

The Journal of the Rev. William Bagshaw Stevens throws light on the Catherine Newton affair and the Lane Inheritance

(Oxford Clarendon Press, 1965, ed. Georgina Galbraith)

William Bagshaw Stevens [1756-1800] was headmaster of Repton and Domestic Chaplain to the Burdetts at Foremark. He kept a diary from March 1792 until his death. His social circle included Anna Seward and her friend Kitty (Anna Catherina, Kitty, Kate) Arden, who by the time of the diaries had moved from Yoxall to Willington. At the time of her involvement with the scandalous activity of Catherine Newton at Kings Bromley in 1777, Kitty was 21, so at the start of Steven's diary she was 36. Stevens was much taken with Kitty, describing her as 'divine' and 'elegant'. Anna Seward, perhaps teasingly, assured the portly and gloomy bachelor Stevens that his regard was reciprocated; in 1792 they were both in a party that visited the Lakes. In his journal (p. 31) he speculates why she was unmarried: "Miss Arden in all her elegance – strange that such a woman should still be a Miss. In her younger days she held her head up too high – after that in Mrs. Newton's affair (vide the trial) she seems to have been too accommodating to her friend, and a Printed account of Indiscretion lasts long and makes a strong impression." Stevens had read the account of the trial (see Historians' publication – 'The Scandalous Divorce of John Newton') and was clearly of the opinion that Kitty's marriage prospects had been seriously compromised by the affair. He worries (p. 517) that the opinion of a friend Mrs. Dodsley (a vicar's wife) might be influenced by Catherine Newton's trial: 'Still anxious to see Mrs. Newton's Trial that she may colour her aversion of Kitty Arden'.

It was John Newton's sisters Elizabeth Newton and Sarah Holte, rather than the Ardens, who alerted John Newton to Catherine Newton's behavior. It is my contention (see Historian's publication – 'The Lane Inheritance') that it was Kitty's involvement in the scandal that led Elizabeth Newton to leave the majority of her fortune to the distantly related Lanes rather than the more closely related Ardens. In Elizabeth Newtons will she left – "John Arden: her real estate in the Co. of Derby, and £1000 and Humphrey Arden £2000". In 'The Lane Inheritance' I guessed, based on the will of John Newton, that the Derby estates amounted to 500 acres. However, Stevens makes an journal entry dated 23rd April 1795 (p.259) – "Arden there, lately enriched by the death of Mrs. Newton with an estate of 1000 pounds per annum". So the estates must have been more like 1000 acres. Remember that Anna Seward's only mention of the will was that Kitty and Anne's Arden's brother was "so cruelly, so unjustly overlooked in the bequeathed riches of Mrs. Newton".

Stevens was acquainted to the Dyotts of Freeford and Erasmus Darwin. I will look at General Dyotts diary (partially transcribed, but mostly manuscript) which is held at SRO and in the letters of Erasmus diary (collected by King-Hele) to see whether there is any mention of the Catherine Newton affair. Also, I suspect that the dearth of Arden papers at SRO is explained by the fact that they moved to Willington; I will investigate at the Derbyshire Record Office.

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