

A Venetian Connection

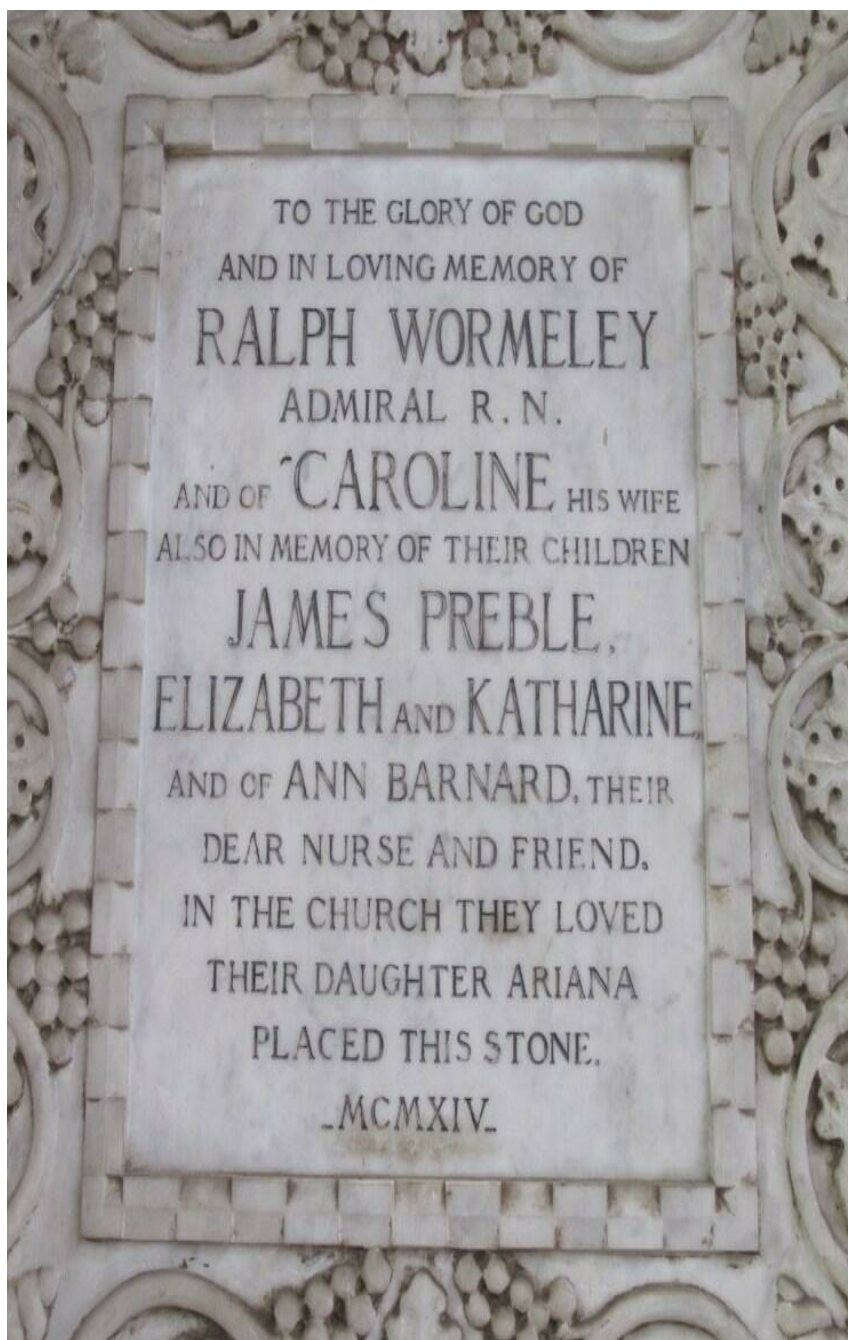
The story begins with an American resident of Dedham, Ralph Wormeley (1785-1852), son of James Wormeley, a committed loyalist who served in the British Army during the American War of Independence. Ralph was born in Virginia but his mother died when he was nine and his father brought him to England where he grew up. He became a naturalised British subject and in 1799 entered on a career in the Royal Navy.

By 1810 he had risen to Commander and he eventually attained the rank of Admiral but in spite of his excellent record on active service at sea and impeccable family connections he failed to see active service after 1814. This is thought to have been because he held *“liberal beliefs, premature in one of his class and station,... espousing unpopular courses favouring the unfortunate”*. A cultivated man, he was *“at home in three worlds; America, England, and France and knew the best in all three.”* On leave in 1820, he went back to the USA and immediately on arrival met and fell in love with Caroline Preble (1799-1872), who like himself came of an old-established Boston family. They were married in October and the following spring returned to England. Their four children were born between 1822 and 1833. Tragically their son James Preble (1826-51), a promising engineer, died young. Their daughters Elizabeth (1822-1904) and Katherine (1830-1908) both became successful writers and Ariana (1833-1922) had literary aspirations too.



Admiral Ralph Wormeley

For the rest of their lives Ralph and Caroline divided their time between the USA and England, where they lived in London, near Ipswich and for a few years at Dedham. With his liberal views, Ralph Wormeley was greatly concerned with the plight of the rural poor in Suffolk. As a convivial neighbour and Steward of the Balls at the Assembly Rooms in Dedham in the 1830s he played an active part in the life of the village and the local community. A surviving account by his eldest daughter describes the family's life at Great House, which was not the present house but its predecessor which burned down in 1936 (see *Dedham Parish Magazine*, May 2017).



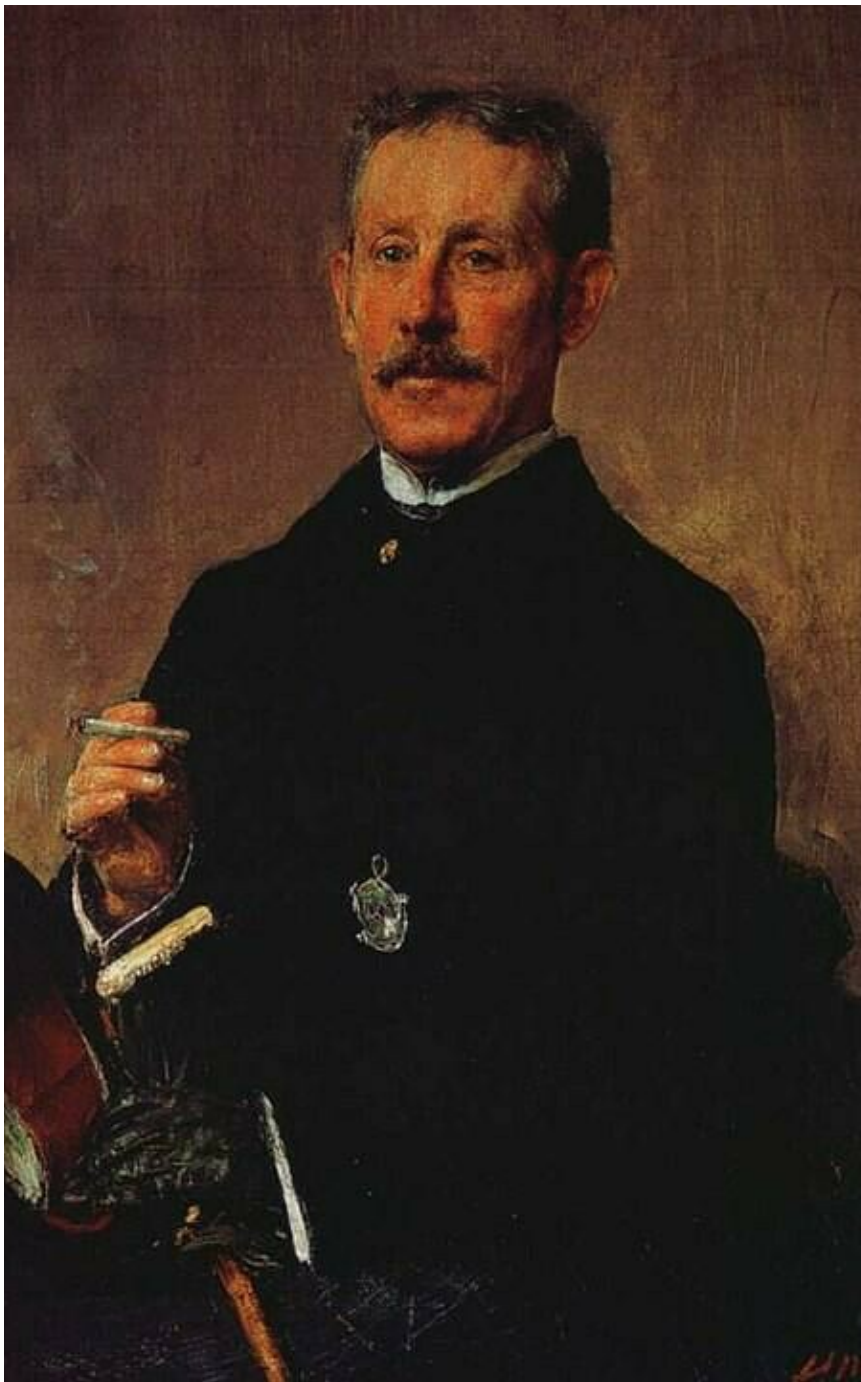
The memorial to Admiral Wormeley R.N. and his family in Dedham Church, 1914

Later on they travelled in Europe and spent a year in Paris before sailing for America for the last time in 1848. Ralph and Caroline's grave is in the Island Cemetery at Newport, Rhode Island but a memorial to them and three of their children can be seen on the west wall of our church to the left of the tower arch. It was erected by their youngest and by then only surviving child Ariana in 1914 when, as we shall see, she had renewed her connection with Dedham.

Ariana Wormeley (1833-1922) was born at Great House and although she had only lived here as a baby she evidently thought of the village with affection. In America from the age of fifteen she lived with her family in Boston and in 1853 married Daniel Curtis (1825-1908) in Newport, Rhode Island. Daniel had been an outstanding student at Harvard, a classical scholar interested in natural history, music and singing, a voracious reader, a skilled draughtsman and a brilliant wit. In his youth he wrote poetry and Ariana who shared his literary interests published three plays in 1868, the most popular one concerned with women's rights. At first they lived in a fashionable house on Beacon Hill in Boston, then moved out to the affluent suburban village of Chestnut Hill where their two sons Ralph (1854-1922) and Osborne (1858-1918) were brought up. Both parents were concerned by the decline of public morals in Boston life and an odd incident occurred on a streetcar in 1869. During an altercation with another passenger over his offensive behaviour Daniel twisted the man's nose and was sentenced to two

months in jail for assault. In 1877 the couple abandoned America and moved to Europe. For four years they took rented apartments in Rome and Florence, where they made many friends and became knowledgeable about the art and architecture but complained about the numbers of tourists! In 1881 they settled in Venice, moving into the fifteenth-century Palazzo Barbaro, one of the finest palaces on the Grand Canal, also acquiring a garden on the island of Guidecca where they could escape the midday heat and take pleasure in growing colourful flowers among shady vines. They kept "*a cozy little place*" in Rome for the winter months when Venice was too cold and paid visits to England to see Ariana's relations and their son Osborne who had joined the British Army.

Having restored Palazzo Barbaro to its past glory and filled it with superb furnishings and pictures, the Curtises began to welcome a constant stream of visitors. These included old American friends such as the leading art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner and her husband Jack, new Venetian acquaintances, such as Sir Henry Layard, discoverer of Nineveh, and his wife Enid, and cultured tourists passing through the city. Ariana loved to invite writers such as the poet Robert Browning and American novelists Edith Wharton and Henry James. James found listening to Daniel's interminable anecdotes rather trying but responded to his hosts' generous hospitality and the charm of the magnificent Palazzo.



Daniel Curtis by Antonio Mancini, 1880s



Ariana Wormeley Curtis by John Singer Sargent, 1882

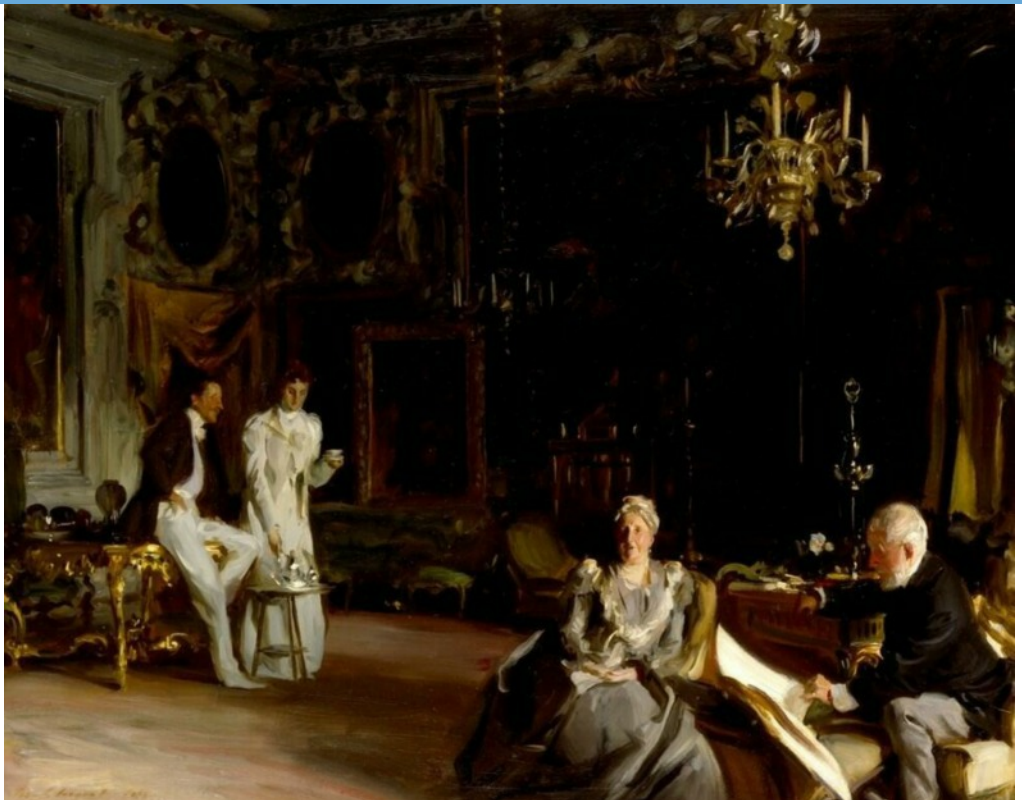
He wrote *The Wings of the Dove* here (it features in the book as Palazzo Leporelli) and was so enchanted with the library that he asked for his bed to be moved, so that he could sleep beneath its ornate stucco ceiling. Artists who visited the Palazzo included the French Impressionist Claude Monet, who painted during his visit and the Americans James McNeill Whistler, introduced by the Curtises' painter son Ralph, and John Singer Sargent, who was a distant relation. His sensitive portrait of Ariana, which he gave her as a thank you present for his first visit in 1882 is now in the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas. Sargent and Ralph met while they were both pupils in the *atelier* of Carolus-Duran (1837-1917) in

Paris and they became firm friends, often going on painting trips together. In 1897 Ralph married Lisa de Wolfe Colt, widow of a friend and heiress to the Colt firearms fortune and they had three children, Sylvia, Margery and Ralph Wormeley.

They divided their time between Cap Ferrat on the French Riviera and Paris, as well as visits to Palazzo Barbaro. In 1899 Sargent painted them with Ariana and Daniel in the salon of the palace. He intended this picture to be a gift but Ariana declined it as she thought it made her look too old and she disliked the informal way her son was shown. Sargent later presented it to the Royal Academy as his Diploma Work.



*Palazzo Barbaro,
Venice*



*“An Interior in Venice” by John Singer Sargent, 1899.
On the left are Ralph Curtis and his wife Lisa, on the right his parents Ariana and Daniel*

As Daniel and Ariana grew older they must have begun to think about a final resting place for their mortal remains. Burials in Venice can be only short-term because the cemetery Island of San Michele has very limited space. For a permanent solution Ariana thought of Dedham, her own place of birth and the church where she had been christened. She evidently made an arrangement with the Vicar, Canon F. G. Given-Wilson because only a week after Daniel died in London on 2 July 1908 his ashes were buried in a grave on the south side of the church. The following year a stained glass window depicting Faith, Hope and

Charity was installed at the west end of the south aisle. Below the figures an inscription reads *“In faith and love this window is dedicated to the dear memory of Daniel Sargent Curtis by Ariana his wife. Love is of God.”* The window is one of the very few designed by the painter Wilfred de Glehn, a close friend and protégé of Sargent, who had quite recently introduced him to the Curtises.

This was the beginning of Ariana’s re-established connection with our village and her friendship with Canon Given-Wilson.

He went to stay at Palazzo Barbaro in October 1911 and again in May 1921; she paid a return visit to Dedham the same year. When she died in Venice aged 88 on 10 February 1922 he wrote in the Parish magazine that *“she took the keenest interest in all our doings and quite looked on herself as one of our parishioners. She never ceased to speak of the great delight it gave her that her visit last August happened to coincide with the unveiling of the War Memorial.”*

Her ashes were buried with Daniel’s in the same grave and a memorial tablet to them both was attached to the wall above it. Beside it there is a matching tablet commemorating their younger son Osborne (d. 1918) whose ashes were also buried here. Their elder son Ralph died in the South of France on 4 February 1922, predeceasing his mother by six days. Ariana’s descendants have continued to live at Palazzo Barbaro.

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I am very grateful to Richard Ormond, John Singer Sargent’s great-nephew and leading authority on his work, for much helpful information and to Patricia Curtis Viganò, Ariana’s great-great-granddaughter for a memorable visit to Palazzo Barbaro in 2011.

Next time: Dedham in the 1830s
when the Wormeleys lived here



*The window in memory of Daniel Curtis
in Dedham Church,
designed by Wilfred de Glehn, 1909*



The grave of Daniel and Ariana Curtis on the south side of Dedham Church. On the wall above are tablets in memory of them and their younger son Osborne.