

Travels with the Leighs

All aristocratic families such as the Leighs of Stoneleigh Abbey were great travellers – there is no surprise in this. Any examination of the history of the Leighs, however, reveals that they travelled extensively from medieval times - one can discover them fighting at Crecy and Agincourt, for example.



These Leighs were originally from Cheshire, however, and the first “travelling Leigh” associated with Warwickshire could be called a business traveller, essentially. Sir Thomas Leigh, knighted by Queen Elizabeth I as he took up the role of Lord Mayor of London in her year of accession, 1558, had travelled the European continent as a Merchant of the Staple. He had been born in Wellington, Shropshire, and rather like Dick Whittington, had gone to London to make his fortune. He rose quickly through the

ranks of the Mercers’ Company until ultimately becoming its Master; as Lord Mayor of London, he was a good man for the Queen to have in that position as he was Protestant.

He travelled frequently, then, to Antwerp and other cities in the Hanseatic League, and is believed to have journeyed as far as Turkey. Nevertheless, his travels being for business rather than pleasure, he is not the focus of this account.

Many of his descendants travelled frequently between their various properties and those of the families into which they married. These were many and varied. In the seventeenth century their travels may have centred mostly on Gloucestershire and Staffordshire, as well as Bedfordshire, where they had either bought or inherited lands and houses. The Gloucestershire branch of the family even decamped entirely to the Netherlands for a time. It is as we move into the eighteenth century that we see “leisure travel” appearing more, with the fashionable journeys at that time viewed as essential for the cultivated man. Edward, 3rd Lord Leigh, certainly undertook the Grand Tour, returning to Stoneleigh with a determination to alter the Elizabethan mansion which his

forebears had built. Fortunately for posterity he did not demolish the property, but instead knocked down simply its western end, engaging local architect Francis Smith to design the grand baroque West Wing we see today. In this way, travel had an impact on the home to which the traveller returned.

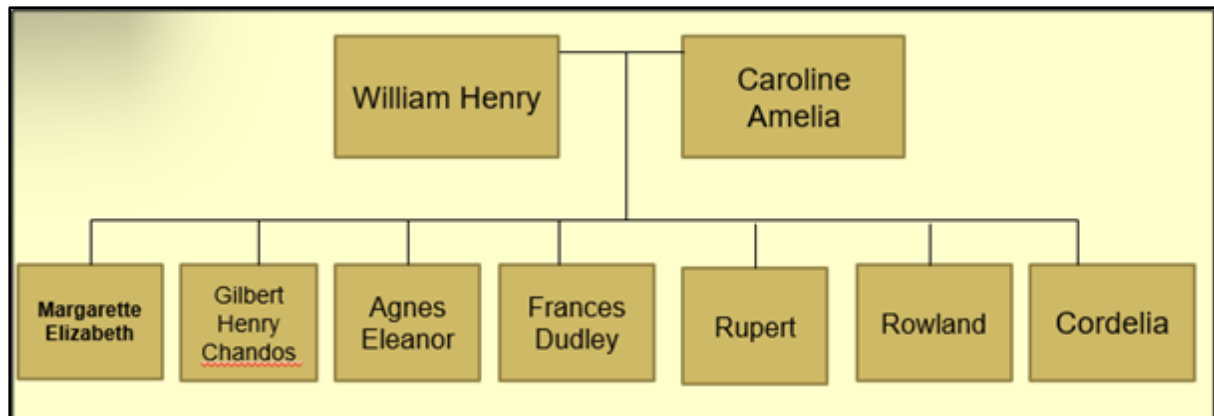


The main people concerned here, however, appear in the Leigh story a century later. The peerage had died out in 1786 but revived by Queen Victoria in 1839, and so our focus is the family of William Henry 2nd Lord Leigh of the 2nd Creation, who was Baron from 1850 to 1905.



William Henry and his wife Caroline Amelia had eight children who survived childhood. During the nineteenth century their travels were extensive, and in some cases unusual. Indeed, William Henry's youngest siblings, twins James and

Sophie, had been born in Paris whilst their parents were travelling, and their father, Chandos the 1st Baron of the 2nd Creation, died in Bonn while there, looking for health cures. It is to those children that the story turns.



The eldest child was Margarette Elizabeth, named after her maternal grandmother. She married the Earl of Jersey, a very wealthy man, and for many years presided over society events at their home, Osterley Park, in West London. Their other house, Middleton, lay near Banbury in Oxfordshire. But their travels began when Queen Victoria made the Earl her Governor General of New South Wales between 1890-93. Even earlier, however, they had travelled throughout Europe and met Bismarck, Wilhelm II, many artists and writers including Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, and Rider Haggard. Whilst in New South Wales, her husband being confined to government business, Margarette at Haggard's suggestion, went with her brother Rupert and her daughter to Samoa, and met Robert Louis Stevenson.



Stevenson's house in Samoa

Margarette describes her travels extensively in her autobiography and evidently enjoyed presiding over society events in Australia just as much as she had done in England. The Samoan visit was highly unorthodox for an aristocratic family, nevertheless, as they found themselves sleeping under the stars, visiting the rebel king Mata'afa incognito. Stevenson seems to have been particularly taken with Margarette's beauty, and in his *Samoa'id* wrote about the trio:

“But two to pursue the adventure: one that was called the Queen
Light as the maid, her daughter, rode with us veiled in green.
And deep in the cloud of the veil, like a deer's in a woodland place,
The fire of the two dark eyes, in the field of the unflushed face.
And one her brother that bore the name of a knight of old,
Rode at her heels unmoved; and the glass in his eye was cold.
Bright is the sun in the brook; bright are the winter stars
Brighter the glass in the eye of that captain of hussars.”



Rupert himself was a seasoned traveller because of his military career – he was the third son and had therefore few responsibilities at home. On Jan 29th 1876 he had been gazetted for the 15th Hussars, and in his diary wrote that by the 30th “I must hold myself ready to embark for Bengal.” He travelled with the Hussars to India, and to Afghanistan twice and by 1881 was in South Africa in the first war against the Boers. In 1882 he was sent to Malta, Alexandria and Port Said and in September 1882 saw action at Tel-el-Kebir. None of this was unusual for

a man of his family and rank, though the village of Stoneleigh rejoiced heartily with triumphal arches and banners when their “Captain of Hussars” returned safely home. Following his travels to Australia with his sister he settled down in England and married, his only child ultimately becoming the 4th Lord Leigh.



Francis Dudley Leigh was the second son of his parents, though he was destined to succeed his father as Lord Leigh, as will be related later. As befitted his status he, like all his brothers, travelled “to broaden the mind” and was an enthusiastic admirer of the opportunities afforded by settlers in America. For a time, he worked on sheep farms in California but became acquainted with many of the states of the continent. His first wife, Helene Forbes Beckwith, was the daughter of a New York banker, though he had met her during the shooting season in Scotland. Their society wedding in London in 1890 brought large numbers of American “aristocracy” to this country, and they remained in contact with US friends after having settled in Warwickshire. Francis succeeded his father in 1905 as the 3rd Lord Leigh, and it was therefore with great sorrow that he found himself without an heir when Helene died, childless, in 1909.



The second-eldest daughter of the family, Agnes, remained single, and for much of her life her travels were confined to the South of France and to Italy, often with her parents who enjoyed vacations at the fashionable resort of Menton. She made frequent trips to stay with friends and relatives in this country, too, but her travels became more extensive following her sister-in-law’s death.

Agnes took up the role of consort to her brother at this time, moving back into the abbey and accompanying him on official visits locally. He was to remarry – another girl from New York – in 1923, but with the exception of the war years 1914-18, when he spent

some time in Belgium driving ambulances or visiting troops, Francis and Agnes travelled much of the world.



From Francis Dudley's album, Belgium 1915

Agnes and Francis (usually known as Dudley) not only wrote journals describing their adventures, but Agnes also wrote descriptive letters home to their youngest sister, Cordelia. They travelled through the Balkans, and to Palestine, and Egypt, then to the Caribbean, specifically Jamaica (taking their chauffeur, Stephens, with them!). At Easter 1920 they were in Jerusalem, then Carthage and amusingly, while in Jamaica wrote about a dinner given them, where their fellow guests were the Archbishop, the head of a girls' school, a deaconess, a newspaper editor ("coloured" she said) ...and his wife, "an escaped nun"!

Similarly, she wrote of a sea journey where a fellow traveller was the Maharajah of Jodhpur, going to a Durbar to ride at the head of his troops. He fought in the passage on the ship with his valet, using wet sponges...he was just a boy of fourteen, after all, and "is at school at Wellington."

Perhaps of greatest interest is that they were in Egypt in February 1923 at the Old Cataract Hotel in Aswan and not only saw the new dam there and the sinking of Philae but also saw the open tomb of Tutankhamun. Lord Caernarvon was a relative and through him they were able to view the artefacts being brought out.

“The whole chamber is smaller than we expected. A lady we know saw the whole couch taken out, so soon there will be nothing left” she wrote on February 22nd 1923.

“This is a huge hotel but Tut has been so popular that he has rather spoiled the Aswan season.”



The youngest boy in the family was Rowland. Although the majority of his life was spent in England, he, like so many of his family, was fascinated by all things American. Perhaps he met his future wife while travelling to the Deep South of America with his uncle James. Certainly, he was married there, in Savannah Georgia, the ceremony being performed by his clergyman uncle James.

James Leigh's travels took up many years of his life. During the 1860s he sailed to America many times on behalf of his brother, William Henry. Following the lifting of tariffs on the import of French ribbons into this country, the ribbon weavers of Coventry and Warwickshire found themselves in desperate straits: French ribbons were more affordable to buy than English ones. This resulted in terrible poverty for the workers and Lord Leigh, with a committee of concerned individuals, set up a cotton mill to provide work for them, utilising their skills. This necessitated the import of American cotton, and it was James (usually known as James Wentworth Leigh) who travelled to do business with the cotton merchants of the South, principally in Savannah Georgia. It was on one such journey that he met his future wife, Frances Butler, who was attempting to manage her late father's rice plantations following the Civil War and the Emancipation of Slaves. James admired the way in which she was caring for her employees and promptly married her. There followed many years of regular travel across the Atlantic, and the young couple attempted to keep the plantations thriving at the same time as James caring for his flock (for he had

become the vicar of the village of Stoneleigh). It must have been a gruelling time for them, and ultimately, they had to give up the American adventure and settle in England. After his tenure as vicar in Stoneleigh, James “rose through the ranks”, finally becoming Dean of Hereford Cathedral.

It is probable, then, that it was through Uncle James that Rowland met his wife-to-be, Mabel Gordon, daughter of a Savannah cotton merchant. After their marriage there, they returned to Warwickshire, and both are buried in the churchyard at Ashow, near the Abbey. They kept close connections with America, however, and Rowland was, in fact, to die in Orange County.

So far in this story there has been little mention of the youngest sibling, Cordelia, for the good reason that her travels were limited to European holidays and visits to relatives in the UK. Like her sister Agnes, she remained single and no doubt her resources were limited. Her importance in the story, however, is that it is through her siblings’ letters to her, the staying-at-home-sister, that much of our knowledge about their travels is known.



But what of the first-born son of William Henry and Caroline Amelia – the heir to the estates and the peerage: Gilbert Henry Chandos Leigh? His travels were perhaps the most wide-ranging, the most interesting – and were to lead to his premature death at the age of thirty-three.

As with all his siblings Gilbert was an enthusiastic diarist and speaker, and we therefore know a great deal about his adventures.

Having travelled throughout Europe and Scandinavia, Gilbert’s aim was to go on a world trip. He began by going to America, so beloved of his family. Once arrived there, however, he heard of the breaking of the bank of California at San Francisco which was where his money was! No doubt considering the possible dangers of the journey on which he was embarking, he bought a rifle but was evidently rather timid as he wrote in his diary that he feared he might shoot himself.

This was 1875, when the US was emerging from the travails of the Civil War and when the mid-West was a largely lawless and empty place. Gilbert went on from California, into the interior as he had a promise from General Lawrence that he might see an Indian Council at Cheyenne. His description of the event follows:

The Indian Council:

The Northern Indians “advanced in a military line, singing – eventually more than 1000. Later, yelling, came Cheyennes, firing guns into the air. On the next day, Red Cloud, Spotted Tail and Northern Indians refused to dismount, expecting disturbance. They formed a circle round the council tent. Red Cloud and Spotted Tail were uneasy, and Little Big Man in full dress rode round the outside of the ring in a menacing manner. All this looked bad. Little Big Man had vowed in his wicked heart to break up the council and had excited all the young braves to join him. If Red Cloud got up to speak, he was to be shot down, and this was true also of Spotted Tail. Every white soldier had 2 Indians positioned behind him by Little Big Man who at a given signal were to shoot him dead and then massacre the whites. All this was frustrated by Sitting Bull: he moved the Indians from behind the soldiers and substituted his own men, saying they would shoot any troublemakers.”

This remarkable account should remind us of the danger in which Gilbert found himself, and as time went on, he faced further challenges. Later in the same trip he was used to going out alone to hunt – antelope, elk, buffalo, sheep, but on one occasion he became lost on the Laramie trail: he rode out alone, following the Running Water stream for 6 miles or so. It grew dark; he camped out. Seeing not even a shrub on which to tie his horse, he left it free; inevitably it trotted, then cantered, then galloped off. “This was a pretty position for an English gentleman bred up in the lap of luxury, no horse, nothing to eat in semi-hostile country, 40 miles from human habitation, among Indians who might relieve their ennui by a little quiet torture of my carcass.” Coyotes were abroad. He had a box of sardines – but no knife to open it. He bashed it against a rock and winkled out small pieces for breakfast, lunch and dinner. He had a cigar, but no lighter! He bathed in the river and 3 days later heard a pony’s hooves, and a man appeared with a gun. What was he to do, he mused - shout “How”? or “A Leigh! A Leigh!” and spring at his throat? It happened that the man was a courier who, startled by finding him in such circumstances, told him he would be scalped if

found. A wagon came along, with 2 men and a squaw, who gave him rolls, whisky and water. Then the mail coach, who said he was being sent a horse. It is peculiar that none of these felt able to take him with them! Eventually after hobbling on, he saw ponies and 2 boys who had been sent for him but who had eaten all his supplies and were just about to abandon the search. Evidently Gilbert's adventures, told with some naivety, give a sense of his being "an innocent abroad."

Following these events, he set off for China via Japan, detailing more adventures in his diaries. He was amazed at the tiny Japanese women and their country which seemed to him to be so backward that it was "like the 15th century", and he was equally astonished by finding Chinese stowaways on the boat he took up the Yangtze to Shanghai – it was a 4000-mile journey taking 24 days. Four of these stowaways died and were embalmed so that they could be buried in their own country, he wrote.

Arriving in Thailand he wrote about what he saw there: the Sleeping Buddha 145 ft long, of brick and gold leaf, his feet of mother of pearl, at Wat Tah temple. Nearby there was a high wall from which they threw paupers who could not afford to be buried and who were then eaten by dogs. He described the palace and the king and then the white elephants (actually light brown). Apparently, the Buddha himself was a white elephant in his last habitation and if you could find one and send it to the king you would make yourself a fortune. He and his friend wanted to get into a particular temple but were not able to do so, "so Warner surreptitiously purloined the head of a stone god, and we departed" - a startling example, to the modern reader, of Victorian attitudes.

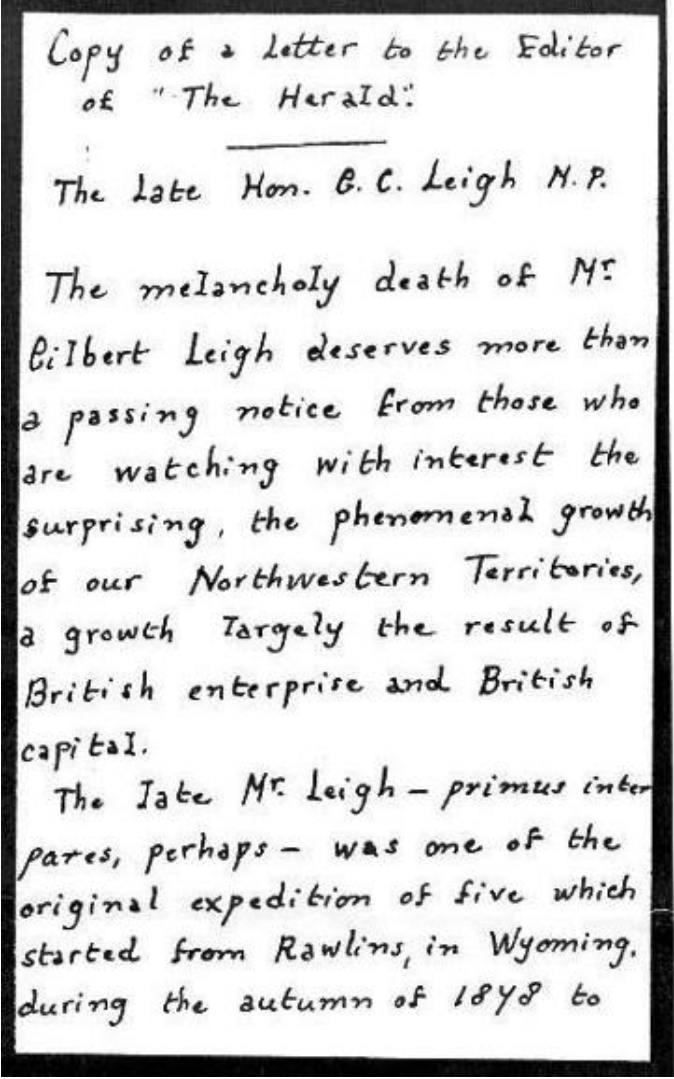
But Gilbert's first love was America, and returning here in 1878, he travelled to New York to stay with his friend Morton Frewen and others "who had already been making havoc in the hearts of the fair sex in that city."

He travelled on to Chicago, Omaha, and Denver. The Cheyenne had broken out in Kansas and killed the settlers – there were lots of similar scary stories which made him wonder whether to continue. Every railway carriage had a man with a gun and escorts all the way to Rawlins.

Once again, in the mid-west, despite lawlessness he had frequently encountered, he often went hunting alone – deer, antelope, elk, wolf, buffalo,

wild sheep. On went the friends, to St Louis and then on to Georgia via Nashville, Chattanooga and Atlanta – a veritable rollcall of famous American places.

By 1884 Gilbert had been to and from the States many times, and it was there that, in the Little Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming, he met an early death. The actual circumstances in which he died are unknown, but he had gone out on horseback alone one September morning, never to return alive. He had been staying with a group of other young men, keen to explore the possibilities of American life. One of these, Morton Frewen, wrote a heartfelt letter following Gilbert's death.



Copy of a Letter to the Editor
of "The Herald".

The Late Hon. G. C. Leigh M.P.

The melancholy death of Mr
Gilbert Leigh deserves more than
a passing notice from those who
are watching with interest the
surprising, the phenomenal growth
of our Northwestern Territories,
a growth largely the result of
British enterprise and British
capital.

The Late Mr. Leigh – *primus inter
pares*, perhaps – was one of the
original expedition of five which
started from Rawlins, in Wyoming,
during the autumn of 1848 to

explore the then absolutely unknown regions which form the watershed of the Big Horn and Yellowstone rivers. Mr Leigh had returned from a previous visit to the Northwest with the most enthusiastic report of the profit of cattle raising in the thousand valleys of the Upper Missouri system, and it is not too much to say that to this report, realized and more than realized as it has been, some hundreds of young Englishmen now owe both their prosperity and their position.

An earnest and thoughtful politician, his claim to the recognition of posterity will yet

rest upon a wider and a more solid foundation than is evidenced by the Parliamentary records of Westminster. He was among the first to recognize the necessity that young England should expand and fertilize with an exodus, not merely of emigrants, but of wealthy emigrants, a great world beyond the Missouri. That this has been accomplished is largely the result of Mr Leigh's pioneer expedition of 1878.

The young heir of Stoneleigh Abbey, the nephew of the Duke of Westminster, leaves behind him in the record of his enterprise a memorial more enduring and more worthy than any that can remain as the mere accident of his birth and station.

(Signed) MORETON FREWEN
Chicago. Sept. 28, 1884.

Once again Uncle James Wentworth Leigh was instrumental in helping the family. He recollected:

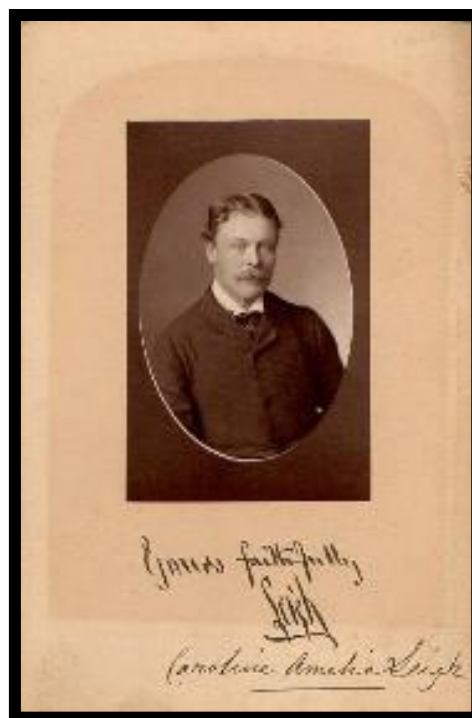
"September 1884: On Wednesday there was a large gathering of the County at a garden party... Alas, in the middle of these festivities a sudden gloom was cast by a telegram received, announcing the death of my nephew, the Hon. Gilbert Leigh, M.P., in the Rocky Mountains, where he had gone for shooting. I offered at once to undertake the painful duty of bringing the body back to England. I telegraphed to Liverpool and found the Britannic had left for America. I knew she stopped at Queenstown, so I telegraphed that I would join her there.

Arriving in New York, I telegraphed to Mr. Morton Frewen, at whose ranch my nephew's body lay. Every arrangement was made for the dispatch of the body, and I met the train in which was my nephew, Dudley Leigh, who had come from New Orleans to Cheyenne, where he met the party. The coffin was placed in Gracechurch Chapel, and next morning we were able to return in the same ship that I had come out in. I was met at Liverpool by my brothers, Lord Leigh and Chandos, and the following day the remains of my dear nephew were interred

in the family mausoleum at Stoneleigh Church. Amongst the numerous wreaths and crosses was one with this inscription:

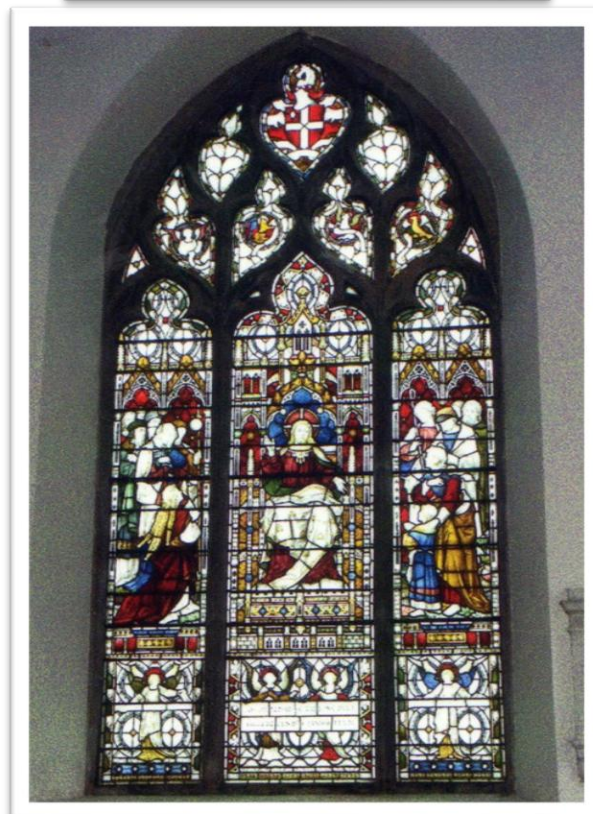
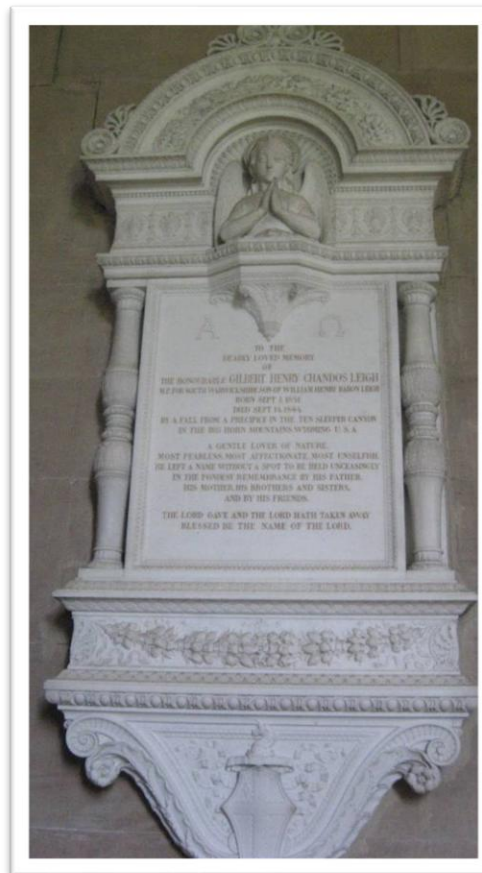
From the Western Ranchmen in memory of the friend of many camp fires."

In Warwickshire the grief following this event was tremendous – Gilbert had been his father's heir and had been seen as a young man of great promise. The plain glass East Window of Stoneleigh Church was replaced with a magnificent stained glass one in his memory, and an elaborate monument placed in the Leigh Chapel where his body lay. Thus, the many travels of the Leigh family of this era conclude with the sad loss of Gilbert Henry Chandos Leigh.



Memorial card, signed by Gilbert's parents

A memorial to Gilbert can be found in the Leigh Chapel, and in the East Window of St Mary the Virgin Church, Stoneleigh, Warwickshire.





Leigh Creek, Ten Sleep, Canyon, approx. 1939. Photo by William P. Sanborn.

About fifteen miles east of Ten Sleep, just past the confluence of Leigh Creek with Ten Sleep Creek there is a sharp promontory known as Leigh Creek Vee. On a broad ledge about 200 feet below the rim of the canyon and about 1,000 feet above the canyon floor is a stone monument topped with a cross. The monument was constructed in 1889 in the memory of a British Member of Parliament (member for South Warwickshire), the Honorable Gilbert H. C. Leigh, after whom the creek is named. In 1884, Leigh, a house guest of Moreton Frewen, lost his life hunting big horn sheep.

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Albums courtesy of Stoneleigh Abbey

Newspaper articles, British Newspaper Archive

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