

Thomas Lucas of Broad Oak, by Rodney Lucas

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I imagine that most family historians find that there is one person in their ancestry who captures their imagination more than most. In my case it is my great grandfather, Thomas Lucas. Thomas was baptised at Tugford on 17th January 1821, some 22 months before his parents, Sarah Bray and Samuel Lucas, were married in the neighbouring parish of Abdon. Every document I have seen bearing his name gives him simply as Thomas Lucas, though in the family he was always referred to as Thomas Bray Lucas, possibly a reflection on the surname used for him before his parents' marriage.

Immediately a mystery arises. Family lore has always said that the Brays were descended from the Reverend Thomas Bray of Chirbury (1656-1730) a prominent churchman who was at one time a missionary to the American colonies. He was influential in the founding of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG). I can only think that somewhere along the line someone has put two and two together and decided they make five: Sarah Bray was certainly descended from two Shropshire clergymen: John Tasker, rector of Abdon from before 1614 to February 1641/2 and John Collier, also rector of Abdon, from 1745 to 1780. My researches show that our Bray lineage comes from Castlemorton in Worcestershire, reaching Abdon by way of Stoke St. Milborough. I can find no connection with Chirbury. Does any reader know of such a link?

Thomas married Lucy Griffiths from Ditton Priors, a woman ten years his junior, and moved to live close to the Staffordshire border. For a while they lived in the Broad Lanes and in 1867 bought the house where he lived out his life, at Broad Oak. Thomas plied his trade of wheelwright there until his death at the age of 82 in 1903. The 1881 census tells me that his uncle, James Bray, worked with him. After Thomas's death the Broad Oak wheelwrights were tenants, remaining in business until the end of the 1950s when the last of them, Albert Harley, retired. Older readers may remember that after climbing the long Broad Oak Bank towards Six Ashes there were always wheels, carts and gates along the roadside by the first house over the crest of the hill, parked there awaiting repair

I remember it well, especially when in about 1958 my father and I helped Albert tyre a cart wheel. For many years the house at Broad Oak was inhabited by Thomas and Lucy's two spinster daughters, Sarah Anne (Sallie) and Emily (Emmie). When the second of them died in 1956 my father inherited the property. Sadly the wheelwright's shop had become very dilapidated and was demolished in the 1960s, after my father sold the house.

This, however, is jumping ahead with the story. One wonderful survival from Thomas's days at Broad Oak is his day book, with details of transactions from 1868 until the end of his life. The information it contains make fascinating reading because not only does he note for whom the work was done and their address, it also details everything done, made or supplied and the price charged to the customer. He worked for many, many people, mainly within a five mile radius of Broad Oak. An entry on the first page shows him charging 8s.9d. for 2½ days of his own time, a lordly 3s.6d. for a day's work. From the beginning he was employing other men and charging the same rate for skilled work and 2s. for a day's unskilled labour. 30 years later the rate for a skilled man had risen to a whopping 4 shillings!

The range of work was broad. There were gates and fences, wheels re-tyred and repaired, carts mended, all sorts of agricultural equipment put right, window frames for a widow, benches made for the school at Quatt, maintenance work on the Dudmaston estate and just about anything which was made from wood and iron. Some time in the 1880s a new element appeared: he started charging for "man and engine for one day". I wonder what sort of engine. Was it simply a steam traction engine or a more complicated ploughing engine? I'll never know. It was not until the day book came to me that I was aware of such a possession in the family.

Thomas was also a pillar of the local community. He was a leading figure in the Broad Oak Chapel, built in about 1865. It has been closed now for many years, though the building survives. It is clear that he was highly regarded in the Congregational community for in 1890 an appeal was launched to purchase a gift as a mark of appreciation for all he had done. The response must have been generous because the gift consisted of a throne-like armchair in ebonised wood, a slate mantel clock in the form of a Grecian temple (both these items bearing an engraved silver plate

marking the occasion) together with a handsome illuminated address. These, I am happy to say, all survive in the possession of my nephew, his great-great grandson, Ian Lucas, together with a copy of the original appeal.

The mental image of this upstanding man is heightened by a couple of studio portraits of him, the better of them showing him very dignified with the mutton-chop whiskers which he sported

Thomas and Lucy lie at rest in the peaceful churchyard at Tuck Hill, just up the lane from his beloved chapel, beside one of their sons who died in his twenties and with other descendants nearby, including my own parents. Of all of my ancestors, Thomas is the one I would most like to have known.

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