

Richard Barwell, Owner of Stansted House 1781 – 1804

Maybe there has always been a time when some individuals receive financial rewards that have little relationship with their talents, experience or skills. In the eighteenth century the beneficiaries of such fortune were often associated with the East India Trading Company, originally formed in December 1600 to promote trade with the Indian subcontinent. Then, as now, such beneficence evoked jealousy and the call for greater regulation; then as now, some benefited from their accumulation before the ire of the envious could blacken their reputation. One such was Richard Barwell, the owner of Stansted House from 1781 until his death in 1804.

Richard Barwell was born into the East India Trading Company, the second son of his father's third marriage in Calcutta to Elizabeth Peirce in February 1739. That it was his father William's third marriage illustrates something of the risks associated with working in India; the prevalence of disease. His first wife had died aged twenty two eighteen months after their marriage in Calcutta. The death of his second wife, the widowed Ann Atkinson, closely followed that of their third child in 1738. His third wife, Elizabeth, was about 17 when she married in 1739 and produced ten children, five in Calcutta and five in Chertsey in Surrey.

William was discharged from the East India Company for administrative incompetence, apparently only venial venality, as he had enough wealth to buy Abbey House on the banks of the Thames and to secure election as a Director of the East India Company at its offices in London. Richard went to Westminster School in January 1750, aged eight and transferred to Christ's Hospital in about 1754 before returning to Calcutta as a 'writer', or junior clerk, to the East India Company in 1758.

This was a good time to return; Calcutta was the main town in the province of Bengal whose head, or 'naweb', Mir Jafar, was under the control of the East India Company's senior official, Robert Clive. Clive was referred to as a 'nabob' a slightly sarcastic play on 'naweb' and was the effective governor of Bengal. The trading interests of other European powers, principally the French and the Dutch, had been neutralised giving a monopoly for trade to the British. Robert Clive offered a clear example to junior officials of how trade could enrich personal fortune. Richard Barwell was a conscientious student and managed to increase both his wealth and reputation over the next decade and secure appointment in 1774 as one of four councillors on the supreme council of Bengal under the chairmanship of the recently appointed governor-general, Warren Hastings. Hastings and Barwell were the only members of the council with experience of India to which the British Government added General John Clavering, George Monson and Philip Francis.

Relationships within the Council were fraught; the three external members insisting that policies and procedures be adopted that would circumscribe the opportunities for personal gains whilst the two internal members argued for the defence of established practice as the most effective means of enhancing the Company's reputation. Richard Barwell, considerably younger than the others, did not ease the tensions by making romantic advances to one of General Clavering's daughters; an interest that so enraged the father that he and Richard Barwell fought what turned out to be a bloodless duel in 1775.

A year later, on Friday September 13 1776 in St. John's Church Calcutta, Richard, then aged thirty-four, married Elizabeth the twenty-two year old daughter of Robert Sanderson,

another official of the East India Company. The couple lived in grand style and Elizabeth gave birth to two children, Richard, baptised on January 13 1778 and Edward James who was baptised on February 8 1779. By then Elizabeth had died, presumably following complications during her delivery, and Richard determined to return to England which he did in February 1800. The rumours were that his wealth was considerable, estimated to be about £400,000 (equivalent to about £25 million at today's prices).

Back in England he followed the pathways of previous 'nabobs', buying his way into parliament through the purchase of a seat in Helston in Cornwall in March 1781 and subsequently in St Ives in April 1784 and then Winchelsea, one of the Cinque Ports, in June 1790. He was not an active politician and is not recorded as having spoken in the House of Commons from 1790. He was against reform of any sort; voting against proposals to enable religious non-conformists to take public office and against the abolition of the slave trade. In December 1796 he resigned his seat in Parliament, yet for reasons that are far from clear bought the controlling interest of the parliamentary seats in Winchelsea, that is the right to nominate candidates for election. He had already purchased a similar right in 1790 for the Cornish borough of Tregony, (between Truro and St. Austell). At the time there were 120 'freemen' in Tregony entitled to vote and Richard Barwell was advised that he could secure their support for his preferred candidate at a payment of £20 per voter. He also sought to reduce the number of freeholders by buying their property in the borough and then letting it to 'tenants at will'; occupants subject to the 'will' of Richard Barwell and who as tenants would not be entitled to vote in parliamentary elections. His agent in Cornwall working to implement Richard's wishes was one of his wife's four brothers, with the surname Coffin.

Five years earlier, on Friday 24 June 1785, Richard Barwell, aged forty-three, Member of Parliament for St. Ives and owner of Stansted House, (bought from the trustees of the estate of George Montague Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax, in 1781 for £102,500) married by special licence at Stansted, Catherine Coffin, *'a very pretty little Girl not 16, of American extraction'*. This description comes from a letter written a month after the celebration by Elizabeth Iremonger to her friend Mary Heber in Northamptonshire. Elizabeth's aunt was Sarah Fetherstonhaugh who lived at Uppark, and Elizabeth's letter continues *'Till a fortnight before this Event he kept a very Beautiful Mistress close to his Park, by whom he has several Children & till very lately He declared most strongly against Matrimony.'*

The mistress was probably Harriet Seaforth, recorded in the Westbourne Baptismal Register for October 30th 1783 as the mother of a 'baseborn', that is illegitimate, child named James Richard Barwell Seaforth. Elizabeth Iremonger's report of *'several Children'* is probably an exaggeration. It is reasonable to assume that Richard met his bride through her brothers and their friendship with Thomas and John Oldfield. The Oldfields were officers in the Marines and in the early 1780s had bought a cottage in Lumley Lane, Emsworth, which became Oldfield Lawn. The Oldfields had served in America during the War of Independence and John Oldfield's son, also called John, in a biography of his mother describes Catherine *'as a most beautiful American lady, sister of Sir Isaac Coffin and General Coffin, old friends of my father and uncle.'* The Oldfields benefited from the friendship as they enjoyed shooting parties in the Stansted estate as the guest of Mrs Barwell.

The marriage of Richard and Catherine was particularly fruitful and nine children were born, six boys and three girls, beginning with the birth of Edward Richard on November 20th 1786 and ending with that of Augustus Leycester in 1802. Richard may not have been altogether faithful to his wife. In the Westbourne Register for January 12th 1814, the baptism of a female called Louisa is recorded; the father's first name is 'Richard (Gent) Barwell' and the mother 'Rebecca Lynne'. Louisa must have been an adult at her baptism as the register gives her date of birth as May 22nd 1790, twenty-four years earlier. Her mother, Rebecca Lynne, was probably a female relative of John Lyne, one of Richard's tenants who farmed in both Stoughton and Up Marden and who in July 1804 was one of the witnesses to Richard Barwell's 'Last Will and Testament'.

Richard spent lavishly on re-modelling Stansted in the Italianate style, employing the architects Joseph Boromi and James Wyatt. He owned land in twelve parishes across Hampshire and Sussex, from Warblington to Bosham, Singleton to Prinsted, as well as

land in Cornwall and in the East and West Indies. The panegyric to his memory in St John's Church, Westbourne, refers to his *'benevolence'* and describes him as a man *'With an understanding strong and cultivated, and a mind open and honourable, were united other qualities rare and estimable.'* This is in stark contrast to the views of William Hickey as published in the second volume of his *'Memoirs'*; *'Mr Barwell made it his study to render himself obnoxious to persons of all ranks, shutting up gates and paths through the park that had, as an indulgence, been always open to the public; prevented the poor from providing themselves from a spring they had been used to frequent, in short doing everything illiberal and ill-natured. His very name from such conduct, soon was held in such detestation that men, women and children hissed and hooted at him as he passed in all his oriental status through the village'*.

William Hickey would have known Richard Barwell in Calcutta in the late 1770s, and visited him at Stansted soon after its purchase in 1781. Hickey was

himself somewhat of a libertine, spending money with consummate ease and by his own account a man with *'an amorous disposition'*. His *'Memoirs'* were written after he finally left India in 1808 based not on any contemporary accounts but his recollection, and must as such be treated with caution.



The real Richard Barwell lies somewhere between the memorial in Westbourne Church and the reflections of William Hickey. We know he was wealthy, that this wealth was not entirely the product of endeavour; we know he treated some of his tenants with arrogance and disregard, we know he had little time for incipient democracy other than how it might serve his own interests, and scant regard for Parliamentary institutions, at one time refusing to attend a House of Common hearing into Indian affairs. His legacy was the refurbishment of Stansted House, undertaken at great cost on his fortune and liability on his estate. Sadly that building no longer survives; it was destroyed by fire on the evening of Friday 3rd August 1900.

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