



Alexander Pope and the Grotto at Crux Easton

A research note

Contemporary evidence, anecdotal references and 19th century gazetteers record a grotto at Crux Easton allegedly built by nine maiden sisters on the Lisle estate before 1733, visited and commemorated in verse by Alexander Pope.

Crux-Easton is a small settlement near Highclere on the borders of Hampshire and Berkshire, about 7 miles south of Newbury. Here the Lisles owned the manor from about 1300 until 1762. Edward Lisle (1666-1722) came to the Crux Easton estate in about 1693 from Moyles Court near Ringwood. He married Mary Phillipps (1672-1749), daughter of Sir Ambrose Phillipps, of Garrenden, Leicester in 1688 and fathered 8 sons and 12 daughters over a period of 28 years:

Mary	1689	died an infant
Anne	1691	died an infant
Edward	1692-1753	married Sarah Bush 1726. MP for Marlborough 1727-41
Ambrose	1694-1728	Barrister at the Middle Temple
Elizabeth	1695-1726	married Henry March 15 July 1721
William	1696	
William	1697	
Mary	1699-1774	corresponded with Sir Hans Sloane (BL nd4059ff)
John	1702	
Jane	1703-1764	married Thomas March 24 August 1734
Catherine	1704-1787	married Thomas Allen
Ann	1706	
Charles	1708	
Thomas	1709-1767	Rector of Burghclere c1735-67
Susan	1710-91	married John Eaton of Hendon, Middlesex
Sophia	1711-1780	married Thomas Rawston of Lexdon, Essex
Sarah	1713-1745	
Frances	1714-1802	
Richard	1716	
Harriet	1717-1794	?also known as Margaret. died at Bath, unmarried

Of Edward's first three daughters, only Elizabeth lived to marry. She died in 1726 without issue and was buried at the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Leyton.

Nine further daughters were born between 1699 and 1717 but only four of them are yet known to have married, the first perhaps being Jane, on 24 August 1734. The dates of the other three marriages are not known: the registers of Crux Easton church, where it is assumed the weddings would have taken place, only start in 1745.

A Grotto constructed

Remarkably, these nine “maiden ladies” built a grotto, though exactly when, or why, is not clear, although it was probably before August 1733 when Alexander Pope is held to have visited and composed some lines about these ladies and their creation, and certainly before the nine became eight on the marriage of Jane on 24 August 1734. First recorded in 1748 in manuscript in a volume of papers belonging to Lord Orrery, Pope’s lines are described as an “Inscription on a GROTTTO of Shells at CRUX-EASTON the Work of Nine young Ladies”:

Here shunning idleness at once and praise,
This radiant pile nine rural sisters raise;
The glitt’ring emblem of each spotless dame,
Clear as her soul, and shining as her fame;
Beauty which Nature only can impart,
And such a polish as disgraces Art;
But Fate dispos’d them in this humble sort,
And hid in desarts what wou’d charm a court.¹

A second, a quatrain, possibly also intended as an inscription, dated 25 August 1733, also held to have been composed, extempore, by Pope is titled “On seeing the LADIES at Crux-Easton Walk in the WOODS by the GROTTTO”:

Authors the world and their dull brains have trac’d,
To fix the ground where paradise was plac’d,
Mind not their whims and idle talk,
Here, here’s the place, where these bright angels walk.²

Both these pieces are included in the Twickenham Edition of Pope’s works, with the proviso that “the authenticity of the epigrams is probable, but they must be classed among the attributed pieces”.³ However, the final lines of a long, somewhat homesick, letter in verse sent to the sisters by their brother Thomas recounting his sea journey to Smyrna during 1733 does offer confirmation that the lines were written by Pope:

“.....
Let not malicious critics join
Pope’s homespun rhymes in rank with mine,
Formed on that very spot of earth,
Where Homer’s self received his birth;
Add, as I said, t’enhance their worth,
The pains they cost in bringing forth;
While his, as all mankind agrees,
Though wrote with care, are wrote with ease.”⁴

Thomas had taken holy orders and been appointed chaplain to the English community at the Levant Company’s factory at Smyrna, in 1732. Writing home on his arrival he appears to have already known of Pope’s lines, perhaps having a copy with him.

* * * * *

Did these young ladies, their ages spanning 18 years actually raise the radiant pile themselves? By 1733 Mary was 15 or 16, Harriet perhaps 34. One can certainly see them applying decorations of shells and suchlike but not, perhaps actually constructing the flint walls or the roof. It is possible that they actually made use of an existing building.

Shells there certainly were and Thomas had seen the grotto before leaving. An earlier section of his letter alludes to his sea voyage in his somewhat elliptic style; the goddess on the sea bed is not named:

*The Goddess (no uncommon case),
Proud, I suppose, to shew her place,
Or piqu'd perhaps at your renown,
Sent Boreas to invite us down;
And he so press'd it that we us'd
Some pains to get ourselves excus'd.
My brother shipmates, all in haste,
Declared that shells were not their taste;
And I had somewhere seen, you know,
A finer grott than she could shew*

According to one later report the interior contained niches in the walls in which each of the Lisle daughters would stand, with a central plinth to accommodate Pope or his muse (Apollo). Another report suggests that there were seats round the walls with a niche to be occupied by “the presiding magician”, presumably also Pope or, in his absence, a substitute. There is no contemporary written record to confirm any of this but it does suggest a certain whimsical indulgence in ceremony.

Pope at Highclere Castle and Crux Easton?

Although it is generally held that Pope composed his two impromptu epigrams while on a visit to the Lisles at Crux Easton in the summer of 1733, there is no known reference to Crux Easton or the Lisle family in surviving correspondence and, to that extent, no support for the statement in the Victoria County History that Pope was a frequent visitor.⁵ It has been assumed that the epigrams were composed on the same visit, but why would there have been two?

However, it seems likely that Pope knew the family already and had visited from Highclere Castle in previous years. Here lived the Hon Robert Herbert, second son of the 8th Earl of Pembroke, whose elder brother Lord Henry became the 9th Earl in 1732/3. Lord Henry, later known as the Architect Earl, had been associated from 1724 with the design of Marble Hill House in Twickenham for Pope's friend Henrietta Howard, Countess of Suffolk, as was Pope, with the layout of the gardens.

There are works by Pope in the Castle library: among others his first printing of 1717 and the six volumes of his edition of Shakespeare's Works published 1723-1725.

The Hon. Nicholas Herbert (c1706-1775), 7th and youngest son of the 8th Earl wrote some lines about the sisters and their grotto, apparently as a riposte to Pope's own lines, and claimed by the family to have been superior. Readers can judge for themselves:

***S**o much the building entertains my sight,
Nought but the builders can give more delight
In them the master-piece of Nature's shown –
In this I see Art's master-piece in stone.
Oh ! Nature, Nature, thou hast conquer'd Art ;
She charms the sight alone, but you the heart.*

Herbert was probably living at Highclere when he wrote this: his mother, Margaret, daughter of Sir Robert Sawyer had inherited the estate and on her death in 1706 it passed to her second son Robert. The eldest son, Henry, inherited Wilton House in 1732, the main family residence, in Wiltshire.

On his way home from Smyrna, in August 1734, Thomas Lisle wrote again, in verse, to his sisters, from Cairo, indicating that the two households were on friendly terms, the young Herbert perhaps casting his eye over the ladies:

*Here I liv'd like a king, never hoarded my pelf,
Kept a coach for my sisters, a nag for myself,
With something that's good, when our Highclear friends come,
And, spite of 'squire Herbert, a fire in each room.*

There are other hints at social intercourse between the families. Harriet, the youngest Lisle daughter made crayon portraits of Sir Richard and Lady Kingsmill, living at the Castle at the end of the 16th century. They were a branch of the same family long established at Sydmonton Court. Copies are today at the Castle, the originals thought to be at Sydmonton. Thomas was a good friend of the Hon Robert Herbert, becoming a trustee of his probate settlement of 1758. As Lord of the Manor and owner of the advowson it is likely that Herbert presented Thomas to the Living at Burghclere, in 1735.

Family connections in Hampshire

It may have no relevance to this paper, but Pope's own paternal family came from the area: his great-grandfather, Richard, probably son of Richard a prosperous blacksmith, had been the proprietor of the Angel Inn in Andover and his grandfather, Alexander (1599-1645/6), had entered the church after Oxford, being ordained Deacon in 1621, appointed rector of Thruxton in 1631, prebend at Middleton in 1633 and of Itchen Abbats; near Winchester in 1639. Pope's father, also Alexander was born posthumously and christened at Andover on 22 April 1646. There were three other children, Dorothy, Mary and William and this must have been known to Pope: there were probably collateral relations living in the county. However, he preferred to hint at nobler ancestry, suggesting, through his father, a connection with the Earls of Downe whose family name was Pope and:

*"Of gentle blood (part shed in honour's cause,
while yet in Britain honour had applause)
Each parent sprung –⁶*

The Downe connection is unproven, even unlikely, depending at least partly on an incorrect statement by Joseph Warton that a younger son of the third earl was Pope's paternal grandfather. This Irish title had lapsed with the death of the 4th earl in 1661, there being no surviving male heirs.⁷ Pope also added a footnote to his Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot, stating that his father "was of a gentleman's family in Oxfordshire the head of which was the Earl of Downe."

Summer rambles

So, when might Pope have visited Highclere? Taking 1724 as a starting point, he visited the Digbys at Sherborne in Dorset between 15 and 27 June. He does not appear to have moved in that direction in 1725 or 1726. In August 1727 he spent three weeks with Lord Oxford at Wimpole, Cambridge. On 17 August 1728 he set out for Bath, going via Stowe, Rousham, Stowell (avoiding Cirencester, with Lord Bathurst absent), Codrington and Doddington. He arrived back in Twickenham on 15 October.

In 1729 and 1730 he appears to have only travelled locally or to London.

In 1731 he made visits to Bolingbroke at Dawley Farm Uxbridge and in July to John Knight at Gosfield in Essex. Between 15 and 25 August he was at Stowe with Lord Cobham, proposing a visit to Lord Peterborough at Bevis Mount. He may have made this visit later but there is no record of this. From Stowe he first went to Lord Oxford at Down Hall and then to Rousham in Oxfordshire before returning to London. Thus it seems unlikely that Pope went near Hampshire and Crux Easton that year. In 1732 he hardly stirred from Twickenham, being much taken up both with work and looking after his ailing mother.

Analysis of his summer rambles during 1733 and 1734 offers the possibility that he might have visited Highclere or Crux Easton between journeys to or from his friends.

1733 brought an unhappy summer for him: his mother died on 7 June and was buried at Twickenham during the evening of 11 June. Although he had considered going to John Caryl at Ladyholt in West Sussex, he went instead on 25 June to Stowe, for a few days. By 15 July he had moved to Gosfield visiting Mrs Knight, staying for at least two weeks. On 9 August he was at Dawley Farm, proposing a visit to Cirencester but this may not have taken place. He was back at Twickenham on 16 August. A (mysterious) short excursion with Lord Oxford was envisaged, starting on Friday 17 or Saturday 18 August, destination unknown and by 21 August he was in Twickenham, and on 27 August in London.

Leaving Twickenham on 9 September he travelled to Ladyholt and on 24 September he arrived at Bevis Mount at Southampton for what was probably his first visit to Lord Peterborough, returning after three weeks, to Twickenham on 13 October.

There is space between some of these visits, though days have to be allowed for travel and it seems unlikely that his trips to Stowe in Bucks, and Gosfield in Essex would readily have included a stopover at Highclere or Crux Easton. More likely perhaps is that his return to Twickenham from Bevis Mount could have been via Crux Easton, 30 miles to the north.

1734 offers possibilities for a visit on the way to or from other houses. After a week at Stowe between 10 and 17 June he went to Rousham on his way to Cirencester, where he arrived on 25 June. On 25 July he stayed overnight with Lord Charles Bruce at Tottenham Park, newly rebuilt under the direction of his brother-in-law, the Earl of Burlington. Next he moved on to Amesbury to see the Queensberrys, leaving for Bevis Mount on the following day. He stayed at Bevis Mount for over six weeks, and during this time made a number of visits in the locality. Returning to Twickenham by 15 September he was preparing to visit Dawley and then travel to Bath with Bolingbroke: they arrived on 22 September. There was the opportunity for a stop off at Crux Easton, on the way but by now there were only eight maiden ladies: Jane had married on 24 August.

The grotto recorded

Joseph Warton (1722-1800) is credited by Robert Carruthers for information about the Grotto.⁸ He noted that “Warton says this grotto was adorned with shell-work and was constructed by the Misses Lisle, sisters of Dr (Thomas) Lisle, Chaplain to the Factory at Smyrna, a long established trading post of the Levant Company. There had been a church built there from 1625 for the use of the staff at the factory. Lisle (1709-65) returned to England in 1735, presently becoming rector of the parish of Burghclere nearby.”

As churchmen they were probably known to each other. Warton surely knew the grotto; he spent most of his life in Hampshire. Born at Basingstoke and schooled there before going on to Winchester College, returning via Oxford as a curate he obtained curacies at Droxford and Chawton in the Meon Valley. He obtained the Living of Winslade in 1748 and was appointed Rector of Tunworth in 1754, both just south of Basingstoke.

In 1766 he was appointed Headmaster of Winchester College after a period as Deputy. There, he would be joined by his brother Thomas for summer recreation. Thomas would explore the area, interested in its landscape and various other attractions.

In 1782 Joseph obtained the Living of Wickham, north of Fareham, retiring here in 1793, prior to which he had enjoyed briefly the tenure of Easton, near Newbury and only a few miles from Crux Easton.

Warton was himself a poet of indifferent achievement, and cast in a different mould from Pope. His publication, "An Essay on the Writings & Genius of Pope" was published in 1756, with a second volume in 1784. It was critical, so offending Owen Ruffhead, Pope's first serious biographer. However, he produced his own edition of Pope's works in 1797, reprinted in 1822, the source of Carruthers' information about the Crux Easton grotto.

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19th century gazetteers describe the grotto in various ways:

The Beauties of England and Wales, or, Delineations Topographical, 1805

John Britton and others, 1805, pp236/237:

CRUXEASTON, once famous for its Grotto, constructed by nine sisters, of the name of Lisle, and celebrated by the lines of Pope, is about two miles from High-clere, on the turnpike road between Andover and Newbury. Only the shell of the Grotto remains; the estate having passed into other hands, it was suffered to go to ruin. The front was of flint; the interior studded with shells, scoriae of iron ore, and other substances: it contained a seat for each sister, with a niche for the presiding magician.

Edward Lisle, Esq. the father of the nine sisters, died at Crux-easton, in June 1722. He had twenty children, seventeen of whom survived him: he was author of a work titled, " Observations upon Agriculture." One of his sons, Dr. Thomas Lisle, was author of Porsenna, King of Russia, and other ingenious productions preserved in Dodsley's Collection: he died Rector of Burgh-clere, in 1765-6. Margaret, the youngest sister, possessed great talents for painting ; three of her pieces in crayons are preserved by Lord Carnarvon ; two of them at High-clere House, are copies of ancient portraits of Sir Richard and Lady Kingsmill, admirably executed. On the trees of the grove surrounding the Grotto, she painted the portraits of several of her acquaintance, in a manner which produced a singular effect, as they appeared to form parts of the trees themselves. This lady is said to have died two or three years ago, between ninety and a hundred years of age. HIGH-CLERE, the manor and residence of Henry Herbert, Earl of Carnarvon and Lord Porchester, was formerly parcel of the Bishopric of Winchester.

Topographical Dictionary of England, Samuel Lewis, 1831:

“here was the celebrated grotto constructed by nine sisters, daughters of Edward Lisle, Esq, and commemorated by Pope. It has been suffered to go to ruin, the shell only remaining.”

The Family Topographer: Being a compendious account of the ancient state of the counties of England, Samuel Tymm, vol 2, western Circuit, 1832:

At Crux Easton was a grotto, the shell of which only remains, constructed by nine sisters of the name of Lisle, celebrated by the Muse of Pope

Katherine Mary Rose Kenyon, The Living Fields, IV Crux Easton, pp19-25, Warren, 1968:

“The home of this large family, the Manor House, has vanished....but the lime avenue which led to it still flourishes in the field alongside the modern lane

which leads to the church and the entrance to the old rectory. This avenue was probably planted by Edward Lisle, which would make it about 270 years old. I am told that Pope described it as looking like a cockscomb, and so rather surprisingly it still does when you notice it against the sky from the southern slope below Grotto Copse. This takes its name from the grotto decorated by Edward Lisle's nine daughters. Pope, who stayed with the Lisles, wrote some lines about the grotto, and Dodsley later printed them."

Katherine Kenyon's book was a collection of pieces originally written for a Hampshire newspaper. She neither gives a source for the suggested statement by Pope nor when he visited the Lisles: the avenue of limes, which can be seen today, had earlier been noted by W H Hudson:

"At noon the following day, the weather still being bright and genial, I went to Crux Easton, a hilltop village consisting of some low farm buildings, cottages and a church not much bigger than a cottage. A great house probably once existed here, as the hill has a noble avenue of limes, which it wears like a comb, or crest...."⁹

Conclusion

Allowing for some conjecture, this is a summary of what may have happened.

Pope came into social contact with the Lisle family when visiting the Herberts at Highclere. Surprisingly, perhaps, he left no record of this that has been identified.

His unrecorded visits may have been "stopovers" when on the way to other houses or places such as Bath and Cirencester. Early visits to Hampshire may even have been undertaken with his father, when the family were living at Binfield. Following publicity for his grotto the Lisle daughters were inspired to make their own, partly as a tribute to him. Inevitably flattered, he wrote some verses about their creation. It is likely that these were set down, extempore, on separate visits. One at least was intended to be an inscription and was dated to 23 August 1733. The other was probably written earlier.

The estate was sold out of the family in 1762 and the grotto fell into disrepair, its shell decorations removed and reputedly disposed round the lake in the grounds of Highclere Castle. Its site is marked on the Ordnance survey of 1910, on the southern edge of Grotto Copse, the building having disappeared by then. One would like to know why this site was chosen, so far from the main house.....

Acknowledgement

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References

¹ Robert Dodsley, *A Collection of Poems*, Vol VI, 1758

² *The Student* no1, *Oxford Miscellany*, 31 January 1750

³ *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, VI, *Minor Poems*, ed Norman Ault & John Butt pp353/354

⁴ BELL'S CLASSICAL ARRANGEMENT OF FUGITIVE POETRY: VOL XIII, 1791, XXV From Smyrna, to his sisters at Crux Easton 1733, by Thomas Lisle, DD

⁵ VCH Hampshire, vol 4, Crux Easton: "His nine daughters constructed in the manor grounds a curious grotto, celebrated in the following lines by Pope, who frequently visited the family at Crux Easton" From: 'Parishes: Crux Easton', *A History of the County of Hampshire: Volume 4* (1911), pp. 311-314.

⁶ *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, 388/9

⁷ Robert Davies FSA, *Additional facts concerning his maternal ancestry*, London, 1858

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George Sherburn, *The early career of Alexander Pope*, Clarendon Press, 1934, pp27et seq

⁸ *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*, vol IV, 1854, p276

⁹ W H Hudson, *About in England*, Kessinger Publishing, 2004, p64