

Blackwells of  
Leicestershire  
1500 – 1850

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## Knaptoft to Arnesby

# 1. Sir Richard BLACKWIN [1]

Birth: 1512, Leicester [2]  
Death: 1587, Shearsby, Leicestershire [2]  
Burial: Shearsby Chapel, Leicestershire

Occupation Rector of Newarke, Knaptoft, Shearsby [1]  
Spouse: (1) Unknown  
(2) Grace BLACKWELL (BLACKWIN)  
Marr: 1562, Knaptoft, Leicestershire

Children: (1) Frances  
Agnes  
(2) George (1563-1640) m.  
Samuel (1565-1632)  
Amy  
Grace

It is increasingly evident that the Blackwells of Leicestershire can be traced to Richard Blackwyn c.1511-1587, often spelt Blackwin. Richard seems to have come from the Blackwyn family of Leicester. Some researchers suggest that he was probably a second son, which is why he was sent to be a monk. He was almost certainly a monk in Launde Abbey, as he was later ordained in Luddington (the parish adjacent to Launde Abbey). Launde Abbey is an Elizabethan Manor House, built on the site of an Augustinian Priory founded in 1119. Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister responsible for the dissolution of the monasteries, so liked its position that he wrote in his diary- "Myself for Launde". But he never lived to occupy the house as he was executed for treason in 1540, the year that building work started. His son, Gregory, lived at Launde Abbey for ten years with his wife Elizabeth, who was sister to Queen Jane Seymour.

Within the House there is a beautiful Chapel thought to be all that remains of the original Priory Church. Some of its stained glass is mediaeval and Nicholas Pevsner has described the monument to Gregory Cromwell as "one of the purest monuments of the early Renaissance in England"

According to Robert Blackwell, also researching this topic, Richard was initially associated with the Black Friars monastery at Leicester and was ordained a sub-deacon at the age of 20 as a Dominican friar.



Launde Abbey

Richard came to leadership in the church at a time when the Reformation was well under way in Europe and when the monarchy in England was changing from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I. The monasteries such as Blackfriars, Greyfriars, and the Augustinian Friary in Leicester were all closed by 1540, and church property was transferred to the crown. Robert Blackwell observes that Richard lost his house at this time.

Richard Blackwin was Sub Deacon to the Priory of St. Clement, of the Order of St. Dominic, known as 'Black Friars in LeAsshes' in the City of Leicester. His signature is found on the formal Act of Surrender to the Crown at the time of the Dissolution in 1538.

He was first rector of the Newarke College, Leicester, which is interesting because a certain John Blackwyn was in the same position about 100 years before, probably an uncle. In one book, Richard is described as having had something to do with choral proceedings in the Newarke College and so he no doubt worked closely with the composer Hugh Aston/Asheton who was chorister there at the time. In about the 1550s Newarke College gave Richard a pension possibly because he was a signer of the Act of Surrender. He then went to be the rector of Knaptoft and Shearsby.

The provision of a pension from Newarke College was a great benefit, not that it would have made Richard rich, but would have provided him with some security. A parish priest received a stipend of between £8 and £10 per year. Some vicars kept cattle in the churchyards to make ends meet. By 1600 there were “not 600 benefices out of the 9,000 in England and Wales where the stipends were sufficient for the support of a learned man. Many of the tithes had been expropriated by laymen who paid the vicars a pittance; in other cases the tithes had been commuted so that the rector suffered a heavy loss from the general fall in the value of money.” (Maurice Ashley, *England in the Seventeenth Century*. Penguin Books. 1952. p.27). Richard was one of the few educated clergy.

The rectory of Knaptoft was valued at 20 marks in 1254 and 40 marks in 1291. The gross annual value in 1535 was £33 3s. 6d. and the living was considered one of the richest in the country during the 16th century. It appears that in the 17th century the rector had no glebe (land serving as clergyman's benefice and providing income) at Knaptoft except the site of the parsonage, because the glebe there had been enclosed by the Turpin family who had offered a lease of land at Shearsby in compensation. In 1606 there were 46 acres of glebe in Mowsley. A list of the great and small tithes was drawn up by the rector in 1620. By the enclosure award of 1788 the rector received 41 acres in lieu of glebe in Mowsley, and 200 acres in compensation for all great and small tithes. The rectory was valued at £624 a year in 1831, with a *modus* of £10 in Knaptoft, 212 acres of glebe in Shearsby, and 247 acres in Mowsley (Adapted from *History of Leicestershire*, Vol. 5).

The Blackwin family at this time were greatly involved in local administration of the City of Leicester prior to industrialisation. William Blackwyn was an Alderman, The name of Blackwyn in fact appears a number of times in the City documentation associated with the Wyggeston Hospital Trust from 1300.

The name of Blackwell/wyn/win has a long and eventful link with Leicestershire both City and County.



Ruins of the Knaptoft Church, Knaptoft,  
Leicestershire

At the time Richard was reported to be married as was permitted of clergy from about 1548, and it was through this marriage that two of his children seem to have been born. In the 1570s he was said to be unmarried, in this case widowed, yet by the time of his will, in 1587 he had a wife, named Grace, so he must have remarried in his last years. Queen Elizabeth reinstated the Oath of Succession that her father had enacted in 1543, requiring loyalty to the Queen by officials including the clergy. It appears likely that in this period, Richard became part of the Church of England going on to become rector in Shearsby where he was buried at his death in 1587. The crown apparently recognized his service there and he was knighted (Cleri Libre) two years before his death.

*Helpful information on Richard Blackwin was provided by Alex. Thacker and Robert Blackwell.*

### **Enclosure – the Demise of Knaptoft**

The village of Knaptoft and consequently the church became one of the deserted villages of Leicestershire as a result of the system of Enclosure, where the properties of small tenant farmer became merged into larger enclosed farms usually connected with a shift in farming from growing grain to grazing. At Knaptoft where Sir W. Turpin owned 1,738 sheep in 1617, there were 26 families at the beginning of the 14th century, but only five families were on the subsidy list in 1524 and all of them were levied on their wage income. The rectory house at Knaptoft was involved in enclosure established by the Turpin family and the rector had taken a house at Shearsby. From the late 17th century onwards the rectors of Knaptoft or their curates have resided at Mowsley, though all the rectors until 1915 were inducted in the north porch of the ruined church at Knaptoft. (*The Transformation of Feudal Landlord Economy into Capitalism*. Koichi Matsumura, Kyoto University Economic Review, April 1984).

The mother church at Knaptoft was allowed to fall into ruins during the middle of the 17th century. There is some evidence to suggest that the Knaptoft church was damaged by fire, although none to prove the local tradition that it was destroyed after the battle of Naseby.



Richard Blackwin was knighted (Libre Cleri) in 1585, two years before his death. He was rector of, and is buried in the church of St. Mary Magdalene at Shearsby.





# 1.1 Samuel BLACKWIN [1] [3]

Birth: 1565, Knaptoft, Leicestershire [2]  
Death: 1632, Leicestershire [2]  
  
Spouse: Amy Brawnson  
Marr: 17 Nov 1589 Arnesby, Leicestershire  
  
Children: Thomas (1600-)

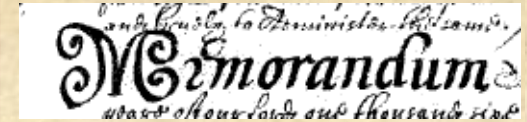
By 1610, Samuel, born 1565 in Knaptoft, was living in Shearsby, a few miles away towards Arnesby, where, according to a property agreement at the time he was listed as a yeoman. By then he had been married for 21 years to Amy (Brawnson). Their son, Thomas, was born in 1600. While listed as a yeoman, by 1620, he was also identified as a corvisor. Eventually, this term came to mean shoemaker, but in Samuel's time it meant a specialist leather worker using a particularly rich red-dyed tanned leather from the Mouflon sheep or goats from Cordoba in Spain. It was eventually used to refer to goatskin, and later it

was made from dyed, vegetable tanned bovine hide. It was not uncommon for merchants at the time to buy property to not only increase their social standing, but to provide extra income, often maintaining their craft while working the land. Ashley (Maurice Ashley, *England in the Seventeenth Century*. Penguin Books. 1952) suggests it was possible that prices increased six-fold between 1500 and 1600.



Shearsby from the Church of St. Mary Magdalene.

**FILE** - [no title] - ref. **DE1110/103** - date: 23rd March 1610/11



**Contents**

Grant.

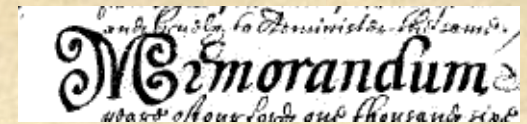
(i) William Cobley & Ann his wife; Samuel Blackwin & Amy his wife; Miles Greves & Alice his wife; Roger Wright & Agnes his wife; Richard Fardell & Elizabeth his wife.

(ii) Richard Foxon, husbandman, Foxton.

(i) to (ii) arable land specified in a schedule attached (7a 1r) in Foxton with rents and profits, lott grass, parting grass and feeding grass, with covenant to save harmless.

Consideration: £130.

**FILE** - [no title] - ref. **DE1110/104** - date: 23rd March 1610/11



**Contents**

Grant.

(i) Samuel Blackwin, yeo, Sheasby & Amy his wife; Richard Fardell, tailor, Hallaton & Elizabeth his wife; William Cobley, husbandman, Kibworth Beauchamp & Anne his wife; Miles Greves, butcher, Leicester & Alice his wife.

(ii) Roger Wright, husbandman, Foxton & Agnes his wife.

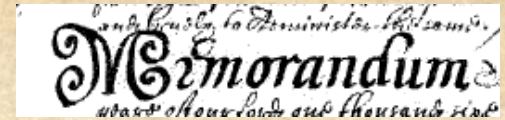
(i) to (ii) a messuage with appurtenances and part of Hall Yard Close in Foxton with parcels of arable in the open fields specified in a schedule and ¼ leisue in the common leisues with one cow pasture with lott grass, leisues, parting grass, feeding pasture and common of pasture.

Consideration: £190.

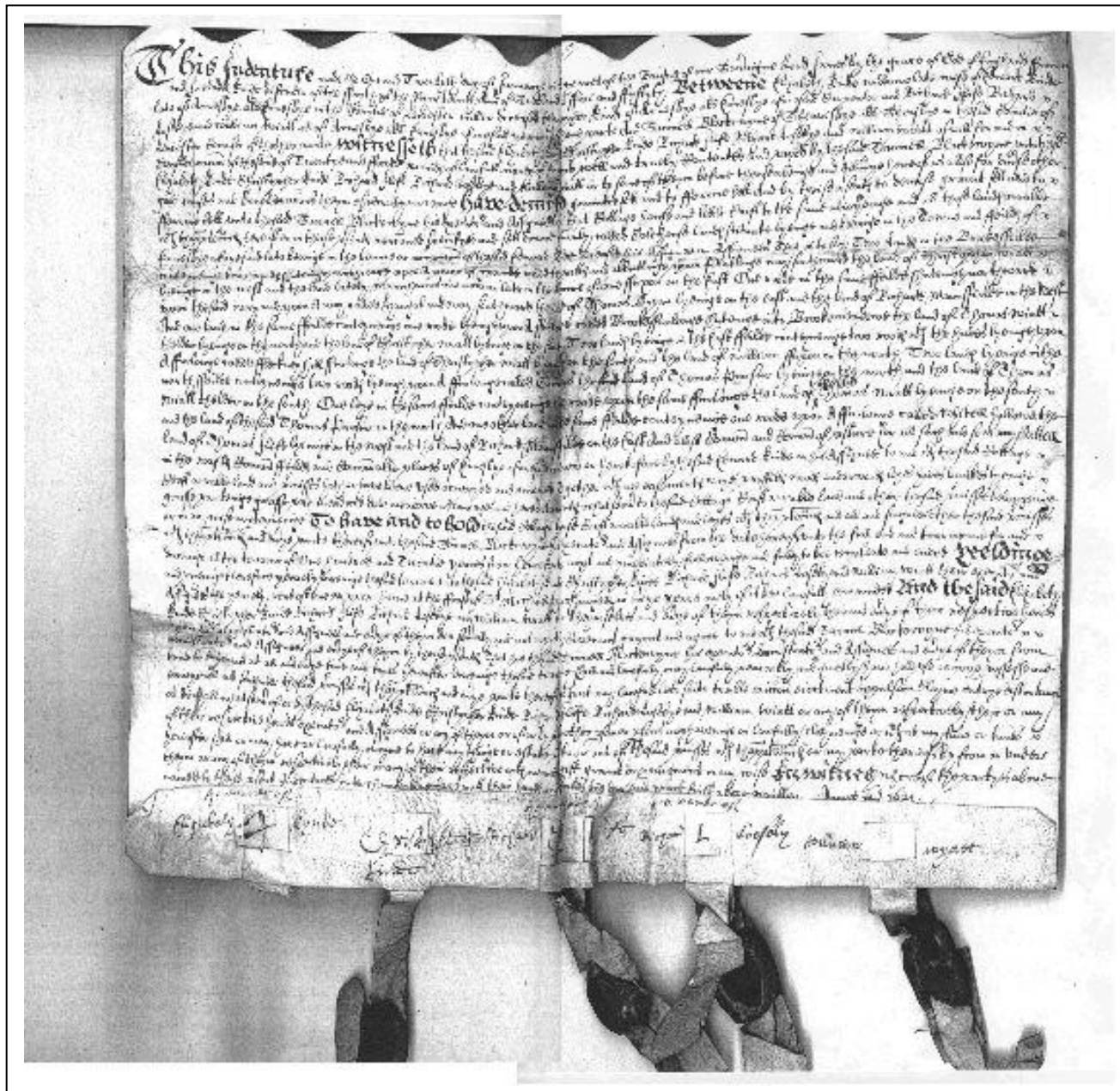


1622 21 January Lease of house and croft for term of 120 years and consideration of £24: Elizabeth Knide, widow of Edward Knide of Arnesby, carpenter, Richard Hiffe, Richard Losely and William Wiatt [Wyatt] all of Arnesby, yeomen, to Samuel Blackwyne of Shearsby, corvisor.

“Lease Agreement,” January 21, 1622, National Archives, Wigston, Leicestershire.



Note: A. Blackwell Archive Researcher – National Archives (Wigston): “This Samuel is undoubtedly the ancestor of the Blackwell family” [3]



Lease by Samuel Blackwyne (Blackwell) for 120 years for £24 on a cottage and croft on Arnesby, thereby establishing the Blackwell family in Arnesby until 1851.



Samuel Blackwin's will is interesting because in some places it refers to his children as Blackwin and in other places as Blackwell. This may have happened because Blackwin was a rare name in the area, whereas Blackwell was more dominant, and so eventually, most branches in the area corrupted to Blackwell, including most dominantly, the Blackwells of Arnesby. (2)



Arnesby, Leicestershire

# 1.1.1 Thomas BLACKWELL

Birth: 1600, Knaptoft, Leicestershire [2]

Death: Arnesby, Leicestershire

Spouse: Grace

Name probably changed from Blackwin to Blackwell during this period.. [2]

Called the Older

Children: Thomas (1657-1704)

Thomas, the Older, was around 21 when his family moved to Arnesby from Shearsby at a time when the economy and the structure of farming were going through rapid change.

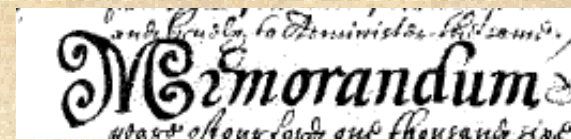
In June of 1651, when he was 51, Thomas bought a cottage and croft. His occupation at that time was listed as “husbandman”. As a husbandman, he was essentially a tenant farmer, working land that was rented from a landowner. An earlier historian observed, “They that be husbandmen now haue but a scant livinge thereby.” (“The Discourse of this Common Weal of England”, Elizabeth Lamond. 1893). Poor tenants make unprofitable tenants and so it

was these small tenant farms that were being enclosed into larger land holding forcing people like Thomas off their farm to work elsewhere. Between 1550 and 1577 there were 12 villages in Leicestershire that saw evidence of the “open-field” system of medieval agriculture change to ‘enclosure’. Between 1578 and 1607 when Thomas was born, the number was 63 and 22 villages had completely changed. (J. Thirsk. *Agrarian History, 1540 – 1950*. Victoria History, Leicestershire, Vol II, 1954. Pps. 254-259).

So Thomas bought (there is no mention of it being a lease) a cottage and croft. A croft, in English terms, was a small piece of tillable, arable land, usually hedged. It probably was not a lot larger than his tenant farm – but it was his. “With property came standing in society and a future for one’s children, for in the early part of the [18th.] century it was relatively easy to pass from one social class to another...” (J.H. Plumb. *England in the Eighteenth Century*. 1950 Penguin Books P. 17).

1651 24 June

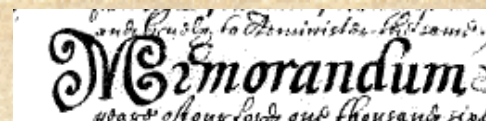
Conveyance of cottage and croft Edward Williams of Kilworth to Thomas Blackwell of Arnesby, Husbandman [4]





1670 April 1

Conveyance in lease and release of close 1 1/2 yards. Thomas Hall of Walton, yeoman and Anne, his wife, to Thomas Blackwell of Arnesby, yeoman. [4]



Twenty years later, in 1670, now 70 years old, he is listed as a yeoman – lower than a gentleman, but much better than a tenant farmer husbandman. In the agreement of April 1, 1670 he leased (with option to renew) a close of 1 1/2 yardlands. A yard or yardland was 20 acres, so his new property was 30 acres and a “close”- a sign that he was moving from tilling his property to grazing.

To add to the story, six years after he bought the first cottage, at age 57, his son, Thomas was born – Thomas the Younger.

### **Yeomen, Gents, and Nobles.**

The structure of society in England was in a process of change at this period of history. The Continental system of a noble caste has not existed in England since early medieval days, and the past seven centuries have rarely seen the use of caste to prevent vertical movement in society, even though it has usually impeded it. The landed gentry, recognized as Britain's untitled aristocracy, intermarried with the peerage families and were recognizable as a caste, and a noble caste at that, identifiable by their arms, but its membership was not protected by law and privilege to the degree prevalent on the Continent. Younger sons of the peerage families dropped into the landed gentry with a small legacy or through marriage, and a couple of generations later their younger grandsons might be yeoman farmers or city merchants or professional officers in the army or navy. During that journey they would have passed the wealthy granddaughters of newly landed squires whose own grandfathers had been successful merchants or lawyers or sea captains enriched by prize money. Those rich and fashionable girls were about to marry newly impoverished peers. Britain had a flexible society that allowed success to prosper socially. In the connection with the Blackwell families of this time (1500-1850), we see yeomen farmers (farmers, graziers, husbandman), gents (wealthy farmers who no longer need to work), or merchants (corvisor – shoe maker, mercer, tailor, miller).



Arnesby