

Elizabeth Heneage and Sheat Manor

by

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This Manor House was built cc. 1600 by the Urry family, many of who remained Catholic throughout penal times. They were popular in the local area where they farmed the land and they were generous in the community particularly to the local Anglican church at Gatcombe. This helped them to escape the punitive fines and the wrath of the anti Catholic establishment at the time. However, most local people would have known where their religious sympathies lay.

Elizabeth Heneage was born here at Sheat Manor in 1734. This Manor House, which she was to inherit from her uncle, Thomas Urry, contained a secret chapel in the attic, (right hand top window as you look up) where Mass was said occasionally during penal times. The escape route for the priest was behind the chimney and out through a tunnel into the garden. This is still evident today. We do not know how many times Mass was said here (and we probably never will) as such details were not recorded in case they fell into the wrong hands and were used as subsequent evidence.

Elizabeth was the only child of John and Mary Browne (nee Urry). Her parents sent her to the famous Convent school for girls at Hammersmith in London. This school survived throughout most of the penal period with the nuns secretly disguised as lay women. In 1761 she married James Windsor Heneage, who came from an old Catholic family of Hainton Hall, Lincolnshire. Catholic gentry and aristocracy frequently intermarried James had the long and arduous journey by stage coach, ferry and pony chaise to Gatcombe in order to build a relationship and win the hand of Elizabeth. They went to live in Lincolnshire, where James inherited Cadeby Hall. Their two daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, were sent to their mother's alma mater, at Hammersmith and then to a convent school in Paris. The parents were determined that the two girls would have a good, Catholic education and would hopefully marry into the Catholic aristocracy or gentry. Introducing them at society events at the London Season, Mary and Elizabeth (known to their family as Molly and Betsy) met two Catholic brothers, Basil and William Fitzherbert from Swynnerton Hall, Staffordshire. Their sister-in-law was the famous Maria Fitzherbert, the secret Catholic wife of the Prince Regent. William married Mary Heneage and inherited Claughton Hall in Lancashire, while Basil married Elizabeth and resided at Swynnerton. The two marriages were successful in that they produced fourteen children. The Fitzherberts were connected through marriage to such prominent families as the Howards of Norfolk, the Petre family in Essex, the Welds and the Throckmortons. An ancestor, the Jesuit Thomas Fitzherbert (1552 - 1640) had been Rector of the English College in Rome. James Heneage died in 1786 and his widow Elizabeth traveled widely in France and throughout England; often staying at her two daughters' estates and frequently returning to her native Isle of Wight.

The Relief Act of 1790 allowed Catholics to build their own churches, which had to be registered. Elizabeth wasted no time in obtaining the necessary authorization and the Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury in Newport was quickly built in the garden of Elizabeth's house (now the presbytery) and opened in 1792. Elizabeth brought the Heneage family chaplain, Fr. Simon Lucas, from Lincolnshire, to be the first resident priest in Newport.

When she died on 10th Dec, 1800, she was buried in St. Thomas of Canterbury church. A marble memorial tablet was erected in St. Thomas's by her two daughters near the font at the back of the church.

To underline St. Thomas' connection with Sheat Manor House at Gatcombe, (Elizabeth's birthplace) a Mass was celebrated by Fr. Barnes on the lawn in front of the house in 2002. This, we believe, was the first Mass there for over 220 years. The little Catholic Church at Newport can therefore be said to have developed from the secret chapel at Sheat Manor House, through the determination and generosity of its founder, Elizabeth Heneage. We are delighted to be allowed back once again to have this Mass on the Feast of St. Bartholomew 2006 in thanksgiving for the preservation of the Faith on the Island in penal times.