

HENRY WOOLLCOMBE AND HIS DIARIES

Summary of a lecture delivered on 3rd April 1975
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One of Henry Woollcombe's obituary notices contains a reference, nowadays easily misunderstood, to "his obvious and instantly allowed RESPECTABILITY", which meant simply that his conduct gave others the ability to respect him. It also said:—

"His address, the ease and polished courtesy of his bearing, the taste which modified the expression of his opinions and feelings, his mild cheerfulness and the gentle interest of his kindly sympathies, a certain show of the aristocratic, and a pleasing touch of the old school in his carriage; all these contributed to perfect the picture of the GENTLEMAN".

Henry Woollcombe was born in 1777 and died unmarried in 1847. The Plymouth in which he was born was a town quite separate from Stonehouse, which in turn was quite separate from Dock, and the Three Towns between them contained less than 40,000 people. By the time of his death the combined population was 90,000 and when the amalgamation finally took place in 1914 it was 214,000. Today it is still no more than 250,000 which means that in Henry's lifetime the proportional growth of Plymouth was seven times as great as it has been in the last seventy years, an equal period.

At his birth, Exeter was a twelve hour journey from Plymouth, and London two and a half days. One year after his death the final railway connection with London was made reducing the journey to a matter of hours. Even before that the stage coach time to London had been cut to just over 21 hours.

Henry himself was interested in transport, and on 12th December 1833 gave a lecture to the Plymouth Institution on "Ancient and Modern Travelling in Devonshire" in which he said that his ancestors were "deserving of considerable censure for their reluctance to exchange for new customs those which were established merely because they were established".

Henry began to keep a Diary in 1797 and continued to do so until 1828 when he suddenly stopped. In the main, the Diaries provide a picture of an active professional man—he became an Attorney in 1798—but because he led that life from a Plymouth base in an age of turmoil, we get glimpses of the wider world as well.

Locally Henry was active in many fields apart from the direct exercise of his profession. He initiated the founding of the Plymouth Institution (now the Plymouth Athenæum) and took a leading part in the formation of the Proprietary Library, the Mechanics Institute, the Plymouth Law Society, the Plymouth Chamber of Commerce and the Plymouth Public Free School.

He also wrote a History of Plymouth which, though never published, exists in two manuscript versions and was described by the late C. W. Bracken as "the basis of all local histories since his day".(†)

He found time, with three friends, to make an extensive survey of the antiquities of Devon and Cornwall and was among the first to approach the subject with some attempt at scientific method.

His interest in education was life long. On 19th June 1834, he gave a lecture at the Plymouth Institution entitled "The Evils of Ignorance", in which he said:—

"Whoever would open his eyes must see that the Giver of Talents does not confine his gifts to any particular class of mankind; hence we perceive some of the highest stations filled by men who have arisen from very humble walks in society. Talent, wherever it be, is a public stock, which should be used for the benefit of all and if not encouraged and cultivated is a positive loss to the community".

The events of the wars which dominated the first half of Henry's life are noticed often in the Diaries, some from the point of view of the distant observer, and some from closer at hand.

His first recorded observation of the offshoots of war is of a macabre event on Plymouth Hoe in 1797, an aftermath of the Naval mutinies of that year.

During this time Mr. Pitt visited Plymouth and walked with Henry on the Hoe. The Prime Minister was in gloomy mood, and regarded the state of the country as very alarming. Apart from the mutinies, there had been a separate Peace between Austria and France, troubles in Ireland and the threat of a Dutch invasion, in the face of which most of the blockading fleet mutinied and withdrew. Yet Henry says that Mr. Pitt "Entertained me much with his conversation and upon the whole left such an impression on my mind as made me heartily regret his departure".

A week later, sailors erupted from Plymouth Dock into Plymouth and damaged property in Castle Street, so that they had to be dispersed by the military. 120 persons, Henry among them, were sworn in as special constables and meanwhile it was discovered that Marines at the Barracks were conspiring to kill their officers.

The plot was frustrated with the help of loyal sergeants, and three marines were arrested as ring-leaders. Six weeks later on 6th July 1797 they were publicly shot on the Hoe near the Citadel where they had been imprisoned and court-martialled.

3,500 troops drawn from the Royal Marines, 25th Foot, the Lancaster, East Devon and East Sussex Militia, and the Plymouth Volunteers, formed three sides of a square around which the condemned men marched preceded by the Marine Band playing the Dead March in Saul and accompanied by their coffins.

After the shooting the troops marched in silent procession round the bodies in the presence of a great concourse of townspeople, among them Henry.

Even that was not the end of it. On 22nd August mutinous sailors were hanged from the yardarms of H.M.S. Saturn in the Sound and Henry who watched from the Citadel, records that "this execution was not near so affecting as that... of the Marines—this partly owing to the effect of

military parade, but more so to the distance, so that you did not behold the agonies of the men."

As a footnote to these events, it is interesting that thirteen years later in 1810 Henry records a conversation he had with an officer of troops then drilling on the Hoe. Henry said that it had once been painful to spectators to hear the constant swearing and violence towards the men; of late he had never heard an oath from any drill officer or any harsh language. The officer replied that "they had never suffered a Man to be struck or sworn on or used harshly, for by frightening a recruit you absolutely prevent him from acquiring any thing". A minority view at the time, perhaps and not always held today, but one with which Henry wholeheartedly agreed.

He had himself had a brief and unwelcome military experience before that conversation. In 1803-1804, at the height of a French invasion scare, he was a member of the Ermington Battalion of Volunteers, of which his brother George was Lieutenant Colonel. On 20th May 1804 he records his resignation:

"It has proved exceedingly irksome. I am truly rejoiced that I am able to withdraw—nothing shall induce me to resume it again but actual invasion".

A little earlier, in 1802, another noteworthy event is recorded.

"October 1st, 1802

I have had the pleasure of seeing this evening the tide kept out from Lipson Bay for the first time since the creation of the World, the Embankment across it was closed this afternoon and I hope will endure for Ages against all accidents".

In 1809 Plymouth was faced with the reception of the troops returning from Corunna after Sir John Moore's retreat. In recent memory the Dunkirk evacuation has provided a similar experience, but in 1809, unlike 1940, nearly all relief work was left to the efforts and generosity of private citizens. Among Henry's papers is evidence of these efforts to relieve distress, not only among the soldiers themselves, but among the women and children who had accompanied them.

A Plymouth Circular of 9th March 1809 reported that the number of women and children who had obtained relief "appears by the Books to amount at present, the former (including 148 far advanced in pregnancy) to 911, the latter to 626; all want, many being nearly naked, and all unfit to be seen or approached; of this number the greater part have proceeded in Transports to other Ports; many others have been furnished with Passes, and travelled on foot, to join the Regiments to which their Husbands belong; others who were unable to walk, from the circumstance of pregnancy, sickness or having young Children with them have been sent, by the Waggon, to their friends and 157 have been received at the three Parish Workhouses, many of whom are recovering from Sickness, and others from Child-birth, and will soon be enabled to join their Husbands or other Friends; the rest, but comparatively very few, have died."

In 1812, on 12th August, a unique event occurred:—

"A Procession took place from the Hamoaze to the place where the

intended Breakwater is to be constructed in the Sound... The Admiral Sir Robert Calder sailed from Dock at $\frac{1}{2}$ past eleven... the Boats... divided into two lines and proceeded thus to the ground where a Vessel was moored in which a stone about 8 tons in weight was stationed, it was lowered into the water at one o'clock... the Hoe was covered with people and many parties were dispersed about on Mount Edgcumbe, Staddon Heights (sic) etc."

Unfortunately not everyone agreed with Henry's view that this deserved more rejoicings than any other event that had ever occurred in Plymouth. "Many Captains of the Navy" questioned the success of the project and "no one is to be found who will co-operate with the Mayor, there is also a great want of money experienced by all classes, and a depression arises in the public mind from the frequent failures" (i.e. bankruptcies) "that occur here—all this I am persuaded is but temporary, and is a salutary check to our extravagance. Pray Heaven it may all turn out well for Old England, that she may be great and at the same time honest".

The following year, 1813, Henry was elected Mayor of Plymouth, and in June 1814 the town celebrated the Peace with France. The Plymouth Chronicle for Tuesday 21st June reports:—

"Public Festival in Honour of the Peace.

THE MAYOR'S BALL AND SUPPER which were given by our esteemed and excellent Chief Magistrate, Henry Woollicombe, Esq., at his house, in Frankfort Street, in a style worthy of the pre-eminent rank he holds..."

On the Friday there was an Illumination, minutely described for all the principal houses, with Mr. Murch showing a touch of originality with his "Transparency by Baynard, Bonnapart hanging on a Gallows, with the words 'The end of the Farmer's friend'".

However, the Peace did not last and in any case there was another war proceeding with the United States. Henry was therefore anxious for his two nephews, William and George, the elder an officer of the 71st Foot (the Highland Light Infantry) and the younger a Midshipman of the Royal Navy.

The sailor was wounded at New Orleans, but outlived his brother to succeed to his father's estate at Hemerdon, and to become the present writer's great-great-grandfather. On 21st January 1815 he wrote his uncle a lively letter which reached Henry in April, describing the disastrous battle, and his wounding in it. He received two shots in his foot and leg and another through his trousers and thought himself "a very lucky fellow not to lose my leg".

His brother William came unscathed through Waterloo though his battalion was hotly engaged and his fate was still unknown to Henry a month after the battle. However, on 15th July 1815 he wrote a letter to Henry headed "Champs Elysées" in which he referred to the "glorious Battle of La Belle Alliance".

In August he wrote again to say:—

We are now in our eighth week encamped dans les Champs Elysées and for that Reason the Name ought to be changed... next year I do not expect to see a single tree alive they have been so destroyed by

Men and Horses belonging to Cavalry, Artillery and Infantry that have bivouacked under them and this is pretty much the case with the Bois de Boulogne, Luxembourg, St. Cloud etc".

Just before this letter was written there was a great day in Plymouth's life when H.M.S. Bellerophon, Captain Maitland, R.N., sailed into the Sound from Torbay with Napoleon on board. The day was Wednesday 26th July 1815.

In common with many others, Henry twice went out in a boat to see "the Man" but succeeded only up to a point, as he records:—

"Friday Night 28th July

I went off in a boat to the Bellerophon... we got very near the Ship about 50 yards, I certainly saw the Man, though so imperfectly that I cannot say it afforded me any satisfaction."

"Tuesday Morning 1st August, I went again into the Sound yesterday to see Buonaparte, and arrived just at the moment he came to the gangway, where he remained a minute or two, but covered half his face by looking through an opera glass, I saw his person completely... but still I have never seen him satisfactorily, and I do not expect to..."

That ended Henry's connection with war, and there was peace in Europe for nearly forty years.

Henry's connection with the Athenæum was very important to him. The following entries in his Diary record the foundation:—

"Sunday 4th October 1812

In the evening several gentlemen met at my House when I proposed the formation of a Society at which Lectures on the various branches of Natural Philosophy and on other subjects was proposed and unanimously adopted, Mr. Ogg undertook to deliver Lectures on Pneumatics, Electricity, Hydrostatics and Mechanics".

"Saturday 17th October 1812

Several gentlemen again met at my House and formed themselves into a Society. On Thursday s'ennight Mr. Ogg commences with a lecture on Pneumatics".

31st December 1812

I commenced the year with stating that Plymouth was become a pleasanter residence from the circumstance of the establishment of the Library and other Institutions, and I may conclude it, with stating, that I am this instant returned from another Institution which has contributed very much to amuse me, our lectures; this evening Mr. Adam finished his lecture on Architecture much to my satisfaction, a pleasant conversation ensued afterwards".

Things did not always run so smoothly. On 3rd February 1814 a lecturer on Mechanics had trouble with his apparatus, his experiment went wrong and his explanations spread confusion among the audience.

More seriously, in that year there were dissensions about a new member, and resignations ensued including one "from Dr. Leach, an honorary Member!! a thing unheard of I believe and which I cannot but highly disapprove".

However, all was not lost "and though we are shorn of some of our thriving branches we shall still continue to flourish".

Despite these storms, on 1st May 1818 the foundation stone of the Athenæum was laid. (At this time the term "Athenæum" seems to have been used only for the building, the Society itself being always called "The Plymouth Institution".)

The original building, destroyed in the blitz in 1941, was designed without fee by Foulston, whose unique contribution to the architecture of Plymouth and Devonport has been so much reduced in recent years by war and municipal vandalism. Though the design was admired, there were complaints; the classical columns of the portico had for reasons of expense to be of plaster, not of stone.

*"Tis classical from top to toe,
Th'idea good, — the work so so :
Design Athenian — but, oh —
The coating is but plaster !
'A plaster covering ; tut, tut,
'Twere better stone of Portland, but
The garb has still a Grecian cut
Though the material's 'Roman'".*

However, even this acerbic poet concluded more equably: —

*"Sometimes sweet music fills thy hall
Sometimes fair pictures grace thy wall,
Long live thy worthy members all,
And health to Henry Woollcombe".*

For the rest of his life Henry was consolidating his work. He was President of the Plymouth Institution for a long period and devoted his time to the practice of his profession, and the public work that he regarded as his duty and, we may hope, enjoyed.

He died aged 69, on 13th February 1847 and it is fitting to conclude with a further extract from his Obituary Notice:—

"Few men in his sphere of life carried to the grave more public respect and more private regard — and if the maxim be true, that the kind of life is most happy which affords us most opportunities of gaining our own esteem, Mr. Woollcombe's was eminently felicitous".

SOURCES

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R. N. Worth, History of Plymouth 1890.

(†) *C. W. Bracken — A History of Plymouth and her Neighbours, 1931
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