

THE BRAEMS OF BRIDGE PLACE

By P.G. Elgar

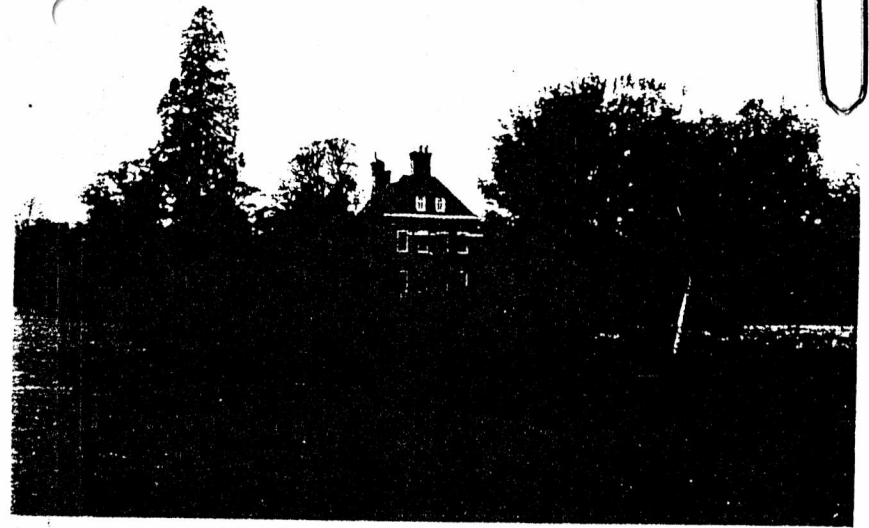
The Braems family were originally of Flemish stock and settled in Sandwich at the beginning of the Stuart period. Jacob, father of Arnold, set up in business in Dover as a merchant in the reign of Charles I. Early seventeenth-century maps of the harbour area clearly show large plots of land on both sides of the harbour wall as belonging to Jacob Braems. The Hoverport car park now occupies part of this area.

Arnold was born in Dover and baptized in St Mary's Church on 3rd October 1602. He continued in his father's footsteps, using all his energies to help develop Dover as a port, gradually acquiring further lands all along the sea front and becoming the principal merchant in the town. He erected large buildings and warehouses in the expectation of Dover becoming a free port, accumulating a large fortune by monopolizing the landing and storage of goods and farming the harbour tolls and customs. Arnold became the first chairman of Dover Harbour Board and was elected Member of Parliament in April 1660, but remained at the House of Commons only a short time, preferring the commercial life. He was knighted by Charles II. Most of the Braems's 'Old Buildings', as they were known, were destroyed in a disastrous fire in 1808.

Arnold was well connected with most leading families in East Kent. Such prominent names as Dering, Harfleete, Oxenden, Digges, Bargrave and Palmer are frequently found alongside references to the Braems.

Arnold was first married to Joan, second daughter of Walter Harfleete of Bekesbourne. She died on 27th July 1633 and was buried in St Mary's Church, Dover. His second marriage was to Elizabeth, second daughter of Sir Dudley Digges of Chilham Castle. She died on 27th May 1643 and was buried in St Peter's Church, Bridge. A memorial tablet to both wives was erected here.

Much of Arnold's fortune was spent on the construction of an enormous and spectacular mansion at Bridge near Canterbury. Bridge Place was originally the site of the Manor of Bridge (or Blackemansbury) and in the possession of the Abbey of St Augustine. It extended over the greater part of the village and continued so until suppressed by Henry VIII when the lands were confiscated. In the thirty-sixth year of his reign the properties were granted to Henry Lawrence to hold by knight's services. A court was regularly held by the new owner. Passing through several hands the land came into the possession of Sir Edward Partherich who conveyed it to Arnold about 1636. About two years later he had the court lodge pulled down and began to erect his magnificent courtyard mansion in a correct classical style, with Tuscan plasters. After Chilham Castle it was the largest house in East Kent in the seventeenth century. Much of the house was built with



Bridge Place today, from the Bishopsbourne Road.

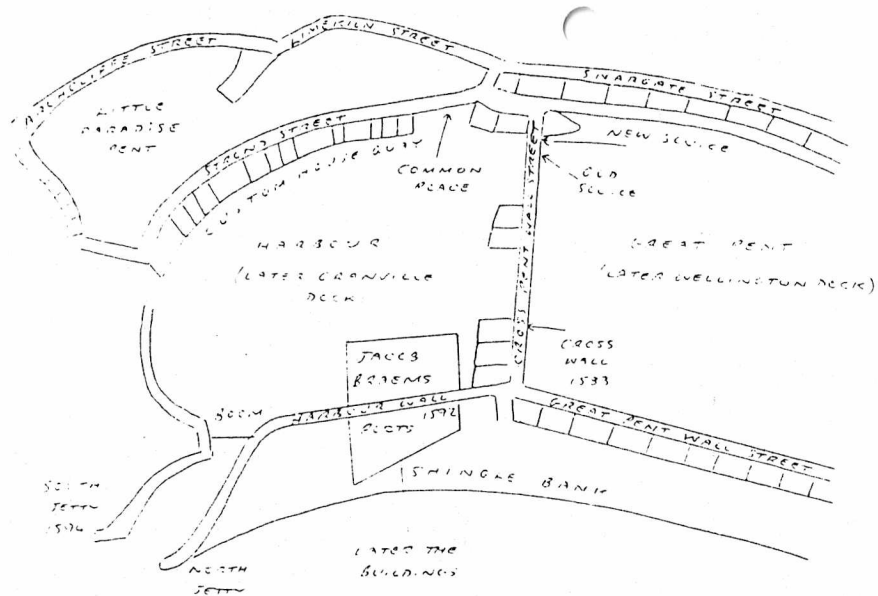
Main Sources Consulted

Chalklin, C.W., 'Kent: a Social and Economic History', Longman's, 1965. Everitt, Alan, 'The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-1660', Leicester University Press, 1966. Hasenson, Alec, 'The History of Dover Harbour', Aurem Special Editions, 1980. Hueffer, F.M., 'The Cinque Ports', Blackwood, 1900. Igglesden, C., 'Saunters through Kent with Pen and Pencil', Vol. IX, Kentish Express, 1901. Lyons, Rev. J., 'History of the Town and Port of Dover', Ledge & Shaw, 1813. 'The Journal of William Schellinks' Travels in England, 1661-1663', Royal Historical Society and Camden, 1993. Tithe Map of Bridge, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, 1838. Parish Registers of St Peter's Church, Bridge, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, 1569-1767.

Acknowledgements

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To the Royal Historical Society, University College, London, for kind permission to reprint two pictures of Bridge-Place from 'The Journal of William Schellinks' Travels in England, 1661-1663', and to quote from the text.

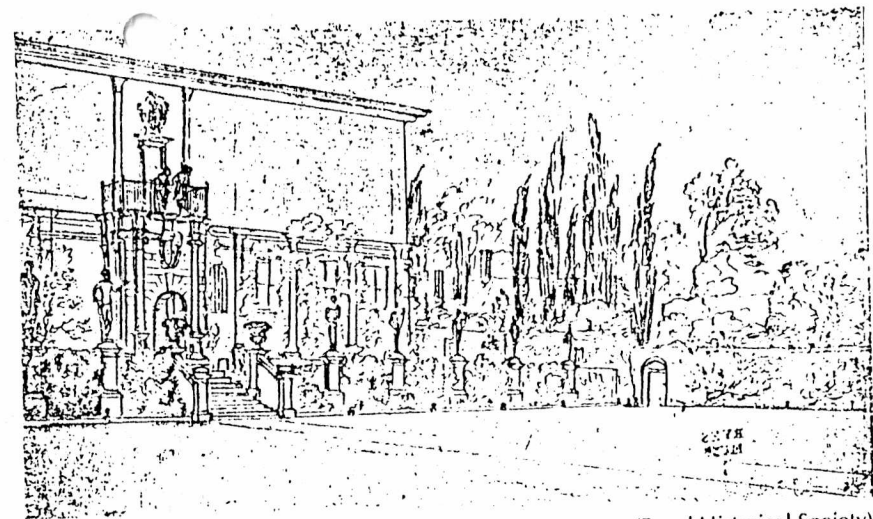


Sketch map of Dover Harbour showing the plots held by Jacob Braems, based on seventeenth century maps.

hand-made Dutch bricks landed at Sandwich. The project exhausted Arnold's fortune to such an extent that he became financially crippled.

The house possessed a large deer park, an aviary and extensive gardens. For an early description we are indebted to a Dutch artist who became a guest at Bridge Place. 'The Journal of William Schellinks' Travels in England, 1661-1663', contains many references to the property and its many facilities. He seems to have been given a tour of East Kent on his way to Bridge Place. He mentions travelling from Dover in the coach Braems had sent via Sandown Castle, Whitfield, Waldershare, Womenswold, Barham, Kingston and Bishopsbourne before arriving at the mansion at 8 o'clock in the evening, 8th July 1661, 'to a friendly welcome and were magnificently entertained and drank quite a few healths with sack'. On the following day he played on the bowling green and on the 12th visited Canterbury Cathedral. He described Bridge Place as containing, in addition to Braems's own fine residence, a large number of rooms, chambers, halls and other good apartments. The grounds were 'very beautiful, well kept pleasure grounds, with fruit trees, well watered by a fast flowing fresh sparkling stream of wonderfully clear sweet water, (the Nailbourne). This splits up into several branches and rivulets; also some fish ponds in which ... trout is bred, which is very similar to a large carp and tastes very delicious.'

'There are also some vineyards, producing yearly two or three hogsheads of wine. He (Arnold) also has his own brewery, bakery, wine-press, hop garden, barns, stables, oxen, cows, sheep, pigs, geese, ducks ... everything that one can



Bridge Place, drawn by Schellinks, about 1661.

(Royal Historical Society)

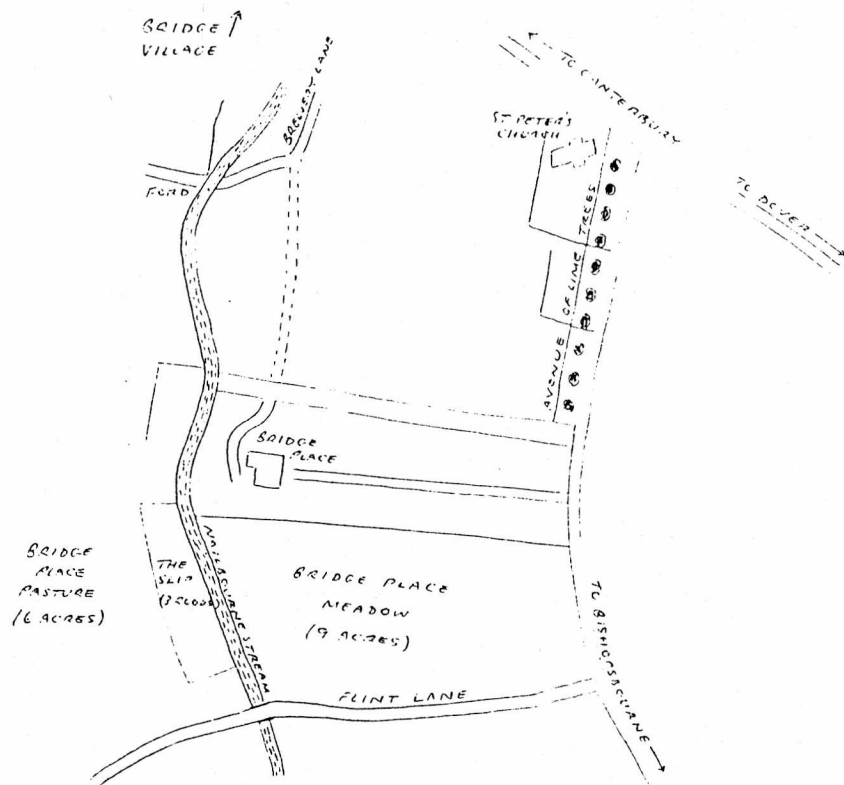
desire in such an establishment. The church stands not far from his house and he has the right to nominate a minister of his choice. He has planted a fine avenue of lime trees from his house to the church under which one is protected from rain and sun'.

Schellinks also mentions an annual muster of seven or eight companies of the Militia on 6th October 1661, each 200 men strong, on the hill above Bishopsbourne. The exercises and skirmishes appear to have gone on all day. Every parish and household was obliged to supply and arm as many men as possible.

Another prominent Dutch artist who visited Bridge Place under the patronage of Arnold was Cornelius Janssen, a fashionable painter in Blackfriars, London, for twenty years. He made portraits of many of the wealthy families of East Kent.

Arnold probably travelled abroad; his younger son Walter certainly did. He accompanied his friend Tom Denne, son of the Recorder of Canterbury, with whom he had fallen out over a probate matter. They set sail from Dover on 28th July 1646 in the *Swallow* for a two-month expedition to the Low Countries. They visited forts held by British troops and various towns including Rotterdam, The Hague, Brussels, Amsterdam and Leyden. They were impressed by the contents of the museum at Leyden, especially the mummies and the bones of strange animals, also the various houses of the Prince of Orange and Rubens pictures at Antwerp. They sailed from Ostend on 8th October but were kept at sea by contrary winds until the 20th, when they landed at Yarmouth instead of Dover.

Arnold and Walter were both involved in the Civil War, holding the ranks of Major and Colonel respectively in the East Kent Force. They supported the Royalist cause and helped to pave the way for the Restoration of 1660. In the Kentish Rebellion of 1648 the petitioners were led by Arnold. He also attempted to corrupt the Commonwealth Navy in 1659.



Sketch map of Bridge House and Grounds, based on Tithe Map, 1838.

Walter laid an unsuccessful plot in 1647-48 in an attempt to seduce the Governor of Dover Castle and take the stronghold from the Roundheads for Prince Charles. When the plot failed Walter was obliged to go into hiding for a while.

It is almost certain that he and other Kent men were involved with other conspirators in the assassination of Doctor Dorislaus in May 1649. A wild conspiracy known as Gerard's Plot involved several young Kent Cavaliers, including Walter. It set off a train of events which were to lead to the most serious insurrection of the Interregnum, the Rising of 1655, usually known by the name of its Wiltshire leader - Penruddock.

The town of Dover itself seems to have been moderately loyal to the Parliamentarians. Returns of 'suspected persons', presumably Royalists, throughout the country, occupy seven volumes in the British Library Additional Manuscripts series. Arnold was one suspect whose movements were carefully watched, the information being notified to central officials. The following extracts cover a three-month period:



The Garden, Bridge Place, drawn by Schellinks, about 1661.

(Royal Historical Society)

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| Dover | Arnold Braems, merchant, 6th February 1656, at the house of Mr Richard Harrison, a tailor over against the Dolphin Tavern, in the Parish of Barking. |
| 12th Feb | Braines gave notice of removal to Dover. |
| 12th March | Againe at Harrison's. |
| 19th May | Arnold Braems of Bridge went to the house of Harrison a tailor. |

The Dover returns were made by one Reynolds 'Registrar', who seems to have been a careless person, constantly upbraided for sending returns wrongly addressed or writing in an illegible hand. Note his mistakes above.

Arnold seems to have supported worthy causes. It is recorded that in 1671 he and his Lady contributed £1.10s. to a collection made by the Privy Council towards the raising of £3,000 for the 'redemption of a great number of our Christian countrymen from that miserable Turkish infidel whose inhuman slavery and bondage they now groan under'. Apart from a 3d and 4d all others donated 2d each.

Arnold died on 13th November 1681 and was interred on the 21st in the East Chancel of St Peter's Church. He was buried in linen, an extravagance for which a heavy fine was imposed. (A law compelled all to be buried in wool for the benefit of the woollen industry.)

No record of any further marriage could be found, although some references to Arnold and 'his Lady' indicate that he did at least have a companion.

Walter lived on until September 1692. His widow Margaret was eventually obliged to sell the estate in about 1704 to Mr John Taylor. He pulled down a large portion but the remaining wing still provided a large enough house for a gentleman. It was later purchased by the Marquis of Conyngham and became part of the Bifrons estate. In recent years it has become a well known country club.