

Turbulent life and times of the colourful Dempster Heming

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A MEMORIAL stone in a tranquil churchyard covers the grave of one of Nuneaton's most colourful and charismatic characters.

Surrounded by rusting, cast iron railings in the shadow of Weddington Church, it marks the final resting place of Dempster Heming, an extraordinary figure, who made and lost fortunes.

But the cryptic, weather-worn inscription hardly does justice to his long, tumultuous and often turbulent life.

Dempster Heming was a law student in Scotland, a rich attorney in India, a former Sheriff of Warwickshire and owner of Caldecote Hall,

He suffered disastrous banking failures, lost investments in Spain, was suspected of entering into a bigamous marriage – and was immortalised by George Eliot.

Despite all of his troubles, he eventually found great personal happiness in later life and lived to the ripe old age of 96.

Local historian and author David Paterson, former head of history at King Edward VI Sixth Form College, has done some research into him and his family.

David said: "Dempster's father, George Heming, made his fortune as a sugar merchant in the West Indies and bought the Caldecote Estate.

"In 1762, he married Amicia Bracebridge, daughter of the Rev Philip Bracebridge, Rector of Weddington..

"Through this marriage the Hemings eventually acquired Weddington Hall and the living of St James' Church.

"But Dempster was the youngest son and it was his eldest brother Samual Bracebridge Heming, who became Rector of Weddington and also Fenny Drayton.

"So Dempster had to make his own way in the world, which he did, studying law at St Andrews University, where he won a prize for Latin translation."

Called to the Bar in 1807, Dempster travelled to India where he amassed great wealth as Registrar of the Supreme Court of Judicature in Calcutta and invested in land back in England.

David Paterson recounted: "Returning in the 1820s as a rich man, he bought Caldecote Hall, possibly from his own family, and in 1832 he stood as a Radical candidate for the new Parliamentary seat of North Warwickshire, but failed to be returned."

The 1832 Reform Act which still prevented working people from having a vote caused great anger through the land and led to dangerous protests.

"Nuneaton was the scene of one of the largest riots during that election and Dempster had spent £10,000 on his failed campaign," said David Paterson.

"But the election disturbance achieved literary immortality by its wonderful (and only slightly fictional) description in George Eliot's Felix Holt.

"George Eliot would have been 13 at the time of the election, but she remembered and described the riots very clearly and there is good reason to suggest that she may have partly based her character Harold Transome, the Radical candidate, on Dempster Heming."

Undeterred by his election failure, Dempster went into business and it was while staying with him at Caldecote Hall that Joseph Aloysius Hansom designed his legendary Hansom Cab.

It may well be that it was Dempster's cash that financed the invention of the immensely popular horse-drawn vehicle that transformed inner-city travel as the 'black cab' of its day.

As colourful and controversial as Dempster Heming, Joseph Hansom also lived at Hinckley where the first Hansom Cab was driven along Coventry Street in 1835.

At 60 years of age Dempster was comfortably off and with a well established reputation.

But, as David Paterson discovered, his personal and financial world was about to become embroiled in an unsavoury episode.

Still unmarried, Dempster got to know a man named Henry Alleyne and then met Alleyne's sister Rhoda.

"There was a whirlwind courtship and they were married in 1839," said David. "Then the rumours began.

"Gossip flew round North Warwickshire that Henry Alleyne and Rhoda were not what they appeared to be, but were actually husband and wife and that Dempster's marriage to Rhoda was bigamous.

"Eventually, the rumour was scotched, but only after an unpleasant period with threats of duels and costly legal action.

"Henry and Rhoda were, indeed, brother and sister, but their name was not Alleyne, it was Chard."

Henry Chard had changed his identity because he was deeply in debt. Had the unfortunate Dempster been tricked into marriage to come up with a rescue package?

But further financial disasters followed as Dempster's business ventures started to go pear-shaped.

A Leicester and Warwickshire joint-stock bank which he had founded failed and one of his partners claimed several thousands of pounds that led to another long, legal battle.

In 1845, he lost a legal case against Isaac Swinnerton over the leasing of local mills.

Dempster had also invested a great deal of money in Spanish bonds, but financial and political instability – just like in Greece today – led the Spanish Government to cancel its debts, leaving wealthy investors, many of them English, fuming and penniless.

Crippled financially, Dempster was forced to sell Caldecote Hall and his nephew, the Rev Samuel Bracebridge, kindly allowed him to live in the Bracebridge-owned Lindley Hall.

After Samuel died, Dempster and his growing family were forced to move from one property to another in the south of England.

Despite all of the problems, his marriage to Rhoda somehow survived. They had three children, including a Dempster Heming Jnr, who followed in his father's footsteps to India, and is also buried in Weddington Churchyard

Dempster himself died in Brighton in 1874 at the ripe old age of 96, a peaceful and contented end to a life lived mostly on the brink – and always to the full.



Dempster Heming's gravestone in St James Churchyard, Weddington