

Scandal and Tragedy

Francis Snell paid dearly for his youthful mistakes, but found redemption in Georgian Colchester. *Mike Snell* explores...

For an Essex gentleman and a man of substance – both financially and in reputation – life in George II's 1750s England was as sweet as it got.

Francis Snell was indeed a man of substance. By 1753 he was also a young man with a future - a merchant tailor with his own shop in Colchester's busy High Street and with much to look forward to. But merely a year later Francis's reputation took a sizeable dent, for by now he was leading something of a dissolute life (a contemporary commentator described him as a "gay Lothario"¹) and he had begun an affair with his handmaiden and servant Ann Fallows (known to all as Nabby).

Her head was turned by Francis against her then suitor John Lyon, an ostler from the nearby George Hotel. It was an act of betrayal that Lyon, a thoroughly good man, never recovered from. Worse still, Francis's and Nabby's relationship led to the greatest shame of all – the birth of a son in 1754. He was christened Francis Fallows at St. Nicholas Parish Church on 2 May but nothing more is known of Nabby or young Francis. Certainly Francis Snell had nothing more to do with them.

Such behaviour would have rocked the otherwise respectable Snell family, and we can only guess as to the reaction of Francis's father John (who died soon after, in 1755), and his two brothers John and James and sister Elizabeth.

A few years later Francis was perhaps turning over a new leaf. He had met and fallen in love with Alice Spooner, a well-connected young lady who lived not in Colchester, but in Great Holland – a village a few miles from the Essex seaside town of Clacton.

The couple married at All Saints Parish Church, Great Holland, on 19 August 1758, and Alice quickly presented her husband with the couple's first child – a boy, Francis, christened on 16 July 1759. A year later their second child, Elizabeth, was born. But Francis's happiness was not to last and in the winter of 1762 his life was shattered by a remarkable set of events. St. Nicholas parish burial records of the time show that on 25 November Alice and her daughter were buried together in the churchyard, followed just 24 hours later by the burial of three-year-old Francis. What caused this awful tragedy is unknown as the deaths of all three are not explained in the records. It is possible that Alice and her children were taken by a common illness or disease.

Francis was undoubtedly a changed man. He lived on and amassed a small fortune by the standards of the day, including owning substantial property in and around Colchester and 85 acres of land in the parish of West Bergholt to the north west of the town.

We get a glimpse of Francis's life through the eyes of a contemporary chronicler, Henry Bland², a former Colchester Alderman: "*Prosperous tailor Francis Snell bought a tenanted house on East Hill occupied, amongst others, by Major Wilshire Wilson of the Royal Regiment of Dragoons and sometime Town Adjutant of Portsmouth. The major was irritated to find that his new landlord was a tradesman, and when Snell called on him to announce the purchase said 'Damn me, Sir, you are a purse-proud fellow.'* To which Snell responded '*Damn me, Major, none can say that of you.*'"

Bland also recorded some of Colchester's more colourful characters, including Abigail Arthey who he described as "marked with smallpox with only one eye". Interestingly, Arthey was for a time Francis Snell's servant! Francis left her £100 in his will³ – a tidy sum – and arranged for her to be provided with appropriate mourning clothes.

Finally, from Michaelmas (29 September) 1789 until Michaelmas 1793, Francis had regained enough credibility to serve as Chamberlain of Colchester and he was in charge of the town's finances⁴.

All of this was little consolation for the earlier tragic loss of his family. Francis died, in December 1793 at the age of 64 in Colchester, and was buried at his own request in the churchyard of St. Nicholas. (Sadly, St. Nicholas, and much of the graveyard, was demolished to make way for redevelopment in 1956.) In his will he bequeathed his wealth to his brothers, sister, nephews and nieces and, in particular, to his great nephews and nieces who at the time of his death were all young children.

-- §§§ --

1 *The Inns, Taverns and Pubs of Colchester*. www.camulos.com/inns/inns5eto5m.pdf

2 From a collection of anecdotes, apparently written by Henry Daniel Bland, Colchester Alderman between 1836 and 841, and seemingly drawn principally from his teenage recollections of late 18th century Colchester. *The Essex Society for Archaeology and History Newsletter 162, Winter 2010*. www.essex.ac.uk/history/esah/Newsletters/ESAH_Winter2010.pdf

3 Will of Francis Snell, Gentleman of Colchester, Essex; 7 January 1794. The National Archives, Kew. PROB 11/1240/46

4 SEAX, D/B 5 Aa2/1