

Pregnancy and Childbirth - Abigail Newton, 1685-86

Abigail Newton was the wife of John Newton, esquire, the son and heir of Sir John Newton, baronet, of Culverthorpe Hall, near Sleaford.

There are three surviving letters to John and Abigail which mention her pregnancy in the winter of 1685 and spring of 1686, written by John's sister Lucy, who was the wife of Robert Scrope of South Cockerington near Louth.

At this period, John and Abigail were living with Abigail's grandmother, the widowed Countess of Dover, at the Countess's house in Chapel Street, Westminster.

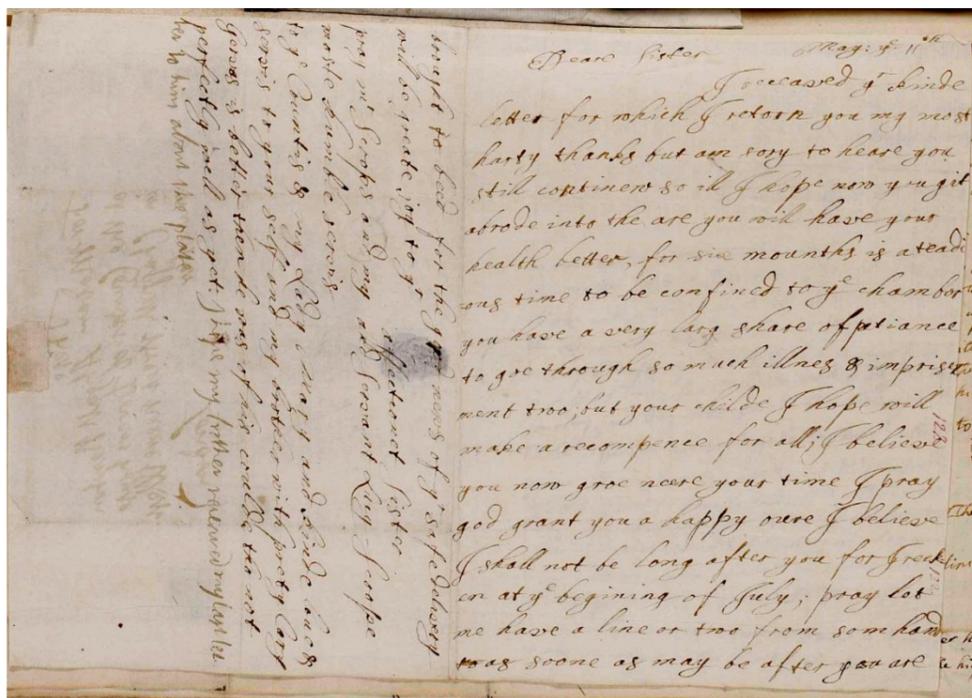
- The first letter, from Lucy Scrope to her brother John Newton, is dated 1 December 1685. John and Abigail had already had two children, both of whom are mentioned in the letter: a son named John who had died four years previously at the age of four (*"I heartily pray God she may go out her time & that you may have the blessing of as fine a boy as you had before"*); and a daughter named Carey, born in London in June 1680 (*"Mr Scrope's & my love & service attends you & my good sister with pretty Carey"*).

The name Carey was a compliment to Abigail's grandparents as it was the family surname of the Earls of Dover.

- The next letter, written on 18 December, is from Lucy to Abigail herself, from which it is clear that the two women were sufficiently close to discuss Abigail's difficult pregnancies plainly: *"I think long, dear sister, to hear how you do and shall be much dissatisfied till I have a line or two from some hand to give me an account of you, being you was so ill the last time I heard; it would be very great joy to me to hear that the usual time of your miscarrying was over; I heartily pray God you may go out your time, so that at length you may have a joy that will recompense all your illness."*

She concludes, *"Mr Scrope presents his love and service to you & my brother with the good ladies"*. The "good ladies" were Abigail's grandmother, Lady Dover, and her mother, Lady Mary Heveningham, also a widow, who also lived at Lady Dover's house. With her mother and grandmother on hand, as well as five year old "pretty Carey", and with moral support by post from Lucy, Abigail seems to have had a considerable female support network.

- The next surviving letter is the one displayed here. It was written five months later, on 11 May 1686, again from Lucy to Abigail.



With the spelling and punctuation tidied up, it reads as follows:

"Dear Sister

May the 11th [1686]

I received your kind letter for which I return you my most hearty thanks, but am sorry to hear you still continue so ill. I hope now you get abroad into the air you will have your health better, for six months is a tedious time to be confined to the chamber.

You have a very large share of patience to go through so much illness & imprisonment too; but your child I hope will make a recompense for all. I believe you now grow near your time; I pray God grant you a happy hour.

I believe I shall not be long after you for I reckon at the beginning of July. Pray let me have a line or two from some hand as soon as may be after you are brought to bed, for the good news of your safe delivery will be great joy to your

affectionate sister

and servant Lucy Scroope

Pray Mr Scroop's & my most humble service to the Countess & my Lady Mary, and kind love & service to your self and my brother with pretty Carey. Gervas [Lucy's son, aged 3] is better than he was of his cold though not perfectly well as yet. I hope my brother received my last letter to him about the plate."

Lucy's optimism was all in vain. Something went disastrously wrong with the last stage of Abigail's pregnancy. On the very day that the letter was written Abigail Newton died in London without her child having been delivered. She was only 26.

Her body was brought back to Culverthorpe Hall and from there to the parish church of Heydour, where she was buried on May 29th.

A beautiful monument to her memory was erected in Heydour church.



The monument's inscription includes the following lines:

She lived so as if she meant to die young. Even her youth was pious and exemplary, in which she diligently hearkened to the law of God and her maker.

And by the same steps with a gentle hand she led into the way of virtue her own offspring. John her eldest she prepared betimes for heaven, and for grief almost followed and now lies buried by him.

She left a daughter Carey, about six years of age, in whom it appeared what the prudence of a mother, neither fond nor severe, could effect even in so tender years.

By a peculiar art her children both stood in awe and loved her.

After a tedious sickness she died big with child, and was to the last more desirous that should live than she.

She had all the virtues that became a wife, a mother and a child.

She deserved a longer life here, but more an eternal one.



Detail of the monument to Abigail Newton.

John Newton remarried five years later, and in 1699 he succeeded to the Culverthorpe estate and the title of baronet on the death of his father. Sir John died in 1734, aged 83 and was succeeded by the son of his second marriage, Sir Michael Newton.

Abigail's daughter Carey married Edward Coke of Holkham in Norfolk and was the mother of the first of the Earls of Leicester of Holkham Hall.

Lucy Scrope, the letter writer, survived the birth of her own child and died thirty years later in 1716, aged 62.