

FisherGate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society

Transcript of a talk on 19th January 2019

Jane Austen, and the Fulford Lefroy Family

An illustrated talk by Allan Francis, concerning the life and times of Captain Anthony Lefroy, Barrack Master and resident of Fulford (1777-1857)

Slide 1 - Introduction

This is the scenario of a novel that Jane Austen could well have written. It has all the elements of an Austen romance but perhaps, not the happy ending we have come to expect. A young, intelligent and attractive country parson's daughter with little in the way of prospects, chances to meet a shy, handsome young law student called Tom, who is visiting relatives who are near neighbours. They go to local dances and a relationship develops that has all the prospects of flourishing. However, he has to return to his studies in London where he stays with his wealthy great uncle.

His father, although a senior army officer, is not wealthy and there are eight other siblings in the family. He is the oldest son and his great uncle funds his professional education. Word gets back to him that Tom has formed an unsuitable attachment to a parson's daughter. They have words. Maybe Tom thinks he will in time become more accepting. Letters are exchanged between the parson's daughter and her older sister, she is clearly enamoured with Tom but hears no more of him. She puts up pretence of indifference.

In the intervening two years, Tom is drawn into a family crisis when he is sent to discourage his younger brother Anthony, a career soldier, from making a match unacceptable to the family. Anthony declares that he will marry for love, as his father did, and damn the consequences. In a fury, his great uncle, who had been financing his army career, cuts off all financial support. Leaving the young married couple to start their lives together on an army captain's pay.

Tom sees his brother committing financial suicide for love and realises that the threats made by his great uncle regarding his own romantic attachment were real. Tom never goes back, but marries wealthy and approved young women, is successful and happy.

Anthony never recovers economically from his family rejection, but his family becomes a close and loving one. The parson's daughter never marries, and, perhaps, from time to time, reflects on what might have been.

Slide 2 - Tom Lefroy and Jane Austen.

This is not a fictional romance, but story based on real events, the parson's daughter is Jane Austen the author, Tom, the law student, is Tom Lefroy, future Lord Chief Justice for Ireland, and Anthony is Captain Anthony Lefroy who lived in Fulford with his family from 1819 until his death in 1857.

Slide 3 - The Lefroy grave.

In the grounds of Old St. Oswald's there is a huge stone grave slab with railings around three sides - the fourth unfortunately, has disappeared.

Slides 4 & 5 – Tombstone Inscription.

It is the burial plot of Captain Anthony Lefroy and his wife, Elizabeth who died in 1857 and 1858, respectively. When I moved to St. Oswald's I was intrigued by this, as I knew of the romantic connection between the novelist, Jane Austen and a Tom Lefroy, it didn't take much research to discover that Anthony was indeed Tom's younger brother. I have pieced together the story of the 'York Lefroys', resident in Fulford from c1819, and what appears is worthy of a Jane Austen novel of true love and disinheritance.

Slide 6 – The Lefroy Family.

This branch of the Lefroy family have a long history of residence in southern Ireland with Huguenot French origins although a wealthy Langlois great uncle of the Lefroy brothers was based in London. Tom and Anthony's father was another Anthony, a Lieutenant Colonel of the 9th Dragoons, who is described as 'of Limerick' on the Lefroy tomb. Their great uncle Benjamin Langlois, who did not marry, wielded much influence in the family due to his wealth. It is worth noting at this point that the young Anthony senior had married secretly, without family approval and fathered 3 children before telling his family! It would seem that he was forgiven and taken back into the fold - but this was not always the case, as will become apparent.

Slide 7 – Dancing & Marriage.

The romantic liaison between Jane Austen and Tom Lefroy was very brief and is an episode in Jane's life that has been much debated by Austen scholars. The Lefroys are inclined to dismiss it as 'puppy love' - the York Lefroys took a very different view. The story of the York Lefroys gives an insight into why they, particularly, Captain Anthony's son, Thomas E. P. Lefroy, saw things differently.

Anthony Lefroy was born in 1777 and would appear to have been destined for a career in the army. In 1790 he joined his father's regiment - the 9th Dragoons as a cornet, (entry level officer class). Four years later, at the age of 17 he was a captain in Lord Mountnorris's foot! It is important to understand that commissions were bought and considerations of age and experience were of no consequence. It was said, at this time, by an adviser to the Duke of York that the army was led by, "boys and idiots".

Slide 8 – Duke of Wellington. (Used as an example.)

Commissions were not cheap and he was probably sponsored by his great uncle Benjamin Langlois, who was at this time supporting his brother Tom, studying for the bar. During the winter of 1795/96, whilst Anthony was building his army career, Tom had visited an uncle and his family who lived near the Austens and were close friends. A flirtation between Tom and Jane began which was short lived as Tom had to return to his studies in London, staying at his great uncle's house.

Slide 9 – Marriage Manoeuvrings.

There was speculation, but as far as the Austen's Lefroy neighbours were concerned, Jane was not in the same league as Tom and it is more than likely that his great uncle would have been made aware of the liaison. He never returned, became engaged 1897 and eventually married Mary Paul (March 1799), a socially and economically acceptable wife and rose to fame and wealth as an MP and lawyer, ultimately, the Lord

Chief Justice of Ireland. Jane Austen had several short lived romances, including marriage proposals, one of which she accepted only to change her mind the next day! However, the debate surrounding the significance of the Lefroy affair still continues today.

Anthony's career, however, began to falter. Whilst a captain in 56th Foot, he met and married Elizabeth Wilkin, in Appleby, in November 1798. His bride's father was described as a 'gentleman' - he was an apothecary in Appleby, Westmorland. It is unlikely that Elizabeth brought with her any income of her own, as her family appear to have no inherited wealth or connections. Although the evidence is circumstantial, it can be deduced that his wealthy great uncle did not approve and as a consequence, he failed to progress in the army as the necessary funds to purchase commissions seemed to dry up. But this may be an over simplification of AL's circumstances.

By this time AL had had a taste of army life, perhaps his rapid rise in the officer class may have been closed to him, but at this time, 1802 he is placed on half-pay. Conflict with the French was escalating and during this period there was a shortage of officers, indeed, during the Napoleonic wars the numbers of officers who obtained promotion through service and ability were in the majority over those who bought their commissions. There are several reasons why an officer was reduced to HP. In peace time, where a large, standing army is not needed, half pay conditions could be imposed on officers, who would then not be on active service, but reserves.

If regiments were posted overseas to fight conflicts, an officer may opt for half-pay conditions to avoid fighting with the regiment. Another reason may have been that he was seeking to sell his commission therefore HP would be imposed. This is unlikely as he remained a captain and appears to have sought employment within the service as a barrack master.

In 1802 the Peace of Amiens was declared, the allies signed an agreement with France and hostilities abated, although it lasted less than a year, it resulted in some demobilisation and surplus officers would have been required to stand down and be reduced to half pay.

Perhaps Captain Lefroy found himself, not required. When the hostilities recommenced, the records show that the regiments Anthony was attached to were on active service, it would appear that for whatever reason he was choosing to remain in England. Perhaps, having experienced service in his youth and then marrying, he decided active service was not for him. For a while, his young family existed on army half pay which amounted to £85/86 pa.

By 1804 with the threat of French invasion and the continental nature of the war, opportunities in organising and mobilising the army opened up, at this time it was recorded that over 18,000 regular troops were stationed in Sussex. Captain Lefroy became the barrack master at Silver Hill in Sussex at a salary of £182.10.00. which was supplemented by his HP commission, which he still held.

Anthony would appear to have continued in this role, (although the posting is missing from his army record) as the family grew, with the birth of five children who all seemed to reach adulthood.

Tom Lefroy continued to prosper and there is evidence that he assisted his brother, financially, and may have been instrumental in his appointment as barrack master at Arundel in 1817, the barracks at Silver Hill closing following the ending of the conflict and demobilisation. In 1819 he moved again, with his family to be barrack master at the cavalry barracks, York.

Slide 10 - Fulford Cavalry Barracks.

There was no advantage to this move, the salary was the same, and as his family were established and his children were born and grew up in Sussex it is difficult to explain. Although he had transferred to the 4th Foot regiment, he still seemed to identify with the 65th, Yorkshire regiment, (re. grave inscription). Whatever the circumstances of his displacement at Arundel, the Yorkshire connection may have helped him obtain the position.

Slide 11 & 12 - North House & North House today.

The family are recorded as living at North House, (1 Main Street,) on the junction with Heslington Lane, which may have been leased to the army. The financial account of Great Britain for this time gives the salary for the barrack master at York as £182.10.00 pa., less deductions.

Captain Lefroy continued to augment his income with his half pay (c£85 pa), from his regimental commission. It is worth noting that £300 pa, at this time was thought to be only just adequate to maintain a household of the poorer professional classes. Patrick Bronte, vicar at Howarth and father of the writers, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, had an income of about £200 pa. The family led a frugal life.

Slide 13 - Lefroy Family.

By 1824, his eldest son at 21, moved to Ireland to join the police force, his other children still seem to be dependent and include Mary Anne aged 6, Thomas E P, aged 9, Phoebe aged 11, George B. and Elizabeth aged 18. Anthony and Elizabeth were in residence at No 1 in 1841 and 1851 - there may have been an arrangement made following Anthony's retirement from the army in 1831 as it seems another army captain lived here after the Lefroys.

Although there were eventually six, or possibly seven, children that lived to adult hood, only one is recorded as resident in 1841, a daughter Elizabeth, and aged 35. In 1851, a daughter Mary Anne, 32 and a son, Thomas (Edward Preston), were recorded as living at this address.

TEPL, as he is often known, became a barrister, and then a county court judge. It is not clear why he was resident at this time as, by now he was 35 and married. By 1841 their older children ranging in age from 39 to 28 appeared to have established independent lives.

Slide 14 - Anthony Lefroy Jnr.

Their oldest son, also an Anthony (born 1802), had moved to Ireland at twenty one, (probably as a consequence of family connections) and joined the police force where his career flourished. He returned in 1839 to create the Gloucestershire Police Force and became the first Chief Constable of Gloucestershire, as part of the establishment of regional forces introduced at that time.

Slide 15 - Lefroy Family

Elizabeth is recorded as resident with her parents in 1841 but became the third wife of Samuel Hibbert Ware MD FRS in 1842 at the late age of 36. Phoebe, born 1813, married Joshua F. Whittell of Upper Helmsley in 1831, (their daughter Blanche was to marry Rev Samuel Keys in 1873). George Bentick Lefroy, born 1806, and apparently living in central London, married Charlotte Dolman in 1844.

There appears to be no record of Lucy Anne, born 1810, she may have died before reaching adulthood. Their youngest daughter, Mary Anne, remained with her parents, unmarried and moved south on the death of her parents and is recorded as living with her brother, TEPL, head of house, in the 1871 census for a house in Richmond Hill, Surrey.

An Austen did eventually marry a Lefroy, on 8 November 1814. Anna Austen, (a close niece of Jane) married Benjamin Langlois Lefroy, a son of their Lefroy neighbours. His wealthy namesake, great uncle Benjamin Langois had died in 1802 and, anyway, he seemed to have favoured his cousins. These Lefroys were of more humble clerical background and socially on a par and the only possible difficulty to the match, his mother (often referred to as 'Madame Lefroy, who may have been an active participant in the intervention between Tom and Jane), had died many years previously, as had his father.

Slide 16 - Anna Austen on the TL/JA Affair.

As time moved on, the families looked back on the events and relationships in their lives and family letters are invaluable in analysing the retrospective perceptions of what happened. In 1869 Jane Austin's nephew, James Edward, published a family memoir, painting a rather sentimental and much edited version of his aunt Jane. James Edward and his sister Caroline were inclined to play down the relationship between Jane and Tom. In a letter to her half sister, Anna she cited the 'York Lefroys', as spreading "a strong version of it all" within the family implying that Tom had been particularly heartless in the affair.

In old age, Tom admitted to an affection for Jane but said it was 'boyish love'. He died aged 93, later that year. In response to her sister's letter, after the death of Tom Lefroy, Anna wrote, to again argue for a more meaningful relationship between the two, it is thought under the influence of her older brothers in law, George and Edward, - but also Thomas Edward Preston Lefroy, the youngest son of Captain Anthony Lefroy, - who had married her daughter, and his second cousin, Jemima in 1846!

It is not difficult to understand the tensions between Captain Anthony Lefroy, his family and his brother, Tom. Tom was the highly successful eldest brother, who married well and became wealthy. Anthony must have been painfully aware of the consequences of a marriage that was not approved, but still he followed his heart. The marriage lasted, through years of comparative hardship, a growing family and dependence on an increasingly more successful brother.

TEP Lefroy, the youngest son and their spinster daughter, Mary Anne, would seem to have grown up and lived a good part of their formative years in Fulford they would seem to be the 'York Lefroys' referred to in extended family letters. Mary Anne moved in with her brother on the death of their parents. TEPL, was a practicing barrister and

later, a judge - like his uncle Tom and, no doubt benefited from his uncle's support in his career.

They must have been very fond of their parents, and perhaps, the sacrifice their father made for true love and the resentment of the life they had to lead may well have coloured the view of the 'York Lefroys' about their successful and ambitious uncle, who seemed to be prepared to give up a genuine attachment, maybe under pressure, for expediency.

In researching this talk, some information was readily available because of the Austen connections; however, there were big gaps and questions still to be answered:

- What was Captain Lefroy doing from 1802-1817?
- How did he avoid direct involvement in the Napoleonic Wars as a commissioned Captain?
- How did the family survive on the HP of an army officer?
- As an established barrister, with a wife and family, why was TEPL still recorded as living with his parents in Fulford in 1851?

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Old St Oswald's Hall
1st March 2019

Sources:

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With additional local information by Barbara King and the Fulford, Fishergate and Heslington History Society.