

ART. XV. – *Harriot Mellon, (1777-1837), Duchess of St. Albans, and the Ulverston Theatre.*
By ALFRED FELL

SOME programmes of theatrical performances at Ulverston in which Harriot Mellon, afterwards Duchess of St. Albans, took part, have recently come into the writer's possession. These, together with the demolition of old property in Daltongate, have revived an interest in the place where that celebrated actress first appeared on the stage.

Harriot Mellon was born in 1777. Her mother, a native of Cork and of peasant descent, was a shop-girl in that city, and also employed as a dresser, wardrobe-keeper and money-taker with a well-known company of strolling players. She married a Lieut. Mellon, but who he really was will always remain a mystery. He soon deserted her, and was supposed to have died on a voyage to India. In 1782 she was again married – to Thomas Entwisle, a musician.

Entwisle, in the first year of his marriage, having to seek engagement elsewhere, considered that Lancashire, his native county, would afford the best prospects. They travelled about carrying their little baby girl and the Cremona violin alternately. Near Preston, they met Thomas Bibby (an eighteenth-century version of Dickens's Vincent Crummies), who, brought up as a tailor at Bouth near Ulverston, had become an itinerant actor-manager, who was glad to engage Entwisle to lead his modest orchestra.

On first coming to Ulverston the Entwisles lodged first with a man named Laycock, a clogger, and later with one Gibson, a shoemaker by trade, who played the violin and bassoon at the theatre. This was a roomy barn belonging to the White Hart Inn. Here in this old barn – the so-called “Ulverston Theatre” – Harriot Mellon, at the age of six, made her first appearance on the stage as one of the juvenile mourners who wept around the bier of Juliet.

Notwithstanding their slender means, Mrs Entwisle sent little Harriot to a day-school in the Gill, kept by a Miss Calvert where “the black-eyed child of the players” was a great favourite. Later she received instruction from the headmaster of the Town Bank School, Mr Pearson, who subsequently became a clergyman and ultimately a Doctor of Divinity, and at one time acted as tutor in the families of several noblemen.

Entwisle instructed her for easy glees, or to lead a chorus and even at this early age she danced beautifully, an accomplishment for which she afterwards obtained much credit in her profession. She could read accurately when very young and was such a winning child that all the poor actors in the company took pleasure in teaching her some of the fine speeches she was to hear in the evening's performance. Her diction was remarkable for its grammatical precision and Sheridan used to say, when she first went to London, that Miss Mellon had the best choice of language in ordinary conversation of any female of her age that he had met.

Bibby, the actor-manager, having been urged by the actors who instructed Harriot to allow her to make a *début* at once, agreed to try her in the farce ‘The Spoiled Child’ as Little Pickle and her success prompted him for the next two years to employ her in many pieces involving a youthful character, and a little later including that of Priscilla Tomboy in “The Romp”.

Though still only twelve, Harriot was now considered able to take an older part, recorded on the first playbill to be noticed:

Theatre, Ulverstone

On Saturday Evening, October 31st, 1789, will be presented that celebrated Comic Opera of
Inkle and Yarico¹

The performance ended with a “favourite hunting song”. Harriot Mellon played Narcissa. The names of the other players taking part are all included in the bill for “As You Like It” (below).

Another playbill, the most curious and interesting one, is for “As You Like It”. It consists of a double folded sheet, but on the back or outside the printing has unfortunately been obliterated. The two inner pages are given here in full, errors not excepted.

Shortly afterwards the Entwistles left the company. They do not appear to have visited Ulverston again, and Harriot acted in London and the provinces until her engagement at Drury Lane.

It is somewhat remarkable that in an old barn, and poor in the extreme, Harriot Mellon first acted a woman’s part as Phoebe in “As You Like It”, and twenty-six years later she retired from the Drury Lane stage after playing the same part in the same piece to become the richest woman in England. Sheridan saw Miss Mellon, not yet seventeen, acting at Stafford, and was so pleased with her talent that he promised an engagement at Drury Lane. He inquired how she had been educated, and when she told him her studies had been confined to her own language, he replied: “There was no occasion for any other, as I never heard a more elegant or accurate diction on or off the stage”. The promise was fulfilled and Harriot made her first appearance on the Drury Lane stage as Lydia Languish in “The Rivals”, Sheridan’s own play, in September, 1795.

Early in 1815 Harriot Mellon married Thomas Coutts, the banker, after the death of his first wife. He was then eighty years of age, and considered to be the wealthiest man in London. Coutts died in 1822, leaving to his wife the whole of his large fortune, who, however, behaved with the greatest kindness and generosity to the children of his first marriage. Five years later his widow married William Audrey de Vere, ninth Duke of St. Albans, after, it is said, refusing him twice.

The Duchess was a handsome brunette, with a figure inclining slightly to portliness, great vivacity and animal spirits, generous, ostentatious and somewhat fiery in temper. As an actress she stood in the second rank, but with the people was always a very great favourite.

The Theatre Royal, Ulverston

A few words about the rooms or barns in Ulverston which were used in times long past for theatrical and other public purposes, may not be out of place. The earliest surviving playbill of c. 1776 merely refers to the “Theatre in Ulverston”. It is well known that plays acted by strolling companies in early days were usually staged in the yards of inns, in which a wooden or canvas booth was set up, or in some other suitable and convenient place wherever available. According to oral tradition several rooms or barns – besides the one in which we are particularly interested – were requisitioned for plays, meetings, and similar occasions: Stockbridge Lane, Paradise Yard in Daltongate, Town-end and a barn

¹ The story of “Inkle and Yarico” is told in *The Spectator* of March 10th, 1710, and rendered into verse in the *London Magazine* for May, 1734.

For the Benefit of
Mr. BLANCHARD.

Being the last of the Benefits this Season.

At the Theatre in Ulverstone,
 On SATURDAY Evening, December 12th, 1789, will be presented
 (not acted here these several Years) a celebrated COMEDY, called

AS YOU LIKE IT,
 OR,
LOVE IN A FOREST.

(Written by SHAKESPEARE.)

"As good wine needs no Bush, so a good Play needs no Comment."—Suffice it therefore to say, that the delicate pastoral Beauties with which this Play abounds, the delightfully instructive Sentiments, the poignant Satire, the luxuriant Fancy, and the pleasurable Incidents which frequently occur, joined with a variety of Character, render it highly pleasing and entertaining.—The pen of our immortal SHAKESPEARE only could produce a Piece so truly amusing and instructive.—In short, there is nothing wanting to render it the most striking Production any Audience can possibly be entertained with.

Jaques,	Mr PENN
Orlando,	Mr BLANCHARD
Oliver,	Mr FARQUHARSON
Banish'd Duke,	Mr DUNN
Adam,	Mr LEIGH
Duke Frederick,	Mr ENTWISLE
Cotin,	Mr COCKER
Touchstone, (the Clown)	Mr BIBBY
Audrey,	Mrs HART
Celia, (with the Cuckow Song)	Miss VALOIS
Pncebe,	Miss MELLON
Rosalind, (her first appearance in that Character)	Mrs BLANCHARD

PROCEEDING THE PLAY,

A PROLOGUE

ADDRESSED TO THE

Young Gentl n of ULVERSTONE

Written by a LADY of this TOWN for the Occasion.

18th century Ulverston Theatre playbill.

Talked by **MRS KIPPLING.**

Between the Play and Farce, an **INTERLUDE**, (by Desire) called

Naval Gratitude ; Or, The **BRITISH TAR**

Tom Grogg, Mr **PENN**
Quid, Mr **KING**
Bowspit, Mr **DUNN**
Shipmaff, Mr **FARQUHARSON**
Jack, (the Sailor) Mr **COCKER**
Sam Stern, Mr **BLANCHARD**

In the Course of the Interlude will be exhibited, a Transparent **VIEW** of

The **British Fleet** off **Plymouth**,

When Reviewed by His **MAJESTY**,

Painted by an eminent Artist for the Occasion.

The **CALM SEA**, *A SHIP* in **FULL SAIL**

The whole to conclude with

RULE BRITANNIA,

By Mr *Blanchard*, accompanied in full Chorus by the Rest of the Company

The whole to conclude with

The **Grand Fricassee Dance**,

By Messrs **LEIGH** and **BLANCHARD**.

To which will be added a Musical **FARCE**, called **THE**

QUAKER

Or, **May - Day Dower**.

Labin, Mr **BLANCHARD**
Solomon, (the Quaker's Man) Mr **DUNN**
Farmer Easy, Mr **FARQUHARSON**
Country Lads and Lasses by the Rest of the Company
Steady, (the Quaker) Mr **BIBBY**
Gillian, Miss **MELLON** *Miss Litchard*
Cicely, Mrs **MART** *S. Albans 1821*
Floretta, Mrs **BLANCHARD**

18th century Ulverston Theatre playbill.

in the Back Ellers at present used as a marine store. Probably the two first named were the same but approached by different passages. The Congregationalists occupied a room in Stockbridge Lane in 1775, and in 1776 one at Town-end which had been "used by players". Services would no doubt be held at this place until the church in Soutergate was built in 1777.

At a meeting held in 1796 it was decided to build by subscription a theatre, assembly-room, dressing rooms etc. on the Tontine System. It was not opened, however, until 1801, and named the Theatre Royal. The pit was on the ground-floor, with stalls at the sides, and a gallery ran round three sides of the building, which was forty-seven feet long, twenty-four wide and twenty-eight or thirty in height. Above was the assembly-room, about the same size, and approached by a narrow staircase.

It was not a financial success, but this was probably not unexpected by the promoters. As early as 1822 it was offered for sale without a buyer being found, a little later it was let and the prospects were better. There was a further improvement in 1826 when it was re-let at a rent of twenty pounds a year. Extensive renovations were found to be needed and the property was sold in 1829 and passed into private hands. The theatre fell into disuse about 1860 having been superseded by the Victoria Hall, Temperance Hall, and the Drill Hall, erected in 1850, 1861, and 1871 respectively. Many of the prominent players of the day visited the Theatre Royal, and in 1854 the Ulverston Amateur Theatrical Society made their first appearance in public at this place.

