of flax, 47 acres of maize and 40 acres of wheat had been grown. The profit on these crops would be £20 per acre, or £3,000!

President Sarmiento of Argentina had encouraged immigration from Europe by land grants throughout the Santa Fé region. In the UK, this area was known as "the River Plate". Agents leased the land, sometimes under punitive conditions, and serious problems arose; would-be settlers arrived to find little or nothing awaiting them. The land was close to Indian territory and Sarmiento failed to provide adequate protection for settlers. Many turned from cattle and sheep ranching to arable farming, as the Indians were primarily interested in cattle-stealing.

Thomas conceived a scheme to grow flax and scutch it on the fertile Argentine pampas. He contracted with one Don Alison Melrose to purchase the 27,000-acre estancia Las Playas. This was near the town of Fraile Muerto (now called Bell Ville in honour of the man who developed it in the 19th century) and the Central Argentine Railway line between Rosario and Cordoba, being constructed by Messrs Brassey, Wythes and Wheelwright. A number of young Englishmen had established a colony here around 1864. By 1870 they had more than 6,000 acres under wheat and other cereals.

Don Alison Melrose was known as "Steam-plough Melrose" for his introduction of the steam-plough to Argentina in 1868. He owned extensive properties around Fraile Muerto and was highly respected.

Thomas offered an "apprenticeship" in farming to the younger sons of middle- and upper-class families in the UK. Advertising in Wiltshire and national newspapers and periodicals such as *The Field*, for £150 he undertook to provide food and shelter, a uniform and protection. He would train the men on a profit-sharing basis; after a fixed term they would acquire a portion of the land to operate as a small holding in partnership with Thomas.

The terms and conditions of the scheme were widely publicized and praised by many commentators, particularly in the *Buenos Aires Standard* where they called Thomas "Plymouth Rock Henly", an allusion to the Mayflower settlers in the USA! However, the Swiss and German colonists criticised his scheme, arguing that the class of man he was seeking was unsuited to this type of work. The British chargé d'affaires in Rosario defended Henly, as did William Hadfield, correspondent of the *Brazil and River Plate Journal*, arguing that such men had been successful in the harsher conditions of Queensland, Australia. With hindsight we can see that many of Thomas Henly's "pupils" (as the press called them) were unsuitable, but he had to seek colonists who could fund themselves.

Thomas's initial party of 50 pupils, complete with a minister of religion and a doctor, left Southampton on 9 May 1870 aboard the Royal Mail packet steamer *Oneida*. The *Buenos Aires Standard* reported the ship's departure

and its arrival on 9 June. The arrangements Thomas had made were comprehensive. Melrose was to meet the party and transfer them to waiting boat that would convey them up the Rio Parana to the Argentine city of Rosario and overland to Fraile Muerto. However, these plans soon went awry.

Two years earlier, in 1868, a young man from a shipping firm in Glasgow had been sitting in a Buenos Aires hotel when he saw Melrose at another table. It surprised him to be told that this man's name was Don Alison Melrose and that he was married to the lady with him. "But he is Joseph Hume Wright! exclaimed the young man. His companion assured him that this was not so. In 1865 Joseph Hume Wright had been employed by a firm of Glasgow shipping agents. In a complicated deal with another commission agent he substituted the larger part of several shipments of muslin to India with coal and pocketed some £10,300. By the time the fraud had been discovered Melrose had left the country, his wife and children. A reward of £200 was offered.

The young man remained suspicious of "Melrose" and, by subterfuge, obtained a copy of his signature. When the young man eventually returned to Glasgow, he laid his evidence before the Procurator Fiscal.

The Scottish authorities examined the possibility of extraditing Wright. Alerted, he fled to Brazil, deserting his second "wife" and leaving many debts. His flight coincided with Thomas's departure from England. Once Melrose was gone, the possibility of purchasing Las Playas and any reception arrangements evaporated. The *Buenos Aires Standard* reported the arrival batches of pupils, carrying editorial comments that were, in the main, encouraging.

Thomas now had to convey his party to Rosario, accommodate them in local hotels, and find another estancia. He settled on one nine miles south of Rosario called Santa Carolina, on the Saladillo river. Smaller than Las Playa, at 6,500 acres it was nearer Rosario, so transport charges for produce would be lower, and there was abundant waterpower for a scutching mill. Both the press and the British chargé d'affaires at Rosario were enthusiastic, and work commenced on huts to house the pupils. Delivery of machinery, farm tools and ploughs was delayed, but in June 1870 Thomas wrote a very optimistic letter to the *Buenos Aires Weekly Standard* about the prospects for his scheme.

In July 1870 the newspapers announced the arrival of the ship *La Plata* and another batch of pupils for the "Henly Colony" ;

Herbert Childers, F. Childers Thompson, St. David Tynte, Arthur Tynte, Glyne and Brother, Carden, Keene, Cuthbert, H. McDowell, Whish, Paul, Griffin, Carr, G. H. Fowler, Woodberry (Sergeant), Chadwell and Wife (trumpeter).

William Hadfield wrote encouragingly of his visit to Henly's estancia with the acting British chargé d'affaires from Rosario in the *Brazil and River Plate Journal*. Several acres of ground had been ploughed and sown: the pupils were in good spirits. However, the British consul in Buenos Aires was reporting a different tale to the Foreign Office in London. All was not well, the doctor and minister had returned to the UK, attracting adverse comment in the press. Thomas's plans were not beyond criticism. He gave the pupils expensive uniforms and money was spent on weapons for defence although their location near Rosario was safe from Indian attack. This led to intense criticism from the organisers of the successful Swiss Bernstadt colony. The flow of new pupils dried up and Thomas experienced a cash-flow crisis.

Enterprising pupils left for jobs on neighbouring estancias and the railway. Thomas auctioned most of his machinery and equipment to pay off pupils and settle debts. In August 1870 he leased a small estancia near Fraile Muerto with crops in the ground, and when the colony was wound up in December 1870 this is where Thomas and his family moved. In a letter to the press he gives two reasons for the colony's failure- the cash-flow problems initiated by the flight of "Melrose" and the failure of many "pupils" to work as hard as he had expected. They in turn claimed that long delays had dispirited many of their number; living conditions had been crude; Thomas did not live with them, but with his family in Rosaria. In his last known letter to the newspapers in January 1871 Thomas states that two of his pupils will be accompanying him to the estancia near Fraile Muerto, He offers to take on any pupils who might still arrive from England, although on more stringent contractual terms, and plans to stay on the estancia for at least a year.

This is almost the end of the tale. Thomas's eldest son, James Smith Henly, set up as a wine importer in Hackensack, New Jersey. USA, around 1871. He died there in 1909. Two of Thomas's daughters - Anne and Marion - lived for many years in British Columbia. Canada, with their brother Clement. During World War I Anne was Dean of Women at the University of South Dakota, USA, and Marion was a music teacher in Victoria, British Columbia. Of Thomas's eldest daughter Catherine, there is no trace.

The *Devizes and Wilts Gazette* of 20 March 1902 contains the following notice:

Deaths: March 3rd at Belleville, New Jersey; Catherine wife of T. L. Henly and eldest daughter of the late B.B. Baily of Highlands, Calne.



*Catherine Henly's grave in Belleville,
New Jersey, USA*

This Belleville is 50 miles from Hackensack. Catherine is buried in the cemetery of Christ Church and at the foot of a Celtic cross all that can be deciphered is: "Catherine Baily wife of Thomas Large Henly..."

Catherine is not in the 1900 Census for Belleville and there is no indication either that Thomas was there. In 1881 she was living at Clifton near Bristol in England with three of her daughters and two Baily nephews, quite close to

Thomas's brother John Henly, Vicar of Ruscombe. Her death certificate indicates that she had been resident in New Jersey for 21 years and that, at the time of her death, she was a widow.

What became of Thomas Henly after 1871? A family photograph dated 1905 purports to show him, his son James Smith Henly, his grandson Walter Frederick and his great-grandson Walter Sheldon Henly, then aged one year. However the photograph appears to be a montage.

Thomas was mentioned in a family will dated 1892, but there is no clue in the death duty registers as to how the bequest was paid when probate was granted in 1898. Tentatively, his death can be placed between 1892 and 1902.



The photo-montage of (left to right), Thomas Large Henly, Walter Sheldon Henly, Walter Frederick Henly and James Smith Henly

STATE OF NEW JERSEY
4225
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
SEE PENALTY FOR NON-REPORT
AND THE LAW, AND ALSO PENALTY, APPLICABLE THERE TO.

1. Full name of decedent *Catherine Henly*
2. Age *70* years *10* months *10* days *10* years
3. Color *White* Occupation *Widow*
4. Marital status *Widow*
5. Birthplace *Bedford, England*
6. Last place of residence *Bedford, England*
7. How long resident in this State *21 years*
8. Place of death *Bedford, England*
9. Father's name *George Henly*
Country of birth *England*
10. Mother's name *Elizabeth Henly*
Country of birth *England*
11. I hereby certify that I attended the decedent during the last illness, and that I checked on the *3* day *10/10/1905*, and that the cause of *old age*

Residence *Bedford, England*
Name of Undertaker *W. H. Henly*
Township of Burial *Bedford, England*
Place of Burial *St. Michael's Church*
Country *Bedford, England*

Catherine Henly's death certificate

Thomas has (or had) only four known descendants to the present day. W. F. ("Pete") Henly, who lived in North Carolina and died in 1991, started me off on this investigation, looking for Thomas's burial. Robert Henly, who lived in Sedona, Arizona, died in 1995. When Thomas's daughter Anne Henly died in 1948 she named nephews Richard and Tom Henly in her will, both living in Bluefield, West Virginia. They are the focus of current investigations. None of Thomas's activities would have come to light had I not found the notice of his discharge from bankruptcy in the *London Gazette* which stated that he was "of Calne and Bathford and of several places in South America".

The search for the other 24 Wiltshire farm labourers who went to Uruguay continues, as does that for Thomas between 1871 and his death, and his burial. What happened to Wright/Melrose?

I shall be very pleased to correspond with anyone who has an interest in this research or who believes that a loose end on their tree may be one of Thomas's labourers or "pupils". For much of my research I am indebted to the staff of Swindon Public Library, friends in the UK, Argentina, Canada and the USA and to Nicholas Tozer, editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, who published several of my pleas for help.

(Original source not recorded)



Bob Henly the author of the above article spent several years of his life trying to ascertain the whereabouts of Thomas Large Henly after his failure in South America. It was assumed that since his wife Catherine had died in the United States so had Thomas. Bob unfortunately didn't live to find the answer.

With the assistance of newspapers and of course the census returns of 1901 and 1911 I have been able to track the final years of Thomas Large.

Bob's theory that Thomas had settled in the United States with the rest of his family proved to be far from the truth. I believe that Catherine had separated from Thomas and went to the United States where her children were doing very well for themselves I believe she had finally had enough of her husband's hair brained schemes. It would appear that Thomas was still alive in 1900 when his wife passed away in Belleville, New Jersey. Since the obituary in the *Devizes & Wilts Gazette* records Catherine as the wife of Thomas L Henly and not widow nor former wife. However the 1901 Census revealed nothing under the search of Henly so perhaps Thomas was still in the United States but elsewhere in the country and not actually with his family.

Since I needed to find Thomas's siblings I the census I set to work on that. As I knew Thomas's eldest sister had married James Smith in 1833 in Calne and that they had settled in the and around London and the South East I tried looking for her first and to my surprise I found her listed as a widow and resident with her was her brother Thomas Smith - bells began to clang now - surely if this was James Smith's brother he would be listed as brother in law but as you can see it clearly states brother on the census.

It also records Sarah as Sarah L. Smith and her 'brother' as Thomas L. Smith. Both Sarah and her brother were baptised as Sarah Large and Thomas large Henly. The dates and place of birth also fitted in perfectly with this being our Thomas Large Henly. The final proof was the occupation recorded for Thomas L. Smith - that of Flax Export Agent. This convinced both myself and Bob's son Clive who had carried on his father's search that finally we had traced Thomas Large Henly and what's more he had still not given up on his dream of flax production.

Why Thomas was recorded as Smith in the census will remain a mystery - it could of course be that the enumerator assumed the name was Smith since that was the surname given by the head of the household Sarah and the fact that he was then recorded as her brother could have given rise to a simple mistake. Or perhaps was there a more sinister and deviant reason and this was a deliberate deception on Thomas' part - possibly to lie low

after all the fuss he had caused over the years in Parliament and with local families still living in Calne that had been separated from other family members forever because of Thomas's dream.

Moving onto the 1911 Census Thomas is living alone in a multi occupancy building and is recorded as a flax exporter and widower.

He is recorded as Thomas Large Henley (another enumerator error I suspect). Certainly there was no intent here to hide his identity.

Thomas finally ended his dream of flax production as his death was recorded in the December Quarter of 1912 at age 86 and is registered in the Fulham Register, London. As of this date no exact date has been found nor has a place of burial been traced.

I am pleased to dedicate this article to the memory of Bob Henly who put so many years into tracing the history of the Henly tree and to providing us with so many transcriptions for the North Wiltshire area around Brinkworth and of course Chippenham and Calne.