

Copeman – the Evolution of a Norfolk Surname

By William Vaughan-Lewis

While researching the background of the Copeman family that settled in Itteringham in the first half of the nineteenth century - at the same time that Copemans were very active as bankers and attorneys in Aylsham - we became interested in the origins of their name and found that all was not quite as one might expect.

Origins of the name

We, like many, had always assumed that Copeman was a very long established surname particularly often used in Norfolk. Our familiarity with the name in Itteringham, Aylsham and in Norwich – the family which became part-owners of the EDP – fuelled the assumption. P Hanks and F Hodges in their *Dictionary of Surnames* give Copeman as an English occupational name for a merchant or trader, derived from the Middle English *Copman* and in turn from Old Norse *Kaupmaōr*. This is the equivalent also of the Old English *Cēapman*, which evolved into Chapman, courtesy of a soft 'ch' sound at the start of the word. The word is a compound of *Cēap* meaning barter, bargain, price or property and *mann* for man. They give the German equivalent of Copeman as *Kaufmann*; the Flemish as *Coopman* or *De Copman*; and the Dutch as *Koopman*.

PH Reaney and RM Wilson in the second edition of the Reaney classic *A Dictionary of British Surnames* closely match Hanks and Hodges' views on Copeman. Interestingly three of the four examples of medieval usage were from Norfolk and are cited below.

So Copeman was another word for Chapman, a trader. The two names evolved in parallel – neither was derived from the other, but rather from a common root. For Copeman one might expect to see early spelling variations such as Coopman and Coupman; these being simple phonetic versions of the same word before spelling gradually became standardised on Copeman. We have also found Coapeman, Coapman, Copman, Copmann, Kopman and more occurring at random through the many parish registers and other documents examined.

Examples of Chapmans and Copemans can be found in medieval documents in Norfolk. However, the relative profusion and widespread use across Norfolk of the Chapman name was never matched by Copeman or its possible variants.

Early usage and variants

From the later family research it became clear that there was a proven link with quite different spellings of the name which at first seemed unlikely given the phonetic differences. With this knowledge we included these - Cockman, Cokeman and Cogman - in our searches from the earliest sources. Even with this wider remit we have found few examples surviving in Norfolk documents from before 1500, despite looking in a very wide range of published sources.

In the twelfth century a Copmannus Clokersuo (also just given as Copman) had given land in Mancroft in Norwich to the Abbey of St Bennet of Holme by 1141-6 (Norfolk Record Society, volumes 2 and 3; and Reaney). A Eustace Fitz John Copman features in a Norfolk 1205 pipe roll and Eustace Coupman in a Norfolk pipe roll of 1230 (Reaney).

The fourteenth century produces more references. A John Cokeman from Gallow Hundred (around Fakenham) was taken to Norfolk Castle Gaol for sheep stealing in 1310. The same year Matilda the wife of Ralph Cokeman reported Thomas Shepherd of Weybourne for stealing Ralph's sheep. We should not blacken his name – he was acquitted! (NRS vol 44, *Crime in East Anglia in the Fourteenth Century*).

The 1327 and 1332 lay subsidies show a very interesting cluster, particularly when taken together with the 1377-81 Poll Tax lists. In this latter (*The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381* Ed. Carolyn Fenwick), among the substantial number of Norfolk entries surviving, there are none for Copeman or Cockman and only two for Cogman, both from the same village. Sedgeford (near Heacham) in 1379 had a Stephen and a Thomas Cogman. In 1327 Sedgeford had an Andr[ew] Cokeman and in the adjacent Southmere (near Docking) in 1332 there was a William Cogeman. Also in 1332 nearby Anmer had a Godwin Copeman. This cluster seems to us to show the possibility at least of a degree of interchangeability in the spelling of Copeman. We will come back to this theme.

The only other Copeman or similar in 1327/1332 across Norfolk was a Rob- Cokeman in Wells in 1332 – he could be linked to the Gallow based sheep stealer above. (1327 and 1332 references from Tim Hawes: *Norfolk Historical Aids* 14, 17 and 23). Of course both these sources have incomplete coverage of the county and cannot be taken as definite evidence of absence of the use of the name Copeman. But at least they show that it was very unusual by comparison to the frequently used and widely spread Chapman.

There was a Norfolk Inquisition post mortem dated to the period 1427-32 for a William Cokeman (Tim Hawes cites IPM volume 23, number 121). But subsequently we have been able to find virtually no Copemans or variants until the late fifteenth century ones. Local wills and administrations (NCC and ANW/ANF) show few survivals before 1500: a Richard Cogman of Woodbridge, Suffolk (NRO, NCC 1462, admon 23 Brosyard) and Maud Cockman of Worsted St Mary (NRO, NCC 1456, admon 12/13 Brosyard).

No doubt more extensive searching at the Norfolk Record Office would find more examples, but the point is made: Copeman was not a widely used surname through the later middle ages in Norfolk, despite its East Anglian origins and subsequent bias.

Is that bias still demonstrable? Yes. The 'Surname Profiler' at www.spatial-literacy.org charts relative frequency of use of surnames in Great Britain in the 1881 census. For Copeman the map shows an extraordinary skew to Norfolk. The Norwich area in particular had 11.68 times the GB average frequency for the name. Beyond Norfolk there was slightly above average frequency into the greater Wash area, including west Norfolk; and some frequency in parts of central Essex and two small spots in London. The rest of Great Britain shows no colour on the map at all – there were no other hot spots for the name. By 1881 the name was fundamentally a Norfolk oriented one, implying that its origins were there too.

Interestingly a search of the The National Archive's PCC wills database shows no incidence of any of the variations of the name up to 1600 for any part of the country. Again, this is not a conclusive finding but at least it supports the relative scarcity of the name.

Even looking into the sixteenth century for Copeman/Cockman/Cogman in Norfolk relatively few incidences of the name appear. For example, the Norwich land gable and poor rate assessments of the 1570s have no occurrence of any version. Likewise there was none among the Norwich City officers of the early modern period (NRS volumes 40, 43 and 52).

Late sixteenth and early seventeenth century usage

Despite this earlier scarcity the name suddenly becomes very visible from about 1600 in two distinct Norfolk clusters. The first is around South Walsham and in due course evolves into the Copemans of Hemsby Hall and later the grocer/newspaper family of Norwich. Norfolk Genealogy volume 13 has the detailed tree for this cluster, which can only be traced back to 1628. The second, earlier one, is around Themelthorpe. This is of particular interest to us as

the Itteringham Copemans stem from this much larger cluster. We have found nothing published on this complicated cluster of Copeman families. For example, Walter Rye in his *Norfolk Families* writes little on the Copeman name and gives brief notes only on the Aylsham and Hemsby/Norwich families and a passing reference to Robert the hatter and hosier and 18C Copemans in Coltishall. Francis Blomefield contains no references to the name in the villages of interest to us, apart from a single reference to William Cockman rector of Sparham in 1569. Visit www.itteringham.com for our extensive research and detailed family tree for this line.

While we have not checked all the admons, thirteen of the fifteen or so Copeman/Cokeman wills proved in the Norfolk courts in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be shown to be linked to one or other of these clusters, as can all the four PCC wills of the seventeenth century for Copemans in Norfolk (all Themelthorpe related). The other two relate to areas nearby and may yet be linked into the known lines. The only other PCC wills with names even remotely similar are for a tiny cluster of four Cookmans in Dorset and Devon between 1617 and 1657.

Similarly in the eighteenth century most surviving wills for Copemans in Norfolk can be connected in to the Themelthorpe and Hemsby/Norwich lines. Of the rest, most are from parishes close enough to Themelthorpe potentially to be minor lines of this cluster.

There are a small number of Norwich Copemans in city parish registers and apprentice/freemen books during the seventeenth century and more in the eighteenth century. Some at least of these will have been accounted for by the Themelthorpe cluster, since we know that they had family links into the weaving trades in Foxley and Norwich. We have not attempted to explore this dimension of the family/name in any detail. However, for the few parishes we have examined where there are later Copemans (eg, St Peter Mancroft and St George Tombland), we find none in the 16C parish registers under any variation of the name. This echoes their absence from the land gable and poor relief sources. There was however an Anthony Cockman, worstead weaver, in the city, taking on apprentices between 1610 and 1617 (NRS vol 29). It would be interesting to know where Anthony (not a Christian name common to the other lines) came from.

The Copemans of Themelthorpe

Despite the fundamentally different spelling, the Themelthorpe based cluster stems from John Cockman the elder who died in Themelthorpe in 1572 leaving a will (NRO, ANW 1570-72, will 173). He is clearly given as Cockman in the will, as are his five sons. Two of his sons leave wills – Robert as Cokeman (NRO, ANW 1612, will 117/160), Thomas as Copeman (NRO, ANW 1616, will 58). Themelthorpe, Foulsham, Foxley and Bawdeswell families flow from these two men and their descendants, with all subsequent wills giving their name as Copeman.

Why are we so sure then that the 17C variations in fact emerged from Cokeman/Cockman rather than Copeman? The wills, registers and manorial court records that do survive present a compelling case.

We were first led to the 'Cockman' possibility by the Archdeacon's Transcripts for Themelthorpe, which cover a few years at the start of the 17C and then a miscellany of years through the century – essential reading since the parish registers do not survive before 1700.

The return for 1601 clearly names Robert Copeman and Thomas Copeman as church wardens. Yet the returns for 1602, '03, '06, '07 and '08 show seven different entries with Cok(e)man (or occasionally just possibly Cob(e)man) and no Copemans. More entries intermittently through to 1633 show a mixture of Copeman, Cock(e)man and Cokeman. The

many references to Thomas the elder and Thomas the younger and their wives' names fit exactly with what we know about the family structure from their Copeman wills.

It is only when we turn to the surviving court books of the manors of Themelthorpe and Foulsham, run by the same steward and using the same books for both, that we can be sure that all these references are to the same family: the Copemans (NRO, Rye MSS 53 and 54). Records survive for intermittent years from 1598. The courts in 1598 and 1599 show Robert and Thomas Cokeman and then Robert and Thomas Cockeman attending (or excusing themselves) as jurors. Another court at the end of 1599 shows them as Robert and Thomas Copeman and this spelling is repeated for a few more courts. Then in 1603 the clerk returns to Cokeman for a number of years. At no court were there both Copemans and Cokemans. Well into the 17th century the Copeman family lands are frequently referred to as 'lands sometime John Cockeman'. The names were being used interchangeably.

The Foulsham court records also show interchangeability between Cokeman and Copeman. Indeed the clerk strongly, but not exclusively, favours the use of Cokeman at a time when all the people he refers to are starting to use Copeman and when that name takes over in parish register entries and wills. We believe that the steward was concerned to use names that would show, without ambivalence, continuity of linkage of specific lands to specific people back over a span of years. So his use of the old spelling continued well beyond the family's own use of it.

The same thing happened with the branch of the family that moved to Knapton. Richard, one of the sons of Thomas Copeman of Themelthorpe (d 1616), moved to Knapton where he died in 1610 (no registers available, but his admon survives as Copeman – NRO, ANF 1609-10, A78). He may have moved there because his wife was of Knapton and inherited lands there – but we have yet to identify her maiden name. By his wife Elizabeth (subsequently she remarried and left a will as Elizabeth Allen - NRO, NCC 1625, will 408 Belward) he had sons William and Thomas. William came into lands that his father had inherited in Themelthorpe. The Themelthorpe court book even recites the deed involved. William later died without issue leaving the lands to his brother (NRO, ANF 1647, will 170), where they can be tracked in the Copeman family in the wills of Thomas's son and grandsons.

This sequence of events can be tracked in the Knapton court books (particularly: NRO, 47C6, MS 20994). There are multiple references during the reign of James I to Richard, Elizabeth and William Copeman. But by 1626 in a detailed reference back to her will, Elizabeth is written as ~~Cockman~~ crossed out with Allen written above in exactly the same hand and ink. The paragraph quotes her will, referring to her Copeman sons and goes on to cite her previous husband as Richard Cockman. A court of 1628, in a single paragraph, refers to Thomas Cokeman and William Copeman inheriting lands from their mother Elizabeth Allen. Another such usage referring to the brothers with these different spellings in the same paragraph occurs two years later. There can be no doubt that Cock(e)man and Copeman were interchangeable for this family at this stage and that Copeman gradually became the accepted usage for the whole family.

Wood Dalling or Themelthorpe origins?

Further support for the Cock(e)man origin of the name comes from Wood Dalling – adjacent to Themelthorpe. A will for John Copeman of Wood Dalling survives from 1581. From his and Themelthorpe will dates and next generation will contents, we know he cannot be directly linked into the family of John Copeman d 1572. But it seems highly likely that there was a link in an earlier generation – perhaps they shared a common grandfather. Unfortunately no registers for Wood Dalling survive before 1653 and the ATs are very patchy from 1600 onwards and have no helpful content.

But a number of wills and deed references show that there had been a Cokeman/Copeman family there for many years. Geoffrey Cokeman of Wood Dalling left a will made in 1506 and proved in 1507 (NRO, NCC 1506, will 422 Ryxe). The main references are to his sons John and Robert. These first names of course, together with Thomas, dominate the Themelthorpe clan less than a century later. We have also spotted deed references for sales of land in Wood Dalling by Thomas Cokeman of Wood Dalling in 1469 and 1474/5; and John Cokeman of Wood Dalling in 1493/4 (NRO: 41C4, NRS 17888 and 17922; 30C7, MS 12475).

While not a complete run, the 16th and late 15th century manorial document survival for Wood Dalling is quite good. A John Cokeman was in Hollewood Hall manor in the late 1470s and early 1480s (NRO, 25E6, NRS 11154). A John Cokeman was present continuously from 1490-91 to 1508-09 in Dalling Hall manor (NRO, 25E6, NRS 11155); and in 1482-83 and 1492-93 he was in Hollewood Hall manor (NRO, 25E6, NRS 11154). But then there is no sign of any Cokeman or Copeman until John Cokeman, possibly the next generation, in Dalling Hall manor in 1522-23 (NRO, 25E6, NRS 11151 and NRS 11158).

There then seems to be a long gap in these manors with no Cokemans/Copemans present, until in 1571 in Hollewood Hall manor we find 'John-Cœpman Cockman' – the earliest yet example of a steward using both names for the same man. The court entries continue thereafter as John Cokeman and it becomes clear that this is the John Copeman of Wood Dalling d 1581. He is recorded as dead in 1582 and his wife Elizabeth comes to court and ten years later his son Peter attends (NRO, 28B3, NRS 13449).

In parallel in Crabgate manor Wood Dalling we find a John Copman in 1566 and for the next ten years he is present as John Copeman. Then after a short gap we find the 1585 admission of Peter Cockman son of John Cockeman after the death of Elizabeth once his wife (NRO, 860x5, MC 1858/20).

So there is a strong chance that the Copeman clan came originally from Wood Dalling with the senior line moving to Themelthorpe during the first half of the 16th century. There is no surviving run of Themelthorpe manorial documents prior to 1598, so we are unlikely to discover much more about the family's early years there. We have only spotted two old deed references: to John Cokeman of Themelthorpe in 1572 and 1548. These are probably both the John d 1572; and incidentally they reinforce that his name was then Cokeman not Copeman (NRO, White of Sall collection). This is reinforced by the John Cokeman named in the Survey of Church Goods for Themelthorpe in 1552 (Norfolk Archaeology volume 28).

As detailed on the Itteringham website, in due course John's line of yeomen and butchers in Themelthorpe and adjacent parishes emerges with Edward Copeman who died in 1743 leaving a will (NRO, ANW 1743, will 161/167). Among others, he left bequests to two of his sons: Robert and Thomas. Robert was the grandfather of Robert Copeman of Aylsham, co-founder of Copeman's Bank there, a lawyer and Clerk to the Peace of Norfolk. Thomas was the father of Robert Copeman, hatter and hosier of Norwich and then farmer, who died in Itteringham in 1832. It was the confusion surrounding these two contemporaneous Roberts that got us interested in this family in the first place. We have been able to prove that they were close cousins, which had not apparently been noticed by family researchers to date.

Thus far we have not been able to find a link between the Themelthorpe and Hemsby clusters, despite the Stalham and Great Yarmouth branch of the Themelthorpe clan being so close to Hemsby. But that does not mean that it is not there and we would welcome any further information on this that readers might have.

Other unexpected spelling variations

The Hemsby line started with yet another version of the name: Copen or, once, Copene. This is evident in the South Walsham register for baptisms from 1628 onwards to a Matthew Copen. Later, the will of one of his sons, George Copeman of Wood Bastwick (NRO, NCC 1707 will 108 Alexander), shows that in this family line Copen and Copeman became interchangeable. In one paragraph in particular, both variants were used as the surname of the same man. This is made absolutely clear by: 'my nephew John Copeman ... as long as the said John Copen gives security ...'. We have assumed from this that the name before 1628 had been something like Copeman; but there is of course an outside chance that it was an adaptation of the quite separate and frequently found name of Copping. We have not yet been able to find out where Matthew came from. Was he a local of the South Walsham area; or a Norfolk incomer, even of an immigrant family?

In Itteringham, from the late 1680s through to the 1750s, we have another possible version or two of Copeman. The registers for much of this period were rather badly kept and written, with some complete gaps. Through this period though we can track first a Francis Cobeman having children and then his eldest son Stephen and his wife Anne (née Wilson) doing the same from about 1715 well into the 1720s. One of the spellings appears to be Cokeman and several, particularly for the baptisms of some but not all of Stephen's children, are clearly Cobourn. None of these names appear before this in the village, nor afterwards. Stephen was buried in 1727 and a John Cobeman in 1728. Anne Cobourn widow, presumably Stephen's wife, was buried in 1755. Apart from these entries there are no more Copemans or similar in Itteringham registers for the next 50 years or so.

Yet, records for the Wolterton/Mannington estate of Horatio, later Lord Walpole, kept at Wolterton Hall show that there was a John Copeman of Itteringham as a tenant of the estate and local carrier from the late 1730s well into the 1740s, with family living locally too at the time. A brother is referred to and the accounts mention a George Copeman and a William Copeman, possibly both John's brothers. There is no mention of any Cobeman or Cobourn in the estate accounts. No wills for Cobeman or Cobourn survive in Norfolk for this period and we have not spotted regular incidences of these names in neighbouring parish registers. We think that these too are phonetic variations on Copeman.

And then there is Cogman. While, like Cobourn, this is nowadays a bona fide surname it is very hard to find much usage of it in North Norfolk in the 16C, 17C and 18C. For example, there are no wills in the Norfolk courts for this long period. And yet it is recorded in a number of registers for parishes around Themelthorpe at just the right time in the late 16C and 17C and with just the right limited range of first names to be a variation of Copeman. Phonetically this seems at least possible if one accepts the Cock/Cokeman link to Copeman and the hard middle consonant.

A good example is the John Cogman listed in the 1577 muster for Hackford (NRS volumes 6 and 7). There are no Cogmans in the Hackford parish registers for at least the first 150 years from their start in the 1550s. But John Coopeman (we assume the son of John d 1572) was married there in January 1579; Alice wife of Thomas Copman was buried there in 1594; and a Thomas Copman was married there in June 1602. Members of the family over many decades bequeath in their wills stalls in Hackford market place. The John Cogman buried 7/11/1624 in Bawdeswell appears to match the John Copeman of Bawdeswell with a 1625 admon.

However, we have to hedge our bets somewhat as the parish registers for Themelthorpe, Foxley, Barton Bendish, Briston and Sharrington in particular do not survive prior to the early 18C or late 17C. This has made it difficult to track each family unit with certainty and thus to be sure of all the spelling variations.

So the Old Norse/Old English derived Copeman name was in use in Norfolk in the middle ages, but infrequently by comparison to the similarly derived Chapman. Reaney and Wilson do attempt separate entries for Cockman and Cogman but give no examples. *Cockman* or *Cookman* is unconvincingly given as either 'servant of cook' or 'the cook's servant', coming from *cōkman* with a shortening of the vowel before the Old English *cōc* became Middle English *couk* or *cook*. Their explanation for Cogman is even briefer: "identical in meaning with *Cogger* – a small boat."

Curiously Richard McKinley's *Norfolk and Suffolk Surnames in the Middle Ages* (Volume 2 of the English Surname Series) makes no reference at all to Copeman; nor to Cockman or Cogman. Similarly, Hanks and Hodges do not give Cockman or Cogman as separate surnames.

There is some indication that Cockman and Cogman might have been Copeman variations in the 14C. By the late fifteenth century a Cokeman family emerged in Wood Dalling and, at that time or subsequently, in Themelthorpe. In the sixteenth century neither version of the name seems to have been widely used in Norfolk. By the late 16th century the surname was shifting to Copeman, but with variations which indeed may well have resulted from writers' unfamiliarity with the name and historical usage. Copeman became the standard form by no later than the middle of the seventeenth century. From that era onwards a great many of the Copemans, in at least Norwich and North Norfolk, can with a high degree of confidence be attributed to the Hemsby and particularly Themelthorpe family lines.

It would be helpful to know if others can shed further light on this unusual and late surname evolution. It would be particularly interesting to know how Matthew Copen came by his name and where Anthony Cockman came from; as well as any further uses of the names in Norfolk manorial documents.

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