

Merger and Crisis: Sir John Turner Dryden and Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire, in the late Eighteenth Century¹

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On the 7th of April 1798 Lady Elizabeth Dryden (1753-1824), the widow of Sir John Turner Dryden (d.1797), heiress of her uncle and adoptive father, Sir John Dryden (d. 1770), and the owner of Canons Ashby House and estates, wrote to one of her creditors, Mr John Tritton Esq., of Lombard Street in London. In response to one of a number of requests for the settlement of her late husband's debts with Mr Tritton, she explained that her finances were in '... the most dangerous and embarrassed state imaginable'.² She continued by expressing her fears that the estate may soon enter chancery proceedings, that her rents may be 'seized' and that, in the meantime, she had '... hardly a bare subsistence left for herself & a large young family'. She evidenced this parlous state of her affairs as proof that Mr Tritton was acting under the 'erroneous idea' that she was '... in possession of a large income ...'. Furthermore, she attested that the debts owed to him were not hers at all, but her late husband's. She had been instructed by her solicitor, Mr Brookes, that she should not sign anything with regards to his debts because she had '... acted entirely by Sir John's absolute command and authority'.

The year following the death of Sir John Turner Dryden had been a tumultuous one in which Elizabeth had been forced to write a long series of letters such as this, pleading poverty and abjuring responsibility for her late husband's debts. Sir John and Elizabeth had, in 1791, taken full possession of a healthy if small landed estate with a fine, if modest, country house. The former owner, Sir John Dryden, had lived a cautious lifestyle, never exceeding incomings with outgoings and augmenting the estate income through well considered purchases of land and other investments. This good work and careful management had

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² Northamptonshire Records Office (hereafter N.R.O.), Dryden Family Papers, D(CA)/364/35, Letter from Lady Elizabeth Dryden, Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire, to Mr John Tritton Esq, 56 Lombard Street, London, 7 April 1798.

continued under the stewardship of Elizabeth and her mother. Yet the position changed dramatically in just a few short years. Sir John Turner Dryden died leaving debts of £10,680, on an estate that was receiving rents of £2,577 per annum.³ The marriage of Elizabeth and John on 14 May 1781 had quickly led to a period of retrenchment and financial embarrassment for the family.

The story of John Turner Dryden and Canons Ashby, although limited as all case-studies are by particularities, is instructive and has broader implications for those studying other landed families. It illustrates the importance of marriage ties for changes and continuities in the wealth and status of landed gentry families. Although high status and wealthy matches were considered prudent, the success of marital alliances often depended on the personality of the dominant spouse (generally the man) and the dynamics of the marriage. Landed estates were protected by legal measures such as strict settlement. However, these factors of personality could, and often did, override such protective measures.⁴ The marriage market, useful as it could be for aggrandising estate fortunes, was one element of landed life that served to make their fortunes quite volatile during the eighteenth century. The article begins with a brief description of the history of the Dryden and Turner families, before turning to consider in more detail the merger of the two families through the marriage; Sir John's period of ownership, and, finally, the impact this had on the fortunes of his widow and of the Dryden family.

The Turners and the Drydens: a brief history

The Dryden family had been seated at Canons Ashby since the sixteenth century.⁵ William Dryden and his son, David, both of Cumberland, are the first of the family to appear in the historical record. It was through the marriage of David's son, John, to the daughter of Sir John Cope, knight, that the family acquired Canons Ashby House. Originally a simple L-

³ N.R.O. D(CA)/364/2, Valuation of the Dryden estates, no date, 1797.

⁴ On the importance of individual owners see P. Roebuck, *Yorkshire Baronets 1640-1740: Families, Estates and Fortunes* (Oxford, 1980). On Strict Settlement see, for example, E. Spring, 'The Strict Settlement: Its Role in History', *The Economic History Review*, vol. 41 (1988), pp. 454-60; L. Bonfield, *Marriage Settlements, 1601-1740: The Adoption of the Strict Settlement* (Cambridge, 1983) and J. Habakkuk, *Marriage, Debt and the Estate System: English Landownership, 1650-1950* (Oxford, 1994).

⁵ *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage* (London, 1965), p. 816.

shaped farmhouse, John set about gradually extending it, work that was followed up by future generations up until the early eighteenth century. The house served as a basis for the growing fame and fortune of the Drydens. John's son, Erasmus (1553-1632), brought the first titular honours to the family when he was created a Baronet, in 1619. He had earlier served as High Sheriff of Northamptonshire (in 1599 and 1618) and was elected MP for Banbury in 1624. His son, Sir John (d.1658), Second Baronet, followed this political career, serving as High Sheriff and later MP for Northamptonshire.⁶ Sir John was succeeded by his son, Sir Robert (d.1708), Third Baronet, who died unmarried and without children and divided the estates between family members: the Warwickshire estates were given to his nephew, John Sneyd, and the Northamptonshire estates (centred on Canons Ashby) to Edward Dryden, his first cousin once removed. Neither of them inherited the Baronetcy, which passed instead to Sir Robert's cousin, Sir John Dryden (d. 1710), who became the Fourth Baronet.⁷

Before inheriting the Dryden estates Edward had pursued a successful career as a grocer in King Street in Westminster, on the site where the Cabinet and Foreign Offices now stand. His family rented a house in Bolton Street, Mayfair, and had a half share in another in the Poultry, off Cheapside. A wealthy man in his own right, he had married the daughter of another rich London merchant and, even after inheriting Canons Ashby in 1708, continued his trade as a grocer until 1715. It seems that Edward did not reside at Canons Ashby at first (none of his nine children were baptised there), but he was responsible for a number of changes to the house. He also recorded the rents he was receiving from the estates which, at the time of his death, in 1717, amounted to £1,100 per annum, and he left £4,300 in other securities along with rents for his London properties. Meanwhile Sir John, Fourth Baronet, had taken rooms at Canons Ashby and contested Sir Robert's will: a move that ended in failure. When he died in 1710 the title (but not the estates) passed briefly to his cousin, Sir Erasmus Henry Dryden (1669-1710), Fifth Baronet, a priest who died shortly after Sir John, and then to Edward Dryden's father, Sir Erasmus Dryden (d. 1718), Sixth Baronet. Sir Erasmus and his son's wife, Elizabeth, lived at Canons Ashby following Edward Dryden's inheritance, managing the estates in his name. It was during this time that the house was modernised, the south face being refaced and more fashionable sash windows replacing the old mullioned windows (Plate 1).

⁶ *Burke's Peerage*, p. 816.

⁷ *Burke's Peerage*, p. 816.

It was after Edward Dryden's death, in 1717, and the death of Sir Erasmus, in 1718, that his son, Sir John Dryden (d. 1770) inherited both the estates and the title of Baronet, Seventh in his family line, thus bringing titular honours and landed income back together. Sir John and his fellow executor, John Shaw, faced a significant challenge in terms of debts on the estates since Edward had left over-generous provision for his younger sons and daughters. This problem was solved through the sale of Edward's London properties; £1000 and income from the estates of Frances Ingram (Sir John's first wife, who died in 1724); a win on the lottery to the tune of £590; investments in the South Sea Bubble, and some thrifty spending habits. Like many other gentry landowners faced with debts on their estates, Sir John succeeded through prudent investments, the use of wider familial resources and sheer good luck. By the time of Sir John's marriage to his second wife, Elizabeth Rooper, in 1726, the estates were in credit and the future looked bright for the Drydens in comparison to the demographic and legal problems the family had faced over the previous generation. Although this period witnessed a greater stability in ownership at the estate, more problems were to develop. Sir John and Elizabeth produced no children of their own, and ended up adopting their niece, Elizabeth Dryden (see below), the future wife of John Turner (Dryden). The Seventh Baronet died in 1770, whereupon the title was extinguished. The estate passed to his adoptive daughter Elizabeth who continued living at Canons Ashby with her mother and later her sister until 1781, when she married John Turner and moved to 10 Upper Seymour Street, off Portman Square in London. In 1791, the dowager Lady Elizabeth died and Elizabeth moved back to Canons Ashby with her husband, who added Dryden to his name.

In some ways the Turner family had a similar history of interaction with business and trade as the Drydens, although of a very different kind. The first of the family recorded in the lineage was Richard Turner (m. 1567), a barrister, originally from Sutton Coldfield in Warwickshire.⁸ Richard's descendants were, like him, businessmen and professionals, rather than wealthy landowners, and were generally centred on London. Thus Richard's great-grandson, John Turner (1622-94), was a London merchant, as was his son, John (1650-1708).⁹ It was not until the life of Sir Edward Turner (1691-1735) that the Turners began to make a name for themselves amongst the country gentry and to accrue wealth from land. Edward rose to greater heights in the business world than his forbears, becoming the Director and Chairman of the 'Honourable East India Company Service.' He was created Baronet in

⁸ *Burke's Peerage*, p. 815.

⁹ *Burke's Peerage*, p. 816.

1733, at the age of 42, and married Mary, the eldest daughter of Sir Gregory Page, Bart., of East Greenwich. The Page family also owed their fortune to trade and were described as living with ‘great splendour and hospitality’ and acquiring significant estates in Bedford and Kent.¹⁰ The marriage between Sir Edward and Mary, like John Turner Dryden’s, turned out to be a fortuitous one for the family later in the eighteenth century when John’s elder brother, Gregory, inherited the Page Kent estates, adding Page to his name to become Sir Gregory Page-Turner.¹¹

Sir Edward purchased a landed estate centred on Ambrosden, in Oxfordshire, which included a house built in the 1670s by the then owner, Sir William Glynne. Edward moved into this house, but his son, Sir Edward Turner (1719-66), Second Baronet, and father of John Turner Dryden, built a larger house and laid out Ambrosden Park after his inheritance in 1735. The Second Baronet also inherited other landed estates from his uncle, John Turner, of Sudbury, Middlesex, and further fortunes from another uncle, Edward Turner. By the time of John Turner Dryden’s birth in 1752, the Turners were in possession of substantial estates and a significant fortune which placed them in a more than equitable position with regards to the Drydens. It was, in some ways, a merger between a family of rising wealth and social standing, and one with a longer pedigree, but of more modest means. In this sense, John and Elizabeth formed a good match for each other.

John Turner and Elizabeth Dryden: a decisive match

We have no exact details as to the circumstances under which John Turner and Elizabeth Dryden met. There were no obvious family connections between them. John Turner was related to a family with connections in the Midlands, the Leighs of Adlestrop in Gloucestershire, cousins of the Leighs of Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire. His mother, Cassandra, was the daughter of William Leigh, of Adlestrop. However this did not tie him into the county society of Northamptonshire, where he may have met the Drydens. Sir John Dryden (d. 1770) had invested in East India shares,¹² a company closely tied to the fortunes of the Turners, but then so did many other gentry and aristocratic families. In the absence of

¹⁰ W. Betham, *The Baronetage of England* (London, 1804), vol. iv, p. 279.

¹¹ *Burke’s Peerage*, p. 816.

¹² N.R.O. D(CA)/971, Letter from Rev. D Burton to Sir John Dryden with regard to Sir John’s investments in the East India Company, 1764.

any direct evidence we can only surmise that John and Elizabeth, or other members of their families, met at one of the centres of sociability during this period, either at a spa or county town, perhaps at races held at Warwick or Northampton or in London.

Elizabeth was the daughter of Sir John Dryden's younger brother, Beville, and his wife, Mary. She was adopted by Sir John and Lady Elizabeth in 1760 at the age of seven, following the death of her father and the impoverishment of her widowed mother – a situation not improved by the decision of Sir John's mother (d.1761) to leave her estate to his sister Mary and her daughter Maria Puleston. In a letter from this period Sir John noted that young Elizabeth was 'amiable' and that he was 'as well pleased as if it was a boy', perhaps indicating that Elizabeth was, even at this age, destined to inherit the estates.¹³ Certainly, there appears to have been a great deal of affection between young Elizabeth and her adoptive parents. She wrote to her mother that she liked living at Canons Ashby, 'uncle brought me play things from Northampton and promises me more. I have got a pretty puppy and am to have a fine new Coat and dressed Linnen ... Uncle hopes soon to get me a little Horse'.¹⁴ Whilst relatively modest treats for the daughter of country landowner and just the kind of thing that might excite the interest of an eight year old girl, it is perhaps significant that Elizabeth enumerates in such detail the material possessions acquired for her comfort.

John was certainly much enamoured of material goods. As a boy he went to Harrow and, after receiving a 'liberal education', he made his Grand Tour under the guidance of Dr Nugent, father-in-law to Edward Burke and author of a descriptive and instructive account of the Grand Tour.¹⁵ The precise duration and itinerary of John's own tour is uncertain, but he certainly visited France and parts of modern-day Germany.¹⁶ In his journal, a common appendage to genteel travel,¹⁷ John repeatedly complained about the accommodation he and his friends were reduced to, as well as the 'indolence' of many of the landlords he

¹³ N.R.O. D(CA)/1032, Letter from Sir John Dryden to his Sister-in-Law, Mary Dryden, 6 April 1761.

¹⁴ N.R.O. D(CA)/1081, Letter from Elizabeth Dryden to her mother, 4 May 1761.

¹⁵ T. Nugent, *The Grand Tour, or A journey through the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and France* (London, 1756).

¹⁶ N.R.O. D(CA)/347, John Turner Dryden's Tour of France, 1774; Betham, *Baronetage of England*, p. 279; *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol.67, Part 1 (1797), p. 521. It is impossible to work out exactly how he was in France since John left several date entries blank and stopped entering information into it on 15th August, either to return home or to travel on to Germany.

¹⁷ H. French and M. Rothery, *Man's Estate: Landed Gentry Masculinities 1660-1900* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 137-48.

encountered. In his entry on 21 July he noted the poor state of his room in a lodging house in Brighthelm, the former name for Brighton, where he was staying before setting out for Dieppe. He had been given a ‘bad bed hard as a stone & not room enough for a consumptive monkey.’¹⁸ He did manage to acquire the best cabin on the packet ship for the journey, paying six guineas for the privilege – a significant sum compared with the 2 Guineas he paid for a week’s stay at the l’Hotel d’Gorch Foucault, in Paris.¹⁹ This combination of care and extravagance was not unusual amongst young men on the Grand Tour – at once constrained by the allowance provided by their father’s and the desire to keep up appearances and enjoy all that the Tour had to offer.²⁰

John’s time in Paris was filled with strolls along boulevards, observations of the fine bridges of the city, meals in hotel restaurants and Italian comedies in the evening. He appears to have stayed there for around three weeks, noting in his journal costs amounting to around £150 – not a huge sum, but quite significant in terms of length of his visit. After Paris, we know little of his movements, but he was reported as receiving a ‘friendly welcome’ at the court in Mecklenburgh Strelitz, where he ‘dined daily with the Duke’ who presented John with a letter of introduction to his sister, Queen Charlotte the consort of George III.²¹ Whilst this honour reflected well on John and his tutor, this tour was less complete than that undertaken by his older brother, Gregory, who inherited the Turner estates in 1766 and became the Third Baronet. These estates included the great fortune and lands that his father, Edward, had inherited from his uncle and great-uncle, along with a separate fortune which Gregory inherited directly from his great-uncle, Sir Gregory Page, Baronet.²² Combined, these made Gregory an extremely wealthy young man. His Grand Tour was extensive and lavish, following the prescribed route from the ‘cold north’ in the Netherlands and Germany, down through France and Switzerland to the ‘warm north’ and into Italy.²³ In 1768, when in Rome in the later stages of his Tour, he sat for a portrait. Pompeo Batoni (1708-87), by far the most popular and esteemed artist with Grand Tourists of this period, painted Sir Gregory with his left hand on a map of Rome, in front of a bust of Minerva and with the Coliseum in

¹⁸ N.R.O. D(CA)/347, John Turner Dryden’s Tour of France, 21 July 1774.

¹⁹ N.R.O. D(CA)/347, John Turner Dryden’s Tour of France, 22 July 1774, 28 July 1774.

²⁰ French and Rothery, *Man’s Estate*, pp. 141-2; p. 147.

²¹ Betham, *Baronetage of England*, p. 279.

²² *Burke’s Peerage*, p. 816

²³ H. French and M. Rothery, “‘Upon Your Entry Into the World’: Masculine Values and the Threshold of Adulthood Among Landed Elites in England, 1680-1800”, *Social History*, 33 (2008), pp. 402-22.

the background. He is dressed in a lavish suit of scarlet silk with gold braiding and lace cuffs. A sword hangs at his side.²⁴ This kind of dress suit was the height of fashionable good taste in the third quarter of the eighteenth century.²⁵ Placed alongside the archetypal images of classical Rome, they showed Sir Gregory to be a man of expensive but refined taste – qualities to which his younger brother also aspired.

On his return to England, John took a commission in the 1st Regiment of the Foot Guards – the most senior regiment in the Guards and a prestigious and costly position to secure.²⁶ With significant resources at his disposal, John socialised with other well-connected young officers and became ‘one of the most fashionable officers about town, both with respect to dress and equipage’.²⁷ Something of this can be seen in the exquisite and expensive suit he commissioned for his presentation to Queen Charlotte (Plates 2 and 3).²⁸ Court dress held great significance in the eighteenth century, despite widespread recognition that the Georgian monarchs were far from being fashion leaders. It was important to dress appropriately, because appearance was one of the key factors in gaining admittance to the public rooms of the London palaces; but clothes also held great symbolic importance. Fine clothing showed respect for royalty and the purchase of new clothing to wear at court signalled loyalty to the crown.²⁹ Given this context, Sir John was clearly anxious to conform. He wore a coat made of dark blue cut velvet into which white silk was interwoven; a delicate leaf pattern being embroidered and appliquéd down the front and matching details added to the cuffs. The fronts were cut back and curved away, the better to show a white silk waistcoat, exquisitely embroidered with blue and gold floral designs. The suit appears French in design and may have been purchased whilst John was in Paris, although there is no mention of this in his journal. Another possibility is that it was imported in pieces and

²⁴ This portrait now hangs in the Manchester City Art Gallery. To see an image of this portrait go to www.manchestergalleries.org/the-collections. For a broader discussion of portraits and the Grand Tour see the website devoted to the National Gallery’s exhibition on Pompeo Batoni at www.nationalgallery.org.uk/the-grand-tour, an exhibition that included the portrait of Sir Gregory.

²⁵ A. Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth Century England* (London, 1979), pp. 28-32.

²⁶ N.R.O. D(CA)/206, Commission as lieutenant in the 1st Regiment, Foot Guards, 25 March 1776.

²⁷ N.R.O. D(CA)/993, 994, 995, 998, various letters; *Gentleman’s Magazine*, Vol.67, Part 1 (1797), p. 521.

²⁸ The precise date of this event is unknown, but probably occurred fairly soon after his return from the Grand Tour.

²⁹ H. Greig, ‘Faction and fashion: the politics of court dress in eighteenth-century England’, in I. Paresys and N. Coquery (eds), *Se Vêtir a la Cour en Europe* (Lille, 2011), pp. 79-88.

finished to John's specifications by a London tailor.³⁰ We might see this suit as an attempt to emulate his older brother and the expensive tastes illustrated in the clothes worn for the Batoni portrait a few years earlier. Certainly it signalled John's desire to make a good show at court, demonstrating his wealth, taste and loyalty.

This particular suit forms only the most lavish example of John's conspicuous consumption which increasingly ran beyond his considerable income. We have no bill or accounts to give us the exact cost of the clothing. It did not come close to the £500 reportedly paid in 1790 by the Duke of Bedford for a brown striped silk suit embroidered in silver and diamonds. Conversely, it must have been considerably more than £16 3s 11d which James Henry Leigh laid out on materials for a fine black broadcloth suit in 1813.³¹ Perhaps it cost in the region of £100-150 – indicative of a more general taste for lavish spending. Other suits belonging to John Turner and apparently dating from a similar period are more sober, being dark velvet; but they retain extravagant and showy touches, including on one a series of diamanté pendants no doubt designed to catch the light and sparkle. Indeed, such was John's ability to spend that Betham reports that he 'dissipated a large sum of money' and 'contracted debts, which the short possession of a large fortune did not enable him intirely [sic.] to liquidate'.³²

Perhaps this helps to explain the match to Elizabeth, described in John's obituary as a 'very amiable lady'.³³ She had a steady and reliable income from the estate, albeit one that was relatively modest in comparison with John's family. We know little about their early married life in London, but John clearly maintained his military interests, being commissioned as a captain in the Oxford Militia in 1782.³⁴ Moreover, they were apparently living well, if not to John's previous lavish standards, and rented a second house near Margate in Kent. They clearly needed to raise cash and, from 1783 onwards, took out a number of loans against the security of their future estate income, mostly with George Brooks

³⁰ We would like to thank Dr Miles Lambert, the Senior Manager of the Gallery of Costume at Platt Hall, in Rusholme, Manchester, for his advice on the origins of this suit.

³¹ Greig, 'Faction and fashion', p. 78; Shakespeare Central Library and Archive (SCLA), DR18/5/6994, receipted bill from Joseph Smith to James Henry Leigh, July 1813.

³² Betham, *Baronetage of England*, p. 280.

³³ *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol.67, Part 1 (1797), p. 521.

³⁴ N.R.O. D(CA)/207, Commission as captain in the Oxfordshire Militia, 30 September 1782.

of Green Street, Grosvenor Square.³⁵ The capital was due for repayment on the death of the dowager Elizabeth Dryden and they took out an insurance policy with the Society for Equitable Assurance on Lives or Survivorships ‘That Elizabeth, wife of John Turner (aged 30) of Margaret Street, Cavendish Square, will survive Dame Elizabeth Dryden (aged 76) of Canons Ashby for £500 in favour of George Brooks.’³⁶ Unsurprisingly, they won their bet: the dowager Elizabeth died in 1791 and the estate passed into John’s possession. Yet this did not spell the end of their financial problems, not least because John’s elevation to the lower ranks of the aristocracy involved significant direct and indirect expenditure. He was knighted in 1793 and had to lay out £108 on servants for the ceremony where he received his title. Shortly afterwards he was commissioned as a captain in the Northamptonshire Yeomen Cavalry.³⁷ He also took advantage of the sale of honours during William Pitt’s first ministry and purchased a Baronetcy at a cost of £350 – an honour linked to his display of loyalty in raising a troop of the Yeomanry.³⁸ All the while, they retained a London residence in Upper Seymour Street. Although apparently a reformed character (his portrait of 1795 shows a man soberly if fashionably dressed in a dark coat with a white silk cravat – Plate 4), Sir John was clearly a man to dispense public duties and ceremonies in style.

These outgoings were by no means ruinous in themselves, but their cumulative effect – perhaps in combination with problems in servicing Sir John’s earlier debts – was clearly enough to place considerable strain on the estate, despite the c.£2,500 per annum derived from the Canons Ashby estate. In 1792, John was writing to the Rev Thomas Leigh at Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire apologising for the delay in repaying a loan.³⁹ Moreover, letters to Elizabeth after Sir John’s death in 1797 provide some clues as to their outgoings and their problems in paying the bills accrued. These were sent by a range of different suppliers,

³⁵ Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (H.A.L.S.) 2348, bond of John Turner to George Brooks, 18 February 1783; N.R.O. D(CA)/222 Memorial inrolled at Chancery of a bond, warrant and indenture, 22 April 1790.

³⁶ H.A.L.S. 2349 Insurance Policy, 2 April 1783.

³⁷ N.R.O. D(CA)/1011, Receipt for payment of the total costs of servants during the award ceremony, no date (1793); Betham, *Baronetage of England*, p. 280; N.R.O. D(CA)/219, Commission as captain of a troop of the Northamptonshire Regiment of Gentlemen and Yeomanry Cavalry, 9 May 1794.

³⁸ N.R.O. D(CA)/1021, Letter from W. Chinnery, of H.M. Treasury, to John Turner Dryden, 26 March 1795. Betham, *Baronetage of England*, p. 280.

³⁹ Shakespeare Library and Archive Service, DR18/8/6/29. Letter from John Turner Dryden to Rev Thomas Leigh regarding a loan of £350, 3 April 1792.

from drapers and coal merchants. One of these, written in July 1800, was from the lawyer J. Ribblewhite, who was representing a coal merchant. Ribblewhite asked for immediate payment of a bill for ‘coals delivered in Sir Johns lifetime’, suggesting that many of his debts were bills that had been left unpaid over a long period.⁴⁰ This is confirmed by another letter, in which a coach-maker asked for the payment of a bill totalling £35, which had been outstanding ‘upwards of seven years’.⁴¹

One area where they appear to have laid out significant sums was on furniture for their newly acquired home. The structure and design of Canons Ashby had been laid down by 1710, after which very few alterations took place, other than changes to the furniture and furnishings.⁴² John and Elizabeth were very active in creating a new arrangement of domestic space at Canons Ashby, most obviously in fitting up a billiard room in the old dining parlour and changing the first floor dining room into a drawing room.⁴³ These and other changes involved acquiring some new pieces, including a billiard table, maces, cue and balls; a grand piano for the new dining parlour, and a suite of satinwood tables for the drawing room. There were also more pictures hung on the walls and a burgeoning number of decorative items, such as a pair of globes and a bust of Dryden (their poet ancestor). It is hard to put a cost against these items or the more general growth in the number of items within the house, but comparisons across to contemporaneous spending at Stoneleigh Abbey suggests that the satinwood furniture might have cost a total of around £100, depending on their size and quality.⁴⁴ This was a significant outlay, to which must be added many other sums for a range of mahogany pieces which appear for the first time in 1819 inventory. It seems likely that the couple spent several hundred pounds overall, although it is clear that much of the change they affected at Canons Ashby resulted from moving furniture between rooms. Moreover, the sums involved pale in comparison with those needed to change the fabric of the building – and there is no indication that either John or Elizabeth had such intentions.

⁴⁰ N.R.O. D(CA)/364/22, Letter from J. Ribblewhite to Lady Elizabeth Dryden, 7 July 1800.

⁴¹ N.R.O., D(CA)/364/37, Letter from Mary Ann Wheatley, of Northampton, to Lady Elizabeth Dryden, 15 March 1804.

⁴² A rare mention of these comes in a 1764 letter from Rev. D Burton to Sir John Dryden, commenting on Sir John’s new blinds at Canons Ashby: N.R.O. D(CA)/971.

⁴³ What had been the Best Parlour was made into a dining room. N.R.O., D(CA)/903, 1791 household inventory, D(CA) 904, 1819 household inventory.

⁴⁴ SCLA, DR/18/5/6999, receipted bill from Chipchase and Proctor to James Henry Leigh, January 1814.

Quite apart from investing in new furniture, the everyday running costs at Canons Ashby grew significantly during the course of John and Elizabeth's marriage. They had nine children in total, five sons and four daughters.⁴⁵ Big families were not unusual in landed families of this period, but large numbers of children placed a significant burden on landed estates of such modest proportions. None of these children entered into costly marital alliances, but then neither did they bring wealth into the family through marriage, as had been the case when the Turners married into the Page family. The debts, and the large family left to Elizabeth to care for were a burden. They determined to a large extent the lifestyle of Elizabeth and the children in her widowhood, which we will now turn in the final section.

Aftershock: the later life of Lady Elizabeth Dryden

The letter we quoted from at the beginning of this article, and those described in the previous section, are a few examples of many others that passed between Elizabeth and her creditors after the death of her husband. There are a total of forty letters in the Dryden archive relating to the debts owing on Sir John's estate, mainly from creditors and these undoubtedly only scratch the surface in terms of the correspondence generated by this problem. Elizabeth was not alone in her dealings with these people. In 1805 she was remarried to Godfrey Scholey, esquire of London, who neither inherited the estates nor assumed the name of Dryden. Indeed, much of their lengthy marriage settlement was concerned with managing and protecting Scholey's estate from the debts of £10,980 left by Sir John.⁴⁶ To make matter worse, Elizabeth was not in full ownership of the estate, a trust having been set up in order to deal with her first husband's debts. Her exact position was set out in a letter from a solicitor which was undated but was probably written soon after Sir John's death and referred to her situation in relation to one of the senior trustees, Sir G. D.⁴⁷ Elizabeth had control of the estates for her life, but no provision had been included in John's will for the next heir. Elizabeth was expected to settle the large debts on the estate and to reduce her own debts in

⁴⁵ John Edward (1782-1818), Henry (1787-1837, Leopold (1792-1846), Lempster (1794-1866), Charles (1796-1883), Eliza, Harriet, Caroline (d. 1792) and Matilda (d. in infancy).

⁴⁶ N.R.O. D(CA)536, Marriage settlement of Godfrey Scholey and Dame Elizabeth Dryden, 19 March 1805.

⁴⁷ N.R.O. D(CA)/364/11 Statement of Affairs of Lady Elizabeth Dryden as they related to Sir G. D., no date. The identity of this individual remains unclear.

order to provide for the 'education and benefit' of her family. She could do this by settling a charge on the estate.

Elizabeth was advised by the trustees that she should sell timber off the estate and land to sitting tenant farmers. Later correspondence to an unknown individual shows that Elizabeth intended to follow this advice by selling land to the value of £3000.⁴⁸ Despite these sales and directions in John's will regarding the 'education and benefit' of their children, the debts he left caused her considerable problems in caring for them. In 1799 she wrote to a Mrs Hammond apologising for the removal of her daughters from her care, but explaining that she did not have the funds to continue paying for their education since she owed 'large sums to several persons both in law expenses & on other accounts'.⁴⁹ Later, in 1810, one of her daughters (the exact identity cannot be established) received a letter stating the money she could expect to receive upon coming of age. The money, it was explained, was at that time held in chancery. The total sum of £800 should be invested, Lady Dryden suggested, in 10% stocks – a risky form of investment for a life's income and one that would yield just £80 per annum. Since this was not sufficient for her to live by herself, Miss Dryden was to be a 'parlour boarder' with a Mrs Marmaris for two-thirds of the year, and then stay with Lady Dryden for three months each year, from the summer to Michelmas. In addition she could spend each Christmas with Elizabeth.⁵⁰

The debts also had a major impact on the future destiny of Sir John's and Elizabeth's sons. The eldest son, John Edward Dryden, inherited the title of Baronet from his father and was to receive the estates via his mother's will. He died unmarried in 1818, aged just 36. Most landed gentlemen would have married before this age and it is possible that the debts on the estates were a factor in his lack of a marriage.⁵¹ This may also have been the reason that none of the three daughters who survived into adulthood married. Two of John Edward's younger brothers, Henry and Lempster, entered the clergy, whilst Henry and another brother,

⁴⁸ N.R.O. D(CA)/364/13, Letter from Lady Elizabeth Dryden to an unknown correspondent, 14 April 1805.

⁴⁹ N.R.O. C(CA)/364/17, Letter from Lady Elizabeth Dryden to Mrs Hammond, 15 June 1799.

⁵⁰ N.R.O. D(CA)/364/10, Statement of the Affairs of Miss Dryden, 7 February 1810.

⁵¹ See T. H. Hollingsworth, 'The Demography of the British Peerage', *Supplement to Population Studies*, vol. 18 (1964), pp. 29-52, for a detailed examination of average ages at marriage and other demographic aspects of landed life in the eighteenth century. For a study of demographic patterns in the modern period see M. Rothery, 'The Reproductive Behaviour of the English Landed Gentry, 1800-1939', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), pp. 674-94.

Leopold, married the daughters of clergymen. Henry was Rector of Ambrosden in Oxfordshire, the home of the Page-Turner family. This might signal ongoing relations between the two families in terms of patronage, although Henry resided at his other living, Leek Wootton in Warwickshire – in the gift of Chandos Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey.⁵² On his brother's death, he inherited the title and estate in 1818, becoming Rev Sir Henry Dryden, Third Baronet. His son, Sir Henry Edward Leigh Dryden, Fourth Baronet and famous antiquary (and currently at the centre of the National Trust's presentation of Canons Ashby), inherited it in 1837. Some 37 years later, Sir Henry also inherited the Page-Turner estates, in Ambrosden, from his kinsman Sir Edward Henry Page-Turner, thus adding the title Seventh Baronet of Ambrosden.⁵³ This later merger between the two families proved far more successful than that arising from Elizabeth and John's marriage, continuing down to the present Baronet, Sir John Dryden.

Conclusion

The inheritance of Canons Ashby brought together two notable families in the south-east Midlands. However, it signalled a recession in the fortunes of the Dryden family, ongoing financial problems for Elizabeth after Sir John's death and, in particular, a more troubled and less honourable lifestyle for their children than they might have expected. In many ways, their children returned to the kind of levels of status and wealth that Sir John had to tolerate earlier in his life. In some ways, this story is a specific one, the result of the particular circumstances and character traits of Elizabeth and John. The lavish and perhaps reckless spending of his youth was somewhat moderated in middle age, but the couple seem to have lived well beyond their means at Canons Ashby. They were unable or perhaps unwilling to cut their cloth in accordance with their purse – Elizabeth retained a London residence in the early nineteenth century, despite her financial worries. Yet this is a story that tells us much about the broader processes of rise and decline in the wealth of landed society. It illustrates, in minutiae, the importance of marital alliances in consolidating, or preferably extending, landed fortunes. It also shows the importance of prudent and thrifty habits of spending whilst in control of the estates. Despite frequent references to landowners in this period as conspicuous consumers of expensive and luxurious products and lifestyles, the key to

⁵² *Burke's Peerage*, p. 817.

⁵³ *Burke's Peerage*, p. 817.

survival actually lay in matching spending to income, rather than in flaunting one's wealth. Small landed estates such as Canons Ashby were particularly susceptible to spendthrift owners and their expensive habits and tastes. Overall, though, the longer term survival and flourishing of the estates illustrates the tenacity of the landed classes and their significant survival skills across history. Whilst individual owners such as Sir John could damage the family patrimony, in the long run and with careful management, such problems could often, though not always, be rectified.