

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.

Scenes in our Parish, written under the pseudonym of 'A Country Parsons Daughter' describes life in the St George area of Bristol in the 1830s.

A Bristol Civic Society Blue Plaque to commemorate Elizabeth Holmes (née Emra) was unveiled by the Lord Mayor of Bristol on 14th January 2026.

The plaque can be seen in Harveys Lane BS5 8HP, which runs between the site of the now demolished Vicarage and the site of Elizabeth's home, after her marriage, at Homefield.

Later editions of Scenes in our Parish have an additional chapter, written by one of Elizabeth's sisters and first published as a separate book telling her life story.

The memoir is often attributed to Lucy Emra, but it was in fact written by Elizabeth's oldest sister, Martha, who was living at Canterbury at that time.

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 Elizabeth's life story.

Birth and Early Life

Elizabeth was born on 20th November 1804 in Bristol, when her father was Curate at St Paul's church. A few months later the family moved to Yatton when her father became curate there. The move to St George (still then outside the City of Bristol) was in 1809 when Rev John Emra was appointed as the Vicar at St George church and the family moved to the Vicarage next to the church.



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"

Young 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'.

Marriage & Life at Homefield

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.

Marcus Holmes's father was also an artist, George Holmes. George and his wife were Irish, they had moved to Bristol in 1802. Marcus's mother died shortly after his birth, but his father later remarried, to a Miss Anstey of Devizes and had three more children.

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"*.

At Homefield Cottage (shown as 'Homefield House on early Ordnance Survey maps) the Holmes family were tenants of the Phillips family who lived at Cloudshill House nearby.

The 'cottage' was obviously a fairly substantial house; sales details from 1847 describe the property as:

"pleasantly situated, and adjoining the Land or Garden of St George's Vicarage, and known for several years past as Homefield-Cottage, in the tenure of Mr Marcus H. Holmes, but at present of Mr Stone, of Summer-hill-House, containing two parlours, two kitchens, a pantry, four bed-rooms, and a closet, with an underground cellar and out offices. The above premises are also well supplied with both sorts of water, and have a Garden attached, well stocked with fine fruit trees"

Elizabeth's first child, a girl, was born on 6th July 1834. One of Elizabeth's children died as an infant – John who lived only 2 days, he was baptised on 27th August 1838 and buried the next day. By the time of the 1841 census Elizabeth and Marcus were living at Homfield with five children, Ann (aged 6), Henry (5), Agnes (3), John Emra (2) & Herbert (5 months).

The Move to Westbury

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 her growing 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.

Read more about the lives of Holmes family:–

troopers-hill.org.uk/history/HolmesFamily.pdf

Scenes in our Parish by a Country Parson's Daughter

First Published in 1830 & 1832

Scenes in our Parish gives a fascinating insight into life and 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 30th October 1831 as seen from St George.

There is a date at the end of most chapters to show when it was written. While St George is not mentioned, 'Crew's Hold' clearly refers to Crew's Hole and some other locations can be identified from the text

The dates given also allow occasional links to actual events; for example the chapter "Laying the foundation stone" is dated 17 April 1830 and the description (and the distance Elizabeth walks) corresponds with newspaper reports on the laying of the foundation stone of Christ Church in Downend on Thursday 15th April 1830 after a procession from the Church of St James in Mangotsfield. So it seems certain that Elizabeth was describing real people and real events. The lack of place names, and indeed the use of a pseudonym, was probably to avoid her friends & neighbours being identified.

Editions were published in both Britain and the United States from 1832 onwards containing both parts.

Below are quotes from two of the chapters that most relate to Troopers Hill and Crews Hole.

Elizabeth also had some other works published; all her published works are listed at the end of this document.

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, 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...”

Listing of Elizabeth Emra's Published Works

(links are to online copies)

1830 - [Scenes in our Parish First Series](#)

1830 - [The Snowdrop's Call](#) (Poem in For-Get-Me-Not, literary annual)

1832 - [Scenes in our Parish Second Series](#)

1832 - Scenes in our Parish First & Second Series (together in one book)

1833 - [Scenes in our Parish, New York, USA edition](#), republished in 1851, [1852](#), 1855 & [1860](#) with an edited version of a 'Sister's Record')

1834 – Scenes in our Parish, Philadelphia edition

1836 - [A Mother's Offering to the younger members of the Church of England](#)

1838 - Realities of Life (published as Old Hetty and other Realities of Life in 1842 with additional material)

1844 – Some of Elizabeth's works were included in '[A Sister's Record, or, Memoir of Mrs. Marcus H Holmes](#)' written by Martha, these included some short verses and some longer poems in the text as well as a short story and other poems by Elizabeth in a separate section.

Longer poems in the text of 'A Sisters Record':

- The Power of Nature (p9)
- The Chevalier Bayard and His Mother (p10)
- A Vision Raised by the Notes of a Musical Snuff Box
- We All Do Fade as a Leaf (p16)
- An Invitation to the Birds That I Feed at My Parlour Window (p41)
- On Laying Aside My Latch Key of the Vicarage Garden (p61)

Hope & Disappointment (short story p79 to p131 of 'A Sister's Record')

Miscellaneous Pieces (p135 to p176 of 'A Sister's Record'):

- Men's Immortality
- Easter
- Hymn for All Saints' Day
- The Nurse's Story
- The Gallina Hen's Cry to Her Mate
- The Guerilla
- The Pirate to the Zenaida Dove
- Berkeley Castle
- Lines Occasioned by Seeing Chalon's Portrait of The Queen
- The Advent

- An Invitation
- Bossington Green, Selworthy
- King Charles's Child
- Birth Day Verses
- The Pilgrim's Invitation
- The Missionary's Blessing
- Communion Service
- The Guest Chamber
- Christ Received into the Ship
- Gen. XXXVIII. 16
- A Free Version of the Twenty-ninth Psalm
- A Prayer for My Child
- Thoughts on the Evening of My Child's Baptism
- A Child's Question
- A Daughter's Thoughts

1855 - Hark! To the Old Bells' Chime (poem published as sheet music, composer Rev W.H. Havergal)

['A remembrancer of old friends'](#) by Eliza Maria Dalton includes six works by Elizabeth which we believe to be otherwise unpublished. Eliza Maria was only 3 years younger than Elizabeth, so they may indeed have been friends.

These works are:

- A monument in Westbury Church, Gloucestershire..
- Lines occasioned by reading the description of the cot purchased for the Royal Infant November 20th 1840
- Charles the 1st after many pious exhortations...
- A District Visitors Recollections in St Georges'
- The Carrier Pigeon to the ...
- The Heliotrope

The last of these works is dated September 1842.

*Friends of Troopers Hill
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