

DISCOVERING THE LOST STORY OF SION HOUSE – Part 2

The Familiar Tale

Sion House was once Tenby's finest house. Built in 1791 as a seaside home for William Routh, a Bristol printer, and his wife Catherine, Sion House was designed by John Nash who had retreated to Carmarthen to avoid his creditors. Nash established himself in Wales as a country house architect before returning to London and becoming the Prince Regent's favourite architect, designing Brighton Pavillion, London's Regent Street and Buckingham Palace. William Routh died in 1800 and Catherine in 1809. Sion house was then bought by Sir Henry Mannix, a magistrate from Cork who had settled in Pembrokeshire. Mannix died in 1822, leaving Sion House to his sons, William and Henry, the latter continuing to reside there. In 1839, following a successful legal challenge by William Richards, Mayor of Tenby, concerning the right of Henry Mannix the younger to use a carriageway to the house, Mannix challenged Richards to a duel. Richards was nearly killed in this, one of the last duels in Britain.

This, in summary, is the familiar story of Sion House. In part 1 I have described how Stella Pedersen, one of the descendants of William Routh's nephew had uncovered the extraordinary tale of the competition between Sir Henry Mannix and Jacob Richards of Tenby to purchase the house upon the death of William's widow, Catherine. This competition was to lead to a feud in which the sons of the adversaries fought a duel in which young Richards was seriously injured. However, questions remain as to why the executor of Catherine's estate, John Willy, a Haverfordwest solicitor, preferred Mannix to Richards as a purchaser, what was the background to the problems with the title which delayed the sale to Richards and what happened to the proceeds of the sale.

What happened to the Trust?

It can be argued that the proceeds of the sale of Sion House were not strictly part of Catherine Routh's estate because they were in trust. Catherine was the beneficiary of a trust into which William Routh put all of his property before they married. It may have been no more than a form of marriage settlement but it seems odd that William put his property out of both his and Catherine's reach, unless he expected some claim against them. It is also of interest that the transfer was in the

form of "lease and release". The process of lease and release was devised in the seventeenth century as a means of effecting a sale of property in secret (the vendor gave the purchaser a one year lease for a peppercorn and followed it up with a release of the freehold interest for a consideration – since neither transaction was of itself deemed to constitute a conveyance of the freehold no-one had to be told about the transfer). However, by the late eighteenth century and until 1845 when property laws were modernised, lease and release was the most common form of conveyance, simply because it was cheap and easy; but it did have the effect of hiding the ownership of property.

The second question is just what was in this trust at the time of Catherine's death? The Rouths appear at certain times to have been considerable landowners but at the time of Catherine's death, the controversy over the sale of Sion House reported above appears to have related purely to the house and associated properties. Stella Pedersen found evidence that Catherine was financially pressed by 1805 – she had taken on the running of *Sarah Farley's Bristol Journal* on the death of her husband and by 1805 her representatives were referring to “a large sum immediately to be made up for Government Duties”; the *Journal* was sold a year later. But even if Catherine were not able to utilise the capital tied up in a trust, if it held a lot of property there should have been a substantial income from it. How real was the trust? What did it actually hold? Could it merely have been a device for putting property temporarily "out of sight"?



Sion House from the north - Charles Norris c 1820

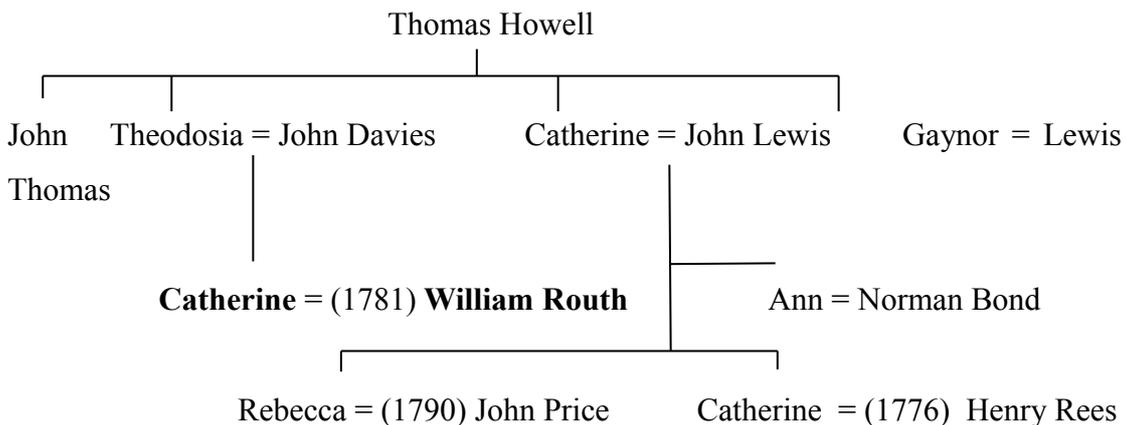
Who were the Rouths?

Catherine Routh was Carmarthen born, the daughter of the Reverend John Davies and Theodosia Howell. Theodosia was the daughter of Thomas Howell who was of the Howell family that made its fortune in sugar in the Caribbean, buying Prinknash Park in Gloucestershire in 1776. Catherine lived and, no doubt, met

William Routh in Bristol - the great mercantile centre.

In 1776 Thomas Howell's son and heir, The Reverend John Howell, died, leaving his inheritance to his sisters, Theodosia, Gaynor and Catherine. John Howell's executor was Michael Hodgson, barrister of the Inner Temple who was also Catherine's trustee; in addition, Hodgson's family later provided the witnesses to Catherine's will. Any search of the archives throws up the name of Michael Hodgson as having been involved in many complex financial and property transactions, and in the associated litigation.

One of the keys to unravelling this tale was the discovery of Catherine Routh's interest in a loan to Sir John Borlase Warren and Michael Hodgson's role in this. Warren was one of the grandees of the period, Member of Parliament for Great Marlow, Ambassador Extraordinary to St Petersburg and, as an Admiral, Commander-in-Chief of the North American Station. Most of his property was in and around Little Marlow in Buckinghamshire and, although he was wealthy, he was not sufficiently wealthy to maintain his very high profile position and so fell deeply into debt. Warren mortgaged the property and it was sold to repay the debts on his marriage in 1780. John Howell's loan to Warren of £12,000 was part of this debt; Catherine's share would have been one third. Since this was, no doubt, just one of many transactions, Catherine was obviously a rich woman.



William Routh, on the other hand, was a self-made man. The eldest son of a Yorkshireman, John Routh, who had travelled with his young family to Bristol, William Routh was born in York in 1739. He had four brothers, one, Richard, becoming Chief Justice of Newfoundland. His brother James Robinson Routh had nine children and became a cabinet maker. It was two of his family, Joseph and

Elizabeth, who became the residual legatees of Catherine Routh. In 1811 young Joseph appears to have set himself up in business as a printer using money lent to him by Jacob Richards of Tenby in anticipation of the purchase of Sion House (after Richards failed in the purchase he reclaimed the money from Joseph and at least part was repaid). In 1815, Joseph married in some style but by the end of the decade, was living in London in reduced circumstances.

William became a printer and was involved in a wide range of entrepreneurial ventures, including timber, property, coal-mining and warehouses. However, his main interest appears to have been in *Sarah Farley's Bristol Journal*, which, as the *Bristol Journal*, he had bought jointly with his brother George and with Charles Nelson in 1775. He also, presumably after establishing a home in Tenby, bought a half share in the Bristol/Tenby packet vessel, *Two Friends*. The full story of the Routh family is contained in Stella Pedersen's book, *More About Maria's Family*.

William Oliver – who did own Sion House?

In April 1784, William Routh obtained from “William Oliver formerly of Wotton Underedge, Co. Gloucester, but now of Bristol, gent.” under lease and release for £320 and an annuity of £100:

- messuages and lands called Grove Demesne, lands called Oxiands, Mileford, Castles and Sentences, messuages and lands called Chappel Hill, Templeton (lands in), cottages and gardens including Old Walls, Cold Blow House, Mountain Side, Petersfinger, Pitch, Rosaside, messuages or tenements called Narberth Mountain and Molleston Back, lime kilns and quarries, tenements called Parrotts Walls, Newcastle, Longstone, Pensoed and Spring Garden, all in the parish of Ludchurch, tenements called Dinnaston, Middlehill, Martin Hill, the New Inn, Dinnaston Mountain Cam Mill, Islands, Ducks pool and Loveston, parish of Loveston, the demesne called Merrixon, tenements called Welch Gate, Camomile Back, New House, Stagger's Hill, Hammonsford Bottom, lands called Row Park, Wells head, the Croft, Kilsaice, Closes and Hill, Hodge Moor, Upper Eighteen Acres, and Little Kiln Park, the tithes of the rectory of Amroth, parish of Amroth, a messuage in Tenby, messuages called Cilvachwennith and Nantagof Issa, parish of Landekeven, messuages and premises called Trenikol, parishes of Landeloy and Lanrythen; a meadow called Pembroke Meadow; lands called Queens Ditch and Doctors Close, a storehouse, etc., parish of St. Mary, Haverfordwest; messuages and lands called Broad Meadow and Jordans Close parish of St. Martin, Haverfordwest; a colliery called Merrixon; messuages called Parke and Talvan, and cottages, parish of Langan, of Carmarthen.

This appears to be a very substantial part if not the whole of the inheritance of the Poyer family of Grove, near Narberth, including coal mines, and worth a great deal more than the sum paid, even in those days.

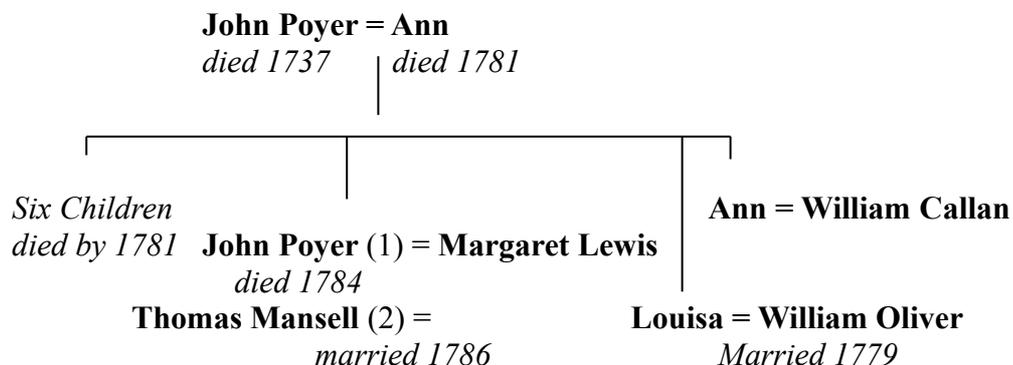
It also includes the “messuage in Tenby” which was to become the site of Sion House. Yet in the burgess records of Tenby for the last decade of the eighteenth

century, Sion House is shown in the occupation of William Routh but the ownership of the land is shown to be “late of Mr William Oliver”. The lease and release mechanism did not require Routh and Oliver to tell anyone about the transfer of title but what did they have to gain by, in effect, hiding the ownership of Sion House? Furthermore, it is only because we have (in Tenby Museum) the burgess records that we know that the ownership of Sion House was not declared. Presumably the ownership of the other property listed was similarly suppressed.

In 1799 the transaction was reversed and the property returned to Oliver – all that is but “*the premises situated in the parishes of St Mary and St Margaret, Haverfordwest*”. The rates records for 1800 are the first which show William Routh as being the owner of Sion House.

The Poyers of Grove and the case in Chancery

The Poyers of Grove, in Lampeter Velfrey, were amongst the old families of Pembrokeshire. The then head of the family, John Poyer had died in 1737 leaving the administration of his estate to his wife Ann, who neglected this charge and herself died intestate in 1781. The eldest son, Daniel had died in 1756 without leaving a wife or legitimate issue and the second son, John, had died in 1784, leaving a wife, Margaret neé Lewis. There had been a total of nine children born to John and Ann but only two who were alive by this stage, Anne and Louisa. Anne was married to William Callen and Louisa had married William Oliver in 1779, the William Oliver who, in 1784 sold the Poyer inheritance to William Routh.



So in 1784 the affairs of the family were in a state of confusion which went back nearly 50 years. There were three surviving claimants on the estate of the older

John Poyer, Margaret, the widow of his son John, and his daughters, Louisa Oliver and Anne Callan, the latter acting (as was the practice in those days) through their husbands.

Margaret Poyer remarried in 1786 – Thomas Mansell, a surgeon – and a dispute broke out between Mansell, acting on behalf of his wife, and Callen and Oliver, acting on behalf of their wives, concerning the distribution of the estate. By the end of 1787 the case had gone to Chancery, the court concerned with wills and similar disputes. This was often a long drawn out process but this case was devolved to a local court and resolved the following year. It appears that Thomas and Margaret Mansell won the right to the bulk of the property but they were required to assign the administration of the valuable collieries at Coedrath (Stepaside and Saundersfoot) held on lease by John Poyer, to Callen and Oliver. However, Louisa Oliver died in 1792 and William Callen in 1793 so the Mansells actually assigned the property to Anne Callen. It would certainly seem that the lease on this colliery was part of the parcel that Oliver had “sold” to Routh since in 1796 William Routh accepted £597.14.6d from Anne Callen in respect of compensation for investments that he had made in it.

An interesting twist to this tale is that although the court appears to have reversed the questionable land deal (William Routh was brought before it and was party to many of the "unscrambling" transactions) the land upon which Sion House was built remained with Routh. Was this the intention of the court or did Routh manage to hang on to it unseen?

All of the above suggests that William and Catherine Routh were conspiring with Oliver to hide the ownership of a substantial part of the Poyer estate with the intent of ensuring that Louisa Oliver and her sister retained a greater share of the whole than they were strictly entitled to? Since the site of Sion House was part of this estate, the Mansells or Callans might well consider that they should have owned this land - was this the "problem with the title" to which Willy referred in his dealing with Richards? Additional support for this hypothesis is that the ownership of the cottages at No Acre, on the same plot as Sion House, was still unresolved 15 years after Catherine Routh's death.

The threat to John Willey

Those who have stuck with the story so far may recall that one of the unsolved

mysteries of the Sion House sale by John Willey, the Haverfordwest lawyer and executor of Catherine Routh, was why he preferred Sir Henry Mannix as a purchaser to Jacob Richards, although the latter may have been thought to have had a stronger claim.

The Willey family were from Lampeter Velfrey and it is quite likely that they had been aware of the Poyer dispute; indeed, it is quite possible that they had advised one of the parties. Mannix was a lawyer and moved amongst the Pembrokeshire gentry, it is certain that he would have known the story. Did Mannix use his knowledge of the queries concerning the title as a means of putting pressure on Willey? If Willey or his family had set up this transaction, did that give Mannix an even more powerful hold over Willey, the threat of exposure? We know that Mannix would not have hesitated if that had suited his purpose.

Questions

Even if the above goes some way to answering some of the outstanding questions surrounding Sion House, it does not answer them all. Henry Mannix did eventually buy the property but the purchase price does not appear to have gone to Joseph and Elizabeth Routh; did it go to the "heirs-at-law", or even to the Callens? Catherine Routh appears before her marriage to have been a wealthy woman but we know that she was short of cash by the early nineteenth century. Was her wealth absorbed by the various, possibly overadventurous ventures of her husband or was it hidden in trusts - in which case, what happened to it?

Sion House was probably the first grand house built following the decline of Tenby and thus contributed to the emergence of Tenby during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a desirable resort. Perhaps the most intriguing question is, could Tenby's development as a fair and fashionable resort have been in part the side effect of a questionable series of property deals?