

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

By John Arthur Gibbs - 1922

CHAPTER III 1785-89—EXETER AND EXWICK (continued)

ANTONY's business at Exeter seems to have been well established in 1785, for an indenture exists, dated March of that year, between one "William Grogen, and Antony Gibbs Tucker and Fuller of Exeter," by which the former binds himself as an apprentice to Antony for seven years, and as a covenant servant for three years longer. From this it may be assumed, though the deduction cannot be pressed, that the business was conducted in Antony's sole name at that time.

The change of Antony's residence from Exeter to Exwick House at the end of 1785 or early 1786 marked a development of his business, for at Exwick had been, or soon was, set up a woollen cloth factory in which he was a partner and apparently the senior partner, the style of the firm being Gibbs Granger & Banfill. The other partners were Edmund Granger of Rougemont Castle, Exeter, and Samuel Banfill. We have seen that the latter was already associated with Antony's business. Granger was a man of some means, which Banfill was not. There is frequent mention in the letters and diaries of Granger and his wife, as well, of course, as of Banfill. One of Granger's sisters was the 2nd wife of the Rev. James Yonge of Puslinch, brother-in law of the Rev. Charles Crawley's sister Catherine. The factory was probably in part worked in connection with Antony's previous exporting business, which still continued, cloth bought in the Exeter market being finished and sometimes dyed in the Exwick factory; but some reason is advanced below for supposing that the export business at least in part was retained by Antony for his own account and that it did not form part of the business of Gibbs Granger & Banfill. The factory was close to Exwick House, but on the opposite side of the road. An essential feature of the factory was one or more water mills, already in existence (supplied by a leat taken off from the Exe), which furnished the motive power of the machinery. Whether the factory, during Antony's connection with it, combined in one concern, as it certainly did afterwards, all the processes of the manufacture of wool into cloth, or whether only some of the final stages of it, remains uncertain. In 1801, twelve years after Antony's partnership at Exwick had ceased, there are allusions in the letters to Granger & Banfill's "new manufactory" and it is probable that it was at that time that the factory received its full development. In Jenkins' *History of Exeter*, published in 1806 (p. 437), we read: "[In Exwick] Edmund Granger and Samuel Banfill Esqres. have established a large woollen manufactory and erected spinning machines, workshops, dye houses, tenter grounds, etc.; also dwelling houses for the manufacturers. Here is Exwick House once the residence of the family of Oliver from whom it came by marriage to William Williams M.D. of Exeter; it was the residence of his widow for many years whose heirs

sold it with the barton to the present proprietors of the manufactory. It is now the residence of Samuel Banfill Esq., the directing partner of that extensive concern." The date of the sale is not given, but from Antony's name not being mentioned it is certain that neither he nor in his Exwick days the firm there were the actual proprietors of Exwick House. It must therefore have been held on lease by one or the other, but the letters show that Antony furnished it himself and improved it to suit Dorothea and himself. Banfill, however, had a room in the house, and this was no doubt a convenient arrangement for the business.

Some letters of Mrs. Hucks and of Eleanor Ward to Dorothea form the only records for 1787. Mrs. Hucks had given up her house at Exmouth, and taken rooms in Soho, London, to make a home for her son John, who much against his will had been placed in Ward's office for a trial of some months before he should be bound. He soon gave up this work; he had no very bad habits, but was extravagant, lazy, and proud; nothing would satisfy him but to go into the Army, and this was finally agreed to, though Mrs. Hucks could ill-afford it, and the Wards were so angry that for a long time they would hardly receive him. Getting his commission in August he joined his regiment at Portsmouth. His mother too went to live there for a time, but in the next year she was looking for a house for herself near Exwick. Antony always took a kind interest in John Hucks. He had him to stay with him at Exwick in 1786, and wrote: "I never saw a more good-tempered fellow and scarcely ever a boy of more lively parts," but found him devoid of all power of application, "and with a great turn to expense and appearance." With reference to the Wards' demeanour to John as above described he (Antony) wrote to Dorothea in 1788: "Good God, how excusable are all the little follies in young men of his age, how much more so than we ought to appear to them to think; they ought equally to be discouraged and forgiven."

When staying in London in 1787 Mrs. Hucks paid a visit to her late husband's cousin Robert Hucks at Aldenham, and this is the first mention in the letters of the estate there since it came into the Hucks family through the marriage of Robert Hucks' father Robert with Sarah Coghill. She described it as "a delightful living house, the grounds beautiful; in the midst of an estate of £1,500 a year, for the rest of Mr. Hucks' fortune is in Bedfordshire."

At this time Dorothea engaged as maid to her mother Hannah Hayne (whose family lived in Exeter), who afterwards married Sir Vicary Gibbs' butler White. She was a valued friend and servant of many of the family, and the aunt of John Hayne, one of the partners of Antony Gibbs & Sons.

The letters throw little light on Antony's life at Exwick, but the time of the great crisis in his life is now approaching which forced him for many years to spend long periods away from his wife, and the regular correspondence during such times has provided a store of letters which henceforth afford the means of much closer insight into his life and character.

Antony set out on the first recorded of his many journeys abroad in August 1788, leaving his wife and children at Exwick House. The journey was undertaken solely for the sake of his business, but from the very beginning there are hints that something was amiss. On his way to Dover he first visited Colonel Simcoe near Honiton, who was a great friend of his, to whom there are many references in the family letters; and then the Wards at "The Willows." For the first of these visits Samuel Banfill accompanied him, and there can be little doubt that the unpleasant day which he says he spent there had to do with a loan of money from the Colonel. He wrote to Dorothea (4 August) that by their parting from one another "the sacrifice we now make must

turn to our advantage in the end; even if it should not produce much profit to the business we shall have the satisfaction of having done our best, and we both know that nothing else would make up for the want of that"; and he impressed on her that, if she showed more agitation "than might be expected, it will encourage the report that I have gone on account of circumstances, which the tuckers in Exeter are I find still attempting to make people believe." In sight of his approaching failure this implied denial of his business being endangered needs some explanation, but the letters throw no light on the point. There can be no doubt but that he wrote what he did in perfect good faith, but it may be that his sanguine nature had obscured his judgment as to his position.

Antony embarked for Calais on 11 August 1788. His business took him to Amiens, Beauvais, Paris, Orleans, Tours, Limoges, Lyons, Montpellier, Toulouse, and Bayonne, in France, and thence to Spain to various towns in Guipuzcoa, Castille, Asturias, and Galicia, and on to Madrid where he spent a long time. He had intended to return home by sea from Spain, but found it necessary to travel back over much of the same ground to settle up uncompleted business, thus greatly prolonging his stay abroad, so that he did not reach home again till May 1789.

In every place he was working hard at the uncongenial task of seeking orders for woollen goods, and his business correspondence with Banfill and others often occupied him till late into the night. But there are allusions to old affairs which had to be settled in some places, and to matters which he describes as very unpleasant to deal with in others, which were probably connected with the disaster that was to occur, and though at first he did not foresee its extent, he was aware that his circumstances must be straitened as the following extracts from his letters to his wife show:-

Tours, 4 Sept. 1788. There will be but one thing a sufficient fortune] wanting when I return home to make me the happiest man in the world and if it were not for that one thing I should never have left my comfortable home for such an occupation as this on which I am engaged.

Pamplona, 30 Oct. Would it not be egregious folly [by returning sooner] to suffer the comfort which I promise myself on my return to be broken in upon by consideration of my not having completed the business which I am come to transact and to which I make such heavy sacrifices. How many happy hours do I promise myself to spend in giving thee accounts of what has happened and by our comfortable fireside in looking back on the scenes I have gone through ; if we are wise it will be a constant source of amusement and satisfaction to us, but if I leave unattained the great object of my travelling I should never look back with any pleasure on any of the circumstances that have attended it: this reflection would poison all the rest.

Madrid, 16 March 1789. I am now sat down with time before me and more pleasure than I can express to write thee a long letter. Thou sayest well that in the midst of our own poverty we shall at least have the satisfaction of seeing some of our nearest friends and relations get rich around us, and with our disposition this will be no small satisfaction either. I trust it will be accompanied too by the pleasure and pride on our part of knowing that without these riches we are as happy as they, at least after we have passed a certain point, and a very moderate one too after we begin to get forward.... I have seen no place that pleases me half so well as Exwick, nor do I believe, excepting the family palace at Clyst, that there is a place in the world so much to my liking.

Clearly there was no thought as yet that either Exwick House or Pytte would have to be given up, as was to occur.

In the autumn, after Antony's departure, Dorothea went with the children to pay visits to George Gibbs, who at this time lived in Lodge Street, Bristol, to the Wards, and to Vicary Gibbs. In her absence her sister-in-law Anne Gibbs used to attend to the housekeeping at Exwick House, and, rather to Anne's annoyance, Banfill insisted on seeing the accounts every evening. George Gibbs' (1st) wife had died in 1787, and his sister Sibella, to whom Dorothea was greatly attached, was now established in charge of his house and children. Dorothea bore herself well in her anxieties about Antony, and her father-in-law wrote to her in October: "George gives us a high encomium of your magnanimity. This new trait of your character might never have been brought to light if it had not been for the present occasion and I think, my dear, you may count the credit you have done yourself as some recompense for the loss of your husband's company."

Antony's thought and affection for his children are brought out in the following quotations from his letters:-

Oviedo, 6 Dec. 1788. You will have remarked a good deal on Vicary's and Kenny's [Mrs. Vicary Gibbs] manner of bringing up their child and you will probably have compared their manner in this respect with ours and that of Charles and Mary [Crawley]. It would be better than a treat to me if you would tell me all you think of this; let us, my dearest love, remark and cull (as far as our judgment will go and our temper admit) the best from all. Impatience has been a great fault in my temper, and in the management of children nothing can be worse than this. I think you will have found that George's method with his children approaches more to perfection than either of the others.

Paris, 30 August 1788. You used to tell me that you thought I was fonder of Henry than either of the other children and I used to think so myself. Till they come to a certain age it seems natural to like the oldest acquaintance best, but you will be surprised to hear that the newest of the three, little George Abraham [born at Exwick 20 January 1788], comes oftenest to my mind; sleeping and waking his little smiling face is always before me.

This child became very ill, and on the very day, 3 March 1789, that Antony was writing from Madrid to tell his wife of his joy at getting news that he had recovered, he died. He was buried at Leyton, Essex.

During part at least of this child's illness Dorothea was at Vicary Gibbs' house in London, and Antony wrote with regard to Vicary:-

Madrid, 3 March 1789. The affectionate attention and friendship which you have experienced from Vicary and Kenny has confirmed, if it were possible to confirm, the idea I had before of their general character and their particular regard for you. I think you have often heard me say if one or any of our family should ever chance to want their friendship we should know more of the value of it. We have I really believe more real friends than fall to the share of one in a thousand and theirs is the only company I wish for out of my own family; there is no real comfort in all the rest.

Dorothea feared to outstay her welcome, but Vicary wrote to:-

We do not deal thus by those we esteem our real friends. We should in a similar situation use your house at Exwick as our own, and should consult our convenience and not yours - sensible that in so doing we should pursue the conduct more agreeable to you. We now desire you to do the same in respect of us.

Steadfastness in friendship was always characteristic of Antony, and this trait is brought out in the last quoted letter from him, in which also the following occurs: "My affection and friendships are already so thoroughly and happily settled in my own country that I begin all new acquaintances with a sort of prejudice." During his travels at this time he had as companion at the beginning a Mr. Jackson, and at another time a brother of James Davy, who (the latter) lived near Exeter, and whose son, George Thomas Davy, was afterwards partner in Antony Gibbs & Sons.

In December 1788 George Abraham Gibbs had mortgaged Pytte and his lands in Clyst St. George and Clyst St. Mary for £1,500 to the trustees of the marriage settlement of Vicary Gibbs and his wife. This act was doubtless connected with Antony's affairs.

Antony returned home in May 1789. On his way he had written (2 April) to Dorothea: "No one knows how much I suffer from having been obliged to delay so long and if I were in decent circumstances I would not have submitted to it, but I have imposed it as a religious duty on myself and a debt which I owe my family." He probably meant that he must spare no pains to carry through all the business possible abroad in order to reduce his indebtedness; and (on 17 April): "Let us thank God, my dearest Dolly, for the blessings we have left and submit with resignation to the misfortune that has befallen us."

He was ruined, and was faced with the necessity of beginning all over again in business. Not only had he lost all his own and the little money his wife had from her father, but also all that his father had borrowed to put into his business for him. His father's failure was involved in his, compelling the sale of Pytte, and of the Clyst St. Mary land.

The failure is referred to in a letter from Eleanor Ward to Dorothea of 10 June 1789:-

My mother's letter quite confirmed what I had heard a month ago, but what I hoped might have been better than was said.... In every situation you will ever be my dearest sister, believe me. It is not your having a little more or less that can make any difference with those that love us, and pray tell me in a loss which you sustained some months ago is this anything like that, and if I were you I should bless God that this has happened as poor Antony's mind will now be at rest and he entirely knows what he has to trust to and is a new man. You love your husband and children. Had I had children I should have been supremely happy even if I had worked for them.

And again (31 July):

I admire your conduct and resolution. I fear I should not be able to act so well in such a situation.

Antony - now 33 years of age - lost no time in preparing for a new career. His recent journey abroad, and the experience gained there in selling goods by personal visits to buyers, evidently pointed the way to him. He decided to establish himself in business in Madrid, and to take his family there with him, and arranged to have the Spanish agency, not only of Granger & Banfill (who continued with the Exwick factory), but also of other manufacturers, as will be related below. Samuel Banfill took on Exwick House and resided there till 1830). A sale was held of Antony's furniture, and a great part was bought by his mother-in-law Mrs. Hucks, who now took a house for herself in Alphington Street in St. Thomas', Exeter.

There are but few letters of this distressing period before Antony reached Madrid, but one which he wrote to his father on the eve of his departure from Exwick, and another written from

Madrid, abundantly show his contrition and his determination to retrieve the past, and will now be quoted at some length.

Letter marked "rec Aug. 1789."

I cannot, my dear Sir, go away [to Madrid] without saying something to you, though I have no excuse to make for my conduct. I most sincerely hope that what has passed, though it may make some people think that it was] impossible I should feel for you and my dearest mother the affectionate duty that I ought, will not have the same effect upon you, for I can freely call God to witness that I can charge myself with no deficiency of that kind. I know my behaviour has been altogether inconsistent, and the objects I had in view of a nature totally different from the means I have taken to obtain them. This the world will not perhaps believe or understand, and I shall not grieve myself on that account if I can but reinstate myself in your good opinion, and induce you to think that my intentions have been always better than they have appeared. I have deceived no one more than myself, and it has been from too anxious a desire to keep from my friends what I knew would distress them that I have brought upon them and myself ten times more than was necessary or possible if I had concealed nothing at first. It shall be my study to give for the future a better direction to any good intentions I may entertain, and you may be assured, my dearest Sir, that there shall be no more concealment from myself or others who may interest themselves for me, and above all that nothing shall ever more induce me to do what I know to be wrong in itself in order to forward any one purpose however good or desirable it may be. I hope I am now in a situation to remit you a considerable sum annually, and, as soon as something handsome can be done in this way, we have it at heart to pay you a long visit at least. Whatever be the term of my life I shall consider a most essential duty as left unsatisfied till the whole of our debts are paid.

Madrid, 2 Nov. 1789.

I have not only the strongest inclination but I verily believe I shall have it in my power to convince all those who have behaved kindly to me that I am not so unworthy of their regard as some people have represented me; it is the opinion of some few friends only about which I am solicitous and such as give me credit for being what I know myself to be. Believe me, my dear Sir, it is not in my nature to disappoint those friends; ten thousand times more satisfaction will it be to me to confirm their opinion than to alter the opinion of those who think more unfavourably of me. I am truly sensible of the enormous errors into which I have fallen and I feel assured within that they are corrected: this conviction affords me some satisfaction at times though I know the scenes I have gone through would necessarily have corrected a worse disposition. ... The whole bent of my mind is now employed in remedying as far and as quickly as I can what [i.e. the errors that] are past. I will go great lengths in order to obtain what I so heartily wish, and I have great prospects of my succeeding.

Though the actual circumstances of Antony's failure are not known, it is clear that he had made his position worse by concealing from his father and friends the difficulties into which he was getting. It is probable that some excess in venturesomeness, to which his sanguine nature was liable to prompt him all his life, may have been one of the causes of his troubles, and another a failure in giving proper attention to his business after he had settled himself comfortably at Exwick House, due to his not having sufficiently trained himself in habits of patience and regularised application. Many of his later letters, and at this time one to his father and his father's reply (both to be immediately quoted), bring out this latter point. His father's letters never failed in kindness, and how magnanimous he was under his own misfortune may be gathered from the facts that neither in his letters to Antony nor to others (so far as the

collection shows) does he make any complaint, and we must read between the lines to find any allusion to his own reduced circumstances.

In a letter to his father dated Madrid 16 June 1790 Antony refers to the kind way in which his brother George was interesting himself in his present work, and continues:-

I am very sensible too that it would be to me the greatest possible advantage and comfort if I could adopt those parts of his character and conduct in which no one is more convinced than myself that I have been deficient or knows more the fatal consequences of that deficiency. At the same time I believe nothing to be more impossible than that I should ever attain the same excellence in those points which George possesses. I have the satisfaction to feel myself improved, and I hope I shall go on improving, though it seems almost unnatural in me to fix at once, as I see many others do, on the shortest and most regular way of doing anything : whether it be natural disposition or habit or both I don't know, but it is certain that seldom a day passes that I am not dissatisfied with myself about some one thing or other in this way, though I certainly take great pains with myself and am upon the whole much more regular than ever I was in my life.

To this his father replied 29 July 1790:-

George is a great example, and I know nowhere a better character than his. But you will consider that he began right, and had the advantage of an excellent master, and has been in the practice of regularity these 20 years. Besides two men may have equal merit in this respect and yet not be exact copies of each other. I believe one of the best general rules is to cultivate the habit in all the transactions of life little as well as great, for there is such a mutual connection and dependence in human actions that you can hardly do anything either well or ill habitually which does not some way lead to doing others after the same manner.

A letter from Antony to his wife may also be quoted:-

Oporto, 7 May 1791. He sets forth his desire that she should apply to their children's training the lesson of his experience of his own liability to fail in steady application, and writes: "This disposition in me was discovered early by my father, but his constant occupations prevented him paying that regular attention to it which was required, and my mother, who has not a grain of it in her own disposition, was either never sensible of it in me, or was not aware of the natural consequences to which it led. To thee, my dearest love, I can speak plain, and I shall add that they were both so thoroughly satisfied at discovering in me such strong traits of sensibility and good humour that they never suspected that anything essentially wrong could grow from so good a stock, and thence paid less attention to this fatal defect in my disposition than it deserves."

This was written, we may be sure, without any desire to make excuses for himself, nor with any trace of resentment to his parents, a feeling of which Antony was incapable. His only object was to point out to Dorothea the moral of his own training.

The protestations made by Antony in his letters to his father of his determination to rectify what was amiss in his character represented no vain resolves. He set himself as a duty the task of paying in full not only his own but also his father's debts, and after his father's death imposed on himself the support of his mother and unmarried sisters. To these ends, and to the support of his own family, all his efforts in future were directed by strenuous application to his work and undaunted struggles against adverse circumstances, such as would have dismayed many a man of less courage. "And though he did not live to complete the task," runs a note written by

Henry Hucks Gibbs, "yet he laid the foundation of an edifice [Antony Gibbs & Sons] which my father and uncle [Antony's sons], travelling in the same paths of honour, integrity and high-mindedness, in which he led them, were able to complete, and which remains, and I trust will remain, supported by the same good principles for us their descendants. In 1840 the last of these debts was paid with interest." Here may also appropriately be inserted a quotation from a letter written by Antony's son, George Henry, in 1839, on the occasion of his own son Antony joining the London house: "And I have reason to hope that he will do credit to the honoured name which he bears, which is associated in my mind with everything that is honourable in character, indefatigable in business, and most kind and amiable in every relation of life." The sequel will abundantly bear out his son's eulogy of him.

It may be confidently asserted that, but for the new circumstances in which Antony was placed by his failure, his career would never have led up to the establishment of the London business.

There is no statement in the family records of the amount for which Antony and his father failed, nor of the amount of debt remaining unsatisfied after their assets had been distributed, but some of the payments subsequently made in liquidation of the old debts are recorded. Some part of these payments was no doubt in respect of money lent to George Abraham Gibbs by his friends to enable him to carry on after his bankruptcy.

It is rather curious that while there is a record of George Abraham Gibbs having to undergo bankruptcy proceedings there is none to show that Antony was ever made officially bankrupt, and it is just possible that in his case a private arrangement was made. Anyhow, it is made quite clear that after the bankruptcy both Antony's and his father's unsatisfied debts were obligations of honour, not legal debts.

Other unexplained matters are referred to in the following note made by Henry Hucks Gibbs in about 1876: "What were the circumstances of his [Antony's] failure I know not, nor how it was that the manufacturing business of Granger & Banfill continued, as it certainly did. Perhaps the export business ... was his own and it was in that that he failed." It is not necessary to assume that the whole of the Exeter buying and exporting business was Antony's; part may have been for his Exwick firm, and part for himself, or even for friends who wished to join in his speculations. The Exwick firm was no doubt, even after Antony left it, a regular buyer of cloth in the Exeter market, and it was certainly a regular exporter. In a letter from Antony to his father in November 1789 it appears that Banfill was the one of the partners who took on the conduct of the Exeter business after Antony left Exwick.

The sale of Pytte, which had been the country home of George Abraham Gibbs and his family for so long, was, we may well believe, one of the hardest trials in the case, and must have been particularly distressing to Antony, for his father's and mother's sake, and also for his own in view of the evidence we have had of his great affection for the place. Vicary Gibbs considered the question of buying Pytte for himself, "to accelerate the winding up of my father's affairs," but concluded that his present circumstances would not allow him to pay as much as his brother-in-law Charles Crawley was prepared to give, and the latter bought it early in 1790 for £3,250. George Abraham Gibbs henceforth, and his wife after his death, lived in Palace Yard, Exeter, presumably in his old house there. Charles Crawley's purchase of Pytte is thus referred to in May 1790 by George Abraham Gibbs, who was then staying at his own son

George's house in Lodge Street, Bristol, on his way to spend the summer with the Crawleys at Stowe: "Had a very kind letter from Mr. Crawley in which he expresses his consideration for us in the purchase of the estate after a very obliging and affectionate manner and we know that whatever he says comes from the heart; any place that is the habitation of his family would be agreeable to us." Antony too (June 1790) expressed his great satisfaction, "having no doubt that it will contribute to the comfort of many branches of the family." The purchase must have been made chiefly out of affection on the part of Charles Crawley and his wife for her old home and family. He had left Whitestone early in 1789, for his uncle, Dr. John Lloyd, rector of Stowe-nine-Churches, Northants, had died in 1788 leaving him that living and £7,000, and he had gone to reside there. He still hoped to make frequent visits to Pytte, but after a time found that he and his family could make but little use of it, and in 1796 or 1797 he sold it, and the Gibbs family ceased to have any direct connection with Clyst St. George for many years. The Rev. Charles Crawley's sixth child Caroline, who was afterwards to marry Antony Gibbs' son George Henry, was born at Clyst St. George in 1794.