

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

By John Arthur Gibbs - 1922

CHAPTER XV THE TOPSHAM FAMILY 1816-20, AND SKETCH OF THEIR SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

The re-entrance of William Henry Gibbs upon the scene may be made the occasion for a continuation and the conclusion of the history of those descendants of George Abraham Gibbs' half-brother John Gibbs of Topsham who were still living in 1816.

As a boy at Topsham William Henry was well known to his Exeter cousins, Antony's family. It has been mentioned already that in 1808 he had joined his uncle Abraham Gibbs' firm, which was styled Gibbs & Co. and had its business both at Palermo and Naples. In January 1816 Abraham gave him (aged 25) a partnership in the Naples branch, and established him in charge of the business there. He himself had hoped to retire soon, and to hand over all his business to William Henry, but on 15 July that year, at the very height of his repute and seeming prosperity, he committed suicide. Not half an hour before he was playing backgammon with his brother Captain William Gibbs who was staying with him. The cause of his sad deed was that a temporary pressure for money, due to a delay on the part of the Government of the Two Sicilies to pay certain moneys owed to his firm, had brought him to the knowledge of the fact that his affairs were seriously embarrassed. It was afterwards found that his confidential clerk had been systematically robbing him, and had managed to conceal from him the serious condition of the firm caused thereby.

William Henry tried, with the support of influential friends of his in Naples, to keep up the Naples House, but in a month or two found it impossible, so that both Houses had to go into liquidation. They were never resuscitated. William Henry being then out of employment decided (early in 1817) to accept an offer to enter his uncle Lyle's compting house in Genoa, which his younger brother John Ley had joined the year before.

Abraham Gibbs' daughter Mary, who had married Colonel Charles Ashe a' Court at Palermo in 1815, was with her husband in Italy during this time. It was feared that she would not get her fortune, which was in the form of a bond for £30,000 given by her father, but the money seems to have been forthcoming later on. There are not many later references to Mary in the letters. She called upon Dorothea in London in 1818, but a letter - a very friendly one - written by her to Caroline Gibbs in 1848, seems to show that from 1818 till just before that date she had had no intercourse with her London cousins, with whom she had been so intimate in earlier years. The renewal of correspondence involved explanations, from which it appears that there had been misapprehensions regarding certain events in 1816, which "if you had known my husband you would never have credited." Her husband had, she said, taken her to Heytesbury, where they

lived a quiet life, and on the return from abroad [probably in 1832] of his eldest brother Lord Heytesbury they removed to Southampton, and in 1842 to live with the 3rd brother, Admiral a' Court Repington, at Amington Hall, Warwickshire, which belonged to the latter. Her husband, who was created a Knight of the Guelphic order in 1818, and obtained the rank of Major-General in 1841, took the name of Repington on the Admiral's death in 1855, when he succeeded to Amington Hall. He died in 1861. Mary died in 1878 at the age of 84. Her only children, Charles Henry Wyndham a' Court Repington (1819-1902), of Amington, and Elizabeth (1822-1911), wife of Sidney Herbert, 1st Lord Herbert of Lea, both left descendants. Lady Herbert of Lea was the mother of (amongst other children) the 13th and the 14th, and grandmother of the 15th (the present-1919) Earls of Pembroke.

Captain William Gibbs, who, as we have seen, was in Palermo in 1816, seems to have been there ever since he took his niece Mary out in 1812. Meanwhile his wife Susan, who is always spoken of in the letters with the greatest respect for her character and management of her family on very slender resources, remained with her 2 daughters and her youngest son Charles in their home at Topsham. The letters show that in 1813 she was forced to make a special appeal for funds to her brothers-in-law Abraham Gibbs of Palermo and Lyle Gibbs of Genoa. Perhaps it was by some arrangement made at that time that her husband stayed on at Palermo, possibly in the employ of Abraham. Lyle Gibbs had been helping that family for years, but apparently Abraham had not contributed to the remittances sent home by the former. Writing in 1837 Lyle, who never married, said that for nearly 50 years he had been supplying them with from £250 to £300 a year, and all "alone ... by the death of Abraham who had promised to do half." Soon after Abraham's death in 1816 Captain William returned to his family at Topsham, but seems to have been quite devoid of means of his own, and his conduct sometimes was such as to endanger the continuance of Lyle's generosity. Lyle now hoped that his sister Mrs. Elizabeth Richards of Ilfracombe, who it seems could have afforded to do so, would have shared with him in supporting the Topsham family, and she did apparently begin to contribute, but soon left all the burden to Lyle, whose business at Genoa was a flourishing one. Lyle had, as we have seen, taken Captain William's two eldest sons William Henry and John Ley into his business, and Charles was to follow them later. The death of Captain William at Topsham in 1830 brought to an end the connection of five generations of his branch of the Gibbs family with that place, for his widow Susan and her daughters then went to live at Tiverton, where her brother, the Rev. John Ley, was a master at Blundell's School. She died in 1834, and her daughters, Frances (b. 1797) and Mary Matilda (b. 1801), continued to live at Tiverton. After her death Lyle expected her family (the Leys), and his sister, Elizabeth Richards, to support the two orphan nieces, but this was not their wish, Mrs. Richards excusing herself on the ground that by over-generosity in the past he had encouraged them to live above their station! So he continued to them the allowance he had given to their mother. Soon after this (1836) he became estranged from Mrs. Richards, resenting the fact that while she would not contribute to her nieces' support she had taken up and was helping their brother John Ley Gibbs in his family expenses, with whom he had meantime quarrelled. We shall see that she also gave money to William Henry and that Lyle had also quarrelled with him. At his death in 1839 Lyle left £1,000 each to his Tiverton nieces and the rest of his property to their brother Charles. Frances died in 1847 and Mary Matilda 2 in 1877, both unmarried. Both were buried at Tiverton.

Among the few references to Elizabeth Richards after 1816 beyond those mentioned it may be recorded that G. Henry Gibbs saw her at Ilfracombe in 1827 "as deaf as a post and uses a trumpet": and there is a letter from her to Sibella Gibbs of April 1839 in which she refers to "the time I used to spend with you at Exeter [before 1789] which I shall ever remember with the greatest gratitude for your good father's great kindness and indeed all the family when I stood in need of assistance." This recognition of her obligations to George Abraham Gibbs and his family may we hope be taken to include repentance for her behaviour to Dorothea Gibbs in Spain 1789-92. She died in 1840.³

To return to William Henry Gibbs, he did not at first stay long in Genoa after joining his uncle Lyle there in 1817. I have mentioned in the last chapter that he was in England later in that year. He went back to Genoa, but could not get on with his uncle, and in 1819 went to London to try to get other work, but not succeeding rejoined his uncle in 1820. Lyle Gibbs changed the style of his business from his own name to that of Gibbs & Co. in 1820, but there is no evidence that he took William Henry and John Ley Gibbs into actual partnership till 1825. As William Henry quarrelled constantly with his uncle and brother it was arranged in 1829 that he should give up his partnership. Lyle gave him £400, and Gibbs & Co. appointed him their agent in London and opened credits there in his favour to enable him to do business for them, but he conducted himself towards them in such a way that in 1831 they severed their connection with him. If one may judge from the letters of Lyle and John L. Gibbs he must have been a man of somewhat unbalanced mind. Good-natured, and attractive, and well intentioned though he was, he was unpractical, and impatient of control and in particular of his position of dependence on his uncle, yet when placed by him in an independent position unable to face the struggle and aggrieved because he could not live in the style he wished, abusive of his uncle and brother, and seemingly very much his own enemy. His cousins, G. Henry and William Gibbs, always treated him with great kindness. In 1832 we find G. Henry Gibbs and Samuel Banfill interceding for him with Lyle, and his brother John trying to put some business in his way. In 1834 he started in business on his own account in Genoa, and A. Gibbs & Sons gave him their agency there, but it was only when his uncle Lyle was on his deathbed in 1839 that he was able to effect a reconciliation with him. Meanwhile, wrote G. Henry Gibbs to Mrs. Richards in 1837: "Experience and misfortune have taught him the value of money.... I know indeed few men who are more grateful for kindness ... or who in his very reduced circumstances would have conducted themselves in so praiseworthy and contented a manner as he has done for some years past." This letter was in reply to one from Mrs. Richards placing £500 at his disposal with A. Gibbs & Sons as a present from herself. Lyle left him nothing in his will, but his brother Charles gave him out of his own inheritance from Lyle £600. Henry Hucks Gibbs saw him in Genoa in 1841. A letter from the latter to Charles Gibbs of Genoa in 1846 shows that William Henry had come home that year and had been staying with his cousin William Gibbs at Tyntesfield, but was returning to Genoa though A. Gibbs & Sons had not then the business there to put in his hands which they had. He afterwards retired and lived for some years at Marsh Barton in Clyst St. George, where he died, unmarried, in 1858, leaving a very curious will of which William Gibbs was executor.

John Ley Gibbs was in England in 1810 and in 1828 and perhaps oftener. He married in 1828 Ellen Maria, daughter of John Richard Gamble of Finsbury Square, London, a lady with no fortune. There was talk at this time of his setting up for himself in London with his younger brother Charles, leaving his uncle Lyle Gibbs alone in Genoa with William Henry, but the behaviour of the latter to Lyle made it necessary for him to return to Genoa. His wife went with him, and three children were born to them there. In 1834 he went home with his family, and a fourth child was born in London in January 1835. He went out again to Genoa later in the year, and his wife died there in November. On 31 December of the same year his partnership with his uncle was brought to an end. Lyle had it seems very good reason to be greatly dissatisfied with him in business, but he treated him well at parting with him, paying all the expense of his trip home in 1834-5 though it had been undertaken contrary to his advice and wishes, and forgiving him a debt which he owed the firm, as he had also done in the case of William Henry. John then set up in business in Manchester and died there in November 1837. His children were taken charge of by their grandmother Gamble. Only two of them had lived, Elizabeth Ellin Gibbs (1835-64), who never married, and John Douglas Lyle Gibbs (1833-91). The latter became manager of the Eastern Telegraph Co. in Egypt. He married, but had no children. At his death the Topsham branch of the Gibbs family became extinct in the male line.

Charles Gibbs (b. 1808), the youngest brother of William Henry and John Ley, joined Gibbs & Co., Genoa, in, or about, 1828. On the death of his uncle Lyle in 1839 he was the only one of the family left in the firm. He and a partner, Camillo Serra, continued the business. Charles married in 1852 Stuarda Yeats, eldest daughter of Timothy Yeats Brown, H.M. Consul at Genoa, by Stuarda 4th daughter of the 2nd Lord Erskine, and had one child Constance Jacqueline (b. February 1857) who married Giulio Adamoli of Besozzo, Italy, by whom she has 3 daughters, all married. Charles died in December 1857. After his death his brother-in-law - Yeats Brown - and Serra carried on the business in partnership (by Charles' will) with the widow Stuarda Gibbs, but she and Serra retired about 1860. In 1864 the style of the firm was changed from Gibbs & Co. to Granet Brown & Co., and this in 1910 to Kirby & Le Mesurier. That firm was taken over on 1 January 1920 by a branch of the Compagnia Italo-Britannica of Milan opened that day in Genoa with A. George Le Mesurier as manager there, Wm. H. Kirby joining the Board of Directors of the Company.