

FROM YEOMANRY TO COUNTY ELITE: THE IMPACT OF THE FRENCH WARS ON THE RISE OF A SUFFOLK FAMILY

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THE KERRISONS RANKED with the most eminent county landed families in the north of Suffolk during the Victorian period; yet they had risen to this status, from their Norfolk yeoman origins, in the space of only two generations. They owed this rapid ascent to a father's attainments in commerce and finance, consolidated by his son's military success. Their spectacular achievements were largely the result of the wars with France from 1775 to 1783 and from 1793 to 1815, which not only provided commercial opportunities in East Anglia, of which the father took full advantage, but also created, through active service in the armed forces, a path which greatly eased the son's leap in social rank.

The father was Matthias Kerrison of Bungay (1742–1827). The 'rags to riches' myth that has grown up around him bears little relation to reality, for his background was not particularly humble and certainly not poverty-stricken. The Kerrisons had long been established as yeoman farmers and millers at Seething in Norfolk. Matthias's father Roger (1711–73) had married, in 1737, Mary, daughter of John Osborne of Kirstead (d.1725/6). As her father's heir she brought to the Kerrisons Kirstead Hall (though she was not brought up there) and land at Kirstead.¹ Roger and Mary moved to a farm there, where they brought up six sons and two daughters. At least four of the sons attained extraordinary success in their careers, which may indicate that they had benefited from an adequate education, and strongly suggests that they were possessed of sufficient capital to launch themselves (Rye 1911, 435–37).

Their second son Roger (b.1740) was by 1777 the owner of two brigs sailing between Yarmouth and Cork, with which he seems to have engaged in the lucrative business of supplying the troops opposing the colonists in the American War of Independence (*Lloyds Register* 1777–86; Baker 1971, 64 *et seq.*, 143). Building on this foundation he went on to acquire a bank in Norwich, and from 1779 he was Receiver-General of the Land Tax, the rich perquisites of which office ensured his financial success. He was twice Mayor of Norwich (in 1778 and 1802), received a grant of arms in 1795 and was knighted in 1800. His sudden death 'in an apoplectic fit' in 1808 (*Gent. Mag.*, June 1808, 566) occurred at a time of embarrassment for his bank, forcing it to suspend payment and leading the Government, unable to recover the tax money he had collected as Receiver-General, to declare the firm bankrupt (Cozens-Hardy and Kent 1938, 136; Rye 1911, 436).

It is with Roger's younger brother Matthias, however, that we are principally concerned. Of a very different temperament from his brother, Matthias was secretive and careful where Roger was flamboyant and daring. As the writer of his obituary put it, he lived 'frugally though never penuriously' (*I.J.*, 21 Apr. 1827). His business accounts have been destroyed, so that his career must be pieced together from surviving correspondence and his many rough notes.

He is known to have been apprenticed to a cooper at Swainsthorpe near Norwich in 1757, when he would have been fifteen years old. On completing his apprenticeship (by constructing a mash tub) he was about twenty-one.² The uses of the barrels made by coopers included the transport of corn, flour and other goods by water, and Matthias found work on the river Waveney and the Navigation between Bungay and Beccles, from where boats could proceed straight to the port of Yarmouth, a total distance of about thirty miles.

The Bungay Navigation, authorized by Act of Parliament in 1670, had opened in 1672 (Pluck 1994, 15–16). Though loosely supervised by Commissioners it was always in private hands, and in 1747 had been sold to John Meen, an ambitious farmer. Meen's daughter was

married to Thomas Sheriffe, to whom in 1757 Meen handed over the Navigation with the Staithe, some large granaries and three maltings, with other buildings and land.³ As owner of the Navigation, Sheriffe was entitled to the duties on cargoes passing through its four locks (Pluck 1994, 16–18), and also traded on his own account at the Staithe in coals, corn, timber and other goods. He was also responsible for keeping open the Navigation by maintaining the sluices, banks, posts and gates.

Not unnaturally he turned for help to his cooper, by definition a skilled carpenter. Matthias Kerrison noted at the foot of a letter he wrote in 1820: 'It is 55 years this day the late Mr Sheriffe took us down the river with him to order a repair – who intrusted me with the management of the navigation as long as he lived and had them [*sic*] two years after.'⁴ Sheriffe died unexpectedly in a drowning accident in 1768. At the time of his death he was insolvent, and his father-in-law John Meen, who was closely involved in his affairs, was also declared bankrupt (Goodwyn, 1989, 70–71).

It may be that Matthias benefited from the incompetence of Sheriffe and Meen and undertook some trading both on his own account and also under arrangements with his employer, though, writing in 1825, he himself dated his entry into trade to 1768.⁵ This statement is borne out by the sudden increase in 1769–70 of the valuation of his property in Bungay Holy Trinity for the Poor Rate.⁶

It seems, therefore, that he came very well out of the bankruptcies of Sheriffe and Meen. He was also helped financially at this time by his marriage, on 22 May 1770, to Mary Barne of Barsham.⁷ He himself told the antiquary David Elisha Davy that his wife had brought with her £3,000 – of more benefit to him than the world supposed.⁸ Mary was to bear him two children: Mary, born in August 1772, and Edward, born probably in July 1775.⁹ Edward was to be Matthias's heir; his career is discussed in detail below.

In his earlier years in business Matthias Kerrison must have learnt much from his elder brother Roger. So few of Matthias's business papers remain that there is little hard evidence for this, though a surviving letter from Roger to his brother, dated from Norwich on 12 December 1782 and referring also to their younger brother Charles (who had taken over the family farm at Kirstead), suggests a degree of fraternal co-operation in business:

I have now sent to Chas at Kirstead as I could not go myself.
If you received any money on Bills for me at Harlstone you have no doubt sent it to Kirstead. If not I desir'd this letter to come to you, on account that cash is scarce here on account of the high price of Corn my discount customers want more than usual.
I know you have a nest egg of Cash and want you to send me all you can tomorrow – or back by the bearer of this letter.¹⁰

Roger had been conveniently appointed a Commissioner for the river Waveney in 1797 so that he was well placed to help secure lockage charges favourable to his brother in 1803, in which year he was also shipping malt for Matthias.¹¹

Matthias was always alert to any potentially profitable transaction. Though many of his dealings are obscure there is no suggestion that he was dishonest. As he confided to his notebook in 1825, 'I have had fifty three years of Gain out of fifty seven I have been in Trade, by having a General Knowledge of diffirents of Commerce and of Land – by Purchasing & Selling parts of it again, where I could be a Gainer some of my Neighbours had but little knowledge of it.'¹² He bought up property and accumulated mortgages over a wide area, telling David Elisha Davy that he had placed all the money brought to him by his wife out on mortgage, which gained him between £80,000 and £100,000.¹³

From early in his career Matthias was concerned with malting and brewing. In June 1771 he

supplied a large quantity of malt to Shipmeadow House of Industry (Goodwyn 1987, 38). Already by that time he seems to have controlled a malting at the south end of Bungay and four years later, in 1775, he was able to buy a malthouse near the Staithe.¹⁴ In 1780–81 he bought the brewery at the King's Arms in Bridge Street with the attached malthouse,¹⁵ and went on to accumulate various public houses.

The war with America, in which France soon joined, saw the corn mills of East Anglia at full stretch. The Government faced the task of shipping provisions to feed the armies 3,000 miles away, and East Anglia was the main source of dry goods, especially flour and peas. Following the bankruptcies of Sheriffe and Meen in 1768, the Bungay Navigation had been bought by Henry Gooch, an ambitious Yarmouth merchant and shipowner who, from July 1774, was in partnership with a Bungay man, Thomas Cotton. Gooch's purchase had included granaries and warehouses, a malting and other properties, including the mansion house beside the Staithe.¹⁶ Gooch and Cotton now sub-contracted for the supply of both flour and peas to the troops (Baker 1971, 1,22–26,64,80). For flour they depended on mills along the Waveney. At Bungay they acquired a windmill and Bardolph's Mill (the watermill at the head of the Staithe) which they rapidly rebuilt after a fire in January 1779. Further watermills were acquired at Ditchingham and Wainford.¹⁷

At the end of March 1783 the Government ordered a halt to the deliveries to the troops. The result was a great surplus of supplies, for which their agents had paid heavy advances. Gooch and Cotton, with other Yarmouth merchants, protested to an unsympathetic Treasury, citing 'very large advances of money on this account to our great loss and inconvenience' (Baker 1971, 143–56). In October 1783 Gooch and Cotton defaulted and, early in 1784, were declared bankrupt.¹⁸ On 30 March 1784 their mills were put up for auction, followed in May by the Navigation, the Staithe and their remaining buildings and land.¹⁹

The Navigation and Staithe were bought by Matthias Kerrison for £8,000.²⁰ It is not known how much property was included in the purchase, but since he and his family moved into the mansion beside the Staithe in 1785,²¹ it seems likely that this formed part of the transaction. He was not short of money at this time. He had surely benefited from the wartime market for grain, for he had occupied a corn granary at the Bungay Staithe since 1770.²² It may well be significant that, as we have seen, his brother Roger's ships were conveying supplies for America to Cork.

Matthias was also aware of the profit to be made from timber in wartime, and already, before 1784, was renting saw-houses and pits at the Staithe.²³ The rapid expansion of naval ship-building during the Seven Years War had led to a timber shortage (Pool 1966, 21–22, 78–79, 87), Matthias's understanding of which is revealed in papers relating to his purchase of farm properties. In April 1783 he bought a farm as far away as Laxfield for £2,240, carefully noting the value of its oak, ash and elm timber. The articles of agreement for his purchase of farms at Topcroft, Bedingham and Woodton (Norfolk) in July 1786 specified the inclusion in the transaction of all the trees and required that the wood should henceforth not be touched. His timber dealing was to continue. For example, in 1801 he bought an estate at Spexhall which he himself helped to value; the wood and timber, which included 211 oaks, were specifically valued at £492.²⁴ All these purchases – the Navigation, the farms and their timber, together with the water corn mill which he erected at Ellingham in 1785–6 at a cost of £825²⁵ and the watermill he built at Geldeston at about the same time (Pluck 1994, 21–22) – meant that he was in a very strong position to take full advantage of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.

Kerrison has always been credited with making an enormous fortune during these wars, but since none of his accounts or relevant papers has survived it is impossible to discover either the sources or the amounts of his profits from what he himself simply refers to as 'trade'. Once in control of the Bungay Navigation he regulated and tightened up its operation in every way. He clamped down rigorously on fraud and theft from wherries. When two plundering watermen

murdered his employee Henry Scarle in February 1787 for informing on them, Matthias gave a stark warning of his new regime by causing the victim's body to be exhibited in a coffin at the 'Three Tuns' in Bungay (Mann 1934, 184); the culprits were apprehended, convicted and executed.

Matthias now insisted on cash payment for the coal, cinders and corn which he sold at the Staithe, and the insurance of all goods carried on the Navigation. He organized lawyers and assembled the Navigation Commissioners to deal with millers who drew off water and to combat complaints about lockage charges (Pluck 1994, 19,23–27).

While the income derived from lockage charges may not have been very great, takings from his sales of coal and grain at the Staithe must have been substantial. We can also surmise that he must have had much business elsewhere, some at least surely arising from his connexions in Yarmouth, where he was regularly seen and where, according to one source, he was a Haven Commissioner and constant in his attendance (Palmer 1872, 389). It seems highly probable that he benefited from the rapid wartime inflation which forced up the price of corn – the price of wheat trebled from 43s. a quarter in 1792 to 126s. a quarter in 1812 (Bowen 1998, 37) – while at the same time being shrewd enough to avoid pitfalls caused by sudden dips in price such as occurred in 1802–03, or by the financial crises of 1793 and 1797 (Hoppit 1987, 100,135ff.). As his brother Roger remarked in the letter quoted above, Matthias always had a cash nest-egg; unlike his two predecessors at Bungay Staithe, he had adequate credit to meet crises. This ability to weather economic storms must have been due in part to the varied nature of his sources of income, which included receipts from malting and brewing²⁶ and from his timber business, rents from his many houses, inns and farms, widespread lending at mortgage and, certainly not least, his investments and dealings in Government stock.

He seems to have begun buying Consols in the 1790s,²⁷ a venture which met with continued success. Davy, reminiscing with him in 1824, noted:

In the course of five successive years he increased his property by the almost incredible sum of £112,000: and this appears by no means improbable from a statement which he put into my hands, being the account of the purchase into the Funds of the sum of £100,000, at an average of 56 and the sale of it at an average of 81: netting him the sum of upwards of £42,000.

He told Davy that this was 'a lucky hit' and that he had never increased his property by speculation.²⁸

Matthias Kerrison was a pillar of the Establishment both in Bungay and in East Suffolk. He was Churchwarden of Holy Trinity, Bungay in 1770 and 1772, and again, without a break, from 1777 to 1826.²⁹ He was Town Reeve in 1812 and, at the time of his death in 1827, had served as a magistrate for over thirty years (*I.J.*, 21 Apr. 1827). He always kept within the boundaries of the law, employing many solicitors and bringing a multitude of lawsuits. But his unyielding belief that he was always in the right invoked implacable enmities. The discerning writer of his obituary could not ignore the image Matthias projected to his contemporaries, though he used a soft pedal:

In the struggle through life, particularly in provincial situations conflicting interests too often create animosities from slight causes and Mr Kerrison's prompt and decided manner, when he thought himself in the right, exposed him to obloquy and to occasional disputes with some of his neighbours nor is it to be presumed that he did not partake of the frailty of human nature by sometimes forming erroneous opinions and

acting upon them: but his principles were clearly those of a man of integrity (*I.J.*, 21 Apr. 1827).

His bitterest animosity was directed against Richard Mann. The Manns were substantial mill-owners and corn merchants. Their business, based at Syleham and Weybread Mills, had expanded with their purchase, first of Bungay or Bardolph's Mills from Gooch and Cotton in 1784, and then of the large water corn mills at Wainford a few years later. In 1803–04 Kerrison and Richard Mann were involved in a dispute over lockage charges which went as far as the Court of King's Bench (Pluck 1994, 26,47,132,148–49). Further disputes with Mann between 1811 and 1816 cost Matthias more than £1,000 in legal fees,³⁰ and the quarrels continued as Mann became increasingly concerned about the effects of the Navigation's condition – especially the depth of the water – on his wherries. Harried over this Matthias in exasperation handed over responsibility to his son Edward.³¹

Edward Kerrison was very conscious that his father's rude and aggressive attitude was bringing the family name into disrepute. In February 1818 he wrote to inform the Clerk of the Works for the Navigation that he should attend to work, at Edward's expense, in whatever part of the river Mann should direct, 'as I have undertaken the direction of these disputes that no blame may attach to my father.'³² Matthias can hardly have been pleased, either by this development or by the appointment later that year of the Norwich lawyer William Unthank as arbiter, with overall responsibility for the proper upkeep of the Navigation. Indeed Matthias made himself so obnoxious that Unthank came to dislike his task intensely. There was a further long-drawn-out dispute with Richard Mann over land at Wainford,³³ while the depth of Matthias's virulent hatred of him may be judged from a clause in his will stipulating that none of his property should be sold or leased to Mann or any of his family.³⁴

Matthias's will contains further evidence of his vindictive and persistent antagonisms. His only daughter, Mary, had married Reginald Rabett of Bramfield Hall in 1793,³⁵ perhaps with her father's approval, since the Rabetts were an old county family with whom a connection might be regarded as an advance on the social ladder. But Reginald (1771–1810) did not have a large inheritance and Matthias evidently became exasperated by requests for money from Mary and her sons Reginald and George. He marked his displeasure by leaving to each of the three the paltry sum of five pounds.³⁶

Mary Rabett, however, also had a daughter (another Mary), who won her grandfather's warm approval by her marriage to Henry Maynard in December 1810. He was the nephew and heir of Charles, Viscount Maynard, who owned substantial estates mainly in Essex and Middlesex, as well as property in London.³⁷ In Suffolk he owned Hoxne Hall with an estate of about 3,440 acres.³⁸ The Maynards ranked much higher than the Rabetts among the landed gentry and Henry was heir to the title and much wealth. Matthias was delighted at the match, confiding to his notebook 'I hope God will bless them with a Prosperous Family to be Religious, Honest & Charitable, from Generation to Generation, is my Harty wish, and both to Live Long and Happy.'³⁹

It was this marriage that led Matthias to make his first move towards the acquisition of substantial estates, which suggests that by this time he had formed the intention of raising his family to the ranks of the landed gentry, a policy which also suited him financially. By 1817 the depressed price of corn was causing mounting rent arrears and a fall in the price of land, and landlords were beginning to place estates on the market (Bujak 1997, 33–40). At the same time the value of Government securities (Consols) was beginning to fall. Matthias's response to this changed situation was to come to an arrangement with the Maynards in February 1818, by which he purchased the Hoxne estate for about £49,000 while permitting Henry and Mary to have the benefit of it during the lifetime of Henry's uncle. On the death of Lord Maynard Henry and Mary would inherit his

estates and move to Essex, leaving Matthias in sole possession of Hoxne. In March 1824 he duly recorded in his notebook:

Lord Viscount Maynard Died March 10:1824 then Henry Maynard Esqre Came to His Estate and Title, prents [*sic*] to Live at Easton Lodge of course Hoxne Comes to me, as I purchasted at that Risque, that Henry should have it during the Old Lord's Life.

He valued the Hoxne Hall estate at this time at £125,000.⁴⁰

This venture was followed by the purchase of Breckles Hall (Norfolk) with 1,566 acres of land in November 1823 at a time when Consols were still falling in value. Matthias wrote: 'Loss on 199,900 of 5% Cl stock upwards of £6,000 . . . and should have lost more if I had not taken the Money Lent some out at 5% and Purchas'd Breckles Hall Nov 9:1823 which I hope will prove worth the Money.'⁴¹

In the same year he purchased from the second Lord Cornwallis his 4,000-acre estate at Brome, Oakley and Eye, valued at £250,000. He confided to David Elisha Davy that he did not give much less than the valuation for it, but that with advowsons, manors, tithes and other sources of revenue, its annual rental amounted to nearly £7,900.⁴²

In the years which followed, Matthias consolidated his property by smaller purchases. In October 1826, only a few months before his death in April 1827, he valued his real property at £533,969. His personalty he reckoned at £207,484, and adding to this 'what is earmarked for Sir Edward and sundries gave my children' (£110,936), arrived at a total estimated fortune of £852,389. It is interesting to note that at that date he held more than £166,000 in mortgages, bonds and promissory notes, and that by now his holding in Government stock was only £14,000, though he also held about £51,000 in Bank stock.⁴³

His personalty was valued for probate at under £250,000.⁴⁴ W.J. Rubinstein, researching in the Probate Calendars into the origins of those men dying between 1808 and 1829 whom he classed as the 'lesser wealthy', not unreasonably assumed from this that Matthias was a London merchant; he could not have expected to find him in a small Suffolk town (Rubinstein 1981, 128).

Such a London mercantile background would certainly have provided an easier base from which Matthias's son Edward could rise into the upper ranks of the Suffolk landed gentry, a goal now clearly desired – and expected – by both father and son. While in material terms Matthias had supplied the essentials, in landed estates and money (even though his total fortune fell somewhat short of the million pounds with which folklore has credited him), he could certainly not be said to have provided Edward with an edifying background. The *Dictionary of National Biography* states inaccurately that Edward was 'born at his father's seat, Hoxne Hall near Bungay', but Matthias never lived at Hoxne (which in any case he did not own until 1818, by which time his son was an adult). He died at Staithe House in Bungay, which had been his place of business for so many years and where, widowed since 1812, 'his habits of life were plain, his wants few'.⁴⁵

It is true that near neighbours – the Hennikers at Thornham Hall and the Adairs at Flixton – were comparative newcomers who had attained gentry rank on the strength of success in commerce. But not only had both these families established themselves in Suffolk somewhat earlier, they also moved in metropolitan and sophisticated circles. Matthias Kerrison, in contrast, was a very provincial merchant, from a lower order of society, and well known in East Suffolk as an unpleasant and aggressive character; a vulgar man, who could put up a notice on the door of a public house in 1823: '4 Doggs in my garden this morning, the Constables have orders to kill them by or of the Magistrates – M.Kerrison – so take Notice.'⁴⁶

Matthias's background was local and apparent to everyone. To win acceptance, his son had to cast it aside and establish his own position, and it was his wartime military career which enabled him to do so. Just as the father's great fortune must be attributed to the economic conditions created by war, so the son's social success was made possible by military service in the Napoleonic Wars.

There is some doubt as to the date of birth of Edward Kerrison, Matthias's only son. It is recorded in the parish register of Bungay Holy Trinity as 31 July 1775,⁴⁷ but as 1774 on his memorial tablet in Hoxne church, while several sources give it as 1776. Such ambiguity was perhaps not discouraged by a man who, as his father's son, had much to gain from not emphasizing his origins. Matthias evidently involved him in his business in his early years, for he was constantly to be seen acting as his father's agent at the Yarmouth corn market, but the young man was reportedly so disgusted with his life that he enlisted as a private soldier (Palmer 1872, 389).

His father seems early on to have appreciated the advantages of an army career, for after six months he purchased a commission for Edward in the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons. He was gazetted cornet on 23 June 1796, becoming a lieutenant early in 1798. In this same year he transferred to the infantry, purchasing a captaincy in the 47th Regiment of Foot, which he shortly afterwards exchanged for a similar rank in the 7th Light Dragoons, which had a better prospect of active service. He remained with the 7th for the whole of his regimental service, and in 1799 saw action with them at the Helder.

In 1805 the 7th Light Dragoons were converted into a Hussar regiment. Kerrison had already, on 12 May 1803, been promoted major, and on 4 April 1805, less than nine years since the date of his cornetcy, he became second-in-command of the regiment with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. In October 1808 the regiment embarked for Spain, where it took part in the retreat from Corunna. In December Kerrison, commanding a squadron of the 7th Hussars, was engaged in a fierce battle with the French commanding officer whom he dispatched. He himself emerged with a broken arm (Wylly 1930, 44–46).

By this time English minds, and none more so than those of the landed classes, were engrossed in the war with Napoleon. Edward Kerrison was pursuing his military career at exactly the right time. He was brave, fearless and ambitious in a period when military heroes were revered. Shaken by defeat in America in 1783, the landed gentry changed their lifestyle. They lost their enthusiasm for tutors and the Grand Tour; the emphasis now was on patriotism, heroism and physical toughness. They donned uniform in unprecedented numbers not only as officers in the navy and regular army but more especially in the militia and volunteer regiments. The wartime Parliament included 300 Members who were militia officers, while nearly 700 were involved in local volunteer corps most of which they had raised themselves. Moreover, in the climate of the time these patrician soldiers were prepared to admit men of action into their ranks and to acquire lustre from the association (Colley 1992, 166–84; Thorne 1986, I, 311).

In East Suffolk the urge for military adventure is well illustrated by the example of John Rous, eldest son of Lord Rous of Dennington (created Earl of Stradbroke in 1821), who, in June 1810, aged only sixteen, joined the Coldstream Guards as an ensign and two years later sailed to Portugal to join his regiment, taking with him his younger brother William (Fletcher 1992, 15). Among other well-born young men who joined the colours were Michael Barne, son of Miles Barne of Sotterley Hall, who in 1778 joined the 7th Dragoons as a cornet, retiring as lieutenant-colonel in 1804 (Thorne 1986, III, 144–45); and Edmund Betts, eldest son of George Betts of Wortham, who joined the East Suffolk Militia as an ensign in 1803 (Doughty 1912, 269,274). The only son of the Marquess Cornwallis, Charles Viscount Brome, served as a colonel in the militia from 1802 and went with his regiment to Hull in the summer of 1804 (Thorne 1986, III, 502–03).



FIG. 140 – Col. Sir Edward Kerrison, bart, K.C.B., G.C.H., engraved by W.C. Edwards from a painting by M.A. Shee, R.A., published 19 March 1818 (*by permission of Suffolk Record Office*).

Fears of the long-threatened French invasion increased after 1798 when Napoleon's Army of England lay encamped along the French coast. The county militias were augmented by a flood of volunteer regiments formed by local grandees such as the Earl of Dysart and Lord Rous. By 1804 there were over 7,000 volunteers in Suffolk – two brigades of cavalry and four of infantry. Most towns and villages of any size had companies, officered, not surprisingly, by the landed classes.⁴⁸ The Vannecks had a troop at Huntingfield; Alex Adair had the Loyal Southelmham Yeomanry; Lord Rous commanded at Blythburgh (Cooper 1928, 154). A corps of volunteers was raised in Bungay in 1798, and in 1803 three companies of Bungay volunteers were formed into a battalion under Major Peter Foster (Mann 1930, 229).

With uniforms and military knowledge widespread among the county elite it is understandable that the career of Edward Kerrison was followed with enthusiasm. In January 1809 John Barber Scott of Bungay, a youth of seventeen, on a visit to Ipswich, recorded in his diary that Matthias Kerrison had written to his father telling him of Colonel Kerrison's safety after the battle of Corunna, except for the broken arm. 'I was charged to convey the news to his Ipswich friends which made me of much importance in their and my own eyes' (Mann 1930, 36).

Having won fame at Corunna, Kerrison did not care to be reminded of the Bungay Staithe; when he married in 1810 he did so well away from Suffolk, at the fashionable London church of St George's, Hanover Square. His bride, Mary Ellice, was the daughter of a Scot from Fife (Thorne 1986, IV, 334). In his notebook Matthias Kerrison identified Mary's father as 'the Late Alexander Ellice Esquire, Deceased, No. 11 Hereford Street' and registered his approval of his daughter-in-law as 'a very nice Young Woman whom I well like'.⁴⁹

Edward Kerrison was promoted full colonel in June 1813, and in the autumn the 7th Hussars re-embarked for the Peninsula to join the Hussar Brigade. At the end of November he assumed command of his regiment and led it during the rest of the campaign and that which was to follow in Flanders. He commanded at the passage of the Oléron, in the action at Sauveterre, and at the battles of Orthes and Toulouse. He was awarded the Army Gold Medal for Orthes, about which Wellington wrote in his despatch: 'The 7th Hussars distinguished themselves upon this occasion' (Wylly 1930, 46–48). The *Norfolk Chronicle* told its readers that the officers of the regiment had presented Colonel Kerrison with a piece of plate worth 200 guineas, in testimony of their admiration of his gallantry (Mackie 1901, I, 119).

In January 1815 Edward Kerrison was knighted by the Prince Regent at Brighton, where the 7th Hussars were then stationed (Mackie 1901, 122). John Barber Scott was introduced into their mess by a friend and noted that their colonel, Kerrison, 'showed me that kind civility and politeness which he always limited himself to with regard to anyone who knew his father or his native town' (Mann 1930, 165).

From Brighton, Colonel Sir Edward Kerrison set out for Belgium in command of three squadrons of the 7th Hussars. They were engaged at Quatre Bras on 16 June and at Waterloo on 18 June. In this last battle Kerrison was severely wounded in the leg and his horse was killed under him. He mounted another horse and continued to command until the end of the battle. After medical treatment he was able to rejoin his troops and was present at the siege of Cambrai and at the surrender of Paris. For his conduct at Waterloo he was made a Companion of the Bath and in August 1819 he was promoted major-general. In 1821 he was created a baronet (Wylly 1930, 47–48).

He had ambitions beyond his military career. In 1813 he had entered Parliament as Member for Shaftesbury, and from 1818 to 1820 he briefly represented Northampton (Thorne 1986, IV, 334). But the real opportunity for a parliamentary career came in 1823, with his father's acquisition of the Cornwallis estates, which brought with them almost a controlling interest in the borough of Eye.

Already known to Lord Liverpool as 'a very warm and kind friend to the government' who should be accommodated, Sir Edward Kerrison was returned for Eye unopposed, on a vacancy

in February 1824, despite some delays and disgruntlement on the part of the Corporation.⁵⁰ He arranged a sumptuous entertainment for his constituents at the 'White Lion' to celebrate his success; such occasions with lavish menus and wines doubtless appealed to the voters of Eye (Busby 1975, 10–11). Despite both spasmodic attempts at opposition and the 1832 Reform Bill (against which he fought bitterly), Kerrison held the seat at Eye until 1852, when he made way for his son Edward Clarence.⁵¹

In May 1827 the House of Commons granted him three weeks' leave to attend to the urgent business arising from his father's death in April and his own inheritance.⁵² From Matthias he inherited an estate amounting to nearly 10,000 acres which included 85 per cent of the land in Oakley, 83 per cent of Denham, 62 per cent of Eye, 55 per cent of Brome, 47 per cent of Hoxne and 22 per cent of Yaxley (Paine 1993, 25). Both he and his heir, Edward Clarence, subsequently purchased additional land, and in 1883 the acreage owned by the latter was estimated at 9,955 in Suffolk and 1,906 in Norfolk, a total acreage of 11,861 with a gross annual value of £18,608 (Bateman 1883, 250). This, according to Bateman's figures, was more in value than the estates of either Lord Stradbroke or Lord Henniker (Bateman 1883, 217, 426).

Though the borough of Bungay appointed Sir Edward Town Reeve in December 1827, he soon severed all connections with Bungay, selling all Matthias's property there including the Navigation and the public houses (Mann 1930, 215, 227). It was about this time that he acquired No. 13 Great Stanhope Street, Mayfair as his town house,⁵³ and in 1830 he almost completely rebuilt Hoxne Hall to the designs of Sidney Smirke (Paine 1993, 25). The Hall, described in 1844 as 'a spacious and elegant Grecian structure . . . surrounded by fine terraces and pleasure grounds, laid out in the Italian style, and ornamented by statuary of stone and marble', was renamed Oakley Park and became the Kerrison seat (White 1844, 459–60).

Edward's father had left him the essential landed estate, together with the means to buy a London house and provide his family with a conspicuous country mansion and an appropriate standard of living. But in order to enjoy his inheritance to the full he had to overcome the stigma of a humiliating background, and it was his own charismatic career and the fame of his exploits at Waterloo which enabled him to do so. It was because of his reputation as a soldier that he obtained seats in Parliament in 1813 and 1818; and although at Eye he owed the constituency primarily to his father's acquisitions, his high military rank and reputation must have helped him to gain acceptance.

A seat in Parliament was one of the recognised symbols of gentry status, but more important was the baronetcy he was awarded in 1821 – a rank which really mattered because it was hereditary (Beckett 1989, 2). Without it he could have been counted second rate when compared to his neighbours, the Henniker-Majors at Thornham, who had held a peerage – albeit an Irish one – since 1800 (White 1844, 346). The Hennikers had had their sights on the Eye constituency since the days of the first Marquess Cornwallis (Thorne 1986, II, 370–71) and in the winter of 1824–25 Frederick Henniker began an attack on the new 'owner', dismissing Edward Kerrison as a Member who exhibited insufficient talent 'to command, or even excite attention', had little claim on patronage, and was 'surely . . . not capable of speaking'. Perhaps it was fortunate that Frederick died before the 1826 election. In 1832, when Eye's representation was reduced to a single seat, there were rumours in the local and national press of another Henniker challenge, but Sir Edward Kerrison was eventually returned unopposed.⁵⁴ The rivalry faded, and in January 1837 the 4th Baron Henniker married Sir Edward's eldest daughter, Anna.⁵⁵

This was the second of the favourable marriages made by Sir Edward's four children. In July 1834 Anna's younger sister, Emily, had been married to Henry Viscount Mahon, afterwards Earl of Stanhope. In 1844 Sir Edward's son and heir, Edward Clarence, married Lady Caroline Strangways, daughter of the Earl of Ilchester.⁵⁶ The youngest child, Agnes, who was not born until 1831, married William Bateman Hanbury, the 2nd Lord Bateman of Shobdon Court in Herefordshire.⁵⁷

Sir Edward gave time and energy to the Conservative cause in Suffolk, but despite an overture to Peel in 1841 his hopes of a peerage were disappointed. His military career, however, continued to progress: promoted Colonel of the 14th Light Dragoons in 1830, he became a lieutenant-general in 1837 and a general in 1851. In 1831 he received the Grand Cross of the Guelphic (Hanover) Order (G.C.H.) and in 1840 was promoted K.C.B.⁵⁸ Waterloo had left him with permanent leg injuries, but also with a hero's reputation. To contemporaries he was always a great soldier, and his affection for his favourite chargers, commemorated by a tall monument in Oakley Park, captivated public imagination (Rushen 1974, 28–30).

Perhaps anxious not to recall attention to his origins, he did not make a great impact on local affairs, but he was not unconscious of his duties as a landlord. In the House of Commons he presented petitions calling for relief from agricultural distress in 1830, and he spoke briefly on the same subject in 1831.⁵⁹ He erected Eye National School on Castle Hill and he encouraged his tenant farmers to grow flax; but, not a progressive man, he opposed all proposals to bring the railway to Eye (Paine 1993, 40,41,46). He was probably happiest in his role as commander of the Norfolk and Suffolk Borderers Yeomanry Cavalry, a post which he held from 1830 until about three years before his death in 1853. He was regarded as a benevolent and kindly man (Wylly 1930, 48–49) and, although in his last years he may have taken on something of the character of a 'Colonel Blimp', he left an heir who was enlightened and progressive, and also from the first a well-established member of the county elite.

Edward Clarence Kerrison was educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford (Bateman 1883, 250), and married Caroline, youngest daughter of the Earl of Ilchester. After their marriage they took up residence at Brome Hall, which was reconstructed for them from the central block of the Cornwallis mansion.⁶⁰ Edward Clarence served as a magistrate and Deputy Lieutenant, and sat in Parliament for Eye in succession to his father until 1866, when he resigned to become Member for East Suffolk – a clear sign of County approval (Paine 1993, 23).

Well-known as a thoughtful and improving landlord, between 1853 and 1882 he spent over £21,000 on his Oakley Park and Brome Hall estates. Because of the fortune inherited from his grandfather he was able to find the money out of income, without increasing rents except for new tenancies. He also built or renovated the cottages on his estate, replacing clay and thatch with brick and tile. His excellent relations with both tenants and labourers enabled him to act as a conciliator in the disputes between farmers and the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in the 1870s, when he persuaded his tenants to recognize the Union and, by appealing to the labourers, quelled their enthusiasm to strike (Bujak 1997, 70, 169, 191–96).

Credited in 1875 with having planned more institutions, organizations and public works than any man in Suffolk during the previous quarter of a century, his achievements included, among many other things, the erection of a flax works at Eye; the building of the Thorndon Reformatory for youthful offenders (later called the Kerrison School); the foundation of the Eye Medical Club; and promotion of the new Town Hall at Eye of which he paid nearly half the cost. With Lord Henniker he helped promote the Mellis and Eye Railway, and he was Chairman of the Hartismere Board of Guardians (Paine 1993, 25). In 1867, in typical landed gentry fashion, he also established a pack of harriers, which were kennelled at Oakley Park (Harvey 1986, 5–8).

Edward Clarence died in 1886, leaving no direct heir. The estates passed to his youngest sister, Agnes, whose husband, Lord Bateman, was already involved with his own property. Following Lady Bateman's death in 1918 the Kerrison estates were broken up. Oakley Park Hall was demolished in 1930,⁶¹ and Brome Hall in 1958 (Paine 1993, 25). Despite the spectacular achievements of the Kerrisons through wartime trade and military service, they had ultimately been unsuccessful in founding a lasting dynasty.

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NOTES

- 1 'Col. Harvey's Norfolk Pedigree Collections', 1816, N.R.O., Rye MS 96, 360–62; information from the Kerrison family.
- 2 Index of apprenticeship records, P.R.O., 53/57 1757; J.B.Scott diaries (transcript by Ethel Mann), 5 Jan. 1830, S.R.O.L., ES 89/1/11.
- 3 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/102; Bungay Museum, notice *re* sale of Navigation, 1768.
- 4 Kerrison letter; copy to William Unthank, 23 Oct. 1820, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/941.
- 5 S.R.O.I., HA85/662/384, 11 Oct. 1825; this document is a notebook in which Matthias summed up his financial position each year between 1820 and 1826, and also recorded a very few family events. It is the most coherent of his papers that we have.
- 6 Bungay Holy Trinity Overseers' account and rate book, 1769, S.R.O.L., PR115/G1/1.
- 7 Bungay Holy Trinity parish register, S.R.O.L., FC148/D1/4.
- 8 Davy MS, f.173; in October 1824 Davy dined with Matthias Kerrison and 'finding him in a very communicative mode' elicited much information.
- 9 Bungay Holy Trinity parish register, S.R.O.L., FC148/D1/3.
- 10 Letter from Roger to Matthias, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/847.
- 11 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/963,559,714.
- 12 Notebook, Oct. 1825, S.R.O.I., HA85/662/384.
- 13 Calculations of rent on sundry properties in north Suffolk – gross rents over £3,000, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/863 n.d. For mortgages see notebook, 11 Oct. 1820, HA85/662/384, mortgages and notes £107,000; Davy MS, f.173.
- 14 Bungay Holy Trinity Overseers' account book, 1775, S.R.O.L., PR115/G1/1.
- 15 Bungay St Mary Overseers' account book 1781, S.R.O.L., PR116/ G1/4. This is listed as 'Brewhouse King's Arms' in HA85/3116/863 n.d.
- 16 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/102,907. The auction catalogue, 25 May 1784 (HA85/3116/1141), lists these properties.
- 17 Pluck 1994, 119–20,128–33,147. See also Ethel Mann Collection, 'State of the Business relating to Bungay Mills', 20 Jun. 1781, S.R.O.L., Acc. 187/1. Pluck thinks there were probably two water mills at Bungay Staithe.
- 18 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/907; *Gent. Mag.*, 54, Feb. 1784.
- 19 Pluck 1994, 120–21; auction catalogue, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/1141.
- 20 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/22.
- 21 Davy MS, f.173.
- 22 Auction catalogue, 25 May 1784, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/1141, p.3.
- 23 *Ibid*, p.2.
- 24 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/103,811, 816.
- 25 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/489.
- 26 In Holden's *Annual London and County Directory*, 1811, Kerrison is entered under Bungay as maltster, brewer and merchant.
- 27 In a note dated 5 Apr. 1817, Matthias refers to purchases over more than twenty years, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/638.
- 28 Davy MS, f.173.
- 29 Ethel Mann Collection: Churchwardens, S.R.O.L., Acc. 187/1.
- 30 Account of Kingsbury and Margitson, 'yourself against Mann 1811–16', for £1,106, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/1041.
- 31 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/557.

- 32 Edward Kerrison to Bryant, 23 Feb. 1818, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/57.
- 33 Unthank correspondence, S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/41,61,974,1022.
- 34 Will of Matthias Kerrison, P.R.O., PROB 11/1724/244.
- 35 Bungay Holy Trinity parish register, S.R.O.L., FC148/D1/4.
- 36 Will, P.R.O., PROB 11/1724/244.
- 37 Notebook, S.R.O.I., HA85/662/384; HA85/3116/644.
- 38 S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/947.
- 39 Notebook, S.R.O.I., HA85/662/384.
- 40 There is no copy of the agreement in Matthias's papers but the date emerges in S.R.O.I., HA85/3116/588. Matthias's payment and valuation and his comments are in the notebook, HA85/662/384.
- 41 Valuation of the Breckles Hall estate, S.R.O.I., HA85/2593/2589; Matthias's comments and date of purchase are in the notebook, 11 Oct. 1822.
- 42 Davy MS, f.173.
- 43 Notebook, 11 Oct. 1826, S.R.O.I., HA85/662/384.
- 44 Probate Act Book, P.R.O., PROB 8/200, PA 1827.
- 45 Obituary, *I.J.*, 21 Apr. 1827.
- 46 S.R.O.I., Biography K.
- 47 S.R.O.L., FC148/D1/3.
- 48 E.R. Cooper, 1935, 'Volunteers in Suffolk' reprinted from *East Anglian Times and Suffolk Regimental Gazette*, 6-8.
- 49 Notebook, S.R.O.I., HA85/662/384.
- 50 Hist. Parl., draft MS, 2.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Hist. Parl., draft MS, 3.
- 53 Hist. Parl., draft MS, 4.
- 54 Hist. Parl., draft MS, 2, 7.
- 55 Davy MS, f.175.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 *Ibid.*, f.174; Copinger 1905-11, 1, 377.
- 58 Hist. Parl., draft MS, 1, 7.
- 59 Hist. Parl., draft MS, 4, 7.
- 60 Eric King of Bungay, pers. comm.
- 61 Only the stables of Oakley Park remain but Eric King has a good collection of old photographs.

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Abbreviations

- B.L. British Library.
- Davy MS. Davy, D.E., Suffolk Collections: Pedigrees, B.L. Add. MS 19,138.
- D.N.B. *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- Gent. Mag.* *The Gentleman's Magazine*.
- Hist. Parl. History of Parliament Trust, draft MS, section 1820–1832, Sir Edward Kerrison.
- I.J.* *Ipswich Journal*.
- N.R.O. Norfolk Record Office.
- P.R.O. Public Record Office.
- S.R.O.I. Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.
- S.R.O.L. Suffolk Record Office, Lowestoft Branch.