

Lady Emma Hamilton

Died 15th January 1815

Martyn Webster

On 28th January 1815, during the brief period of peace between England and France before the battle of Waterloo while Napoleon was still in exile on Elba, when cross channel packets were back in the running for a while, there arrived at Dover on a passage vessel from Calais on her fourteenth birthday a British orphan girl. She was accompanied by a male chaperone in the person of Henry Cadogan (no relation), the Lloyd's agent and British Consul in Calais, to be handed over on arrival to the husband of her paternal aunt (Catherine, known as Kitty, Matcham, nee Nelson). The uncle was George Matcham, an East India Company man, whose family's home was at Ashfold house in Sussex whither she was then taken to live. She had few possessions. Such items as were hers were with pawnbrokers in France listed on an inventory of her recently deceased mother's belongings which she brought over with her. These were retrieved for her by her uncle some time later.

This poor girl was Horatia, the love child of Admiral Lord Nelson and Emma, Lady Hamilton. The whole of her life to this point had been caught up in the outcome of the complicated triangular relationship of her parents and Sir William Hamilton, the former British Ambassador to Naples. She had been born in London in 1801 and raised under the surname of Thompson in



Lady Hamilton - Emma

circumstances contrived to give the illusion that she had been adopted by Nelson and given over to the care of Lady Hamilton. In later life she did indeed acknowledge Nelson as her father, even adding his surname to hers, but never admitting to her mother's identity even though it must have been plainly obvious to her having been under her care and guidance throughout her young life.

Horatia bore the marks of her childhood through to her death at the age of 80 even though meanwhile having become happily married to a Norfolk clergyman and raising a large family of ten children. She had become Mrs Horatia Nelson Ward. Her mind however must over the years have turned back often not only to earlier happy times with her "parents" and their society (her father died when she was but four years old) but more to the dismal time she had spent latterly as a teenager with her mother in misery caring for her in her dying days in lodgings in Calais where, impoverished and abandoned, they had sought exile from debtors' prison and public banishment.

In his dying words on HMS Victory in 1805 at Trafalgar, and also written in a last codicil to his will, Nelson had bequeathed the welfare and fate of his beloved Emma and their daughter Horatia to the nation. The nation however turned its scandalised back on them so that Emma fell into penury,

poverty and alcoholism leading inevitably to her own self destruction, exiled on a foreign shore at the age of 50. Her story has been told many times over and has been made the subject of films, plays and books evoking every emotion.

Emma had risen from the humblest of surroundings at Neston pit village on the Wirral, Cheshire where her father, who died shortly after her birth in 1764, was a blacksmith. She had been raised an only child to country ways by her mother at the home of her grandmother, a Mrs Kidd, at Hawarden in Flintshire. Then, when in her teens she with her redoubtable mother, known as Mrs Cadogan, moved inexplicably to London for menial work. There her captivating beauty and talent for dance soon caught the attention of two young society rakes, Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh (baronet and politician) with whom she lived for a time at Uppark and Charles Greville (antiquarian, collector and politician), friends of the artist George Romney who was inspired by what he saw to paint her portrait several times. Through their society she was introduced to a very much older father figure, uncle of Charles Greville, the widowed and childless Ambassador to Naples Sir William Hamilton and given over to him in settlement of debts incurred by his nephew. She married him in 1791 at the age of 26 (he was 61) having lived from 1785 onwards in Naples with him as his wife, all under the eye of her ever present supporting and resourceful mother (who died in 1810). He had Emma educated in the ways of courtly life, music, art, languages and his prodigious knowledge of antiquities and vulcanology. She was a quick learner. She then spent ten subsequent happy years as British ambassadress, a role which she played with such aplomb and success that she had the entrée to the royal palace itself at all times becoming a confidante of the Queen of

Naples, Maria Carolina, sister of the ill-fated Marie Antoinette. Anybody who was anybody from everywhere passed though the ambassadorial Palazzo Sesso and they all fell under Emma's entertaining spell to the magical backdrop of the Bay of Naples and Mount Vesuvius. Through this she was first introduced to Nelson in 1793 when he arrived in Naples with his fleet seeking shelter and victualing which Lady Hamilton achieved for him through the Queen. After various successful sea battles where he lost his right arm and the sight of an eye he returned to Naples in 1798 and their historical romance then began in the turmoil that descended upon Italy caused by Napoleon's invasion of the country requiring the evacuation of the royal family of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the Hamiltons to Palermo on Nelson's own flagship.

Nelson and the Hamiltons subsequently returned together (referring to themselves as "*Tria Juncta in Uno*") after a triumphal journey through Europe to England in 1800 but when they got there they inspired only derision, scorn and contempt of many in a hypocritically scandalised society - none more so than Frances, Lady Nelson (formerly Nesbit, nee Woolard) who refused to divorce her husband for his adultery and flagrant behaviour. Nelson however in spite of everything remained and rose above it all as the national hero that he was and still is, gathering honours to himself all the while.

Emma in life we are told by her detractors was indulgent, fat and coarse tongued. She had never been able to shake off the image of a vulgar upstart. This was all a matter of opinion of course. However no one could ignore that she had and retained great beauty of face, was kind, generous to her own long term disadvantage, highly intelligent and accomplished in all that those around her had taught her. She

idolised Nelson reciprocally. Her story is truly captivating. It has intrigued and fascinated posterity so that whatever the rights and wrongs, the truths and falsehoods about her she has appealed to an enduring sense of historical romance that overcomes the contemporary judgments of her. She was an enigmatic tragic woman ahead of her time and has captured the imagination to the present day.

It is now 200 years since Emma, Lady Hamilton gave up on life. She died on 15th January 1815 at number 27 Rue Françoise, Calais where she and Horatia had upper rooms. This humble house along with the entire centre of old Calais was flattened to the ground by the bombardments of the Second World War and alas no trace of it now exists. We have however a photograph of it on an old commemorative French postcard.

War and other tribulations of time have also taken from existence Emma's final resting



Picture Card of 27 Rue Françoise, Calais

place in Calais. A contemporary account of the funeral does exist. She was buried with proper ceremony, apparently embalmed with a vain view to being returned to England, one week after her death and at the expense of the British consul and well-wishers but some uncertainty has always remained as to where exactly her grave was. It is supposed by biographers to have been in the churchyard of the Eglise Notre Dame and/or a site referred to as the Duchess of Kingston's garden either of which may or may not be the same as the site now known as the Parc Richelieu. However in France bodies do not always remain in the graves in which they were or indeed are first buried beyond the rate of burial concession paid for. It is one way or the other recorded that soon afterwards the site, wherever it was, became a timber yard where the graves there ceased to be cared for and eventually "passed from sight". Whatever the case, disappearance was undoubtedly the fate of Emma's last earthly remains which over time are said to have been moved more than once. In any event, when the Second World War brought havoc to Calais, wherever Emma's body then lay, it was lost altogether in the destruction and subsequent reconstruction of the devastated town.

It is recorded that at first Emma's grave had a wooden sign "like a battledore, handle downwards" bearing the inscription "Emma Hamilton, England's friend". By 1833 a headstone had been long erected in Latin legend but only partly decipherable when recorded reading "Who...at Calais in the Rue Françoise died in no 106 on the 15th day of January AD 1815. In her fifty-first year". In the First World War British Army Officers in 1918 following the centenary of her death fixed a memorial plaque to the house where Emma had died but this along with the whole neighbourhood disappeared in the Second World War. A second plaque was

subsequently placed in 1958 by the city of Calais through the then British Consul on a wall in the street now standing where the Rue Françoise had once stood together subsequently with an adjacent information board which is now only skeletal. This is at the intersection of the present Rue Jean de Vienne and Rue Philippine Hainault.

Finally on 23rd April 1994 an American benefactor Mrs Jean Kislak in the presence of descendants of Nelson and Emma Hamilton unveiled a monument surmounted by stone from near Emma's birthplace on the Wirral a monument to her in a quiet corner of the Parc Richelieu (just across the canal from Calais railway station near to the Tourist Office) on the perceived approximate site of Emma's original grave, which she donated to the city of Calais.

On the bicentenary of Emma Hamilton's death, 15th January 2015, it is therefore heartening to record that in remembrance of Nelson's dying wish for the great love of his life floral tributes were laid at the



*Emma's Monument at Parc
Richelieu, Calais
15th Jan 2015*

memorial for her to honour her memory. Disheartening is the fact that no mention of this anniversary appeared in any national newspaper or journal nor reference made by either the Nelson Society or the 1805 Club, whose own websites uphold their concerns for the upkeep of graves and memorials to those associated with Nelson. At the time of the tri-centenary in 2115 it is extremely doubtful on this basis that any of the Calais memorials will be legible, assuming they remain in place that long, unless they are kept in good repair and the stone lettering re-incised sometime soon.

Emma had done good service for her country and those around her in her lifetime. It is in this spirit that we in our turn should now bequeath her memory to the nation in keeping with Lord Nelson's own bequest to us.

I am indebted in this account for much of the detail courtesy of Flora Fraser's book "Beloved Emma - The Life of Emma, Lady Hamilton" (Bloomsbury 1986, reprinted 2013).



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— Peter Sherrerd —

When on the 20th January 1986, in Lille France, President François Mitterrand and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher announced their support of the Channel Tunnel project followed by an Anglo-French Treaty and Exchange of Notes signed in Canterbury by Geoffrey Howe, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and Roland Dumas, The Minister for External Affairs of the French Republic, on 12th February 1986 it was clear there would be