

## The Family of "de Essex."

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THE founder of the family of de Essex was Robert Fitz-Wimarc. In these days of deep and critical research, when a fierce light beats on every statement or conjecture hazarded, it is with shrinking diffidence that the writer ventures to enumerate even those details which appear to him to be based on good authority, in connection with a family which played so prominent a part in the county of Essex during the period of history extending inclusively from the reign of Edward the Confessor to that of Henry II. of England.

Robert FitzWirmac was a Norman noble, who, in the days of Edward the Confessor, settled in England. To what family he belonged it is not stated, but the Sex of Wimarc is given by William of Poitiers, who introduces Robert as "*Dives quidam finium illorum inquilinus, natione Normannus, Robbertus filius Wimaræ, Nobilis Mulieris.*" J. Horace Round, in "*Feudal England*," claims him as a Breton on his mother's side, for he considers Wimarc to be a distinctively Breton name. Perhaps some genealogist or antiquary skilled in Norman literature will come forward to solve the problem of the paternal ancestry of this nobleman. He is described in the Waltham Charter as "*Robertus Regis Consanguineus*," viz. : of Edward the Confessor, and by William of Poitiers as "*Consanguineus*" of William the Conqueror.

His blood relationship therefore to these two monarchs may be accepted. He was one of the favourite ministers of Edward the Confessor, and by "*The Biographer of Edward*" (page 431) is presented as "*Regalis Palatii Stabilitor.*" His most familiar title is "*Robert the Staller.*" In several counties of England he had large estates, and we find him a landowner in Somerset, Hertfordshire, Shropshire, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Oxfordshire, Suffolk and Essex. He was also Sheriff of the East Saxons. At the death of Edward the Confessor he is one of the most prominent figures. It is in his arms that the King dies, and present at the same time are the Queen, "*The Lady Eadgyth*," Dux Haraldus (afterwards King Harold), and Stigand Archbishop of Canterbury.

Aeldred, Abbot of Rievaulx, in Yorkshire (b. 1109, d. 1166), gives the same list. To-day may be seen on the Bayeux Tapestry at Caen this identical group, and no one can doubt that the one who is personally attending on the King is the Court Officer, "The Staller Robert" (Freeman's *Norman Conquest*).

Robert was still found secure in his possessions during the short period of Harold's reign.

The part which the exigencies of the time called upon him to play was indeed a difficult one. He, being akin in blood to both Edward the Confessor and William the Conqueror, must have been aware of the actual wishes of the former regarding the succession to the English throne, and also of the rumours persistently spread and by certain factions believed of the compact between Harold and William of Normandy, in which Harold, it was stated, had renounced all aspirations to the crown of England. It is beyond the scope of a short article to enter in detail into the vexed question of this alleged agreement between Harold and William. Harold without doubt was the choice of the English. At the battle of Stamford Bridge on the Derwent, fought September 25th, 1066, it is uncertain whether Robert Fitz-Wimarc was present; but according to Professor Freeman, his was the message despatched to William of Normandy immediately prior to the battle of Hastings, in which he counsels William to withdraw his troops at once, urging the folly of risking a pitched battle with Harold, who was hastening from the north at the head of 100,000 men flushed with victory over Hardrada, Tostig, and the flower of the Norwegian army. Had the advice of Robert FitzWimarc been followed, it is reasonable to believe that the whole of the subsequent history of England would have undergone a marvellous change. At this crisis it is fair to imagine that Robert FitzWirmac remained neutral, for on the conquest of England by William of Normandy he still retains possession of his vast estates. His death took place previous to "The Survey." His son Sweyne assumed the affix "de Essex," and thus he is found to be styled again and again in the Essex Domesday.

Sweyne de Essex was the greatest of all the landowners in Essex, and Domesday assigns to him vast properties, comprising fifty-five lordships in that county. In addition to this, we find he owns nine lordships in Suffolk, forty-one burgesses in the town of Ipswich, and the manor of Wedresley, in Hunts.

Sweyne was the builder of the castle of Rayleigh, called in Domesday *Riganea*.

This is the only castle mentioned in the Essex Domesday. The writer had the pleasure of inspecting the site of this ancient castle under the guidance of the brother of the present owner, E. B. Francis, whose interesting description of it he was allowed the privilege to peruse.

Of Robert de Essex, Sweyne's son and heir, nothing worthy of note or importance is, as far as the writer is aware, recorded, except that he founded Pritwell Priory, near Southend.

His son and heir, Henry de Essex, succeeded him as Baron of Rayleigh, and it is to him that the family of de Essex owes both the loss of possessions and prestige. He was a Warden of the Cinque Ports, and is stated by Camden in his "Britannia" (Vol. i., page 364, Gough's edition) to have restored Saltwood Castle half-a-mile distant from Hythe, a very ancient edifice whose origin is ascribed to the Romans. He was accused in 1163 of cowardice in a battle against the Welsh, the charge being that in the hour of retreat he threw away the Royal Standard, of which he was bearer and custodian. For this offence he was judged to enter the lists against Robert de Montford, by whom he was defeated. He spent the rest of his days shorn a monk in the monastery of Reading, and his vast estates were confiscated. Whether the charge was true or not is left doubtful. Henry II. was without question hampered at the time by pressing demands for money. There were the conquest of Ireland, the war in France, which his own sons instigated, and war with Scotland. His exchequer must needs be replenished, and the extensive possessions of Henry de Essex were not to be despised.

The representative of Henry de Essex to-day is the Baroness Berners.

Dugdale says that Henry de Essex had a brother, Hugh de Essex, whose place of residence was Rivenhall, which was a manor forming part of the estate of his grandfather, Sweyne de Essex. It is in the descendants of this Hugh that the family continued to survive in the male line for nearly 500 years. The last representative of this line was Sir William Essex, Baronet (created November 25th, 1611), of Bewcott or Beckett House, near Shrivenham, Berks, whose daughter Lovise, or Louise, Essex, on the death of her brother, Colonel Charles Essex, slain at the battle of Edgehill, 1642, became his representative. With the descendants of this lady rests the honour of being the representatives of this branch of the family at the present day.