The Anti-Slavery Debate Around Lichfield
Anna Seward, the Clapham Sect, the Lunar Society, Yoxall Lodge and Kings Bromley

The area around Lichfield was the scene for intense arguments at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. On the one hand, families such as the Newtons of Kings Bromley and, after 1794, the Lanes of Kings Bromley were slave owners and therefore anti-abolitionists. On the other hand groups such as the Clapham Sect, which included William Wilberforce and Thomas Gisborne of Yoxall Lodge, and the Lunar Society which included Erasmus Darwin and, on its fringes, Anna Seward of Lichfield were abolitionists.

Some people's acquaintance spanned both groups. The Lanes' cousin, William Legge**,** second Earl of Dartmouth (1731–1801), was a member of the Clapham Sect. Anna Seward knew the Newtons of Kings Bromley, and was very friendly with the Ardens of Longcroft, Yoxall, particularly with the daughters Anne and Althea Catherina, who are mentioned in the trial of Catherine Newton (see KBH publication 'The Scandalous Divorce of John Newton') The Arden sisters' two brothers John and Humphrey were both beneficiaries of Catherine Newton's will (see KBH publication 'The Lane Inheritance') and John was vicar of Kings Bromley from 1782-1800.

Anna Seward, the 'Swan of Lichfield' was a poet, perhaps now best known for her collected letters and her *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin.*

Anna Seward by Tilly Kettle in 1762

Born in Derbyshire in 1742, her father undertook her education and Anna developed her literary tastes at an early age, reading Milton at two and writing religious verse at ten. After her father became Canon of Lichfield Cathedral in 1754, Anna and her family moved to Lichfield and became neighbours of Dr Erasmus Darwin. He became aware of her literary talents and encouraged her to write poetry. After her mother died in 1780, Anna remained at home, caring for her father and continuing to write poetry.
She published *Elegy on Captain Cook*, which established her literary reputation. In 1781 she published *Monody on Major Andre*, which dealt with the hanging of one of Honora Sneyd's, (her adopted sister) suitors in the American War of Independence. The poem enjoyed success both in Britain and America. Between 1782 and 1787 Anna Seward published *Louisa*, a poetical novel and other poems and also wrote a series of letters under the name of "Benvolio" to the *Gentleman's Magazine*. By now, Anna increasingly moved in literary and intellectual circles and was frequently meeting with Darwin, Thomas Day, Edgeworth and Dr Johnson.

This was a difficult time for women authors. The waspish gossipy confirmed batchelor Horace Walpole said she had "no imagination, no novelty." Between 1775 and 1781, Seward was a guest and participant at the much-mocked salon held by Anna Miller at Batheaston, near Bath. However, it was here that Seward's talent was recognised and her work published in the annual volume of poems from the gatherings, a debt that Seward acknowledged in her *Poem to the Memory of Lady Miller* (1782). She was, however appreciated by Sir Walter Scott who edited Seward's *Poetical Works* in three volumes (Edinburgh, 1810). To these he prefixed a memoir of the author, adding extracts from her literary correspondence. He declined, however, to edit the bulk of her letters, and these were published in six volumes by A. Constable as *Letters of Anna Seward 1784-1807* (Edinburgh, 1811). Anna Seward was originally not convinced of the anti-slavery case, as can be seen in a letter she wrote to Josiah Wedgwood of the Lunar Men on Feb 18th 1788. She had clearly been influenced by John Newton of Kings Bromley, a man who owned three plantations in Barbados and about 600 slaves:

> "I am honoured and obliged by your endeavours to enlighten me on a subject so important to human virtue and human happiness. They have not been in vain; and I blush for the coldness my letter expressed, whose subject demanded the ardour of benevolent wishes, and of just indignation.
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> Let me, however, do myself justice to observe, that my heart has always recoiled with horror from the miseries which I heard were inflicted on the negro slaves; but I have had long acquaintance with a Mr. Newton of this place, who made a large fortune in the East, where slavery pervades every opulent establishment [either she or her transcriptor must have mistakenly put 'east' for 'west']. He constantly assured me that the purchase, employment, and strict discipline of the negroes were absolutely necessary to maintain our empire, and our commerce in the indies. As constantly did he affirm, that they were of a nature so sordid and insensible, as to render necessary a considerable degree of severity, and to make much lenity alike injurious to the indulger and the indulged; that the accounts of the cruelties practised upon the slaves by their masters was false, or at least infinitely exaggerated. He observed, that the worst people will abstain from vice, when it is against their interest to practise it; that the high price and value of the subjugated, inevitably preserves them from the dire consequences of this imputed barbarity.
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> When I sighed over the severe discipline for the necessity of which he pleaded, I was desired to recollect the fate of the Ashwells - uncle and brother to young gentlewomen of this town. The former, A West India Planter, whose compassionate temper, which his nieces assert had been ever soft and indulgent, even to weakness, led him to take scrupulous care that they were constantly and plentifully supplied with wholesome food; yet he was murdered by them in a most cruel manner; and his nephew, then a youth of fourteen, intentionally murdered; they have stringed and cut off his left arm, and two of the fingers of his right hand, leaving him, as they thought, lifeless.
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> The last mentioned Mr. Ashwell, who lives the hapless wreck of negro cruelty, uniformly confirmed to me, for I have often conversed with him, all Mr. Newton had told me of the generally treacherous, ungrateful, and bloody temper of the negroes"

Josiah Wedgwood must have eventually persuaded her of the abolitionist case. It was he who came up with the 'Am I not a brother and a man' image, which became a powerful symbol used by the campaign:

Author Stephen Tomkins in his book 'The Clapham Sect' argues that there were three generations of the sect, which was a loose affiliation of like-minded people, and that it was never called The Clapham Sect' until it no longer existed. The first generation included William Legge and John Newton the ex-slave trader who became a vicar and wrote 'Amazing Grace' (not to be confused with the John Newton of Kings Bromley). The second generation contained Thomas Babbington and William Wilberforce, both evangelical Christians and abolitionist MPs and Thomas Gisborne of Yoxall Lodge who married Mary Babbingon, Thomas's sister.

It was Thomas Clarkson who led the abolitionist campaign in the country, he did much of the research and publicised the horrors of the 'middle passage' and the condition of the slaves in the Caribbean. However it was William Wilberforce who was the leader of the campaign in Parliament. Wilberforce was often said to be the 'conscience' of the PM, Pitt the younger, and exerted influence through his high moral tone which was based on an evangelical Christianity. His opponents argued that, as a rich man, he could afford principles. Paintings like the following by Beechey, 1793, were brought out as propaganda for the argument that he should have been more concerned with the poor at home. (Beechey also did the famous portrait of Thomas Lane at Goldsmiths)

After the inconclusive result of the first slave trade abolition debate in 1789, Wilberforce turned to Thomas Babbington and Thomas Gisborne, who had been friends and contemporaries of his at Cambridge. Gisborne inherited family estates in Staffordshire and Derbyshire, was ordained and devoted himself to life as a country squire and vicar, living at Yoxall Lodge. According to Tomkins: 'He was a prolific and fairly popular writer, publishing books of philosophy, politics, religion and science, as well as some well received poetry and hymns. He was one of those writers who is a name to their own generation, and completely forgotten by the next." Rather like Anna Seward.

Wilberforce was determined to try again and the parliamentary committee hearings on the slave trade started in January 1790 with Wilberforce acting as counsel for abolition. He had thousands of pages of evidence provided by Clarkson, and others such as Dickson, Pitt, Eliot and Granville Sharp who all met with him at Westminster and in his house at Clapham.

Granville Sharp had acted for the slave John Hylas in the 'Hylas vs. Newton' case of 1768. Hylas claimed that his wife Mary had been kidnapped in England by her former master, John Newton of Kings Bromley, and resold into slavery in Barbados. The court found for John Hylas and "... the defendant was bound, under a penalty, to bring back the woman, either by the first ship, or at farthest within six months" and was charged with a paltry one shilling damages. It is unclear whether John Newton did bring back Mary, but the case did have ramifications back on the Newtons plantation in Barbados, where her family under the matriarch 'Old Doll' seemed to have considerable power at the time when Thomas Lane, the brother of John Lane of Kings Bromley, was attempting to run the plantation remotely from Goldsmiths Hall. It was Sharp's later case, the 'Somerset Case' which was widely interpreted as establishing the principle that no man breathing English air could be a slave - although the judge in the case, Lord Mansfield, denied that is what his verdict had meant. It was popularly thought that Lord Mansfield's apparent bias in slavery cases was caused by his love for his half black great niece Dido Belle, who he had adopted along with another great niece Elizabeth. This is the argument put forward in the book 'Belle' by Paula Byrne, and the film of the same name. The famous portrait of the two adopted girls hangs at Kenwood House:

Lord Mansfield would have argued that his judgements were based strictly on the interpretation of case law and not on sentiment. In the famous 'Zong' case slave traders had thrown live and healthy slaves overboard in order to claim the insurance on them. The insurers brought the case against the slavers, which was heard before Mansfield. He found for the insurers on the basis that it was a false claim - he did not (as was invented in the film) comment on the inhumanity of the slavers at all. Nevertheless the publicity of cases like the Somerset and Zong cases made the country much more aware of the awful nature of the slave trade and slavery. Wilberforce decided that the time was right to reintroduce his bill.

He decided that few MPs would be prepared to wade through all the evidence that had been collected so he organised a working house party at Yoxall Lodge to create an abridged version. At Yoxall Lodge was Marianne Sykes, daughter of Henry Thornton, one of the bankrollers of the Sect. She was a good friend of Jean Babbington (wife of Thomas), apparently through the Sykes' connection with Anna Seward, who introduced her to the Gisborne's circle. Other guests were Dixon, Babbington and Wilberforce's mother.

Marianne Sykes described what happened at Yoxall Lodge in letters, (some of these are quoted by Tomkins, and are held in the Thornton MSS, Cambridge University Library, Add. MS 7674, particularly 7674/1/N 38-42 - a visit from a KBH historian to Cambridge would perhaps be useful). Tomkins quotes her letter:

> Mr. Wilberforce and Mr. Babbington have never appeared downstairs since we came except to take a hasty dinner and for half an hour after we have supped. The slave trade now occupies them 9 hours daily. Mr. Babbington told me last night he had 1400 folio pages to read, to detect the contradictions, and to collect the answers which corroborate Mr. W's assertions in his speeches. These with more than 2000 papers to be abridged must be done within a fortnight, they talk of sitting up one night within a week to accomplish it. The friends begin to look very ill, but they are in excellent spirits, and at this moment I hear them laughing at some absurd question in the examination, proposed by a friend of Wilberforce's.

Wilberforce must have decided at Yoxall that the parliamentary sub-committee should hear the evidence of one Isham Baggs. As described in 'The Scandalous Divorce of John Newton', Baggs was John Newton's protégé who repaid his benefactor by making love to his wife, Catherine, while staying at Kings Bromley Hall. Baggs was disowned by John Newton and had his name dragged through the mud at the two well publicised trials and the House of Lords divorce. Baggs got his own back by testifying what he had seen of the slave trade and Barbadian slavery. In the evidence given before the privy council sub committee, published 1793, Isham Baggs was presented as having been chaplain on two voyages that the RN 'Grampus' made on the E. African coast. However he also gave evidence on the cruel treatment of slaves, particularly pregnant women, in Barbados. This knowledge can only have come from a trip, or trips, that he made as a boy, or young man in the 1770s or 1780's with John Newton, who at the time had three plantations - Newtons, Seawells and Mount Alleyne. The rift between the Newtons and the Ardens was caused by the fact that Anna Seward's friends Althea Catherina Arden and Anne Arden were friends of Catherine Newton who, in John Newton's opinion, knew of, and maybe encouraged, Catherine's adulterous behavior with Isham Baggs and others. The two Arden girls were named in the two Doctor's Commons trials of December 1778 and September 1781 and the Lords divorce of February 1782. This can have done their reputation no good. When Elizabeth Newton, the last of the Newtons died childless in 1794 she left her nearest relations, the Ardens, very little and her distant relations, the Lanes, most of her estate. In 1797 Anna Seward wrote a letter to a Mrs. Adey directly referring to this will, referring to the Ardens as "so cruelly, so unjustly overlooked in the bequeathed riches of Mrs. Newton". It is clear that after the divorce case relations between the Newtons of Kings Bromley and the Ardens of Yoxall were strained. It is tempting to suppose that, irrespective of the value of Isham Baggs' evidence, the Yoxall set would have enjoyed embarrasing the Newtons and Lanes with it. Although Anna Seward lived until 1809, and the Lanes took over Kings Bromley in 1794 there is no mention of them in Anna Seward's letters. To travel from Lichfield toYoxall one would have to make a wide detour to avoid Kings Bromley, so one can imagine Anna Seward riding straight through the village now owned by the Lane ‘usurpers’ – as she would have seen them.

Tomkins quotes Marianne Sykes as describing Yoxall Lodge as a 'delightful place...very large and every corner is filled with books'.

The act to abolish the slave trade was finally passed in 1803. Curiously to us now, not all abolitionists thought that slavery itself should be abolished. Thomas Gisborne was one of these. By taking this stance no doubt he could reconcile himself with his neighbours, the Lanes of Kings Bromley, who still owned Seawells plantation in Barbados. In actual fact the abolition of slave trading had little effect on Barbados, where the slave population was increasing naturally anyway. In any case the profitability of sugar slavery was gradually falling due to competition. When the emancipation act was passed in 1834, John Newton Lane, the then Lord of the Manor of Kings Bromley, cannot have been too concerned. The slave owners were well compensated by the government for the loss of their 'property' and on 2nd May 1836 John Newton Lane received £4746 1s 10d for the 224 slaves on Seawells, while his cousin Richard Lane received £5538 8s 1d for the 262 slaves on Newtons.

Like Kings Bromley Manor, not much remains of Yoxall Lodge, which was knocked down in the early twentieth century. We do have a large number of photos of KB manor, but I have only managed to find these undated ones from the Burton Mail website: http://www.burtonmail.co.uk/Gentry-bluebells-story-Yoxall-Lodge/story-21546453-detail/story.html. The current farmhouse is built on the same site.

Thomas Gisborne and his wife Mary were painted by Joseph Wright of Derby in 1786 in the grounds of Yoxall Lodge:

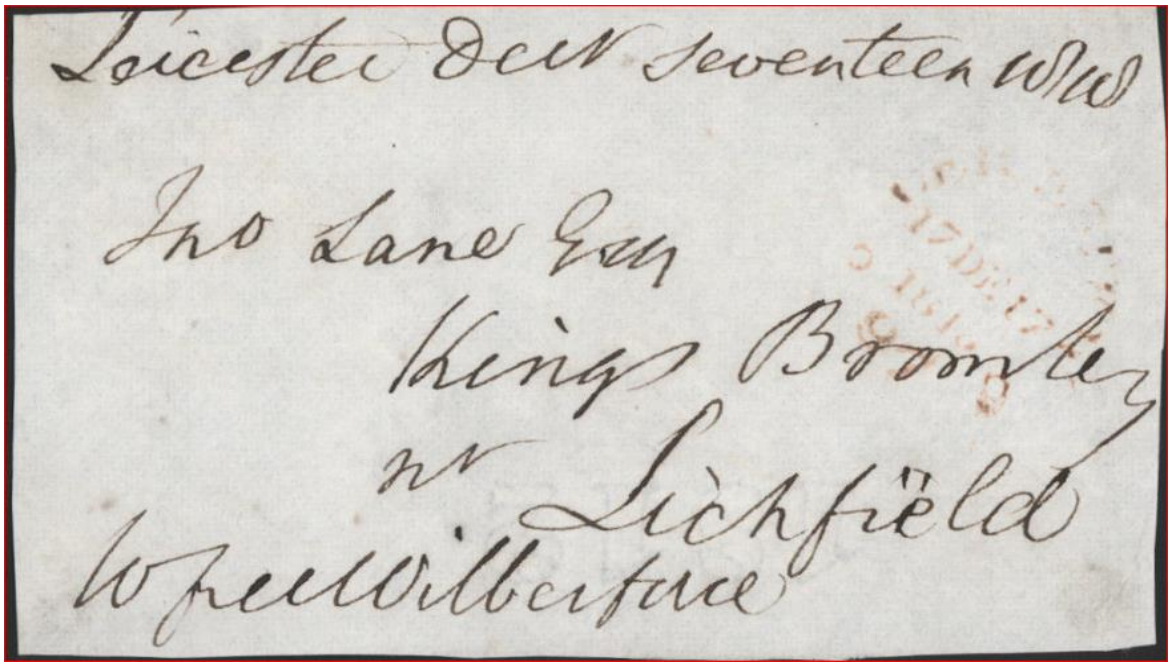
Yoxall Lodge now:

Anna Seward died in 1809. There is a grand memorial to her on the north wall of Lichfield Cathedral just past the west entrance:

Her memorial in Lichfield cathedral bears a poem by Sir Walter Scott:

'Amid these Aisles, where once his precepts shew'd,
The heavenward pathway which in life he trode,
This simple tablet marks a Father's bier;
And those he loved in life, in death are near.
For him, for them, a daughter bade it rise,
Memorial of domestic charities.
Still would you know why o'er the marble spread,
In female grace the willow droops her head;
Why on her branches, silent and unstrung,
The minstrel harp, is emblematic hung;
What Poet's voice is smother'd here in dust,
Till waked to join the chorus of the just;
Lo! one brief line an answer sad supplies—
Honour'd, belov'd, and mourn'd, here Seward lies:
Her worth, her warmth of heart, our sorrows say:
Go seek her genius in her living lay.'

In 2015 a letterhead came up on Ebay, for sale for £200. It was from William Wilberforce to John Lane of Kings Bromley, postmarked Leicester, 17th Dec 1818:



Unfortunately the letter is not included, further research is needed to find out why William Wilberforce would be writing, fifteen years after the abolition of the slave trade and nineteen years before the abolition of slavery to John Lane, who still owned the 200+ slaves on Seawells and was the eventual heir of John(2) Newton of Kings Bromley, who the abolitionists had so actively opposed, and who the 'Yoxall Set' of the Ardens and the Gisbornes seemed to have fallen out with.

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