

# The Life of Elizabeth Holmes (née Emra)

1804 to 1843

## A Country Parson's Daughter

Elizabeth Emra, or 'Little Elizabeth', was the author of "Scenes in our Parish" the first part of which was published in 1830. Her father was [Rev John Emra](#), vicar at St George Church from 1809-1842. Later editions of the book have an additional chapter, written by Elizabeth's sister Lucy, and first published as a separate book telling her life story.

Elizabeth's oldest sister, Martha, also published a book, in 1840, 'Recollections of Childhood or Sally the faithful nurse'. As with her sister's book she was careful not to mention the names of people then living or the names of places where they lived; she also used a pseudonym 'Primogenita' - reflecting the fact that she was the oldest child. Martha's book describes the life of the family as her father served at different churches as Curate and then in St George as vicar.

From her sisters' books and various official records we have put together much of her life story. Elizabeth was born on 20th November 1804 in Bristol, when her father was Curate at St Paul's; as described above she was part a large family. After the move to St George Elizabeth lived with her parents in the Vicarage until she married.

Elizabeth's baptism was recorded by her father on 17th October 1815, at the same time as her two sisters who had also been born while the family was living in Bristol; John Emra added a note to the register - "Memo: These my three Daughters, namely Lucy born 19th September 1799, Sarah-Grey born 21st May 1802, and Elizabeth born 20th November 1804 were privately baptized in their infancy, but through inadvertence their Baptisms were not at that time registered"

Elizabeth survived contracting smallpox but otherwise appears to have had a happy and healthy childhood. As she grew up she increasingly involved herself with trying to help the poor of the Parish.

Elizabeth's youngest sibling, her brother, Henry, died in a boating accident at Oxford in 1829, aged 18, and this is what she refers to at the beginning and end of the chapter entitled 'The Strawberry Feast', which was written exactly a year later. It appears that he drowned while 'amusing himself on a skiff upon the river Isis, near Worcester college [Oxford], of which he had recently entered as a member'.

Elizabeth married the artist Marcus Henry Holmes on 12th July 1833. Marcus had been born in Bristol in 1803, he was educated at Bristol Grammar School and then became a student at the Royal Academy.

After their marriage Elizabeth and Marcus lived in 'Homefield Cottage' next to the Church and the vicarage; "the shadow of my father's trees Fall on my husband's home". Her first child, a girl, was born on 6th July 1834. One of Elizabeth's children died as an infant, but by the time of the 1841 census she and Marcus were living at Homfield with five children, Ann (aged 6), Henry (5), Agnes (3), John (2) & Herbert (5 months).

Elizabeth's mother had died on 24th April 1837 and this was followed by the death of her father, who was still serving as Vicar of St George after 33 years, at the age of 73 on 19th September 1842. Following her father's death, Elizabeth and the family no longer had access to the vicarage and its garden next to their house - Elizabeth wrote a poem 'On Laying Aside My Latch Key of the Vicarage Garden'. In December 1842, Elizabeth and her family (now 6 children, Marion was born earlier that year) moved to Westbury Hill (Redland/Westbury-on-Trym), 'within a short walk of her sisters' new residence'.

Within a year of the move, on 10th October 1843, Elizabeth died just a few days after the birth of her own 'little Elizabeth' her eighth child. Elizabeth was laid to rest 'in her father's tomb, beside her loving mother, and the young brother who had found his early sepulchre there so many years before'.

Elizabeth's husband, Marcus Holmes, continued to live in Westbury with their children and is recorded there with his four daughters and youngest son in the 1851 census. Marcus died in January 1854, at Minehead (though his will written in September 1853 has his residence as Westbury). After their father's death the youngest children continued to live in Westbury with Elizabeth's sisters.

Scenes in our Parish gives a fascinating insight into life and death (mostly death) in the 1830s in St George. It describes many of those who lived in the Parish who Elizabeth visited and tried to help and comfort in her role as the Parson's daughter.

Elizabeth wrote the book in two parts with the first chapter dated 1829 and the last chapter describing the Bristol Riots of 30<sup>th</sup> October 1831 as seen from St George. Her youngest brother died when Elizabeth was still a child and I assume this is what she refers to at the beginning and end of the chapter entitled 'The Strawberry Feast'. It appears that he may have drowned on the day of the feast.

The following pages have some quotes from the book which was published in both England and America.

The 1833 American version of the book is also now available on Google books via this link:

<http://tinyurl.com/emra1833>

## ***Scenes in our Parish by a Country Parson's Daughter***

### ***First Published in 1830 & 1832***

“the barren and quarried hill, with its yellow spots of gorse and broom, and its purple shade of heath, raising itself above the dark heaps of dross on our own side; and then the river, the beautiful, soft flowing river that we have all loved so well, laving as kindly our rough and barren banks, and holding its pure mirror to us, as truly as to the embellished and fertile scenery on the other side; and how clearly we saw every reversed image of the trees in the little copse-wood beyond...”

[Dictionary definition of dross: 'The scum thrown off from metals in smelting']

### ***The Crew's Hold 1831***

Elizabeth is speaking to 'Old Thomas' about 'Crews Hold' and asks if he can remember how the sailors used to come up here to hide from the pressgang.

“the people, for the most part, liked the sailors, and harboured them, and used the officers of the pressgang very ill.”

Elizabeth mentions that she has heard about taking them down the coal pits. Old Thomas confirms that they did, he goes on:

“I'll tell ye something worse than that they did once, they took the King's officers, and carried them blindfold down to the copper furnace. They tore down the door, and made them look down into the furnace, and threatened to throw them in if they ever came that way again.”

On the name...

“in time to come, when a generation or two more have past, people will not know the meaning of the name given to this part of the parish – *The Crew's Hold* – for it has already degenerated into the unmeaning word *Screwshole*. It is a singularly wild and poor part, yet we feel now not the smallest fear; and indeed, I don't think there is anybody here now, that would hurt a child.”

Elizabeth describes a cottage near the river where she used to visit Henry and Sarah Curtis when she was young. She says the house and the area around it are now much altered.

“The precipitous bank, beyond it, where there used to grow gaze [???], and furze [gorse] and broom, is excavated into a very large stone quarry. There are noble masses of stone, displaying every variety of colour, from pale brown to deep red, and from cold neutral tint to bright purple.”

“they have discovered, that the whole hill side can afford stone, and soon I suppose it will be one huge quarry.

They have done worse than this.

They have built a steam-engine for raising coal on a spot, which we used to think quiet and pleasant; and where, until then we could gather woodbine and blue violets.”

Of the house she says:

“it was unlike all other houses that we had ever seen. It consisted but of one room on the ground floor, from whose corners a bed room, pantry, and the little sitting-room were partitioned off. There was a large flue in the middle of the ceiling, at which we used to gaze up in wonder; and I remember old Sarah’s trying to describe to us the apparatus which once belonged to it, and which was used, as far as I understand, for trying the qualities of ore.”

The house by the river must have been part of the old copper smelting works “The Cupolas”. The quarry is probably the area of Bull Lane and the steam-engine the one at the bottom of Troopers Hill Road.

Since Elizabeth was born in 1804 and this is written in 1831, it would date the Engine house at around 1820. This fits with the maps since it is not shown in 1803 but is there in 1845.

## ***The Strawberry Feast 1830***

“once in every summer, we would make an excursion to the cottage of an old woman, to drink tea and to enjoy the particularly fine fruit, with which her hilly and sunny garden would supply us.”

“On the preceding evening, how anxiously we watched the sunset, and foretold fine weather, however it threatened rain, - or feared rain, however glowing and glorious the setting sun might be.”

“it was not till old Betty became too infirm to receive us, and the meeting was adjourned to the house below the hanging gardens, beside the river, that we found out all the pleasures of that evening. We could not ride there to be sure, but you know how lovely the walk is, down the fields on a summer’s evening and through that deep and stony lane.”

“The scene of our festivities was a large lofty room in an awkwardly built house, designed originally for the agent of a certain concern which failed as many other concerns have done; so that for years the extensive works connected with it have lain void...”

“the great house was let to a poor but very respectable family, who thankfully allowed the use of their large room on these occasions. It was a curious old place altogether; but its chief charm was the garden, built according to the taste of the times sixty years ago. Perhaps I should have said laid out, but there were so many flights of stone steps leading through brick arches, to broad straight walks one above another; and so many square summer-houses with stonewalls and square doors and windows, that your first thought was of the buildings; and stiff and formal enough it must have looked when it was first planned. But now that the brick arches were falling into decay, and ornamented with faithful wall-flower, and wreathed and half covered with ivy; ... it had become interesting from its appearance of antiquity.”

“For when we reached the top of the last flight of tottering steps, we found ourselves in a wilderness, where, up the steep side of the hill, grew untrimmed bushes of red and white roses, tangled with wild bramble, and over topped by stately old pear trees.”

“many a frock was torn, and many a tumble we met with, before we reached the arched summer house, with the bath in the middle, at the very top of the hill. And oh! what a view we had then. The steep and singular garden up which we had just climbed; the old buildings and tall chimneys clustered together so very far below us; the barren and quarried hill, with its yellow spots of gorse and broom, and its purple shade of heath,.....