

## Sir Henry Thomas De La Beche in Lyme Regis by Keith Shaw

Until recently, little was known about the early life of Henry De La Beche (right), the famous geologist who founded the Geological Survey. It was known that he lived for some of his early years in Lyme Regis but not much more. Recently, a journal, handwritten by De La Beche came to light and was obtained by Richard Morris whose wife is Henry's great-great-great-granddaughter. Morris collaborated with Tom Sharpe, then of the National Museum of Wales and now a Trustee of Lyme Museum to publish the journal but, unfortunately, the journal finishes just before Henry came to Lyme with his mother, Elizabeth and her third husband William Huddle Aveline.

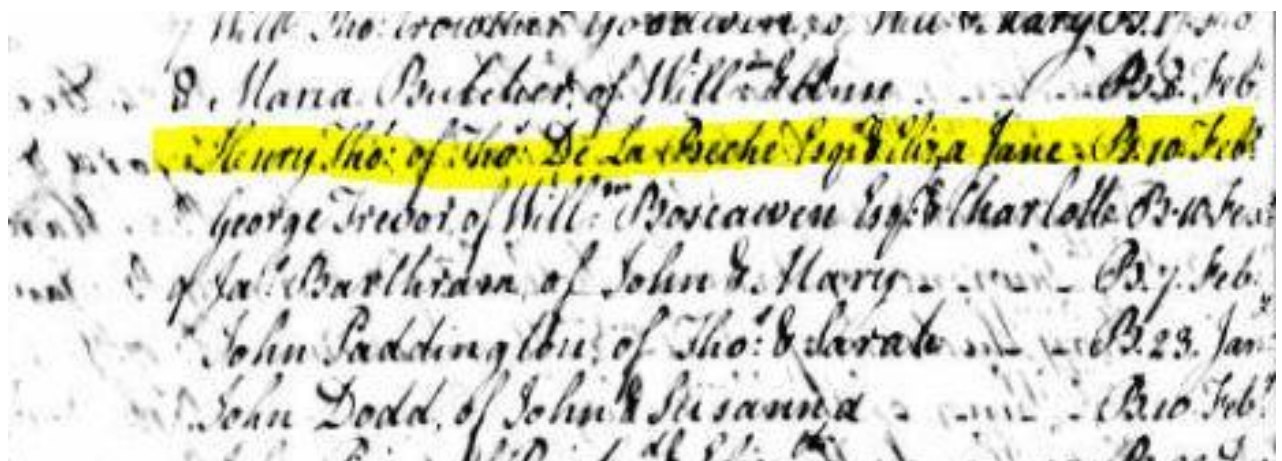


### Origins and early life

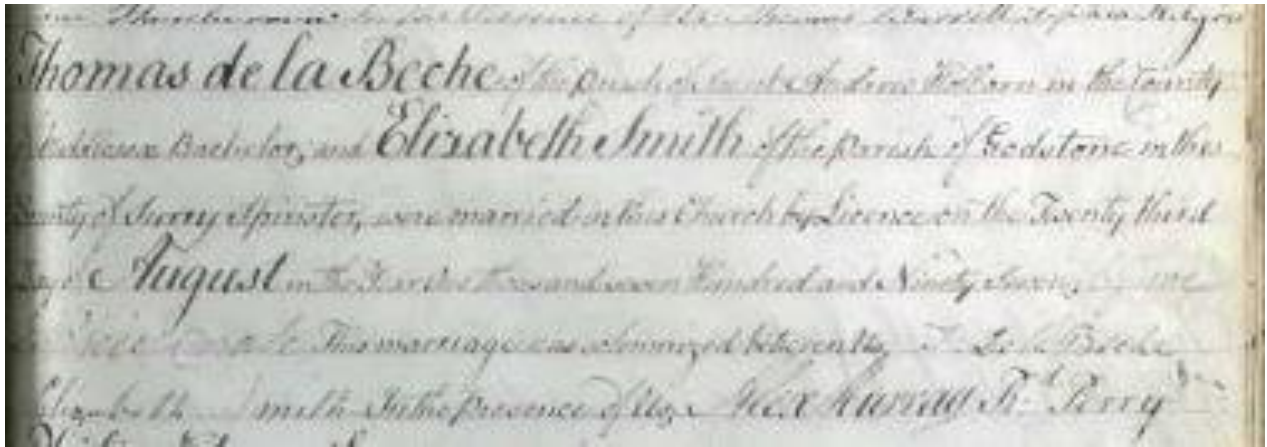
Henry's father was Thomas De La Beche (pronounced "beach") who was born in 1756 and his mother was Elizabeth (or Eliza) Smith. She was born in 1779 and lived in Downham, Norfolk and was probably just 16 when she fell for the dashing Brevet Major in the Norfolk Regiment of Fencible Cavalry stationed in the town.

Thomas was the son of the Hon. Thomas Beach of Jamaica who had married Helen Hynes, heiress to a sugar plantation. Henry's father and his uncle, John Hynes Beach, had petitioned King George III to let them change the family name to "De La Beche" in 1790. The aim was to raise the family's status but Henry wrote in his journal that it had been a waste of time and money that had only succeeded in "lightening the weight of the modern family purse".

Thomas and Elizabeth caused uproar by running away together and Henry was born in St Marylebone London in 1796 when Elizabeth was just 17. His birth record is shown below.



Below is a marriage record for a Thomas De la Beche and an Elizabeth Smith in St Andrew Holborn (the adjoining parish to St Marylebone) in 1797. This was the only such record to be found and is most likely to be Henry's parents. It could well be a regularisation of the marriage in England following elopement and a wedding out of the country.



In 1775 Thomas Beach had inherited the plantation at Halse Hall (below), about 30 miles west of Kingston, Jamaica from his grandmother. In 1800 the Norfolk Fencibles were disbanded and Thomas, now a Colonel, was put on half pay. He decided that now was the time for him and his family to visit Jamaica. The visit did not turn out well. On 1<sup>st</sup> June 1801 Thomas died whilst taking the waters at Bath about 30 miles east of Kingston.



Elizabeth decided that she and Henry would return home and she set sail on the *Bushy Park* under the command of Captain Brown which on the 10<sup>th</sup> August became one of six English ships wrecked on the Great Inagua reefs at the southern end of the Bahamas. Fortunately, both mother and son were rescued by a warship, the *Bonetta*, and eventually arrived back in England in October 1801.

In late 1802 Elizabeth married Henry Metcalfe, a widower from Northumberland and who had a 13 year old daughter, Anne, by his first wife. The Metcalf family settled first in Bath and then in Clifton and Hotwells in Bristol with Henry going to school at Keynsham. From his journal, it seems that was the time that he first became interested in geology not, as had previously have been thought, when he came to Lyme and met Mary Anning.



However, life still did not run smoothly for Elizabeth. Although Henry got on well with his stepsister, there was increasing friction between Anne and her young stepmother. This led to Elizabeth separating from Henry Metcalfe in 1807 and moving with her son to Sidmouth at which time Henry was sent to school in Ottery St. Mary. The house above is thought to be where Elizabeth and Henry lived in Sidmouth.

In 1810 it was decided that Henry should follow his father's profession and, at the age of 14, he was enrolled at the Military College at Marlow in Buckinghamshire. From his journal it is obvious that this was a turning point in his life. He wrote - "I felt an excitement in learning I had never before experienced ... for the first time in my life I felt a real desire for study". He particularly enjoyed Mathematics taught by eminent mathematicians: William Wallace and James Ivory, Military Drawing taught by the landscape artist William Delamotte and surveying. All of which would be invaluable to him in his future chosen career.

Henry's sketching ability stayed with him all his life. In 1830, Henry used it to help Mary Anning who was in financial difficulties because the prevalence of large fossils had decreased. He sketched *Duria Antiquior* – An Ancient Dorset depicting seas full of ichthyosaurs, plesiosaurs, ammonites and belemnites. It was the first time anyone had envisaged a pre-historic seascape. He sold prints to raise funds for Mary.

How unfortunate then that his army career was soon to end in great ignominy with expulsion from Marlow for insubordination in 1811. He was accused of encouraging "a dangerous spirit of Jacobinism" among the cadets.

By this time Henry Metcalfe had died and Elizabeth had left Sidmouth for Ilfracombe where she married again. Her third husband was William Huddle Aveline and the couple and their son settled first in Dawlish, then Charmouth before arriving in Lyme in 1812. William Huddle Aveline was also interested in fossils and geology so Lyme seemed an ideal choice.

### **The Lyme years**

The young Henry De La Beche was a gentleman of means especially on coming of age in 1817 when he inherited Halse Hall from his father. He now had the time and money to pursue the activities that interested him most. These were:

- a) Geology - for example, in 1816 he went for a geological tour of northern England and Scotland with George Holland and Thomas Coulson Carpenter. Two well-known Lyme names.
- b) Fossils – he became friendly with Mary Anning
- c) Sailing – he had his own yacht (see drawing below)

d) Young ladies – this interest seemed to fit well with (c) above and Henry had quite a reputation.

The Lymiad poem which purports to have been written about Lyme in 1818 uses the name “Sir Fopling Fossil” for Henry and says “He guides the helm, whilst by his side a damsel young and passing fair reclines... “

The poem also appears to refer to his geological prowess – “He is a most accomplished youth. That is, if madam Fame speak truth; and more than this I cannot tell; But some who know Sir Fopling well, inform me he’s an F.G.S.”

Henry was elected to the Geological Society in 1817 so that seems fine but he wasn’t knighted until 1842 so the anonymous writer of the Lymiad was prescient indeed!

The Lymiad also poked fun at Elizabeth Aveline referring to her as Madame Trois Maris but Elizabeth seemed to have found happiness at last with William Aveline and lived quietly in Lyme till she died in 1833.

Henry married Letitia White in Clifton, Bristol in November 1818. The couple went off on an extended honeymoon round Europe. It appears that Halse Hall was still generating plenty of



income at least for the time being. Whilst in Geneva, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1819, Letitia gave birth to Bessie whose baptism was in Lyme on 25th November 1820 so it seems likely that the honeymoon was very extended.

Back in Lyme, Henry, Letitia and Bessie lived on Pound Street according to the memories of Selina Hallett (*Lyme Voices 1*). Selina wrote of Henry; “He resided for a short time at the Grove (in the time of Mr

Dinneson, that built the house there).” This should be Mr Lillingston (Abraham Spooner Lillingston to be precise) who is known to have sold a property in that area of Pound Street to Edward Hillman whom Jo Draper said in her article in *Historic Houses of Lyme Regis Part 1* was “*The first occupant listed in the Directories*”. The Grove (below) no longer exists having burned down in 1951.

Land Tax records show that Henry De La Beche rented a property from A S Lillingston in 1822 with a rental value of £20.00 which would have been a fine house indeed for that





cost and which confirms Selina Hallett's words.

In 1823/4 Henry went to Jamaica for a year to oversee his estate leaving Letitia and Bessie behind. It is possible that revenues were falling; by 1830 they had dried up altogether. Once again things did not go well. This time it was his relationship with Letitia that suffered. On his return matters did not improve and they separated in 1825 and were divorced in the ecclesiastical courts in 1826. Letitia went to London where she

moved in with Major-General Henry Wyndam leaving Bessie with Henry in Lyme.

By this time Henry needed to work for a living and his chosen profession was as a geologist. Geological surveys meant being away for much of his time so Bessie lived with her grandparents, William and Elizabeth Aveline.

She attended Turles School in 58 Broad Street. She wrote to her father when he was working in St Austell: "I like my new music mistress [that was Miss Turle herself]. I wish to do botany this spring with the Misses Aveline and Savage. I will try to have my garden ready for your visit this year." Above we can see some of the pupils in the mid 1800s. The school is behind the hotel sign in the background with steps and bay windows.

William Huddle Aveline died in 1839 six years after his wife. By that time Henry and his Geological Survey were based in Swansea living first in a house called Lilliput and then in The Rhyddings. Bessie married Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, the son of one of her father's friends and so the connection to Lyme was lessened but Henry always referred to himself as "Henry De La Beche of Lyme Regis".

### **Where did they live?**

One final question needs to be answered. Where in Lyme did William, Elizabeth and Henry live in the period from 1812 until Henry's marriage to Letitia?

John Fowles believed that the family lived in Aveline House (below) but when carrying out research for an article on Aveline House (*Historic Houses of Lyme Regis Part 1*) no evidence to verify this was found.

Selina Hallett also wrote - "W. Aveline, Esquire, that I mentioned in one paper as living in Woodville [Silver Street, just north of Hill Road], was a brother of the two Miss Avelines that lived for many years at Aveline House [now Lloyds Bank, nos 53-54], Broad Street, and stepfather to Sir Henry [Thomas] De La Beche, the great geologist. They were a



very good family for the town [Aveline was interested in geology, one of his sisters was a minor writer]. My parents both lived in their service many years, until the death of Mrs Aveline, when he gave up housekeeping and went to live in apartments at Spring Cottage.” (From *Lyme Voices* 1 - additions in square brackets by John Fowles.)

Selina Hallett is clear that William Huddle Aveline lived at Woodville (Silver Street) and later at Spring Cottage (Uplyme Road) but John Fowles believed he lived at Aveline House on Broad Street. Which one was correct or perhaps both were at different times? Selina Hallett was baptized in 1839 which was the year that William Aveline died and her memories are thus only what she heard from her parents. Could John Fowles just have assumed that as William Aveline was the only male Aveline to have lived in Lyme then Aveline House was named for him and not his sisters (Mary & Elizabeth)?

In his survey for the Borough Council in 1824, John Drayton recorded the name “Aveline” over Woodville on Silver Street. That seems pretty good corroboration for Selina Hallett’s view but what other evidence is there?

There is an entry in the Lyme Regis section of *Pigot’s Directory for Dorset, 1830* which implies that William did not live on Broad Street in 1830:

*Avelin, William, esq. Lyme*  
*Eveline the Misses, Broad St*

The second entry obviously refers to William’s sisters Mary and Elizabeth with their name misspelt. If William lived on Broad Street then why does the Directory not say so as it does for many other residents?

That is the only relevant entry in the Directories. Census information is only available for 1841 onwards. Electoral registers were only started in the 1830s. Poll books only recorded people who voted and not necessarily their address. The only official documents that seem to be potentially both useful and available are the Land Tax Records.

*Excerpt* } An Appraisal made for the service of the year of 1804 in pursuance of an Act passed in the 35<sup>th</sup> year of his Majesty's reign for granting an Aid to his Majesty by a Land Tax to be raised on Great Britain  
*Dorset* } for the service of 1798 and made perpetual by another Act of the 35<sup>th</sup> above mentioned of another Act of the 39<sup>th</sup> for continuing and granting to his Majesty a Duty on persons Offices and personal Estates

Proprietors	Occupiers	Estates	Value	How Payable	How Estimated
Clark - Robt - Jr	Drayton - John Wm Tomell	Olmills Dobson Orchard	3 - 10 2	14 4	
Coat Ann - late Coat Ann - Esq	Ann <sup>e</sup> Coat Esq <sup>e</sup> Rev <sup>d</sup> H. Bath	Wherrens field House and Orchard	5 2	1 5	8
Jr	John Cothney	Gate Cloves	2		8
Corporation Lyme	Rev <sup>d</sup> Love	Plot of Square mead	4	4	
Charmanth Mashing Smdow of	Berke Ware	Waters Close	1 - 10	6	
Dave Hurah	Jr	Wm's Estate	11 - 10	2 - 6	
Wason Jr	himself	House & Garden	2	8	
Dave Giles	Robt Bidda	Town mead	1 - 10	6	
Walter Ste	John Hodge	Beam close Harris field	4 3	16 12	

As an example, above is the Land Tax Record for the Reverend Michael Babbs renting a house and gardens with a rental value of £2/annum from Samuel Coade. It does not give the

address of the property and it is for Colway not Lyme Regis. It is possible to find Babbs renting the same property right back to 1792.

So where is Colway? Colway Tithing was that part of the parish of Lyme Regis that did not include the Borough of Lyme Regis. The map below shows the boundary of the tithing then there would have been fewer when William Aveline came to Lyme. Incidentally, the property the Reverend Babbs rented is thought to be the Kersbrook Hotel. Then called Bellevue and known to be owned by Samuel Coade.

Why is this relevant? For 18 years from 1814 through to 1832 Land Tax records show that William Aveline rented a house and gardens in Colway Tithing from a Mrs Woolcot. That property was definitely not Aveline House!

So if William Aveline didn't live in Aveline House who did?

In the aforementioned article on Aveline House it says that the Flight family owned and had a drapers shop in the building. In 1832 they still owned the building and what was termed "the upper house" was rented to Miss Aveline. Other parts of the building were termed "the lower house" and "the house behind". In 1824 the Flights were renting the property to Miss Aveline but the record has been altered. It was originally James Edwards who was entered as the owner. This implies that the property changed ownership in the year from Edwards to Flight. We can track the Aveline rental back to 1818 but prior to this the lessee was a Mrs Babbs who started the lease in 1813.

Who was she? Was she related to the Reverend Michael Babbs? They were, in fact, related by marriage and their lives were very interlinked.

Catherine and William Babbs married in St Marylebone on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1785 and Michael Babbs officiated. Michael and William were cousins. This is relevant to our story because



Catherine (nee Huddle) was the widow of William Aveline and the mother of William Huddle Aveline, Henry De La Beche's step-father. It is clear that William's mother and sisters had come to Lyme at the same time as he and Elizabeth had and it was they who lived in Aveline House. In fact William's sister Elizabeth lived there for well over 40 years until she died in 1856. No wonder it was called Aveline House. The lease changed from Babbs to Aveline when Catherine Babbs died. Incidentally, Michael Babbs officiated at her funeral.

If we go back to 1813 we find Aveline House being rented by Ann Daniel the widow of William Daniel. Presumably, her young children Jane Daniel and William Pomroy Daniel were also living there. Jane is known from the *Ayot Rectory – Family Memoir* as "Poor Jane Daniel" who died of a broken heart after having been jilted by her beau Charles Symonds and William Pomroy Daniel went on to become a Mayor of Lyme. There are no earlier records for the property which implies Aveline House was built in 1811 or 1812.

So where did William, Elizabeth and Henry live? We know they rented a house from Mrs Woolcot in Colway Tithing but can we prove it was Woodville on Silver Street (below)?

Investigation shows that the family name was Wolcott not Woolcot. They had themselves lived in the house for many years before James Huyshe Wolcott died and his widow Bridget moved away to Thornhill Park near Stalbridge in north Dorset. Bridget came from the wealthy Marwood family and on her father's death had come into a small fortune. The Wolcotts had a daughter, Sarah, who married the Reverend Harry Farr Yeatman in Lyme in 1810. Michael Babbs officiated at the ceremony. Bridget died in 1835 and her property passed to her son in law. On the 1841 Tithe Map, Woodville is shown and in the index it gives Harry Farr Yeatman as the tithe payer. The Tithe Map therefore agrees with Drayton's earlier map.

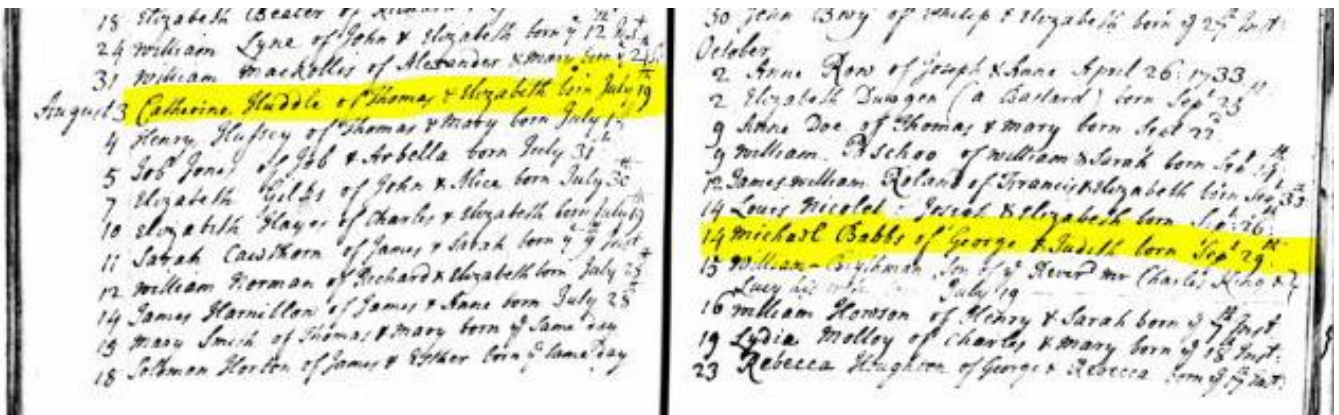




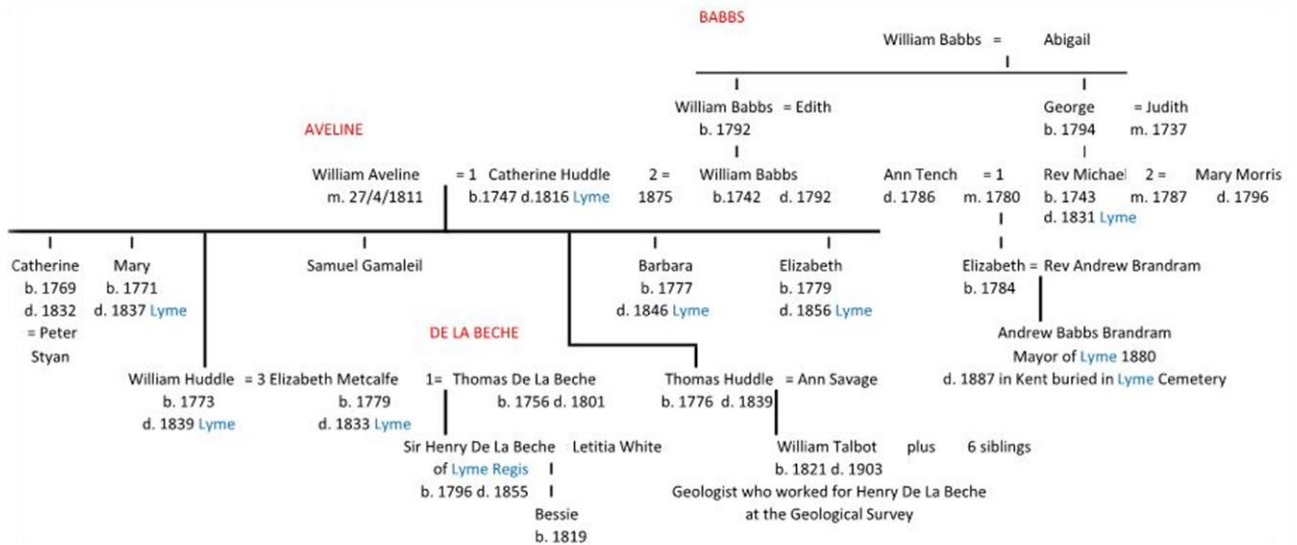
Selina Hallett is thus correct and thus William Aveline lived at Woodville until his wife's death and then moved to Spring Cottage which is opposite the Lyme Regis Health Centre. Henry De La Beche would have lived with his parents and not in Aveline House though he would have frequented it, visiting his step grand-mother, Catherine Babbs and aunts Mary and Elizabeth Aveline.

**Footnote**

There is one last item of interest involving the interlinked lives of the Reverend Michael Babbs and Catherine Huddle/Aveline/Babbs. Michael had officiated at Catherine's wedding and funeral. He was the same age as Catherine so definitely could not have officiated at her baptism but, as shown below, his baptism was recorded on the opposite page to hers in the parish records for St. Marylebone.



The Aveline, Babbs and De La Beche families are joined by a number of marriages. They all have important links to Lyme which are shown on the family tree below.



## **Sources**

*A Journal of Sir Henry De La Beche* Edited by Richard Morris and with an introduction by Tom Sharpe ISBN 978-0-9563784-4-6

*Lyme Voices 1* - Lyme Regis Museum. edited by John Fowles

*The Lymiad* Lyme Regis Museum - annotated by John Fowles and John Constable

*Historic Houses of Lyme Regis Part 1* published by the Lyme Regis Society

*Land Tax Records* – The Dorset History Centre via [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk)

*Ayot Rectory – A Family Memoir* by Carola Oman, 1965