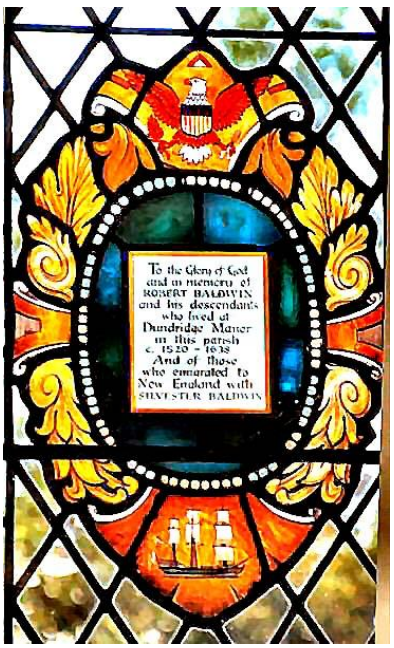
The Baldwins of Connecticut-cum-St Leonards

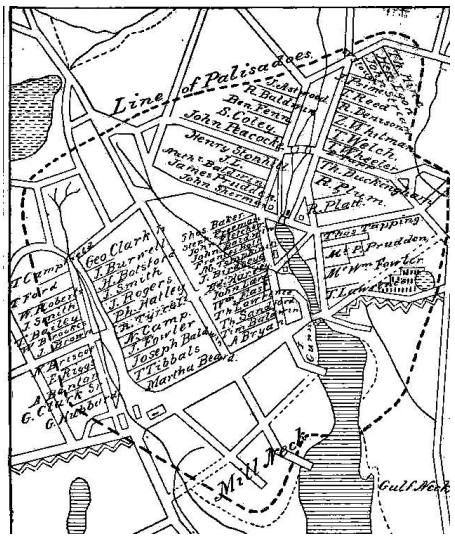
The Chilterns are a popular destination for visitors. The History Group also receives regular requests from those researching family history. Last year I had three separate enquiries from Americans who were planning to visit this area in late 2012 because they were descendants of the Baldwin family, who owned or leased properties around here between the 14th and 17th centuries.

The Baldwin dynasty has many branches throughout the USA, Canada and elsewhere. The connections with our villages have been well-documented thanks, primarily to impressive research conducted by Charles Candee Baldwin of Cleveland, Ohio. In the 1870s he spent two years in England searching for Baldwin family records. Augmented by impressive research in the USA he published a 1,000-page Baldwin Genealogy 1500-1881 chronicling why and how some Baldwins came to emigrate and make a home in the new Colonies.

By the 16th century the Baldwins owned or leased several properties in St Leonards (then part of Aston Clinton parish) and land in Cholesbury, Chesham and Wendover. The Countess of Salisbury owned Dundridge Manor. In 1522, by taking on the lease for the manor, Robert Baldwin became her Bailiff. In 1541 Henry VIII seized her lands and had the Countess executed. The Crown did not disturb the tenancy, by then held by Robert's son Richard. In 1544 Henry granted the entire Countess' lands to his Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, Sir John Baldwin of Aylesbury. He was related to the Aston Clinton Baldwins. Henry, a grandson of Richard Baldwin who had inherited the tenancy of Dundridge, shrewdly purchased the Lordship of Dundridge Manor in 1579.



Sylvester Baldwin, a nephew of Henry, was born in Cholesbury in 1598 and married Sarah Bryant in 1620. They became tenants at Chapel Farm in St Leonards (see also, Anne Batchelor's article in this Newsletter). In common with other Baldwins they were devout Puritans. Under Charles I's rule nonconformists were ruthlessly persecuted. From the 1620s onwards groups of Puritans sought sanctuary from religious oppression by setting up religious enclaves in the New World. In 1638 Sylvester and family, his brother John, and up to three of their cousins and their families, sailed for Massachusetts aboard the Ship *Martin*. Sadly Sylvester died at sea on 21st June 1638 and this necessitated a detailed examination of his will in Boston.



Consequently invaluable details about the Baldwin heritage were well documented. Sarah, Sylvester's widow, and others on the *Martin* became discontent with less than strict religious observance in Massachusetts and joined a new colony at New Haven, Connecticut. Sarah was one of 300 'freemen' assigned plots. In 1640 she married John Astwood, a founding colonist who arrived in 1635.

By 1653 Astwood had become a magistrate, accumulating more wealth and power. In 1653, as Representative for New Haven, he returned to England to forge an alliance with Oliver Cromwell against the Netherlands. John died in England and Sarah returned to America to inherit her husband's estates. It is reckoned that she had become the richest woman in the American Colonies. Sarah died in 1669 but not before seeing her four surviving children and nephews establish the Baldwin dynasty. In contrast, the English Baldwin estates, including Dundridge, fell into disrepair. By 1748, Robert Montieth Baldwin, with no Baldwin descendants, had disposed of the estates to a cousin. Subsequently the estate was split up and sold with Robert T. Green becoming owner of Dundridge.

Having developed a bespoke 'Baldwin Tour', some of you might enjoy following the trail. I suggest you start at St. Michael and All Saints Church, Aston Clinton. There is an interesting stained-glass window dedicated to Robert Baldwin who travelled on *The Martin* with Sylvester, and an oak bookcase. Both were donated by American Baldwins. Proceed to St Leonards Church to see a memorial to later Baldwins. In the porch is a print of the old Rectory, which once stood in the church grounds, gifted by a Baldwin. Over the road is Chapel Farm where Sylvester and Sarah lived prior to emigrating to New Haven. In St Lawrence's Church, Cholesbury, there is a further memorial to family members. Finally, you can stroll along the bridleway off Oak Lane alongside Dundridge Manor, which can perhaps be called the ancestral Home of the American Baldwins.

Chris Brown