

JOHN BYNG RIDES INTO HARBOROUGH, 1790¹

by Rosalind Willatts



Colonel John Byng, 1743–1813 was a nephew of the Admiral John Byng who was executed on his own quarterdeck in 1757 pour encourager les autres. After a military career he had a tedious government office job in London but spent his summer vacations travelling extensively around Britain. He made at least 14 journeys in all, although his records of only 9 survive. They could last up to six weeks. By not using coaches he could explore the countryside off the turnpike roads and delight in the fresh air and flexibility. In general, accompanied by his dog, he rode his own horse; his manservant rode another. They stayed and ate at inns. He would go to bed late and rise early, yet somehow find time to write copiously of his journeys. In 1790 his tour was to Derbyshire. Having sent his servant and horses on three days in advance to Leicester he took the Manchester Coach from London at 7 am on Monday 7th June. By 11 pm the coach reached *Harboro'* where the horses were changed. It arrived in Leicester at 1.30am where his legs were cramped double and his hips sore. Nevertheless he was up and about at 7am as there was

“no abiding at such an alehouse (The Bell) he went to the Three Cranes and there found (much to my satisfaction) my horses in excellent plight.”

On 9th July 1793 aged 50, he set out from London for North Wales at five pm. On Sunday 14th having spent the night at Bedford, he went to Church at Higham Ferrers, thence by Irthlingbrough and Finedon to arrive

“at the town of Kettering (White Hart); not too early, as the sun was set and nine o'clock approach'd. A good stable and a large parlour suited me and my horses much. And one smells a forest near when there is cold venison pasty upon which with cold lamb I supped with much relish. And then reading the newspapers, I slumber'd till I went to bed.”

“Monday July 15th . . . St Swithun's Day . . the heat is now so violent that, catching the sun's focus thro' a tumbler of water, you may light a match or a piece of paper. The church at Kettering is a handsome building and the chimes are very musical. After my supper - last night I walked about the market place . . this morning I rose at seven o'clock.”

As always the day was very full. He went into the town and visited a bookseller and his private museum of curiosities, returned to breakfast. Went to Boughton, seeing a view of Warkton church he sent his valet ahead to get the key. In the church he saw the large Montague monuments

“ . . They are very fine, very cumbrous, and savour of pompous stupidity, with inscriptions too long to read.”

He visited Boughton house. He dined at 2 pm (at Kettering) on venison pasty again and drank port. At 5 pm, tired of Kettering he set off. He passed Glendon Hall and visited Rushton Hall where the owner aged 83 lived all the time in the kitchen. He met the gentleman and was shown round the house by the chattering housekeeper. He passed Rushton Triangular Lodge, but had no time to look properly. He described it

“as one of the oldest, oddest buildings I ever saw, fantastically formed with three fronts and here called the Three Square Tower.”

Byng was totally unaware of this building whose strangeness surprised him. He commented

“Surely some drawing has been made of a building so worthy of preservation.”

The weather was now overcast and he feared the impending thunder and lightening. He was on his own as he had sent his valet with his sheets and nightcap ahead of him. Then through Desborough and trotted over a high grazing country nervous and peevish at the dartings of distant lightening.

“At last sweating and faint at nine o’clock I entered Market Harborough, where to my sorrow, was a feast – and revelry, tipsy dance and jollity, with wonderful drunkenness, owing to the extreme heat; and I found myself consign’d to an alehouse inn, the George ², an hot, stinking narrow house without a breath of air, my horse in a stifling stable, and I to avoid company, put into a small back room. My landlady, an affectedly civil termagant, was offended at my dog’s coming in and gave herself many airs. I supped upon nasty sweating ham and beef, and soon retired to an old chamber hung with painted arras.

There was cudgel-playing here, tho’ their best gamesters are gone with the militia. The great landlady was terribly alarm’d at the lightening, and violently shock’d at my wishing for a fine tempest during the night.”

“Tuesday July 16th: I slept but little last night in my little doghole, where the curtains would not draw and I was obliged to keep open the windows, from the heat and fustiness all about. At six o’clock I was up and glad to get away from such a house and such a landlady



THE GEORGE INN, SHOWN HERE ON THE RIGHT OF THE HIGH STREET MARKET HARBOROUGH. PHOTO TAKEN IN C. 1865

The morning was very pleasant and the wind, now West met me. Soon after near North Kilworth, I was overtaken by my valet, (I) having loitered and walk'd on foot down the hills . . . I was happy to get into the Denbigh Arms at Lutterworth for my head ached exceedingly. In haste I got breakfast drinking a gallon of tea, cheered with brandy. Then to a refreshment of clean linen"

He spent the day in and around Lutterworth and in writing up his diary.

"Here (Lutterworth) I had propos'd to have slept last night, had not the heat of yesterday sent me (most unluckily) back to Kettering: for my intention was to avoid Harborough for a sleeping place and to rest here. . ."

Despite the headache he goes out to visit the church, *"a very handsome building, clean and well pew'd"* while his valet procures a pair of saddlebags so that he hopes *"both he and his mare will move easier."* His dog Flora is lame, not surprising after all the running beside him she had done and also *"from now jumping out of the window after me."* Was the window in the George at Harborough or the Denbigh Arms at Lutterworth? After a meal of beans, bacon and cold roast beef he decides to stay realising that his valet is ill, his dog lame, his linen dirty and speed is foolish. *"Why hurry and broil along in this extraordinary season?"* He feels the atmosphere developing into a thunderstorm so he orders the valet to bed, and sends his linen to the wash. Then in the evening goes out for a walk, sits down *"to sketch (the) gay scenery,"* walks to Misterton, visits the church and its monuments, returns to Lutterworth at half past eight, has another meal of cold beef, and goes at 10.30. *"A good bed and bedchamber were a great comfort after those of Harboro'."*

On Wednesday 17th July he is up at 6 am, saunters around Lutterworth till breakfast, sends back some luggage to London, fits the newly acquired saddle bags then leaves at 8 am. That night he is at Coleshill in Warwickshire 25 miles further on, but noting his poor dog is stiff and tired. At the Swan at Coleshill *"an old lady was commandant, as at Harboro , but of a cooler breed."*

John Byng's unfortunate visit to Market Harborough was en route to North Wales. His tour was 736 miles on horseback. It began in London on Tuesday 9th July and finished on 21st August (44 days). He got as far as the Menai Strait on August 3rd where he looked across to Beaumaris on Anglesey and then turned back to London.

Apart from his pithy comments on the many places he visits and people he meets, Byng's diaries tell much about travelling in the late 18th Century. His comments on the unknown-ness of Rushton Triangular Lodge is a plea for conservation. Sixteen hours in discomfort from London to Harborough makes one appreciate today's train travel which is over 10 times faster. But who today would be so indefatigable on long tours as to rise so early and not stop for the night until 9pm?

Notes

¹ Rides around Britain, published by the Folio Society 1996, the manuscript of 1790 is in Manchester Central Library; that for 1793 in Cardiff Central Library.

² The George was in Market Harborough the High Street opposite the Church.