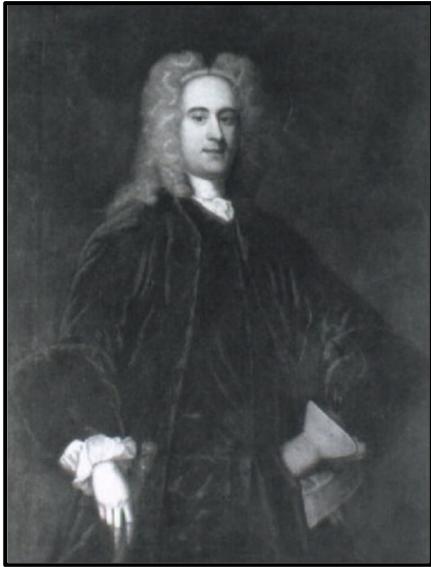


Embsay Cottage, Shires Lane : A 17th Century Sanatorium



One of the oldest buildings in Embsay stands on Shires Lane, mostly hidden behind a high hedge and wall. It is a former barn with house attached, now converted into two separate private residences.

The house has been much altered over the centuries and now has the appearance of a mid-19th Century house. But behind this relatively modern façade is a 17th Century building.

The man who built it was Dr. Martin Lister (1639-1712). His name may be unfamiliar to most but he was, in fact, an extraordinary man who deserves to be better known.

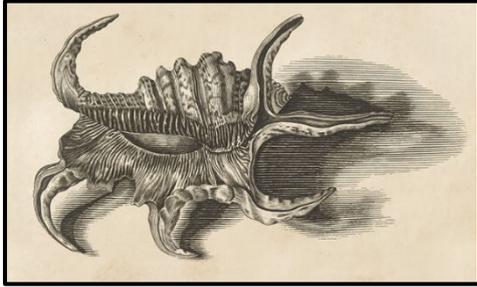
Martin was born in 1639, at Radcliffe, Buckinghamshire, the 4th of the 10 children of Martin Lister, who served as a member of the “Long Parliament” for Brackley in Northamptonshire during the turbulent period leading up to the English Civil War. This was a wealthy family with property in Malham, Carleton-in-Craven, Flasby, Winterburn, Eshton and Airton, as well as London’s Covent Garden, and in Lincolnshire. They were also

well-connected. Martin Lister senior’s cousin, Frances, married the famous Parliamentarian general, John Lambert. His wife, Susannah, had been a maid-of-honour to Anne of Denmark, King James I’s queen consort.

Like so many others, the family was split apart by the civil wars. Martin Lister senior was a staunch royalist, while his brother-in-law, James Temple was a regicide, signing the death warrant of King Charles I. His uncle, Dr. Matthew Lister, was physician to Anne of Denmark, and later to her son, King Charles I, as was another uncle, Dr. Edward Lister. During the civil war, it was Matthew Lister who dashed down to Essex to deliver Queen Henrietta Maria’s last child during her secret, tortuous and dangerous journey back from France with the funds the king desperately needed for his failing campaign.

Matthew took a personal interest in the education of his great-nephew, the young Martin Lister, who was obviously a promising talent from a very early age. He ensured that the young man was sent to Cambridge University, and then to France to continue his studies before joining the medical profession. On his return, Martin practised briefly in Skipton, before moving to York in 1670, where he became part of a group of artists, scientists and philosophers who met regularly in a house in Micklegate to debate the latest discoveries and ideas. In 1683 he moved to London, and in the 1690s was the personal doctor to the British ambassador to France. In 1709, his family connections included his niece, Queen Anne’s favourite, Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough (the subject of the 2018 film “The Favourite”) and she obtained a position for him as a physician to Queen Anne.

In his day, Martin Lister was a well-known scientist. He was the archetypal polymath, learned in a wide range of subjects, an excellent personification of the Age of Enlightenment. Indeed, he was one of the very first to apply the principles of modern scientific classification to the natural world. He was the Vice-President of the prestigious Royal Society, he invented the histogram and the geological map. He worked with Isaac Newton perfecting the reflective quality of telescopes and helped found the natural history collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. He wrote over 60 papers for the Royal Society on subjects as wide ranging as herbal remedies, a travel guide to Paris, Roman cookery, fossils, kidney stones, diabetes, gout, rabies, smallpox, molluscs, geology, the effects of soil and climate on French wine, the Roman walls of York, chemistry and mathematics. There is a ridge on the Moon’s surface named after him – The “*Dorsa Lister*”. The botanist John Ray (1627 – 1705) named a genus of orchid “*Listera*” (commonly known as twayblade) in his honour but unfortunately, in the UK, it is now officially re-named the “*Neottia*” genus. There is also a spider named after him.



A shell from "Historiae Conchyliorum" (1685) by Martin Lister - engraving by his daughters. © Wellcome Collection

His classification and detailed studies of spiders, molluscs and sea shells were standard text books for over 200 years. He taught his teenage daughters Anna and Susannah the art of scientific illustration. Their technical skill was a remarkable feat when most late-17th Century women of their class received little education beyond music, dancing and needlework. Over a period of more than a decade, they not only drew the illustrations for his large treatise on shells and several of his papers for learned journals, but also hand-produced all the copperplate engravings for the printers. They were probably also the first women to ever use a microscope for scientific study.

So what was Dr Lister's connection to Embsay?

He suffered from asthma, so often took his summer breaks in his Craven estates, taking the opportunity to collect specimens from the area for his studies in natural history. He would also frequently visit Embsay because the house he built here (Embsay Cottage) was a convalescent home for his London patients, many of whom were members of the nobility or important members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Two centuries before Eastby Sanatorium for tuberculosis patients, and before Thomas Parkinson turned the abandoned mill at Whitfield (a few remains of which can still be seen along the shores of Embsay Reservoir) into a health resort in 1890s, Dr. Martin Lister had selected Embsay as the most suitable place for his fee-paying patients who needed fresh country air to recover their health.

Sadly, he was unable to save the lives of two of his children – his son Michael was buried at St Helen's Church, York in 1676; and 5 year old daughter, "*dear childe*" Jane, died in 1688 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Dr. Martin died in 1712 and was buried with his beloved wife, Hannah, in Clapham, Surrey. Over 1,000 letters survive of his extensive collection of correspondence with leading scientists and philosophers of the day, much of which is held at the Bodleian and British Libraries including letters to his wife, "*My dear Hart*".

There is a date stone in the house which reads "M. Lister, 1747" – this probably refers to his son, another Martin Lister, who was a physician to King George III. Perhaps he too used this house for his patients – or maybe he even lived here, using it as a country retreat.

Jane Lunnon, Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group. 2019