

## CHAPTER I

### THE DORSET PITT FAMILY

DEVON has always taken herself and her worthies more seriously than her more modest, but no less lovable sister Dorset has presumed to do. Devon men are not wont to forget men of their county who have distinguished themselves in history. But it is to be feared that the proportion of the inhabitants of Dorset is small who remember, if they have ever heard, that the Great Commoner and his son, the two most illustrious English statesmen of the eighteenth century, sprang directly from one of the oldest Dorset families. If Thomas Pitt had been a Devon and not a Dorset man, the chances are that his claims to distinction would long ago have received fuller recognition from his fellow county men than they are ever likely now to do. And yet not only was he the most masterly and successful of all the Englishmen who in his day and generation were laying the foundations of the supremacy of his country in India, but he was also the forefather of our two greatest prime ministers. Throughout a long and adventurous life he laboriously and persistently amassed wealth, which he invested in such a manner as to secure for his descendants ready access to Parliament and political influence. But for its aid, it is unlikely that they would ever have emerged from provincial obscurity in the conditions of English political life which then prevailed. A study of what is known

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of him reveals points of resemblance between their very remarkable characters and careers and his, and enables us to trace the steps that he took which paved the way for their phenomenal successes. Incidentally it clears up some obscure points in the early history of British India, and discloses the invaluable services which he rendered at a very critical time to his fellow countrymen engaged in the Eastern trade. It also presents curious illustrations of some of our old institutions, and the social life, manners and habits of thought of the times in which he lived, which were very eventful ones. For he was born under the Commonwealth when the first Dutch war was at its height, and he died in the last year of the reign of George the First.

Few families that have produced great men have been more firmly rooted in one county than the Pitts were in Dorset towards the close of the seventeenth century. As far back as the reign of Henry the Eighth, Nicholas Pitt of Blandford and Wimborne had a firm footing there. His grandson, John Pitt, became Clerk of the Exchequer to Queen Elizabeth. He had married a Blandford lady; and their eldest son became Sir William Pitt of Iwerne, Dorset, and Strathfieldsay, Hants; and the bulk of the family property went to him and his descendants. One of the younger sons of this county magnate was Thomas Pitt of Blandford, a physician of repute and the grandfather of Governor Pitt. One son of this country doctor succeeded to his father's practice; another became Mayor of Dorchester; and the third Rector of Blandford St Mary, where Thomas Pitt, the subject of the present work was born on the 5th of July 1653. Blandford was therefore the native town not only of Governor Pitt but of his father, uncle and grandfather. And his ancestors had

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possessed landed property there for at least six generations.

Blandford takes its name from its being situate upon what was in olden days one of the chief fords of the River Stour. On one side of the river lies the market town of Blandford, still called Blandford Forum; and on the other, Blandford St Mary, a pleasant country village. The two are joined by a picturesque many arched bridge, which has long ago taken the place of the ancient ford. Governor Pitt seems to have cherished a great affection for the place, which will not surprise those who know it and the surrounding country. One of the first things he did after rising in the world was to buy an estate at Blandford St Mary. It appears from his correspondence that whilst Governor of Fort St George he contemplated buying another estate in the same parish, but being chary of parting with his hard earned gains, and informed by his eldest son, Robert, who was then at home, that £12,000 was asked for it, which was £4000 beyond its value, he abandoned the project. "I would willingly," he says in a letter dated the 5th of February 1709, "have bought Mr Chettel's estate, as being in the parish where I was born, and having an estate there, but at this time of day to buy land too dear is not answerable to common reason and nothing but a good bargain can induce a man to meddle with it<sup>1</sup>." After his final return from India however he bought this estate as appears from a deed in the Dorchester museum, in which it is referred to as having been recently purchased by him.

The Pitt family in those days was a very large one. Governor Pitt's cousins and his uncles and his aunts crop up throughout his correspondence in bewildering multiplicity, the more so because

<sup>1</sup> Dropmore i. 41.

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so many of them bore the same Christian names. George seems to have been the favourite name in the elder branch. In the younger there are innumerable Roberts, Johns, Williams and Thomases. From the family tree it would appear that the greater number of these cadets entered one or other of the learned professions, the Church, medicine or the law. One became a Master in Chancery. One, the grandfather of Governor Pitt, as already mentioned was a physician at Blandford; and his practice descended to his son and grandson, the latter of whom was the father of two Dorset clergymen, one of whom was Christopher Pitt, the poet, the literary man of the family, whose claim to fame now mainly rests on the fact that he is to be found in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. Johnson tells us that he "was born in 1699 in Blandford, the son of a physician much esteemed"; that "he was in 1714 received as a scholar into Winchester College, where he was distinguished by exercises of uncommon elegance, and at his removal to New College in 1719, presented to the electors, as the product of his private and voluntary studies, a complete version of Lucan's poem, which he did not then know to have been translated by Rowe." "This," says Johnson, "is an instance of early diligence which well deserves to be recorded." "When he had resided at his college three years, he was presented to the rectory of Pimperne, in Dorsetshire by his relation, Mr Pitt of Strathfieldsea in Hampshire" (the head of the Pitt family), "and resigning his fellowship continued at Oxford two years longer, till he became Master of Arts; he then retired to his living, a place very pleasing by its situation, and therefore likely to excite the imagination of a poet, where he passed the rest of his life, revered for his virtue and beloved

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for the softness of his temper and the easiness of his manners. His general benevolence procured general respect ; and he passed a life placid and honourable neither too great for the kindness of the low nor too low for the notice of the great." " He left the world in 1748, and lies buried under a stone at Blandford on which is this inscription :

In Memory of  
 Christopher Pitt. M.A.  
 very eminent  
 for his talents in poetry :  
 and yet more  
 for the universal candour of  
 his mind, and the primitive  
 simplicity of his manners.  
 He lived innocent,  
 and died beloved,  
 April 13, 1748,  
 Aged 48."

His chief poetical work seems to have been a translation of the *Æneid*, which Johnson contrasts with that of Dryden, pronouncing them " the two best translations that perhaps were ever produced by one nation of the same author." " If the two versions are compared," he says, " perhaps the result would be that Dryden leads the reader forward by his general vigour and sprightliness, and Pitt often stops him to contemplate the excellence of a single couplet, that Dryden's faults are forgotten in the hurry of delight, and that Pitt's beauties are neglected in the langour of a cold and listless perusal ; that Pitt pleases the criticks, and Dryden the people ; that Pitt is quoted and Dryden read."

It would be difficult to find lives and characters more widely dissimilar than those of this blameless and scholarly poet, and his cousin the Indian adventurer. Of the latter it certainly cannot be said that his life was a placid one ; or that he was

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“beloved for the softness of his temper.” Such “primitive simplicity of manners” as he retained to the day of his death seems to have revealed itself for the most part in the rude bluntness of his painfully plainspoken abuse of the things and persons he disapproved of. These uncontrollable explosions of wrath and disgust, which occur only too persistently throughout his correspondence, and some of which would have done no discredit to the most untutored peasant of his native county, might possibly have been couched in less startling phraseology if, like his cousin the poet, he had been educated at Winchester and Oxford. But there is no reason to suppose that he would ever have been content to devote his energies to mastering the mysteries of dead languages and turning Latin poetry into English verse. That he was fully alive to the advantages of a sound business and political education, and even of a liberal education for those who had any taste for it, is however abundantly clear from the directions which he gave for the guidance of his eldest son and the bringing up of his other children; and from his willingness in after life to pay for the education of the families of his poorer relatives.

It will be gathered from what has already been stated that the immediate ancestors of Governor Pitt were a sound stock of well educated country gentry, most of whom fortunately for themselves had found it necessary to earn their own living, in one or other of the learned professions, for the most part in their own county, unspoilt by idleness or urban luxury. But the members of the family were increasing beyond the opportunities of finding employment for them at home; and when Thomas Pitt, the second son of the Rector of Blandford St Mary was born, the time was coming, when some of them must necessarily seek their fortunes

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elsewhere. The Rector had nine children, five of whom survived him; and though passing rich on his income of £100 a year from his country living, he cannot have been able to spend much on the education of any of his children. There is no reason to doubt that his son Thomas during the short time allowed him for the purpose made the best use of such facilities as were available to him of picking up some rudimentary education of a kind likely to be serviceable to him in after life. He certainly learnt how to express himself forcibly and unmistakably in his mother tongue. Spelling and grammar in those days were very much matters of individual taste with the majority of men and women even of good position. In neither does he fall below the average of the age. If taken to task for his shortcomings in these respects, he might well have retorted as Will Honeycombe did to the Templar<sup>1</sup>, that he was above such pedantries, and that he wrote like a gentleman and not like a scholar. He also learnt to pride himself on being a Pitt; and to the end of his life he seems to have had a becoming respect for the head of his clan. His family were all armigeri, a distinction more highly valued in those days by the poorer gentry than it is now that armorial bearings are not only taxed, but assumed without let or hindrance by anyone who cares to use them. That Thomas valued his privileges in this respect may be gathered from the fact that one of his earliest letters, written whilst he was still struggling with adversity in India, is stamped with a roughly executed seal, bearing the shield of the Dorset Pitts.

We may fairly assume that at a very early age he recognised the fact that he had to make his own

<sup>1</sup> *Spectator* 105.

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way in the world ; and that there was very little chance of his entering any of the professions which had provided a livelihood for his ancestors. He could not hope to succeed to his uncle's practice as a local physician. That would naturally fall in due course to his cousin. It is unlikely that he had any desire to enter the Church. He was better fitted for the law ; but his father could not afford to bring him up to that. In the circumstances it is not surprising that he should have chosen as his calling the mercantile marine, then as afterwards a common resource for disposing at an early age of the rough colts of impecunious households. This may have been suggested to him or to his parents by the propinquity of Blandford to Poole, a very flourishing port in those days, to which many a young Dorset lad betook himself, when his home became too hot to hold him. He was in many ways eminently qualified for the sea service. He had throughout his life indomitable courage, great industry and common sense, readiness of resource, a strong constitution and a very determined will of his own. We shall probably not be far wrong in assuming that he spared no pains to make himself a good seaman ; but nothing is known of the details of his career until he went out, probably as a mate or in some minor capacity, on board the *Lancaster*, an East Indiaman, under the command of Captain Goodlad in 1673.

His family at Blandford probably considered him exceptionally fortunate in obtaining so early in life an appointment on board so fine a ship in the service of the powerful East India Company, the more so as they must have been just then in straitened circumstances. For his father had died in 1672. It may therefore have been with some consternation that they learnt, when his ship



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came back to England, that he had abruptly left her and the service of the Company, whilst she lay at Balasore in the Bay of Bengal. Knowing his ungovernable temper, they may not unreasonably have feared that this catastrophe was the result of a falling out with his captain or some other superior officer. That his employers were disposed to treat his desertion as a grave breach of discipline, and to make a severe example of him is clear from several letters which the Court of the Company sent to their chief officer at Hugli.

In the first of these which is dated the 24th of December 1675, they say, "Wee understand that Captain Goodlad of the Lancaster left there" (at Balasore) "one Pytts, and that he is entertained by our Chief there, as also the Carpenter of the said ship did Leave the Commander, and Wee are informed was prevayled with to do so by our Chief: But whether he had a hand in it or not, Wee do require you to take Care to send them to the Fort" (Fort St George) "to remaine there till next years shipping and then to be sent to England<sup>1</sup>."

Instructions from London took a long time to reach India in those days, and when received were often ignored. It was not until the 18th of December in the following year that the Council at Balasore seem to have taken any action in the matter, as appears from the following entry in the diary of Streyntsham Master, the Agent of the Company, who visited Balasore on his tour of inspection of the factories in the Bay. "The Councell," he says, "being acquainted that there was severall Englishmen not in the Company's service in this Towne, some that came trading voyages from the Coast, and others that reside

<sup>1</sup> Hedges 3. 2.

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in the Bay, they were all sent for and acquainted with the Honble Company's Orders, that all Englishmen not in the Company's service are to reside at Fort St George or Madraspatam. All the English being withdrawn, the Councill sent for Thomas Pitts and read the Honble Company's Order to send him to England by the first Ships, and required his observance thereto, who promised to comply accordingly."

Five days after this entry at Balasore in Streynsham Master's diary, the Court of the Company in London, having become impatient at the non-arrival of Thomas Pitt in England, wrote again to Hugli, to the effect that if he and the carpenter of the *Lancaster* did not come by the next ships, they would esteem it a contumacy on the part of their officials.

Again a year afterwards, no Thomas Pitt having made his appearance, they sent a further letter to the Bay, in which the following passage occurs. "And for Thomas Pitt we confirme our former order to have him sent home, for goeing out with an intent to stay in the Countrey, or running away from their ship are courses we cannot approve, and will rather at any time send a Seaman from home to you than by our Indulgence encourage such practices<sup>1</sup>."

It is highly improbable that after Streynsham Master had left Balasore, Thomas Pitt kept the promise exacted from him or surrendered himself to the authorities at Fort St George. He certainly was not sent back to England in accordance with the Company's instructions. What he was doing, and why the Chief at Balasore was unwilling to dispense with his services, will appear in due course.

<sup>1</sup> Hedges 3. 3.