

AGNES STRICKLAND AND HER BIRTH-PLACE

By ERNEST R. COOPER, F.S.A.

Those who have Jane Strickland's *Life of her Sister* will find no mention of Agnes' first home, and very little about her girlhood, and early days, the *Life* giving only eighteen pages to that period, and jumping in Chapter Two to the death of her father in 1818 and her juvenile efforts as a poetess.

Having occasion to look up her early life I found contradictory statements as to her native place, the D.N.B. giving it rather vaguely as London, which is the nearest to the mark that I could find; the *Encyclopædia Britannica* suggests that she arrived at Reydon Hall, Suffolk. *Chambers' Encyclopædia* says the same, and various local writers claim that she was Suffolk born. However, I read somewhere that her father, Thos. Strickland was at one time Manager of the Greenland Dock, which still exists as one of the Surrey Commercial Docks, now part of the Port of London's huge Undertaking: The Greenland Dock was constructed as the Howland Great Wet Dock in 1696, and named after the owners of the site; About 1763 it was used by the whaling ships, and became the Greenland Dock, but in 1807 it was bought by the Surrey Commercial Docks for the timber trade, and is still part of their system on the Surrey side of London River.

There is a print, dated 1700, of the Howland Great Dock which shews the Manager's house on the Quay at the far end, opposite the entrance lock, and the present Dock is in Rotherhithe Parish, County Surrey, the Redriffe so often mentioned in Pepys' Diary as the location then of one of the King's Ship-building Yards.

On application to the Rector of Rotherhithe, whose mother by the way was a Woodbridge girl, he made search and found the entry of Agnes Strickland's baptism, of which he sent me the following certificate:

"1796 August 18, Agnes Strickland d. of Thos. and Elizabeth Strickland. 31."

The Rector states the figures 31 relate to the age of the infant when baptized, and that this entry appears at p. 73 of the Baptismal Register, 1792-1810.

It is therefore clear that the Historian of "Queens of England," was born at Rotherhithe, County Surrey, on the 18th July, 1796, that her sister was a month out in the date, and that all the statements as to her birthplace, which I have been able to consult, are wrong. Probably Jane inspected the Register and took the date of baptism for the birthday.

In 1796 the Greenland Dock must have been in a very slummy district and, if it was still patronised by the whalers, the Dock House cannot have been a home for which a child could have any affection nor any wish to recall it in later life, and of course, most important of all, no one could claim for it a "genteel" situation.

However, the Editor of P.L.A. the Port of London Magazine, informs me that the Dock House was pulled down many years ago so it will be no use any later biographer trying to locate the actual house in which Miss Agnes arrived on the scene.

When the family finally settled at Reydon Hall, via Thorpe by Norwich, and Stowe House near Bungay, and became well known in social, and literary circles, both in Suffolk and London, it is perhaps only natural that Rotherhithe, and the Greenland Dock were never disclosed, nor referred to, and that little is said in the *Life* as to the period antecedent to their settling in Reydon in 1808.

It does not appear that Agnes ever went to school, and she seems to have been educated by her father on very strict and narrow lines, but however that may have been, he made a thoroughly good job of her historical instruction: The *Life* is chiefly devoted to literary work, and to acquaintances in high life, and the visits paid to various great houses and their distinguished owners.

Amongst others Agnes spent some days at Sizergh Castle, Westmorland, as guest of the tenant who occupied it during the minority of Walter Strickland, the owner, in order to examine the MSS. bearing on the period when Queen Catherine Parr was living there.

Jane refers to Sizergh as the old ancestral castle, and says the family derived from Sir Adam de Styrkland, who came over with the Conqueror and took their name from lands assigned to them by him. As to this a member of the Sizergh Stricklands wrote to me from Kendall, Westmorland, that there is no foundation for the suggestion that the Historian was connected with his family, more than one of whom carefully investigated the claim and found there is nothing more in it than wishful thinking. He further states that the Reydon Stricklands derived from a respectable yeoman family living at Light Haugh, Lancs., the name being common in that area, formerly known as Styrkeland. The supposed descent from a Sir Adam de Styrkeland, who came over with the Conqueror, he says has no foundation in fact, the Sizergh Family not taking the name of Strickland for more than a century after the Conquest. I am also told there is a review of the *Life* in the *Athænaeum* of 23 Ap. 1887 (which I have not seen) in which some of these points are dealt with.

However, whatever may be said of these genealogical flights, the fact remains that upon her wide researches and great industry rests the honourable niche which she occupies in the *Dict. of National Biography*, as the Historian of Women.

Agnes Strickland's early efforts in poetry would long since have passed into oblivion, via the twopenny box, but her work as Historian of *The English Queens and other Royalties* will always be widely read and quoted, and Suffolk people may be proud of her long residence, where much of her work must have been done and that she now rests in that overcrowded graveyard which surrounds the noble Church at Southwold, while a tablet fixed to 21 Park Lane, Southwold, marks the Park Lane Cottage in which she spent the last decade of her life, ending 1874.

I may perhaps be excused for rounding off this little paper by including a letter from Miss Strickland, kindly presented to me by one of our Members, Mr. R. R. James and I believe hitherto unpublished.



REYDON HALL, SUFFOLK.
In the Stricklands' time
1808 — 1864

PLATE I.

PLATE II.



AGNES STRICKLAND
In her prime — 1796 — Late in life

"Dear Mr. Harrison, I have used due diligence in correcting the proof of the "Pirate's Grave," but your careful and judicious revision had left me little to do, I am greatly obliged to you for the trouble you have taken, and hope next year to be able to illustrate one of your plates.

I blush to say my 3rd volume of the "Lives of the Queens of England" will not be ready till the end of next week I have been so impeded by indisposition and eternal interruptions.

On Tuesday week (2?) my sister and myself leave town for Middle Hill in Worcestershire, I am reckoning much on escaping into the Country.

With kind regards to Mrs. Harrison and your young ladies and little son and best wishes to yourself believe me ever Dear Mr. Harrison,

Yours in all sincerity,

AGNES STRICKLAND."

(on back)

"To W. H. Harrison, Esq., Crown Life Office,
New Bridge Street, Black Friars."

Author's Note. This letter has neither address nor date, neither can I find anything of Mr. Harrison, nor the Pirate's Grave, but from the *Life* I gather it was written from London, and that they were about to visit Sir Thos. Phillips, of Middle Hill, Worcestershire to examine his fine library and MSS. collection, for information as to the early life of Queen Catherine Parr, en route for Sizergh Castle, where she was brought up.

E.R.C.

Also a letter written from Porchester Gardens, dated Nov. 29, 1851, to a Mrs. Cook, from Agnes' elder sister, Elizabeth who collaborated in the great work of the Lives, wrote almost the whole of Vol. 2, and had a hand in every other Volume, but would not be known as joint authoress. She says here "Agnes is now studying at her ease at Reydon, sometimes she sends in a great hurry for me to make a search in the *Douglass Peeverage* (for someone or other) which she has not at Reydon being one of the scarcest books in print."

And so we will leave these literary sisters, one at Reydon Hall the other in London, labouring at the work which brought sister Agnes so much kudos, while sister Elizabeth kept out of the limelight.