

Visiting Nunnington

I recently had the chance to visit Nunnington, a small and undistinguished village high on the North Yorkshire Moors, not all that far from Ampleforth. I say undistinguished though it does boast a National Trust property, Nunnington Hall, but that was not what had drawn me there.

The reason for my visit was that Cornelia's father, Ralph Peacock, was born in the village. Now that I'm living in Yorkshire myself, I've wondered from time to time about Cornelia's English heritage, her Yorkshire genes, and how the direct and straightforward manner for which Yorkshire people are renowned may have contributed to shaping her character and her way of dealing with the circumstances of her life.

We know very little about Cornelia's English antecedents, though research was done when information for Cornelia's cause was being collected. Peacock is a common enough Yorkshire surname and Cornelia's Peacock relations were tenant farmers in this little village. Her great grandfather, William, was born here but her maternal great grandparents, the Dodsworths, lived in York and Cornelia's grandmother, Mary, grew up there, in a city of significance in English history which boasted a magnificent Minster. It must have been a very different world she entered when she married Cornelia's grandfather, Thomas Peacock, in 1754 and moved to life on the farm in Nunnington.

Mary and Thomas had seven children, six boys and one girl, of whom Ralph was the youngest. Like everyone else in Nunnington, the family must have attended the only church in the village, the rather oddly named 13th century Anglican church of All Saints and St James. We know that Ralph was baptised here on 2 July 1768.

Ralph and his brother William, who was two years older than he was, emigrated together to the United States in 1794 or 1795, when Ralph was about 16 years old. It's not an exaggeration to call their journey perilous: travelling across the Atlantic by sailing ship was not for the fainthearted, but these were two young men looking for a new life. I can find out nothing more about William, but Ralph became a naturalised American citizen in 1797, the year before he married Cornelia's mother, Mary Swope. So, Ralph, at least, had determined to settle in the United States. Like his parents, Mary and Ralph went on to have seven children, of whom Cornelia was the youngest. Perhaps, as Ralph had been a youngest child himself, he had a particular

affection for his own youngest child? But as he died at the age of 50, when Cornelia was only nine, we know virtually nothing of her memories of him.



All of this brought me to Nunnington towards the end of September. After circling the village and realising how small it was, we made our way to the church and were fortunate enough to encounter someone inside attending to the flowers. Enquiring of her about any Peacock graves, I was told there were certainly some in the graveyard surrounding the

church. Then she went off to bring her husband, who is a churchwarden, and he was able to produce a clear list of the position of every grave and the names of those buried there. But when I told him the dates of the people I was looking for, he said it was very unusual to find gravestones in English churchyards before about 1750 – a piece of information that was entirely new to me. (I looked it up on Google later where it was confirmed.) There are at least four or five Peacock graves, and we found two particularly early ones close to the west door of the church, one bearing the name George Peacock and one Elizabeth.

The church itself is unpretentiously Protestant, though proud of its 13th century heritage. I was particularly struck by the baptismal font, where presumably Ralph and his siblings were baptised: it is one of the plainest I have ever seen.





We were delighted with our visit, and very grateful to the churchwarden and his wife, clearly so invested in the history and current life of the little church. They were really interested to hear about Cornelia's connection with the village and to learn something of her story. Coming away, driving through the glorious North Yorkshire countryside, I couldn't help thinking about what Cornelia had inherited from her Yorkshire family. I wondered if she ever visited the Duchess of Leeds, as we know some SHCJ did, at her Yorkshire home, Hornby Castle, in Wensleydale, not that far away from Nunnington? If so, perhaps Cornelia

travelled from there to see her father's old home and her Nunnington relatives? But that is definitely in the realm of speculation.