

## **The career of William Gamul Farmer (1746-1797) in India, 1763-1795**

By Penelope Farmer

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This case study originated in a collection of family letters that travelled between England and India from 1763 to 1795. They were generated by the long absence from England of one family member, William Gamul Farmer, who was sent to India at the age of sixteen as an East India Company servant. More recently this material has been augmented by the appearance of William's private letter book containing most of the letters he wrote between 1794 and 1796, before leaving India for good.

The family letters alone offer insights into the private and social workings that underpinned the imperial and mercantile enterprise of the East India Company (EIC). They suggest how families held themselves together despite the vast distances in time and space that separated them, and how crucial a sibling relationship could be in helping to provide for a Company servant in India both materially and psychologically. At the same time they show how frustrating and sad the whole process could be for a mother lamenting her son's absence from home and family and who, despite obvious energy and ability, could only affect his career in minor ways, even though she gave him – and us reading her letters now – much fuller and more lively insights into the contemporary life he had left behind in England than his other correspondents. At least one letter (from William) throws new—Indian—light on how one family managed to rise from the merchant class into the country gentry. More personally—for me—almost all the letters demonstrate recognisable family characteristics persisting through the generations.

The letters in the letter book, written between 1794 and 1796 at the end of William's career, have less to offer on such a private level. On the other hand, they are in places as intimate as the earlier individual letters – in some respects even more so. Addressing men to whom after years in India he has often been closer than to members of his family, the writer seems able to admit more freely to his hopes and regrets and his lack of family life – he never married – than he can express to his younger brother. His sometimes affectionate letters to Indian colleagues—with their use of Indian terms, references to Indian festivals and legal processes—suggest, too, how deeply embedded William Gamul Farmer was in an Indian life that could have meant very little to those at home. The survival of such a complete collection of records is unusual. Farmer's comments on financial deals, political events, and political problems in his rich

correspondence augment our knowledge of East India Company business and the English men who conducted it.

## I. The Letters



Figure 1. Nonsuch Park, Surrey. Image courtesy of Penelope Farmer.

The family letters were preserved in a dispatch box held in the family mansion at Nonsuch Park in Surrey, passed on to my father at the sale of the house in 1937. After my father's and my brother's deaths, the dispatch box fetched up in a niece's house in Wales, where I encountered the letters for the first time, two years ago. The writers were William Gamul Farmer (1746-1797), his younger brother Samuel (1747-1839), who was a scarlet dye merchant, and their mother, Margaret Farmer (1725?-1797). There are also two letters sent to William by two business colleagues in London. The collection consists in all of thirty-six letters, most of which I have now transcribed, sometimes with difficulty and in need of help.<sup>1</sup>

Almost all the surviving letters from England were written in the 1770s. Of the thirteen sent from India by William himself, two (to his father) were dated 1763 and 1774; the rest were addressed to his brother Sam, between 1789 and 1795. The final group, from Surat, where William ended his career as Chief, are, thankfully – his later writing was

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you Margaret Woodall, archivist at Belmont House, Kent.

hard to read — copies by one of his Indian writers. (This duplication was common practice, so many of the ships carrying mail were lost at sea.)

From the beginning William's task in India was to make his fortune, a theme that reverberates throughout both collections of his correspondence. How much money he made in India is still in question. But a letter in his own hand, dated June 1794, states that part of his gains are being sent back anonymously, to avoid suspicion—William was suspected by the Company of dubious transactions in the years he spent down on the Malabar Coast, 1792-4. The sums involved are described in full detail in the letter book and though not enormous compared to some fortunes sent back from Bengal, they do appear substantial enough to indicate that the family's subsequent rise from the merchant class might not have been due simply to Sam's successful dye business, as the family have always assumed: 'the Farmers put the red into redcoats' was the word around Nonsuch Park, the estate where Samuel set himself up as a country gentleman after William's death. I will return to this at greater length, later in this case study.

There are twelve letters from Sam to his brother, between 1772 and 1777, detailing his life in London, his business, the health and doings of their father, complaints about their mother and their elder half sister in Chelsea. He details his attempts to get preferment for William, imparts gossip about friends, and outlines his love life. The failure of his first attempt at courtship sends Samuel on an abbreviated Grand Tour, during which he is invited to a private meeting with the then Pope conducted entirely in Italian.<sup>2</sup> This encounter suggests, as does his frequent use of Latin and French tags, that the two brothers were well educated. (In one letter William explains attempts in patronage by Sir Francis Baring, of the banking family, was due to their having been school fellows: certainly, Baring's educational record in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* put him at Mr Fuller's Academy at Lothbury, a well-thought of private school not far from the Farmer family's home and dyeworks.)<sup>3</sup> Sam's command of Italian echoes later evidence of William's own language skills in India, including fluent Marathi, probable Persian, also working knowledge of Portuguese and, possibly of one of the languages of the Malabar.

There are two further letters from Sam. One, dated 1784 and addressed to the younger brother of his partner, Goodwin, in Virginia, suggests his involvement in the slave trade; the second dated 1810 to his son, William Meeke Farmer, refuses to advance him the funds he requested following his wife's first pregnancy but does make clear the by now considerable extent of Sam's landed property.

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Farmer to William Gamul Farmer (henceforth WGF), 29 March 1795. The letters are in the private possession of the Farmer family.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Farmer to WGF, 16 September 1795. For Baring, see John Orbell, 'Baring, Sir Francis, first baronet (1740–1810)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1382>].

The liveliest of the letters are five from William and Sam's mother, Margaret Farmer between 1775—1777. She was a difficult woman, evidently, complaining about everything and everyone and obsessed with money (not unreasonably, nominally an heiress, she was entirely dependent on largesse from her male relations, including by this time her two sons.) Finally there are four letters, addressed to William between 1776-7, two from Harding Stracey, a clerk in the House of Commons Committee Office, by the tone of the letters an old friend, and two from William Richardson, Company Secretary at the Company headquarters in Leadenhall Street. All touch on politics, East India Company affairs and gossip relating to both (Stracey's brother was recently retired from the Company service in Madras).

In comparison to the family letters, the letter book is a much more extensive collection of correspondence. Some letters, again, are to William's brother Sam, in England; others are to London bankers to whom he is intending to transmit his money. There is also one loving and personal letter to Sam's wife, Elizabeth, of whom William is clearly very fond. Many more—the majority—are to fellow East India Company servants, with some of whom he was clearly on affectionate terms. There are letters too to the Parsi or Portuguese merchants William did business with and to whom he wrote with equal respect and affection, together with several to Mr Murdock Brown down in Malabar, whose name will feature later. Many letters relate to his worries about sending home his fortune, worries caused by the French Revolution and the fears it aroused in England: 'if the mob has its way we will be 'republic of Albion' he wails, in a letter from Surat dated 23 June 1795. Later that year (29 December 1795) William can be found making arrangements for his sudden departure from India, selling horses and carriages, sending other goods to auction and listing the few things he wants to take with him. Though I have not yet been able to transcribe these letters fully –in numbers they far exceed the original group—I have made a précis of their contents and copied some relevant passages. Even at a glance they make clear just how embedded William Gamul Farmer was within the East India Company hierarchy, and how extensive and sometimes affectionate his acquaintance was with his correspondents, many of them Company hands, often with a much higher profile than his own. They include Jonathan Duncan, later Governor of Bombay, William Palmer of Delhi, one of William Dalrymple's "White Moghuls" and Sir Charles Malet, the Resident at Poonah [Pune].<sup>4</sup>

It is the very informality of these letters that makes them interesting; what they leave out is as informative as what they put in. They indicate the kind of forces that drove this Bombay servant during his life in India, how he managed and continued to nurture his family relationships from afar, and of how the family managed and fostered their

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<sup>4</sup> For Duncan, see Pamela Nightingale, 'Duncan, Jonathan (bap. 1756, d. 1811)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8224>]; for Palmer, see William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (London, 2002); for Malet, see David J. Howlett, 'Malet, Sir Charles Warre, first baronet (1753–1815)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17876>].

relationship with him, despite the parties being so distant in time and space. In this way, like other such letters, they help humanise our understanding of the effects and experience of Empire at home and abroad. Not least, in the way Sam passes on information about politics in London, and William describes events in India – particularly in the letters from Surat - they show, in informal terms, how ‘home’ became to seem ‘abroad’ and ‘abroad’ ‘home’ from the standpoint of the old India hand, no matter how he might continue to regard his original home in theory. Above all they make clear that what made India real for the Farmer family was William’s being there; his presence in India was far more significant to them than the nature of India itself. Sarah Pearsall, focusing on trade in the Atlantic world, suggests that it was common for middle-class families of that time to send one member away. She adds that ‘strange new locations could force some to cling ever more resolutely to family ties’ and that ‘these ties could often helped to enable imperial and colonial power. ...The family ....created worlds of trust and allowed for even long distances to be surmounted [helping] forge the tone of familiarity.’<sup>5</sup> William Gamul Farmer’s extensive correspondence allows us to trace these linkages between family, trade and empire from the perspective of the later eighteenth-century Indian Ocean world.

## II. The Farmer family

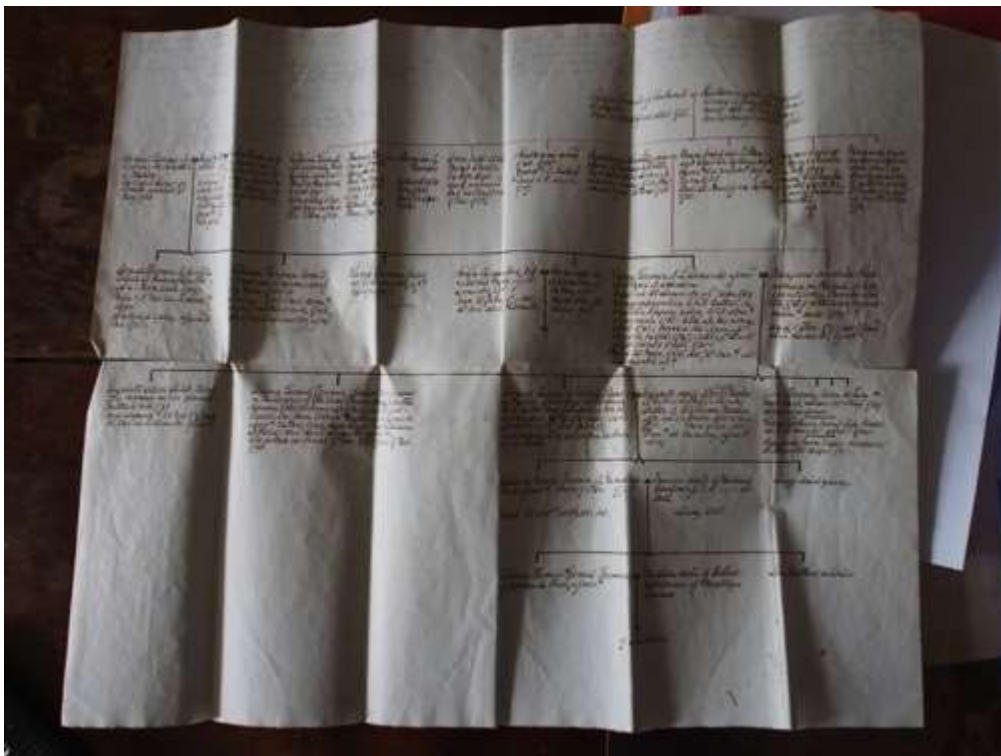


Figure 2. The Farmer family tree. Image courtesy of Penelope Farmer.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 13.

The two brothers, William and Samuel, born 14 months apart in 1746 and 1747, were the sons of George Farmer (1710-1784). Farmer was a successful scarlet dye-maker, living above the family business in Hogg Lane Shoreditch, half a mile or so from what is now Liverpool Street Station and prosperous enough by the time of William and Samuel's birth to employ three or four apprentices and to have premises substantial enough to house a family of eight.<sup>6</sup> Their mother, Margaret Shawalter, an heiress from Chester in Cheshire and their father's second wife, gave birth to several other children, none of whom lived beyond early childhood. The marriage was equally unsuccessful. By the time most of these letters were written, in the 1770s, the parents were separated, the father retired and living in the country, the mother mostly back in Cheshire, but spending the odd winter in lodgings in London. Unusually, the entire family lived apart. Sam, having served his dyers apprenticeship and taken on the dye works alongside his father's partner, Chamberlain Goodwin, remained in Hogg Lane. William was in India, while an elder half-sister, daughter of George's first wife, whose behaviour according to Sam 'would have disgraced an upper servant,' lived by herself in Chelsea.<sup>7</sup> The implied impropriety of such arrangements exercised Sam greatly when courting his future wife, in case it put her family off their marriage.

A stolid merchant family it was, however, in every other respect and defiantly English. The comments about France made after a sojourn by the brothers' father in Boulogne prefigure attitudes within my family that existed into my own generation. Writing to William on 8 July 1774, Sam asserted that their father 'left the place as the apostles did when they were not well received, that is he shook the dust from his feet and cursed them, their wine was so thin and fluxed him, add to that the difficulty of procuring pipes and tobacco, you will not wonder at his stay being very uncomfortable, he lost all his belly, the very sight of him convinced that there was not such good beef in France as we have here'. Similarly these letters reflect what was until recently the family's attitude to women—as does the fact that I, a history graduate, was never told that the letters existed. (Sam's statement on his half sister 'tis fortunate for the nation that Heaven has made her plain or she would have introduced the bend sinister into our coat of arms' is merely an extreme version of such attitudes.)<sup>8</sup> This tone to the family voice leaps out from the letters, not least in the constant complaints of the mother, Margaret Farmer, and in the complaints about her by her younger son, who also referred to the assets brought to him by his wife as his.<sup>9</sup> Margaret was clearly a difficult woman and such attitudes were then the norm, but you cannot help feeling for her, dependent as she was and even passed over by her own aunts who left the family estate not to her but her eldest son, William. Trailblazers these sons were not in this or any other way, and no more intellectually curious than some, if not all, of their male descendants.

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Diana Tillman for her very helpful work on the Farmer family.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Farmer to WGF 26 April 1796.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Farmer to WGF 8 July 1777.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Farmer to WGF 6 March 1777.

More significant, however, was how close the two brothers obviously remained throughout William's life, despite the geographical distance between them – a closeness that has been shown in other case studies here —for example, the Russell brothers of [Swallowfield Park, Berkshire](#).<sup>10</sup> Such closeness between siblings may have been not so unusual then or in the following century: Jane Austen's life and novels are full of it. My Farmer grandmother's diary between 1877-9, makes clear that apart from husband-trawling seasons in London, her social life too consisted largely of her many siblings, some of whom she continued to support throughout their lives.<sup>11</sup> In Sam and William's case their dysfunctional family may have made them still closer. 'Sam is a good lad' his brother said in his first letter home (October 1763), and so he remained, judging by his willingness to send William what he asked for. Despite the fact that none of Sam's letters to William after 1778 survived, the correspondence that remains makes clear that they kept in continuous contact throughout William's years in India. Not least he depended on Sam to supply his needs: clothing, hats, riding boots, medicines, claret, and, latterly, seeds for his garden. Their mother sends jars of her own preserves and the odd Cheshire cheese. These latter presumably were gratis: Sam's efforts, in contrast, were not. Ever the merchant, he sends full accounts in his letters of what William owed him for these goods, as well as William's share of support for their mother that Sam has advanced her. William for his part sends home shawls for his half-sister and for his sister-in-law after Sam's marriage. These often elaborate and expensive pieces of cloth were a common way of bringing India to the family at home throughout this period.<sup>12</sup>

The closeness between the siblings may have also have been augmented by their geographical separation. In an imperial context family remained the one constant for the absent member, living in a world barely comprehended by those back at home. It was what the absent one depended on for retaining his sense of identity as an Englishman as well as for more material things they sent him, from clothes to homemade preserves. Similar intimacy between separated siblings in the nineteenth has been shown elsewhere: in Macaulay's letters from India to his sister Margaret and in Murdoch's Stewart's references in his Memoir from Canada to his elder brother back in Scotland, for instance.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Margot Finn, 'Swallowfield Park, Berkshire', <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/case-studies-2/swallowfield-park-berkshire/>.

<sup>11</sup> Penelope Farmer, *Sisters: An Anthology* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), p. xvii ff.

<sup>12</sup> Margot C. Finn, 'Colonial Gifts: Family Politics and the Exchange of Goods in British India, c. 1780-1820', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40, 1 (2006), 203-231.

<sup>13</sup> See Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), and Elizabeth Vibert, 'Writing "Home": Sibling Intimacy and Mobility in a Scottish Colonial Memoir', in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, (eds), *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (Irbana, IL: University of Indiana Press, 2009), 67-88.



Figure 3. Penelope Farmer and Margot Finn with the manuscripts.  
Image courtesy of Ellen Filor.

Before the letters surfaced, I had only known of the family connection with India via a set of 1789 accounts for a business in Bombay, which appeared after my father's death and set me combing East India Company records for the surprisingly extensive evidence of this unknown ancestor's career in India. William Gamul Farmer's trips to Madras and Calcutta are recorded and the displeasure of his superiors at his belated return to Bombay: so too are his knowledge of Marathi and appointment as Secretary to the Maratha committee in 1777. His year as hostage in the Maratha camp between 1779 and 1780 and his attempts to extricate himself, in particular, are covered in a whole series of letters and documents.<sup>14</sup>

With or without the background knowledge, reading the letters themselves has been a far more affecting experience. Through this correspondence, my eighteenth-century family leapfrogs over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries straight into the hands and feelings of the twenty-first, colouring the official material in a much more gossipy, personal and recognisable way, not least by demonstrating those enduring family characteristics. The young William's letter written from Bombay shortly after his arrival in 1763, along with another very affectionate letter to his father in 1774 are particularly revealing and touching, as are Sam's accounts of his adventures in love in the 1770s. Sarah Pearsall comments that 'family letters collections demonstrate that familiarity while certainly not the only style was the major note struck.'<sup>15</sup> Such a note, I should add,

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<sup>14</sup>IOR/P/D/62-5, British Library, African & Asian Studies.

<sup>15</sup>Pearsall, *Atlantic Families*, p. 13.



though invariable in the letters of Margaret Farmer, was not always apparent in her sons' more political and commercially oriented communications. Yet they, too, when relating to family matters, take quite a different tone: the affection with which William addressed his father in 1774 makes the point precisely. 'I daresay when I arrive in England again you will be an overmatch for me in walking. The affair of the shot in your arm might have been very serious one and you may thank God for the escape. If I was inclined to be superstitious there is great room to imagine that it was an immediate interposition of providence in favour of the poor partridges for I observe you say that it hindered your sporting about three weeks – in that time .....the young partridges begin to fly strong – and then my dear sir I believe there is no need to tell you – they are fully out of danger from you' (16 January 1794).

Such letters humanise later less sympathetic reputations – William's questionable dealings down in Malabar, for instance, and Sam's curmudgeonly public record as an MP between 1810 and 1818, voting for the suspension of Habeas Corpus and against Catholic Relief.<sup>16</sup> It has been suggested to me by Diana Tillman, a Nonsuch historian, that the very openness, not to say intimacy, of this correspondence may have been due, partly, to the distance between the correspondents; feelings – grievances – affections could be more openly revealed and discussed with someone far away than with someone closer at hand.

Here, for instance, are the two rather touching letters about Sam's courtship and marriage to a Miss Elizabeth Meeke written between 1776 and 1777. The union had been embarked on because of his need to make a profitable marriage, and the letters initially evoke a dispassionate description of his intended bride's physical and moral qualities. On 26 April 1776 Sam wrote that 'She is above the middle size and well-made but rather stoops her neck, upon the whole is rather a fine-looking woman, her complexion is fair, fine blue eyes, good nose and fine hair, her face too wide around, her teeth small and even but not of good ivory but not black, her temper all gentleness and love, was never seen in ill humour or in a passion, she is sensible, but it is concealed by her timidity and diffidence'.

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<sup>16</sup> R.G Thorne, *History of Parliament online*, Record for Samuel Farmer MP: <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/farmer-samuel-1748-1839>.



Figure 4. Shawl. Kashmir, India. Early nineteenth century. IS.2081A-1883. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Less than a year later, on 6 March 1777, Sam reveals he has fallen in love. 'I have been in possession of the best of women since the 16<sup>th</sup> of last November, it would be doing her an injustice not to say that at the same time she is the best of wives.... I informed you in my last letter that she was tall and genteel, good complexion and hair and very fine eyes, she wants nothing but fine teeth to be judged a very handsome woman indeed.' (He can't quite forget about the teeth; in a world of much sugar consumption, black English teeth and toothache are perhaps the slaves' revenge.) His love is confirmed, by the recent and coincidental appearance, of a harp, now the property of an American harpist, but first bought by Sam for his wife in 1782 for £150, which would have been at the time a very large sum. (According to the present owner, he paid rather more than he needed; business acumen deserted him in this private matter.) William, too, appears to have been fond of his sister-in-law; in the later letters he enquires after her tenderly and promises to send her those shawls from India. And the one letter to her that appeared in the letter book, 19 November 1795, more than confirms his affection.

The outpourings of the mother, Margaret Farmer, are still more intimate. They complain of everything: her family, her health, her doctor, her younger son, Sam, his new wife – 'she is only a merchant's daughter but sets up for a woman of quality. She made me a visit of an hour and a half since I came to town and in that time I had enough of her' (3 March 1777). In a previous letter (5 February 1777) she had already decried Sam's over-expensive coach 'It is quite in taste painted an Apple Green and the armes [*sic.*] in brown. But the liveries are ridiculous, a maroon colour turned up with apple green laced with narrow silver lace at the cape and cuffs with silver tassels on the shoulder.' Above all she complains of her lack of financial independence especially after the family

estate owned by her aunts was left over her head to her elder son: ('You are to know I have since found out when he [Sam Farmer] persuaded them to alter their wills I had the house in Barn Lane and £50 a year from the Estate which would not have enabled me to live in any very sumptuous [*sic.*] manner but it was too much for a woman who will first and last bring a fortune of ten thousand pounds.' (15 December 1775.)

William's sojourn in India she bewails throughout her correspondence with him, attempting to persuade him to come home for good. She promises him his own rooms in her house in cold Chester, and imagines happy tête-a-têtes on winter evenings. On 23 April 1777, Margaret wrote longingly that 'they have got the Chester Playhouse hired but what signify's if there will be no Plays in winter those evenings are dreadful there ... I think if you and I was to gather there we cd pass em away cheerful'. It was a prospect that might well have explained William's failure to return to England permanently until just before his death. Apart from the sadness of women separated from their young by the growth of the Empire, these letters reveal little of India and EIC matters. Yet but for the future Empire they would not have been written. They are also exceptionally entertaining, full of contemporary and sometimes scandalous gossip, both private and public, of the kind of which William and his fellows would have been deprived, and might well have looked for. Her description on 23 April 1777 of her successful and intelligent pursuit of the family patron, Lord Sandwich, on behalf of a protégé suggests real and frustrated ability with nothing to do and nowhere to go as her main problem, at the same time demonstrating the influence women could have even then where rare opportunity offered.

This last point helps illustrate something else that the letters make clear: the close connection the family had with the East India Company – Lord Sandwich being the patron they looked to for help in advancing William's career with the company, though without a great deal of success. Many of Sam's letters recount meetings with Sandwich and in one he outlines his lively defence of John Herbert's behaviour in Balambangan, in the EIC council; he is very proud of his oratory here and his presence indicates that he was an EIC proprietor. William's first letter from India, in October 1763, sending thanks to a range of EIC names, from Rous to Manship and the Moffatt brothers (not excluding Lord Clive himself), suggests that the family business was part of a healthy trading network that enabled William's writership in the first place.

The decision to send William abroad would largely have been made by the men involved – not least the boy himself, fired by this prospect of adventure – on commercial and practical grounds. A mother's regret at losing her son appeared to be of no account. Margaret wrote on 5 Feb 1777: 'Sorry I am from my soul that you ever went to India but I never was considered a person of any consequence. Mr and Mrs Goodwin were the people always consulted, indeed you was so much set upon it that I learned to reconcile to what I cd not prevent in the belief that if young boys were crop'd out of employment they like themselves it hurts their spirits.' Interestingly, one woman was involved in this

decision, but not Margaret. Yet if it was George Farmer himself, his partner (Mr Goodwin) and Goodwin's wife who urged the decision—a decision occasioned, possibly, by the bad behaviour for which William apologises in this first letter—they would have depended on inevitably male EIC connections. The fact of William's having, unusually, been allowed to stay in the captain's cabin during the voyage out - 'he took very particular notice of me which is very seldom done and even lodged me in his apartment' - the captain was one of the Moffatt brothers (a prominent merchant family) - and of his being invited to dinner by a member of the Bombay council, shortly after his arrival, also implies good connections within the Honourable Company.

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What leaps out from these letters is that India for the two brothers was above all a trading resource: nothing but 'a large warehouse', was how William described his Surat territory to Jonathan Duncan on 8 May 1795. This was an attitude noted, disapprovingly, by contemporaries such as William Macintosh, who decried the young men who, he claimed, 'generally set out for [India] with ideas of acquiring wealth, which ideas being nourished not only by example but advice and exhortation soon grew up into the dominant passion of the heart and ruling principal of the mind'.<sup>17</sup> This comment was borne out by the contemporary criticism of 'Nabobs', the nickname given to the wealthy merchants who returned to England to throw their financial and political weight about, after making their fortune in India, like those described in other studies here.<sup>18</sup> In reality they were a small minority of the company servants who had headed out to India in the first place, hopeful of such riches (among whom might be numbered William himself).

Money is the letters' chief subject throughout, not unreasonably, given the precariousness of such lives, where fear of bankruptcy stalked even the successful. Bankruptcy had destroyed Margaret Farmer's protégé's father, as it had destroyed some of Sam's fellow businessmen. ('I hope the exaggerated accounts of the bankruptcies here have not alarmed you,' Sam writes on 15 February 1773). Empire builders, bringing civilisation to the benighted 'Hindoo' in the way recommended by Thomas Macaulay seventy-five years later, the Farmers were not, any more than they were evangelical zealots out to convert the heathen like many of their other successors. (Most of the rare appeals to the Almighty are to be found in the letters from Margaret Farmer - and are of the most conventional kind.) There is no evidence in the family letters that William fell in love with the subcontinent, adopting its mores and its dress, in the manner of the 'White Moghuls' described by William Dalrymple, even if the letters in the letter book give a more nuanced picture of his life in India. Certainly he complains of much - calling some of his Indian contacts 'thieves and rogues'.

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<sup>17</sup> William Macintosh, *Travels in Europe Asia and Africa* (London: J. Murray, 1782), pp. 250-253.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the concept of the nabob see esp. Helen Clifford, 'The Dundas Property Empire and Nabob Taste', <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/aske-hall-yorkshire/>.

At the same time the more personal letters, particularly the ones to Sir Charles Malet and William Palmer, both of whom had established Indian families, indicate that he wholly accepted their way of life. He asks to be remembered to Palmer's Indian wife, adding 'I remember her in 74 when she was young and very pretty and I was young, No need to be jealous – of your females I only troubled the Mattranney,' suggesting that he himself was far from unsusceptible to the charms of Indian women. He ends this letter 'Yr faithful and affectionate friend', indicating the strength of the friendship even though till the time of writing the two had not recently been in touch (17 June 1795). This was more evidence of how deeply embedded he was in Indian life in every respect, not surprisingly given how much of it he spent in the Durbars of Indian Rajahs and negotiating with Hindu and Parsee businessmen – not to mention the year he spent as hostage in the Indian army camp. His letters to his chief business colleague, the Parsi merchant Dady Nasserwanjee always begin 'Dear Friend Dady,' he sends diwali greetings to another, Hindu, contact, and frequently uses Hindi words in this correspondence, in particular the Hindi word for 'fate' whether in relation to his life or theirs. Earlier on his career, according to the letters from his London business colleagues Richardson and Stacey, he had pleaded the cause of another Parsi colleagues being fleeced by impecunious English officers (10 March 1775 and 6 April 1776). And he also insisted on proper provision for other Indian colleagues and for his 'loyal' servant at his departure for England in 1796. But this did not stop his attitudes hardening over time. Pamela Nightingale in *Trade and Empire in Western India* quotes Farmer as suggesting, in 1789, that the Company should not leave trade to 'Crew of Parsees in whose welfare the State has no interest and who on every occasion have plucked the Company without mercy'.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, William was what Thomas Macaulay later called 'one of the young men who came out as Company servants and for whom banishment is their emancipation'.<sup>20</sup> He was one of those who, unlike Macaulay, had become far so accustomed to what they saw around them as to regard India as normal if not always to be accepted as it stood. It was a world with which such men had to contend socially and professionally throughout their careers, especially in Bombay where English and Indian lived in much closer contact. One near contemporary, Maria Graham, in her *Journal of a Residence in India*, published in 1812, complained of being much further from Indian life in Madras and Calcutta, places which William also knew.<sup>21</sup> Macaulay, in contrast, retreated thankfully from closer contact with Indian life to a house in Calcutta surrounded by a garden and never ventured into the world beyond without shuddering at the immorality and squalor – 'a dozen half-naked blacks!' - described in an early letter home to his sister Margaret.<sup>22</sup> The much more pragmatic accounts of William himself, let alone the more

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<sup>19</sup> Pamela Nightingale, *Trade and Empire in Western India, 1784-1806* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Cited by Hall, *Macaulay and Son*, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Graham, *Journal of a Residence in India* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1812), p.136.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Hall, *Macaulay and Son*, p. 216.

lyrical - sometimes even dazzled - accounts in James Forbes' *Oriental Memoirs* (published in 1813) seem to come from quite different sensibilities, another world. (Even if Forbes, in later life did advocate converting the 'Hindoo' to Christianity.)

I have a further point to make before detailing William's career more fully. It is a philosophical rather than historical point that would apply to all communication between London and India at this date, given the distance between them and the length of time between letters and reports being written and their arrival in the hands of the intended recipient – not least because ships of that period were only able to sail at certain seasons of the year, in order to utilise more favourable winds and tides. Time has two different faces. On the one hand there is the linear time that the letter-writer is living through and describing. On the other there are the discrete moments in time, the snapshots, read by the recipient. The writer does not know as he or she writes where the recipient is, even if he or she is still alive. (Sam around 1775 complains as he writes that he does not know where to send the letters or whether or when they will reach William, currently – he thinks – somewhere between Calcutta and Madras.) The contemporary reader likewise does not know exactly how or where the writer is, six months having passed since the letter was written. This leads to various kinds of redundancy: here on 8 July 1774 is Sam, for instance, sending a millstone for William's Biscuit Factory after he has closed it and Sam again, in the same month in 1774, chiding William for not writing to their father, though a letter had been despatched in January 1774. And here he is being asked to send the seeds for William's garden in a letter that would have arrived after William had left India for good. Finally, in the EIC records of late 1795, Sam asks permission to send his brother a case of claret, just as William was about to leave Surat—permission fortunately was not granted.

I am also conscious of how little those back in England would have known about the real nature of life in India. They would have known about the health problems – William complains in his first letter about having fallen victim to the 'bloody flux' – dysentery – and they would have known about the malaria he suffered from and which probably killed him in the end. But how much they could have known - or at least comprehended - about his lodging, his environment, the climate, his travels within India, is harder to gauge. He may have been more open in his earlier letters to Sam; he claims he had told him more about the voyage out than he has time to tell his father. But these letters do not survive and those to his father are determinedly upbeat, even if he complains in the 1774 letter, as throughout his career in India, how difficult it is to make money there. But literary William is not: though many letters have not survived it seems unlikely he would have made the detailed, scholarly, almost thrilled descriptions of the country found in the *Oriental Memoirs* of his near contemporary James Forbes– who mentioned William as an 'intimate acquaintance'.<sup>23</sup> Forbes' memoirs were not published till the 1813 edition – edited, unfortunately, by a pious daughter and at a time when

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<sup>23</sup>Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, vol. I, p. 548.

contemporary accounts of India were beginning to flood out – and descriptions of life in India through the second half of the eighteenth century were much rarer. Many were related to the captive narratives, discussed by Linda Colley, some of these by women of dubious reputation – Eliza Fay and Elizabeth Marsh, for instance.<sup>24</sup> If any of these volumes fell into the hands of the Farmer family the letters do not say.

The Farmers might have recognised - and been bored by - the stultifying English social life of Bombay, an island only a mile in length and lacking in English women. Sam might have been comfortable with the atmosphere of a place where, according to George Paterson in 1769 'trade and the means of getting money is [men's] principal pursuit'.<sup>25</sup> But could they have imagined the heat of a Bombay summer or the fury of the monsoon? Or for that matter the prevalence of various kinds of wild life indoors and out of which later residents such as Mrs Sherwood complained? Could they have imagined the 'execrable material effects' of climate described by Macaulay?<sup>26</sup> Could they have understood that Bombay, with a relatively pleasant climate, as noted by James Forbes among others –the malaria inducing marshes by now mostly drained - was quite possibly rather less noisome and dirty than their own filthy and stinking city? William's family lived after all above the dye works, a notoriously smelly business and eighteenth-century London was far from being the 'so clean city' that surprised Indian visitors to my house in the 1980s. (An older man added; 'but your people are so dirty', a statement still more true in the eighteenth century: one of the many complaints made against nabobs when they returned to England was that they had picked up the effete Indian habit of washing daily).<sup>27</sup>

William, on the other hand, would have less difficulty in imagining life in England. He made several home visits (the first in 1768) spending two or three years in England between 1780 and 1784, and both his mother and his brother filled him in on life as it went on. Latterly he even tried to import something more of it than European dress - hence the seeds for his 'English' garden. His mother's gossip about the Duchess of Devonshire's dangerous metal corsets might have seemed very remote from Bombay but at least he could have appreciated the context and maybe been grateful to feel some connection to his family's world. John Gillis' distinction between home as the family we live *in* and home as the family we live *by* seems apposite here.<sup>28</sup> William never created a family in India to live in: the family he grew up in, thousands of miles away, was the one he lived *by*, as these letters suggest.

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<sup>24</sup> Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002); idem., *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (London: HarperPress, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Pamela Nightingale, *Fortune and Integrity: A Study of the Moral Attitudes in the Indian Diary of George Paterson, 1769-1774* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, *Macaulay and Son*, p. 238.

<sup>27</sup> William Dalrymple, quoted in Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.171.

<sup>28</sup> John Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual and a Quest for Family Values* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

### III. William Gamul Farmer's career

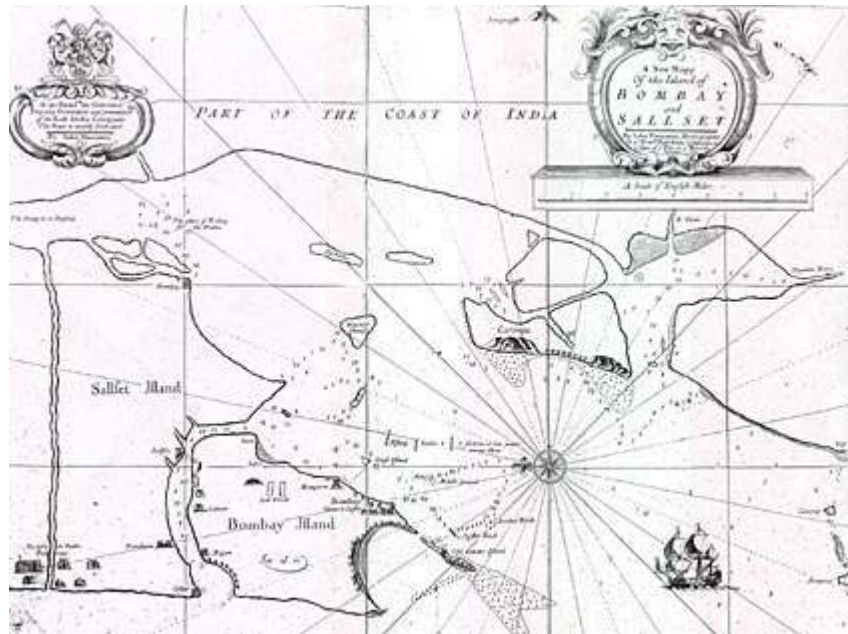


Figure 5. Map of Bombay.

Nine writers were appointed to the Bombay residency in 1763 according to EIC records.<sup>29</sup> Of five there is no trace later than 1768. One more survived until his return to England in 1780. Two appear in the records till the 1790s. William's death in January 1798, at 51, made him long-lived by these standards, though not by those of his long-lived family – Sam survived till the age of 93. India was a notoriously unhealthy place for Europeans at that time.<sup>30</sup> In part, this high mortality rate was due to tropical diseases, malaria in particular: one of William's requests to his brother is for 'bark' otherwise quinine, then the only remedy (December 1789). But it was also in part because of their failure to adapt their habits to the climate. According to one contemporary observer, 'many newcomers shorten their days by a mode of life unsuitable to the climate, eating great quantities of beef and pork and drinking copiously of the strong wines of Portugal in the hottest season. In addition they persisted in wearing European dress which restricted the free circulation of the blood and made the heat more intolerable by confining the limbs.'<sup>31</sup>

William's petition for an EIC writership was standard; it included proof of baptism, of having been educated in writing and accounts, ('a regular course of accountancy after the Garton method') and also the standard promise 'to behave himself with the utmost Diligence and Fidelity and is ready to give such Security as your Honours shall

<sup>29</sup> General letter to Bombay 1762, OIR/E/4/33, British Library.

<sup>30</sup> Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European death rates in India remained high. See Philip D. Curtin, *Death by Migration: Europe's Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia and Other Countries in The East*, (1763), Volume 2 p. 375.



require.<sup>32</sup> The man who recommended him was an Edward Ward, presumably an EIC proprietor, though he is not one of the Company names mentioned in William's first letter from Bombay in October 1763.

William sounds hopeful of commercial success at first, although he does complain that 'Bombay is not a place for Writers just come out, everything of necessaries is very dear. Our allowance of 30 rupees a month [£3.10] really not enough for subsistence. There never was anyone ever so parsimonious that could make it serve.' He has not much help from his superiors. 'Upon my first landing I was introduced to the governour and delivered my letters. He took no notice of them nor as much as mentioned them to me such is the effect of letters of recommendation. The Governour indeed is a very particular man, he has been a Drudge to the Services all his lifetime.' But he had better welcome from Mr Spencer, an old India hand and a close ally of Lawrence Sullivan, later chairman of the East India Company in London. 'Mr Burgess' letter to Mr Spencer I hardly know what to say about. Mr Spencer sent for me and told me I had been very strongly recommended by Mr Burgess, he made no promise of serving me he very seldom does but if he sees a person sober and steady at business that has been recommended to him he always takes notice of that. I had an invitation to dinner, a thing not a very common.'

William, of course, like all company servants at that date, was allowed to conduct his own, private, trade whenever he was not put to company business. (Company business, meant, at the beginning of his career, endlessly copying EIC correspondence within India and to and from London; his title 'writer' meant exactly what it said.) As he points out in this first letter, the Company paid its servants far too little to live on. They had to make money for themselves – or go bankrupt as some in Bombay did, while others returned home without fortunes.<sup>33</sup> This system continued in Bombay till the early nineteenth century; it was the source of the fortunes that were made then – and that had been made in Bengal for many years if among the few rather than the many. It was also the source of the corruption so derided in England in popular description of nabobs, and the reason for the eventual prohibition on private trade first in the Bengal and Madras presidencies and subsequently in the Bombay presidency following the suspect fortunes made, like William's, down on the Malabar coast. William himself in the letter book complains that the profits and efficiency of the Company were much undermined by servant's private trade, and is also highly critical of a system which sent many of them to take up office in places where they did not speak the language and had very little idea of local cultural and legal norms—something the Company began to amend itself at the end of the eighteenth century. Understanding language, law and

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<sup>32</sup> Personal Records, IOR/ J/1/432, p. 367, British Library.

<sup>33</sup> See Peter Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes* (Clarendon Press 1976). For trade and risk in India in this period, see Holden Furber, *John Company at Work: A Study of European Expansion in India in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), and Huw Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

culture was something that William, on the other hand, unusually, appears to have sought out for himself, which may partly have explained his friendships with Malet and Palmer, both much closer to Indian life than the norm.

Company servants were not, of course, allowed to compete with Company trade - much less profitable in Bombay than in Bengal. Nor could they trade directly with England, but had to send goods east, to China, for example. In particular they were not allowed to compete with Bombay in its chief trade in raw cotton and later pepper.

However 'sober and steady at business' William might have tried to be he had little luck in early years; pickings in Bombay were few, unlike in Bengal. Fortunately his investments were not always so ill advised as the loan the sixteen-year-old mentions making to the impecunious Mr Waters, without serious attempt to discover if Mr Waters would ever be in a position to repay him. But the loan, in 'respondentia,' - that is lending money to other merchants to buy ships' cargoes - was one way of making money he continued to use through his career in India, successfully enough, judging by the sums his letters claim that he hopes to bring home. Pamela Nightingale, for example, refers to his lending by respondentia in 1789.<sup>34</sup>

Despite his managing to stay alive unlike so many of his fellows, William was not without health problems- in particular chronic malaria to judge from his descriptions of the symptoms that forced him to give up his Chiefship at Surat at very short notice in late 1795 and that probably led to his death in England barely two years later. By 1768 he was already having problems of other kind; he requests and is granted the right to return to England for a while for the sake of his health. (In 1769 he is given permission to return to his post). In 1772 he is appointed Assistant to the Marine Storekeeper, one of the posts available to still junior company servants and presumably a good source of information on matters of ships' cargoes etc. But in the second letter to his father, of 1774, written in the affectionate tone that the father evokes in both sons, while indicating that he is surviving financially he also complains how much harder it has become to make money because of the political situation. 'When I was in India before I could have lent taking the tune of £10,000 a year safely on respondentia ... now it is difficult to lend one rupee safely insomuch that I think it best to let my money lay at the common interest of 9% which I can lay by and keep corresponding yearly.... and with that economy live on the Company allowance... which everything included is only £126 a year and this is little enough let me tell for one who has been in their service now going on 11 years- if had not got the Bakehouse to employment I do not know what I should have done.' (The Bakehouse was a factory making hard tack, the staple seaman's diet: William's attachment to the Marine Storekeeper must have been useful here too. Setting up the bakery appears to have been a piece of typical private initiative on his behalf: throughout his career, the ever-increasing sums he claims he will be able to

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<sup>34</sup> Nightingale, *Trade in Western India*, p. 79.

bring home do suggest that he succeeded in making more money in Bombay than many of his contemporaries, even if not quite the legitimate fortune he was hoping for.) He adds: 'the greatest profit.... is supplying the Company's fighting vessels here with Biscuit I do not know what I should have done – in the last year here between you and me I made one thousand pounds of it but do not expect to make this year more than 500 and shall be content with that for among other reductions the Company have lessened their Marine Force here almost a half, the consequence of which you know must be that there will be fewer biscuits cracked.' (This was due to the dire financial straits of the Bombay Presidency, always a much less profitable station than Bengal and Madras.)

William goes on to claim that with all his other financial strategies he should be able to return to England within four years with £8000, not yet the great fortune that his father might have hoped for but one he could live on. 'The more I think of it the more I approve of my Plan especially when I consider there is no one depends upon me at present for provision nor I believe ever will be, for unless a man is governed by an unknown destiny in the act of marriage I think I shall die a bachelor.' This last statement negates both his mother's and his brother's attempts to interest him in this 'flirt' or that; that the letter is more or less contemporaneous with his affection for William Palmer's girls might explain in part his lack of interest.

But nor did William leave India: he did not return to England for good until just before his death, despite the period of three or four years he spent there in the 1780s. The letter (17 June 1795) to Palmer states that he had only returned to India because he had invested his money in what he called 'manufactory' and lost it all. On the other hand he had not resigned his post meanwhile, which might suggest an ambivalence about his absence. As for marriage - whether his warring parents put him off it altogether, or he did not see himself as making enough to support an English wife, an expensive business in Bombay, and/or he would have preferred to set himself up with an Indian *bibi* or two like Malet or Palmer or his own first governor, Crommlin - it is impossible to know. He left no will in Bombay providing for any dependents, but this does not mean he had none, any more than the lack of records in the IOR series of any unofficial marriage or of any births or christenings resulting from such a union prove that he remained permanently unattached. Leaving Malet and Palmer aside, he would have had the opportunity, both in Bombay and elsewhere to consort with *nautch* (dancing) girls; in Bombay, parties to which the local Parsi traders invited customers such as William often included *nautch* girls dancing. Down in Madras, after parties at the palaces of local Indian *nawabs*, unmarried Englishmen were reported to go home with the dancers. That said, the Farmers being a conventionally respectable family – the horror evoked by the behaviour of Sam and William's half-sister is significant - it was more than likely he would have kept such attachments to himself. He lived, moreover, in a society of bachelors: very few wives came out to India before the nineteenth century, and even

some of the official ones were Anglo-Indian.<sup>35</sup> Many other bachelors did not marry until they returned to England for good.



Figure 6. Penelope Farmer with the family letters. Image courtesy of Ellen Filor.

The EIC records and, tangentially, the family letters, record that in 1774 William was given permission to go to Madras on private business and that from there was sent to Calcutta as assistant to a John Taylor, a more senior Bombay Servant charged with explaining a recent treaty to the government there. In November 1776 Taylor died. Farmer was again in Madras on business – his Bombay masters complained of his long absence there, and Sam complained of not knowing where his brother was: their mother referred to letters coming from ‘Calcutter.’ (15 and 20 December 1795). Back in England meantime William had been made heir over his mother’s head to her family’s run-down estate in Cheshire. Despite her chagrin, her letters of this date, attempting to entice him home, were all about the orchard she had had planted for him, and about other attempts she was making to bring the neglected estate up to scratch. All this was interwoven with the description of a burglary at her house, probably instigated by a maidservant – ‘I got one that let a gang into my house at a celler window and robbed me of more than 30 in cloaths and other things. I heard ‘em in the house but would not ring for fear that I should in coming to me be murdered’, and by descriptions of her attempts to find a doctor to cure her of unspecified ailments (15 December 1795).<sup>36</sup> Later she finds lodgings in London for the winter, only to be forced to move because of the noisy young man downstairs (3 March 1777).

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<sup>35</sup> See esp. Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> OIR Personal Records II, p. 83, British Library.

Money continued to be a problem throughout this period, as did William's health. In 1777 he was one of the signatories to a letter from all the Company servants to the Council complaining about the inadequacies of the company salaries.<sup>37</sup> Shortly after, he was permitted to go to Poonah 'for his health' by which chance he was in a position at a time of political crisis to give important intelligence of the Designs of a Monsieur St Lubin, who was endeavouring to conclude an Alliance with the Marathas. (The Marathas were the warlike Indian rulers throughout the territory of the Bombay Presidency, whom the Bombay directorate attempted unsuccessfully during two wars in the 1770s to drive back, while working, more successfully, to keep out the French.) In 1778 William, still in Poonah and with the Maratha problem increasing, was appointed Secretary to the Poonah Committee; two months later he was appointed, too, Marathi translator. There was no indication whether he had learned Marathi while in Poona or whether he had acquired the language in Bombay. The language used among themselves by his Parsi colleagues was Persian, a language William may have acquired, as he did others – certainly, according to a letter to Sam in 1789, he encouraged a protégé to learn it. In the diary of his travels sent to the Bombay Council in December 1793 when he was supervisor of the Malabar province, he complains of having to translate some of his dealings into Portuguese, and appears to indicate some knowledge of the local language besides.<sup>38</sup>

William Gamul Farmer's knowledge of Marathi was probably one reason he was, along with a Lieutenant Stuart, left as hostage in the camp of the general, Scindia after his defeat of the Company forces in January 1779. The two remained there until March of the following year. No word of this experience to or from William's family survives, though there is a request from Sam Farmer noted in the EIC court records, 27 April 1780, asking for steps to be taken for the release of his brother.<sup>39</sup> Of the (relatively) contemporary references to it, that appeared in English publications one reports William asking if he and Stuart – both young men still - could swim in a river there: they were refused permission on the grounds that the river probably flowed to the sea and that the Englishmen as water people 'might escape that way'.<sup>40</sup> The other reference, this time by James Forbes, has William, his 'intimate acquaintance contriving to send me secretly a few words concealed within the tube of a very small quill, run into the messenger's ear, to inform me of the enemy's determination to recapture Dhuboy; advising me [.....] to make the best terms possible and deliver up the keys to the Maratha sirdar as all resistance would be vain.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Selections from the letters, despatches and other state papers preserved in the Bombay Secretariat: Home Series*. Ed Forrest (Bombay, Government Central Press 1887), p.197.

<sup>38</sup> IOR/P/E/6: 1793 pp. 58-66, British Library.

<sup>39</sup> IOR/L/L/2/21, British Library.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Moor, *The Hindu Pantheon* (London, 1810), note p. 359.

<sup>41</sup> Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, Vol II, p. 548.

This was not an easy year for William. To summarise a large amount of correspondence in the EIC records, William was continually asking for money for his various expenses in Scindia's camp, was in constant danger because of the Company's immediate failure to keep the terms of the treaty, and because of his supply of secret information to General Goddard commander of the Company army. He was also forced to bribe some of Scindia's men to prevent them roughing him up and in the end had to pay his own ransom, recouping it from the Bombay Presidency with much difficulty and only with the aid of Warren Hastings himself.<sup>42</sup> It was not surprising that later in his career he so resented his treatment by the Company and expressed his sense that it owed him something for his pains.

Certainly William's long and sometimes dangerous sojourn in the Poonah area would have deepened his knowledge of an India, that he appears, socially, geographically and linguistically too to have known as well or better than most. John Rennell, the geographer, thanked him for providing information that improved the accuracy of his mapping of the area around Poonah.<sup>43</sup> The close friendship with Charles Malet long-time resident at Poonah there almost certainly stemmed from this time.

Allowed by the Company to go to England after his ordeal, as reported to William Palmer (17 June 1795), on his return to India in 1785 Farmer was awarded his first post as Chief, at Fort Victoria, a very small settlement, sixty miles from Bombay, definitely not a lucrative posting. The Chiefship he really wanted and seemed to think he had earned was that of Surat. But when Ramsay, its Chief, resigned early in 1787, John Griffiths, William's junior, already at Surat as Ramsay's deputy, was appointed to the post, something of which William complained bitterly in a letter from Fort Victoria in February 1787.<sup>44</sup> He protested in vain; his next posting was the Chiefship of Tannah on the Island of Salsette, all now part of the city of Bombay.

Tannah where William remained between 1789 and 1792 was not much more profitable than Fort Victoria, though it did produce the first surviving family letters for eleven years: two from William to Sam (3 July, December), in handwriting by now much deteriorated. Here William shows himself the old India hand, advising newcomers on how to get on in India. Of one boy he says: 'the best thing for him is to leave him some years where he is as that will form him to the habit and knowledge of public business whereas removing a young man from Bombay tho it betters his present income generally renders him indolent and ignorant for ever from the want of sufficient occupation.' Another boy he has taken with him to Tannah, 'which will keep him from bad company and bad habits most of all which prevail in a large and mixed company.' This was also the boy he had taught Persian. He still talks of coming home – if all comes through he hopes to return with £15,000, which together with his inheritance, he

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<sup>42</sup> IOR/P/D/65, p.342, British Library.

<sup>43</sup> James, Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindostan: or the Mogul Empire* (London, 1788), p. 148.

<sup>44</sup> Nightingale, *Trade and Empire*, p. 74.

considers would be sufficient to live on comfortably. In one letter he provides the usual list of requirements – thin pairs of shoes, thick ones, boots (very precise here: *'military boots that is without tops, the same all the way up, waxed leather, buckram will not do.'*) He also requested bottles of some stuff called 'Dalbrosian' and more of 'Chary', tincture of Bark – i.e. quinine. Sam is clearly still ready to provide everything his brother asks for. This demonstrates yet again how close and how necessary the brothers were to one another.'

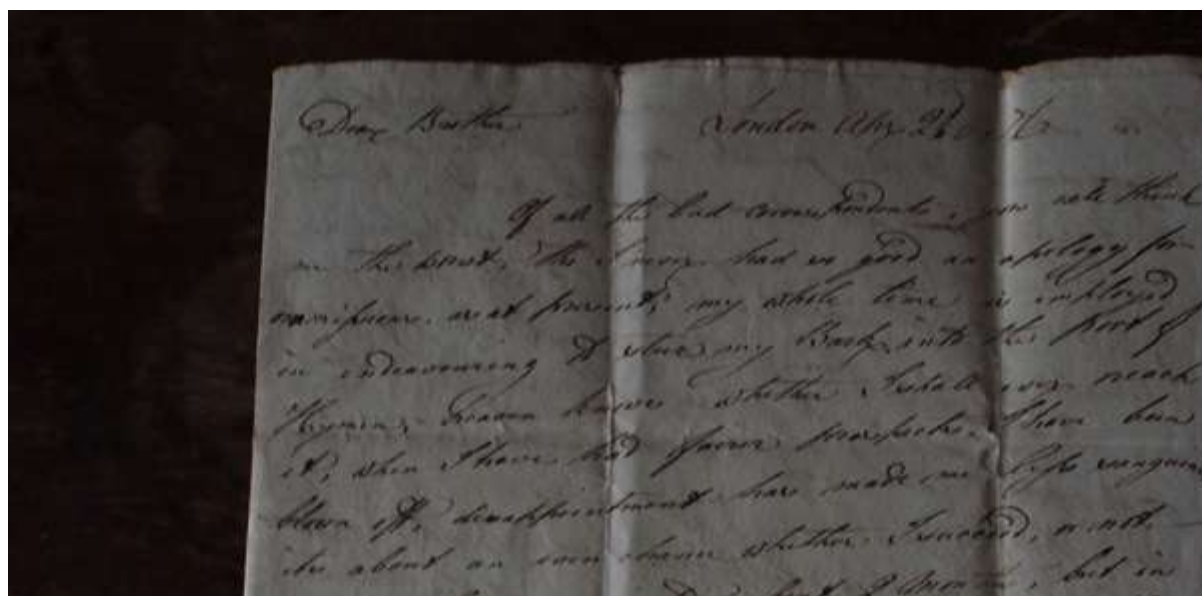


Figure 7. Sam writes to William regarding Elizabeth. Image courtesy of Penelope Farmer.

Nor was Sam's support for William merely practical. He had, it seems, commiserated with William on being passed over for Surat, for William responds in relatively philosophical mode. 'If it had been my destiny I should have had Surat, as it was your manners were certainly very proper' (December 1789). Sam's concern is reciprocated in William's affectionate and equally concerned reference to his admirably docile sister-in-law of whom he was clearly fond. Elizabeth is no longer living above the business in Hogg Lane or even in Mortimer Street in the West End where Sam appears to have acquired a house at some point. For by now Sam also possesses a country estate, his income from a successful dye business having been added to by his ventures in the slave trade.<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth's only son was now of an age to be off at boarding school and her husband was still working in London, but she does not seem to be flourishing out there in the new home. William writes of the fear Sam has given him for 'my sister's health.....I am afraid she keeps too much in the house or perhaps you have now planted Beckenham which precludes proper air or perhaps you are too solitary in the country. I

<sup>45</sup> See *An Account of the Number of Vessels, with the Amount of their Tonnage, their Names, the Port to which they belong, and the Names of the respective Owners of each, that have cleared out from the Ports of London, Bristol and Liverpool, to the Coast of Africa, for the Purpose of purchasing slaves, in the Three Years preceding the 5th of January 1792*. House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, Vol. 82, pp. 329-37.

will cure her when I come back again and make her ride out .... I am much younger than when I left England and have much better spirits.’ (December 1789)

#### IV. William Gamul Farmer’s fortune

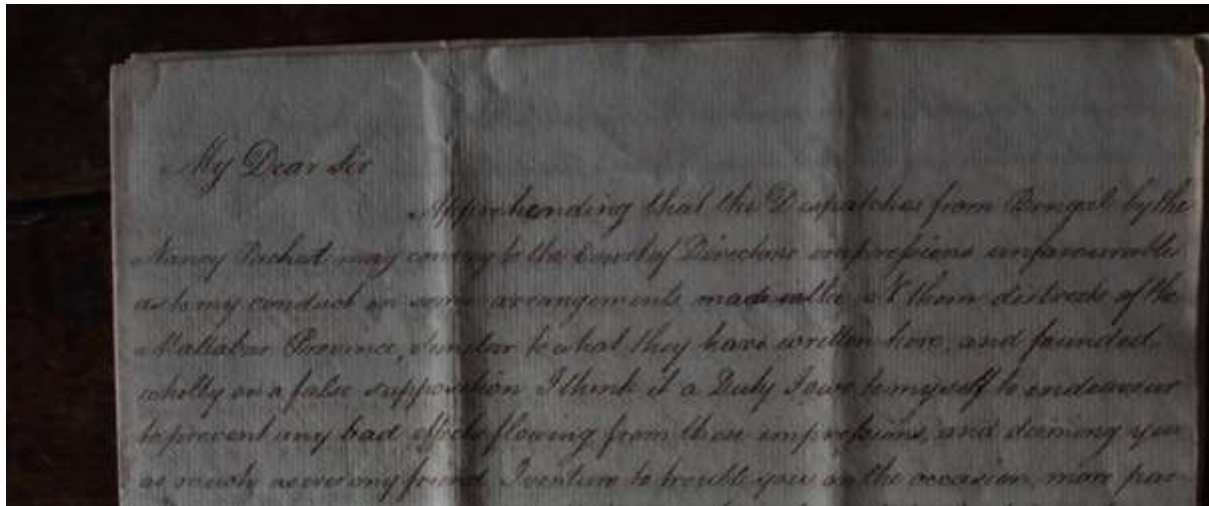


Figure 8. Letter from William Gamul Farmer regarding conduct in Malabar province. Image courtesy of Penelope Farmer.

And so, at last, to William’s possible acquisition of the fortune he had sought for so long. It was the climax of his career and followed his at first reluctant departure to the Coromandel Coast after the first defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1792, charged as a joint commissioner with investigating potential revenue from the pepper trade. In 1793, a year later, he was made Supervisor of the Malabar province.

Pamela Nightingale’s study details the suspicions against him following these appointments.<sup>46</sup> Firstly there was his close collaboration with a disreputable Mahé trader, Murdock Brown, whom he claimed not to have known beforehand, a claim Nightingale disputes.<sup>47</sup> Walter Ewer, an EIC Director who sent to report on the province later wrote of Brown ‘I am firmly of opinion that if he had his deserts he ought to be hanged as a traitor to his Country or sent Prisoner of War to Bombay.’<sup>48</sup> Evidently William did not share Ewer’s distrust; protesting Brown’s virtues many times over, he took Brown with him in his tour round the durbars of the Northern Province Indian rajahs, as translator for the finer points for which he claimed his own command of the local language was not sufficient. He also took Brown’s advice on what he claimed to his superiors in Bombay were the only viable arrangements for the pepper tax.

<sup>46</sup> Nightingale, *Trade in Western India*, pp.73-110. Nightingale gives a detailed description and critique of the arrangements WGF made for the collection of the pepper tax in the Malabar and for the organization of the mint at Mahé.

<sup>47</sup> Nightingale, *Trade in Western India*, p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Home Miscellany CDXXXVIII Walter Ewer to Henry Dundas 17 July 1797, British Library.



In William's extensive official diary he recounts in detail his travels in the Malabar and of his difficult dealings with the rajahs.<sup>49</sup> But just how much he – and Murdock Brown – profited from the fiscal arrangements they made is not clear. Though Nightingale acknowledges his relatively astute understanding of local rivalries and the way they could be exploited, she is sure he did profit and not only from the pepper tax, for, as superintendent, William was also in charge of the mint at Mahé that produced the local coinage, the fanam, in reference to which the critical Walter Ewer noted: 'that [Mr Farmer] had a great advantage from it few people doubt.'<sup>50</sup>

The advantage in either case led almost certainly to the letter written to Sam on 14 June 1794. 'Not to trust too much to the man who copies for me it is necessary to inform you separately that the reason why I have avoid the appearance of your name or mine in any shape in the bills of exchange to be sent to Europe from China is that it may not be known at the India House to whose accounts these remittances are made. There are certain malicious reports I find prevail here as to the great increase of my fortune by going down the coast. Though not wholly true it would be more expedient to avoid giving weight to them by my combusting circumstances. If it was observed at the India House that such large remittances were making for my account it might give rise to suspicion and perhaps to enquiries which at best are always troublesome.' He adds – William Gamul Farmer even here was not going to forego any monies he thought the company owed him: 'You may say this – from my long service and loss of health in the Malabar business I should be entitled to petition the company for some annuity should I be obliged to relinquish Surat which the extent of my fortune if known would prevent me from attaining and I shall therefore find it convenient to say I am only worth £25 to 30 000 which at 4% cash is but a poor remittance after 30 years service.'

The following year, facing questions in Bombay about the tax arrangements that he had made, William wrote a very lengthy defence of his action<sup>51</sup> – a defence not accepted by other observers such as James Stevens, his successor in Malabar. Apart from appealing to Murdock Brown to back him up (in several letters in the letter book between 1794-5) he also sent a copy of his defence to Sam, the one piece of his writing to be found both among the family letters and in the EIC records. This was not merely to justify himself to his brother; according to the letter book it was also so that Sam could use its contents in William's defence if the Council in London showed signs of depriving him of the Surat chiefship, following suspicions of his activities down on the coast.

Though his arrival in Surat was much delayed, he did at last attain the Chiefship. But William's stay lasted barely nine months and was far from peaceable. He wrote to Sam

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<sup>49</sup>IOR P/E/6 1793 pp. 58-66, British Library.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Nightingale, *Trade in Western India*, p. 99.

<sup>51</sup> IOR/P/366/16, 11 January 1795 letter to Sam enclosing copy of the defence of his tax arrangements.

<sup>51</sup> IOR/P/366/17, pp. 28-9, James Stevens to Bombay 20 December 1794.

<sup>50</sup>17 June 1795, 2 letters to Jonathan Duncan defending himself (Letter Book in family possession.)

on 4 September 1795, 'by way of amusement this month we have had an insurrection of the Mahometon mob who rose, plundered and abused the Hindoos and it has occasioned a great deal of writing and a great deal of trouble to me.' Yet he sounds contented enough, even claiming, of the appointment of his friend Jonathan Duncan to the Bombay governorship, 'I am very glad the governorship did not fall on my shoulders as I wish for nothing so much as a quiet retirement somewhere.' (This latter possibility was due to his old schoolfriend Francis Baring's actions on his behalf, though, given the suspicions against him it seems unlikely that he would have been considered.) He continues in his final letter from Surat in November 1795: 'The truth really is that by the setting in of the cold weather together with an abstinence of wine my stomach and my general health are so much mended that I feel quite comfortable and if it was not for the pleasure of rejoining the family I should feel totally indifferent about England nor do I think that any part of my life I either have been so comfortable or shall be so comfortable as I am at present with my body in a tolerable state and my mind occupied and gratified ... I think at least that your next in answer to this will find me still here, and therefore I must remember for you about the garden seeds that occupation being my principal delight here.'

Amid discussions of EIC politics and, Indian politics, of the profits he was proposing to send home, he gives orders for the seeds to be obtained from a Mr Swinton of Brentford, near Isleworth, instructing that they should be packed in a very particular way. He even asks for some fruit trees – nectarines. In a letter book missive of 1 July 1795 to his Portuguese agent and friend, Miguel de Lima de Souza he also asks for orange trees from China, here again giving precise instructions as to how they were to be packed. In the letter to his sister in law on 19 November, he makes clear that his interest was hands-on in every sense. 'I am frequently up to the elbows in dirt,' he tells her.

This mixture of contentment in his Indian life and nostalgia for home is interesting: William seems as ever in the imperial bind, caught between two worlds. One analysis of his management in Surat suggest it was the start of a greater separation between Indian and white colonial life which became the nineteenth-century norm.<sup>52</sup> If so, maybe his Englishness was reasserting itself, and he wanted to live more as if 'at home', despite having been so close to Indian society and its mores for so long, un-cushioned by family and domestic life. Yet after spending two thirds of his life in the sub-continent, he did not feel sufficiently English either to engage totally with life *in* family preferring to recreate this one small part of it in a world by now so much more familiar to him: life *by* family rather. He could also, in some respects have seen it as his way of creating a family. In a letter to John Forbes in July 1795, referring to his orange trees, he adds that 'planting a tree and getting a child are amongst the cardinal virtues and as I make no attempt at the latter I must compensate in the tree way'. Yet in some respects William's

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<sup>52</sup> Lakshmi Subramanian, 'Trapped inside the Colonial Order: The Hindu Bankers of Surat and their Business World during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 21, 4 (1987).

English garden seems as much a myth of family and England as an actuality. I doubt if many peas and cabbages grew behind the family dye works above which William grew up, let alone orange trees.

But he was never to see his peas and cabbages, his orange trees, grow. It was Malabar he always claimed had finally ruined his health. In his official journal there he had reported that illness sometimes prevented his working: elsewhere and this same illness led to his departure from the province. Complaints of ill-health recur throughout the letter book he kept thereafter. His renewed optimism in early December 1795 turned out premature. Due to an injudiciously cold bath after riding- he claimed – he fell ill again. Despite wishing to stay in India till the situation in Europe improved, he was forced to plan his departure. In January 1796, he boarded the Bombay ship, *The Princess Amelia*, hoping the voyage would mend his health. As ambivalent as ever, William did not resign immediately, despite arranging for his local possessions to be auctioned: if he proceeded no further than the Cape, his position at Surat would remain open. He did indeed proceed further; the *Amelia* failed to stop at the Cape, something William claims to have regretted in a shipboard letter to Sam, his health having improved. The ship's log shows him disembarking at Southampton in July 1796.<sup>53</sup> In an ironic, not to say galling coda, it also showed him being accompanied as far as St Helena by his erstwhile junior, John Griffiths. John Griffiths was piped on and off the ship with a nineteen gun salute: William's was just seventeen.

William Gamul Farmer survived less than eighteen months in England. His will was proved in February 1798, a month after his death.<sup>54</sup> It is very brief, unlike that of Sam nearly 40 years later,<sup>55</sup> and contains no details of property, making Sam the sole residuary legatee—of how much exactly, I cannot be sure. Letters in the letter book to Dady, Sam and others shift from claiming that he was sending enough to be able to live comfortably to claiming he was only bringing back a pittance, not enough, he said, to help out Sam who was having business difficulties of his own. (Sam's venture into the slave trade appears not to have been successful; among the family papers is a copy of request dated 1 December 1790 for information about one slave ship, indicating almost certain wreck.) It is of course true that getting money back from India via Bills of Exchange was an uncertain business at the best of time and particularly in the mid nineties because of the war with the French and the dangers of attack besides shipwreck: either process could destroy not only the copies of the bills but also the profits on which depended those on whom the bills were drawn.

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<sup>53</sup> *Princess Amelia: Journal*, IOR/L/MAR/B/36J : 23 February 1795-10 September 1796.

<sup>54</sup> PROB 11/1301/252, The National Archives (Kew), 28 February 1798.

<sup>55</sup> PROB 11/1912/56, The National Archives (Kew), 9 June 1839.



Figure 9. Nonsuch Park, Surrey. Image courtesy of Penelope Farmer.

William sent multiple copies of the Bills on different ships to avert the first danger and tried to use particularly stable houses like Forbes or Scott to pre-empt the second of these perils – his second set of bills, for instance, was drawn on Scott, and sent to a different bank. One tranche of his money, the 150,000 rupees – approximately £15,000 – sent to China by his Portuguese colleague, Miguel de Lima e Souza in 1795 he claimed reduced to only £2000 because of the loss of the ship in which the money was invested. On the other hand he also claimed to have insured himself against this possibility, so who knows what the sum did actually come to. Still, adding together the sums of his theoretical assets, £27,000 from the first batch of bills, plus the £28,000 odd from the second and adding to these the £1000 he had in hand in Bombay, the full amount he could have remitted to England was something between £60,000 and £70,000. Even taking away the 15,000 from de Souza would still have left him with a comfortable £55,000 odd—on which, of course, as it turned out, he did not have to live. On William's death, most of the money would have gone intact to Sam, who did not (unlike his brother) invest it in 'manufactory' but put it straight into that much safer asset landed property. It thus might be fair to suggest that William's fortune from India was one means by which Sam Farmer, the successful but maybe not quite so successful, dye merchant – and slave trader - raised his family to the landed gentry and an entry in Burke's *Landed Gentry*.

Sam had been prosperous enough before his brother died to have acquired one Surrey estate and sent his one son to Harrow and Cambridge. Yet only in 1799 after William's will was proved did he truly spread himself, buying the estates in Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and Surrey that he mentions in an 1810 letter to his son. Above all Sam acquired the Nonsuch estate, along with its Mansion House, which he immediately had remodelled in the Tudor-Gothic style by the future re-modeller of Windsor Castle,

Sir Jeffrey Wyatt [later known as Wyattville] (see above). In 1802 he opened an account at Hoare's Bank with £1100 – 'a very large and interesting account' according to a letter from the bank to my father. In 1804, for £4000, he also bought himself the rotten borough of Huntingdon from Lord Sandwich, first putting his son in the seat, then sitting as an MP himself between 1810-18. A nineteenth century account of MPs listed some as contemporary Dick Whittingtons: men who had made their fortunes in London. Among these figured Samuel Farmer.<sup>56</sup>

## V. Conclusion and timeline

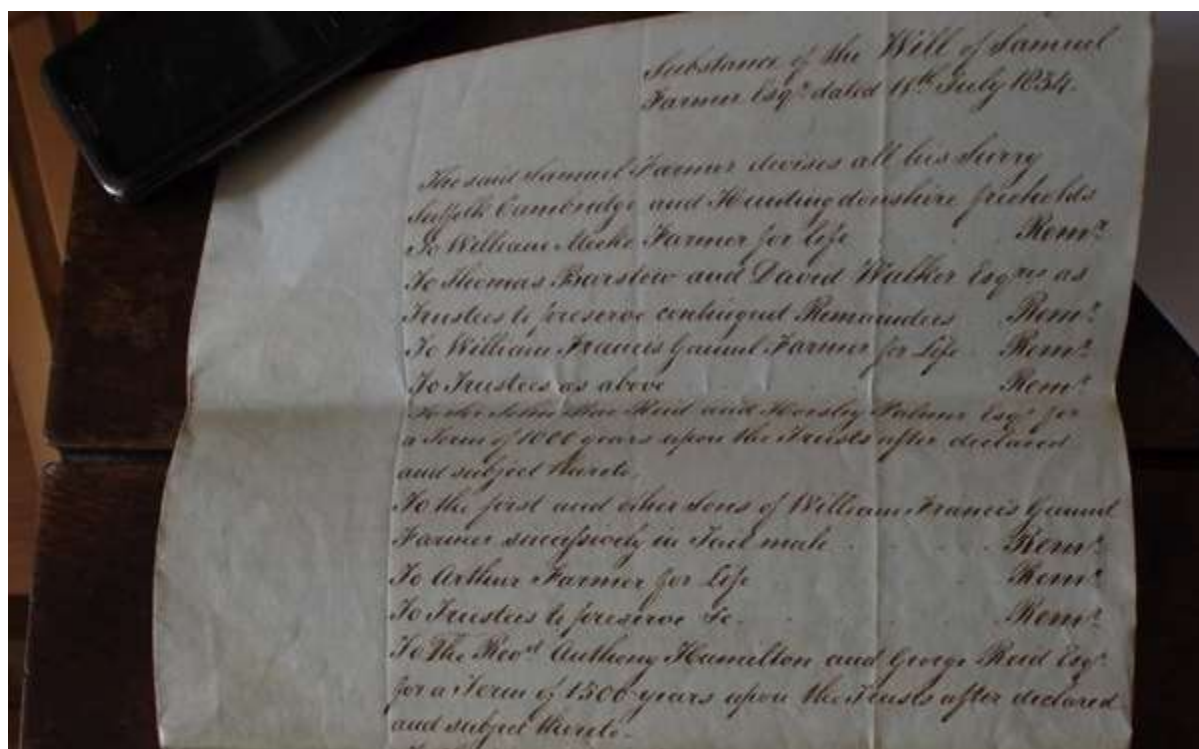


Figure 10. Samuel Farmer's will. Image courtesy of Penelope Farmer.

Indian fortune or not, William was no nabob in the tradition of the Bengal returnees. Though suspended like them between their English and Indian selves, he did not live long enough to throw his money about, had he been inclined to. Nor did he bring Indian goods and artefacts home with him- his lack of a wife and family might explain this. With him on the *Amelia* he proposed taking only his 'bureau', his papers – among them likely the letter book - cases of wine, and his 'turkies' – carpets. At the sale of the family house in 1937 the sole evidence of India in the sale catalogue was a Benares tray and four 'very large' elephants – carved ones, presumably.<sup>57</sup> And though his heir, Sam, made use of William's money for his acquisitions of property, it was prudent investment judging by his refusal to advance his son more money until his estates had begun

<sup>55</sup>The House of Commons, 1790-1820, Volume 1, R.G Thorne, p. 291.

<sup>56</sup>Nonsuch Sale Catalogue in the collection of Bourne Hall Museum. Ewell Surrey.

earning. His greatest extravagance was probably employing Wyatt to work on Nonsuch. On the other hand, Sam's progeny were country gentry with the tastes and habits of country gentleman. His eldest grandson had a famous collection of orchids: his eldest great-grandson was Lord Lieutenant of Surrey. Only the younger brothers of the family had to seek employment, none in trade of any kind, and none as empire builders. Though two did emigrate to Canada, other male siblings went into the army or the church or became lawyers like my grandfather.

Nonsuch remained in the Farmer family until 1937, when it was sold by my father's niece: Sam's intention to pass his house down through the male line had been thwarted by the nineteenth-century clerk who omitted the word 'male' from the entail. (I like to imagine the ghost of Margaret directing his pen.) One subsequent loser, my father, did inherit a little of the family – William's? - money. He used it to put his four children through boarding school. His son being no academic, the last vestiges paid for a daughter, me, to read history at Oxford.

### **Time line of William's career in India**

Arrived at Bombay 1763 with the appointment of writer.

October 1764 appointed an assistant in the president's office.

June 1767 was appointed assistant to the storekeeper.

In 1768 was permitted to return to Europe for the sake of his health. Recommended for leave to return in 1771.

1772 appointed assistant to the marine storekeeper.

In 1774 obtained permission to proceed to Madras on private affairs.

In 1775 was sent to Bengal as assistant to Mr Taylor . In 1776 Mr Taylor died. In May 1777 Mr Farmer was censured for not returning from Bengal and on his arrival in Bombay in July 1777 explained the cause of his absence to the satisfaction of the board and the censure was withdrawn.

The latter end of 1777 he was permitted to go to Poona for his health.

In 1778 he was appointed secretary to the Poona committee, in February 1778 he was left as hostage with the Marathas. In March 1779 he was released.

In 1780 he proceeded to Europe on his private affairs and was recommended for leave to return.

According to 1794 letter to General William Palmer included in his letter book he had intended to remain, but lost his fortune by investing in 'manufactory' and was forced to return to India.

In December 1784 he was appointed by the court to succeed Mr La Touche as resident as Bussorah (Basra) but to return to Bombay meantime. In December 1784 he was appointed by the court to succeed Mr La Touche as resident as Bussorah (Basra) but to return to Bombay meantime.

In 1785 he returned to Bombay. On being required to take charge of the residency at Bussora he relinquished this appointment on the grounds of ill-health.

In November 1795 Mr Farmer was appointed resident at Fort Victoria where he remained until 1787 when he was appointed Chief at Tannah.

In May 1790 he resigned the Chiefship at Tannah on account of ill-health.

In 1790 there being a great scarcity of grain provisions for proposals of certain persons for supplying the market were accepted and Mr Farmer was appointed to superintend their conduct.

In 1791 the scarcity having eased he requested to be released from the appointment which the board granted.

In April 1791 he was appointed by the court to succeed to the chiefship at Surat upon the death or resignation of Mr Griffiths.

In April 1792 he was appointed one of the commissioners for arranging and settling the ceded countries on the Malabar coast.

In March 1793 he was appointed by General Abercromby Supervisor and Chief Magistrate of the provinces of Malabar which appointment he accepted on condition that it should not be any bar to the succession the chieftainship of Surat.

In late 1794 he became chief at Surat on the resignation of John Griffith.

In January 1796, his ill-health recurring he took ship on the Princess Amelia arriving in Southampton in July. He died in January 1798. His will was proved in February.