

## *This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'*



### **ONE FORGOTTEN WOMAN – REBECCA COTTON**

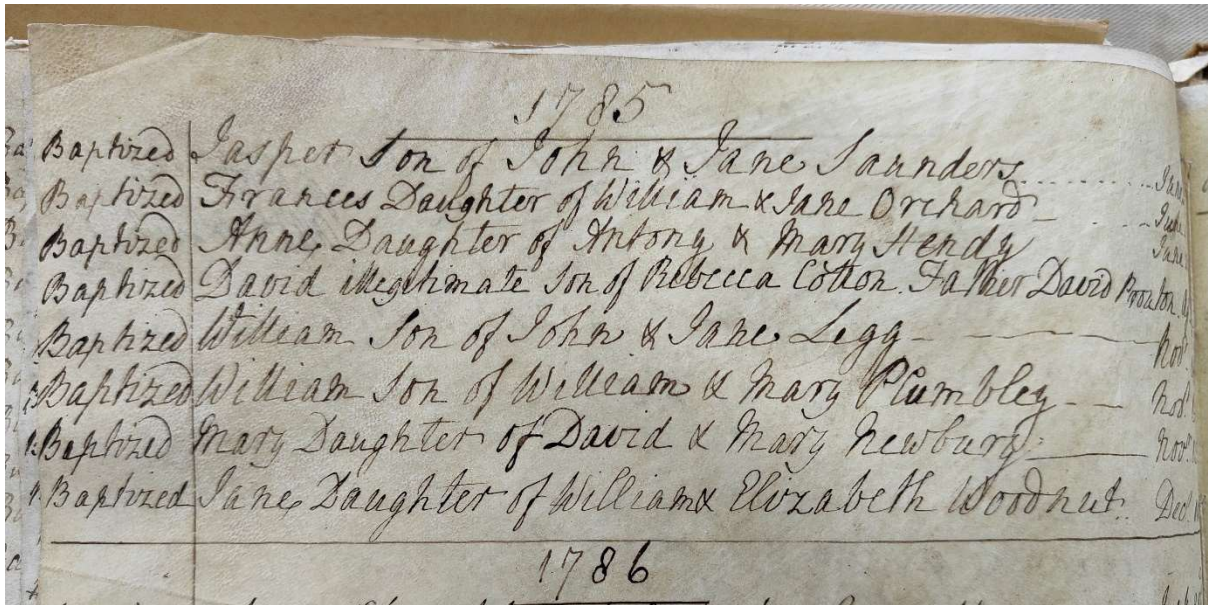
Rebecca Cotton is a hitherto forgotten late-18<sup>th</sup> century woman. In life, she left nothing by way of a lasting mark beyond her name appearing on a handful of documents. She is very unlikely to appear on anyone's family tree. Her birth was not recorded – she was not baptised - so who her parents were, is unclear. She never married. There was no gravestone. She left no descendants. All that is known for sure is that in August 1785, she presented her illegitimate son for baptism at the small parish church in Mottistone, in the western part of the Isle of Wight, England. Three years later she had him buried there. She named the baby David, and the parish register states that the father was one David Prouten. Now, more than two centuries later, I want to acknowledge her, and try to piece together the story of what looks to have been her short and sad life.

Over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, nine Rebecca Cottons were recorded as having lived on the Isle of Wight; seven were recorded as Rebecca (or spelt Rebeckah or Rebekah or Rebeccah) from birth, and two became Rebecca Cotton by marriage. In almost every year throughout that century, there were at least one or two girls or women bearing the name Rebecca Cotton, and for a

few years in the 1760s, there were as many as four. But into the next century, and certainly by the 1841 census, of the fifty-five female Cottons on the island, none was a Rebecca.

I have looked at the parish and the poor-relief records for all of these Rebeccas and their associated families. For this period of history, the parish registers for the western half of the Isle of Wight are remarkably complete. Baptism and burial records (and where appropriate, the marriage records) can be brought together for eight of the nine Rebecca Cottons. However, for one adult burial, there is no corresponding baptism. The handful of other records which cannot be linked to those eight, all fit together to form a consistent timeline for a Rebecca Cotton who was born in 1765, almost certainly in the west or south-west of the island, and who later moved to the island's main town of Newport where she died, aged just thirty-two, having given birth to three short-lived children. If the Mottistone and Newport records are not linked, it means that there was a second "mystery" Rebecca Cotton, which is unlikely. There was, incidentally, no record of anyone of that name born on the mainland, who might have moved to the island.

The foundational record for Rebecca's story is that of the baptism of her baby son David. The Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* of 1662 affirmed the importance of infant baptism, and on Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1785, Rebecca Cotton presented her baby at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul in the small village of Mottistone. The parish register clearly states that he was the illegitimate son of David Prouton (sic).



**The Mottistone parish register showing baby David's baptism**

**Isle of Wight County Record Office, used with permission**

The body and base of the baptismal font were already some five hundred years old when Rebecca stood there with her baby. They remain in place today, although the wooden cover and top stone section date only from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Rebecca will also have seen the fine Jacobean pulpit, there since the early 17th century.



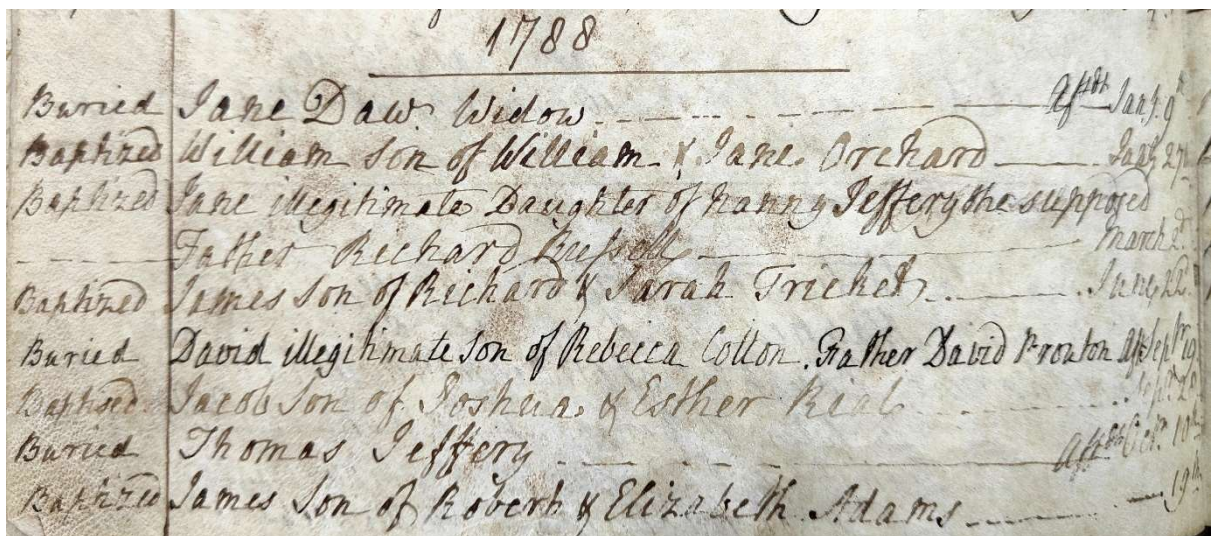
**The Mottistone baptismal font**

### **The Pulpit**

There was only one David Prouten who could have been the baby's father – David, the son of Thomas and Mary Prouten of Steephill. He was a yeoman and a fisherman, who was aged twenty-one in 1785. Yeomen were seen as of a class between the gentry and the farm labourers. He was my 4xgreat grandfather.



Further down the same page, the parish register shows the burial of the child some three years later, on Friday, 19<sup>th</sup> September, 1788. As was usually the case, there was no record as to why he died. Maybe he caught one of the many childhood diseases, or perhaps he simply did not thrive, because of his mother's circumstances.



**The burial record in the Mottistone parish register**

**Isle of Wight County Record Office, used with permission**

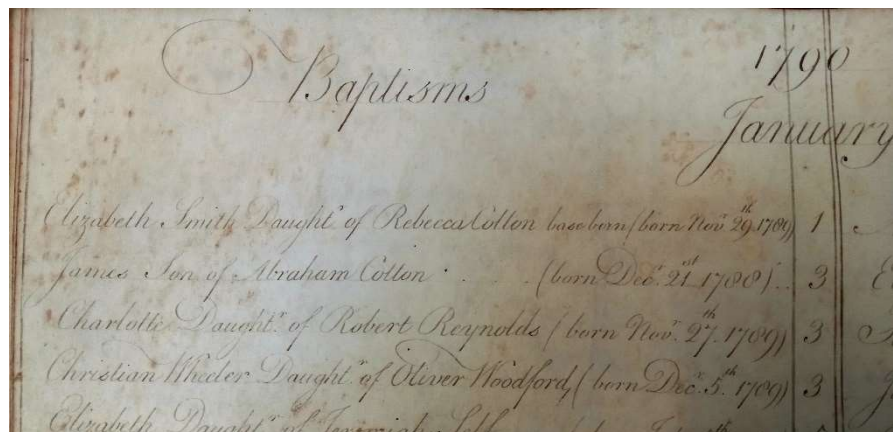
The service for the *Burial of the Dead* stated that it should not be used for a person who had died unbaptized, or excommunicated, or who had committed suicide. Rebecca had ensured by having him baptised, that at whatever age her child died, he could be properly buried. The words that would have been used for young David's baptism and burial can still be read today.

The Officiant at these services was likely to have been either Robert Gibbs, the Rector of Brooke (the adjacent parish) or Andrew Gother, a curate who from 1769 to 1802 served the church in Mottistone.

There are no more records of Rebecca in Mottistone, but the following are linked to the town of Newport, and I believe they relate to the same Rebecca Cotton.

In the early part of 1789, Rebecca must have had a relationship with a man maybe with the surname Smith, such that on November 29<sup>th</sup> of that year, she gave birth to a baby girl, who she named Elizabeth Smith Cotton. The child, recorded as *Base Born*, was baptised in St. Thomas's in Newport on Friday, January 1st, 1790. Note that two days later baby James, the son of Abraham Cotton, was baptised.

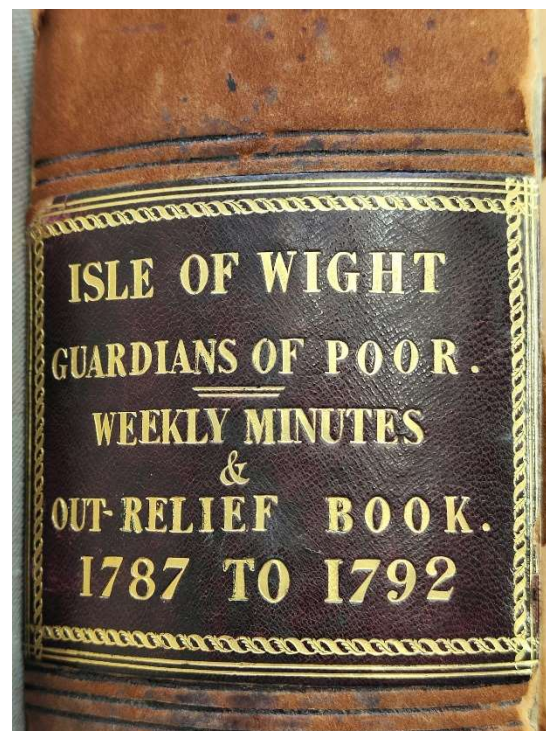
**St. Thomas's  
baptisms in January,  
1790  
Isle of Wight County  
Record Office, used  
with permission**



At that time, the baptismal font in St. Thomas's was not the grand affair that is prominent in the church today. It would have been the smaller font bearing the date 1633, which was removed when the church was rebuilt in the 1850s. It was only in the next century that it was discovered hidden in a garden in Newport, and it was subsequently returned to St. Thomas's, where it now resides.

A week before baby Elizabeth Smith's baptism, Rebecca had been granted a one-off Out-Relief payment of two shillings and six pence, equivalent to £25-30 today. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was provision for the Poor, either by way of their living within the Workhouse, or in the form of Out-Relief payments. They were typically granted to a man, but in the case of female recipients, there was often a comment in the records such as "wife of..." or "widow of..." Rebecca was neither of these, so in the Minute Book she was just *Rebecca Cotton*.

***The cover of the Minute Book  
Isle of Wight County Record Office,  
used with permission***



Rich Patchell		✓	6s -	1 17 6
Woodruffs Wife		Newport	1s 6	
Cath Hammond			1s -	
Wm Jenkins's Wife L.F.	5		7-6	
Thos Shello's Wife			3s -	
Wm Smith			2s 6	
Jackson			2s -	
Robt Russell			1s -	
Rebecca Cotton			2s 6	
By Guardians			1s -	1 5 -
Rich Whittington		Thalfleet	3s -	

**Image from the original Out-Relief Minute Book**

**Isle of Wight County Record Office, used with permission**

The official meeting at which this payment was authorised would have been held in the Isle of Wight Workhouse, more correctly named the House of Industry. The building, located within Parkhurst Forest, was about a mile to the north of Newport town. It was relatively new, having been established in 1770.

Overseeing the affairs of the House of Industry were twenty-four Directors and thirty-six acting-Guardians. The Directors were the wealthier group, and they served on a committee, by rotation. The acting-Guardians were chosen by their parishes, and from this pool, the Directors chose individuals to serve alongside them. The Committees met on a weekly basis, and dealt with all the day-to-day business, including overseeing the purchase of provisions for the Workhouse. All these positions were held by men.



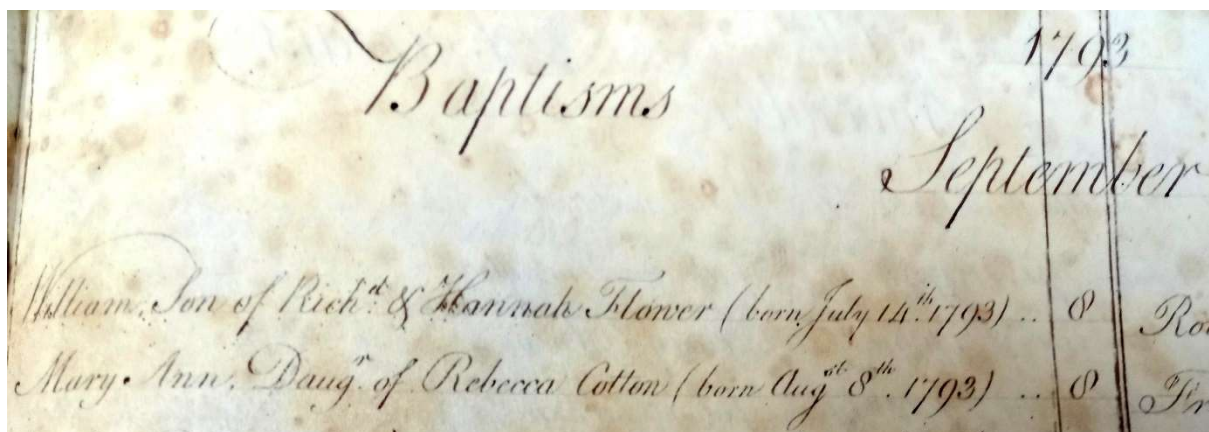
***The House of Industry entrance, today part of St. Mary's hospital in Newport***

On December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1789 when Rebecca's Out-Relief was granted – just a month after her daughter Elizabeth Smith Cotton had been born – the Poor Relief Committee consisted of two Directors and three Guardians. Thirty-five people were successful in their requests for Out-Relief that day, although there is no record of those who were unsuccessful.



There was also provision within Poor Law for small weekly payments to be made to support mothers of illegitimate children, and Rebecca may have been in receipt of them.

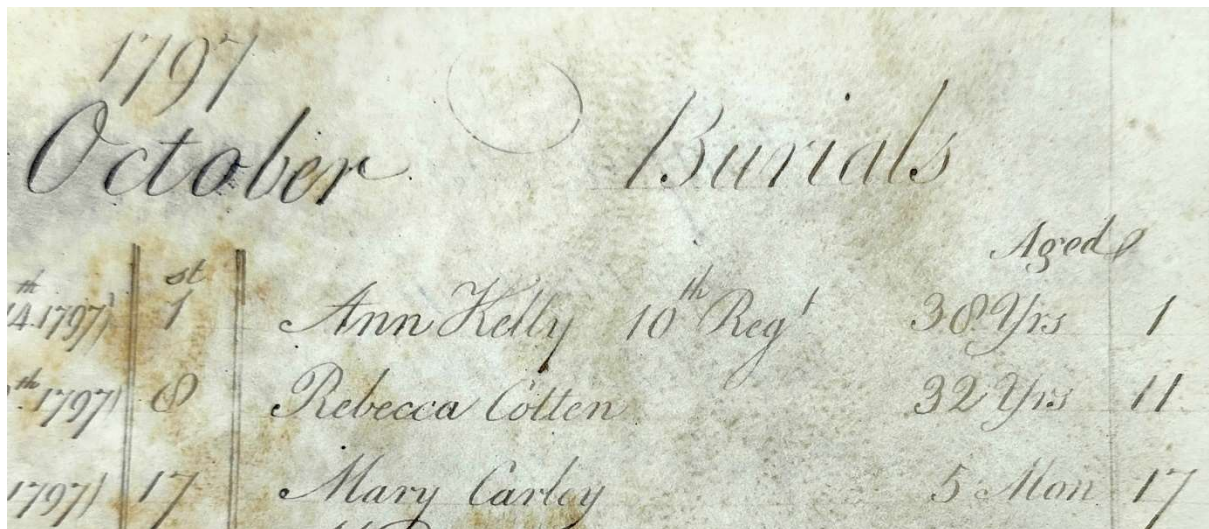
Nevertheless, aged less than two years, Elizabeth Smith Cotton died and her burial was recorded at St. Thomas's on April 27th, 1791. Then towards the end of 1792 Rebecca conceived another child, who was born on August 8th 1793, and christened Mary Ann Cotton, a month later.



***The Newport parish register showing Mary Ann Cotton's baptism  
Isle of Wight County Record Office, used with permission***

There are no further records of this child: nothing relating to marriage or burial, and nothing in the 1841 census. It is therefore likely that she died very soon after her baptism.

Four years later, Rebecca herself died, aged just thirty-two. She was buried on Wednesday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1797. No cause of death was recorded.



***The record of Rebecca's burial in the Newport parish register  
Isle of Wight County Record Office, used with permission***

Rebecca (like her two baby girls) would have been buried in what became known as Church Litten. Up until the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century this area of flat, open ground was used for archery practice. However, as the number of plague-deaths increased, it was thought necessary to bury in Newport those who had died there, rather than transport the bodies to Carisbrooke, over a mile away. Church Litten was established as an area for burial in 1593, and the Elizabethan entrance is still there, by Newport's Church Litten Park. While she had lived in Newport, Rebecca must surely have seen this entrance many times. The burial ground was linked to St. Thomas's close by, which at the time was just a dependent church of St. Mary's, in Carisbrooke. For those who could not afford a headstone, there was an area for unmarked graves.



*The Elizabethan gateway is still there today*

Thus ended Rebecca's short life, and she left no descendants. But she must not be forgotten.

### **Some reflections on Rebecca's life**

Accepting at face value that David Prouten was indeed the father of baby David, then the obvious but unanswerable questions are:

Why did David not marry Rebecca? In those times, the awareness of pregnancy was usually the trigger for a marriage. And, did David even know about his

illegitimate son? If he was told, did he know before or after the child was born, or had died?

While it might seem unlikely to us, it is very possible that David really did not know about Rebecca's pregnancy. The area around Mottistone and Brooke was very isolated from the rest of the island. At the time, there were only local farm tracks connecting the villages and hamlets of West Wight, and life in that part of the island was very much focussed on one's immediate community.

David lived in Steephill, near the coast in the parish of Godshill, almost twelve miles to the east of Mottistone, as the crow flies. If he had first met Rebecca in the area of Brooke or Mottistone, it is most likely that he, being a fisherman, would have sailed there and landed at Brooke Bay.

But even if David had known about Rebecca's pregnancy, there could have been several factors which influenced his decision about whether or not he would spend his future with her.

Aged twenty, David might have considered himself too young for marriage. He did marry, but not for another three years. His bride was Ann Hunt, the daughter of Mary and Thomas Hunt who, like David, was a yeoman. At that time, it was usual for family and friends to be very involved in a person's marriage choice, and social status was considered of great importance. Rebecca's family may have been agricultural labourers, as were so many at that time.

David had already known tragedy in his life. The date isn't certain, but it was probably in 1780 that both his father Thomas, and his older brother Thomas had been drowned off Ventnor in a boating accident. As a consequence, in 1783 (ie. prior to his meeting Rebecca), it was David's name that had been put on a new *Lease for Lives* covering a cottage in Shanklin which is still there, and known today as the Chine Inn. David in later life was to become the landlord of the Inn. He and Ann had eleven children.

Whatever the reasons, the fact is, Rebecca and David did not marry.

Then, there is the question of who Rebecca Cotton's parents might have been?

I started by looking at Rebecca's relationship with David Prouten - if baby David was baptised soon after his birth, then he was conceived in the latter part of 1784. If we assume that the relationship began typically, as a young man meeting a young woman, it is likely they were of a roughly similar age. The record of the Rebecca Cotton who was buried in Newport in 1797, aged thirty-two, places her birth in 1765, the year after David's. It does not prove anything, but it is a good starting point.

I then looked at the forty-eight records for the island's Cotton children baptised between 1750 and 1780. There were seven couples who had no baptised children beyond the very early 1760s, but there were five others, any one of which might possibly have been Rebecca's parents.

There were two Cotton couples who had children baptised around 1765, but none of them was named Rebecca. Then there was a couple who married in

the village of Whitwell in 1766. Their first-born was baptised in December, 1766 and they had nine more children. It is possible that Rebecca was born to them a year before the marriage itself. Whitwell is but a short distance from Steephill, where David Prouten lived. This would have made David's meeting Rebecca very much more likely. However, there are a dozen parishes closer to Whitwell than Mottistone, in which Rebecca could have had her baby baptised, away from community gaze. Yet she chose Mottistone. Maybe that was simply because she lived near there.

Fourthly, there were Benjamin Cotton and Rebecca Temple who married in 1745. Living in Shalcombe, similarly on the west side of the island, they had seven recorded children. Their first, a daughter named Rebekah, was baptised in 1747, and she married in 1768, in Mottistone. It is possible that this Rebekah had a baby girl, the Rebecca of this article, in 1765, prior to that marriage, and that this baby was not baptised.

Finally, there are James & Charity Cotton, who not only offer a good fit geographically but they also provide a possible answer to the question as to how Rebecca might have supported herself when she moved to Newport. If James and Charity were indeed Rebecca's parents, then she would have had two brothers who were living in Newport in the 1780s, who could have provided a home for her.

James Cotton married Charity Fry in December 1750 in Shalfleet (a parish adjacent to Brooke and Mottistone). They had five boys baptised in Brooke between 1752 and 1760, and then a William in 1768. While it is not unheard of for a couple to have six children, all boys and no girls, it is nevertheless very

unusual. There was that long gap in baptisms between 1760 and 1768, within which they could have had Rebecca in 1765 and, for their own reasons, not had her baptised. The baptismal records for the first five children just mention James Cotton as the father, and it was only William's baptism in 1768 that recorded both James and Charity as the parents.

Their first-born, another James, married Ann Way. In 1778. The marriage Banns were read in Brooke, the third reading being on 11<sup>th</sup> October, but they actually married in Newport on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup>. Over the following years, they had four boys, for whom only the father James was recorded as the parent. There was also an Ann baptised in 1781 and then a Rebecca, for whom there is no baptismal record but she was buried in Newport on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1789.

Their fifth boy, Abraham, looks to have married and he too moved to Newport. Among the records for his four children were a Mary Ann baptised in 1787, and it was his son James, born in 1788, who was baptised in Newport in January 1790, just two days after Rebecca Cotton's daughter Elizabeth Smith. If James & Charity were indeed Rebecca's parents, their sons, her brothers, James and Abraham would surely have provided support for when Rebecca moved to Newport.

We will never know for sure who Rebecca's parents and siblings were. But I suggest that James & Charity Cotton are the most likely - because of where they lived; because there was that eight-year gap between the baptisms of their boys, which included the year 1765; and because their sons James and Abraham moved to live in Newport, as did Rebecca. Was it also just coincidence - the closeness of the dates for Abraham's son's baptism and that

of Elizabeth Smith Cotton's; and Abraham naming his daughter Mary Ann, which Rebecca might have copied? It is possible too that Abraham's Mary Ann died as a baby.

Whoever her parents were, it is most likely that Rebecca grew up in either Brooke or Mottistone, each of which at the time had only around 150 inhabitants. To get an idea as to what life was like for her, unmarried and bringing up her child in a small, late-18<sup>th</sup> century village, there are many examples in fictional novels. One example would be Winston Graham's Poldark series. Rebecca's community would have been very close-knit. Most people living there knew only their neighbours and the farmers who employed them. All those around Rebecca would have been aware of her circumstances, which would have been frowned upon. At a time when even every field in Brooke had its own local name, that same intimate knowledge would have extended to every resident's affairs. Brooke in the 1700s was described as being in a time *when the Lord of the Manor and the Rector, usually benevolently, decided everything; when everyone knew their place and almost every community event was connected to the church.*

The church building in Brooke was destroyed by fire in 1862 and there is nothing of significance visible today in the rebuilt church (or its surroundings) that survives from Rebecca's time. The church building in Mottistone also had major renovations in Victorian times, so it is only the pulpit and the lower part of the baptismal font which survive from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.





***Mottistone church (in 2013)***



***Mottistone Manor, located close to the church, parts of which go back to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.***

In 1788 Rebecca moved on, leaving the rural life of West Wight. It was after her son David's burial in Mottistone that she went to live eight miles away in the island's main town of Newport. Its population was growing – at the time it was around three thousand. The town itself largely comprised well-ordered streets running roughly east to west, and north to south. They were described as *well paved, kept remarkably clean, and were provided with footways. The buildings were neat, commodious and of pleasing appearance.* There were markets twice a week on Wednesdays and Saturdays. There was even a theatre.

But more and more soldiers were being garrisoned around the town. What was having a massive impact on island life were the rapidly changing events in France. The French Revolution began in earnest in 1789, and war on England was declared in early 1793. The Isle of Wight was strategically important for the defence of England against the already-planned invasion by the French. They had drawn up maps showing how they planned to take over the island, for use as a base from which to invade the mainland.

Across the island, a volunteer army was being assembled - at the time, the island's population was described as *naturally warlike and courageous.* There were *three thousand island volunteers, a squadron of horse, and about five hundred Sea Fencibles* willing to take action to defend the land. The Sea Fencibles were a naval militia (mostly volunteer fishermen and local residents) formed in 1793 to act as an anti-invasion force in Britain's coastal waters.

It was to this new world, very different from the one in which she had grown up, that Rebecca moved, and where only a few years later, she died.

## **Final thoughts**

Rebecca's short life had ended at the age of thirty-two. One would hope that within it, she would have experienced some moments of joy with her family and her children. But there must also have been many times of great sadness, regret, fear, and feelings of rejection and exclusion. Countless other women followed a similar path but today, Rebecca Cotton, most likely the daughter of James & Charity Cotton, can be acknowledged, and she is no longer a forgotten woman.



***Brooke Bay, looking towards Freshwater***



***Brooke village, looking inland from the cliff top***

### **Information Sources**

The team at the IoW County Records Office in Newport, who have been particularly helpful.

The IoW Family History Society.

Myra Joan Jones' thesis *Of the Poor in the Isle of Wight 1771-1836* published in 1982.

*The History of Newport (Isle of Wight) Parish Church*, by Wilfrid J Way, 1975.

*Vectiana, or a Companion to the Isle of Wight* published in 1806 by John Albin.

A copy of the 5<sup>th</sup> Edition is held in the Bodleian Library and can be read online on Google Books.

*Brook, A Village History* by Daphne Denaro Brooke-Smith and Susan Mears, published by Crossprint in 2010. ISBN 978-0-9567050-0-6.

Members of the congregations of the churches of St. Mary in Brook, St. Peter & St. Paul in Mottistone and St. Thomas in Newport.

*All photographs and text ©Anthony Miles-Prouten*

A version of this story has also appeared in the journal of the Isle of Wight Family History Society.

***Anthony Miles-Prouten 2023***