

## **Forget the Crisis and Dance: Reconstructing Master Treby's years of dancing and pleasure 1802-1815**

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Master Paul Treby, a Devonshire gentleman of considerable means, decided that it was time to keep a diary. Almost nine years of war were over and peace negotiations had begun. January 1802 was an ideal time for reflection. In the preface he wrote:

When the golden age of youth is succeeded by the iron one of old age I shall say to myself I might have passed my youth more usefully than in hunting, shooting, dancing and instead of the hounds I might have followed some gentlemanly profession...(1)

Treby was proud of the hectic social whirl of which his life consisted. He called himself a pleasure seeker, justifying the activities he recorded and exclaiming:

At present I am fond of all the amusements on the following pages and perhaps this lot of nonsense may afford me some pleasure in my old age.

Treby was not the only West-Country person thinking about pleasure. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the wealthy Calmady family of Langdon Court Wembury, were improving their estate and making their house more fit for dancing and entertainment. Their home and land appear was deliberately developed as an explicit demonstration of social status and material wealth, a show case for entertaining fellow gentry, an architectural and landscaped backdrop for the staging of country pursuits. A painting of the house, by an unknown artist, sometime after 1709, shows an aesthetically pleasing symmetrical building surrounded by terraced gardens. Vistas on all sides are carefully designed and constructed. A

fashionable belvedere, surrounded by an enclosed rabbit warren, stands on Mount Pleasant and overlooks the house and gardens. There are no deer in the ancient deer park but instead rare breed cattle graze in the fields and ornamental fowl are being set free in a specially constructed pond. Rare breed husbandry was uncommon this far west and this is evidence of hobby farming similar perhaps to Marie Antoinette's pastoral playtime in pre-revolutionary France. The painting shows that even farm buildings are designed to be pleasing to the eye. To the left of the main house, fronted by a white classical fence, stands an ornamental but practically useless threshing barn, the doors and fashionable porthole windows mirror those in the main house but would allow too much wind into the building for any useful threshing to take place. Further evidence of development for pleasure can be found by comparing the early eighteenth century painting with the house and surrounding landscape as shown on a 1789 Calmady estate map upon which a duck pond, shown in the painting, survives but new formal ponds and an ornamental canal system have been created. The Devon Rural Archive holds water colour paintings called *The Park Pond*. These were painted by young members of the Calmady family around 1840 and show the canal system in detail. In the watercolours anglers fish in the waters and well dressed ladies stroll on the banks of a well established canal, developed still further since the 1789 feature. This suggests that whilst the poor of rural Devon were suffering wartime hardship the Calmadys were still putting considerable sums of money into landscaping for leisure.

The plight of the poor stands starkly in contrast to all the fun, frolics and frivolity. Whilst Paul Treby and his friends were pleasure-seeking others were suffering hardship. Documents detailing settlement examinations show that penniless Elizabeth Philips was searching for her missing husband, Thomas, who had vanished since being drawn into the army reserve, and pleading in vain with parish officials for aid, assistance and a home (3) and skilled masons were walking many miles to seek a few hours work to help their families survive. (4)

1802 was a momentous year for many people. How aware the above individuals were of the Treaty of Amiens is unrecorded but the latter reflected the nation's long weariness with war. Civilians must have been delighted to be at peace as income tax was abolished, the volunteer regiments disbanded and the size of the navy dramatically reduced. In Devon the Grand Fleet at Torbay was broken up and 40,000 sailors were discharged. (5) There were celebrations in the streets of Plymouth and plenty of excuses for dancing in the halls of its 'three towns'. The crisis and challenge of war was over. We now know of course that it wasn't over at all. After a mere year of peace, hostilities with France broke out again and the war continued to 1815.

This paper gives some indication of the social life of the privileged few during a period of national crisis. Master Paul and his neighbours lived in the Devon countryside, just outside Plymouth, their daily lives unfolding against a backdrop of war with its financial and social implications. Despite the shadow of this war Paul and his friends found many excuses to seek out opportunities to drink fine wine and dance. They danced visited numerous places to meet new dance partners. Evidence from handwritten diaries, contemporary news reports, handbills and other primary sources, enables us to retrace their steps, exploring how, for some, though not for all, dancing would always be more important than warfare.

The evidence in Treby's diaries is rich, though somewhat idiosyncratic, and clearly demonstrates that whilst the poor struggled to feed and clothe their children and even those

above the poverty line, low ratepayers, pulled in their belts, young Paul did his best to be a pleasure seeker. His diaries illustrated by his sister Leticia and therefore presumably intended for a wider readership, provide personal testimony to the lengths a young man would go in the pursuit of pleasure and jollity.

The diaries begin in 1802, at the time of the aforementioned short lived peace, and continue throughout the following years of war. It is clear that, at the time of writing, Treby believed that he would make no contribution to the war effort. In explaining that he might have spent his youth more usefully he suggests that a suitable gentlemanly profession would have been 'that of arms...I might have shot French men...' Instead he frequently confesses to 'tripping with the beauties of nature' showing that even during wartime, at least for those with wealth, the routines of social engagements continued apace. What the rural poor thought about the antics of rich young men is sadly unrecorded but it is clear from the activities Treby records that he must have been a familiar figure riding across the Devon countryside, wearing, if his sister's pen drawing is accurate, an impressive top hat and smoking his pipe

In July 1803 Treby describes a public breakfast and a ball given by the first Devon Militia at Wembury Camp, in the coastal countryside just outside Plymouth. It is clear however that military activities were the last thing on his mind, as the passage includes details of the alcohol consumed and a recipe for lambs' wool, a concoction made from ale, sugar and spice. He was at the camp again in May, having a 'jolly time', when he declares that there was 'no supper but plenty of songs'

Treby writes to amuse himself and his audience but woven between his anecdotes are snippets of information which add to our understanding of the community's contact with war time activities. The frequency with which he records social gatherings at Wembury Camp suggest that major contributions to the war effort, as well as the social life of the wealthy, were being made in the heart of the rural community. Fortunately record linkage with military documents

confirms this. Wembury camp features several times in the military order book kept by Captain Clark of the Devon Militia. (6) The listings contain details of parades, courts martial, military ceremonies, marches and the movement of prisoners of war. Military activity, both tactical and social was frequent and observable and it would seem no expense was spared. One February evening 9 officers and 7 guests consumed 5 bottles of Madeira at 8s. 10d, 1 bottle of sherry at 5s.4d, 12 bottles of port at 5s.10d, 3 bottles of port at 8s. Plus an 'untolerable deal of sack'.

In contrast however, whilst Treby was enjoying military hospitality at Wembury Camp, parish office holders in Wembury village were struggling to find new ways to preserve parish resources, even ceasing to pay parishioners for bringing in hedgehog heads under the *Noyfull Fowels and Vermyn Act*. This change of policy, with an average total of 49 head payments a year made considerable saving. Actually Treby himself was extremely active in vermin control. Listing his various interests, which included wrestling, swimming, boating, dancing, shooting, dogs, hunting and catching rabbits in long nets, he notes with glee that he personally shot '778 creatures in one year's bag.' At this point it becomes clear that using the Treby diaries as historical sources may not appeal to squeamish researchers. Not content with listing his prey Treby glued the body parts, mostly ears, of the unfortunate creatures, moles and foxes, on relevant diary pages.

Socialising with military men shows that Treby was not unaware of the nation in crisis. He didn't ignore it but simply refused to let war interfere with the pleasure of living. He used his military contacts to provide opportunities to meet and dance with as many young ladies as possible. At times he shows considerable political awareness, though he dismisses much unpleasantness in a light hearted manner. His diary provides evidence of local gossip about the political situation and Treby quotes, at length, lines from witty local ballads and broadsheets on the sayings of Napoleon, for example this comment on the 1803 report of the latter's alleged view

that England was a nation of shop-keepers. References to steel seem a good indication that locals were aware of the war and prepared to fight:

When the tyrant of France with a view to degrade  
Says we're nothing but shopmen and laughs at  
our trade  
Let none to the obvious aspersion object...  
All England we know is some little shop  
Where every customer freely may stop...  
For since Bonaparte has found our vocation  
And says 'tis his wish that we serve the great  
nation  
A card of what good we to furnish are able  
That not be amiss to lay on his table  
The first we are ready this moment to deal  
In capital stock of the best polished steel.....

However whilst men were being drafted by ballot into the militia, Treby remained defiant of his right to seek entertainment, writing in 1803:

The hunt my boys is a glorious sport  
To which we country squires resort...  
Your country's joys are better by far  
Than the militiaman's war.

By 1806 however the war effort has caught up with him. He entitles his 1806 -1807 diary 'The marches of a militia man' and in it he records:

I joined the first Devon Militia at Exeter as a  
jolly ensign Monday the twenty second of  
September eighteen hundred and six. I got my  
lieutenancy. My commission is dated  
November 4<sup>th</sup>.

By February 24<sup>th</sup> he is in charge of militia men 'I got my company.'

Unlike poorer men, joining the rank and file of the militia, he seems to have successfully combined his military duties with an ever expanding social calendar and lest his readers think he is not enjoying himself at balls and hunts he often adds the sounds of pleasure to his commentaries, adding 'whoop, whoop!' at various intervals. Not content to remain in Devon, which has 'good galloping ground apart from all the turnips', this pursuit of pleasure takes him all over the country and he even finds time to sojourn in the capital city:

Left Chelmsford at two o'clock this morning in a gig and arrived at the Tavistock coffee house Covent Garden at six o'clock in the morning, from there we took post ferry to Cophorne to see Tom Belcher...we returned to London and dined at the Burton House Henrietta Street Covent Garden then mounted our gig...

And there is plenty of evidence that he does not take his early military life too seriously. His accounts of duty in various parts of England read more like a gazetteer for tourists rather than service to the nation. He outlines the marches he undertook but turns them into opportunities to expand his social life. Honiton, where he had a dispute with a landlord at HQ, is dismissed as 'famous for its lace and nothing else'. Salisbury fares little better 'a stupid town rivulet flows through but does not add to its cleanliness.' but other places are better suited to a pleasure seeker:

At Kingsbridge. Newman's wine very good. The 62<sup>nd</sup> [militia] almost all Irish jolly fellows. Kingsbridge is a very pretty town and a very good run...we carried some of our love of good living and fun to astonish the people of Kingsbridge and a bottle or two of port every evening to put our heads in order...Fareham, the wine here is excellent and a visitation in the town many drunken parsons and a few drunken officers...

His aim was clear always to hunt, drink and dance and drink again, with perhaps time for a 'few rubbers at bowls'. He certainly enjoyed dancing in Winchester and attended balls. At first reading this diary might appear to offer no more than accounts of young men enjoying nights out on the town. However it is far more valuable than this. In between dancing and other social engagements Treby accurately describes long marches and illness facing ordinary men:

24 miles one day march, a detachment of the regiment of which I was one marched into quarters...to make room for sick and wounded soldiers...

The locations of Treby's drunken exploits match the orders in the militia records. They also give some indication of what was

expected of ordinary militia men, poorer members of Wembury and surrounding villages, drafted into service by ballot. The distance covered by Treby and his drunken colleagues, from Devon up country as far as Warwick, Loughborough and Ashby de la Zouche, gives some indication of the journeys men were expected to make on foot, for very little pay, one shirt and two pairs of socks. Treby's accounts of his travels match statements, made by those who had no time to dance, the poor whose voices can be heard in documents of Wembury settlement examinations. Together they provide evidence of the flexibility and mobility demanded by militia service and the pressures placed on families when their main breadwinner is absent for long periods of time. It is somewhat ironic that Paul Treby's diary, with its entire obsession with hunting, dancing and pleasure seeking, bears witness to hardship. It is doubly ironic considering that if the decision making office holders of Wembury had been given access to the diary, then the testimony of many including deserted wife Elizabeth Philips, previously mentioned, might have been believed. The diary illustrates clearly the gulf between the very rich and the poorest members of the Devonshire community. Whilst poor militia men and their families feel the true pressure of wartime service the rich can turn active service into a more enjoyable experience, cushioned from hardship by their rank and their financial resources.

Treby gives accounts of militia duties on prison ships and upon Dartmoor to the prison, recently constructed for American and French prisoners of war but he had the means and the will to turn most things into comfortable, sometimes dubious, but most often useful experiences, taking tea with Mr Styles, agent for the prison ship Europa at 'his beautiful petit maison at Saltash, where he takes "Mrs Agent" and pretty little ones in the summer afternoons....' and improving his social skills by persuading French interpreters at the prison to give him French lessons so he may go riding and socialising and with 'M Villard, my sister's French master.' Treby was not alone striving to improve his communications in French; female heads were being turned by

French Naval Officers, held prisoner in parole towns. They were enchanting the young ladies, encouraging dancing and breaking a few hearts in the process. (7)

Paul Treby's descriptions of the wine cellars of naval commanders and the pleasure gardens and zoological collections of high ranking officers contrasts sharply with the role the poor military foot soldier caught up in war time duties, away from family and friends with nothing pleasant to divert them. Nick Foulkes has highlighted this contrast clearly in his aptly titled *Dancing Into Battle*. (8)

Paul Treby was not the only young person to make the most out of wartime experiences. Military service provided opportunities for men and women to dance and socialise with a variety of different companions. His younger sister, Caroline, began her own diary in 1808 and continued it for thirty years. In her early volumes (9) she describes many of the social gatherings and occasions for dancing which also appear in Paul's diary. It is interesting to read about the same events seen through contrasting male and female eyes. Paul and his sisters attended the same events but saw them in different ways. It is clear that whilst Paul attended many public and private balls and rarely distinguished between the two, Caroline preferred balls which required formal invitations. On January 8<sup>th</sup> 1808, the enthusiasm and excitement of youth can be imagined as the teenage Caroline writes, in her new blue leather *Minors Pocket Book For The Young of Both Sexes*:

I went to a ball at Plympton for the first time in my life. My partners were Col Vivian of the 7<sup>th</sup> dragoons, George Hunt, Capt Elford 1<sup>st</sup> Devon Militia, Capt Bayner Royal Navy, Capt Graham Royal Engineers.

In their respective diaries Paul and Caroline both mention balls linked with Bodmin Races, Paul also comments on the races, Caroline does not name a single horse or rider. When describing balls Paul rates the quality of the wine and names a few of his some dancing partners, in contrast Caroline seldom mentions the refreshments but almost always rates the quality of her dancing partners. The latter vary from 'tolerably good' through 'very good' to 'exceedingly good'

though closer inspection of the long lists of partners and dances shows that she is not commenting on individual dancing ability but rather on the rank and/or status held by her partners. Thus an ensign might be 'tolerable' and a militia captain 'good' but a naval captain 'very good'. At the above mentioned first ball of 1808 she declares 'Col Vivian the best partner.' He does of course out rank all her other partners, other than the Naval Captain, but the Vivian family were one of the richest in the county so he has higher status than all the other men.

Caroline's diary shows that she finds her brother's contacts useful when seeking introductions to dance partners. Her diary contains far less detail about social gatherings whenever she notes 'Paul is away' but when he is at home she describes the invitations she has received in great detail. Paul's military colleagues and other friends become potential suitors. After one Valentine's Day ball she draws a heart and writes inside it 'Henry my valentine'. She also records her dance list, which included The Nameless, Miss Ray, The Tars of Victory, Paddy O'Carrol, Maltese Dance, the exciting sounding Kennyan Slashers and La Ridicule. The *Minors Pocket Book*, helpfully providing the instructions for the latter on the back cover:

1<sup>st</sup> lady changing with 2<sup>nd</sup> gentleman, change places with the second lady, pousette and right and left. Set and hands across and back again. Lead down the middle up again and right and left.

1809 was a momentous year for Caroline. She lists all her new acquaintances, the forty books, in French, which she has read and comments on the weddings of friends, in particular that of 'Miss Molesworth to Philip Browne of Edinburgh rather in a hurry.' 1809 was George III's jubilee and both Treby diarists had many opportunities to dance and socialise. There were balls and other entertainments, including theatre visits, throughout the year but the busiest month was October which saw Paul dancing:

at Fountains [the Plymouth Dock Assembly Rooms] with Miss Fanshaw, with Miss Carew and Miss Rashleigh at a ball at Mount

Edgecumbe and with Miss Fortesque at Plympton.

Unlike Caroline he felt no need to rate his partners but could not resist commenting on the excellent supper and ‘double bodied champagne’ provided at Mount Edgecumbe. Caroline found the Edgecumbe ball very exciting. Hosted by Lord and Lady Edgecumbe, it was by invitation only and the Plymouth guests had to cross the river Tamar by boat to reach their impressive house. Caroline records only four partners at this ball in contrast with her usual ten and none of these were military gentlemen. The ball was by all accounts a splendid occasion and was fully reported on in *Truman’s Flying Post* and *Plymouth Dock Telegraph*. The Edgecumbe ball was not the only occasion for celebrating the jubilee. Plymouth held its own Charity event and advertised it in the local press. People were encouraged to buy tickets, with the promise that there would be beer for the men and dancing for their wives, so Paul’s comments on the quality of the alcohol and Caroline’s focus on the dances may reflect wider social attitudes. The Plymouth press often advertised dance related events and entertainments. The Dock Theatre, which Paul frequented, included dance in many of its programmes. The latter featured in many *Plymouth Dock Telegraph* pages. Especially impressive were the dancing achievements of one Mr Bennett; one Friday evening in the character of Harlequin, he concluded a short pantomime with ‘a flying leap through a globe of fire’, after which he appeared in the opera *The Children in The Wood* as a dancing dwarf, followed by his ‘whimsical transformation into a woman!’ Next he performed an Irish dance, by special request, recited poems about ‘Boney’ and about ‘Nelson’s victories and glorious death’ and became Harlequin again, with surprising leaps and escapes, before finally growing to a monstrous giant, twenty feet high.’

After attending balls or visiting the assembly Caroline often records arriving home in the early hours of the morning with Paul going on to another event with friends, whilst she and her sisters retire to bed. These late nights and early mornings were not unusual. In

November of jubilee year Paul Treby recorded spending time at the Fountain where he

Kept it up with jolly fellows I know Bruce and Palmer till nine o’clock in the morning,

though quite how he managed this is a mystery as the Fountain’s rules stated that there was to be no more entertainment after midnight! The Fountain Tavern, Plymouth Dock (Devonport) ran a season of subscription balls from the first Monday after Michaelmas week in September which continued on alternative Mondays for 13 weeks. Paul records spending more time here than his sister. Subscribers had to pay 10s and 6d each for the season but non-subscribers could attend on payment of 2/6d for each admission. Gentlemen were charged 1 shilling each for tea, though there is no mention of charges for ladies. Both men and women could be subscribers and the custom was for ‘A Queen to be drawn for the night from one of the married ladies.’ The Queen had to be a subscriber. Once chosen this married lady ruled the ball and all activities in the assembly for one night and before appointing a successor. The Fountain’s rules further stated:

Queen’s Determination in any dispute is final

Queen to be assisted by two stewards to be chosen by her

Queen and stewards may choose their own partners

Ladies who are strangers are neither to draw for partners or places

Ladies to be considered strangers only the first time of their appearance for the season

No lady to dance before tea who does not draw

Gentlemen who mean to dance before tea to give their names to one of the stewards

Minuets to begin at seven o’clock precisely

Two country dances only before tea

After tea ladies to draw for places only

No dances to be called for after 12 o’clock (10)

There were similar rules for the assembly at the Long Room Stonehouse (11):

All ladies and gentlemen that frequent this room are desired to subscribe

Every Thurs in the summer season there is a concert and assembly

The concert begins at six o'clock and ends at eight o'clock

Dancing to begin at eight and leave off precisely at eleven o'clock

Subscribers to pay one shilling each on entering the room and non sub to pay three shillings and sixpence for which they can have coffee or tea

No tea and coffee to be allowed for entrance money in the room after nine o'clock

If any lady or gentleman should omit to pay their entrance money it is humbly hoped they will not take it amiss when called on for it

Gentlemen on public days are desired not to wear swords in the room

The proprietor begs that no dogs be suffered in the room.

These rules could be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps they imply that the balls were decorous occasions, where everyone behaved impeccably at all times though the comments on swords, dogs and the Queen's determination in all disputes might suggest that at times certain behaviors had been less than respectful of surroundings and other guests. At any rate Paul attended more of these events than his sister who preferred the more genteel private balls. Nevertheless it is clear that for both of them, and presumably for the rest of their siblings, dances were important events on their social calendars even or perhaps especially through the long years of war. Balls and entertainments were rarely cancelled but the siblings and the local press record that events at the assembly rooms were postponed out of respect, when the Princess Amelia died in 1810.

One paper cannot do justice to all the evidence found in almost thirty years of personal testimony. There are other narratives to unfold as part of an ongoing larger project. However the diaries of the Treby siblings

when, linked with press reports and military records have thus far given insight into some of the ways young people of means still found time to dance when their country was in crisis. Paul Treby wrote of himself as a pleasure seeker but later military records show him rising in rank and taking care of his men. As an older man and a JP he features in Wembury parish records showing concern for the poor and making arrangements to distribute clothing but that is another story. The younger Paul appears to know that one day his older self will become more responsible, perhaps passing judgement on the activities and pleasure of youth. In the preface to his dairy, which he dedicates to his future older self, he writes:

It would have been better had I danced in attendance on some great man of power than to have tripped it with the beauties of nature...I might have employed my leisure hours better than in writing this confounded nonsense but now it cannot be helped, so let that pass...at present I am fond of all the amusements on the following pages and perhaps this lot of nonsense may afford me some pleasure in my old age.

We do not know whether his writing amused him in later life him but researchers of historical dance should be glad that he and his sister Caroline chose to record their dancing experiences throughout and despite the twenty years of war.

### Notes

1. This and all subsequent references to Paul's diary WD/864/2
2. Robin Waterhouse explains these features in his *Langdon Court's Secret Garden*, illustrated walks, which he started in 2007.
3. WD/125/51
4. WD/125/57 and WD/125/37

5. Harvey R *The War Of Wars; The Epic Struggle Between Britain And France 1793-1815* Constable and Robinson (2006) 317-320
6. WD134/1
7. One such parole town was Launceston in Cornwall, where they were billeted in houses throughout the town and had considerable freedom to court and even marry local girls. Launceston Lawrence House Museum tells their stories in an exhibition.
8. Foulkes N. *Dancing into Battle* Weidenfeld and Nicholson (2006)
9. This and all following references to Caroline's early diaries WD/11/48/2
10. Cited Llewellyn Jewitt *A History of Plymouth* (1873) reprinted 2001 Lazarus Press. Jewitt comments on the quaintness of these 'old fashioned' rules which were set in 1792 and still in use at the time Paul was writing, thus showing how attitudes change between the early and later years of the nineteenth century.
11. Ibid