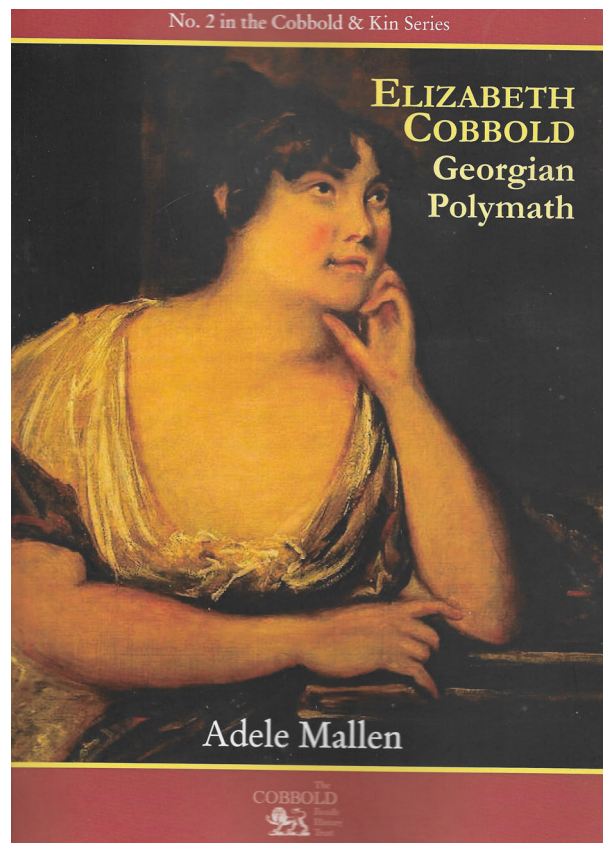


ELIZABETH COBBOLD GEORGIAN POLYMATH – A REVIEW

January 2020

Here is the first review of *Elizabeth Cobbold Georgian Polymath* written by Adele Mallen and reviewed by Jane Dismore.

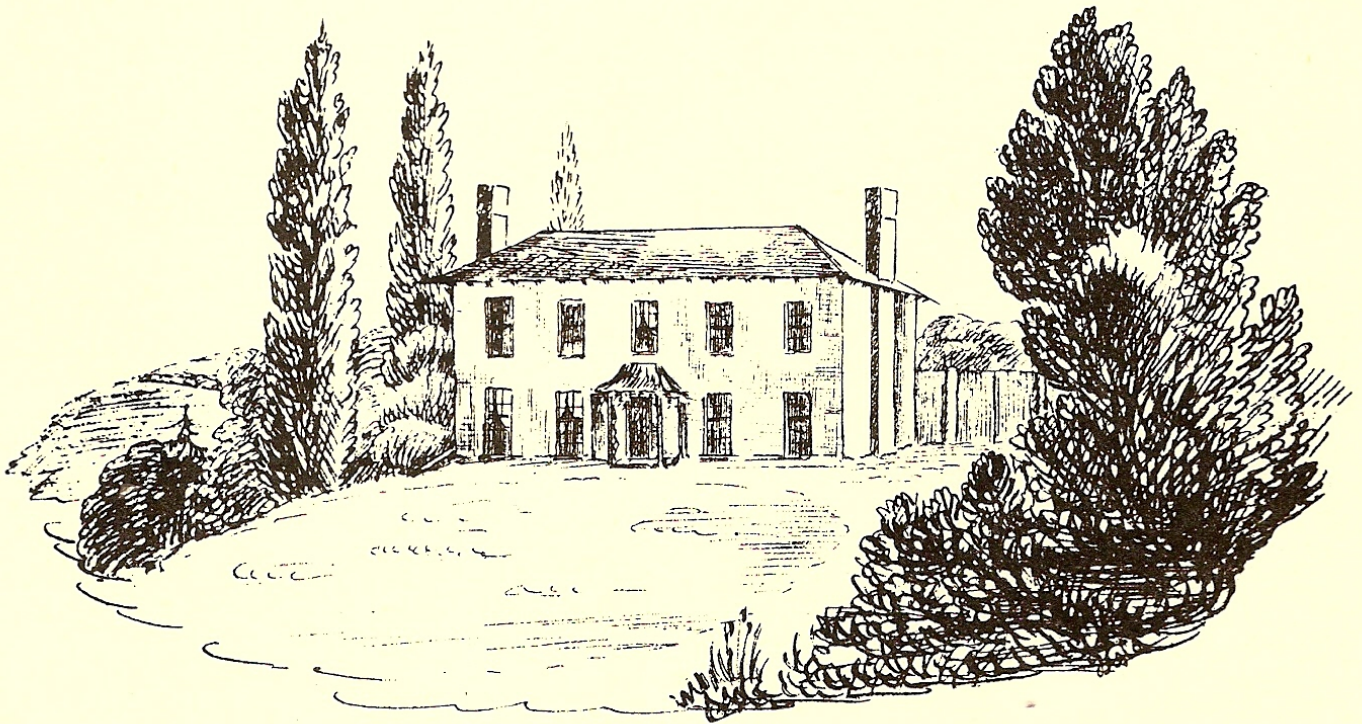
To suffer a severe head injury, and then turn the experience into a humorous poem, suggests rare qualities. In 1810, Elizabeth Cobbold, aged 45, second wife of John Cobbold, the Suffolk brewer, fell through an open cellar door in an Ipswich street, causing her family to fear for her life. Details of the operation to ascertain her injuries, carried out without anaesthetic in her parlour at Cliff House by the Orwell, were relayed to her concerned friend and protégé, the artist John Constable, while another artist hoped she would not die because ‘there are few like her, she is an original.’



Indeed she was, as this fascinating and well-researched book makes entertainingly clear. After telling a friend in verse that ‘the wound in my cranium has opened a way/For the muses bright phantoms poetic to stray’, Elizabeth Cobbold picked up once more the many creative and social strands of her life that justify her description in the book’s title, *A Georgian Polymath*.

The energy, talent and determination of this woman, born Elizabeth Knipe in 1765, were remarkable and saw her succeed in areas generally reserved for men. A contemporary of Jane Austen, she was a poet, playwright, scientist and artist, celebrated for the art of paper cutting. Her ‘fierce intelligence and self-confidence’ saw her question attitudes to her sex and led her to correspond with influential and ‘perceptive men who allowed women more equality with themselves’. Elizabeth also excelled as a social hostess but, lest she be considered too clever for her sex and thus become alienated from her peers, she remained mindful of her maternal duties.

With her wealthy and much older first husband, William Clarke, who died after just three months of marriage, Elizabeth had no children but she acquired fifteen on marrying widower John Cobbold, twenty years her senior, with whom she had seven more of her own.



Pen and ink illustration of Holy Wells taken from Elizabeth Cobbold's scrapbook, 1820

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Fortunate in having a wealthy and tolerant husband who gave her the freedom to pursue her interests, Elizabeth used her energy and talents well. Here are her enlightened scientific contributions and her devotion to writing in its diverse forms, whether Petrarchan sonnets, plays or columns for ladies' magazines. Among her best-known poems were lighter ones to accompany her exquisite hand-cut Valentines. In 1806 she began holding Valentine balls which became one of the highlights of the Ipswich social calendar, where unmarried ladies and gentlemen could look forward to picking from a basket one of her delicate papercuts with a verse inside that gave them hope in love.

Her charity work for infants and her kindness were part of her Christian life. A servant who famously benefited was Margaret Catchpole, whom Elizabeth treated with compassion even after she had stolen from

her employers; Margaret's story was recorded for posterity by Elizabeth's son, Rev. Richard Cobbold. Elizabeth Cobbold died in 1824 but such was her reputation that Charles Dickens, visiting Ipswich in 1835, used her as the model for Mrs Leo Hunter in *The Pickwick Papers*, who 'dotes on poetry'. Adele Mallen's book brings to life this extraordinary woman who deserves recognition.

Jane Dismore

Jane Dismore is a biographer and freelance writer of history and heritage. She became acquainted with the Cobbold dynasty when writing her first book, *The Voice From the Garden: Pamela Hambro and the Tale of Two Families Before and After the Great War*, which focuses on Pamela Cobbold (born 1900 at Holy Wells, Ipswich) and her husband Charles Hambro. The book was nominated for the New Angle Prize for Literature 2013. Jane's latest book is *Princess: The Early Life of Queen Elizabeth II* (pub. 2018 Lyons Press USA & Thistle UK), nominated for the People's Book Prize 2018.

Jane's website is at www.janedismore.com

Note: If, like the Keeper, you are unfamiliar with 'Petrachan' and resort to your dictionary you will find that it means 'pertaining to, imitating the Italian poet Francesco Petracca or Petrarch (1304-1374)