

The History of Antony and Dorothea Gibbs & of the early years of Antony Gibbs and Sons

By John Arthur Gibbs - 1922

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

George ABRAHAM GIBBS, the father of Antony Gibbs, belonged to a younger branch of the family of Gibbs of Clyst St. George, Devon, which for two generations before his own had lived in the township of Topsham, a port on the estuary of the Exe, a mile distant from Clyst St. George.

He and his sister Anna were the only children (except for one who died in childhood) by the marriage of their father, Abraham Gibbs, of Topsham, with Mary Monke. Anna married John Remmett, of the Court House, Tiverton. By a second marriage, with Sarah Ewings (born Lyle), Abraham had one other child, John Gibbs (1725-1774), who went to sea and eventually became a trading sea captain. John married, in or before 1752, Elizabeth, daughter and co-heiress of William Meachin, and made a home for her in his ancestral town of Topsham, where all their seven children were born.

The head of the family in the days of the above-mentioned Abraham Gibbs of Topsham was his uncle, George Gibbs, the possessor of the house in Clyst St. George called Pytte, with its estate of 100 acres. George married in 1711, and according to the pedigree a son was born to him in his 78th year, but only lived a few months; and by his own death in 1723 his branch of the family became extinct. Under various dispositions which he had made the estate in Clyst St. George then came to be occupied by his friend and brother-in-law, the Rev. Francis Pease, rector of the parish; but, since he (George) had made no bequeathal of its ownership, the reversion of it went to his nephew Abraham Gibbs of Topsham as next-of-kin; and, when Abraham died in 1726, to Abraham's eldest son George Abraham Gibbs, who was then only eight years old.

George Gibbs and his nephew Abraham were of more important social standing than their immediate ancestors at Clyst St. George or Topsham, and they had cousins in Exeter - as presently to be mentioned - who had also risen in position from the yeoman stock of Clyst St. George. Abraham in his will claimed the title of "gentleman," whereas his father had been content to describe himself in his as "yeoman." George erected in 1708 the mural monument in the church at Clyst St. George in memory of his parents and grandparents which bears the arms of the ancient Gibbs family of Fenton in Dartington, near Totnes, from which the Clyst St. George family is believed to have been derived. The monument is inscribed with a note of a purchase of land made by him for the benefit of certain poor. The parish registers record of him, "*vir nulli pietate secundus*," a compliment of the more value since in the case of no other person is any remark made in them beyond the official facts.

Abraham Gibbs in his will left £500 to his son George Abraham; £300 to his daughter Anna; £21 and no more to his son John; and the residue to his widow.

One other legacy to George Abraham is recorded - namely, from his grandmother Tryphæna Gibbs (born Rowe) in 1733 of £30, and a share with his sister and half-brother of her wrought plate.

But for Pease's tenancy of Pytte we may believe that George Abraham would have been brought up to live by the land, but instead of this he became a surgeon, as was also his uncle Nicholas Peters of Topsham. Whether he was brought up by his step mother, who remarried in 1729, is not known, but that his education was a thoroughly good one is abundantly shown by the style of his letters.

Just before his marriage he was appointed (1747) on the staff of surgeons of the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, which had been founded in 1741. Eventually he became its chief surgeon, and he only resigned his work at the hospital in 1781.

The Rev. Francis Pease died in 1738, and the tenancy of Pytte passed to his eldest surviving son, who was also the Rev. Francis Pease; but George Abraham Gibbs, by an arrangement which he had made with the latter in 1744 and paying him £300 to terminate his rights, had come into possession of the property, to which, as we have seen, he was heir-at-law. He could not live altogether at Pytte on account of his professional work in Exeter; but Clyst St. George being only five miles distant by way of Topsham, he or some of his family often occupied it as their country residence.

Besides the property in Clyst St. George which George Abraham Gibbs received back from the younger Pease, he bought from him (in 1749) 15 acres, "part of the manor of Ashmore," in Clyst St. Mary, the next village, which land had been left in George Gibbs' will to the elder Pease, subject to certain charitable charges. Before 1789 George Abraham added a further purchase to his property in Clyst St. Mary.

At one time George Abraham had prospects of the inheritance of considerable estates. These were properties acquired by his relative John Gibbs, of the Exeter family referred to above, a second cousin of his father. This man, who died in 1741, was educated at Christ Church, Oxford, and was a student of the Inner Temple. He possessed many manors and large estates in Devonshire, and was a Justice of the Peace for the county. He had no sons. One of his daughters married Stephen Weston, son of the Bishop of Exeter. Another, to whom the estates were left in trust, married three times, and her heir was her only child, a daughter, who married in 1752 Thomas Taylor, of Denbury and Ogwell, Devon, and had issue by him. So the estates remained in the Taylor family, and George Abraham Gibbs, who would otherwise, it seems, have succeeded to them, lost his chances.

George Abraham Gibbs married in 1747 Anne (1722-1803), daughter and co-heiress of Anthony Vicary of Exeter, and of Elizabeth, daughter of Nicholas Munckley of Exeter. His letters to Anne of 1744-1747 are the earliest of all the Gibbs letters in the Aldenham collection.

Anne Vicary's "father was a wealthy man, who kept a grocer's shop in combination, according to the custom of Exeter in those days, with a linen draper's." She had several brothers and sisters, who all died unmarried or without issue, two only, John and Elizabeth, surviving beyond 1749; and eventually she "came into a fortune of about £10,000. She was an excellent woman, and brought up a family of ten children to the admiration of everyone, but was

not without certain notions of her own importance which were rather amusing in her later years." Her family was said to be descended from that of Vicary of Dunkeswell, in North Devon, but the connecting links have not been actually proved.

On his marriage George Abraham took a house near the Bishop's Palace in the Cathedral Close in Exeter on lease from the Bishop, at 18 guineas a year. It was situated (and it still exists) in Palace Yard, which is a little court close by Palace Gate. "You come through the outer door into a little square court which leads immediately into the house by a second door," so he described the position; and a note by Henry Hucks Gibbs says: "Palace Yard is a little square close by the old Episcopal Palace, and in the house opposite to one as one approaches it" George Abraham Gibbs lived. The house had 12 or 13 rooms, besides garrets, kitchen, offices, brewhouse, etc., and a garden. There he brought up his family, and he retained it all his life and his widow after his death.

George Abraham was brought up as a Presbyterian, but joined the Church of England "when the minister and congregation of the Mint Meeting House in Exeter began to alloy their Presbyterianism with Arian doctrine." His wife, too, was probably of the same persuasion, for she was baptised in the Mint Chapel. Those of his children whose place of baptism is recorded were baptised in the same chapel, including the firstborn and the youngest. His son George remained a dissenter till 1814, when he joined the Church, but Antony, and probably most of the other children, were Church people.

Among George Abraham's special friends must be counted Edward Addicot, John Mallett and William Pitfield, whom in his will he asked to help his wife settle his affairs, describing the last-named as "my dearest and best friend." Another intimate friend of his was Dr. Hugh Downman - of Exeter, a well-known physician, poet, and man of letters. He published poems in several volumes, in one of which, *Poems to Thespia* (2nd impression, Exeter, 1791), appears a sonnet addressed to George Abraham Gibbs.

There was a literary society in Exeter at this time called "The Exeter Society," to which it is quite possible that George Abraham Gibbs belonged.

After the letters to Anne Vicary, there are none in the Aldenham collection till 1769. This was two years after George Abraham Gibbs' 11th and youngest child had been born; and it will be convenient here to mention all his children:

George ...	b. 1748 d. 1750.
Elizabeth	b. 1750 d. 1780 mar. R. B. Remmett.
Vicary ...	b. 1751 d. 1820.
George	b. 1753 d. 1818.
Abraham	b. 1754 d. 1782.
Antony	b. 1756 d. 1815
Anne (Nancy)	b. 1757 d. 1828 mar. S. Banfill, s.p.
Mary	b. 1759 d. 1819 mar. C. Crawley.
Sibella (Bell) ..	b. 1760 d. 1841 unmarried.
Sarah (Sally) ...	b. 1763 d. 1785.
Catherine (Kitty)	b. 1767 d. 1820 mar. B. Burroughs, s.p.

Very little information is available as to the early years of these children. Vicary and Antony received part of their education at the old Exeter Grammar School, as also probably did the other two sons.

Vicary (afterwards knighted, and Chief Justice of the Common Pleas) obtained a King's scholarship at Eton, and was there from 17 March 1764 to 1770, under the headmasters Dr. Edward Barnard and Dr. John Foster. "He gained much distinction by his compositions in Latin verse, a specimen of which will be found in the *Musæ Etonenses* 1795." He was the only one of the sons who was at a university, being, in 1770, elected a scholar of King's College, Cambridge, of which he was a Fellow from 1774 to 1784, and "where he greatly distinguished himself as a Greek scholar. He was elected Craven University Scholar in 1772, and graduated B.A. in 1776 and M.A. in 1778." He was admitted a student of Lincoln's Inn 24 August 1769, and, after completing his career at Cambridge and his pupillage in a pleader's chambers in London, he practised on his own account as a special pleader for nearly ten laborious years. "He had the stimulant arising from necessity." Called to the Bar at last in 1783 he joined the Western circuit, and had at once from his large practice as a pleader "an extensive connection of clients, and was soon looked upon in the profession as one of the soundest lawyers and most useful juniors of the day." "His abilities secured the favourable notice of John Dunning, afterwards Lord Ashburton," the great Devonshire lawyer, who married (1780) Elizabeth Baring, sister of George Abraham Gibbs' fellow-townsmen and acquaintances the brothers Baring, who carried on their wool manufacturing business at Larkbear, Exeter. To Vicary Gibbs later in his life Robert Gifford of Exeter "was chiefly indebted for his advancement and celebrity," I and became, like him, Chief Justice of the Common Pleas (1824), with the title of Baron Gifford of Parker's Well (Exeter).

Distinguished though Vicary became, it is beyond the scope of this work to attempt to write his history in detail, but the salient facts will be mentioned, and the glimpses of his private life transferred to these pages from the Aldenham letters will be some addition to the numerous accounts of him which have been published. From the latter a few further extracts may now be made.

He was a small man, not more than 5 feet 4 inches in height, and of a meagre frame.

[He] acted as Lieutenant under Erskine at the time of the riots of 1780 [in the corps, which] as it consisted of lawyers, rejoiced in the *sobriquet* of "Devil's Own."

[At Eton] he formed friendships with several noble and eminent men which lasted till the end of his life.... [With these friends he in London] enjoyed the usual pleasure of society. The theatre was one of his favourite relaxations [and he had] an extensive familiarity with almost every line of Shakespeare. ... Prince Hoare dedicated his play *Indiscretion* to him [1800]. ... [In domestic society] he always shone, and they who partook of it were loud in their declaration of the charms he imported to it. His peculiar friends, and they were many from both sides of politics, bear witness to his virtues, his high religious feelings, his honourable principles, his goodness of heart, and the kindness of his disposition notwithstanding occasional irritabilities of temper.

Another of his biographers writes :

His merits as a skilful special pleader and an acute and learned lawyer have been universally acknowledged. He was wholly destitute of humour and possessed of so caustic and bitter a manner that he acquired the name of "Vinegar Gibbs." Confident of his own legal strength he was equally uncivil and outspoken to his own clients. ... Though somewhat narrow-minded and impatient on the Bench Gibbs was a thoroughly conscientious judge and Taunton's "Reports" bear record to the accuracy and extent of his legal knowledge. In politics Gibbs was a strong and decided Tory. As a parliamentary speaker he met with little success.

Above all should be quoted in praise of his qualities an address delivered in 1823 by James Freshfield to a select committee of the House of Commons on the law of principal and factor:-

I may be permitted, as a humble but affectionate friend of that great judge, to state that my Lord Chief Justice Gibbs must be regarded as one of the most accurate lawyers within our memory; and not only was he a most able lawyer, but he loved the science in which he was so profound; he spared no pains to possess himself of the papers of those who, in their turns, ranked high as lawyers; and, perhaps, a more valuable collection of law authorities never was brought together than he possessed ... and it is scarcely necessary to say, in the hearing of members of the committee, whose rank in life enables them to say more upon that part of his character than I can, how astonishing were his powers of discrimination; indeed, if I may be allowed to express my own opinion of Lord Chief Justice Gibbs, I should regard him as a proof of the superintending providence of God, who gave him an understanding unrivalled by any one of the powerful men of his day, and yet denied him that share of eloquence possessed by others. With his acuteness, profound learning, and application, had he possessed the oratorical powers of Lord Erskine, he would have been dangerous to society, except so far as he might be restrained by his own excellent principles from deceiving those whom it was his duty to address in advocating the cause of his clients.

From a letter dated 27 April 1769, addressed by George Abraham Gibbs to his second surviving son George, then 16 years old, we learn that the latter was already at that date apprenticed to his cousin Samuel Munckley, merchant of 53 Queen's Square, Bristol, who was a son of Nicholas Munckley of Exeter, a brother of Mrs. George Abraham Gibbs' mother Mrs. Vicary. Nicholas Munckley's widow married for her second husband John Duntze of Exeter, whose son, Sir John Duntze (created Bart. 1774), was therefore Samuel Munckley's half-brother. The Duntze as well as the Munckley families were friends of the Gibbs family, of Palace Yard.

Samuel Munckley was a much respected character in Bristol. "He was known as the 'Chancellor,' and was referred to on almost all occasions as arbitrator in disputes, being possessed of sound, unbiased judgment." He was Master of the Merchant Venturers of Bristol in 1768, and a partner in the Harford Bank, Bristol, from 1769 to 1774, but seems to have had his own business as a West India merchant besides, to which George Gibbs was apprenticed. George Abraham Gibbs wrote of him in May 1790: "What an excellent man he is: taking him all round, I have never met nor expect to meet the like of him." In the letter of 1769 referred to above George Abraham contrasts George's situation, "under the care of so virtuous and worthy a man as your master," with that of Vicary, who was now in the sixth form at Eton, "and will, in his life be exposed to a variety of temptations from which you, my dear sir, will be exempted. The first and principal object of my wishes is not that which goes under the name of success in the world. My greatest ambition is to see you all virtuous and worthy men." In another letter he

speaks of George's duty of gratitude and affection to Munckley and "you will find me often suggesting such reflections as these, not because I have any reason to doubt your good behaviour, but because I wish to confirm you into it by showing its tendency to make you happy." These quotations show how George Abraham Gibbs endeavoured to inculcate good principles in his children. The reverence in which, as will be seen further on, he was held by his son Antony, and the uprightness of his sons' characters which the reading of their letters brings into prominence, are sufficient proof of his success.

George Gibbs was taken into partnership by Munckley in January 1789. The style of the firm was, till 1802, Munckley Gibbs & Richards, the third partner being James Richards, who afterwards married Elizabeth, the daughter of Captain John Gibbs, of Topsham; but there is some reason to think that this style was adopted even as early as 1775. From this firm were eventually to be developed the large concerns of Gibbs Bright & Co., of Bristol and Liverpool, and Bright Brothers, Australasia, which were all to be absorbed in 1881 by Antony Gibbs & Sons of London.

George married his first wife, Esther Joanna, before 1778. He lived in Bristol itself till July 1807, when he moved to Redland, a suburb of that town. Esther Joanna, who died in 1787, was the mother of all his children, and they all died young except Joanna (b. 1777) and George (b. 1779). She was the youngest child, and (in her children) heiress of Richard Farr, merchant of Bristol.

With the third surviving son, Antony, the principal subject of this memoir, I deal later.

George Abraham Gibbs sent his fourth surviving son Abraham out to Genoa in 1771, "I apprehend to be in the same house [of business] with Mr. Short," wrote Rose Heath to her brother John, who had gone out there in 1764. At that time the most important trade of Exeter was in Devonshire-made woollen goods. In these there was a large export thence to the Continental countries, and a return trade in foreign products. Many Exeter men were attracted abroad by this commerce, and, amongst the friends of George Abraham Gibbs, some members of the families of Heath and Short of Exeter.

Captain John Gibbs of Topsham, the half-brother of George Abraham, died at sea in January 1774. He was then captain, and (as appears from his will 6 dated 1773) half-owner of a brigantine named the *Ceres*, "making another trip" from Leghorn to Cephalonia for corn." He left his share in the ship to his wife, Elizabeth. She died in 1779, and in her will, made in 1778, the *Ceres* is mentioned among her property. George Abraham wrote to his own son George in August 1774: "You know the mutual affection in which [he and I] lived so many years and the connection of interest which there was between us. ... Now, I have [his] seven children added to [my] ten, for I must and will be a father to them as far as my ability reaches and as long as my assistance can be useful." What "the connection of interest" was does not appear, but quite possibly it had to do with Captain John's Mediterranean business. He may even have been the owner of the other half of the *Ceres*. Anyhow, the fact that Captain John was trading from Italy may well have been an inducement to George Abraham to send his own son Abraham out there, as we have seen he did.

Captain John Gibbs' children, who were all born at Topsham, were :

Elizabeth ...	bap. 1752 ; d. 1840 ; mar. James Richards, s.p.
John Meachin	bap. 1755 ; living 1779 ; unmarried.
William ...	bap. 1757 ; d. 1830.
Abraham ...	bap. 1758; d. 1816.
George ...	bap. 1761 ; d. 1793 ; unmarried.
Lyle ...	bap. 1761 ; d. 1839 ; unmarried.
Thomas ...	bap. 1767 ; d. 1796 ; unmarried.

John Meachin was with his father when he died, and may have remained abroad to manage the *Ceres*. The date of his death is unknown. George was a lieutenant in the Army, and died in Jamaica, shot at the mouth of a cannon supposed to be unloaded. Thomas entered the Navy, and when he made his will 4 in June 1796, shortly before his death, was 2nd lieutenant on H.M.S. *Minotaur* under Admiral McBride. There is nothing more to say in these pages about these three, but William, Abraham, Lyle, and Elizabeth, as also William's children and Abraham's daughter, will enter occasionally into the story.

William became a sea captain, like his father, and, like him, eventually made Topsham his home.

As to Abraham, his uncle George Abraham Gibbs arranged an apprenticeship for him in 1775. He was to go to Genoa for his cousin Abraham (George Abraham's son) to take him to Leghorn and "put him into the hands of his master, who is one of the most considerable merchants in the place." Abraham (Captain John's son) remained at Leghorn till at least 1788, and eventually founded the mercantile houses of Gibbs & Co., of Palermo and Naples (both of which were closed in 1816), was banker to the Court of Naples, agent for Lord Nelson in the management of his Sicilian estates, and Consul at Palermo for the United States of America. A letter from Lyle Gibbs to his brother William of November 1803 says: "Abraham is in a fair way of increasing rapidly once more his fortune at Palermo. He becomes daily a man of great consequence.

The fifth son, Lyle, went out to Italy in 1777 or 1778, and, after being a partner in a firm not named, became a partner about 1794 with John and Charles Heaths (sons of Benjamin Heath, of the Exeter family mentioned above) in the firm of Heath & Co. of Genoa. Eventually, John Heath having retired to London and Charles Heath being dead, Lyle Gibbs, on 1 May 1814, changed the style of the business to his own name, and afterwards, his brother Abraham's Palermo and Naples firm having been liquidated, adopted for it (1820) the style of Gibbs & Co.

Of George Abraham Gibbs' six daughters the only one of whom there is anything to say at this point is the eldest. The other five will be mentioned in later chapters. Elizabeth married in 1776 Dr. Robert Butler Remmett, a physician in practice in Plymouth, who seems to have been, though there is some slight doubt on the point, a son of George Abraham's sister Anna, the wife of John Remmett of Crediton.

A fragment of an interesting historical event is recorded in a letter of George Abraham Gibbs dated Exeter 30 August 1779. He was in Plymouth staying with his daughter Mrs. Remmett when the town was thrown into consternation by the combined French and Spanish fleets

appearing off the place with the intent to attack and effect a landing. He got a carriage ready to take the Remmetts to Exeter. On the Tuesday these fleets were making for Plymouth, fighting the English fleet, and he with glasses could see “the unequal combat of the *Ardent* with several of the enemy’s ships.” The enemy retired, but for fear of a renewal of the attempt on Plymouth, 1,300 French, Spanish, and American prisoners who were there were sent thence to Exeter, and others to Bristol, and were guarded by associations of gentlemen who enrolled themselves for the purpose.

The next year Elizabeth Remmett died at Plymouth, but visits of members of the Gibbs family to Dr. Remmett continued to take place not infrequently, and the letters often mention visits paid by him to one or other member of the family, and in his medical treatment they put great reliance. He had three children by Elizabeth, but two died young, and Robert (b. 1778) is the only one who will be mentioned in these pages. Dr. Remmett married again in 1787.