

To shed light on his wives, allow me briefly to introduce John Still, the man:

1544 – 1608 Enthroned as bishop Feb. 1593

John Still cut a striking figure with a combed black beard and large nose. You can see him stretched out in red bishop's robes on his Cathedral tomb. Undoubtedly intelligent, very well educated and knowledgeable he was imposing in company but inclined to arrogance. Friends called him 'Divine Still' because he always knew he was always right...

He twice married wealthy women, ruthlessly exploited the lead mines on Mendip and died a very rich man.



The Two Wives of John Still

Still wife 1

It is perhaps a bit of a stretch to include the first Mrs Still in stories of 'Women in the Palace' because she died in the Palace only two months after John had been made bishop and she had moved in with their six children. But the first Mrs Still brings a unique contribution to our Palace history.

As Anna Alabaster* she married John Still in Hadleigh Suffolk, bore nine children during fourteen years (three babies died) eventually died age 46 in 1593 and was taken back to Suffolk for burial in the parish church. On the wall there stands a tall brass plaque with a Latin inscription commemorating her faultless life and a full-length image of *'an Elizabethan lady wearing a hat with a rounded crown and full brim, and an embroidered under- kirtle showing through her farthingale in front.'***

Very few bishop's wives have been immortalised in literature, even fewer in art, but Anna Alabaster has left an impression of herself in sixteen century brass!

So now we can all imagine how her ghost might appear as she haunts the Palace stairs at night....!



Still wife 2

Having lost one wife and being left with six children under eighteen, the freshly minted bishop wasted little time in seeking a mother for his children, a manager for his household and a mistress for his bed, and in December 1594 he married Jane Horner, daughter of an influential and wealthy Somerset family.

One child, Thomas, resulted from the marriage, but it was not the end of Jane's contribution to history.

A year or two after the deaths of John and Jane Still the Lord Bishop of Ely recounted a story from the summer of 1596 when Jane Still was in a congregation at divine service in the Cathedral at Wells. Without warning a torrential summer storm broke above their heads with fearful flashes of lightning illuminating every corner followed by several immense claps of thunder crashing around the nave. In fright the whole congregation threw themselves on their knees fearing the end had come.

But as is often the way with summer storms it passed as rapidly as it had arrived and all were able to leave without apparent harm. Afterwards, however, many noticed that the marks of a 'cross' had appeared, imprinted on their bodies – some on the shoulder, breast or back and other parts. Jane Still observed such marks on herself and rushed to the Palace in some excitement to tell her husband of this miracle.

At this point the bishop became the 'doubting Thomas' of the New Testament disciples - 'who could not believe what he could not see' - and soundly treated his wife's claim as absurd. With a spark of rebellion Jane refused to meekly accept her husband's ridicule, and is reported to have rapidly given the bishop - in sixteenth century language – '*ocular proof*.'

And with that clumsy-sounding phrase, as Jane exposed her body to her husband, we glimpse an unusually intimate moment between a bishop and his wife. And how we wish we could draw back the curtain of years and find out more...!

But there is little more to be said. In February 1608 John Still died age 55 a very wealthy man commemorated by a painted monument in the Cathedral

Jane was only 37 when she died later that same year. Her family buried her in the tiny All Saints Church in Cloford near Nunney, from whence she came.



All Saints Church Cloford

* All UK Alabasters are direct descendants of Anna's father, Thomas Alabaster www.alabaster.org.uk

** Hembry; *The Bishops of Bath and Wells* p185.