

The Dawkins of Moggerhanger - A short history

Introduction

The Dawkins family who bought the Moggerhanger estate from the Thorntons in 1858 have been paid little attention in comparison to the latter, despite being responsible for building the church of St John the Evangelist in village.

However research has revealed that the wider Dawkins family have left a not inconsiderable physical legacy in terms of country houses and old master family portraits and perhaps more important they have had surprising connections with many historical figures. It is a story in which Jane Austen herself makes a cameo appearance.

The Dawkins move to Maggerhanger

The Reverend Edward Henry Dawkins (1794-1859) and his wife Elizabeth came to live at Moggerhanger House in 1858. Prior to that they had been living at West Markham Nottinghamshire where the Reverend Dawkins, a Fellow of All Souls College Oxford, was vicar of All Saints. He had been appointed in 1828 at the age of 34 and his patron was a distant cousin of roughly the same age, Henry Pelham-Clinton, the 4th Duke of Newcastle under Lyne.

Elizabeth was the daughter of the Reverend Sir Henry Cooper (Baronet) and his wife Isabella. She had already been married in 1818 to a cousin of Reverend Edward Dawkins, George Augustus Frederick Dawkins, but he had died without issue just after 3 years of marriage in 1821. He had fought at Waterloo, so did he die of some battle related injury? Elizabeth was thus a widow for 15 years before marrying Reverend Edward Dawkins in 1836.

In 1837 their only son Edward Henry Frederick was born. He was duly sent to Harrow for his schooling (like many sons in the wider Dawkins family) until the age of 14.

The Reverend Dawkins' residence at Moggerhanger House was short lived. In under two years in 1859 he had died aged 65. Elizabeth died four years after her husband in 1863. However they left an enduring legacy in the fine church and vicarage built in 1861 by Elizabeth Dawkins in memory of her husband. Both are buried in the Chancel.

The inspiration for this may have come from her time in West Markham. Here during Reverend Edward Dawkins' tenure as vicar, Henry Pelham-Clinton, the 4th Duke of Newcastle, whose seat was at nearby Clumber Park (NT), had built a new church (and vicarage) to serve as the resting place for his beloved wife and daughter. Both had died prematurely within months of one another.

Reverend Edward Dawkins' son, Edward Henry Frederick Dawkins, inherited the Moggerhanger estate at the relatively young age of 26. Four years earlier in 1859, he had married Louisa Maria Barnett of Stratton Park, Biggleswade, daughter of neighbouring landowners. The couple continued to live at Moggerhanger House

where they raised three children, Edward Charles Honeywood Dawkins, Percy Henry Dawkins and Ethel Louise Dawkins. Edward Henry Frederick was appointed High Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1871. The tenure of this honorary post was for one year and was commonly awarded to landed gentry. In 1886 at the age of 49 he sold Moggerhanger House and the estate to Richard Mercer, a banker from Maidstone, Kent for £14,000. It is possible that there were financial pressures, since he had mortgaged the estate twice. The Dawkins family were thus in residence at Moggerhanger House for 29 years.

Edward Henry Frederick Dawkins then moved to Guilsborough in Northamptonshire where he bought Guilsborough Grange, a georgian country house surrounded by a small estate. There Ethel Louise at the age of 38 eventually found romance, marrying Captain (later Lt. Colonel) William Gordon Renton of nearby Guilsborough House. Ethel Louise died in 1954 and was buried in Moggerhanger where her father, mother and brother Edward were buried. Two of her children, confusingly called Ethel Louise and Eleanor Louise, became known in Guilsborough as the Renton sisters and were renowned there as local historians in the 1920's. Eleanor's descendants several generations later, live today in an Edwardian semi in Rylett Crescent, Hammersmith, London.

The Dawkins Family Roots

Reverend Edward Dawkins' father, Henry Dawkins (1764-1852) and mother, Augusta Clinton (it was she who was related to the Dukes of Newcastle), had 7 sons and 4 daughters. The pair had married after first eloping from her father, Sir Henry Clinton's house, in Portland Place, London, by means of an ingenious strategy to avoid pursuit using multiple decoy carriages. Poor Sir Henry was sometimes blamed for losing the America colonies, as he was British Commander in Chief in America during the War of Independence; and now he had lost his daughter. Some months later however the two families were reconciled.

The Dawkins family seat was at Over Norton Park (near Chipping Norton) Oxfordshire. Henry Dawkins' father, yet another Henry Dawkins (1728-1814) had married Lady Juliana Colyear, daughter of the 2nd Earl of Portmore. They had 8 sons and 4 daughters. The wife of David Colyear, the 1st Earl of Portmore, and therefore a great great grandmother of the Reverend Edward Dawkins, was the notorious Catherine Sedley, Countess of Dorchester, one time mistress of King James II when he was Duke of York. Catherine did not think herself beautiful (though the flattering portrait of her with tousled hair and robes by Sir Peter Lely, seems to belie this) and was puzzled as to what James Duke of York saw in her. She reputed to have said "It cannot be my beauty because he has eyes to see I have none, and it cannot be my wit since has none to see that I have any"

The source of the Dawkins family wealth were sugar plantations in Jamaica which had been built up over the 17th century by preceding generations of the Dawkins family.

Reverend Edward Dawkins' relatives

Several of Reverend Edward Dawkins' brothers and cousins had distinguished military and diplomatic careers.

His elder brother Colonel Henry Dawkins (1788-1864), who inherited Over Norton, fought at Waterloo and is depicted with 80 or so other officers in the huge painting by Salter of the annual Waterloo dinner held by the Duke of Wellington in 1835. It hangs at Aspley House, the Duke's London home. Salter's individual portrait of him is in the National Portrait Gallery

A cousin of his was Edward James Dawkins (1792-1865), who was Minister Plenipotentiary in Greece from 1833-1835. He was Charge d'Affaires at Florence in 1817 and British commissioner at Congress of Panama in 1826, before his posting to Athens. He was the son of the Reverend Edward Dawkins' uncle, Richard Dawkins (b. 1768). A sketch portrait of him is in the Government Art Collection.

A younger brother Colonel Francis Henry Dawkins (1796-1847) also fought at Waterloo as a Captain. He became eventually Deputy Quartermaster General in the Ionian Islands. He died at Corfu after retirement.

Another younger brother Clinton George Augustus Dawkins (1808-1871), born at Aston Clinton, Berks, held the post of Britain's Consul General in Venice. His wife was Maria Robarts, born in 1824 at Macao China, and daughter of James Thomas Robarts. They married on the 25th May 1850 at St George's Hanover Square. It was the Reverend Edward Dawkins himself who officiated at their wedding. Clinton George Augustus Dawkins is also noteworthy as the great great grandfather of the most well known Dawkins alive today, Clinton Richard Dawkins FRS (b. 1941), evolutionary biologist, popular science writer and outspoken atheist.

A son of the above Clinton George Augustus Dawkins and therefore a nephew of the Reverend Edward Dawkins was Sir Clinton Edward Dawkins (1859-1905). He was a distinguished civil servant having had financial posts at the Treasury and in the Empire, namely in Egypt and in India where he was financial advisor to Lord Curzon, Governor General of India. In 1899 he left the civil service to accept an offer from the American financier, John Pierpont Morgan (founder of JP Morgan) of full partnership in the London branch of J P Morgan & Co. He was made Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath in 1902 for his work in reviewing the administration of the War Office. Between 1902 and 1905 he bought and rebuilt Polesden Lacey (NT) in Surrey. The exterior of the house we see today, is his work.

One of the Reverend Dawkins' great uncles was James Dawkins (1722-1757), who as a rich young gentleman achieved fame in the 18th century for discovering the ruins of Palmyra in Syria with his travelling companion Robert Wood. He became a member of the exclusive Society of Dilettante which was composed of rich aristocrats who had completed the grand tour and appreciated classical art and architecture.

Earlier in his life, James had Jacobite sympathies and in this he may well have been influenced by Edward Holdsworth of Oxford University, a poet, Jacobite, grand

tourist teacher, and classicist. It was said of him, that if his grand tourist students were not already jacobite supporters when they left, they were certainly so on their return. James continued to be an active jacobite even after the failure of the 1745 rebellion. He is said to have provided the Young Pretender with money and in 1753 he went on the latter's behalf on a mission to Frederick of Prussia. The British government went so far as to issue a warrant for his arrest and this may have encouraged him to abandon the Jacobite cause.

James died young in his 30's of typhus while visiting the family plantations in Jamaica and so the considerable family fortune devolved on to his younger brother Henry Dawkins (1728-1814), Reverend Edward Dawkins' grandfather. A fine pastel portrait of Henry Dawkins by Maurice Quentin de la Tour is in the National Gallery.

This Henry Dawkins commemorated his brother in a gigantic painting showing James Dawkins and Robert Wood discovering Palmyra. The painting commissioned from the artist Gavin Hamilton, now hangs at the University of Glasgow.

This Henry Dawkins also bought and embellished Standlynch Park in Wiltshire, a substantial country house and estate. In 1814 on his death, it was put up for sale according to his will. It was bought by the Government for £90,000 who then donated it to Lord Nelson's brother and family 'from a grateful nation'. It was renamed 'Trafalgar House'. It is now owned by a private trust and used for corporate events and weddings.

An uncle of the Reverend Edward Dawkins was George Hay Dawkins (1764-1840). He is most notable for having the good fortune to inherit the wealth of the Pennant family who also owned sugar plantations in Jamaica as well as the Penrhyn estate and slate quarries in North Wales. The Pennants had run out of male heirs and George's father's mother was a Pennant. To acknowledge his Pennant roots, George added the name Pennant to his own.

He used his wealth to build Penrhyn Castle (NT), a gigantic neo Norman folly, partly demolishing and encasing the original Pennant house. The castle was started in 1819 but took a long time to build. It was still not finished when the 13 year old Princess Victoria visited in 1833. During all this time George Hay was content to live in a cottage watching the castle rising.

He had two daughters nicknamed by the Press as the 'Slate Princesses' and within the household as 'Sugar' and 'Slate', to indicate where the wealth they would inherit, came from. These rich young ladies did not lack suitors. Thus a Captain Edward Gordon Douglas of the Grenadier Guards and brother of the Earl of Morton, asked for the hand of George Hay's eldest daughter, Juliana Isabella Mary Dawkins Pennant or 'Miss Slate'. George Hay initially disapproved, he being the younger son of a younger son. The two men argued and Edward Gordon retired to the local hostelry ready to give up. However George Hay's 2nd wife, who happened to be cousin of Edward Gordon, encouraged him to persevere and George Hay eventually relented. The couple were married in 1833 at Trinity Church, St Mary-le-bone. The priest who married them was none other than the Reverend Edward Dawkins himself.

The couple were happily married and had 5 children, but then tragedy struck.

Isabella from the portrait of her at Penrhyn, was pretty and delicate looking. The latter may well have been her undoing. While walking with a party on Snowdon, she lent her cloak to someone who had not brought hers. Isabella then caught a chill and became persistently unwell for weeks, so much so that her doctor advised her to seek the warmer climes of the Mediterranean. She went to Italy but unfortunately caught a cold once more and died at Pisa in 1842 aged just 35.

Another uncle of the Reverend Dawkins, James Dawkins (1750-1843), had also the good fortune to inherit the estates in Weybridge Surrey, of William Colyear, 3rd Earl of Portmore. James's mother, Juliana, was a sister of the 3rd Earl, so James was his nephew. It was not the lack of a male heir that was the problem here, but that the 3rd Earl had fallen out with his son and heir and decided that his nephew James should inherit all the estate except the title.

James moved from Over Norton to Richmond to be closer to his new estates, eventually adding the name Colyear to his own. He might have occupied the Portmore mansion in Weybridge, originally built in the in the 17th century by the Duke of Norfolk, but for the fact that the irascible 3rd Earl had allowed it to deteriorate so it had to be demolished. Ironically all that is left of the mansion now are two grade II listed gateposts, incongruously marking the entrance to a 1930's housing development.

James's move to Richmond may have facilitated the first meeting of the Dawkins and Cooper families. Thus James's son, George Augustus Frederick Dawkins, met and married in 1818 Elizabeth Cooper daughter of Reverend Sir William Henry Cooper, who had family roots in the area. George Augustus died soon after in 1821 leaving Elizabeth widowed for 15 years until she married George Augustus's cousin, the Reverend Dawkins in 1836.

Elizabeth Dawkins (nee Cooper)

If the Reverend Dawkins' family history was colourful, that of his wife Elizabeth was no less so. Her Jewish grandfather, Moses Franks (d 1789), son of Jacob Franks (1688-1769) was born in New York. Jacob was a merchant and helped to construct New York's first synagogue.

Originally from Hamburg via England, the Franks family were colonial merchants who settled in New York City during the 1700's. Moses came over to represent the family's business interests in England. During the American War of Independence, he with his brother David in New York were involved in financing supplies for British prisoners of the colonialists.

Moses was one of a group of rich and respected Jewish residents living in the Richmond / Twickenham neighbourhood at that time. His uncle, Aaron Franks (1692-1777) was a wealthy diamond merchant who lived at Isleworth House, a grand house with gardens leading to the Thames at Isleworth. He was reputed on one occasion to have lent £40,000 worth of jewels to the Princess of Wales.

Moses married his uncle's daughter Phila in 1765. Moses and his wife were said to have been popular where they lived in Teddington and were friends with Horace

Walpole, the renowned 18th century letter writer, who lived at nearby Strawberry Hill. They had one daughter, Isabella Franks(1769-1855), who married William Henry Cooper (1766-1834), a Christian, in 1787 with their parents blessing. Isabella was just 18 and William 21.

William's father, Sir William Grey Cooper of Worlington, Suffolk, who was a Secretary to the Treasury, and Moses Franks, were old acquaintances. During the American War of Independence he had written to Grey Cooper to intercede with Sir Henry Clinton on behalf of his brother David who was suspected (wrongly) by the colonialists of spying for the British.

The young William Henry Cooper, after an initial unsuccessful spell as an ensign in the 3rd Foot Guards (now the Scots Guards), took Holy Orders, was made a Prebend of Rochester Cathedral (1793-97), and at some time supposedly was appointed a Chaplain in Ordinary to George III. He became the Reverend Sir William Henry Cooper on succeeding to the Baronetcy in 1801 and was said to have been detained as prisoner in France by Napoleon. A glowing curriculum vitae on the face of it, but all was not as it seemed.

When Moses Franks died, in 1789, his wife Phila having been declared a "lunatic", it was supposed that his fortune would devolve to Isabella and her husband William Henry. However there appeared to be some difficulty obtaining the inheritance and the couple now with 3 children fell on hard times, made worse by William Henry being somewhat liberal in his spending.

The couple had inherited Teddington Place which had been built by and was home to Moses and Phila Franks. It was villa in several acres of grounds which lead down to the Thames. Evidently in need of money they sold it. The purchaser was up and coming Mr John Walter who, four years earlier in 1785, had founded the Times newspaper

Incidentally the house survived to 1930 when it was demolished and a housing estate now covers its grounds.

Sir Grey Cooper's and Lord Cadogan's families were friends, living at neighbouring country estates at Worlington and Santon Downham, Suffolk, respectively. It was for this reason that Lord Cadogan invited William Henry and Isabella to stay as long as they liked in his houses at Santon Downham, and Grosvenor Street in London.

Sometime in the early 1790's William Henry, having somehow been made a Prebendary of Rochester Cathedral and now titled 'Reverend' began a liason with Lady Cadogan, who as her husband's second wife, was considerably younger than him. When Lord Cadogan eventually realised what was going on, he threw his wife out of the house and brought a case of 'criminal conversation' against the Reverend William Henry Cooper. The case was heard in Westminster Hall before the Kings Bench with Lord Kenyon as judge. A member of the prosecuting team was non other than William Garrow (popularised two centuries later in the 2012 TV drama series Garrow's Law) Lord Cadogan won the case and was awarded £2,000 damages against the impoverished Reverend William Henry.

Reverend William Henry Cooper and Lady Cadogan then fled to Abergavenny in Wales, but they were pursued by Lord Cadogan's steward who managed to find them because Lady Cadogan was betrayed of all things by her two pet bullfinches, which she was seen carrying. Reverend William Henry Cooper was clapped in Monmouth

Gaol until he could settle the damages. Meanwhile Lord Cadogan obtained a divorce from his wife but was obliged to pay her an allowance of £600 a year.

In 1801 Reverend William Henry Cooper's father, Sir Grey Cooper, died suddenly at his home at Worlington Manor in Suffolk. William Henry inherited the baronetcy and was now titled rather grandly, the Reverend Sir William Henry Cooper. At his father's death he was said to be in Wales (was he still in Monmouth Gaol?) and it was his younger brother Frederick, who attended his father's bedside.

At some point Reverend Sir William Henry Cooper must have obtained enough funds to pay the £2,000 damages and release himself from gaol.. There was no question of going back to his wife Isabella however, since we next hear of him and Lady Cadogan together in France in 1802.

This was during the Peace of Amiens when everyone thought that the war with Napoleon was finally over and many British aristocrats poured into France to resume their long interrupted touring. In 1803, war was resumed and all Napoleon's 'British visitors' were interned at Verdun until 1814.

Little is known about Reverend Sir William and Lady Cadogan in this period except she was noted for her soirees for other well heeled internees. The couple asked for leave to stay in the much pleasanter town of Nancy. It was stated that they left no debts which implies many others in their position were running up debts with the local French trades people.

The choice of Nancy may be explained by the fact that Lady Cadogan's father Colonel Charles Churchill and her mother, formerly Lady Maria Walpole, maintained at home at Luneville near Nancy in Lorraine where they were personal friends of the old Duke of Lorraine. The young Lady Cadogan, or Mary Churchill as she then was, would have been well acquainted with the area and may well have known people there.

Incidentally Mary Churchill on her mother's side was a niece of Horace Walpole, while on her father's side she was a descendant of a brother of John Churchill, the 1st Duke of Marlborough, from whom Sir Winston Churchill was directly descended

Lady Cadogan died in France in 1811 and is likely to have been buried at Nancy. It would appear that Reverend Sir William Henry Cooper seemed now to wish to return to his wife Isabella, whom he had abandoned all those years ago.

Meanwhile Elizabeth's elder sister, Mary Anne Cooper (d. 1841), married Sir John Courtney Honeywood in 1808.

Lady Honeywood was known to Jane Austen who praised her in one of her numerous letters to her sister Cassandra. She writes "I have extended my lights and increased my acquaintance a good deal within these two days. Lady Honeywood you know; I did not sit near enough to be a perfect judge, but I thought her extremely pretty, and her manners have all the recommendations of ease and good humour and unaffectedness; and, going about with four horses and nicely dressed herself, she is altogether a perfect sort of woman"

Baron Brabourne, son of Jane Austen's niece, who published an edition of these letters also seems to have met Lady Honeywood in later life, he writes "The Lady Honeywood mentioned in these letters was the wife of Sir John Courtenay Honeywood, and daughter of the Rev. Sir William Henry Cooper, Bart. The commendations which Jane bestows upon her in a later letter, were well deserved, for even within my

memory she was a graceful and charming woman, and must have been beautiful in her youth. I have always heard her spoken of as one of the most delightful people, and believe that she fully deserved the description ".

By 1830 it would appear that Lady Cooper and her husband Reverend Sir William Henry Cooper were reconciled. They had acquired a fine Robert Adam designed town house at 57 Portland Place, London.. In early 1833 Lady Cooper also inherited Isleworth House from her aunt Priscilla and she and her husband lost no time in improving it, engaging as architect none other than Edward Blore, who designed the gothic façade of the former Bedford Modern School, now the Harpur Centre, in Bedford.

He built amongst other things a campanile or bell tower to the side of Isleworth House. Very shortly afterwards the Reverend Sir William Henry Cooper died on Dec 7 1834, and Lady Cooper herself continued with the improvements. The house and its grounds presented a fine view across the Thames from Syon Park and this caught the attention of King William IV, who paid her a visit. He even went so far as to have trees cut down in Syon Park to improve the views of the house.

Just over a year later, her son, though aged just 47, and now styled Sir William Henry Cooper (1788-1836), of Chilton Lodge, Berkshire (yet another country house bought by Lady Cooper), died at 57 Portland Place on Jan 14 1836. He and his wife had no surviving children.

Lady Mary Ann Honeywood after being widowed, is reported to have died at Isleworth House in March 1841 aged 50.

Lady Isabella Cooper herself died at Isleworth House in 1855 aged 85 having survived her husband Reverend Sir William Henry Cooper, her son and two of her daughters. Elizabeth was now her only surviving child.

To digress a little, Isleworth House went on to have another life when after passing through several owners, it was bought in 1892 by the Poor Sisters of Nazareth and renamed Nazareth House. They used the house and grounds as a hospital for infirm or aged persons and sick children. The nuns remained in residence until the 1980's and the TV personality of the time Eamonn Andrews opened a fund raising fete there in 1986. Apparently his mother in law had been cared for by this order of nuns in Ireland and he had crossed the Irish Sea to say thank you. By 2007 however the house and grounds (now Grade II listed) having stood empty for some years, was subject to a planning application, lodged by the Poor Sisters of Nazareth who still own it, for the erection of village for the elderly.

Lady Isabella's wealth had come from her father, Moses Franks, and her mother's father, Aaron Franks, the latter descending to her via her aunt Priscilla. This involved both an estate at Isleworth, Middlesex including Isleworth House and several West Indies plantations.

A considerable amount of Lady Isabella's wealth was now channelled to Elizabeth and her husband the Reverend Edward Dawkins. Under a will dated 18th March 1847, Lady Isabella bequeathed part of her fortune to her daughter Elizabeth and her grandson Edward Henry Frederick. This consisted of certain estates in Jamaica and Grenada, a leasehold mansion and sum of £30,000. She appointed Reverend Edward Henry Dawkins and Elizabeth's cousin, William Honeywood, as executors.

Her will made the stipulation that the leasehold mansion (possibly 57 Portland Place, Lady Isabella's town house) had to be sold and the monies arising together with the

£30,000 were to be used in the purchase of a freehold estate in England or Wales. Thus in 1855 on Lady Isabella's death, Elizabeth and Reverend Dawkins inherited a considerable fortune, but it had to be used to buy a country estate. In fulfilment of this it appears that the Moggerhanger estate was purchased at auction on the 19th Feb 1858 for the sum of £34374/19/6.

The Reverend Dawkins is reputed to have quipped to a member of the Thornton family that he now had somewhere to hang the numerous family portraits he had inherited from his uncle James Dawkins and his Portmore relatives. These family paintings by the leading English portrait painters descended to his son Edward Henry Frederick. They were sold at Christie's on the latter's death in 1913 after publicity both here and in the New York Times, by his three grand daughters, Auria Winterbottom, Hylda Nutting and Dorothy Wilson.

The Dawkins burials at Moggerhanger Church

Reverend Edward Henry Dawkins and Elizabeth Dawkins are buried in the Chancel. Their son, Edward Henry Frederick Dawkins, his wife Louisa Maria Dawkins (nee Barnett) and their son and daughter, Edward Dawkins and Ethel Louise Renton (nee Dawkins), are buried in the graveyard.

J.P. Brun
Old Forge Cottage
Moggerhanger

May 2013

(a more detailed version of this history is in preparation)