

## John Sterling and James Fitzjames

One bright, sunny day last January, Professor Eric Nye of Wyoming University and Mr William Battersby came to Cowbridge and Llanblethian from Cambridge and London respectively to walk in the footsteps of John Sterling and James Fitzjames. They met with me and Dick Buswell, and luckily saw this countryside at its winter best, which was of prime importance to their visit.

Eric Nye is researching and writing a biography of John Sterling, the essayist, who lived for five years as a boy in Llanblethian from 1809 to 1814, and attended school in the Eagle Academy on the corner of Westgate. His father, Edward Sterling, who became the editor of *The Times*, had moved the family here from the Isle of Bute, probably sailing from Greenock into Swansea or Bristol, and their rented home seems likely to have been Llanblethian Cottage, on the side of Mount Ida on the plot where the current Old Vicarage now stands, looking down over Piccadilly, St Quentin's castle, Llanblethian mill and the river Thaw. Clearly this area of the Vale left a lasting and highly favourable impression on the young John. At the end of his twenty-first year, amongst his earliest printed pieces, he wrote the following (and those who know and walk this area might note that nothing too much has changed over the past two centuries):

*'My home was built upon the slope of a hill, with a little orchard stretching down before it, and a garden rising behind. At a considerable distance beyond and beneath the orchard, a rivulet flowed through meadows and turned a mill; while, above the garden, the summit of the hill was crowned by a few grey rocks, from which a yew tree grew, solitary and bare. Extending at each side of the orchard, toward the brook, two scattered patches of cottages lay nestled among their gardens; and beyond this streamlet and the little mill and bridge, another slight eminence arose, divided into green fields, tufted and bordered with copsewood, and crested by a ruined castle, contemporary, as was said, with the Conquest. ....I well know that no landscape I have since beheld ....gave me half the impression of living, heartfelt, perfect beauty which fills my mind when I think of that green valley, that sparkling rivulet, that broken fortress.....'*

*'In that little town there was... a school where the elements of human knowledge were communicated to me, for some hours of every day, during a considerable time. The path to it lay across the rivulet and past the mill, from which point we could either journey through the fields below the old castle, and the wood which surrounded it, or along a road at the other side of the ruin, close to the gateway of which it passed. The former track led through two or three beautiful fields, the sylvan domain of the keep on one hand, and the brook on the other; while an oak or two, like giant warders advanced from the wood, broke the sunshine of the green with a soft and graceful shadow. How often, on my way to school, have I stopped beneath the tree to collect the fallen acorns; how often run down to the stream to pluck a branch of the hawthorn which hung over the water!*

*The road which passed the castle joined, beyond these fields, the path which traversed them. It took, I well remember, a certain solemn and mysterious interest from the ruin. The shadow of the archway, the discolorizations of time on all the walls, the dimness of the little thicket which encircled it, the traditions of its immeasurable age, made St. Quentin's Castle a wonderful and awful fabric in the imagination of a child, and long after I last saw its mouldering roughness, I never read of fortresses or heights or spectres or banditti without connecting them with the one ruin of my childhood.... ..*

*At the entrance of the little town stood an old gateway, with a pointed arch and decaying battlements. It gave admittance to the street which contained the church, and which terminated in another street, the principal one in the town...In this was situated the school to which I daily wended. I cannot now recall to mind the face of its good conductor, nor any of his scholars, but I have before me a strong general image of the interior .....The long desks covered from end to end with those painted masterpieces, *The Life of Robinson Crusoe, The Hunting of Chevy-Chase, The History of Jack the Giant-Killer, and all the eager little faces and trembling hands bent over these ... ..**

*'I remember the house where I first grew familiar with peacocks, and the mill-stream into which I once fell, and the religious awe wherewith I heard, in the warm twilight, the psalm-singing around the house of the Methodist miller, and the door-post against which I discharged my brazen artillery; I remember the window by which I sat while my Mother taught me French, and the patch of garden which I dug for ..., but her name is best left blank; it was indeed writ in water. These recollections are to me like the wealth of a departed friend.....'*

Later in the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle, the historian and essayist, wrote 'The Life of John Sterling' and stayed for a while in the village of Llandough. Within his general outline of the Vale, he made the following comments :

*'Llanblethian hangs pleasantly, with its white cottages, and orchard and other trees, on the western slope of a green hill looking far and wide over green meadows and little or bigger hills.... a short mile to the south of Cowbridge, to which smart little town it is probably a kind of suburb....'*

He considered Llanblethian to be something of an exception to most Vale villages where *'The peasantry seem indolent and stagnant, but peaceable and well-provided, much given to Methodism when they have any character; ...for the rest, an innocent, good-humoured people, who all drink home-brewed beer, and have brown loaves of the most excellent home-baked bread.....'* Llanblethian had, Carlyle wrote *'a decidedly cheerful group of human homes, the greater part of them indeed belonging to persons of refined habits; trimness, shady shelter, whitewash, neither conveniency nor decoration has been neglected here...'*

William Battersby, who accompanied Eric Nye this day, is pursuing a belief that John Sterling had a half-brother named James Fitzjames. James was born 1813, some 7 years after John Sterling, and is known to be the illegitimate son of a dissolute diplomat of that era, Sir James Gambier, but there are no known records of his mother. James Fitzjames,

who followed an illustrious naval career, was acknowledged as a contemporary 'James Bond', but lost his life prematurely in the ill-fated Sir John Franklin expedition of 1845-8 when his ship, in attempting to navigate a section of the Northwest passage, was wrecked off arctic Canada.

William Battersby suggests that Hester Sterling, the mother of John, left her Llanblethian home temporarily to give birth to James Fitzjames. As a young child he was brought up by the Sterlings and primarily by Hester's brother and family in Llysworney. Hester's brother was the Revd. Robert Coningham, a wealthy intellectual, who did not take up clerical duties during his stay in Llysworney. Which house the family rented there is not yet known, but parish records show the Coningham's eldest child, John, was baptised in Llysworney church in 1814.

Whether any evidence will come to light about the Sterling/Fitzjames blood relationship remains unknown, but that January day passed very pleasantly in relating the nineteenth century observations to those of the present day.

*Betty Alden  
May 2015*

*Post script:* The house, The Cross, stands on the hill leading up to Llanblethian church – just above where the Sterlings are thought to have lived. That prolific recorder of local news and gossip in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, David Jones of Wallington (who grew up in Great House) writes *'Molly Evans lived at The Cross, Llanblethian in 1800-1810. She was the mother of Hester Kennedy who afterwards married the Revd. Browne Williams. She was the natural daughter of Molly Evans, but after her marriage was taken in hand by the gentry and was a great favourite. Her patron was William Lewis Traherne. Molly Evans had lived with the Trahernes as a servant. Afterwards she went to London and there was begot with child.'*

Records show that Molly Evans was a tenant in The Cross until about 1818, so would have been a very close neighbour of the Sterlings. Let's see whether William Battersby can unravel or prove any links with her, or her daughter Hester, and the unknown mother of James Fitzjames!

## Betty Alden

**From:** William Battersby [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** 25 July 2013 15:58  
**To:** 'Betty Alden'  
**Subject:** Update on John Sterling et al

Dear Betty,

I hope all is well with you and thank you for all the information you have given me on Cowbridge and the time the Sterlings lived there. I have had some interesting follow-ups and I'd like to share them with you.

Firstly, I have met several times Professor Eric Nye (<http://www.uwyo.edu/profiles/faculty-staff/eric-nye.html>). He is currently a visiting Fellow at Clare Hall in Cambridge and I am hoping I will be able to bring him to Cowbridge so he can see the site of the house the Sterlings lived in, the school and so on. If it was possible to meet you too I am sure both of you would find that interesting. He is researching and will be writing a biography of John Sterling and of course Cowbridge, and the potential Fitzjames connection, is of great interest to him.

Secondly, you might remember that I am pretty certain that Hester Sterling was the illicit mother of James Fitzjames, with Sir James Gambier as the father. I have had further correspondence with Anne Coningham-Naylor, who is the Rev. Robert Coningham's great x4 grand-daughter and therefore related to James Fitzjames, all the Coninghams and the Sterlings. Anne sent me an intriguing email which included the statement that

- *".....reading through family records I notice that Robert Coningham and the Gambias [= Gambier's] had land next to each other in Wales and that Edward Sterling spent a lot of time in France 1813-14 without Hester! she joined Edward in France in 1814 until 1815 leaving J Fitzjames behind to live with Robert Coningham and son William".*

Well, William [Coningham] wasn't born until June 1815, and was born in Penzance, but she is correct I think that when the Sterlings left Cowbridge to go to France they left James Fitzjames in the care of Robert Coningham. I wondered whether you had any evidence of the Gambier family owning land or a house in your part of the world. I have asked Anne for access to the 'family records' she is referring to but she is a bit cagey. Hence I wondered whether you had any?

I hope you don't mind me recontacting you again like this but I think when the story is properly understood and documented it will be very interesting for all of us.

With best regards,

William

[REDACTED]

31 July 2013

Dear Betty,

Thank you for sending Mr Battersby's latest e-mail. He says, quoting a descendant, that Coningham and the Gambiers 'had land next to each other in Wales'. We know that the Rev. Robert Coningham was living in Llysworney in February 1814 (when his son John was baptised). And the Sterlings lived at Llanblethian Cottage c.1809 - c.1815. I checked the annual land tax assessments for both parishes for the years 1812 to 1815, but there is no trace of any of these people.

There is only one other possible line of enquiry - the records of the Nash Manor Estate. The Carnes and Markhams of Nash Manor owned most of the houses in Llysworney, so there is a chance that the names of Coningham and Gambier might occur as tenants. The estate rentals for the relevant period have the reference DC E/4. The documents themselves are not 'on line' but the catalogue of the Carne Collection is, so Mr Battersby would be able to access that in his computer via the Glamorgan Archives website [www.glamro.gov.uk](http://www.glamro.gov.uk)

With best wishes,

Brian