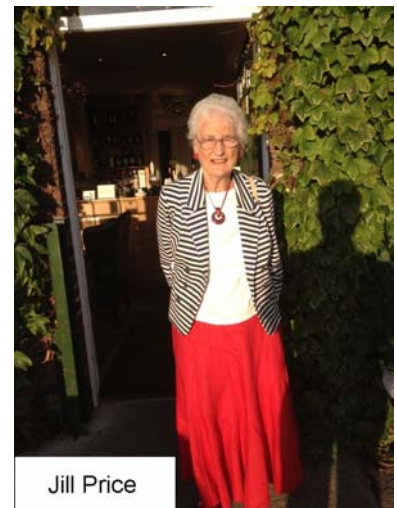


Impressions of King's Lynn - August 21-22, 2012

By Diane "Dede" Claiborne Clements

After a rendez-vous in London, several of us Claiborne descendants journeyed to King's Lynn to visit the ancestral roots of William Claiborne. Dede Clements, Ruth, and Rick Rose arrived by car with the help of GPS to navigate British roundabouts and highway exits. Susan Penfold and Julie Haynie came by rail and managed to avoid being detached in Cambridge. They were met at the King's Lynn Station by Jill Price, the experienced guide familiar to many in the Claiborne Society. She proceeded to make our visit easy and meaningful. We were steeped in history from the outset. Old King's Lynn is a small area of narrow streets around a central square that still serves as a weekly market place. It's bordered on the West by the Ouse River flowing into "The Wash", an inlet of the North Sea. Vistas are dominated by old slate or tile roofs and graced by flowers. Church spires rise above the two-story brick structures, and sea gulls squeal over the now sleepy seaport. We lodged at the Dukes Head Hotel, facing the square just a block from the water, so we could walk to most interesting sights. After lunch, Jill took us out and began to illuminate our quaint surroundings.



Group assembled before entering Town Hall to meet Mayor
Left to Right: Rick Rose, Jill Price, Julie Haynie, Susan Rose Penfold,
Ruth Claiborne Rose, Diane Claiborne Clements (Dede)

Our first stop was the Town Hall, an interesting "checker-board" pattern of local flint and stone whose oldest section dates from 1420. Indeed, the Trinity Guildhall (its formal name) reflects the medieval hey-day of King's Lynn. The high vaulted ceilings, great leaded windows, and gorgeous paneling seem almost ecclesiastical in their authority, and they house numerous treasures from the Town's past -- silver salt bowls, a magnificent chalice, paintings, annals detailing its history, and more. We were excited to see Elizabethan period references to the mayoral rules of William's grandfather and father, both named Thomas Claiborne. Jill, whose own research augments the local histories she commands, reminded us that young William Claiborne went to Pembroke College at Cambridge University when he was just 16, six years before he set sail for Virginia in 1621. Besides the Claibornes, other prominent citizens of King's Lynn include Sir Robert Walpole, England's first Prime Minister (1720-40), and George Vancouver, whose 18th c. exploits in North America are a source of pride.



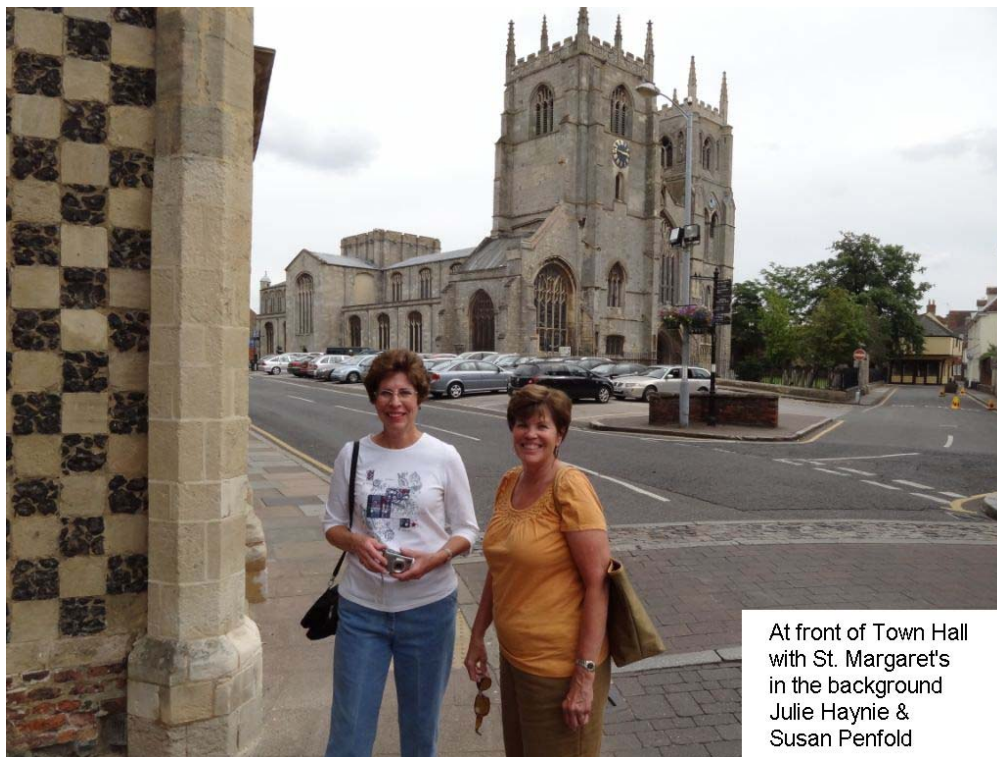
In Town Hall great room, large enough for over 60 Counselors to meet
Julie Haynie, Ruth Rose, Susan Penfold, Jill Price, Dede Clements

A special pleasure at the Town Hall was meeting Mayor Wareham. What an engaging and distinguished gentleman. Honored by a Claiborne visit, he was dressed in his traditional red robe with fur trim and adorned by the heavy breast chains and crest of his office. He could not have been more gracious, serving us tea in his impressive chamber and regaling us with jolly stories of the Counsel's work, his travels in the US, and the Queen's recent jubilee celebration in that very room – yes, we were in the same chairs she and Phillip had used!

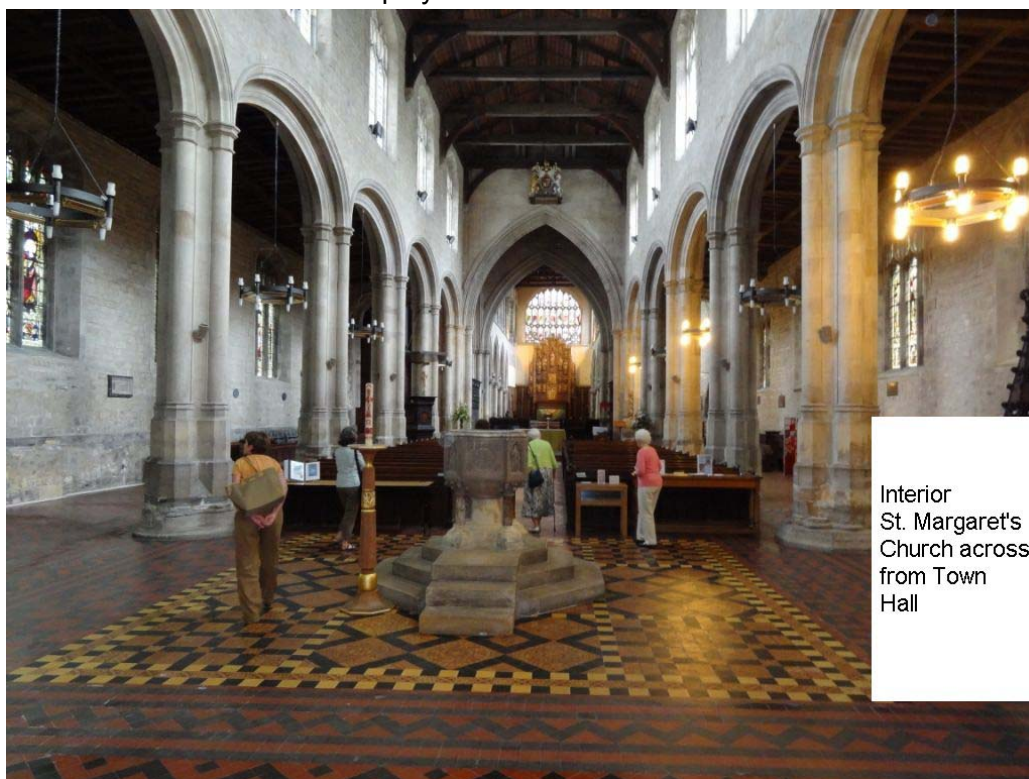


With Mayor
Wareham in
his office
Jill Price,
Ruth Rose,
Julie Haynie,
Mayor Wareham,
Rick Rose,
Dede Clements,
Susan Penfold

Across the cobbled street lies St. Margaret's Minster. The huge grey stone Church has two imposing towers and is decorated with a large clock on one side and, on the other, an instrument indicating the tides – yet another reminder of the old Town's commercial life-blood.



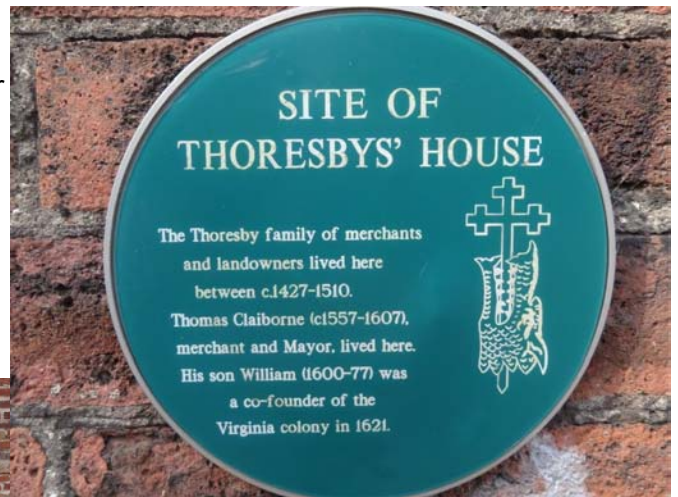
The Church interior, like St. Nicholas Chapel on the other side of the square, is warmed by a wood ceiling and stunning stained glass imagery. Some graves are enclosed in the floor, but many, including the Thomas Claibornes, were covered over by Victorian tiles in the 19th c. Still on display, however, are two very large tombs of other King's Lynn leaders. Jill, on behalf of the King's Lynn Town Guild, had rubbings done of their beautiful brass covers and displayed the intricate artwork in time for the Queen's visit.





The home's garden wall
Ruth Rose, Jill Price

Outside, on the Church Rectory's garden wall, is a small historical plaque indicating that the 16th c. Claiborne home lies at the bottom of the yard – unfortunately hidden from our view and accessible only from the Rector's home. But the flowering shrubs peeking over the bricks attest to its lovely surroundings. Our first day ended with a gourmet dinner on the riverfront, a meal we invited Jill to join. As the sun set over the water, we continued to be awed by her knowledge, touched by her devotion to her Claiborne Society friends, and delighted by her humor and warmth.



Historic note indicating Claiborne dwelling



Historic note on wall of Thomas Claiborne warehouse
Dede Clements, Rick Rose, Susan Penfold, Ruth Rose

Jill returned us to the quay next day. On the stroll, we saw the Merchant Exchange and explored the warehouses and docks where huge quantities of grain had been exported and wine imported, along with other commodities that made King's Lynn so prosperous through the 17th c. Most of the warehouses, including those first owned by members of the Hanse, a significant Baltic trade league, have been converted into desirable dwellings. One, Thoresby College, housed monks originally but is now a useful community center – I would love to have my book club meeting in the 16th c. vaulted chamber with huge beams! Other converted warehouses have become offices, stores, and restaurants. In Thomas Claiborne's former warehouse, we paused for a coffee in the cheerful shop, while studying the big doorway to the wharf and the massive beams supporting the old structure. Given the busy construction on the quay, it seems that renovation work has replaced trade as a profitable business in King's Lynn.



Thomas Claiborne warehouse

As we walked on, Jill also pointed out interesting features of medieval and Georgian dwellings, too numerous to recount. A magnificent house several miles East of King's Lynn, however, deserves special mention – Sandringham, the Norfolk retreat of British monarchs since Victoria. We drove to it after lunch and spent some time among throngs of English families on holiday, all of us enjoying the grounds and admiring royal rooms, furnishings, and personal photographs. Such intimacy was an unexpected treat indeed.* The proximity of Sandringham to King's Lynn may explain why "our" Town was Queen Elizabeth's first stop on her Jubilee tour of her realm. If we had scheduled more time in the region, visits to Walpole's home, Houghton House, and nearby Cambridge University would have been pleasant and interesting – recall "Brideshead Revisited"!



Quay in front of Claiborne warehouse

But our next destination was northwest in Cumbria to glimpse Cliburn, where a branch of Claibornes may be linked (see book by Lolita Bissell). If you blink, you could miss the cluster of houses along the small country road. Were it not for the lovely little church, it wouldn't even classify as a village. But the stone Church and its graveyard are memorable, set on a hill amidst vibrant greenery. Indeed, the rolling and craggy landscape contrasts boldly with the flat land of southeast England. Around Cliburn, the hillsides dotted with sheep and ancient stone walls preview the rugged Scottish scenery just north. This Westmoreland setting is deeply evocative of old Cliburn life, perhaps more than Cliburn Hall. The view of the 14th c. house from the lane has been obscured by its current owner, who has constructed dairy farm buildings in front of the house.



The village of Cliburn

My Claiborne family's actual ancestor remains mysterious for now, but seeing both King's Lynn and Cliburn has doubled the romance of imagining past generations, the sturdy and courageous people who came before us to found our home in the new world. I've been lucky to have made this wonderful trip with my cousins and aunt, regretting only that my deceased mother, Rosalind Claiborne Clements, was not with us. An avid researcher of family roots, she would have loved every minute, and I've felt her spirit constantly.

*In the wilds of Scotland on Sunday August 26, we serendipitously came upon the Royals at Balmoral!! From the country road, we saw some people waiting along the narrow driveway to the Castle gate, so we stopped and joined them. Within a few minutes, Charles drove himself and Camilla across the little road and up to a small hillside church. A chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce followed shortly, with the Queen and Phillip clearly visible -- she in a bright pink hat and coat. They all smiled and waved cordially to us only a few feet away. I really could not believe our good luck!



Cliburn Hall