

THE PRINCESSE DE LAMBALLE



There is a persistent story – persistent, that is, because of repetition over the past two centuries – that some of the jewels of Queen Marie Antoinette of France were brought to England for safe keeping in 1791. The courier was her trusted friend Princess Marie Teresa Louise of Lamballe (1749-1792).

Marie Louise had little luck in her life of nearly 43 years. She was a member of a junior branch of the house of Savoy, which through the expiry of the senior branch ended up as kings of Sardinia and then of Italy; but that was many years after her premature death.

At the age of 17 she was married off to an extraordinarily wealthy descendant of the French royal family who very soon died of venereal disease. The Prince de Lamballe was named after the town close to St Brieuc on the north coast of Normandy, today dominated by its spectacular cathedral. He was a descendant of Louis XIV and the heir to what was reckoned to be the greatest fortune in France.



The Prince and Princesse de Lamballe (Wikipedia and www.geni.com)

The French royal family rescued her, or so it seemed at the time, and in due course she became a close friend of Marie Antoinette of Austria (1755-1793), who married the heir to the French throne at the common but still somewhat ridiculous age of 14 and became queen of France in 1774, when she was 18. Fifteen years later the French revolution broke out, though it did not become seriously violent for a little while.

The turning point in the Revolution for the royal family – though it might well have happened later – was in June 1791 when they tried to flee the country but were intercepted at Varennes-en-Argonne in north-eastern France, in what is now the département of the

Meuse, close to where counter-revolutionary troops were based. They were brought back to Paris. At once it was obvious to revolutionaries of all colours that the king and the royal family opposed the principles of the revolution and were prepared to fight to restore the old order of autocracy and privilege. For the Princesse de Lamballe the change of mood was a disaster. She had been responsible for trying to safeguard at least some of Marie Antoinette's jewels – and may just have done so. When she came to England she lived for a short time at Bath but also is reported to have come to Catsfield where the Gibbs family then owned Catsfield Place in the south-eastern part of the parish [see Estates and their families section].

Sir Vicary Gibbs (1751-1820) was a well-known barrister and MP, knighted in 1805, who rose to be Solicitor-General, then Attorney-General, ending as Lord Chief Justice. He had a very independent approach to politics and could hardly be said to be popular: shrewish, with a shrill voice, he was nicknamed *Vinegar Gibbs*. He was a brother of the founder of the Gibbs mercantile dynasty best remembered now for its construction of the imposing house at Tyntesfield in Somerset; the company was floated in 1773 and was bought by HSBC ten years later. Little is known of his wife Frances other than she was the sister of the famous Lord Seaforth FRS MP. In 1792 Seaforth raised the 78th Regiment of Foot, popularly known as the Seaforth Highlanders; he was later Governor of Barbados. It appears that the Princess stayed only a short time at Catsfield in 1791 before returning to support her friend and patron in Paris. It is possible, indeed likely, that the Princesse and the then Mrs Gibbs had met at Bath.

From the end of 1791 things got distinctly worse for the French royal family and their adherents. Austria declared war on France in 1792, at least ostensibly for the safety of the French royal family whose queen was Austrian, and prepared to attack from what is now Belgium but was then the Austrian Netherlands. The war made the French Bourbons apparently the enemies of their own country. The royal family was imprisoned, and the Princesse was regarded as a figurehead of resistance: no doubt the revolutionaries had heard of her journey to England and of her closeness to the family. On 3 September she was brought to court in what would later, perhaps mildly, be called a show trial. She quickly proclaimed herself in favour of liberty, whatever that really meant; but when asked to swear hatred to the royal family she refused. She was immediately taken off to be killed, which the mob very willingly did. Published details of her death are particularly unpleasant but may owe some exaggeration to the revolutionary fervour of the times. Lady Gibbs survived, to die at Hayes in Kent in 1843.

That brings us back to the question: if the jewels were taken to Catsfield – and it remains an if – where are they? No indication of their whereabouts, let alone a sight, has ever been had. Of course, if someone had found them, they might have disposed of them quietly and for large sums of money, without saying where they were from. No-one knows. If they are still at Catsfield (if indeed they ever were) perhaps some later generation will unearth them.