

The visit of John & Abigail Adams to Axminster, 1787

Introduction

The website of the Massachusetts Historical Society (masshist.org) makes transcripts of extracts from many letters and diary entries linked to John Adams and his wife Abigail easily accessible¹. From 1785 to 1788 he was principally resident in London, representing the United States at the Court of St James. He was subsequently elected the first Vice President of the United States (1789 to 1797) and the second President (1797 to 1801).

Abigail Adams had a distant relative by marriage who lived in Axminster, in the form of John Cranch, an attorney and aspiring artist². Cranch had written to the Adamses urging them to visit Axminster, which they did in 1787, on their way from London to Exeter. Volume 3 of the 'Diary of John Adams' (which includes narrative passages by his wife Abigail, including the following extract) records their arrival in Axminster on 26 July, as follows.

Visit of the Adamses to Axminster

"Here we put up at the best Inn I ever saw, the George kept by a Mr Ellis³. The apartments were not only neat and convenient, but every thing had an air of Elegance and taste. Here we were visited by Mr John Cranch a Nephew of my Brother Cranch who is an Attorney and resides here. The Town is a little narrow dirty village, but a great through fare, all the Plimouth, Exeter and many other Stages passing through it. Went with Mr Cranch to see the Manufactory of carpets for which this place is famous. The building in which this buisness is carried on is by no means equal to an American Barn. The whole Buisness is performd by women and children. The carpets are equally durable with the Turky, but surpass them in coulours and figure. They are made of coars wool and the best are 24 shillings a square yd., others at fourteen. They have but two prices. From thence we went to a tape manufactory which are the only two manufactories in the Town. Mr Cranch invited us to drink Tea with him. He is a single man, of a delicate complexion, small features, about 26 or 27 years old. He never looks one in the face and appears as if he had been cramped and cowed in his Youth. He has a good understanding, which he has improved by reading, and appears a virtuous amiable man. He accompanied us to Exeter and Plimouth."

The following day (27 July) Abigail Adams' commentary records that "... Mr C. dined with us, and requested we would take tea at his cottage; he came at six to attend us. He lives in a small, neat cottage; every thing around him has an air of taste, united with neatness. He has a variety of small prints, the heads of many eminent persons, and the six prints, Hogarth's representation of la marriage a la mode. He has also a painting of Sir Walter Raleigh, which

¹ The underlying source is 'Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses' (Ed C. James Taylor, Boston, Massachusetts Historical Society, 2016).

² John Cranch was the son of Joseph Cranch, whose brother Richard had emigrated from Devon to Massachusetts and married Abigail's sister Mary.

³ Contemporary sources, including a lease for the George from the Petre estate, confirms that the landlord was called John Ellard rather than Ellis. John Cranch had also written to Abigail Adams on 17 July saying "In obedience to your command about the inns, permit me to acquaint you, that I think you will be accomodated much to your satisfaction at the George, here; and I shall expect to be honor'd in due time with your preparatory commands to the host and hostess (Ellard) as to beds, horses, time, &c, if necessary, that you may suffer no inconvenience which it might have been put into my power to prevent".

is thought an original picture; it was lately left, by an old gentleman who died, to the British Museum. Mr C. says he has a great inclination never to deliver it; he thinks it ought to be preserved sacred in this county, because its original was born here in the parish of Baidley⁴, and that Sir Walter's character stands very high throughout the county of Devonshire. Papa observed that his character did not appear unexceptionable; he answered that none of his faults were known here; they believed only in his virtues and excellencies".

⁴ Sir Walter Raleigh was born at East Budleigh, so either the original or the transcript is wrong about the parish.