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FELIX HOLT AND 'A FINE SIGHT OF LAWSUITS'

By Sheila Woolf

During the festivities surrounding the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, much was said about his Warwickshire roots, and commentators noted, not for the first time, his use of Warwickshire dialect. The same is frequently said about George Eliot, of course. A good example occurs early in *Felix Holt*, in the coachman's words as he takes passengers up the hill past the village of Little Treby:

How many times in the year, as the coach rolled past the neglected-looking lodges which interrupted the screen of trees, and showed the river winding through a finely-timbered park, had the coachman answered the same questions, or told the same thing without being questioned! That? Oh, that was Transome Court, a place there had been a **fine sight of lawsuits** about. Generations back, the heir of the Transome name had bargained away the estate, and it fell to the Durfeys [...]. But the Durfeys' claim had been disputed over and over again; and [...] the lawyers had found their luck in it. (emphasis added)¹

'A fine sight', in North Warwickshire parlance, means 'a great many, or a multitude'. Growing up there myself, I often used to hear this as a child: 'You'll hear a sight more about it before I'm done with you!' George Eliot's recall of the language of her childhood is, as ever, spot-on.

So, initially it was the language used, which drew me to this 'fine sight' of lawsuits. And then I began to wonder, are these lawsuits based on reality, and is the property being described an actual place? Transome Court sounds like many a Warwickshire stately home. Others before me have made suggestions that Little Treby is the village of Stoneleigh, in the south of the county between Coventry and Kenilworth; that the property being described is Stoneleigh Abbey; and that the lawsuits are those of the Leigh family who lived there. Is any of this true? Would Eliot have known about this property and the problems associated with it? Isn't it too geographically distant from her sphere of knowledge? Were there not other families with similar difficulties and anyway, does there have to be a real life situation when a novelist's job is to invent and imagine?

Transome Court, near the 'low-nestled' village of Little Treby 'which lay on the side of a steep hill not far off the lodge gates' was 'a large mansion, built in the fashion of Queen Anne's time, with a park and grounds as fine as any to be seen in Loamshire'. The lodge-keeper had opened the heavy gate under the stone archway as the coach approached, revealing a terrace 'where there was a parterre kept with some neatness' (1,11). Grand trees surrounded the house, many windows of which 'had the shutters closed'. 'Standing on the south or east side of the house, you would not have guessed that an arrival was expected.' But the carriage entrance was 'on the west side' and it is here that the double doors open into the entrance hall, 'letting in the warm light on the scagliola pillars' (1,12). These descriptions are uncannily similar to the situation of Stoneleigh Abbey, the West Wing of which was added in the first decades of the eighteenth century. Its Elizabethan wing to the east is completely invisible from the western entrance which is approached via the medieval sandstone gatehouse, a relic of the original Cistercian abbey which the house replaced. Mrs Transome awaits her visitor in an ante-room which is furnished with ebony bookshelves and

adorned with 'portraits in pastel of pearly-skinned ladies with hair-powder, blue ribbons and low bodices' (1.12); again, the fabric and furnishing at Stoneleigh bears a strong resemblance to its fictional counterpart.

There are striking similarities between the fictional description and the real house and its location, but there are other such places, surely? And how would she have known it? To date I have found no evidence that she had actually been to Stoneleigh Abbey. Robert Evans however was land agent at Packington, and we know that as a child she travelled about with him. Her brother Isaac took on the estate after his father's death. Both would also have met and talked to fellow land agents from neighbouring Warwickshire properties. The North Warwickshire Hunt always began at Stoneleigh. Before a modern bypass was built in the twentieth century, it lay on the main route between Coventry and Leamington, the same road, in fact, which ran from Nuneaton, past Griff House, through Bedworth and right through the centre of Coventry before stretching onwards past Stoneleigh to Leamington. It may well have been a familiar route for Eliot to take. Although Stoneleigh may seem, to modern Nuneatonians, a fair distance away, it would not have seemed so in Eliot's lifetime; it is a mere three miles from Coventry. But still, of all other villages which might lay claim to being Little Treby, why might one identify Stoneleigh, and Stoneleigh Abbey as Transome Court?

The house itself might or might not have been known to George Eliot personally. The family who lived at Stoneleigh, the Leighs, were nevertheless extremely well-known throughout Warwickshire: theirs was the largest estate (nineteen thousand acres as against five thousand owned by the Newdigates of Arbury, for example) and the family were pre-eminent in philanthropic affairs throughout the county. The estate was renowned for its timber, so frequently remarked upon by Eliot in *Felix Holt*. In later years Lord Leigh's sister Georgiana became the second wife of Lieutenant Colonel Francis William Newdigate and she was locally famous for having written a magnificent and widely-published description of the visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to Stoneleigh in 1858. Eliot is very likely to have read some of the many newspaper articles about the visit.

All the same, many communities like to consider that they have a relationship with the works of a great writer. It can become rather silly. I think it's nevertheless a 'given' that Eliot was well placed to know a great deal about some of the families in the great houses of Warwickshire. Her father's connection with Packington is one such example. And also through her father there is a strong connection with the family at Baginton, the Bromley Davenports, who could trace their pedigree back to estates in Ellastone, Staffordshire, and who intermarried with the Newdigates for whom the Evans family worked. There are complex stories of entail in each family's past, which Eliot may have drawn upon in composing *Felix Holt*. Baginton is about a mile and a half from Stoneleigh, across the fields, and was certainly known to Eliot.

But what the Leigh family of Stoneleigh was known for more than anything in the first half of the nineteenth century was The Leigh Peerage Case – a 'fine sight of lawsuits' indeed. The coachman said these lawsuits had been going on for generations, as indeed they had at Stoneleigh. The story provided scandalous reading matter throughout the whole country for nearly fifty years.

Perhaps it will help to give the background to the case. In the sixteenth century, a former Lord Mayor of London, Sir Thomas Leigh, had bought up, post-Dissolution,

a Cistercian monastery at Stoneleigh, near Kenilworth, in Warwickshire, and passed the property on to his second son. His first son, Rowland, had inherited his father's properties in Gloucestershire. Thus there began two branches of the Leigh family, the Warwickshire and the Gloucestershire.

By the middle of the eighteenth century the Warwickshire branch of the family had long been elevated to becoming barons. The fifth Lord Leigh, Edward, a brilliant young man, was nevertheless declared a 'lunatic of unsound mind' and remained unmarried, dying in 1786. He had left a will, made in the 1760s whilst still of sound mind, stating that his heir should be the nearest male of his 'name and blood'. He had a sister, Mary, who died in 1806, herself unmarried. The Warwickshire line of descent having ended, it was decided that the Gloucestershire family, who, though landed gentry, had lived quietly as country squires, should take over. Thus in 1806, the Reverend Thomas Leigh, the rector of Adlestrop in Gloucestershire and a first cousin of Mary and Edward, took on a life interest after which everything would pass to his nephew, James Henry Leigh. There was a deep sense in Warwickshire that the new heirs had somehow 'bought into' the inheritance; not everyone was thrilled to have the estate transferred to the ownership of a far-flung relative. Indeed, a second possible heir was one James Leigh-Perrot, the uncle of Jane Austen, who was bought out to the tune of £20,000 by his cousin the Reverend Thomas. But that's another story, and we know how fond Jane Austen was of inheritance plot-lines!

The existence of complex inheritance situations at the time makes it interesting to note, as an aside, that in 1806 at Arbury the famous Sir Roger Newdigate died at the age of 87, childless, after which the baronetcy became extinct. And the new incumbent, Francis Parker Newdigate, brought with him to Arbury his agent Robert Evans; quite possibly George Eliot's knowledge of these various local circumstances informed her thinking when she wrote *Felix Holt*.

And so began the 'fine sight of lawsuits' at Stoneleigh, first, in 1808, with a challenge to the Reverend Thomas's succession. It came from one John Smith, who claimed descent through the female line and had, in 1802, obtained Royal Licence to use the surname Leigh in place of Smith. He issued proceedings in the Chancery Division claiming an account of the rents and profits, and that Edward's trustees should be required to assign and deliver up the estates to him with all relevant title deeds and documents relating to them. In monetary terms this was a huge claim: at Edward's death, it was reputed that the estates produced a net income of some £20,000 per annum. Not surprisingly, John did not satisfy the conditions of the will and therefore his claim failed.

It might be appropriate here to have a look at part of what Eliot wrote to the Chancery barrister Frederick Harrison in 1866, about the circumstances she needed to get clear in her mind for her own inheritance story:

It is required to know the longest possible term of years for the existence of the following conditions:

1. That an estate, for lack of a direct heir, should have come into the possession of A [...].
2. That subsequently a claim should have been set up by B, on a valid plea of near kinship.
3. That B should have failed in his suit from inability to prove his identity, over which certain circumstances (already fixed) should have cast a doubt, and should have died soon after.²

This sounds remarkably similar to the Stoneleigh case thus far.

Unhappiness about the inheritance rumbled on. In 1811 an unfortunate sequence of events led to one of the most scandalous news stories of the time. Extensive restoration work was begun then at Stoneleigh Church, and at the same time a new bridge was built over the River Avon at the Abbey. Incredible as it may seem, claimants emerged who accused the new owners of the Stoneleigh estate of wilfully destroying a monument in the church which provided evidence to confirm that the inheritance should go elsewhere. In 1813 the Reverend Thomas, who was generally agreed to be an honourable man, died, and the estate passed as agreed to his nephew James Henry Leigh.

Legal challenges continued. In 1817, handbills appeared, asking for information about the destruction of this monument, sponsored by a new claimant called George Leigh. These were pinned up in Hertford Street, Coventry and in Kenilworth, and asked for any information to be brought to the Craven Arms, Coventry, or the Swan Inn, Stoneleigh. Then, nationally, the following notice appeared. In 1819, George Leigh presented a Petition to His Majesty the King, George III claiming he was entitled to the Barony of Stoneleigh. The petition went to the House of Lords in 1828. There was not just a wealthy estate at stake, but a title, too.

One hundred guineas reward.

Whereas, in or about the year 1813, under the specious pretence of rebuilding the south wall of Stoneley parish church, in the county of Warwick, (which was not then considered to need repair so much as the north wall,) a certain part, enough to answer the purpose designed, was taken down; and a monument which was thereon affixed.....was removed away, and has never since been replaced in the said church. Now, whosoever will give information of the inscription which was inscribed on the aforesaid monument, and verify the same to be correct....shall receive a reward of one hundred guineas immediately on furnishing the particulars hereby required to William Corbett, esquire, solicitor, No. 9, Bloomsbury Square, London.

To cut a very long story short, the new claimant suggested that a monument which revealed the true ancestors of the family had been removed from the church and used, broken up, as ballast at the base of the bridge being built over the Avon. Obviously, it was said, workmen may have read what was written on this monument, and therefore such workmen had to be got rid of, by poison, physical attack, or 'accident' by which they fell whilst building the bridge, and so on. Both local and national newspapers were full of it. The 'new' Leighs were not just interlopers, but murderers.

This may all seem more suited to a Gothic novel than to a work by Eliot! And no matter how sensational this was, it had its roots early in the century, before George Eliot was even born. How, then, can it have any relevance in suggesting an inspiration for the Transome Court plot in *Felix Holt*?

We need to fast forward to 1849. A report in the *Coventry Herald* on 5 April that year gave details of the history of the case, enumerating all the stages of the 'fine sight of lawsuits' as Eliot put it. It spoke of George Leigh's claim and its rebuttal by the House of Lords. It continues 'and so things went on until the year 1845 when a new claimant started up in the person of James Leigh, and some thirty or forty persons broke into the Abbey and took forcible possession of it, for which they were indicted and convicted at the winter assizes of that year; some were sentenced to two years' imprisonment, others to eighteen months.'

At this time in 1849 Eliot was living in Foleshill in Coventry, looking after her father, who was to die on 30 May that year. The *Coventry Herald* was of course owned and edited by her friend Charles Bray, and she herself was a regular contributor to the newspaper and had lived in Coventry since 1840. In the edition of the *Coventry Herald* referred to – 5 April 1849 – nearly three out of its total of four pages are taken up with the trial which followed the assault upon the Abbey. We are talking ‘big news’. And for one who would later write about an incredibly complex inheritance situation, in her novel of 1865-6, *Felix Holt*, this story must surely have held interest. This was the conclusion to the ‘fine sight of lawsuits’ that had lasted for decades. The Leigh claimant, when asked to be quiet in court, had shouted ‘I have been quiet for thirty years!’

Novelists are very patient: they use material sometimes years after it has first been stored in the memory. Eliot’s reading was comprehensive and her research meticulous. Her letters and journals of 1865-6 reveal not only such works as Fawcett’s ‘Economic Conditions of the Working Classes’ and Mills’ ‘Liberty’ but also a series of requests for legal and political information from Frederic Harrison and from John Blackwood. Writing to Blackwood on 27 April 1866 she says ‘I took a great deal of pains to get a true idea of the period’ (ie surrounding the Reform Bill) and goes on ‘My own recollections of it are childish [...] I went through *The Times* of 1832-3 at the British Museum”.

And this is where I believe that despite, there being many other real-life entail stories which Eliot may have known about, it is the Leigh Peerage’s cross-over with political unrest which emerges and is utilized in *Felix Holt*. The defending solicitor in the above case of the assault upon the Abbey was a Leamington man called Charles Griffin. He was a Chartist and a Radical, and one who was interested in damaging the reputation of those in power wherever he could. Although he lost his case, and those who attacked the Abbey were imprisoned, in 1848 – year of revolutions! – he rather recklessly decided to publish a book, called *Stoneleigh Abbey thirty four years ago*, which resurrected all the old claims, and in particular asserted that murders had taken place, in which the current Lord Leigh was complicit. Unsurprisingly, Lord Leigh’s patience was now exhausted, and he took Griffin to court for libel.

So, in 1849, all the old dirt was dished up again. The predictable outcome was a verdict of Guilty upon Charles Griffin, who was fined £500 and sentenced to two years hard labour. Hence the three page article in Bray’s *Coventry Herald* – for which George Eliot, or the young Mary Ann Evans, wrote – and there were similarly lengthy and detailed accounts in newspapers up and down the land.

This is a story of greed, of land, of money, of status, and it combined scurrilous detail with the suborning of many of the labouring classes, who were plied with drink or cash by Griffin to blacken the name of the upper classes. One could say that he ‘treated’ them, like the election agents in *Felix Holt*. To a reader such as George Eliot, it must have been sound evidence of the frailty of man, his corruptibility, and of the collision between classes in the English social system.

By mid-century, then, we have a sensational case on the doorstep. It has rumbled on for decades, and the lawyers have got rich. Eliot must have been aware of it, owing to her connection with the Brays, the Sibrees, and the *Coventry Herald*. In another edition of the same newspaper there appeared a report of a tenants’ dinner celebrating the birth of a son and heir to Lord Guernsey of Packington. Taking the chair on the occasion was Isaac Evans. Immediately below this report is a brief ‘appeal to the benevolent on behalf of the family of Mr Griffin’. It is beguiling to speculate whether George Eliot remarked the proximity

of the two pieces. I mentioned the Bromley Davenport family of Baginton earlier, a family connected with Robert Evans's employment history. Eliot knew Baginton well and was a regular visitor to her half-sister Fanny, who had married a Mr Houghton there. The village of Baginton is only a mile and a half from Stoneleigh – about the distance, one might say for the benefit of Warwickshire readers, from Griff to Collycroft! The village boundary was the deer park entrance to Stoneleigh Abbey, a pleasant walk. Fanny and Marian were quite close until the liaison with George Henry Lewes, at which point Fanny, like Isaac, cut off communications. 'It is too much to hope that no member of her own family will figure in it', Fanny wrote to Isaac when *Felix Holt* was published, revealing that she knew how much the writer liked to draw on what she knew, however much she denied it. Thus the question of whether Stoneleigh was at too great a geographical distance for Eliot to be familiar with it can be laid to rest.

But there is a closer relationship still between the Leigh Peerage Case and George Eliot. I believe that she was much more closely interested in the family's story than merely as a reader of newspapers and as a Warwickshire person.

Students of the nineteenth century will be familiar with the writer Thornton Leigh Hunt, the first editor of the British daily broadsheet newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, and co-founder of *The Leader* with George Henry Lewes. Hunt became the lover of Agnes, Lewes's wife, and father of some of her children. Thornton's father, usually simply known as the poet Leigh Hunt, was actually called James Henry Leigh Hunt. Why? His father Isaac Hunt had been employed by James Brydges, 3rd Duke of Chandos, as tutor to his nephew, James Henry Leigh. When Isaac had a child of his own he named him after his pupil – James Henry Leigh Hunt. And this is the very same James Henry Leigh who was at the centre of the Leigh lawsuits, after having inherited the Stoneleigh estate in 1813.

Further, James Henry Leigh had a son, Chandos, his Christian name being a deliberate echo of his ducal heritage. Chandos was created Lord Leigh by Queen Victoria in 1839, thus reviving the contentious Leigh peerage. And it was Chandos who stood accused with his parents of all the skulduggery which took place at Stoneleigh – the destruction of monuments, the murders of workmen at the Avon Bridge – and Chandos who took Charles Griffin to court for libel. Chandos, a close friend of Byron (what would Felix Holt have said?) and a member of the Holland House set of poets and thinkers, was well acquainted with Leigh Hunt, who was a member of the same circle and had been named after Chandos's own father. Chandos in fact lent the serially-indebted Leigh Hunt money on more than one occasion, attempting to keep him out of debtors' prison. Just a year after the conclusion of the trial, in 1850, Chandos died, apparently worn down by decades of stressful lawsuits.

Now, given the friendship between Thornton Leigh Hunt and the Leweses, can we really imagine that, when Eliot was writing *Felix Holt*, there were not conversations in the Lewes household about Thornton's father's namesake at the centre of the Leigh Peerage Case?

What, then, can one conclude about the 'fine sight of lawsuits' at Stoneleigh being on Eliot's mind as she gathered material for *Felix Holt*? And to what extent was she familiar with the area itself? In those opening descriptions of the approach taken by the coachman to Transome Court one can discern many similarities to the road between Coventry and Stoneleigh Abbey; the road from Baginton, a village which Eliot knew well through family connections, meets the Abbey's deer park close by. Geographically, there is a strong case for Transome Court to be Stoneleigh Abbey, and for Little Treby to be Stoneleigh village.

In Chapter One, the description of Transome Court itself bears a strong resemblance to Stoneleigh Abbey, its approach, its architecture and its furnishings.

The Leigh Peerage Case with its labyrinthine inheritance detail provided yards of newsprint over many decades, with its emphasis on possession, family, land, corruption and greed.

The sensational case brought by the Chartist agitator Griffin would surely have interested Eliot; its extensive coverage in the *Coventry Herald* at the time she was contributing to it suggests her familiarity with it. In creating the character of Felix Holt she would reject the methods of those Griffin defended, 'a drunken howling mob, whose public action must consist in breaking windows', as Felix scornfully describes them in Chapter 46.

Finally, Thornton Leigh Hunt, whose father had been so dependent upon Chandos Leigh and who had been named after James Henry Leigh, was a friend of the Leweses. Might we not speculate that in drawing together the stories of class conflict and landed wealth which lie at the heart of *Felix Holt*, Eliot might have recalled the troubled experiences of the Stoneleigh family whom he would have known so well?

Notes

- 1 *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. A. G. Van den Broek (Everyman Paperback, 1997), Introduction, p. 9. Further references to the chapter and page of this edition will be given in the text.
- 2 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), Vol. IV, p. 216.