

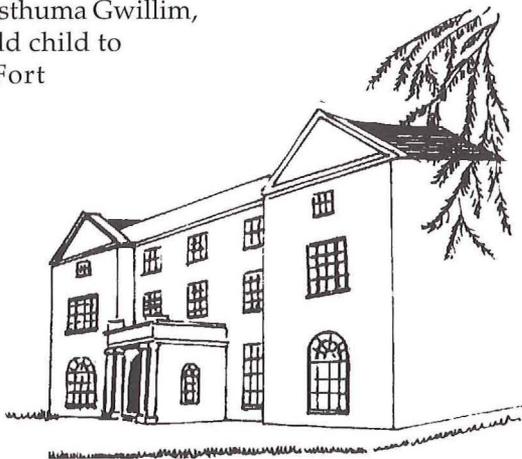
GENTEEL WIDOWS OF BATH

I – MRS MARGARET GRAVES AND HER LETTERS FROM BATH, 1793-1807

Hilary Arnold

In November 1792 Mrs Margaret Graves (1727-1808), the wealthy widow of Admiral Samuel Graves,¹ moved into the newly built house at 15 Lansdown Crescent. Over the next fourteen years she wrote regularly to her great niece Eliza Simcoe. Her letters not only describe some of Bath's social events, her concerns about servants and the cost of living, and contemporary reaction to events in France, they also reveal some of the problems and pleasures of moving into a new house in Bath.² In particular they provide evidence of the use of rooms and garden which is slightly different from other recent interpretations, for it shows that Mrs Graves and her staff were the sole occupants of the house, and that the planting was for fruit rather than flowers.³

Margaret Spinckes was baptised on 16 March 1727 in the parish church of All Saints at Aldwinkle, Northamptonshire, youngest daughter of Elmes Spinckes who owned the manor. She married the widower Admiral Samuel Graves on 15 June 1769. After the death of her sister Mrs Elizabeth Gwillim, in September 1762, Margaret helped her mother to rear her orphaned niece, Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim, and then took the six year-old child to her new home, Hembury Fort House at Buckerell, near Honiton, in Devon (fig.1). Fourteen years later, Elizabeth met and, on 30 December 1782, married Admiral Graves's godson, Colonel John Graves Simcoe.⁴



1. Hembury Fort House,
Buckerell, Devon.

The Admiral died in March 1787 and his nephew Captain Richard Graves inherited Hembury Fort House. Mrs Graves first moved to stay with the Simcoes in their new mansion, Wolford Lodge, at nearby Dunkeswell (fig.2). In 1791 Colonel



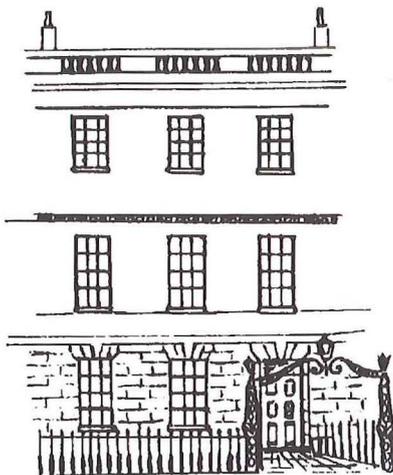
2. Wolford Lodge, Dunkeswell, Devon.

Simcoe was invited to become the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada (now Ontario). He and his wife eventually decided to accept and set sail for Canada taking the

two younger children (Sophia and Francis) and leaving the four older girls (Eliza, Charlotte, Harriet and Caroline) at Wolford Lodge with Miss Hunt acting as governess and her mother Mrs Hunt as housekeeper. Soon afterwards Margaret Graves moved to Bath (fig.3).

Lansdown Crescent was being constructed by various speculative builders between 1789 and 1793 but the unified façade was the design of the architect John Palmer. Margaret Graves was the first occupant of No.15. She wrote to Eliza in January 1793:

I like my house extremely, 'tis a very handsome one, but I have been much inconvenienced by my best chairs not having been sent which, with the want of a carpet, at present make my Drawing Room of no use to me ... I have had surprising luck in the moving of my furniture as there is little or no damage to them. The leg of the black Sopha is broke off[f], but as it was one of the hind legs, 'twill be of no other consequence than the expence of repairing it. The books, which were the material things, are all of them come safe. My Drawing Room is seven and twenty feet by two and twenty,



3. 15 Lansdown Crescent, Bath, Margaret Graves's home from 1792 until her death in 1808.

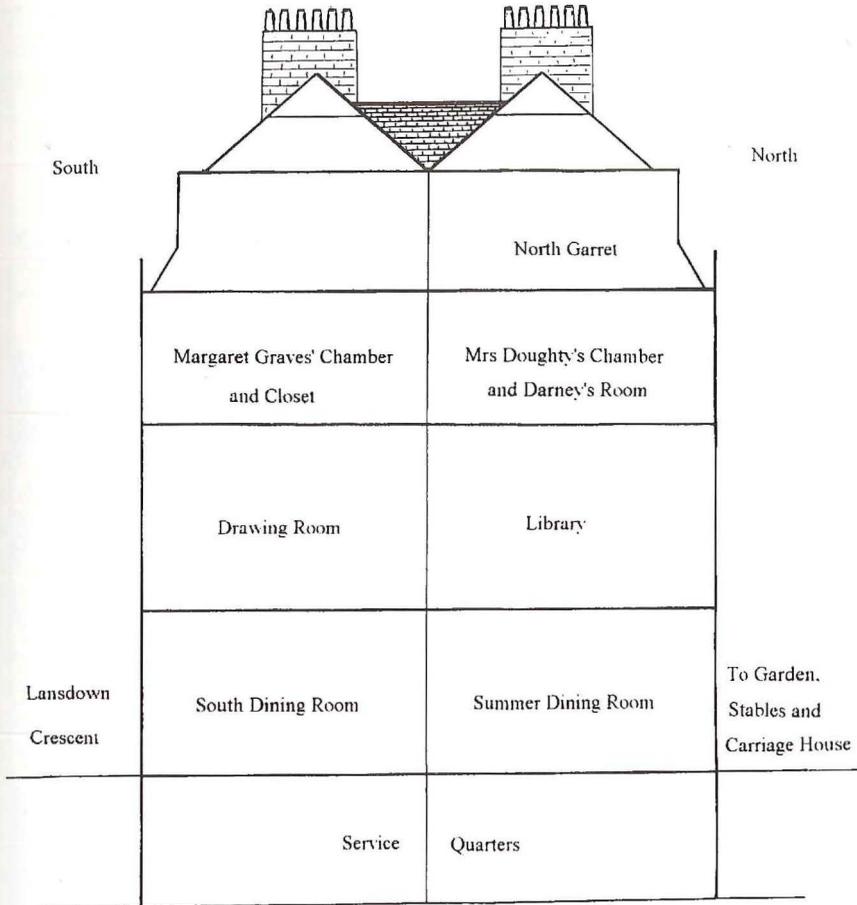
and fifteen high. The picture of Hero and Leander and yours is over the chimney. Captain Saunders and Captain Richard are on each side of them ... The Admiral's picture hangs over the chimney in the front Dining Room, and your Grandmother's in the Summer Dining Room and vastly well they look. My books are not yet put up, and the workmen here are particularly tedious.

Her books were important to her. She proudly told Eliza in 1797 that she had added many more books to her Library, and she asked General Simcoe to 'lay out' £100 in new books in 1803. Those named in her letters include Plutarch's *Lives*, the *Revolution in Portugal*, a book of American sermons, Hannah More's *Strictures on Female Education*, Livy in translation and Dugdale's *Baronage*. Her will reveals that 'Hero and Leander' was painted by Rubens, but makes no reference to the portrait of the Admiral mentioned above.⁵

In May 1794 Mrs Graves wrote to Eliza inviting her, with her sisters and Mrs and Miss Hunt, to Bath for a fortnight's holiday. 'You need not bring your Cribbs with you, for I can dispose of you all without any trouble of that sort. Mrs and Miss Hunt shall have Mrs Doughty's Room.' Mrs Doughty must have been the companion who had left. 'She is a very great loss indeed and I am quite melancholy and dull without her ... You shall have the bed you used to occupy put into Darney's Room for it is too large to be carried up my small staircase.' Darney was probably the housekeeper. 'I have fitted up the Northern room or large Garret. There Charlotte and Harriet shall lie and little Caroline shall have the smallest of the Duchess Beds in their room. I have no bed now in the Dining Room Apartment. I moved that into Mrs Doughty's Room and her bed into the Garret ... and set the top and bottom chairs in my Closet.' Duchess beds were made up of two low padded bergère chairs forming the head and foot with a padded stool between.

It is thus possible to reconstruct the layout of Margaret Graves's Lansdown house and the use of the rooms (fig.4). We have no information about the basement with its kitchen and servants' quarters. There were two dining rooms on the ground floor, the one for summer use being on the north side. The second floor was given over to chambers (bedrooms) with that of Mrs Graves and her closet facing south and probably two on the north side – Mrs Doughty's and Darney's. Above lay the north and south garrets in the roof space.

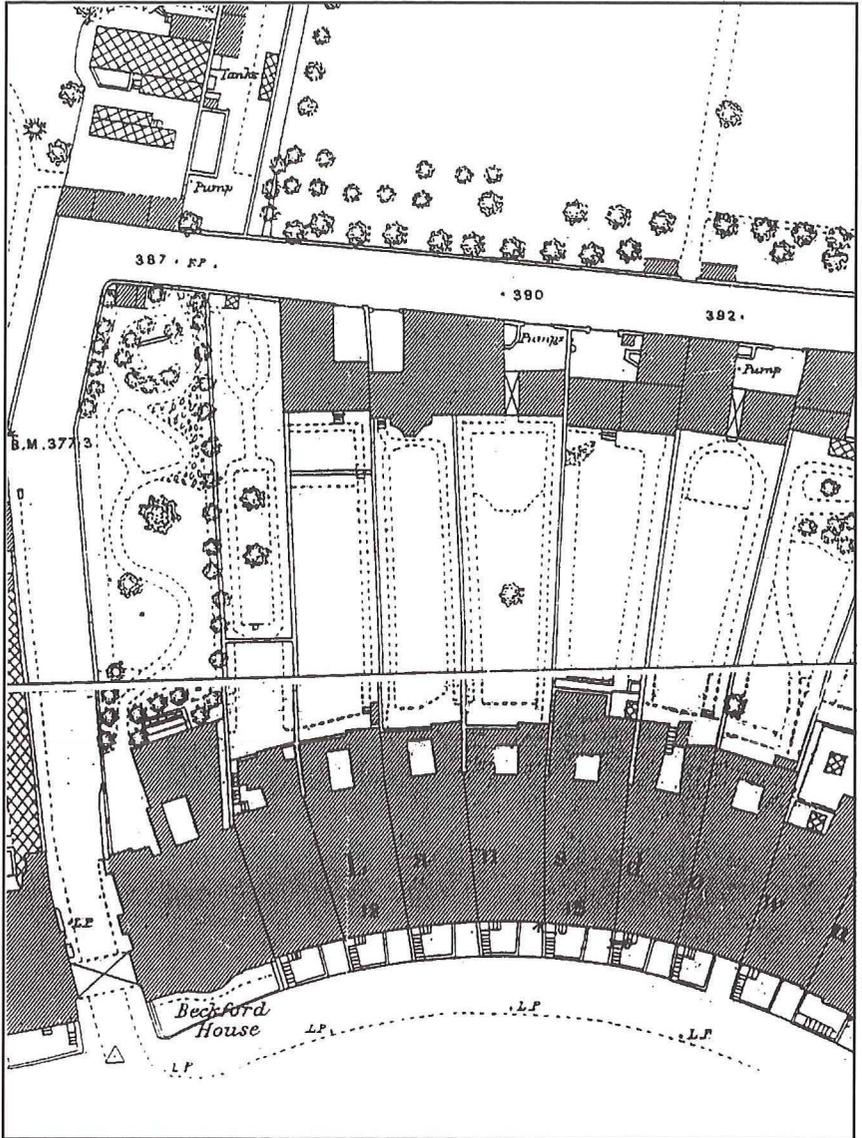
The fine house in Lansdown proved less than waterproof on the night of 7 January 1802 when 'the present thaw' occurred and 'the water was



4. Section across 15 Lansdown Crescent during Margaret Graves's occupancy, 1792-1808, with suggested use of the rooms.

pouring down in the best garret at an amazing rate, the people were running about for to get tubs to receive it in ... I slept very quietly until the morning when I had the mortification to find the snow, or water proceeding from it, had found its way into the chamber next to my own. A Crack in the ceiling just over the Bed gave it way and it has dirtied my clean white Bed, the quilt etc.'

There was a garden behind the house with a coach-house and stables. These are marked on the first large-scale Ordnance Survey map of 1886 (fig.5).



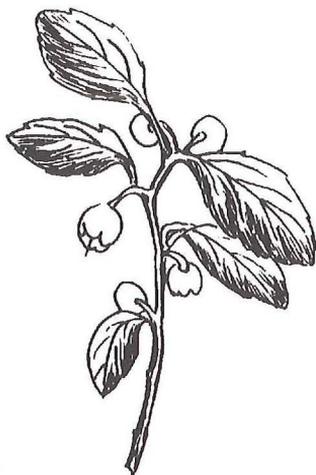
5. The large-scale Ordnance Survey map of 1886 showing Margaret Graves's house, 15 Lansdown Crescent, facing south, with her garden stretching northwards to the stables and carriage house along the back access road. (Reproduced by courtesy of Bath Central Library)

The layout of her garden is similar to that of the reconstructed Georgian garden behind the Circus, but most of the plants mentioned were for food. Margaret Graves wrote on 7 October 1794:

I have just had a great quantity of strawberries planted in my Garden that when I have the pleasure of seeing you and your sisters again you may have still more fruit to pick. But the wind was so high on Sunday night that all I had put in my Garden was very near being demolished. It blew down four foot of the Coach House and Stable Walls the whole length of the building and, had the ruins not tumbled into the Garden, the poor Horses would have been demolished and carriage broke to pieces. It made a dreadful crash when it fell.

By 10 November, 'My Garden is put in order again though it cost me £2.8s. to repair it. The gardener was purloining all my strawberries into the bargain, but I happened to see the gentleman at his work and sent down and forbad his carrying them away for you know when you and your sisters come to Bath again it will be very pleasant for you to pick strawberries for your supper.'

Eliza had received some seeds of a sweet-scented fern and Mountain Tea from Canada (fig.6).⁶ Mrs Graves suggested, 'If you have a great quantity of it pray send me a little. I think I should like prodigiously to drink some of your Brother's Tea', but the following year wrote again, 'I have altered my mind concerning them for I think my Garden is so small that were they to grow with me, they would only encumber the place instead of beautifying it.' There are more clues as to what she had planted. In June 1795 'The season is so backward that I have not one single rose in bloom in my Garden not so much as one Honeysuckle. The fruit trees too make a very moderate appearance. I doubt when you and your sisters come here that we shall not be able to gather currants and cherries for Puddins as we did last year.' But in September 'My Apricots were and are very fine tasted ... for I have a tart or dumplin of them every day'.



6. Mountain Tea or Wintergreen which was sent by the Simcoes to Devon but rejected by Margaret Graves in favour of fruit trees.

Alterations to the garden layout occurred. 'I have pulled up my gravel walk and covered it in turfs which in a good measure prevents the reflection that used to render my Library unpleasant during the bright months.'

Mrs Graves's comments on servants are of interest. In July 1800 she wrote, 'Last week my stables were in the night broken open and William, who was too lazy to bring his cloaths into the house, was robbed of his new livery and his next best coat, 2 very good waistcoats, 3 pocket handkerchiefs and several other things. They got clear off with their booty.' In December 1801 she wrote,

Poor Smith, who went from me in September to the low marshy village of Bridstock in Northamptonshire for the benefit of her health, has recovered surprisingly since she got into her native air, but I have no means to supply her loss. The Lady-looks of this city undertake everything and perform nothing, nor do they seem to have the excellent respect for the interest of their employer. My footman too, John Thergold, who had long been too great to wear a livery, left me a fortnight after I came from Devonshire. He had got a situation he told me would bring in £40 a year upwards. It was bookkeeper to the Stone Masons Company. There he went for one week, and was turned out the next for not being sufficiently versed in accounts. He now plays to a French Dancing Master's scholars and at servants' clubs and things of that sort ... I have got a sad awkward stupid fellow in his room.

The letters list a number of people whom she had met or visited. In September 1794, 'Mrs Porteous, sister to the Bishop of London, is come to live in the wing belonging to Lansdown. She resides with a Mrs Fairfax, an American lady. I like these both very much.' 'Mr Randulph, who preaches at the Octagon, preaches better than any man since the times of the blessed Apostles, it seems is an acquaintance of your father', she wrote with irony in February 1797. He visited her and explained that, 'If there had been a bishop of Upper Canada, Col. Simcoe would have appointed him'. Mrs Graves was probably a well-preserved old lady, as she makes a number of derogatory remarks about other people's looks worthy of Jane Austen's Sir Walter Elliott – 'Lady Graves seems pritty well in health but appears as old as if she had taken a sail in the Ark with Noah', and 'Miss St. John is such a martyr to ill health as makes her appear more like the sister than the daughter of her mother'. She admired other older ladies like Mrs Rose Drew who 'has kept herself in a marvelous preservation, her teeth as white, her eyes as bright as when she and her aunt used to be of our parties at Bath before your mother married'.

There are occasional glimpses of popular entertainment in Bath.

You cannot think how I wished on Thursday the 25 [October 1798] to have had you and your sisters with us for this whole city was illuminated. There was an abundance of transparencies and other devices, some very elegant ones. Those that pleased me most was Hibernia fallen and a Ruffian going to destroy her, but Britannia held forth her protecting shield and saved her from his fury. There was another transparency of Hibernia lamenting over her burning towns and slaughtered people and Warren pointing to his fleet to comfort her. Lady Elizabeth Noel had a very pritty one of the French fleet surrendering and in coloured lamps was wrote, God gave the Word and Nelson struck the Blow. Pickwick had transparencies of Lord How, Lord St. Vincents, Lord Duncan and Warren and the device was These are my faithful Friends spoken by the King, who was looking at and pointing to them with great delight. Crowns, Anchors and ships in coloured lamps were innumerable and the houses so decorated with laurels that Bath now seems less like a City than a Laurel Grove. However the joy showed on the occasion was very temperate and proper; the people were wonderfully pleased but very civil; there was neither riot nor bustle in any part of the town.⁸

On 3 February 1802,

I designed to go last night to see the Phantasmagoria. It was exhibited at the Theatre. The house was crowded, the lights extinguished and every door fast locked, the noise of the galleries very disagreeable enveloped in darkness. They uttered abject fear and vulgar impatience with shrill whistles and loud screams. The first appearance was an imitation of the forked lightning too dull to be terrifying. Then skeletons came forwards and one figure seemed in pain. They receded and grew less as they left the stage, a yellow light flowing round them had a good effect. These gave place to Lord Nelson's crowning by Fame and ended with a figure of his Majesty ushered in by the old loyal tune of God Save the King.

Three weeks later she visited Millardet's Automaton and wrote a detailed description of the figures which she saw writing in French and English, drawing, fortune-telling and performing acrobatics, along with a mechanical spider.

Margaret Graves has far less to say about visits to more usual plays at the Theatre. In April 1806 she wrote,

Master Betty has come to Bath and all the inhabitants of this city are mad to see him act. I design going to the Theatre to see his Duglass on Thursday next, but I had the prudence to refuse a place for tomorrow, as the crowd was so great that some ladies fainted away in the box-lobby in only endeavouring to bribe Bartley to secure them places. I had no mind to die. I shall leave the whole management to my friends. If they get me a place I shall accept it with pleasure. If not I shall be very well satisfied for my eyes are too bad to judge of his countenance.

Margaret Graves would have approved of Jane Austen's view of contemporary drama expressed in *Mansfield Park* by Fanny Price and Sir Thomas Bertram, upset by the choice of the German play *Lovers' Vows* for amateur theatricals. Mrs Graves states,

I used to love plays amazingly and thought them not only entertaining but instructing to auditors ... but now one meets in German pieces profaneness, the vulgar pert manners of our own ... they are only calculated for a village wake and should be acted in a Barn for the Dramatis Persona are footmen, abigails [lady's-maids], cheats, barbers and apothecaries. I am literally too much of an aristocrat to be the least entertained with the conversation of those underbred gentry.

Eliza had attended Lady Porchester's rout in 1803 and Mrs Graves commented, 'Amusements at these meetings are always the same – casino, whist, quadrille, and so likewise are the refreshment – cakes, ices, lemonade. The company at Bath, tho' not so brilliant as London, is yet very respectable. Royal personages have we none, Stars and Garters some but very few.' However she poured scorn on the royal family in July 1796.

The Prince of Wales has been to Bath to visit his brother, the Duke of York. He was extremely well received here and great crowds of people assembled wherever he went in order to see him ... so they would have done if his Pandemonium Majesty had appeared with any degree of splendour. I was most pleased with little John Smith, who was beyond measure eager to see the Prince of Wales. At last his friends got him a full view of the Prince. The child burst out acrying, rolled himself in the street and said aloud, 'That's not the Prince, it's a man.'

Fear of the French is a theme which recurs in the correspondence. The Simcoe girls were anxious to receive letters from their parents in Canada. Margaret Graves explained in a letter of 1794,

Not hearing so frequently as you used to do, is owing I believe to those vile French monsters, who I am sorry to say, take abundance of our ships ... I have just heard that those wretches ... the French ... have murdered the Dauphine by mixing slow poison in strong wine which was the only liquor they allowed him to drink. Happy for him, poor child, that he is now released from their tyranny ... I hope at last it will please God to destroy those impious persons who renounce his authority and trample on his laws, profane his sanctuaries and act with more than savage cruelty by humankind.

Four years later (May 1798) she reported, 'This city is rejoicing from one end to the other for the escape of Sir Sydney Smith', who had thwarted Napoleon's plans in Syria. She was rather surprised,

for he brought neither peace nor victory ... the Pump Room, the Public Gardens, every place of amusement where the people can get a glance of him is crowded. When he enters the Theatre the people clap him as they do the Royal Family. The people who have benefits beg leave to mention on their bills that he will honour the Theatre with his presence and they are thought to gain at least £50 a night by his complying with their request.

Fears of the French revolutionaries were replaced by fears of Napoleon. He was rumoured to be preparing for a landing in June 1801. Eliza's father, now General Simcoe, had been placed in charge of the defence of south-west England. Mrs Graves wrote to Eliza in July 1803,

You are very good to invite me [to Wolford Lodge] ... by telling me how quiet Buonaparté remains on the other side of the water ... I cannot but look upon his present quietness as that awful stillness which precedes the thunderstorm, before it roars tremendous and scatters fire and death amongst the sons of man. ... But it appears to me ... that one great means of our preservation will be owing to your father's scheme of arming the whole mass of the population. They talk of it here. And of teaching them to load and fire quick and to shoot at a mark, but if the Government does not send arms and ammunition

and appoint people to show their mark-firing, they may plan schemes of defence when England will be no more ... The mass cannot furnish themselves with ammunition and, had they sufficient for that purpose, they are more likely to spend it on strong liquors than on gunpowder.

Rising prices worried her. In 1799,

Everything is so expensive that one hardly knows how to get along. However the poor are well supplied, for the Corporation have allowed the use of their kitchen and likewise their Cook and a subscription has been raised for them among the rich to purchase provisions for them, so that any poor person who can raise three halfpence may have a quart of soup, a small piece of meat and a few potatoes and take it home to their families or eat it there as they choose.

Margaret Graves's payment of the Poor Rate is recorded in the Returns for the parish of St. Stephen's (fig.7). She had also paid 'about eleven pounds' in Income Tax at this time. In 1800 she had heard, 'Mr Pitt intends putting a tax on carriage horses. If that Gentleman continues ... I must lay down my carriage, quit my house, and take a smaller one in a more central part of Bath which would not be so agreeable.'

It is Margaret Graves's attitude towards the inequality of the sexes in contemporary society which is the surprising part of her letters. After the Simcoes had returned from Canada a second son, John Cornwall Simcoe, was born. She wrote to Eliza, 'Not that I like Boys better than Girls for I do not love them half so well; for in general I think them a dominating set of beings, strutting and boasting and making a noise about trifles ... these are boisterous and turbulent times, ill-suited to the delicacy of women'. In 1800 a third son was born, Henry Addington Simcoe, and Mrs Graves wrote,

I was happy to find ... that your mother had given you a Brother and not another Sister; for, as you observe, there is girls enow ... I don't rejoice because I like Boys better than Girls, ... but they can struggle through difficulties better than Girls ... By being brought up to professions they can acquire fortunes for themselves or better those they have. Girls have none of those advantages and can scarce gain (with their utmost industry and pricking their finger to the bone) a single Shilling a day. Gentlemen's Daughters are too often an unfortunate set of beings. Brought up in affluence, used from their cradles to tenderness and delicacy, in maturer age are often left to

9.	Sharpleff	1 10	⊠
10	A. M. Cooban	1 16	⊠
11	Charles Worthington	1 18	⊠
12	Blanch Woollaston	1 18	⊠
13	Charles Cox	1 18	⊠
14	Mary Skinner	1 18	⊠
15	Margaret Graves	1 18	⊠
16	Mary Hichey	1 18	⊠
17	Charles Arthur	1 18	1 18
18	Edith Frankland	1 10	⊠
19	Christopher Irving	1 10	⊠
1	John Louder	2 2	⊠
2	Edward Henry King	1 5	
3	Henry Bonanquet	1 5	
4	E. T. French	1 1	
5	Henry Best	1 1	
6	Grace Blackwood	1 1	⊠
		27 7	- 1 18.

7. Poor Rate Returns for the Parish of St. Stephen's, Walcot for August 1802 showing that Margaret Graves, living at 15 Lansdown Crescent, paid £1.18s. (Reproduced by courtesy of Bath Record Office)

disappointment and distress. The appearance and manners of Gentlewomen taught them from infancy, they cannot support, and their present narrow circumstances rendered bitter to them by the remembrance of their former happy situation in Life.

Margaret Graves had enjoyed wealth and comfort all her life, so these observations must have been based on such women she met in Bath. She might have been describing Jane Austen's characters like Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax in *Emma*. In October 1799 she wrote again in this vein. 'I think every woman should be taught the worth of things and how to make the best of them. Economy is not only amiable in a woman, but absolutely necessary. The custom of our country to give so large a part of the fortune to the son, as but too often, leaves the girls in an uncomfortable situation.' When in 1801 the Simcoes bore another daughter, Katherine, Margaret Graves wrote to Eliza, 'I by no means rejoice that your relation is a Sister and not a Brother. The present times are awful ... distressful and turbulent ... poor helpless girls are ill-calculated to struggle with the impending difficulties of the present times.'

By April 1807 Mrs Graves was renovating her whole house.

The more I wish to economise, the more I spend. The paper I had bespoke for the rooms was too small in quantity by at least one third. I was obliged to have a new lock to the Door and they are breaking pains [panes] ... that I have to replace. I have been sleeping on two Sophas in the great Drawing Room for this month past and when I shall have the comfort to repose on a Bed again I cannot exactly say. I do sit in my Library again but at the hazard of my health for it stinks of pain[t] like poison.

This was the last letter she wrote to Eliza so maybe the paint did indeed contain poisonous fumes. Naval records state that the widow of Admiral Graves died in November/December 1808. There is however no mention of her death in any Bath newspapers, nor her burial at Walcot Parish Church in Bath. Perhaps her will of October 1806 gives the reason. She wrote,

I do desire that my corpse shall be carried to the grave without any show or parade, no hearse, mourners, no scarfs, hatbands or gloves, no pall or covered coffin, but carried by six poor men to the churchyard and there buried without entering the church, which properly is a place of prayer for the living and not a receptacle for the dead.

She made a few small bequests and then ordered that her house with all its contents should be sold and the money divided amongst her five older nieces – Eliza and her sisters. Margaret Graves had made sure that ‘those young ladies’ had sufficient income for the rest of their lives.

Notes

- 1 Admiral Samuel Graves (1713-1787) pursued an unspectacular naval career until promoted in 1774 to be commander of the North America station, where he attempted to enforce the Boston Ports Act. Having no firm orders on how to deal with colonists’ attacks on British shipping, he was goaded into a retaliatory assault on Falmouth (now Portland), Maine. This so incensed the Americans that George III recalled him. Graves’s request for a courtmartial was disregarded, so he withdrew to Hembury Fort House where he died in 1787. Margaret (with a supposed fortune of £30,000) was annoyed at being turned out of her house, which he bequeathed to his nephew. (Information from Mr C.T. Cooper of Tor Point, 1988)
- 2 The letters are in Devon Record Office, Exeter. Ref 1038M/F 1/117-176.
- 3 See The Building of Bath Museum at The Vineyards, The Paragon, Bath, and the handbook by Christopher Woodward, *The Building of Bath* (Bath Preservation Trust, n.d.), especially pp.38-9. Also the Georgian Garden, 4 Circus, Bath, discovered and restored by Bath Archaeological Trust.
- 4 Many biographies of General and Mrs Simcoe have been published in Canada. The most recent is Mary Beacock Fryer, *Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe* (Dundurn Press, Toronto and Oxford, 1989).
- 5 The fate of the portrait of ‘The Admiral’ is not known, but hopes were raised by a sale at Sotheby’s in November 1988. It has however been confirmed that this painting by Gainsborough was of Admiral Thomas Graves (1725-1802), a cousin of Samuel, who commanded the British fleet in the American War of Independence, and was later created Baron Graves of Gravesend.
- 6 Mountain Tea or Wintergreen needs to be fermented to yield any flavour. It was used by native Americans and colonists as a medicine. (*Information from Sue Kershaw, London, Ontario*)
- 7 Mrs Sally Fairfax and her husband were lifelong friends of George Washington. After her husband’s death she moved to 109 East Wing, Lansdown, the name by which the present Lansdown Place East was known.
- 8 The celebrations were occasioned by the quelling of an uprising in Ireland and a mutiny in the navy, and by victories over the French, Dutch and Spanish fleets.