



## An opium dream ...



**Celebrating the end of a pandemic: ‘the magnificent but incongruous assemblages of an opium dream.’**

The scene is labelled Fancy Dress Ball in The Mansion House, Coronation of William IV. The painting was originally exhibited at the 1832 Northern Counties Fine Arts Exhibition with a long but descriptive title: Representation of the Entrance Hall of the Mansion House, Newcastle upon Tyne, on the Evening of the splendid Fancy Dress Ball, given by Mr and Mrs Mayoress, on the 22nd March last. In fact, neither title reflects the contemporary reason for the celebration but understanding it may give us some hope in these strange times. This article discusses the painting, briefly introduces some of the characters portrayed relevant to the Lit and Phil and reveals the true purpose of the ball.

As we struggle with the effects of the pandemic, it may be comforting to remind ourselves that disease-inflicted catastrophes have occurred in the past and that they do, eventually, come to an end. In the nineteenth century, before the link between poor

sanitation and the spread of diseases was discovered, cholera became a regular visitor to the North East of England. In early December 1831, in the first instance of the disease in England, cholera raged through Sunderland; inevitably it soon crossed the river and on 7 December the first case was reported in Newcastle.

The disease spread quickly through the overcrowded and insanitary streets and it visited not only the population of the narrow chares on the Quayside and the poor inhabitants of the Sandgate but also the more affluent parts of town where sanitation, even in the newly built grand terraces, was basic. Contemporary newspaper reports echo the Covid-19 reporting today with daily tables enumerating the people infected, numbers recovered, and numbers dead.

The local churchmen, of all denominations, prayed and distributed religious tracts to call upon divine help to prevent the spread. Hot lime was used to wash buildings and fire engines hosed down the streets; the theatre was closed, and incoming ships quarantined for fifteen days. Businesses stagnated and the troops were confined to their barracks. A fund was established to try to alleviate the financial distress of inhabitants. Interestingly, one of the doctors battling with this outbreak of cholera, in Killingworth Colliery, was a nineteen-year-old apprentice surgeon/apothecary from Newcastle Infirmary, John Snow, who was later instrumental in identifying the link between contaminated water and the spread of cholera in London.

The ferocity of the North-East cholera outbreak came to an end in mid-March 1832 (although it did not completely disappear until the summer) and on 22 March a ball was hosted by the Mayor, Archibald Reed, and the Mayoress in the Mansion House on the Quayside. The ball was 'to serve the tradesmen who had all suffered to some degree from the previous visitation (cholera)' and this, for reasons not explained in the newspaper accounts, led to the party being not only a Grand Ball but also a Fancy-Dress ball. The attendees, 'a most numerous and fashionable assemblage', were immortalised by artist Henry Perlee Parker (perhaps more recognised now for his paintings of smugglers) in the painting which hangs in the 'new' Mansion House.

It must have been a truly splendid occasion. The Mansion House, both inside and out, was decorated with greenery, flowers and lamps. The carriages started to arrive at 9pm and continued in a steady stream until 11pm. Dancing began at 10am, led by the sheriff of Newcastle WA Surtees and Miss Reed, daughter of the Mayor and Mayoress. A feast was served from midnight and then dancing continued until 6am- the newspapers had to go to press before the event had finished.

The ball is captured by Parker in a vibrant, multi-coloured, tableau. The Newcastle Journal, reflecting a very different age, suggested it was reminiscent of 'the magnificent but incongruous assemblages of an opium dream.' The event was lavishly described in newspaper reports for the consumption of the public and as a souvenir for the attendees- the nineteenth century equivalent of a social media post. The fancy-dress costumes were listed together with the wearers and included characters from the theatre; national dress; historical figures and military finery. The descriptions enabled a viewer of the painting to be able to identify the revellers celebrating the end of the

pandemic in true Newcastle style. (In fact, many of the party-goers enjoyed it so much they did it all again at the Assembly Rooms a few nights later- the newspapers ~~were~~ clearly fatigued by this point and simply mentioned that the fancy dress worn, and the attendees, were similar to the Mayoresses' ball and therefore would not be listed).

Parker, who was dressed as a brigand, must have planned the composition on the evening of the ball and then arranged for the notable individuals to sit for portraits later. The faces are not generic, and the attendees would have been able to recognise themselves immediately. The painting was reviewed favourably in the Newcastle Journal, which suggested:

The picture perpetuates the remembrance of the gorgeous scene as it appeared in the entrance hall, and the fidelity with which the numerous groups are portrayed, the richness and variety of the costume, and the circumstances that occasioned the gay assemblage, confer upon the picture more than ordinary local interest.

However, it was not universally admired- a reviewer from the Tyne Mercury begrudgingly wrote:

It appears to have been painted, not so much for the sake of making a picture, as generally for the commemoration of the ball, and particularly for the purpose of immortalizing, as far as a Mansion-house Ball and an artist can immortalize, the ladies and gentlemen who were present. A number of the likenesses are excellent, and particular groups are well managed

This does, however, underline that the picture is a reliable source for identifying the prominent citizens of early nineteenth century Newcastle.

Parker has tried to show as many of the 550, or perhaps 600, party-goers as he could fit in and, as a commercial artist, attempted to portray as many recognisable figures as possible. The Tyne Mercury noted, 'So carefully has the artist finished his work, that almost every individual figure would make a separate picture.' Parker would have appreciated that commissions would flow from a favourable representation.

The figures in the foreground of the painting are carefully drawn, although their faces are slightly out of scale. For example, Mr Adamson, antiquarian and under-sheriff and trustee of the Lit and Phil, is shown as Henry VIII and Captain Battersby of the 15th Regiment of Foot can be picked out dressed as Napoleon Bonaparte. Dr Snow, and his mentor Dr Hardcastle, are not listed as attendees but Dr Headlam, prominent local surgeon and future Vice President of the Lit and Phil was there in 'full dress'. The ladies and gentlemen portrayed were likely chosen specifically because their portraits would lead to public interest when the painting was exhibited. They read as an A to Z of the city: Armstrong, Brandling, Charlton, Collingwood, Donkin, Ellison, Errington, Fenwick, Hood, Liddell, Loraine, Ridley, Surtees to name a few. These men and women were the local celebrities of their day and it is possible the painting was engraved and reproduced as prints- as was the case with some of Parker's other work. Whatever the popular reception for the

painting, the members of Newcastle Town Council must have been flattered by their portrayal because the Newcastle Corporation purchased it for £100 - hence why it is in the Council collection today.

There are many interesting figures, and work to be done to identify them whilst I am stuck in the house. I am carrying out doctoral research into the life and work of John Theodore Hoyle the Newcastle coroner from 1857 to 1885, and I have identified him and his brother Richard in this picture, in the middle ground, under the crest surrounded by a ring of weapons. There are many intriguing costumes: there is a man dressed as a wizard; a man in full Highland dress and Charles I dubbing a fellow guest. It all looks very tempting and, perhaps when this is all over, we should emulate our Victorian ancestors and, as our President suggests, hold an enormous party to celebrate the end of the pandemic and to begin to rebuild the community- fancy dress optional.

Helen Rutherford

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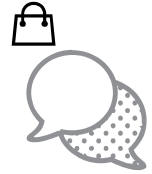
Posted by Helen Rutherford on 16 Apr 2020

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### About the author

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Helen is a solicitor and senior lecturer in law at Northumbria University. She has published on legal education, legal history and the English Legal System. Her research interests focus on the life and work of the Victorian Coroner for Newcastle upon Tyne and nineteenth-century crime and punishment.



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