

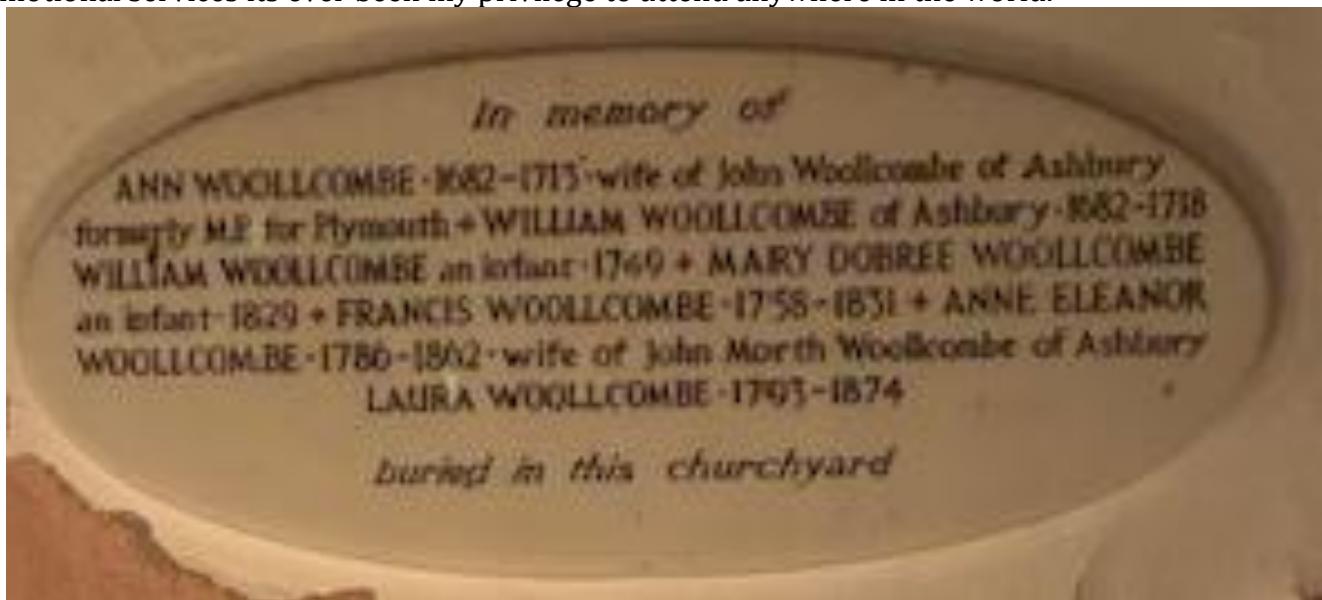
WOOLLCOMBE FAMILY UPDATE LETTER

Christmas 2025



Service of Light – St Mary's Ashbury – Sunday 2nd November

There is a fairy-tale quality about the Church of St Mary's Ashbury – which makes it magical for any Woolcombe arriving at it for the Annual Candlelit "Service of Light." Tamsyn Woolcombe, Amanda Lean (*a cousin of Bishop Harry Woolcombe*) – and myself were warmly welcomed by the vicar and congregation of Northlew and neighbouring farms and parishes for one of the most moving and emotional services its ever been my privilege to attend anywhere in the world.

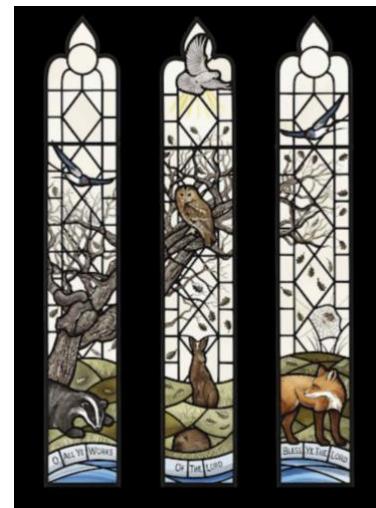


For a start – you feel yourself in the presence of the spirits of hundreds of Woolcombes who, down the centuries, have worshipped here. And – as you read their stories – their loves, their lives, their passions, their careers – you cannot help but be inspired by the fact that Woolcombes, on the whole, were rather good people – people who served their communities as vicars, lawyers, caring landlords, farmers, mothers, nurses, artists, military men and public servants. [*You will read about some of them lower down this update.*] Though there must have been black sheep in our family, I have yet to find any: every single one of those I've come across so far in this archive were men and women who did their best to do good with their lives. So – going to Ashbury Church allowed me to commune with their spirits: it made me feel intensely proud to be a member of this great family. Any of you who make the same journey will, I'm sure, feel the same way.

Then there was the service itself, conducted by the Rev. Leigh Winsbury – who looks like a close relative of Elijah! Taking advantage of the fact that the church has no electricity, the service is lit by over 100 candles. As Leigh said in his address: darkness has no way to snuff out the light of even a single candle: light will always defeat the darkness. Christ tells us: “I am the Light of the World!” It is the business of Christians every where to bring that light into our parts of the world. For, as Leigh reminded us, our world is a bit too full of darkness at the moment – both globally with wars, climate emergencies and endemic political darkness; – and locally: he had conducted a lot of funerals for his parishioners this year. Which is why the community loves to come together every year for this Service – or Festival – of Light. Leigh crafted it masterfully, choosing hymns and prayers that accentuated the positivity of that Light. We owe him, and the wonderful members of his congregation who welcomed us so warmly, a deep debt of thanks.



Finally, there is the church itself – small, delicate, touchingly beautiful. To the left of the altar is a large plaque memorialising Carol Woolcombe, youngest daughter of Bishop Harry, who bought the church off the Diocese of Exeter for £1 in 1982.



Carol was the living embodiment of all things bright and beautiful – as the memorial window to her in her own church in Acaster Malbis, testifies. Her daring purchase saved our family's church from falling into ruin. There-after, her effort was supported by many other Woolcombes: Tamsyn Woolcombe, Robert's daughter, is a regular attender of services and the names of the other Tamsyn - Tamsyn Blaikie - and her brother, James Woolcombe of Hemerdon, appear several times in the Ashbury Church Visitors Book. Their support means that, long before I deleted the website's mistaken home page last year, declaring that our family was a “Tale of Two Houses,” Hemerdon Woolcombes loved and attended the Ashbury church.

It is, of course, the spiritual home of every member of the Woollcombe family and a beautiful symbol of our family's unity and values. Carol's vision of bequeathing the church to a Charitable Trust has finally been realised by Nicholas Woollcombe earlier this year. I circulated his article about this to you in the Spring. ([Click HERE](#) to read the article)



Nick and his fellow trustees, Lizzy and Amy, deserve the gratitude of Woollcombes everywhere for their commitment and dedication to saving this church for our own, and future, generations of Woollcombes – and to the Northlew vicar and residents who love this little church as much as we do: it is part of their landscape. The fact that over 50 of them turn up to both the summer and winter services, year-in / year out – is ample proof of that.



Local Residents packing the church for the Service of Light – led by the Rev Leigh Winsbury (centre)

Nick and I deeply appreciate their support – which they formalised by donating the Service of Light collection to the new Charity for the maintenance of the church.

Amanda, Tamsyn and I left with our spirits raised and our hearts on fire! You will too if you go to either of the annual services. As soon as I have the dates of the June and November 2026 services, I'll let you know.

And – if you cannot attend in person – please think about other ways you might support this living symbol of our family's heritage. I know Nick and his trustees want every Woollcombe family member to feel a share in its ownership. He is setting up a Justgiving page to receive donations, and will appoint Associate Trustees who can contribute in other ways to the St Mary's Ashbury Charity. Do contact Nick direct if you are interested in supporting it: nick.woollcombe@gmail.com

“GOOD WOOLLCOMBES”

Thomas Woollcombe (1800 - 1876)



Thomas as a young man



Thomas in later years



The Plaque to Thomas in Ashbury Church

I've written in [past Christmas Updates](#) about our Bishops and Army pastors + Admiral George Woollcombe who was a significant leader of the West African squadron that implemented the Wilberforce Act abolishing slavery. Nick Woollcombe has now dug up the story of another good – if controversial! - Woollcombe worthy: Thomas Woollcombe of Devonport. Born at Ashbury in 1800, he became a well-established solicitor and an extraordinary community leader. He was a railway pioneer, and a founder of the Royal Albert Hospital in Devonport. But he will forever be remembered as the civic leader who was prepared to fight a duel and go to jail to defend the honour of his name and family. You can read Nick's full story – and a fascinating newspaper article about him on the website, here. In brief, you will read how a misunderstanding over which candidate Thomas supported in the famous election of 1832 led to Thomas becoming the victim of a smear campaign by one of the candidates, Sir Edward Codrington. The campaign was both unfair and untrue. So Thomas challenged him to withdraw his accusations or fight a duel. That of course, was illegal at the time. Thomas pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 30-days in prison + a £100 fine. On his release, Codrington admitted that he his accusations had been “in error.” The result was that Thomas became even more popular in Devonport: a dinner was held for him on the day of his release at which the great and the good of Devon lined up to sing Thomas' praises! This tablet now in Ashbury Church is a memorial to his 'energy' and 'usefulness.'

John Morth Woollcombe (JMW – 1783 - 1866)

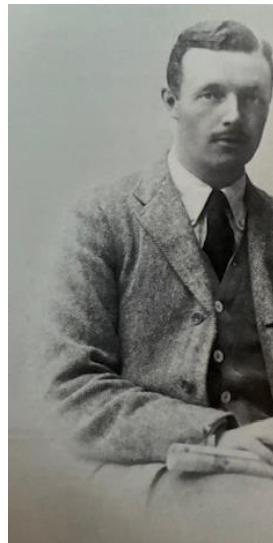
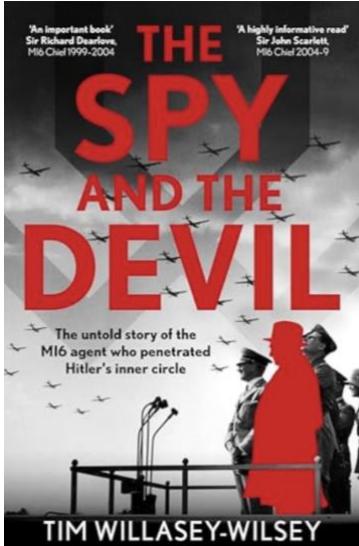
Paul Strickland, great-great-great grandson of Charles Strickland to whom there is a plaque in Ashbury Church sent me a fascinating insight to the legendary squire of Ashbury, John Morth Woollcombe who, on his death, passed it to his younger brother Louis Douglas Woollcombe, Nick Woollcombe's grandfather, who was the last owner of the estate. Charles Strickland was a huntsman and gamekeeper on the Ashbury estate. Paul talks about Charles's son, Henry, who was born on the estate but – somehow – found his way to London where he was 'Industrial Master and Steward' at St Mark's College, Chelsea - England's first teacher training establishment. He did this for several years before moving to the Isle of Wight to take up the post of Steward at Parkhurst Prison for young offenders. The first Governor of Parkhurst Prison had been Captain Robert Woollcombe RA, John Morth's brother. Paul writes:

“I am convinced that for Henry to get from remote Ashbury to London at that relatively young age he must have been given a leg up. He was clearly a bright boy but I doubt that any education he received at the dame school in Northlew would have been sufficient and, even if it had, he would have still needed money to fit himself out and get himself up to London. Whatever form the assistance took, the Woollcombe connections would also have been crucial, helping him to get both the position at St Mark's and the one at Parkhurst.”

In other words, JMW must have given him the leg up. Paul continues:

"I have come across reports that JMW would throw parties for the workers on his estate and in hard times when work was scarce in the area he would employ extra labour. On one such occasion, 'the tables were loaded with good old English fare of roast beef and plum pudding etc and ... all did justice to the "good old English gentleman's" hospitalityUnder the arrangement of the older servants, a procession was formed and conducted by Mr E Scawn the butler and Strickland, the old huntsman, carrying appropriate banners and escorted by the Ashbury brass band'. You could almost be reading the Pickwick Papers."

Malcolm Woollcombe (1890 - 1968)



Malcolm Woollcombe, the head of MI6's political section, who was responsible for Bill de Ropp's political reporting and circulating it in Whitehall. He was highly regarded by successive heads of the Foreign Office.
(© Tamlyn Woollcombe)

Though Malcolm was Ashbury Tamsyn's grand-father, I have a personal interest in this story as the author, Tim Willasey-Wilsey who wrote [The Spy and the Devil](#) – the story of the German spy, Baron William de Ropp whom Malcolm handled from the UK Foreign Office – contacted me to ask if I knew of a Natasha Woollcombe: searching Foreign Office files – this is the only Woollcombe he could find and she is, of course, my daughter who has been working on the Gaza and Syria desks at the FCDO. I put him in touch with Tamsyn – who proudly showed me the book – in which is published this lovely picture of her grand-father. It is, according to her, a cracking good read: get it on [Amazon](#)!

Graham Woollcombe



Graham (left in the hat) with fellow meditators

Graham read architecture at Magdalene College, Cambridge but then decided to devote his life to Transcendental Meditation as a follower of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. He has lived all over the world – and is always an informed and visionary counsellor whenever we meet him on his rare trips back to England. He writes:

"Thanks for sending your update. It was very interesting following what other Woollcombes are doing. We had a great time this year. It started with a trip to Hyderabad where, amongst 10,000 TM meditators and Yogic Flyers creating World Peace, there were two Woollcombes – one from the US and the other myself. The trip was very successful as there are now about thirty different groups, in the military, in schools, amongst ladies and different spiritual organisations, trying to

create a permanent group of mediators who have a lasting effect of world peace. Here is a photo [linked to a video](#) of the gathering + a [link](#) to the research paper about the World Peace initiative."



[Experiencing the 10,000 for World Peace Assembly at Kanha Shanti Vanam, Hyderabad, India](#)

John Woollcombe (1878 - 1917)

Philip Allen-Westrop sent me an article about this military Woollcombe who died in action at the Hai Salient, Mesopotamia, in February 1917. His Colonel wrote of him: "Major John Woollcombe was, I believe, the first officer to get to the Turkish line, and it was there that his body was found. It is impossible for me to describe how much both officers and men feel that the efficiency of the battalion was due to the untiring efforts of this gallant officer during the five years he was with us." Philip concludes: "My sense is John Woollcombe is a man about whom more could be written."



HEMERDON NEWS

Hemerdon House gets a steady trickle of visitors on their summer open days with tours lasting 1hr. 15 mins, starting at 2:30 and 4:00pm. I took my son, daughter and nephew on a tour in July and it was brilliant: the house is not only beautiful inside, it is a treasure trove of Woollcombe memorabilia and treasures, all carefully curated by Jim Woollcombe's daughters under the watchful eye of his sister, Tamsyn, 101 this year! Here are the opening times for [Summer 2026](#):

May 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 21st, 25th and 26th

June 6th, 7th, 8th, 20th, 21st, 22nd and 23rd

July 25th, 26th, and 27th

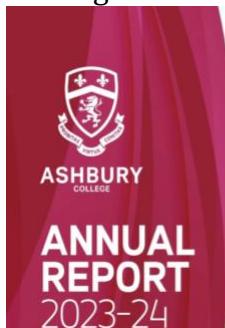
August 9th, 10th 11th, 25th, 26th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 31st

CANADIAN WOOLLCOMBE NEWS

Stephen Woollcombe reports the sad news that his beloved wife Judy died in March. Stephen and she had been together for 25 years. She leaves four children and eight grandchildren from her first marriage. She was stepmother to Stephen's daughter, Dharini Woollcombe Tolley - an actor, writer and physiotherapist who lives in Toronto with her husband Chris and children Olive (12) and Linden Penrose (8). At 86, Stephen continues to live in good health and happily in Ottawa.



Several Toronto Woollcombes, descendants of George Penrose Woollcombe (GPW), will be having a Christmas reunion on December 20th at the home of Judge Jennifer Woollcombe. Jennifer is a great granddaughter of GPW as is Dharini.



As all Canadian Woollcombes know, GPW, an Oxford graduate, migrated to Canada in 1891, and founded the now-renowned Ashbury College in Ottawa. He named it after Ashbury House in Devonshire, the seat of the Woollcombe family from 1684 until it was demolished in 1934. In July 2022, the headmaster of Ashbury College donated a bronze plaque which Canadian, Rick Chataway, ceremoniously placed in St. Mary's Church – the former Ashbury House chapel where I can confirm it still proudly remains – a permanent reminder of our family's great Canadian connections. Stephen Woollcombe's excellent biography of GPW is still available on Amazon. I can attest that it is a great read about another very, very "Good Woollcombe"!

ENGAGEMENTS



Two very happy-making engagements to announce: Alexander Woollcombe and Miranda Fitzgerald announced their engagement to us on 15th December 2025. Venetia Mitchell and Tommy Cullinan sent these photographs of their engagement announced earlier this year. We wish all four of them long life and happiness.

WELCOME WOOLLCOMBES



Hubert Louis Smith



Rufus John Neville

To Maud - daughter of Humphrey & Julia Smith, & Thomas Caldecott, a son, Hubert, born April 2025;
To Bea Neville – daughter of Oliver & Priscilla Smith, a son, Rufus John Gauloises Neville born 5th July 2025
Both are great-great grandsons of Bishop Harry Woollcombe;

CREATIVE WOOLLCOMBES

Meeting Maud and seeing her brilliant portfolio of [MaudeMade](#) paintings and then her cousin, Charlie Wood's extraordinary production of [Cabaret at the Kit-Kat Club](#) in London all in the same week – reminds me of how many great creative Woollcombes there have been. So in **Next Year's Update**, I intend to write about some of them – poets like Carol Woollcombe, artists like Maud and her great grand-mother, Hilda – wife of Bishop Harry Woollcombe. Also the brilliant New Zealand-based water colourist, Ben Woollcombe and my Uncle, Richard Woollcombe. There are probably many more – so please write and tell me about any you know of? I give you a taster of them below:



Hilda Woollcombe's Nature Notes

Maud Smith

A Ben Woollcombe New Zealand landscape

Do keep writing to me: I get a steady stream of emails from people who have discovered the website and want to know more about an ancestor or a living relative. As you know, I am a rogue amateur at this – so would love to have more help enlarging and improving the Woollcombe Family Archive. For that I definitely need help!

I wish you all a very happy Christmas – and a happy, productive 2026. And if you have any thoughts about “Creative Woollcombes” – do send them to me for next year’s update.

Very Best wishes,

David Woollcombe, Keeper, The www.Woollcombe.co.uk archive
Email: david@peacechild.org