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FRAGILE FORTUNES

THE ORIGINS OF A GREAT BRITISH MERCHANT FAMILY

Elizabeth Neill

Born in Topsham in Devon and denied his inheritance, George Abraham Gibbs was destined for a career as a surgeon in Exeter. Set against a background of political turmoil and war, this book looks at how he used his extensive network of friends and family in the wool trade to further his fortune.

His eldest son Vicary studied law, becoming attorney general and was knighted. George was a West India merchant in Bristol and Antony, having 'pushed hope and expectation too far', bankrupted the family. Abraham, a friend of Nelson and Sir William and Emma Hamilton, was a successful merchant-banker in Italy, but his life ended suddenly amid rumours of corruption.

Using original family papers and archives in London, Exeter, Bristol and Palermo, the author traces the humble origins of the Gibbs family in Clyst St. George and Topsham in the mid-sixteenth century to the 1840s, when after an 'act of insanity', its fortunes changed forever.

Elizabeth Neill was born and educated in north London and qualified as a State Registered Nurse at University College Hospital. Some years later, wanting a change of direction, she graduated in Politics and Modern History at the University of Manchester. Throughout her career in the public, private and voluntary sector she has had a continuing interest in social and economic history and has written a number of articles on a variety of subjects.

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