



The Stoneleigh Scandal

or “Bring Up the Bodies”

- a review of

the Leigh Peerage Case

Preface

It is more than 20 years since I moved to Stoneleigh and first became acquainted with the story of the “bodies under the bridge at Stoneleigh Abbey”, and since then I have heard the story retold by villagers, visitors, and the guides at the Abbey itself. Indeed, I participated as a guide in a so-called “Dark Deeds” tour there, though it presented the story in a way which invited the audience to make up their own minds about its veracity.

As a result, I became interested in aiming to distinguish between the facts and the myth which seemed to have grown up around them. Local lawyer David Vaughan took up the challenge, too, and in 2015 we presented a talk to the Stoneleigh History Society which aimed to give an outline of this complex case.

More than ten years have gone by since then, and sadly, David has passed away. His widow Jean subsequently gave me David’s research notes, which, typically of the man, revealed a tenacious and meticulous methodology – and a clear judgement. My aim in this brief paper is to summarise his findings as well as my own, and as such I am pleased to dedicate it to his memory.

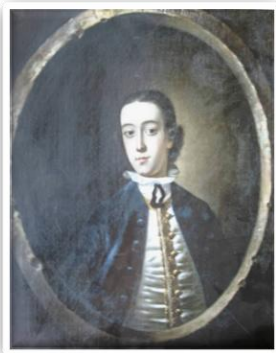
Sheila Woolf 2026

Chapter 1 -Introduction

What can be more appealing than a story of wrong and revenge, rivalry and murder, wilful deception and bribery? Throw in deliberate vandalism in a parish church, a rioting mob, poisoned pies and concealment of dead bodies; add in a cast list of lords and ladies, and a valuable country estate, and you have a tale which is worthy of a Netflix serial.

Such is the saga of the Stoneleigh Abbey succession. It stretches from the late seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, and echoes are still heard despite the Abbey and its vast estates being no longer in possession of the Leigh family, who passed them on to a Preservation Trust. In 2016 a book called “The Missing Monument Murders” – its title giving a clear indication of the writer’s view – was published by Australian academic Judy Stove. It is an exhaustive investigation, yet Ms Stove leaves the reader in no doubt that her verdict clearly rests with the Leigh family’s culpability, injustice served upon those who challenged them, and a cover-up on the part of the establishment and local people alike. The following pages will contain a reasonably brief attempt to adjudicate between the conspiracy theories and the facts as presented in legal papers, parish registers and newspaper accounts.

First, we must examine the bare bones (!) of the situation.



Edward, 5th Baron Leigh



Mary Leigh, his sister



James Henry Leigh



Chapter 2 The backstory

Warwickshire's Stoneleigh Abbey had been founded in the 12th century by Cistercian monks, who remained there until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. In 1561 the buildings and the enormous estates associated with them were purchased by a former Lord Mayor of London, Sir Thomas Leigh. He was a wealthy merchant who also owned property and land in many other English counties. At his death one of his sons, also called Thomas, inherited the Warwickshire lands, and another son, Rowland, inherited property in Gloucestershire.

For centuries the two branches of the family continued without major incident. The Warwickshire Leighs became ennobled in 1649, however, whilst the Gloucestershire Leighs remained wealthy gentry.

All this changed in the 18th century, when the 5th Lord Leigh, Edward, died without issue in 1786, leaving only an unmarried sister, Mary, to inherit for the term of her life. His Will had stated that his heir after Mary should be the “nearest male of [my] kindred and blood” – a standard legal expression but one which was to cause enormous trouble.

‘.....unto the first and nearest of my kindred, being male, and of my name and blood, that shall be living at the time of the determination of the several estates herein before limited and devised, and to the heirs of his body lawfully begotten, and for want of such issue, to my own right heirs for ever.’

Many were the “contenders” after the death of Mary in 1806, but the “nearest” was ultimately agreed- not without challenges from other Gloucestershire relatives, the most notable being the uncle of Jane Austen - to be a cousin, the Reverend Thomas Leigh, unmarried and elderly Rector of the village of Adlestrop in Gloucestershire. He would follow Mary in inheriting as a life interest, after which the heir would be his nephew and ward, James Henry Leigh, whose father James, Thomas' elder brother, had indeed been “the nearest ...” except that he had predeceased his cousin Edward! Already this looks complicated!

James Henry Leigh and his wife Julia Judith came to Stoneleigh, then, upon the death of Uncle Thomas in 1813, and one would presume that henceforth the Gloucestershire line, descended just as properly from the merchant Sir Thomas Leigh as the now-extinct Warwickshire line, would carry the dynastic line forward.

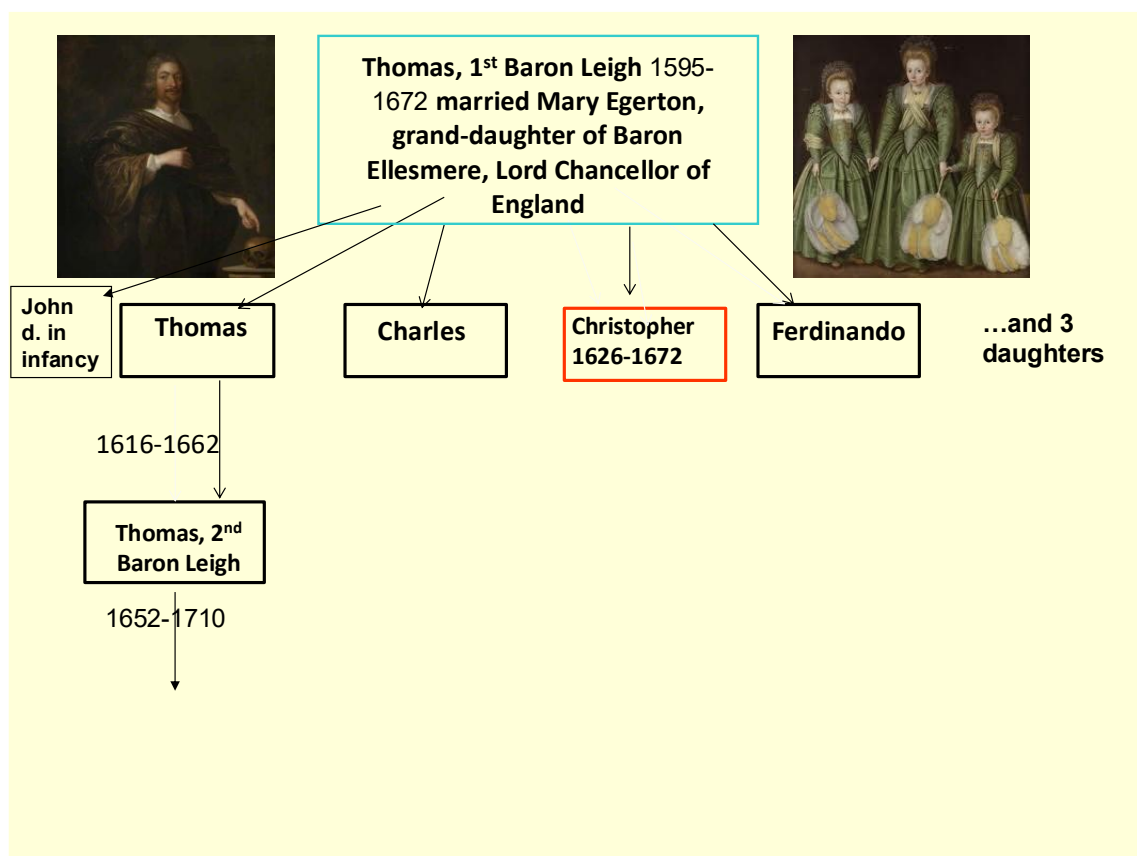
Matters did not work out so smoothly. Mary had made several labyrinthine Wills which themselves muddled the water, but in addition things took a surprising turn – a new claimant, John Smith Leigh from Lancashire, had come forward to challenge the Gloucestershire family, stating that he had a Warwickshire ancestor with a greater claim.

How did this work?

When one delves back into the 17th century history of the Leighs, one sees the aforementioned elevation to the peerage, in 1649, of a Sir Thomas Leigh, who had hosted King Charles I at Stoneleigh at the beginning of the Civil War. This Thomas, created by the King 1st Baron Leigh of Stoneleigh, had five sons and three daughters. The two eldest sons, John and Thomas, predeceased their father, the result being that the son of the second son, Thomas, became the 2nd Baron Leigh, when his grandfather, the 1st Baron died in 1671. The third son, Charles, inherited land in Bedfordshire, and had one daughter, who died young. The fourth and fifth sons, Christopher and Ferdinando, remained in Stoneleigh. Ferdinando also predeceased his father, dying unmarried, and Christopher died in 1672 leaving one son.

The Stoneleigh Baron Leighs, then, descended in a direct line until 1806 from the 1st Baron, via his grandson, Thomas the 2nd Baron.

So what of our new claimant, John Smith Leigh? After the line of Warwickshire barons seemed to have failed, he contended that he was in fact descended from them



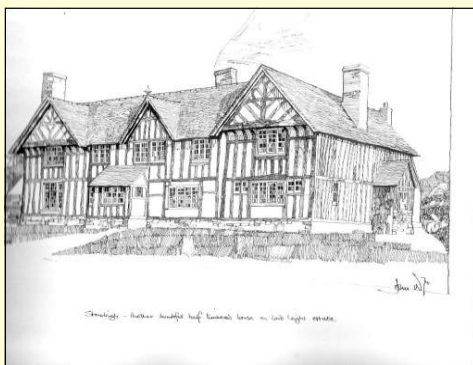
John had been born plain John Smith, which is not encouraging in terms of the Will of Edward, which had stated “of my name”. He claimed descent, however, through the female line, his great-grandmother having been the 2nd Lord Leigh’s youngest sister Jane. He had even, in 1802, obtained Royal Licence to use the surname Leigh in place of Smith. He issued proceedings in the Chancery division claiming that he was the first and nearest male kindred of Edward’s name and blood. His claim failed, unsurprisingly, as it did not meet the terms of the Will.

He was not the only Lancashire Leigh to put his name forward, however. In 1808, another, George, claimed that he was descended from Christopher’s son Roger, who had been born of an early marriage between Christopher and a Cheshire family. The plot thickened. It is now necessary to look a little at Christopher’s life.

Christopher Leigh

born at Stoneleigh,
baptised at Hamstall Ridware
married 13.10.1670
Lived at Manor Farm
died at Stoneleigh 1672
buried in family vault at Stoneleigh

Constance Clent
d.1697, **buried**
at Stoneleigh and left
legacies to Lord Leigh,
Charles Leigh,
her son Thomas and the
poor of Stoneleigh



Thomas Leigh
baptised 27 July 1672
(was less than 2 months old
when his father died
in September 1672). Died 1698

Chapter 4 Christopher and the case of the missing memorial

Christopher Leigh had probably been born in Stoneleigh in 1626, but his baptism is recorded on 30 September that year in Hamstall Ridware, another Leigh property in Staffordshire which was favoured by them in the 17th century. In his adult years, however, he was definitely in Stoneleigh as he lived at what is now known as Manor Farm, a large property befitting a member of the Leigh family, in the heart of the village. On 13 October 1670 he married, his bride being Constance Clent, who was aged 30, Christopher being 44. They had one son, another Thomas, born in 1672.

It might be thought that George, our 19th century claimant, then, was descended from Christopher's son, Thomas. Not so – Thomas died in 1698, still a young man, and though he was described in the registers as “of London, gentleman” was buried, as his parents had been before him, in Stoneleigh, in the vault beneath the parish church.

However, the claim at the heart of this story derived from the surprisingly mature age of Christopher upon marrying Constance Clent. Might this mean that he had been married before, and produced children from this earlier marriage? This was George Leigh's contention.

His claim rested on a supposed prior marriage between Christopher Leigh and Penelope Cotton, of Combermere Abbey in Cheshire. Attorneys were sent there in the early decades of the 19th century to examine family papers and parish registers, but they found no evidence of a marriage, supposed to have taken place in 1650, when Christopher would have been 24 and Penelope about 30. The date of the suggested marriage put forward by George was crucial here, because many parish registers were either incomplete or had been destroyed during the Civil War, a situation just as true in Stoneleigh. Penelope's supposed death in 1668 was two years before Christopher married Constance on 13th October 1670. Had a marriage taken place and the evidence lost? The claim was that it had, and that a son, Roger, had been born, from whom George was descended. If true, this line of descent would trump the Gloucestershire family, as it came from the Warwickshire one.

Proof was needed.

Let's look at the family tree of the Leighs of Lancashire. Who, really, was George Leigh? His father carried on business in Wigan as a tanner. George was apprenticed in his youth to a cotton manufacturer and in later life is believed to have carried on such a business of his own – he made a success of it, evidently, and retired comfortably. But obsessed with his belief that he was entitled to be the sixth Baron Leigh, he had effectively frittered his fortune on efforts to obtain evidence and prove his birthright.

George had come to know H K Causton, a London printer, who had taken an interest in the succession to the Stoneleigh and other estates. Causton lent George money on the assumption that George's claims to the peerage would succeed, and if so, he would recover the amount lent to George (over £1000). He therefore became exceedingly active on George's behalf.

In 1817 George raised the spectre of a monument to Christopher Leigh in the church at Stoneleigh having been removed, in order to cover up his line of descent and thus strengthen the position of the Gloucestershire line.

Why did he do this at this particular time?

The Reverend Thomas Leigh, incumbent at the abbey and heir after Mary, had died in June 1813, childless, at the age of 79. As has been stated, the estates descended to his nephew, James Henry Leigh, the first son of Thomas' elder brother James who had died in 1774, before Mary Leigh's death. The Gloucester branch of the family was now firmly in place.

But in September 1817, handbills appeared in Stoneleigh. Apparently, George had visited the village, putting up at The Swan Inn, claiming that he was entitled to the Stoneleigh and other estates because he was descended from Christopher Leigh, the fourth son of the first Baron Leigh by Christopher's first wife, a Miss Cotton, a daughter of the distinguished Cotton family of Combermere Abbey in Cheshire.

A good deal of fevered discussion in the village was engendered, as can be imagined. The handbill was apparently fairly widely distributed and was to be seen on local noticeboards, and in public houses in Kenilworth and Coventry.

Ten Pounds Reward

Whereas

The Monument, which was dedicated to the memory of the Honourable Christopher Leigh, the fourth son of the Right Honourable Thomas Lord Leigh the first Baron of Stoneleigh, and which was erected on the South Side of the interior of the Parish Church of Stoneleigh and which Monument described the Honourable Christopher Leigh's Marriage and Issues in the County of Chester; as also the marriage and Issues of his Sons in the County of Lancaster, was soon after the decease of the Honourable Mary Leigh, sister of the late Edward Lord Leigh, who died in July 1806, taken down and removed from the said church.

Any person who can give any Information so as to lead to discovery of the said Monument will receive the above reward, by application to the Agents of the Heir at Law of Lord Leigh, who will be in attendance at the Craven Arms Inn, Coventry, and Swan Inn Stoneleigh; who at the same time will be glad to receive such honest and just information as may be useful and lend to a furtherance of the claim of the heir to the Title and Estates.

August 30th 1817

Causton then followed this up: in the hope of finding witnesses from Stoneleigh and elsewhere to speak of the existence of the memorial to Christopher Leigh, his marriages and children, Causton promised an even greater monetary reward, asserting that during repairs to the south wall of the church in 1811, there had been clandestine removal of the monument to Stoneleigh Abbey, after which it had disappeared or been destroyed.

"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, to the memory of the honourable Christopher Leigh, fourth son of Thomas, first Lord Leigh, baron of Stoneley, (the coffin of which Christopher was remaining in the family vault of his father, in 1806,) 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, in order to furnish the heir of the said honourable Christopher Leigh with evidence to prove the identity of the said monument, and to bring to condign exposition and legal punishment the party which, for sinister and selfish motives not necessary here to mention, caused to be abducted the sacred memorial of his ancestor, and has further caused the same to be wickedly concealed or sacrilegiously destroyed, 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."

(printed by Causton's print works on the instructions of a Solicitor by the name of Manning, then acting for George Leigh.)

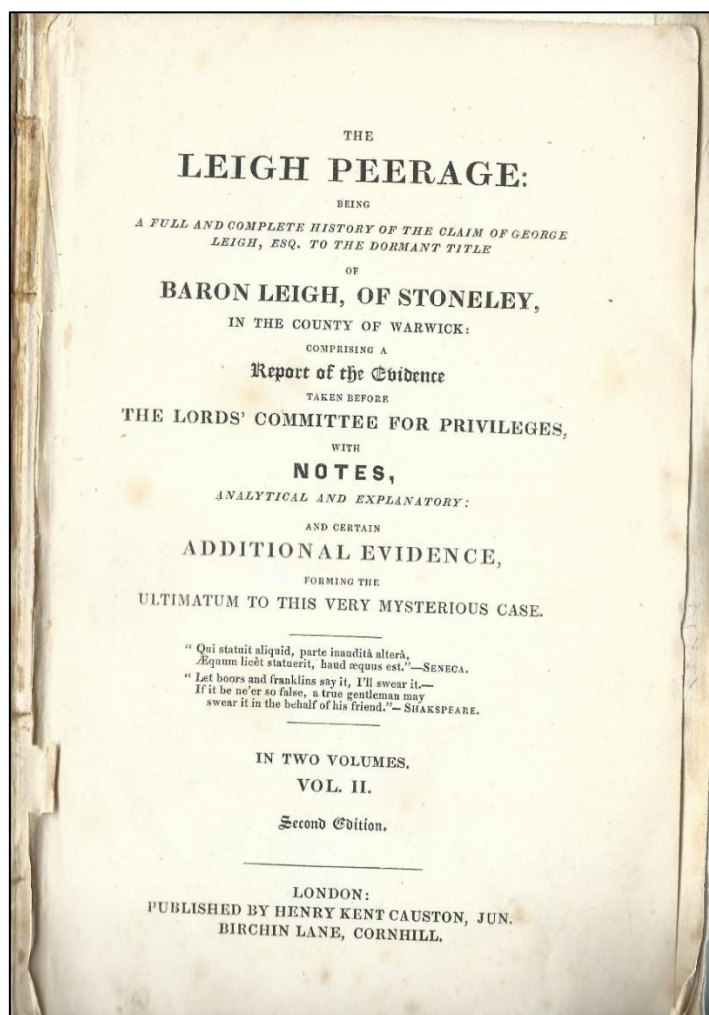
The church at Stoneleigh had indeed undergone considerable repairs, beginning in 1810, during the time of the Reverend Thomas Leigh. The church had apparently been neglected for some time and was badly in need of attention, both internal and external. Along with new pews, a new roof, a new organ, much stonework to the floors, there was a rebuild of the south aisle. Works continued for at least a decade, during which the south wall was rebuilt. Now it was being suggested that a vital memorial tablet on this south wall had been deliberately removed to obliterate any evidence of Christopher Leigh's family tree.

Then began an extraordinary and protracted sequence of events.

Chapter 5 – Witnesses for (and against) the prosecution.

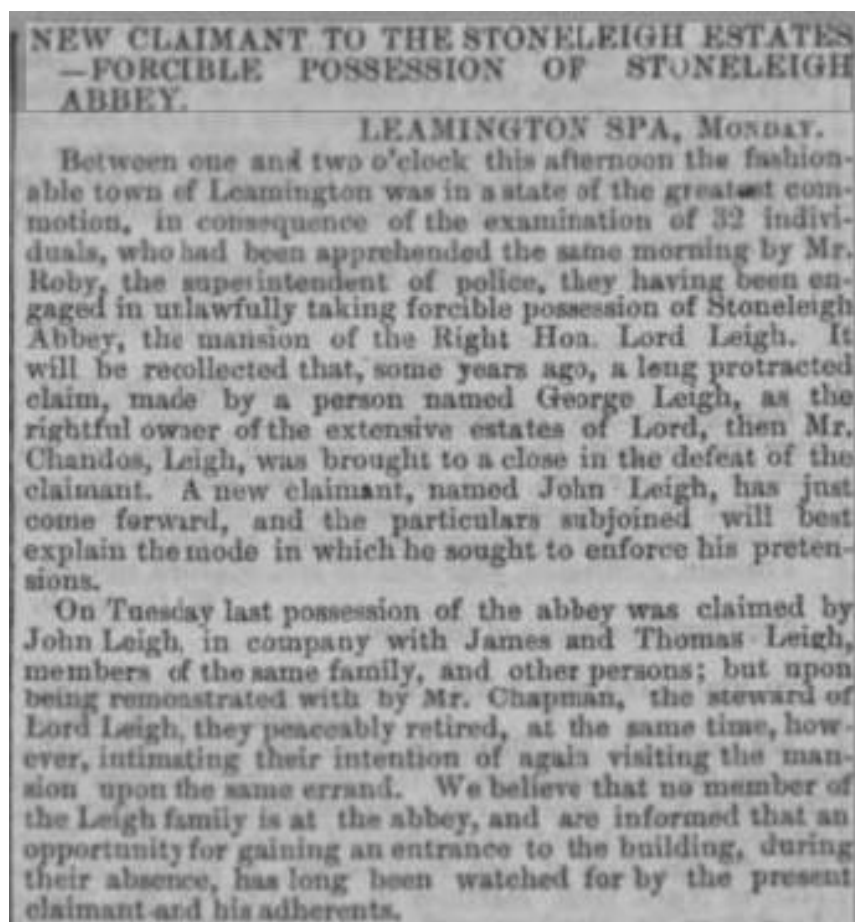
George Leigh continued to press his claim and in 1819 presented a Petition to His Majesty King George III. The petition was duly referred to the Attorney General, Sir Robert Gifford. George encountered a good deal of difficulty in achieving a favourable recommendation, but in 1826 a new Attorney General, J S Copley, concluded his findings by saying that he thought the claim that George was descended from Christopher improbable; nevertheless, so many people had stated that there had been a monument that he recommended the case be submitted to the House of Lords. In consequence a hearing commenced before the Committee for Privileges of the House of Lords on 1st April 1828, many years after it had been first presented. It continued intermittently through eight days during June of that year and eventually concluded on the eighth day, 11th June 1828. In the end, George Leigh's claim failed. He died in 1834, presumably still in a state of insolvency.

During those years, however, as Copley noted, witnesses had been found to speak of the existence of the Christopher monument, and of its subsequent destruction. The whole story of George Leigh's claim was then published by Causton:



In his book – and in many newspapers both local and national – Causton reiterated the evidence which had been given in court about the monument. Villagers and tradesmen were brought to the court to be cross-examined: had there been a monument? Where in the church had it been positioned? What colour was it? What did the writing on it say? Huge discrepancies appeared in witnesses' testimony: some said there was no monument at all, some agreed that there had been one on the south wall, some hazarded a guess at what it might have said, and some testified that the writing had been partly in Latin. Some of those cross-examined could neither read nor write. Nevertheless, there was some agreement that a monument had indeed existed. Later commentators have concluded that those who supported the Leigh family's denial of it were either family members or employees, or people connected in business with them and stood to benefit. Those who perhaps had much less to lose were more bold in challenging the family's position.

That George lost his claim – “the claimant has not made out his claim to the title and dignity of Baron Leigh of Stoneley (sic)” – as the court stated, has often been said to be an establishment stitch-up. More was to follow.



Chapter 6 – 1844

James Henry Leigh, Stoneleigh incumbent, had not lived to see his rival lose his claim. He died in 1823, quite suddenly, a fact which was to be the subject of speculation in years to come. His wife, Julia Judith, who had undoubtedly been the managing spirit of Stoneleigh while her husband was alive, outlived him by twenty years. Her character was such that she evidently made many enemies: she did not hesitate to remove tenant farmers if she considered they were not making a profit, one famous example being Thomas Parkes the father of Henry Parkes who went on to play a vital role in Australian politics. Many other tenants – even the victualler of the Swan Inn – became victims of a ruthless mindset which “took no prisoners.” Her denial of the existence of Christopher’s memorial tablet was another reason for local people to view her with suspicion, even dislike. After her death, in fact, the funeral drapes around her pew in church were stolen.

Her only son, Chandos, had been born in London in 1791 and for much of his childhood was absent from Stoneleigh at Harrow School. He proceeded to Oxford and for several years spent most of his time in London, where he became associated with many literary figures. He had been a schoolboy friend of Byron and wrote a good deal of poetry in Byronic style himself. He travelled in Europe and certainly had some unwise personal relationships which necessitated his family lawyer (and his mother) pulling strings to cover up indiscretions. Not an angel, then, but he married in 1819 and settled down to what he hoped would be peaceful married life in Adlestrop, Gloucestershire. Only when his father died did he and his young family move to Stoneleigh, though they continued to travel widely – indeed in 1838 twins were born in Paris while Chandos, his wife and eight children were journeying on a sort of progress through Italy, Switzerland and France. He wrote to his mother that he had “a large property...a large family, with large encumbrances.”

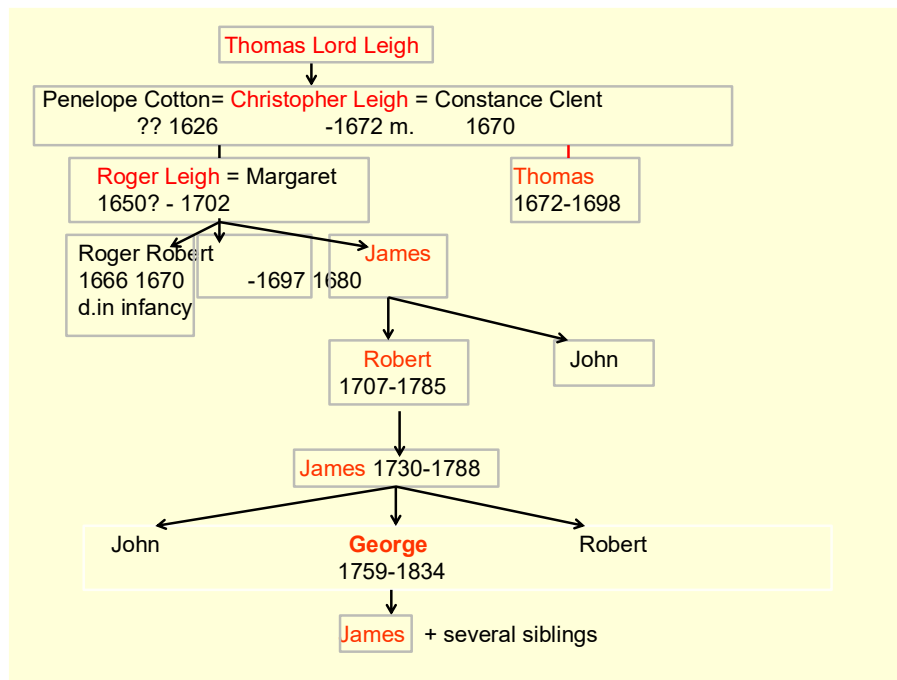
Shortly afterwards the defunct peerage was revived for Chandos to become “the 1st Lord Leigh of the Second Creation.” Some believe that his mother was the one who agitated for this. Letters Patent were granted by Queen Victoria on 11th May 1839. Not since the death of Edward, 5th Baron Leigh in 1786, had there been a member of the family who was a lord.



Chandos Leigh, 1st Baron Leigh of the 2nd Creation

If anyone was still interested in challenging the right of these Leighs to possess massive, wealthy estates and a title to boot, now was the time to do it.

And it came, again, from Lancashire.



This rudimentary family tree outlines the basis of what had been George Leigh's claim. If, and it was a big if, Christopher Leigh had been married to Penelope Cotton and had children, George would have been his direct descendant. Despite this claim failing to persuade the court in 1829, there were still those who believed it was true. And in October 1844 matters came to a violent head when a mob invaded Stoneleigh Abbey. Perhaps the participants had waited until Julia Judith died (in 1843), perceiving perhaps that Chandos was an easier target. Chandos and family were in fact away from Stoneleigh at the time, the steward and housekeeper being in charge of the building, with many other servants being present. George Jones Jnr, the family solicitor, was also there.

The ringleader was James Leigh, son of George, and came with other members of the family. A small number of the group had come to the abbey several days before and had demanded entrance but had been refused. Now more than 30 arrived, armed with hammers and bludgeons, swearing murder, and broke their way in despite the efforts of George Jones, who escaped to alert the authorities in Coventry. When he returned, he found that the mob had taken possession of the abbey.

It appears that the rioters were happy enough to surrender to the police and a hearing into the case was held at Leamington. James was reprimanded for continuing to shout during the hearing, whereupon he declared that he had been quiet for thirty years!

Unsurprisingly when the case went to Warwick Assizes the group were found guilty of forcible entry. James Leigh and three others were found guilty of assault upon Abbey staff. He, as ringleader, was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment with hard labour, the other three were given 12 months; all the rest were given 3 months. It had been a dramatic time and received much media attention locally. More was to come.

Chapter 7– Charles Griffin

And so we come to Charles Griffin.

The lawyer defending James Leigh and his associates was a Leamington man. His role in our story is an explosive one, revisiting everything which had been presented in court in the 1820s and in Causton's book, and amplifying the evidence of those who claimed to have seen the Christopher memorial. Not only that, but he also now presented testimonies from people who said that the memorial had definitely existed, had been removed from the church to the abbey to conceal it, and had then been destroyed. Finally, he produced witnesses to say that some of the men who had been employed by Julia Judith in so doing, had subsequently been murdered to shut them up!

After the collapse of George Leigh's claim and the trial of those who attacked the abbey, Griffin took an almost obsessive interest in the whole story. He was known for his anti-aristocracy views and may have been a Chartist. Certainly, he saw himself as being on the side of the working man, and seemed to view James Leigh as a sort of folk hero.

What he did in May 1848 was extraordinary – he published a lengthy paper entitled "Stoneleigh Abbey Thirty-Four Years Ago", containing, as he said, "A short history of the claims to the peerage and estates, and a catalogue of the confessed and suspected crimes etc etc" and he applied for a warrant to search the abbey grounds for buried bodies of workers. In 1814 a new bridge had been built there by Rennie, assisted by George Jones, the father of the Leighs' current lawyer. He was claiming that beneath this bridge there had been buried, since that time, the men who had removed the Christopher stone and transported it to the abbey, whereupon under the supervision of Julia Judith Leigh they had been murdered so that they would never be able to tell the tale.

He went further, suggesting that even the name plate from Christopher's coffin in the vault under Stoneleigh church had been removed, implying that his supposed coffin could have contained anyone. He questioned the burials of other family members and demanded that the now-closed family vault should be pickaxed open.

Some of the workers involved, he said, had been shot or hammered to death; some had been poisoned. Some, while working on building the bridge had had masonry dropped on them from a great height. Some had been hanged.

Obviously, Chandos Leigh refused the granting of the warrant, partly on the grounds of irrelevant expense. He stated vehemently that he had nothing to hide because the whole idea was preposterous. If only Griffin had left matters there! The next thing he did, however, was formally to charge Chandos with murder.

What ensued is so detailed that it is too long for this paper. Suffice it to say that the sensational story of the trial occupied six broadsheet pages of many newspapers that

May, as far away as the Manchester Times. A principal witness was one Barnett, who claimed under oath to have seen blood oozing from under the bridge, where bodies lay in sacks. Julia Judith, he said, had been on the bridge and gave the command "Let go!" to release the masonry onto the bodies. It soon emerged that Barnett was a convicted criminal, and ultimately he was himself arrested for perjury, the court referring to his story as fairy tale. Before that happened, however, other witnesses provided equally startling narratives: Sarah Smallbone, erstwhile cook at the abbey who had died in 1846, had, according to a friend, Elizabeth James, given a death-bed confession in which she said that Julia Judith had given her "white powder" to mix in the workmen's beer and pies. So many men had been killed and buried, she had said, that there was an area close to the abbey which was "like a churchyard." This was regarded by her doctor as nonsense – she was, he said, "weak-minded", illiterate and given to fantasy.

Others claimed that young itinerant workers, in good health, had been done away with somehow and were buried in the graveyard belonging to Stoneleigh church. This claim was strongly refuted by Mrs Sarah Goode who, despite being a centenarian, attended court and stated that she had been their landlady and they had died of natural causes.

There were, in fact, almost as many villagers and workers who contradicted the claims of such as Barnett and Smallbone – just as, in the early part of the century, there had been many who said there had been a monument to Christopher in the church, and many others who had said there was not. Of course there were, too, lawyers associated with the Leigh family and influential relatives such as Charles Adderley, MP, Chandos Leigh's son-in-law, whose arguments in court will have seemed much more persuasive simply because of his rank in society. This division has led, largely, to the battle lines which have been drawn up ever since – many who believe in the basis of Griffin's case feeling that his witnesses and argument had at least *some* credibility, whilst those who consider it entirely fantastical perhaps feel that it was all an attempt to discredit those in power.

It is no surprise though, that Griffin was to be the one who came off worst.

The court dismissed his case, and the following year Chandos Leigh sued Griffin for libel. Once more the gruesome details were rehearsed, though Barnett, Griffin's star witness, had rather wisely disappeared. Again, the newspapers followed it all at length and with some glee, and the trial lasted for five days. Griffin was found guilty and sentenced to two years with hard labour. He had to provide £500 as surety and a further £250 to guarantee his good behaviour when released. Chief Justice Thomas Wilde in his summing up left the jury in no doubt of his belief that Griffin's stories were both absurd and malicious.

Griffin survived jail and lived until his late sixties. He is buried in Leamington.



Charles Griffin

Chandos, however, died only 18 months after the final trial, his health in ruins. He had travelled to Bonn to take the waters and was 58 when he died there on 27 September 1850.

This tomb built in 1850 is believed to be by George Gilbert Scott and is an alabaster chest embellished with vine and oak branches placed inside a multi sided recess. Although built in the 19th century, the style is 13th century Gothic.



Chandos Leigh's tomb in Stoneleigh Church

Postscript

- Had Christopher Leigh married twice, and produced a son from his first marriage whose descendants were the true inheritors of the Leigh wealth and status?
- Had there ever been a memorial to Christopher in Stoneleigh Church which proved all this, and was it maliciously removed by the Gloucestershire Leighs who inherited?
- Who is to be believed in bearing witness to the stone? – there are many voices both for and against its existence.
- Was George Leigh of Lancashire an imposter or under a delusion of grandeur? What were the motives of H. K. Causton?
- How valid were the claims of those who led the assault on the abbey in 1841?
- Of Griffin's witnesses, who is to be believed from among the many he found to testify to skulduggery, and in contrast who might be believed among those who refuted their statements?

As I noted in my Preface, the story persists at Stoneleigh today, and visitors to the abbey still ask about the bodies buried under the bridge. As time has moved on, the credibility of any or all of "the Leigh Peerage Case" has not. Some are convinced that for two centuries a massive cover-up took place and the status of the victors provided its own truth; others are inclined still to question it all.

However, I began by dedicating this paper to the late David Vaughan. David, a retired lawyer with particular expertise in property law, pored over the claims of George Leigh in the early 19th century, and those of grandson James in 1844. His research took him to leasehold documents of a Leigh family in Lancashire, in a place called Haigh. George Leigh claimed that his ancestors were the Leighs of Haigh, the first of whom, Roger, had been the son of Christopher Leigh and Penelope nee Cotton. But buried in Causton's published account of George Leigh's claim (a book which extends to two hefty volumes!) via Wills and leases it emerged that the dates of the family did not add up: Roger Leigh of Haigh, apparent son of Christopher, had in fact been born around the same time as Christopher, his supposed father! David's words on discovering this were, at the time, "Game, set and match, I think!"

In arriving at their labyrinthine judgment in the 1820s the lawyers had actually stated

"This evidence is so clear in its proof, and decisive in its result, as to render argument superfluous that the family of Leigh of Haigh was totally distinct from that of Stoneleigh, at any rate so far as to the alleged descent of the claimant from the honourable Christopher Leigh." They went on:

"Here then is the end – here is the ultimatum of the Leigh claim of peerage. The goodly fabric, supported in its principal feature by evidence the most extraordinary at once crumbles into the baseless impress of a dream."

Henry Causton in quoting this was at pains, even then, to contradict it. However, this was not all. There had been many attempts to discover a marriage between Christopher Leigh and Penelope Cotton, but no such document could be found. As stated earlier, given the supposed marriage date of circa 1650, perhaps the marriage was never registered in those troubled times around the time of the Civil War, though those who believed it had been documented were convinced that it had later been deliberately destroyed. Yet in a footnote in Causton's work, David discovered that the Attorney General, J S Copley, had examined the pedigrees and found only one Penelope Cotton of Combermere, who had died unmarried aged 77 in 1712. Evidently this was not the wife of Christopher Leigh!

To complicate matters (if further complication were needed) Penelope had had a sister Sydney, who had married a man called Nathaniel Lee. Had there been a general confusion as time had passed, especially between the names Leigh and Lee? There were so many of this name and variant spelling in Lancashire at the time that there was a proverbial saying that there were "as many Leighs/Lees as fleas"! It looked as though George had – probably without realising - been barking up the wrong family tree.

There were, of course, still those who had sworn under oath that the Christopher monument had existed which had delineated the names of his descendants. And so the story goes round and round, embellishment being added to embellishment along the way. Is it a case of "Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story"? or, as an Address to Chandos, Lord Leigh in 1849 given by the Vicar and Churchwardens of Stoneleigh after the trial of Griffin said,

"...we cannot suppress our admiration of Your Lordship's Christian patience and exemplary forbearance."

If the reader has managed to read to the end of this paper, I echo such sentiments and applaud you.



Christopher Leigh

Stoneleigh History Society