

# The Berkshire Archæological Journal

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## A Vanished Berkshire Family.

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kind permission of the Editor.)*

THE total extinction of a surname is a very rare event and when that name has been borne by a family who has in any degree left its mark on the country there is a double pathos in its passing.

Lately there has come to an end a family so representative of the best traditions of the English middle-class, so well endowed with the finest instincts of literature and journalism, and so well-known in the county of Berkshire that it seems desirable that some record should be made in print of its long history and activities before its somewhat meagre family archives and anecdotes fade into oblivion. This family is the family of Cowslade which first rises to notice in stray records at Newbury, Wallingford and Basingstoke during the sixteenth century. By the following century the family had established itself near Newbury, and was living at Donnington Priory in the parish of Shaw, a fine house which was afterwards rebuilt by a later Cowslade, and which remained in the family till 1814. By that time their numbers were reduced to one brother and sister, and John Cowslade, Gentleman Usher to Queen Charlotte,<sup>1</sup> dying in 1795, was obsessed by the idea that the family was on the decline

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<sup>1</sup> Mural Tablet in Shaw-cum-Donnington Church,

and left instructions that the following words should be inscribed on the tablet (still remaining) which was erected to his memory in Shaw-cum-Donnington Church :

“ He esteemed it a piece of vanity to aim at perpetuating by adoption a family which by the will of Providence is on the verge of extinction.”

But in February 1783, Thomas Cowslade, a member of another branch of the family, living at Reading, had married Marianne Smart, the daughter of Christopher Smart whose great but eccentric poetic genius has remained to our own day a topic of surprise and admiration. Christopher Smart having lost his fellowship of Pembroke College, Cambridge<sup>2</sup> by marrying the step-daughter<sup>3</sup> of the famous old publisher, John Newbery, and having fallen into debt and a state of melancholia, John Newbery purchased for Mrs. Smart a recently established newspaper named *The Reading Mercury* and when her daughter married Thomas Cowslade it was carried on under the joint names of Smart and Cowslade. This journal, fathered and helped by John Newbery and such famous friends of his as Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander Pope and Doctor Burney, soon became one of the most successful newspapers in the home counties, and circulated throughout Berks, Bucks, Oxon and Hants. It remained the property of the Cowslades till 1914, and the various members of the family who ruled over it all possessed such strong, racy, humorous and benevolent qualities that they might well have served Charles Dickens as models for the peopling of his novels. But they all shared one idiosyncrasy, an aversion to marriage, and usually only one in each generation married, the last to do so being a daughter, so that eventually the prophecy of John Cowslade made in 1795 was fulfilled in 1932 by the death of (Miss) Rosa Maria Cowslade at the age of eighty-three, the last of her name. The following brief sketches of the most prominent members of the family (written by a descendant of the last of the Cowslades to marry) will, it is hoped, be found either interesting or amusing according to the characters

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<sup>2</sup> Smart's portrait, a large one in oils, in which he holds under his hand a letter from Alexander Pope, was given in 1925 by Miss Rosa Maria Cowslade to Pembroke College, Cambridge, where it now hangs in the Great Hall.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Maria Carnan, whose mother, a widow, married John Newbery.



*Christopher Smart, from a contemporary oil painting.*

portrayed, and also may act as a mirror reflecting the life and occurrences of a period of time covering nearly three centuries.

#### THE DONNINGTON COWSLADES.

*George Cowslade* of Donnington Priory was Mayor of Newbury in 1664, and again in 1672.

During his Mayoralty in 1664 there was fierce rioting in Newbury over the first Easter Vestry after the passing of the Act of Uniformity and the reinstatement of the old Liturgy after the Restoration of the Monarchy. The Mayor and Corporation having met to elect Churchwardens, they were "in a most barbarous manner assaulted by a rude multitude of Phanatiques. The tumult continued until one of the Corporation, being an officer of militia, went out and pretended that he would call in the company upon them." Their ringleader was a man named Milton, "a rigid Presbyterian who had been a rebell from his cradle" and who kept a coffee-house in Newbury. He and a rabble of his confederates had "assaulted the Mayor's house and brake in upon them using threatening and insolent language towards them: whereupon the officers and soldiers were commanded to turn them out, at which time a pistol was fired (being late at night) and the Marshall was told to his teeth by one of the mob that he himself would kill one of them that night. Sir Thomas Dolman went forth and taking a guard with him cleared the streets and commanded the rioters to their houses."

"Certain grand Phanatiques" were later charged at Quarter Sessions with various offences, such as "cutting off a piece of the Incumbent's gown as he was burying a corps, reproaching him publicly in the pulpit, and making a noyse and outcry when he administered the Holy Sacrament of Baptism; as if it had been a Bear Baiting!" Subsequently the Mayor, Mr. Cowslad(e) bound four ringleaders, including Milton, whose friends planned to rescue him and fired a pistol as a signal. Finding that they grew bold, Sir T. Dolman "scoured the streets with his soldiers, forced in the rabble, and put out fire and candle." He afterwards complained to the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Lovelace, that "the Mayor was more forward to excuse the riot than to notice it as he ought," but the prevailing opinion was that Mr. Cowslad(e)

had acted with more discretion than Sir Thomas Dolman, who was inflamed by extravagant loyalty mingled with a vindictive feeling against the Puritans. By the following Sunday peace reigned in Newbury, all was quiet at the Church, the Mayor and others receiving the Communion, and even Sir Thomas admitted that "the Mayor whose cowardice he blames for these affairs is now very active, hopes the town will be soon transformed: a letter should be sent to the Mayor to act with more courage."

Dolman and the Mayor were publicly reconciled later amidst ringing of bells and great rejoicings which included entertainment by the Corporation, and they remained friends and neighbours at Donnington for the rest of their lives and are buried in Shaw-cum-Donnington churchyard.<sup>4</sup>

On the death of George Cowslade in 1674 the next to rule at Donnington Priory was Richard Cowslade, who lived till 1718 and became Newbury's great benefactor. He gave to the Church an organ, a stipend for the organist and a sufficient sum of money to keep the organ in repair: he also bequeathed an annual sum for the Mayor and another sum for the clothing and instruction in perpetuity of ten poor children. These gifts are gratefully remembered by the long inscription on his tomb in Newbury Church..

Having no children he left his house to his nephew Thomas Cowslade, whose son, another Thomas, appears to have been of a very ingenious turn of mind, for he "discovered a method of converting the stalks of bindweed into corduroy, thus deriving public utility from a troublesome weed, as corduroy having been hitherto imported from abroad has been the occasion of considerable sums having been sent out of the country."<sup>5</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine* for October, 1792, in an obituary notice of this Thomas Cowslade, enlarges further on this invention as being "likely to produce considerable advantages to this kingdom, and further particulars relating to it together with the

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<sup>4</sup> The account of these happenings is compiled and the quotations extracted from the contemporary numbers of *The Kingdom's Weekly Intelligencer* in the collection of Mercuries, Diurnals, etc., in the Bodleian Library.

<sup>5</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*.



*Marianne Smart, daughter of  
Christopher Smart, who married  
Thomas Cowslade  
(from a miniature).*



*Thomas Cowslade, who married  
Marianne Smart  
(from a miniature).*

memoirs of Mr. Cowslade would undoubtedly prove interesting to our readers. He was ingenious, scientific, and useful to society, and established at Donnington a manufactory of cotton that proves highly beneficial to the poor and convenient to the Gentry of that neighbourhood."

He appears to have been unmarried. His brother John, whose post at the Court as Gentleman Usher to Queen Charlotte had brought him the close friendship of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay) survived him only three years, and the one remaining brother, Frederick, and a sister named Anne, who died in 1811 and in 1814 respectively, were the last Cowslade residents of Donnington Priory.

#### THE READING COWSLADES.

A cousin of the Donnington Cowslades, Thomas by name, now arises to resuscitate the family, and by his marriage to Marianne Smart during the latter half of the eighteenth century starts a new epoch in its fortunes.<sup>6</sup> Not only were the young couple blessed with a family of six sons and three daughters, but they at once entered the society of the best literary minds of the day. The young wife's father—Christopher Smart—and her step-grandfather—John Newbery, the publisher—were of course well acquainted with all the contemporary writers, and Newbery being a successful man of business had provided for Mrs. Christopher Smart by presenting to her the weekly journal *The Reading Mercury*. She carried on this business in her own name until her daughter Marianne married Thomas Cowslade when she transferred it to him, the name of Cowslade first appearing as owner in the year 1785. From that date till 1914 the paper remained their property and was edited by them with increasing success throughout this long period.

Three of his sons, Francis Peter, Frederick, and Henry, succeeded their father in the ownership of the *Mercury*. Of

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<sup>6</sup> "February the 2nd 1783. Were married Mr. Thomas Cowslade and Miss Marianne Smart, at Reading in the County of Berks. Witnesses Mrs. Mary Power and Mr. James Payne.  
(Father) G. A. Baynham, O.S.F."

Extracted from the Catholic Record Society's reprint of the Reading Register.

these *Francis Peter* was the most noteworthy, having devoted the services of himself and his paper to the Whig party in the long battle of the Reform Bill, with what success may be judged from the presentation to him of a large loving cup of solid silver, with two handles, which is still carefully preserved in the *Mercury* office.<sup>7</sup> The cup is inscribed on one side with the arms of Reading and the words :

“As a token of gratitude for the gratuitous information at all times afforded to the public this Piece of Plate is presented by the Mechanics of Reading to Mr. Francis Peter Cowslade, Editor of the *Reading Mercury*, Anno Domini 1832.”

And on the reverse side is engraved a printing press with heraldic supporters personifying Liberty and Justice, beneath which is the inscription :

“Noble Engine of Freedom, may thy energy never be cramped by the minions of despotism and corruption.”

Seldom has the Press been apostrophised in such grandiloquent language as in the inscription on this cup !

Of his two brothers *Henry Hartley*'s mind was mainly fixed on Astronomy and Science, and he first started in Reading the Literary and Scientific Society which afterwards grew to large proportions. *Frederick*'s share in the activities of the Mercury appears to have been negligible, but out of six brothers and three sisters he was the only one to marry. About the year 1817 a Miss Anne Walpole became his wife and this marriage prolonged the name of Cowslade for yet two more generations.

Francis Peter's three remaining brothers chose the Army for their profession. *Christopher*, at the age of nineteen and at the height of 6ft. 3ins., succumbed to fever during the disastrous Walcheren campaign ; the other two brothers *Thomas* and *John* entering the Indian Army at an early age were shipped off in the service of “John Company” to India where they remained,

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<sup>7</sup> This cup was discovered a few years ago by the Editor of this Journal in a silversmith's shop in Ipswich. It had been converted into a tea-urn in Mid-Victorian days. The unsightly additions were removed and it has now been restored to the proprietors of the Reading Mercury.



Tom until his death, and John for forty years. Tom all his life was a *character*, When a boy his mother one day found him weeping and on her enquiring what he was crying for she received the answer : " Because I'm so ugly ! " Many tales were told in the family of his pranks in India, and his practical jokes appear to have become famous—and expected of him—wherever he went. At last, however, they reached a climax on the occasion when he, as senior captain of the barracks at Calcutta, was sent to the docks to receive a contingent of young cadets—then called " Griffins "—arriving from Addiscombe by an East-Indiaman. He brought them and their baggage ashore and having previously chartered a sufficient number of cabs, instructed each young man to put his luggage inside and to mount the outside himself and sit on the roof ! In this manner the procession passed through the astonished streets of Calcutta to the Barracks gate, the youngsters being assured that they were doing the proper thing in making their arrival thus ! However, this was nothing to the adventures of the next day when they were all to be presented by Captain Cowslade to the Governor of Calcutta. They were marshalled in the morning by Captain Cowslade who said to them : " I suppose you know, gentlemen, that it is the custom here that everyone should have their heads shaved before they are presented ? "

The young men very naturally demurred, suspecting another trick, but he assured them solemnly that it was so, saying that in order to convince them that he was speaking the truth he would come with them to the barber and have his own head shaved first. Presently a party of entirely bald men arrived in the ante-room of the Governor's palace, but just before they advanced into the audience room Cowslade pulled out a wig, clapped it on his head, and saying : " I hope, gentlemen, that you are all similarly provided," ushered his bevy of bald youths into the astonished presence of the Governor, to whom he whispered hurriedly : " They've had a touch of the sun, sir, so we've had to shave them all to save their reason."

This escapade nearly caused him to be cashiered, but on account of the immense amusement which it occasioned, and

which was expected of "mad Tom Cowlade," he was forgiven. He later distinguished himself in a campaign in Burmah and was mentioned in despatches in 1825 for "particularly conspicuous conduct." Surviving the campaign he eventually died at Cawnpore. His brother John remained for forty years in India, returning home at last with the rank of Colonel, and having "shaken the Pagoda tree" in some manner during his long residence in the East, appears to have amassed sufficient money to pose as "the rich Nabob" amongst his admiring relatives, whom he proceeded to load with expensive gifts after the ever-generous custom of the Cowlades. The presents which gave the greatest amount of pleasure were those presented to his two young great-nieces (mother and aunt of the present writer) whose tastes and talents he quickly gauged by presenting to one a handsome piano, and to the other a basket-chaise and a pony named Flo. What presents for two young girls just entering their teens! especially when one was already becoming noted for the brilliancy of her piano playing, and the other for her fine horsemanship. "Uncle the Colonel" became their God. He spent the remainder of his life travelling on the continent, visiting Rome, Paris, etc., and entering into the social life of the English in the bigger centres with great zest. But to the suggestions of his family that he should marry he always replied: "No, no! I'd sooner be a fat rector than a thin curate!"

Of their three sisters—two of whom lived to be over ninety—*Ellenor*,<sup>8</sup> who was born in 1792 and died in 1883, possessed talents and accomplishments of an unusually high order. Educated in a French convent, through the generosity of her aunt Madame Le Noir de la Brosse, she became a gifted musician, a painter of above the average skill, and a perfect writer and speaker of the French tongue. Her witty and distinctive letters are illustrated by the following extract from a letter to a great-nephew: *Nous fûmes honneur à un excellent dîner : je soupère en vous disant que le mets principal était deux de vos bienaimés canards. Non-contents de les avoir dévorés (ils étaient excellent) nous avons emporté deux de leurs frères avec intention de les dépecer demain.*"

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix.

A devoted Roman Catholic—she and her sisters having been brought up thus by their mother—she was the mainstay of the Roman Mission in Reading for the whole of her life, her piety being of an exceptional order. Her aunt, usually known as Mrs. Le Noir, was Christopher Smart's younger daughter. She had married a distinguished French refugee, the Chevalier Le Noir de la Brosse, and was herself well known for her poems and tales, and Miss Mary Russell Mitford, who became very friendly with her and her three nieces, speaks in *Our Village* of her enjoyment of Mrs. Le Noir's novels. Even as recently as four years ago Mr. Edmund Blunden had a long article in the *Times* on Mrs. Le Noir's interesting life and writings, and in particular of her friendship with Doctor Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith and Doctor Charles Burney.<sup>9</sup>

WILLIAM WALLACE COWSLADE.

We now step down another generation and come to the sons of Frederick Cowslade. There were two of them, and again they carried on the family tradition, the younger—*John*—going into the Army, and the elder—*William Wallace*—succeeding to the *Reading Mercury*. He was born in 1818 in the reign of George III. and lived to the great age of nearly ninety-seven, dying in 1915 after a life covering the reigns of six English sovereigns. It seems almost incredible that one pair of eyes could have seen, as his did, a sedan chair passing through the streets of Reading, and an aeroplane flying over his house in the same town with warlike intent during the Great War! In the long interval between these two sights those same eyes beheld the passing of the stage-coach, the birth and death of the hansom cab, the coming of the railways, of steam in its various forms, of petroleum, of gas, of electricity, the advent of the motor-car, and the revolution of the art of printing through the invention of the linotype. In his boyhood, stamp duties still fettered newspaper reading and it was not until he was seventeen that the price of the *Mercury* could be reduced to even fourpence. As a lad of eighteen he

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<sup>9</sup> "A Boswellian Error. Mrs. Le Noir's Notes" by Edmund Blunden. *The Times*, May 20th, 1929.

entered the service of the paper, and his father sent him twice a year to collect the monies from the *Mercury* agents in all the bigger towns from Southampton to Oxford. Usually he made these trips on horseback, followed by a groom on another horse, and both of them armed with pistols to protect their money bags, but sometimes he drove round in a gig always accompanied by the groom and the necessary pistols. When he succeeded to the reins of office and responsibility for the paper which by this time had become the *Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette* he built fine new offices for it and much enlarged its scope. What a great character he was! Of a most handsome and genial presence he gave pleasure wherever he went, for he was the soul of honour and kindness, had broad and generous sympathies and was an excellent horseman and sportsman. There was little he could not do with a horse, and for the greater part of his life his fine figure riding into Reading or along the country roads with his handsome young daughter by his side, was an everyday sight, only varied by the occasions on which they drove in a high-wheeled double-dog-cart known as the "red-wheel." This continued until he was eighty years of age when one morning as he was riding a favourite old mare who had reached the equine equivalent of his eighty years, she suddenly fell with him and crushed his leg under her so badly that the doctors declared that as he was too old for an amputation there was nothing for him but death. However, he did *not* die, his vigorous constitution and clean life pulled him through, and though he was debarred from riding because of his permanently rigid leg, he continued to shoot regularly whatever game was in season and managed to bring in a rabbit on his ninetieth birthday! He attended the Coronation of William IV. and almost certainly that of Queen Victoria, being also present at the funeral of the Duke of Wellington. In his native town he did much important public work in addition to his journalistic labours. As administrator of the large printing staff he was most successful in securing hard work and loyalty, and it was not unknown for two generations and three members of the same family to be serving on the paper at the same time, when they would be distinguished thus :

" Old Smee and Young Smee and Young Smee's son ! " Truly his was a remarkable life.

JOHN CHRISTOPHER COWSLADE.

*John Christopher* who was the only and much younger brother of William Wallace, had a short and somewhat mysterious career of only thirty years. On entering the Army, 34th Regiment, he was at once sent out to India where he was seized with the ambition of emulating the pranks of his uncle " mad Tom Cowslade " and proceeded to copy his habit of keeping wild animals loose in his house, with dire results, for on one occasion in spite of the fascination which all Cowslades possessed over animals, a young leopardess which was licking his hand suddenly gave indications that she thought human blood was desirable, and John, with great presence of mind remaining motionless, had to call to his bearer to bring a gun and shoot her on the spot. On the only occasion on which he returned home on leave from India the first intimation his relatives had of his return was the appearance in the house of a large monkey which was suddenly thrown in at the front door ! On going back to India he was the subject of a murderous assault in his quarters one night in the dark, and only saved himself from strangulation by a severe struggle with the intruder who succeeded in making his escape. The sequel to this adventure gave rise to the conjecture that he had fallen foul of some secret society, for when his next English leave was due his brother received one morning in Reading a telegram informing him that the troopship *Delawur* had arrived at Plymouth with Lieutenant Cowslade in a dangerous and apparently dying condition. He was dead by the time his brother arrived in Plymouth and his bearer and his valuables were missing from the ship. The mystery was never solved, and at the age of thirty another Cowslade departed from this world.

FREDERICK AND HENRY COWSLADE.

When William Wallace retired from active work on the *Mercury* he was succeeded by his two sons *Frederick* and *Henry* who had assisted him since they were young men and were both so well-known in Reading that but a short account of them is necessary here. The bachelor brothers became known as " The

Brothers Cheeryble " from their benevolent and kindly qualities, but amongst their intimates they were more usually referred to as "*Rouge et Noir*," Frederick having flaming red hair and Henry jet black. Neither of them inherited his father's genius for horses, but Frederick affected dogs, especially St. Bernards, and Henry had a wonderful flair for birds and kept an aviary of the rarer kinds of pheasants, pigeons and doves. With these doves he was accustomed to do many surprising tricks such as pulling them out of his pockets and placing them upside down on the back of a large Persian cat which he held in his arms ! An exhibition of these tricks gave unbounded joy to the little girl friends who were always his dearest pals, for like Lewis Carroll he could not live happily without these little companions. " Uncle Hen and his chicks " as everyone called them passed countless happy hours in these amusements, but directly the " chicks " became " pullets " the magic time came to an end until another batch of " chicks " grew up to solace " Uncle Hen." His life came to a sudden close in early middle life, and there was such a demonstration of sorrow at his death that mounted police had to be employed to regulate the immense crowds of all classes who came to his funeral to show their appreciation of his kindly character and great charity.

Frederick on the other hand lived to be over eighty, and though he was never so picturesquely in the public eye, yet his good literary judgment and excellent sense of style maintained to the last the best traditions of the paper ; he never descended from the high ideals of the purpose of journalism which he had inherited from his forebears, and which have now passed beyond recall. In 1914, age and infirmity compelled him to sell the property which had been the pride of the Cowslades for one hundred and twenty-nine years, and ten years later he died.

ELIZABETH ANNE SMART COWSLADE

AND

ROSA MARIA COWSLADE.

There now remained of all that long family only William Wallace's two daughters, *Elizabeth Anne Smart*, who had married

Canon Alexander Nash<sup>10</sup> and had a large family of sons and daughters, and *Rosa Maria* who remained a spinster. The two sisters were a fascinating pair, one famed for her musical abilities and the other for her horsemanship, and all who knew them recognised in them the gaiety of heart, the integrity of life, the tenacity of purpose, and the quick understanding of children and animals and also of distress in all its forms, which were the main characteristics of their race. They also inherited the family good looks and iron constitution and both lived till they were well over eighty, dying in 1931 and 1932.

"Let us now praise famous men and our fathers which begat us."

The county of Berkshire may well take both pride and interest in these sons and daughters of hers who have served her so well, and who throughout their entire records appear to have unswervingly lived up to their family motto: "*Cassis Tutissima Virtus.*"

#### APPENDIX.

In Vol. XXXII. of the Excerpts from the Catholic Record Society appear the Catholic Registers of Reading and Woodley Lodge—1780-1869 A.D. These records contain a transcript from the "Cowslade M.S." which was written by Miss Ellenor Cowslade (b. 1792) and is preserved in the Diocesan Archives at Portsmouth. It embodies the memories of her grandmother, Mrs. Christopher Smart, and her descendants, and narrates the immense interest they took in befriending and housing the destitute French Refugee Priests who fled to England during the troubled years of the French Revolution. Mrs. Thomas Cowslade and her sister Mrs. Le Noir helped them in every possible way, and Mrs. Le Noir, having purchased the block of ancient houses in Hosier Street (Reading) known as Finch's Buildings, established there a Presbytery which gave them a fitting asylum. She accommodated them there until their numbers became so large that the British Government came to the rescue and granted

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Nash, M.A., Vicar of Standish with Hardwicke, Gloucestershire, and Hon. Canon of Gloucester Cathedral.

them the use of the old posting hostelry on Castle Hill known as " The King's Arms." In September 1796 the new settlement, under the name of " Reading House " was opened with 25 Priests whose numbers by the end of the year had grown to 200, and in addition there were many lay refugees. By 1802 so many of them had left and dispersed themselves about the country or returned to France, that " Reading House " was closed in August of that year, but four French Priests still remained in Reading and were once again housed by Mrs. Le Noir and the Cowslades at Finch's Buildings, where they heard confessions and whence they visited the sick. Amongst the four was the well-known Abbé François Longuet who built the first Catholic Chapel in Reading which was consecrated in 1812. He was cruelly murdered on the highway leading from Pangbourne to Reading in 1817, and his body now rests in the sanctuary of S. James' Church.

Miss Ellenor Cowslade whose long and active life lasted from 1792 to 1884, and to whom we are indebted for the MS. giving all the details of the generosity displayed to the French refugees by her family and doubtless by many other citizens of Reading, lived for very many years at 12, Abbot's Walk, Forbury Gardens, with her two sisters Anne and Matilda and her youngest brother Henry Hartley who (like his five brothers) was a Protestant, having been brought up according to the then well-established custom by which daughters were educated in their mother's, and sons in their father's form of religion. No. 12, Abbot's Walk now houses the School Medical Service department of the County of Berkshire.