

## The Character of John Lane



In 1794 John Lane, along with his younger brother Thomas, inherited, from his distant cousin Elizabeth Newton, most of the land in Kings Bromley Parish along with a considerable amount of money. In addition, he inherited Seawells plantation in Barbados, along with its 180 slaves while Thomas inherited Newtons plantation and slaves. John Lane was 42 and had been working as a barrister at Lincoln's Inn since graduating from Queens College Cambridge. Two years after inheriting he decided to stop practising and concentrate on acting as Lord of the Manor of Kings Bromley.

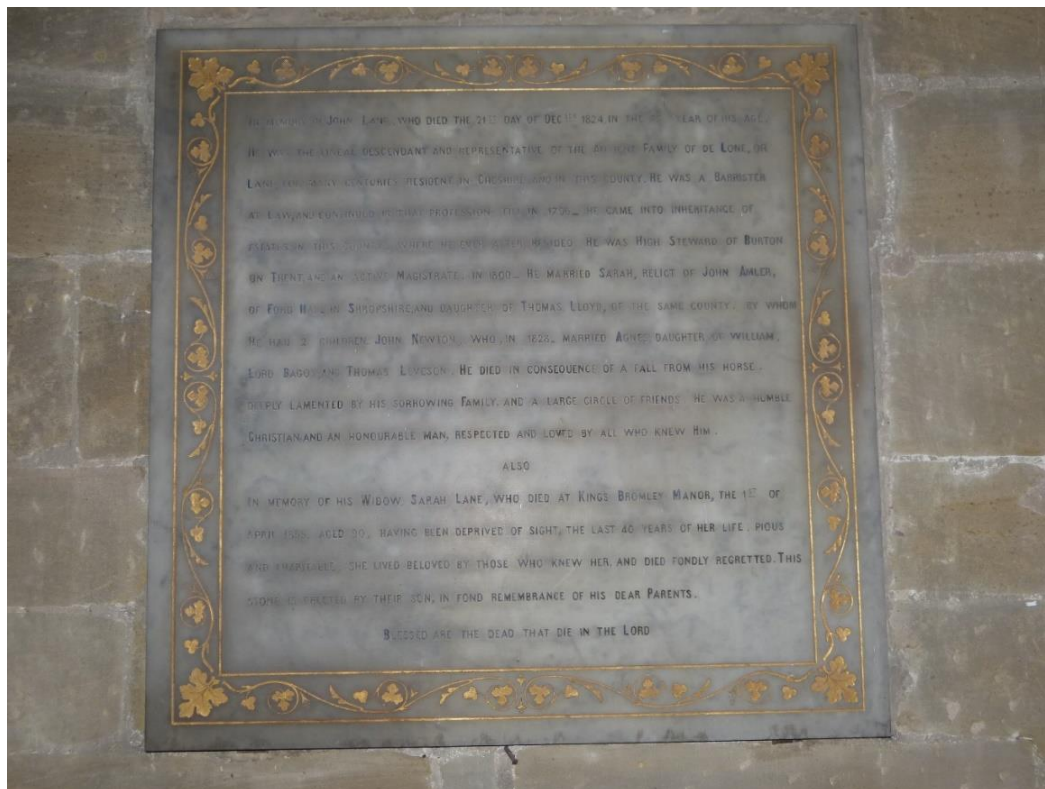
John Lane's father (1723-1782), also John Lane, was the last Lane of Bentley (nr. Wolverhampton) since he had sold his family seat in 1748 - there being some suspicion of straitened circumstances. He nevertheless set up his sons in reputable professions in the law and his daughter Maria married well: she had in 1788 married John Hammond Lucy, a vicar, who had in 1786 inherited Charlecote from his distant cousin George Lucy. Therefore, by good fortune, the Lanes, in one generation re-established themselves among the land-owning gentry. Thomas bought Leyton Grange in Essex from where he could continue his work as a solicitor and Clerk of the Goldsmiths' Company.

In 1800 John married the widow Sarah Amler: he was 48, she was 35. From her first marriage to John Amler of Ford Hall in Shropshire she had a daughter, Frances Amler, born in 1789. John Lane and Sarah went on to have two children, John Newton born in 1800 and Thomas Leveson born in 1802. John Lane had had six illegitimate children by Melissa Mattenley whilst living in London before marrying Sarah Amler; he acknowledged and supported these children and was a witness at some of their marriages. Despite this unconventional arrangement and his professional past John soon became part of the Staffordshire establishment becoming Deputy Lieutenant of Staffordshire, High Steward of the Town of Burton-upon-Trent and Sheriff of Staffordshire in 1807. He was clearly well read and intelligent, setting up the large library in the Manor House.

John's son, John Newton Lane, created the Chancel Aisle offshoot to the north of the Chancel in All Saints Church, Kings Bromley, to cover the Lane vault, which contains the coffin of John himself. On the north side of this building are two carvings, one of John Lane which is shown above and one of Sarah, his wife. John has his lawyer's wig on and does appear to be smiling in a slightly sardonic way. What we know about personality does confirm that he was fun loving and good company. We have several documents confirming this, which are reproduced here.

On Lady's Day 1805 John and Thomas divided their inheritance, John took the west of the parish and the Hall, Thomas the east. Both brothers consolidated their landholdings by purchase, transfer and enclosure. The E side contained 1007 acres, the W 1068. The total area of KB parish is 3500 acres. The estates in Barbados were jointly administered by Thomas until they were divided in 1820: John receiving Seawells and Thomas receiving Newtons (and paying John compensation since Newtons was the larger)

A plaque in the Chancel of All Saints, Kings Bromley, commemorates his life:



IN MEMORY OF JOHN LANE, WHO DIED THE 21<sup>ST</sup> DAY OF DEC<sup>BER</sup> 1824 IN THE 73 YEAR OF HIS AGE. HE WAS THE LINEAL DESCENDANT AND REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ANCIENT FAMILY OF DE LONE, OR LANE, FOR MANY CENTURIES RESIDENT IN CHESHIRE AND THIS COUNTY. HE WAS A BARRISTER AT LAW, AND CONTINUED IN THAT PROFESSION TILL IN 1796 HE CAME INTO INHERITANCE OF ESTATES IN THIS COUNTY, WHERE HE EVER AFTER RESIDED. HE WAS HIGH STEWARD OF BURTON ON TRENT, AND AN ACTIVE MAGISTRATE. IN 1800 HE MARRIED SARAH, RELICT OF JOHN AMLER, OF FORD HALL IN SHROPSHIRE, AND DAUGHTER OF THOMAS LLOYD, OF THE SAME COUNTY, BY WHOM HE HAD 2 CHILDREN JOHN NEWTON, WHO, IN 1828 MARRIED AGNES, DAUGHTER OF WILLIAM, LORD BAGOT; AND THOMAS LEVESON. HE DIED IN CONSEQUENCE OF A FALL FROM HIS HORSE. DEEPLY LAMENTED BY HIS SORROWING FAMILY, AND A LARGE CIRCLE OF FRIENDS. HE WAS A HUMBLE CHRISTIAN, AND AN HONOURABLE MAN, RESPECTED AND LOVED BY ALL WHO KNEW HIM.

ALSO

IN MEMORY OF HIS WIDOW, SARAH LANE, WHO DIED AT KINGS BROMLEY MANOR, THE 1<sup>ST</sup> OF APRIL 1855. AGED 90, HAVING BEEN DEPRIVED OF SIGHT, THE LAST 40 YEARS OF HER LIFE. PIOUS AND CHARITABLE, SHE LIVED BELOVED BY THOSE WHO KNEW HER, AND DIED FONDLY REGRETTED. THIS STONE IS ERECTED BY THEIR SON, IN FOND REMEMBRANCE OF HIS DEAR PARENTS.

BLESSED ARE THE DEAD THAT DIE IN THE LORD

There are three sources which give an insight into John Lane's character. The first, and most complete, is an exchange between the Bishop of Chester and Wm. Edward Tomline, eldest son of the Bishop of Lincoln, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1808, which is labelled 'A true dialogue' and comes from The Jane Lane Papers, the last set of Lane papers deposited at the Staffordshire Record Office on the death of Jane Lane in 2013. SRO 7286/3. I am thankful to Miranda Kauffman for drawing my attention to this. The second comes from a letter sent from John Lane to Lady Holte during her chancery case, in which John Lane helped her. The third is mentions of John Lane in the letters of Anne Bagot.

**1. 'A true dialogue' between the Bishop of Chester to Wm. Edward Tomline, eldest son of the Bishop of Lincoln, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1808.**

William Edward Tomline (1787 –1836) married Frances, the daughter of John Lane's wife by her first marriage to Thomas Amler, in 1811- three years after this 'dialogue'. They had two daughters, one, Mary (1815-1839) left money in her will to build the almshouses in Kings Bromley which still stand. On 19 November 1812 Tomline was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. He was MP for Christchurch from 1812 to 1818, Truro 1818 to 1820 and 1826 to 1829, and Minehead from 1830 to 1831. He was appointed High Sheriff of Lincolnshire for 1824-25.

The 'dialogue':

The Bishop of Chester

You're fond of hunting, Sir, I hear,  
I would not wish to be severe,  
But still 'tis jolly great, I think,  
That when the dogs do smell a stink,  
Young men and old should madly ride  
O'er hedges high & ditches wide,  
And try with all their might & main  
To crack their neck just like their brain.  
Don't hunt. It is an exercise  
Which I by no means patronise.  
Where have you been this winter past?  
Tell me at least, where were you last.

Mr. Tomline

From Staffordshire, I took my flight  
Two weeks ago last Monday night;  
'Twas at King's Bromley that I stay'd;  
A visit of some length I made;  
I fear (so long I kept my station)  
My visit was a visitation.

The Bishop of Chester

What Mr. Lane's? I know your host.

Mr. Tomline

Of all my friends I like him most:  
If e'er sincerity can please,  
Good humour set you at your ease,  
If sterling worth can win the heart,  
Or Talent pleasure can impart,  
A visit to Kings Bromley Hall  
Will never fail to give you all.

The B.P of C

He's a good man I know: 'tis sad  
That he should be so very mad.  
He's often put me to it greatly,  
How to behave myself sedately,  
And keep that sanctified decorum  
As ev'ry Bishop should before him.  
Sometimes I condescend to laugh,  
But still I'd rather not by half.  
He's very odd: I can't expect  
He will improve in that respect.  
My wife to me he's apt to pester  
To take him on our way to C\_st\_r  
But I upon consideration  
Continue to shirk his invitation.

Mr. Tomline

Indeed, my Lord, I see no reason  
That any one should think it treason,  
To make your Lordship laugh with jokes,  
Or even treat you with a hoax.  
But Lane - he's quite another man;  
I'll promise you, I'm sure I can,  
He'd never give you any pain  
With witty bullets of the brain

The Bishop of Chester

I've always heard he's very good,  
If once his manner's understood.  
But the defect in that's so glaring,  
To me its really past all bearing.  
Give me a man that sits quite steady,  
That is not with his tongue so ready,  
If smile he must, that smile's discreetly,  
And smiles that little very neatly,  
If such a man as that I find.  
He's a companion to my mind.  
But Lane is quite another creature

In ev'ry point & ev'ry feature;  
He laughs at jokes & talks & puns  
On anything his fancy runs:  
Such action too & attitudes  
When he is in his crazy moods  
His eyeballs too so very funny,  
His words not quite so smooth as honey,  
Sometimes they stop & slowly linger,  
And then a motion of the finger  
Brings them by dozens at a jerk:  
His simp'ring lips, so very smirk,  
Are apt to show the longitude  
Of both my eyes(?) in latitude.  
A quiet man doth please me best,  
That will not with his jokes molest,  
With Talent .. that's but seldom shown  
And sense .. more fitted to my own.  
That Lane's to me by no means suited,  
In what can never be disputed.  
I like, in talk where'er we roam,  
To be the only one at home,  
And boldly seem to bid defiance,  
To all the world be sons of science.  
I cannot bear to have it thought.  
That I am ever to be taught.  
Why! Don't I shew you when I preach  
That 'tis my Duty, Sir, to teach?  
But if we talk about the Church,  
E'en then he hops upon the perch;  
And be the subject what it may,  
He's always something good to say.  
Yet, though he's seldom very long  
Before he proves me in the wrong,  
He seems so anxious to appease me,  
I cannot think he means to tease me.  
Then (I suppose by way of fun)  
He ends the subject with a pun,  
Such is his mode of conversation  
Deserving excommunication.

Mr. Tomline

At least excuse "the punishment"  
Excepting where a "pun is exeant(?)"  
He puns, I freely will allow it,  
But very often does not know it.  
And give me leave my Lord to tell,  
He puns particularly well.

## The Bishop of Chester

Now do not interrupt me, pray,  
But hear on what I've got to say:  
You're always finding a pretence  
To speak a word in his defence.  
The man is lively, why 'tis true,  
And very sharp and witty too;  
He seems by Nature fully made  
To please you at a masquerade.

Mr. Tomline

Some men the greatest pleasure yield  
Their real character conceal'd;  
Some have a masque for every friend,  
And think they cannot then offend;  
Some in all scenes of life (like Lane)  
For ever will the same remain;  
His only character's *John LANE*

Readers can make their own minds up whether to agree with the Bishop of Chester or Edward Tomline, but it is quite clear that John Lane was something of a character, who liked to joke and pun and had rather unorthodox views.

### 2. John Lane's Letter to Lady Holte

This comes from SRO 7286/4 John Lane to Lady Holte 8 January 1773. Wedderburn was to represent her alongside a Mr. Maddox. In it he hopes that Wedderburn [another lawyer who John Lane had suggested could help her] should:

give her ease but if not he 'shall almost think that in more cases than one a Lady is not very easily satisfied (joke apart)'.

It would seem that John Lane was on good enough terms with Lady Sarah Holte to joke with her that ladies are not easily satisfied, which reflects on his jokey, or flippant, nature and her forbearance.

### 3 Anne Bagot's Diary (SRO D7452/4)

Anne Bagot's diary covers the twenty-two-year period from May 1819, when she was 45, to June 1841. She never married and died in 1847. During this time, she lived in the Cathedral Close, Lichfield, in a substantial house with up to four servants. Latterly she could afford to keep a horse and a small carriage.

Anne enjoyed a full social life; her immediate family was large and her extended family huge. She was well educated, spoke French and Italian and maybe more languages. Her family was engaged with the cultural life of the times, for instance her father was a good friend of the poet Cowper and she herself met Wordsworth and Southey. She tells many anecdotes about Dr Johnson and her visits to the 'Ladies of Llangollen'. As might be expected she was resolutely Tory, Royalist, Anglican, anti-reform and anti-Catholic. She resolved at the start of her diary to use it in a positive way and not to be critical of others and most of the time she lived up to this principle - her lapses must be due to what she would think of as extreme provocation. She was fully self-aware, making many jokes at her own expense in the diary.

Anne was particularly friendly with John Lane, whom she refers to as 'dear friend' and 'cousin' (although the Bagots and Lanes at this time had only been joined in marriage once - back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century). Anne was godmother to John's second son, Leveson Lane, and Anne refers in the diary to the many good times she had at Kings Bromley before the diary started. After John Lane died, she remained on very good terms with his sons John Newton and Leveson, and this relationship was cemented when John Newton Lane married Agnes Bagot in 1828. Anne appeared to be genuinely fond of 'dear' Agnes, whom she had known from a child. By the time Anne died, the Newton Lanes had five boys, described as 'nice boys' and a 'happy family'.

It might be assumed from this friendship that John Lane shared many of the opinions of Anne Bagot, although from the 'true dialogue' we might gather that John was something of a sceptic on all matters, whereas Anne's Tory opinions were unquestioning. What comes through from the diary though is that she did not take herself too seriously and this must have recommended her to John, and vice-versa.

Anne refers at one point in her diary to the dangers of 'enthusiasm'. This was a loaded concept at the time and was applied both to evangelicals/ nonconformists and to those in the anti-slavery movement.

### **John Lane as a Slave Owner.**

From 1794 until his death in 1824 John Lane was an absentee slave owner. We have no actual record of his opinion on the subject, but we know that his brother, Thomas, as can be seen from the Newton Papers, had no scruples about it. During the time John owned Seawells a couple of events occurred that highlight the violence that underpinned the slave system in Barbados.

Firstly, in 1816, there was a rebellion of slaves on the island, now known as 'Bussa's Rebellion'. This extract is taken from 'The Interest, How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery' by Michael Taylor, Bodley Head, 2020:

One British Colonel reported that the parishes of St.Philip and Christ Church were 'involved in a general flame, whilst household furniture of every description, Rum, Sugar, Wine, Corn, and every species of food ... were promiscuously scattered in the Roads and Fields ... with a destruction that evinced the fury of the insurgents. [However, they] were outgunned and, within three days, the rebellion was quelled.

The colonial reaction was just as violent as the insurgency. The British punished the conspirators viciously and often fatally, some were shot, some were hanged, some were tortured in public to dampen any residual enthusiasm for revolution.

Seawells was, of course, in Christ Church parish.

Secondly, in 1823, a Methodist minister named William Shrewsbury set up a chapel in Barbados. The planters were aware that dissenting voices in England were promoting the abolitionists' cause and blamed a recent slave uprising in Demerara on them encouraging slaves in the belief that they were to be freed. In October 1823, the chapel building was destroyed by a mob of white rioters and William and his pregnant wife were forced to flee for their lives to St. Vincent. Shrewsbury had first come to Barbados in 1820 and was known for his fiery speech in reproving sin. He spoke about the detestable way both slaves and planters lived and thought that if slaves wanted freedom they would have to take it by force.

Sarah Ann Gill was a Free Coloured and a member of this controversial Methodist church in Barbados. Sarah Ann and her sister-in-law, Miss Christiana Gill, were among the leaders of the church who subsequently opened their homes as meeting places for church members. In the prevailing adversarial, even life-threatening, environment, this was an act of exceptional bravery. A 28-year-old widow, Sarah Ann held regular worship services in the face of continued and active persecution. These included threats to burn down her house and two prosecutions in the law courts for holding "illegal" meetings. Sarah Ann was

persecuted continuously for one year with threats of grievous bodily harm, questioned by magistrates about supposedly having guns and ammunition in her home and finally prosecuted by the House of Assembly. On each occasion, and at her own expense, she not only defended herself and defied the authorities, but also took the extraordinary step of continuing to hold services in her home.

John Lane would have been aware of the savagery of plantation slavery in general and the persecution of William Shrewsbury and Sarah Anne Gill in particular - this persecution having been carried out to protect the system of which he was a beneficiary. While non conformists such as Methodists and Quakers alleged, quite rightly as we would now think, that slavery was against the spirit and moral teaching of the Christ of the gospels, many Christians, particularly those in the slave owning Anglican establishment, argued that Christ had never, specifically, condemned slavery and that the Old Testament actively condoned it and Pauline theology appeared to accept it. It is likely that John Lane, in a detached and pragmatic way, took the second view.

His commemorative plaque in All Saints Church describes him as a 'humble Christian'. What we know of him shows that he was not humble, and his views were certainly not appreciated by the rather stuffy Bishop of Chester who nevertheless agreed that he was 'lively, sharp and witty'. Of the four Lane Lords of the Manor he was by far the most interesting, and the one you would like to invite to your dinner party.

Allan Howard, November 2020.