

A noble American family or the law of success

THERE should always be one in every self-respecting American family, but sometimes it's not just one but often four or five. So let's make it 'there should always be five'. Although the phrase doesn't match the elegance of the original observation, it is more exact and would thus appeal more to lawyers and the civil courts. Which is entirely apt as in the history of what became the United States the name 'Barrington-Ward' is synonymous with the law.

Although one recent Barrington-Ward boasted he could trace his ancestors almost to the dawn of time, he was immediately hushed by other family who disliked and dislike boasting and attention. The family can't, of course, trace its origins so far back because, despite the insistence of what should strictly be called the 'proto-lawyers', it wasn't for millennia that the world began to keep records.

In fact, it isn't until the Battle of Maldon in the tenth century in Anglo-Saxon England that the first definable Barrington-Ward ancestor can be identified. He was an Essex thegn who distinguished himself helping to repel invading Vikings and his service was honored by Ethelred, his king. He was Edgar of Colchester, but little else is known about him.

Seventy years later, his grandson Cuthbert impressed Harold Godwin and was by the Saxon king's side when his army was defeated on the battlefield between Aldbec Hill and Telham Hill — we should be specific — by William, Duke of Normandy. The Barrington-Wards are agreed that their lineage can be traced from that Cuthbert until the present day, and is further agreed that was when their almost unceasing prosperity began.

There were and are many ways in which a man can advance his fortunes, and with Cuthbert the family's successful procession through medieval and later history began. Most noble Saxon families did not thrive under Norman rule, but the Barrington-Wards (though the name came later) were a distinct and distinguished exception. Whether by loyal royal service, by many a judicious marriage, by valour on the battlefield or benefiting from well-planned treachery and treason, Cuthbert's descendants all made their way.

Although the family scions were not always the brightest, each was nevertheless wise enough to seek out and follow good counsel. So they followed such counsel during the Anarchy when it was uncertain whether Matilda or Stephen would prevail. When more than three hundred years later Henry Twdor, regarded by many as an uncouth upstart with a dubious claim, usurped the throne, the Barringtons (as they then were) again chose wisely and were rewarded with titles and land.

The family's fortunes did flag in the 16th century when Thomas Barrington, who had been created Earl of Rutland, almost suffered the same fate as that of his good friend Thomas Cromwell. Unlike most of his ancestors and family and most of his descendants, Thomas Barrington foolishly opted to adhere to 'principles', notably the religious principles expounded by that age's more zealous church reformers.

Henry Twdor's son, the even more ruthless Henry the VIII, became suspicious of the Earl of Rutland when one of William Tynedale's 'English bibles' was found at the Earl's residence. Barrington-Ward lore insists that despite the first earl's reformist convictions, he was not a stupid man and not foolish enough to allow a Tynedale bible in his household (and the matter is still debated to this day when Barrington-Wards gather at the family Hanover estate).

The earl was taken to the Tower of London for trial for treason and execution. He survived because Henry died shortly after, obese and unloved, though the earl remained, forgotten, in the Tower for six more years until Henry's daughter Mary succeeded her brother Edward. He was then pardoned as no one was sure what he was thought to have done. This was according to Mary's principle that 'my father's enemies are my friends'.

Towards the end of the reign of Mary's half-sister Elizabeth, his grandson the third Earl of Rutland took as his second wife (after the death in childbirth of his first) one Elizabeth Ward, the very rich widow of a City merchant, and it was from then until this day that the family has styled itself 'Barrington-Ward'.

For many that name rings out proudly among those of our nation's most successful and respected families. But many might be surprised by the family's history in England's nobility. Wisely, given the lip service we pay to equality and egalitarianism, it is now rarely spoken of except when it is useful to do so at British embassy receptions around the world and negotiating with rich businessmen.

In the reign of Charles I, the fourth Earl's third son, Charles, emigrated and made America his home, but he did not inherit his title until he was 43 and was settled in New Hampshire. His eldest brother, William, the fifth Earl, died young in a hunting accident (he had broken his neck falling off his horse) and had no children.

The title passed to his younger brother, Edward, a somewhat effete young man who ostentatiously declined to marry (which surprised no one) and who also left no heirs, also dying young, in a murky affair at a drunken game of whist. Charles Barrington-Ward, the new earl, decided his future lay in his adopted American home rather than in the then military dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate. He did not, though, renounce his title, but he and subsequent earls chose not to use it publicly.

That was another wise move, or perhaps a lucky one — it is usually, in hindsight, impossible to distinguish between wisdom and luck, although men important enough are usually given the benefit of doubt and deemed wise.

When one hundred years later the Second Continental Congress endorsed the declaration that the thirteen American colonies now regarded themselves as sovereign and independent of the Kingdom of Great Britain, the eighth Earl, also Charles Barrington-Ward, surprised many of his land-owning peers by siding with the Congress. Whether this, too, was wise, lucky or his motivation lay entirely elsewhere is now impossible to establish. Family gossip claims the eighth Earl was having an affair with Elizabeth Jameson, the young sister of George Partridge, a New Hampshire delegate to the Congress, but nothing conclusive has been established.

The income from the various Barrington-Ward estates was now immense, every son (and most recently daughter) was given a good education, and it became family tradition that each was encouraged to train for the law. The reasoning, as recorded in the memoirs of several 19th century Barrington-Wards, was that 'the law gives you access to everything and everyone: no area of life can do without recourse to the law'. Put more succinctly: only fools ignore the law. So becoming a lawyer, and very often a judge, became the family profession and has sustained the Barrington-Wards to this day.

The family believes that its historical knack for being in the right place at the right time and saying the right word has been and will be the basis of its success and thus for them the law is holy. For the past two hundred years a Barrington-Ward has assisted our greatest and richest and, you will find a Barrington-Ward in every field of business and commerce, although always in a legal capacity.

More to the point, the eldest son of the eldest son inherits the title of Earl of Rutland. America be proud!