

Robert Blanch

It is from the middle of the eighteenth century that the ancestry of the Blanch family can be definitely traced. In March 1753 Robert Blanch was baptised at Hollington in Sussex. His parents were Edward and Hannah Blanch. Whether Robert was a younger child of Edward Blanch of Salehurst who had married Honour Heather in 1731 or the first child of their son Edward is not clear. Indeed little can be discovered about these people other than their very names.

In 1776 Robert Blanch married Elizabeth Brann³ in the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin at Rolvenden. Elizabeth came from the neighbouring parish of Sandhurst. She was the daughter of Benjamin Brann who had married Ann Fitlow at Sandhurst in 1748. As Elizabeth's brother, Benjamin, was a blacksmith it is quite possible that her father was also.

The economic climate in which these people lived was far from favourable. Year by year the records tell of more people receiving parish relief. Retail prices rose and wages stood at the same level as they had for a hundred years or more. At the end of the century the standard wage for agricultural workers in the area was only 4d a day, while youths and women got as little as 3d. With flour at 2s a gallon, potatoes at 4s a bushel and beans at 4s 6d a bushel, prices must have been cruelly high to people trying to feed a family on 2s or 3s a week, and

¹ Sussex Record Society Vol. XLVI, 1946, Pages 299-301; & Vol LIII, 1953, Page 135-136. This information was located by Galde Nelson.

² The Complete Peerage, Vol. V, P.153

³ The spelling of this family varies. In southern Kent in the mid eighteenth century it is most usually spelt Bran or Brann, but in earlier times the spelling was clearly Brand. These are all interchangeable but the actual surname was most probably "Brand"

many were on the verge of starvation.

The Blanches were among the unlucky. At the period when their children were being born, 1785 to 1792, the Parish Registers record Robert and Elizabeth Blanch as paupers. While it seems that only one of their children did not survive infancy Elizabeth herself died young, as a pauper, in 1792 aged forty six. Their only surviving son was Edward Blanch, christened in 1787. Their remaining children were all daughters. The eldest, Martha, married James Maynard in 1799 and had five children. One of her daughters, Mary, was to emigrate to Australia with her uncle in 1838. The three sons of another of Robert and Elizabeth's daughters, Sarah Kennard, also emigrated. Elizabeth Morris, the second daughter, remained in Rolvenden where she became a greengrocer.

With the outbreak of the Napoleonic War economic conditions in Rolvenden became even worse. Parish relief, which had dealt with only 30 cases in 1798, rose to 50 in 1805, 180 in 1812, and 220 in 1813. Faced with this situation the Parish Council was forced to maintain, by means of the poor rate¹, nearly one fifth of the population. At this time the population of Rolvenden stood at 1,130, consisting of 195 families (136 agricultural workers) housed in only 137 houses and cottages.

Edward Blanch

In 1807 Edward Blanch married Maria Ashdown at Ewhurst in Sussex. Maria Blanch was aged only eighteen at the time of the marriage and was the third daughter of Thomas Ashdown of Westfield in Sussex and his wife Mary Catt. Maria was probably related to the Ashdown family of Sandhurst near Rolvenden in which the names Isaac and Stephen were common. Maria was to give these names to two of her children. Maria, like her mother-in-law was to die young in 1837.

With the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 the economic condition of the region improved. Prices rose slightly and there was a steady decrease in unemployment until 1819. The condition of the greater part of the country, particularly in the industrial areas, was, however, steadily deteriorating, and a great agricultural depression began in 1822 and 1823. In Rolvenden the worst of this terrible depression was from 1822 to 1832.

The circumstances of the family did not improve. In 1818, in 1819 and again in 1821 Edward Blanch received bread and cheese from the parish in recompense for cleaning tombstones. His son Thomas seems to have also received this charity in 1828. Although local conditions improved in the 1830's Edward and his family continued to receive charity from the parish right up until 1838. When the call for settlers for the vast new lands in Australia came it is not surprising to see Edward and his children, along with hundreds of other people from Kent and Sussex greeting the prospect with thanks, and leaving the miseries of the past fifty years behind them.

The village they left, no doubt with regrets, was a place where they had lived their lives as their ancestors had for generations. There they had lived on the produce of the land, had made their own clothes, and had seldom left the parish. These skills were to be of great use when the time came to leave forever, to travel to an unknown country half a world away.

¹ The Poor Rate was an amount paid by the wealthier members of the community towards the upkeep of the poor. The four main purposes of the rate were "for providing stock, putting to work, putting out of poor children as apprentices, and for the necessary relief of the poor".