

Meet the Emras

Bristol Times Article

by Dave Stephenson



Elizabeth Emra, or ‘Little Elizabeth’, lived in St George from the age of four until around a year before her untimely death at the age of only 38. She was the author of “Scenes in our Parish” which was first published in 1830. The book includes descriptions of the area as it then was, including a reference to *"the barren and quarried hill, with its yellow spots of gorse and broom, and its purple shade of heath"* – which remains a good description of Troopers Hill to this day.

Local historian, Dave Stephenson wrote about the Emra family for the Bristol Times insert in the Bristol Post and has kindly given us permission to publish the article.

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‘Book made sure aspects of parish life were seen’

Dave Stephenson wants you to meet the Emras, a St George family which left its mark on the area, and one of whom bequeathed us a priceless portrait of the lives of many of the people living there in the 19th century.



The Rev John Emra and his wife Elizabeth. One of their daughters, “Little Elizabeth” would write a remarkable memoir of everyday life in their semi-rural community.

Let me introduce you to the Emra family: John Emra was the vicar of St George's church from 1809 to 1842. He was born in the West Indies in about 1769, came to England on his own aged about 12 and stayed with family friends in Bristol. All were wealthy and very much connected to the slave trade.

He would be ordained in 1794, serving in several other churches before coming to St George.

His wife Elizabeth (née Bastone Blake) would give birth to 11 children, nine of them surviving infancy – two sons and seven daughters.

One of these daughters was known as Little Elizabeth to distinguish her from her mother and in 1830 she wrote a book titled *Scenes in Our Parish, by a Country Parson's Daughter*.

It sold well and has been reprinted in recent times. It's a little masterpiece.

This district had been created in 1751, at a time when John Wesley came through here like a tornado. The Established Church felt threatened – and Wesley was against slavery. But Bristol's Corporation made sure they had the right to select the Vicar.

In 1766 there were only about 400-500 families in St. George; two or three Quakers and no Catholics. One in eight were receiving parish relief, so it was a very poor district.

It covered an area of 1,831 acres, going from Lawrence Hill towards Temple Meads, following the river to Crews Hole along the Kingsway to Royate Hill, down to Easton and back to Lawrence Hill (to use modern names).

John Emra's family were all well-educated, and there were talented artists among them, but Little Elizabeth was the gifted writer. Her book is just over 300 pages and contains 14 chapters with such headings as 'The Old Couple', 'Christmas Day 1829', 'The Graves of Infants', 'Mary, the Sailor's Widow', 'The Strawberry Feasts' and more.

Elizabeth never mentions the surnames of the people she writes about, neither does she mention the places where they live, but we know it was mostly around Troopers Hill and Crews Hole, people and places she knew and often visited.

The Chapter that moved me the most was about a couple named Samuel and Hester. Sam had the chance to get a contract to deliver coke to a factory, so he took out a Loan for three horses and a cart, but over a period of time, the horses died and he went blind, so it was left to his wife to manage their lives in spite of poor health herself. He still went to church every Sunday – he knew the way as he'd been going there his whole life. Hester always made sure he had clean clothes, and at the church he had his own pew, as was the custom in those days.

Then he died, and Elizabeth watched as he was buried next to his father and his seven children, all of whom had died young. Elizabeth noticed a lot of graves in the churchyard, many of them young children.

There was a charity school nearby - built in 1785, it said above the door. In 1810 it was recorded that 200 children attended the school on a Sunday and 100 on weekdays. It was here that Elizabeth became a teacher.

She married Marcus Holmes, a very talented artist, and also a teacher. His work today is quite collectible.

They lived in a house just behind the church, known as 'Homefield', in Harveys Lane. Marcus painted many local scenes, and the place was also popular with other artists like Edward Bird and Francis Danby.

Elizabeth's book attracted a lot of praise from many people, including the poet Robert Southey, who actually made a visit to her home.

Elizabeth was for a while very interested in politics, always travelling into Bristol to find the results of elections until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. She and many of her friends saw this as a threat to them and to their church.

Many Catholic families at the time lived in the Old Market area, and were blamed for many problems. In 1831 the Bristol Riots occurred just a few miles down the road and the mob were threatening to burn down the church and vicarage. The family sought shelter in a nearby cottage, hiding some of their possessions elsewhere. Luckily, nothing happened.

On many evenings Elizabeth would get together with friends to make clothes for the poor. At her wedding, there was no cake; instead the money went to those more in need of it.

John Emra died in 1842 and was buried in the churchyard and so the remaining family had to leave the vicarage and move away. Elizabeth also moved, to Westbury-on-Trym, with her own family. She died in 1843 and was buried next to her beloved father. She had a good heart, was very religious and always thoughts of other people.

It would have been nice if she had written about other subjects, such as the first post office in the district (1828), as she must have sent her letters from there. It was for the Penny Post, situated where a school is today at the top of Plummers Hill.

It would have been nice also to read about the first police station, almost opposite the church (1839) or the poor-house not five minutes away; in 1841 there were 180 children living there, ranging in ages from one to 15. Sometimes there were whole families. But all she said of that place was that the new overseer was much harsher than the previous one.

She never mentions slavery, or her family history, or the servants.

Two of her sisters, Martha and Lucy, also wrote books. One of them married an Anglican vicar and the other a Wesleyan minister. One of her brothers also became a vicar, and another died in a boating accident at Oxford. They were a very talented and interesting family.

Nearby Emra Close is named after them. Perhaps a blue plaque should be put up – but where?

Scenes in Our Parish, by a Country Parson's Daughter can be downloaded from

First Series published 1830 - tinyurl.com/EmraScenes1

Second Series published 1832 - tinyurl.com/EmraScenes2

1833 American version of Scenes in our Parish - tinyurl.com/emra1833

Read more about the Emra Family at - www.troopers-hill.org.uk/emra/

Dave Stephenson has also written other articles for the Bristol Times about St George which he has also given us permission to include on our website, see:

troopers-hill.org.uk/memories.htm#Dave

More information on the history of St George:

Friends of Troopers Hill - www.troopers-hill.org.uk/history.htm

Barton Hill History Group - www.bhhg.co.uk/

Friends of Troopers Hill – March 2025