The Manor House at Keevil, built around 1580

Scored into a leaded window-pane in the room above the front porch of Keevil Manor around 1770, is the following plaintive plea:

**Remember Ann Beach**

This message, seemingly calling to us from the 18th Century, was scratched in desperation by Anne Beach herself, with her diamond ring. It remains as a delicate, self-inscribed epitaph to the tragic love affair between Anne and the Rev. William Wainhouse – Curate of St. Mary’s Church, Steeple Ashton.

Bryan writes more about the front-cover picture…

The image of Anne Beach’s message contained in the following article appears in ‘Anne Beach – A Keevil Tragedy’ by Victor & Marjory Manning, on pages 7-12 of ‘A Book of Keevil Vol. 2’ (1998). It has been reproduced here by kind permission of ‘The Keevil Society’ – who hold the copyright. In this instance, its use is restricted to this article only. I have also used the Mannings’ account as my main source for this article.

Anne Beach was born in 1749 (most records use the spelling ‘Anne’, although her own message reads “Ann”). By the time of her birth, Anne’s family had amassed a sizable amount of wealth. They had owned Keevil Manor since 1680, when it was purchased from the Lambert family by her great-grandfather William Beach. The Beaches increased their fortune across the decades via several notable marriages, including that of Anne’s grandfather to an heiress to the estate of a very successful East India merchant named James Harding. Anne’s
parents – William and Anne – continued to prosper, buying the Manors of Fittleton and Netheravon in 1760 from the Duke of Beaufort. Keevil Manor House remained in the Beach family right up until 1911.

Anne was the second eldest of three children. Her elder brother, William Wither, was born in 1746. He attended New College, Oxford, and wrote poetry. Apparently, William later became ‘insane’, and died a bachelor at 82. Anne’s younger sister, Henrietta Marie, was born in 1760.

William Wainhouse was born in 1738. He was the only son of the Rector of Keevil the Rev. Richard Wainhouse, and his wife Mary. Having gained a B.A. degree at Oxford at the age of 21, William became both Curate and Deacon of St. Leonard’s Church, Keevil. He continued his studies and obtained an M.A. degree in 1762, following the death of his father Richard in December 1761.

On the 25th September 1763, at the age of 25, William Wainhouse was ordained a Priest. He stayed as Curate at St. Leonards, and by 1764 was also made Curate at St. Mary’s Church, here in Steeple Ashton. Although he continued to perform quite often as both Curate and Minister at Keevil, it is likely that William would have been living at Steeple Ashton Vicarage, or at a residence close-by. It was during his years as St. Mary’s Curate in the late 1760s that Wainhouse – who already knew Anne Beach from her attendances at St. Leonards Church, and doubtless as a member of the most prominent family in Keevil – began to take an interest in her.

By the Reverend’s own admission – in a self-penned pamphlet written later which he called his “Narrative” – Wainhouse had shifted his attentions onto Anne following an unsuccessful previous attempt at securing the hand of a lady “of good prospects” (we do not know to whom he refers). Nevertheless, it would seem that Anne, then in her late-teens, welcomed the
Clergyman’s second venture into seeking out an eminent wife – and a friendship soon turned into romance.

When Anne’s parents heard of the affair, they were far from pleased. A Curate of humble means was not what they had envisaged as an appropriate husband for their eldest daughter. Deeply disapproving of Anne’s relationship, William Beach and his wife took it upon themselves to intervene directly, and bring it to an end. They summoned the Curate to their Keevil Manor home, and made it quite clear to him how they felt about his courtship with Anne. They succeeded in extracting a solemn promise from the Reverend: to make no more attempts on their daughter’s affections.

William Wainhouse broke his promise – and went on to make two attempts at eloping with Anne. Initially, the pair intended to escape to Scotland. The lovers’ quest to be married north of the boarder was thwarted however, when Anne’s sister awoke at a crucial moment. Their second plan also collapsed in its early stages – with Anne enduring a cold and lengthy wait in the Manor shrubbery while her mother searched for her at the Curate’s lodgings (presumably in Steeple Ashton) after she had found her missing.

This incident proved to be the ‘last straw’ for the Beaches. Knowing Wainhouse could not be trusted to keep his word, and convinced that their daughter would not give up her quest to marry him, at some point around 1768, they resorted to drastic measures.

In 1611 a front porch with a small room over it had been added to Keevil Manor. In a cruel and inhumane attempt to break the lovers apart, Anne – not yet 20 – was confined to this room by her parents. Effectively imprisoned in her family home, Anne was to be locked away from the outside world until she relinquished all desire to be with Wainhouse.

Left alone above the porch, at some stage – after how long, we do not know – Anne took her diamond ring and inscribed: “Remember Ann Beach” into the glass of the window – the same pane through which, periodically, she may well have been able to catch sight of the man she loved, as he carried out his duties in Keevil (the high walls that now surround the Manor grounds were not constructed until later).
As the months passed, just what this young woman went through psychologically in that room, we can only imagine. Yet William and Anne Beach had underestimated the strength of their daughter’s resolve – and the depth of her love for Rev. Wainhouse: following two years imprisoned above the porch, Anne had not succumbed to her parents’ demands.

By now, Anne was 21 – and the Beaches were faced with little option other than to admit defeat: the incarceration of their own daughter had not succeeded. Anne had come of age and was lawfully free to associate with whom she wished.

However, this ‘eminent’ Keevil couple were not prepared to let their daughter decide her own future without incurring a heavy price. They laid down an ultimatum: unless Anne gave up the Curate for good, she would be cast out of Keevil Manor with “but a shilling”, and have to forfeit her claim to a share of the Beach estate. Anne made her decision: and on the 22nd November 1770, she married the Rev. William Wainhouse in St. Leonard’s Church, by special licence.

Finally a married couple against all the odds, William and Anne Wainhouse settled in Steeple Ashton. Tragically though, this was not to be a fairy-tale ending. On the 10th February 1771, less than three months after marrying the man she had gone through such acute suffering, abuse and victimisation to be with, Anne died. Her body was laid to rest in the south aisle of St. Mary’s Church, beneath a tombstone which ends with the engraving: “BLESSED ARE THE MEEK!”

It is generally believed that Anne died of consumption. Wainhouse claimed she had contracted the condition as a result of her time spent hiding in the Manor shrubbery in the cold during the couple’s second attempt at eloping; however, as that incident had taken place more than two years prior to her death, it is debatable whether it could have been the direct cause of her illness.
Today, there is one point over which we surely can be certain: namely, that Anne would have suffered both psychologically and physically from her two years’ imprisonment. Even if we allow for the accounts of her incarceration being perhaps not wholly accurate (for example, maybe she was allowed the freedom of the house occasionally, or frequently), following such an ordeal, despite her obvious and quite remarkable strength of character, by the time of her marriage we can imagine that Anne’s overall health, and state of mind, would have been far from good. It is quite easy to surmise how, in the 18th Century, she could have been left weakened or ill beyond recovery by her experience – or in the least, left dangerously susceptible to the various illnesses of the era.

Inevitably, given the circumstances, a version of the life-story of this young, 18th Century Keevil woman persists which declares that Anne Beach died of a broken heart. It says that her new husband was unaware until after their wedding that his wife had been disinherited. When Anne told him, it soon became clear to her that he did not love her, and had only married her for her share of the family fortune. Weak following her imprisonment, this realisation overwhelmed the young bride, and proved to be her ending. This interpretation of ‘the story of Anne Beach’ was adopted wholeheartedly by reporter Peter Hiscocks, in his ‘Western Daily Press’ piece of Monday February 19th 1968.

Hiscocks’ somewhat sensationalised full-page account was entitled: “Tragic prisoner of the manor”, and is accompanied by a cartoon-style illustration of ‘Anne’ cowering on the floor by a prison-cell-like door, with a hunched, faceless, long-armed father looming over. It makes no mention of Anne’s older brother, and states that Anne was the eldest child. The article certainly contains some accuracies, and makes for a romantic, tragic 18th Century yarn; and yet its overall tenor, combined with the way in which Hiscocks includes intimate details of events and conversations between the main characters, suggests that it should be considered essentially a tabloid account – and therefore read exactly as such.

However, regardless of this ‘Western Daily Press’ treatment of the story, the possibility that Anne Beach may have died of a ‘broken heart’ should not be totally discounted.

A recent item on BBC radio reported some research which has suggested that feelings of deep personal loss and bereavement held by an individual, can in some cases actually lead to very serious physical deterioration, and even result in death. In the case of Anne Beach – whether William Wainhouse had been drawn to her from the outset purely because of her family’s wealth or not – if, after their marriage, Anne had felt for some reason that all was not well, given what she had endured, a ‘broken heart’-related death is perhaps not unfeasible. Yet, of course, over 240 years on from the events, to ascertain the exact truth of the couple’s relationship and marriage would prove very difficult – although we are able to gain some insight into William’s thoughts.

It would appear that the Curate felt a need to ‘set the record straight’ (as he would likely have thought). He produced a pamphlet – his “Narrative” – subtitled: “A Tale of Domestic & Uncommon Parental Barbarity”, in which he vented his feelings regarding the Beaches.

The Curate blames Anne’s mother for her son’s madness – he claims she crossed him in a youthful love affair, thus throwing him into a deep depression. He also stated that Mrs Beach focused all her affections on her youngest daughter Henrietta – on whom, Wainhouse writes, she had always intended to centre the family fortune. According to the Curate’s account, Henrietta herself was at one stage overheard to say that if Anne rejected her parents’ wishes, “... it would be a fine thing for herself, as she shou’d be a great Fortune out of it.” The Reverend even goes so far as to say how Anne’s mother had, in the end, brought this
inheritance – her desired outcome – into reality: “This she has effected by the Death of her eldest Daughter.” (Later, Henrietta married into a distinguished family, and eventually inherited the entire Beach fortune after the death of her brother). Regarding his marriage to Anne, William wrote that she had “…flung herself at me…” when she reached 21, so as to escape her family.

According to Peter Hiscocks’ 1968 account, William Beach had every copy of Wainhouse’s “Narrative” he could locate destroyed; but I cannot verify whether the reporter’s claim is accurate. ‘The Keevil Society’ article by Victor and Marjory Manning simply says how copies are now incredibly rare, and that they could only discover a few extracts.

William Wainhouse’s writings certainly seem less concerned with his wife’s treatment, imprisonment and eventual death, and appear more driven by a general attack on her parents; in particular, her mother – the way in which she had affected her son’s mind, the preference she had apparently always held for Henrietta, and the act of disinheriting Anne. His words also read as somewhat detached and cold regarding his wife – notably, the comment on Anne having “…flung herself at me…” to escape the family. Coupled with how he had mentioned that he had turned his attentions to Anne having failed in securing the hand of another lady “of good prospects”, well over two centuries on, it is indeed tempting to believe in the ‘broken heart’ version of the tale of Anne Beach. However, without more substantial evidence, and an entire copy of the “Narrative” to study, any judgements or conclusions regarding their marriage are probably best left open to speculation.

As to the fate of the Rev. Wainhouse, the Clergyman carried on as Curate at Steeple Ashton – but the remainder of his life was not uneventful.

By May 1772, 15 months after Anne’s death, Wainhouse was writing love poems to a Miss Sarah Madocks of Denbigh. A swift courtship ensued – but was almost brought to a dramatic end just weeks later. On the afternoon of June the 20th, William was standing in the north parlour of Steeple Ashton Vicarage, talking to the Rev. Pitcairn of Trowbridge, when a sudden lightning bolt hit the building – throwing a fire-ball down the chimney and into the room. Despite great damage being brought to the Vicarage, astonishingly, Wainhouse escaped serious injury (Rev. Pitcairn was less fortunate – a detailed account can be found in the February 2013 issue of ‘Round About Your Parish’).

Having survived this freak event, in the same year, William married Sarah Madocks in Denbigh on the 29th September. The newlyweds settled in Steeple Ashton, and in February 1773 William was instituted as Rector to the small parish of Butterleigh in Devon. He would spend little time there however, preferring to delegate duties to a Butterleigh incumbent whom he paid from the living he received: effectively, William became ‘Rector in Absence’ of Butterleigh. In August 1773, Sarah gave birth to their first child, and their second arrived early in 1775. Soon after this child’s birth, following the Christening, the Wainhouse family left Steeple Ashton for good. Their exact next movements are unclear, but it seems that by around 1777 the family was living in Berkshire, at Ufton Nervet, where William was Curate.

William and Sarah Wainhouse had three more children by 1780, making five in total: two sons and three daughters. In 1789 William was instituted as Rector to the parish of Badgworth in Somerset, while remaining as ‘Rector in Absence’ to his Devon parish. It was in this final Somerset home where he died, on the 25th October 1797, at the age of 59. Sarah survived for another 22 years, dying in 1819.
In the Baptistry of St. Mary’s Church, formerly known as the ‘Beach Chapel’, a fine stone and marble memorial to Wainhouse’s first bride can be found, to the right of the font. It carries the following inscription:

To the dear Memory of
Anne,
Wife of the Revd. Wm. Wainhouse,
Daughter of Wm. Beach Esqr. of Keevil,
She died Feby. the 10th. 1771.
In the 22nd. Year of her Age:
In Temper, meek & humble,
In Manners, gentle & engaging,
To her Lot, in Life & Death, resign’d.

Rest, virtuous Spirit! to thy latent Grief,
Death, on thy Slumbers stealing, brought Relief.
Thy youthful Days, in silent Suff’rings past,
Kind Heav’n repaid with Smiles & Peace at last.

William Wainhouse doubtless enjoyed the full life which was denied his first wife. Yet – whatever the truth of his feelings towards her – while her stone memorial, and her own scratched message in the window over the front porch at Keevil Manor survive, Anne Beach, and her undoubted suffering and fortitude, will indeed be remembered.

Bryan Berrett.

Acknowledgments

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Sources

Anne Beach’s memorial, in Baptistry of St. Mary’s Church, Steeple Ashton.
Anne Beach’s tombstone, in south aisle of St. Mary’s Church, Steeple Ashton.