



FRIENDS OF ST NICHOLAS CHURCHYARD

Not from around here

How the refugee Sanxay family became the establishment

The story of the Sanxay family links **religious persecution, migration, education, commerce, the Church, the development of Sutton and Cheam, and even the beginnings of modern tourism.**

At its centre is **the Rev. James Sanxay**, Rector of Sutton during a period when Sutton was beginning to change from a small rural community into an increasingly important stopping place and road junction.

From refugees to the establishment

The Sanxays were originally French Protestants, or **Huguenots**. James's grandfather, the Rev. **Jacques Sanxay**, was a Protestant minister who left France following the persecution associated with Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Jacques eventually ministered to a French Protestant congregation in Exeter.

His son, **Daniel Sanxay**, represents the family's remarkable transition into English society. Daniel was educated at Oxford, became a clergyman of the Church of England and established himself at Cheam.

He became headmaster of **Cheam School**, moving the school into new premises in 1719.

Daniel married **Jane Antrobus** in 1711. This marriage began a particularly important relationship between the Sanxay and Antrobus families. Further marriages followed, and members of both families became interconnected through the Church, medicine, commerce, banking and property.

The monuments in the **Lumley Chapel at Cheam** preserve some of these relationships in stone.

James Sanxay

James was the son of Daniel Sanxay and Jane Antrobus.

He studied at Oxford, taking his BA in 1731 and MA in 1734. On his father's death, he succeeded him as headmaster of Cheam School in **1739**.

James was an accomplished classical scholar. In 1754 he published the substantial ***Lexicon Aristophanicum, Græco-Anglicum***, a Greek-English lexicon of the works of Aristophanes.

Around **1745–46**, James became **Rector of Sutton**, remaining at St Nicholas until his death in 1766.

He therefore combined responsibility for Cheam School with the Rectory of Sutton for several years.

In 1750 he married **Catherine Firmin** at Beddington. Their family became firmly associated with Sutton, with children baptised at St Nicholas.

Sutton was changing

The Sutton James Sanxay knew was still a small Surrey settlement.

But during his incumbency its position as a place on important routes out of London became increasingly significant.

The **Sutton and Reigate Turnpike Act of 1755** improved routes running:

Direction	Broad modern equivalent
Sutton towards Reigate and the south	A217 corridor
Sutton through Cheam towards Ewell	A232 corridor
Across the Downs	Connections towards Banstead, Epsom and wider Surrey

Improved roads encouraged greater movement of people, coaches, goods and information.

Sutton increasingly became a **coaching and stopping place**, particularly for travellers heading towards Epsom, Reigate and eventually Brighton.

The railway transformed Sutton after 1847, but the process of turning Sutton into an important transport junction had begun much earlier.

What was James Sanxay's role?

As Rector, Sanxay was one of the most important figures in eighteenth-century Sutton.

The parish vestry and local landowners dealt with matters which today would be responsibilities of local government, including roads, charities and poor relief.

Local research has associated James with **road improvements and turnpike administration** during this period. His position, family connections and responsibilities make such involvement very plausible.

However, a surviving published source naming him explicitly as one of the original trustees or promoters of the **1755 Reigate Turnpike Trust** has not yet been identified.

It is therefore safest to say that Sanxay was an important local figure **during and probably involved in the changes surrounding Sutton's roads**, rather than claiming that he personally created the turnpike.

Enter William Gilpin

Around 1750 another outsider arrived in the Sutton and Cheam area.

William Gilpin, born near Carlisle in 1724, was a young clergyman looking for a position.

He became an **usher**, effectively an assistant or deputy master, at Cheam School under James Sanxay.

When James gave up the school in **1752**, Gilpin took it over.

The connection seems to have been much more than a simple business transaction. Local and family sources suggest that the wider Sanxay family helped Gilpin establish himself.

James's brother **Robert Sanxay**, a successful London druggist and businessman, is said to have provided financial backing. James himself remained supportive and supplied copies of his Greek lexicon to the school.

Under Gilpin, Cheam School recovered and expanded considerably.

Gilpin introduced ideas about education that were unusually progressive for his time, placing greater emphasis on personal responsibility, practical learning and preparation for adult life.

Gilpin and the Picturesque

Gilpin's fame eventually came from something quite different.

During his travels, he developed his ideas about the **Picturesque**, encouraging people to look at landscapes as though they were compositions in a painting.

He particularly liked:

- irregular and dramatic landscapes;
- ruins and ancient buildings;
- rough trees and broken ground;
- interesting combinations of light and weather;
- scenes which could be mentally “framed” like a picture.

His journey along the River Wye in 1770 became the basis of one of the most influential early books of picturesque travel.

Gilpin did not invent tourism, but he helped popularise the idea of travelling **specifically to look at scenery**.

Doctor Syntax

Gilpin's influence became so widespread that it also became the subject of satire.

Writer **William Combe** and artist **Thomas Rowlandson** created the comic character **Dr Syntax**, a travelling clergyman constantly searching for picturesque views.

Dr Syntax was not literally William Gilpin, but contemporary readers understood that Gilpin and his followers were being mocked.

There is a wonderful connection back to Sutton and Cheam: the nationally famous ideas that inspired Dr Syntax developed in the mind of a man whose career had been helped into existence by **James Sanxay and the Sanxay family**.

Did Gilpin have a connection with St Nicholas?

Local research suggests that Gilpin's name appears in material associated with the Sutton parish registers and that he may occasionally have helped James Sanxay with services at St Nicholas.

James apparently had no regular curate until late in his ministry.

This makes Gilpin's occasional involvement **quite plausible**, but individual entries should be verified before claiming that he regularly officiated at St Nicholas.

Evidence, probability and family tradition

Story	How securely can we state it?
Sanxays were Huguenot refugees from France	Well documented
Daniel Sanxay became an Anglican clergyman and Cheam schoolmaster	Well documented
Daniel married Jane Antrobus	Well documented
James succeeded Daniel at Cheam School	Well documented
James became Rector of Sutton	Well documented
James published a Greek lexicon in 1754	Well documented
Gilpin succeeded James at Cheam School in 1752	Well documented
Gilpin became an important theorist of the Picturesque	Well documented
Dr Syntax was a satire influenced by Gilpin	Well documented
The Sanxays financially supported Gilpin's takeover of Cheam School	Supported principally by family/local history
Catherine Firmin encouraged James to give up schoolmastering because it was beneath his new social position	Family/school tradition, plausible but not proven
James played an active role in Sutton's turnpike administration	Probable/local tradition, further primary evidence desirable
Gilpin occasionally took services at St Nicholas	Plausible, register evidence needs closer examination
Jacques Sanxay was poisoned by a French agent	Colourful family tradition, not established historical fact

Why the Sanxays matter

In little more than two generations, the family moved from the insecurity of religious exile into the heart of eighteenth-century English society.

Jacques Sanxay arrived as a refugee.

His son **Daniel** became an Oxford-educated Anglican clergyman and schoolmaster.

His grandson **James** became Rector of Sutton, classical scholar and headmaster of Cheam School.

Other members of the family became medical professionals and successful London merchants.

Through marriage with the **Antrobus family**, their descendants and relatives moved into banking, finance, property and the Surrey establishment.

And through their support of **William Gilpin**, the family's influence reached unexpectedly into education, art, landscape appreciation and the development of modern sightseeing.

The Sanxays began their English story as people who were very definitely “**not from around here.**”

Within a few generations, they had become part of the network of clergy, merchants, educators, landowners and professionals who helped shape Sutton and Cheam.

They had become the establishment.