

THORPE WATER FROLIC

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'. . . of all the gay, the bustling, and delightful scenes in nature, we know of none more refreshing and enchanting than a 'Water Frolic' . . .'. The *Norfolk Chronicle's* words about the Thorpe frolic in 1825¹ convey very much the feeling of Joseph Stannard's oil painting of the same scene first exhibited the same year. All the many water frolics on the Norfolk rivers and broads were festive occasions, and some were splendid spectacles and afforded good sport, but the frolic at Thorpe in the 1820s was unusual in its social dimension: it combined fashionable event with popular holiday, a party outing for the gentry and at the same time a respite for so many from the conditions of everyday working life. Stannard's picture hardly hints at this. Yet in 1824, the year of the frolic he depicts, an estimated crowd of nearly 20,000 spectators came out to Thorpe from Norwich and the surrounding districts. The whole population of Norwich was then not much above 50,000. Every loom must have been silent that day, manufacturing at a standstill. And on the Yare, that all-important link between Norwich and its trans-shipment point to foreign markets, commercial traffic would be halted with the passage at Thorpe blocked. For once the wherries and other cargo craft were ousted by more frivolous vessels, or even put to festive use themselves.

The contrast in all this would be keenly savoured. The Georgian imagination revelled in a transformation scene, and especially one that cast a glamour on the dull economic necessities of life. Take the contemporary description of the opening of a new navigational channel to King's Lynn in 1821. Here was a prosaic undertaking, and one completed only after long years of difficulty and bitter opposition, yet on the day of inauguration all utilitarian purpose was for the moment forgotten. Lynn was thronged with spectators, the river covered in vessels. A steam packet, still at that date something of a novelty, had arrived and was decorated for the occasion and provided with a band of music. As the gay flotilla moved by it seemed like a scene out of mythology. The imagination 'was hurried back to the remote ages of fabulous antiquity'; the steam packet 'appeared a second Amphitrite, with her train of attendant Nereids', and the music wafting over the water might have come from the conches of Tritons.²

Was the mind's eye so stirred at the Thorpe frolic? It is always hard to imagine as the historical past imagined. At first sight Stannard's picture looks straightforward and un fanciful. There are naturally no mythological props. There is no special effort to suggest the pageantry of water processions, the splendour of fleets, or the tangle of associations (including patriotic feelings) that vessels on water often evoked in the Georgian mind. But there is one detail. The centre of the canvas is dominated by a great white sail. One's eye rests on the sail, then travels down the vertical of the mast; it moves left along the word SYLPH lettered on the stern and reaches a white-haired figure. It is John Harvey, chief begetter of the day's festivity, and he is standing in a gondola. Clearly it is a gondola, for its distinctive beak appears further to the left, beyond a costumed gondolier. This unexpected craft adds a sudden new dimension to the scene. The Thorpe frolic is no longer just a characteristic local event. It now has romantic overtones of the regattas and water ceremonies of Venice, which Harvey had seen and whence his gondola had come.³

For most of the weavers and tradesmen and their families the gondola was perhaps simply a curiosity. The rural charm of the setting meant far more. Norwich,

while not a Manchester or Birmingham, was still a populous and industrial city. A day out at Thorpe represented an escape from the looms and the cramped conditions of living and work in unhealthy alleys and courts. Moreover Thorpe was picturesque, and a taste for the picturesque – that cosy, urban aesthetic of the countryside – was filtering to all classes of society. The pleasantness of the site is well suggested in Stannard's painting: water and meadows and corn-fields, with a backing of wooded slopes and 'gemmed' by villas, all the features that gave Thorpe its contemporary reputation as 'the Richmond of Norfolk'.

One of the hamlet's principal improvers had been Harvey himself, who had bought the estate of Thorpe Lodge in 1787.⁴ He it was who had planted the rising ground with woods, who had built houses here for his sons and landscaped his own grounds, who was even now helping to lead the agitation to make 'Norwich a port' – which would be expected to increase the water traffic past Thorpe by giving Norwich traders a direct passage to the sea, by-passing Yarmouth. Harvey was of course a cloth merchant and manufacturer (and inspirer of the local shawl business), which explains well enough his concern for improved navigation. His manufacturing and commercial interests almost certainly affected the development of the water frolic he instituted at Thorpe in 1821.

There was no lack of general precedents for frolics, however, for they had long been a local diversion. The annual Yarmouth frolic indeed had evolved out of a centuries old tradition of beating the bounds of the town's riverine jurisdiction. This was the most spectacular of all the frolics, sometimes having as many as two hundred vessels taking part. An impression of such an occasion by the contemporary writer William Taylor is well worth quoting:

All the many pleasure-boats kept on these rivers assemble; the commercial craft is in requisition to stow spectators, to waft music, to vend refreshments . . . There are sailing matches, rowing matches, and spontaneous evolutions of vessels of all sorts, a dance of ships, their streamers flying and their canvas spread. It is a fair afloat, where the voice of revelry resounds from every gliding tent. And when the tide begins to fall, and to condense this various fleet into the narrower waters, and the bridge and balconies and windows of Yarmouth are thronged with innumerable spectators – and boys have climbed the masts and rigging of the moored ships, adding to the crowd on shore a rocking crowd above – and the gathering boats mingle their separate concerts in one chorus of jollity – and guns fire – and loyalty and liberty shout with rival glee – and the setting sun inflames the whole lake – the scene becomes surpassingly impressive, exhilarating and magnificent.⁵

But a drawback to the Yarmouth frolic was that the main events could not be enjoyed properly except from a boat on Breydon Water. Ordinary shore-based spectators could catch only distant views of the sailing and rowing contests; otherwise they had to be content with the fleet's departure and triumphal return. In this respect the frolics at Wroxham, Hickling, Oulton and other places afforded the boatless spectator better entertainment, while in terms of general participation the Thorpe frolic must have been unrivalled. Its easy accessibility from Norwich was another great advantage.

Nevertheless it seems that Harvey's frolic began in a quiet, semi-private fashion. Perhaps he had in mind to provide an alternative to the river procession that sailed downstream annually from Norwich to Postwick Grove or beyond. Dating back at

least to the early eighteenth century and involving bands of music, often a feast at Postwick, and a visit to a riverside pleasure garden on the return, this tradition had gradually been losing favour and in 1821 the outing was poorly attended. That was the year Harvey's experiment began, partly as a sporting event, but perhaps more importantly as a social occasion – though as yet for the privileged few. In 1822 the event was repeated. Nine cutters raced for a silver cup, five rowing boats for another, and the neighbouring meadows and banks were filled with 'genteel company'. There seemed to be no obvious reason why the Thorpe frolic should not continue permanently in this way, purely as an entertainment for the gentry. Why then the unexpected decision to invite the working population of the area to the event in future? Was it a gesture of unprecedented liberality and no more, or were there other implications? Could it have been conceived, at least in part, as some kind of social safety valve?

Harvey delighted in convivial occasions and he courted popularity. (Within a year or two, now in his seventies, he was attempting to revive horse-racing on Mousehold Heath, and in 1825 he pleased the crowds by going up in an air balloon.) At the same time he had a vested interest in good relations with the working classes. He was a magistrate. He had been Sheriff and then Mayor of Norwich, and would soon be Deputy Lieutenant of the county. He was a leading manufacturer. Most significantly of all he was in command of the East Norfolk Yeomanry Cavalry, formerly the Norwich Light Horse Volunteers, of which he was successively founder-member (1797), captain (1779-1803), major (1803-23), and now lieutenant-colonel. This was the sole permanent local troop that could be called upon in an emergency – and emergencies were only too likely with the chronic threat of agitation from weavers and agricultural workers whenever food prices rose or work became scarce. In 1822 there was a period of agricultural distress in Norfolk and a riotous mood among the Norwich workers. In early 1826, during the financial crisis, unemployed weavers held rebellious meetings in Norwich. In June 1827 the Yeomanry had to be called out to prevent further damage to property at a moment of renewed disturbance. No wonder that Harvey wrote urgently to the Secretary of State in December 1827 protesting at the intended disbandment of the Yeomanry Cavalry and urging its vital protection value in a district with a high population of workers engaged in the worsted and silk industries. Yet Harvey – 'the weavers' friend' – was almost certainly not a repressive man by nature. Speaking at a meeting of county magistrates in 1831, and in reference to recent instances of machine-breaking, he could only sympathise with working men:

One plain truth I must speak, and I think it is my duty to say that the great mass of operative labourers in this county are ill paid, not kindly treated, but too often neglected and insulted; and have thus been driven to commit these acts of violence to obtain by force what they ought to have had without.⁶

It was not without reason that the weavers got up a penny subscription and presented Harvey with an inscribed vase in token of their genuine respect. This was in 1822, just before Harvey opened the Thorpe frolic to the 'industrious many'.

So it was probably from a mixture of motives that Harvey persuaded his fellow manufacturers that the frolic should become a general holiday and that their workers should be encouraged to join in. In 1823 some 10,000 people made the most of the opportunity; in 1824 nearly twice that number. Mingle with the

gentry of course they did not: the social barriers could not be lowered to that extent. The gentry disported themselves on the north bank, the work people on the south bank, and the river lay between. But the total effect was 'at once animated and orderly; bringing the personal distinctions of rank into harmonious approximation with the strong characteristic traits of popular manners; so happily blended, without being confounded with each other, were the different divisions of the social fabric – in such good keeping were preserved the lights and shades and demi-tints, not only of the natural but the moral picture.'⁷

Stannard's composition preserves the same distinctions. On the left, enclosing Harvey himself, are the members of his family, his guests, and the Dragoon Guards band; the ladies show off their fine fashionable dresses and bonnets, the gentlemen wear or flourish top hats. On the right, at the inner bend of the river, are the ordinary citizens, more or less displaying the traits of popular manners referred to above. Stannard has taken his vantage at the extreme right and looks across the water to Harvey, for whom the picture was intended. As he gazes he shields his eyes from the afternoon sun that streams full onto the scene from the south west. Probably the sailing match is still in progress downstream. It started on the third gunshot at one o'clock and since there is a slightly better breeze than last year they are sailing two heats. Meanwhile the two bands play airs from Haydn, Mozart and Rossini, and small boats ply to and fro. As soon as the match is over and the victor known, Harvey's guests will adjourn to the two marquees for a lavish picnic and speeches; then in the evening will be the rowing match, and the presentation of silver cups, and a novelty event (two girls paddling skiffs, a muslin gown for the winner), and perhaps fireworks, and certainly waltzes and quadrilles at Thorpe Lodge – when Harvey might let curious folk watch through the windows and even offer them refreshments.

Water frolics held a quite special interest for Stannard beyond the aesthetic and social. He was a skilled oarsman and owned a prize-winning boat, the *Cytherea*, a four-oared skiff. If the *Cytherea* appears in his picture it is given no prominence – unlike Harvey's *Sylph* – but it was certainly on view at the frolic of 1824, steered by an urchin and rowed by four youths in a uniform of blue-netted waistcoats, scarlet belts, white trousers, and yellow straw hats with a laurel leaf and *Cytherea* in gold. Unfortunately the rowing match in 1824 was for six-oared boats, so Stannard had to join another crew – and the winning crew as it turned out. If the Thorpe water frolics were really great pageants, as the *Norwich Mercury* suggested, and if the multitudes who attended were all actors, then Stannard played his part thoroughly. The *Cytherea* in 1825 appeared richly transformed:

. . . its colour is purple; the inside is adorned with an elegant gilt scroll, which completely encircles it; on the back-board where the coxswain sits, is a beautiful and spirited sea piece, representing a stiff breeze at sea, with vessels sailing in various directions, painted in oils, and the spoons of the oars are nearly covered with gilt dolphins . . .⁹

The crew this time wore broadly striped jackets, black belts fastened by large brass buckles, blue trousers, and black glazed hats. But it remains uncertain whether the artist was there to see. This year the athletic Stannard (an accomplished skater as well as oarsman) was ill, the result of 'the too ardent pursuit of that delightful art which he so energetically and successfully labours'. Only three weeks earlier the Norwich Society of Artists' exhibition had opened with six works by Stannard on view. Number 9 in the catalogue, 'a most charming and brilliant picture' and probably the best painting on show, was *Thorpe Water*

Frolic – afternoon. Its composition, the *Norfolk Chronicle* thought, was ‘intensely interesting, masterly and elegant’; the subject had been deeply felt by the artist and the whole picture bore the stamp of truth and nature. The *Norwich Mercury* agreed. It was a work of great skill ‘whether the diversified disposition of such a multitude of objects of the same class, the lights and colouring, or the entire effect, be considered’. The *Mercury* then adds a significant comment: the picture is a striking blend of fact and fiction. In other words Stannard has taken legitimate artistic license. The feel and mood of the occasion have been seized, the scene and the properties and the actors are given their due, but we are not dealing with a literal transcript of a moment in time. This is the imaginative re-creation of a water frolic, not a documentary photograph.

With Harvey once more off on his Continental travels in 1826 the frolic could not be held. Its resumption in 1827 on his return was widely welcomed, for it had become an occasion ‘. . . looked forward to by a large portion of our fellow citizens as a day of recreation and gaiety . . .’ And indeed little seemed altered. The marquees again stood under the walnut trees. Except for a few guests who chose to be ‘dull and dignified’ the crowds were gay; the fields around were golden with corn, the sailing – in spite of the confined waters – went well, and this year the *Cytherea* won the rowing contest with ease (Stannard did not row, though his brother Alfred did). As usual there were two bands, and boys tried to climb a greasy pole for handkerchiefs, and the day ended with fireworks and dancing.

But if this had been the ‘blithest’ frolic yet, the following year brought a change. For the first time the weather was uncertain and the attendance down. In both sailing and rowing races there were serious infringements of the rules and displays of bad temper. During the next few summers the Thorpe festivities seem to have been reduced in scale, though large numbers of spectators still came. However in 1835 Harvey reached the age of 80, and in fulfilment of an old promise he organised one more great fête. Once again, whether it was ‘the love of such amusements or the enchantments of the scenery, the sailing or a gregarious feeling’, the genteel company assembled, the people came out from Norwich, and a huge assortment of vessels converged on Thorpe.

. . . never do we remember the banks of the Yare more crowded with our male inhabitants, their dames and daughters, or the river covered with boats manned by their sons, . . . May this beautiful village long continue to be the scene of so much happiness and general festivity, and its promoter live to enjoy and dispense these satisfactions amongst his neighbours, his friends, and his fellow-citizens.¹⁰

But if this last great Thorpe frolic proved one of the best, there was sadly no Stannard to witness and record it. He had died in 1830 at the age of 33. Harvey himself, his fortune much reduced towards the end from unwise speculations in British and foreign mining companies, died in 1842.

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Acknowledgement

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¹ *Norfolk Chronicle* 6 August 1825. Much of the material in this article is based on contemporary newspapers, viz. *Norfolk Chronicle* and *Norwich Mercury*, July – September dates from 1821 to 1835.

² *Norfolk Chronicle* 4 August 1821. D. Summers, *The Great Ouse* (1973), 101-111.

³ The sale of Harvey's effects in August-September 1842 included 'A set of 4 views in Venice, in gilt frame and glass' (lot 344) from the South East Sitting Room at Thorpe Lodge.

⁴ The most useful source for Harvey is: J. R. Harvey, *Records of the Norfolk Yeomanry Cavalry* (1908), passim. See also the same author's manuscript *Notes on the Harvey family*, ff. 48-51, in Norwich Castle Museum.

⁵ Printed in W. Taylor, *Collective works of the late Dr. Sayers* (1823), vol. 1, xvi-xvii.

⁶ J. R. Harvey, *Records*, *op. cit.*, 247. On the question of civil unrest at this period see also H. J. Barker, *The working class in Norwich, 1790-1830*, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of East Anglia (1972).

⁷ *Norfolk Chronicle* 28 August 1824.

⁸ Artistic precedents for Stannard's painting include the works of other Norwich School artists, Dutch marine painting (Stannard visited Holland in 1821), and possibly prints of Venetian and other regattas. On Crome for example see: F. W. Hawcroft, 'John Crome and the "Yarmouth Water Frolic"', *Burlington Magazine* 101 (1959), 288-91, and T. Clifford 'John Crome's Steam Packet' *Connoisseur* 185 (1974), 181-5.

⁹ *Norwich Mercury* 27 August 1825.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 22 August 1835.

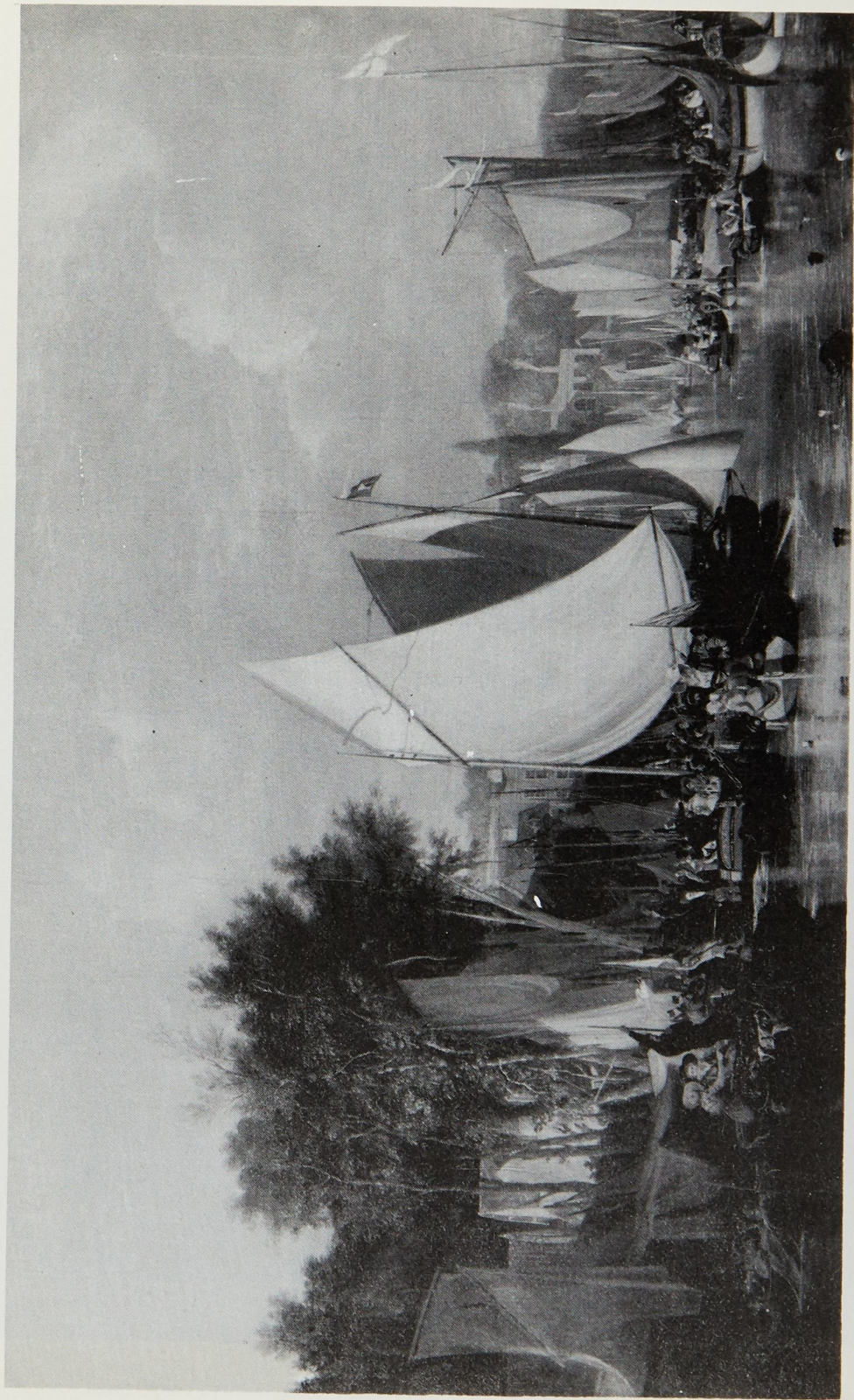


Plate I
Joseph Stannard *Water Frolic at Thorpe*, 1825
(Castle Museum, Norwich) *Norfolk Museums Service*

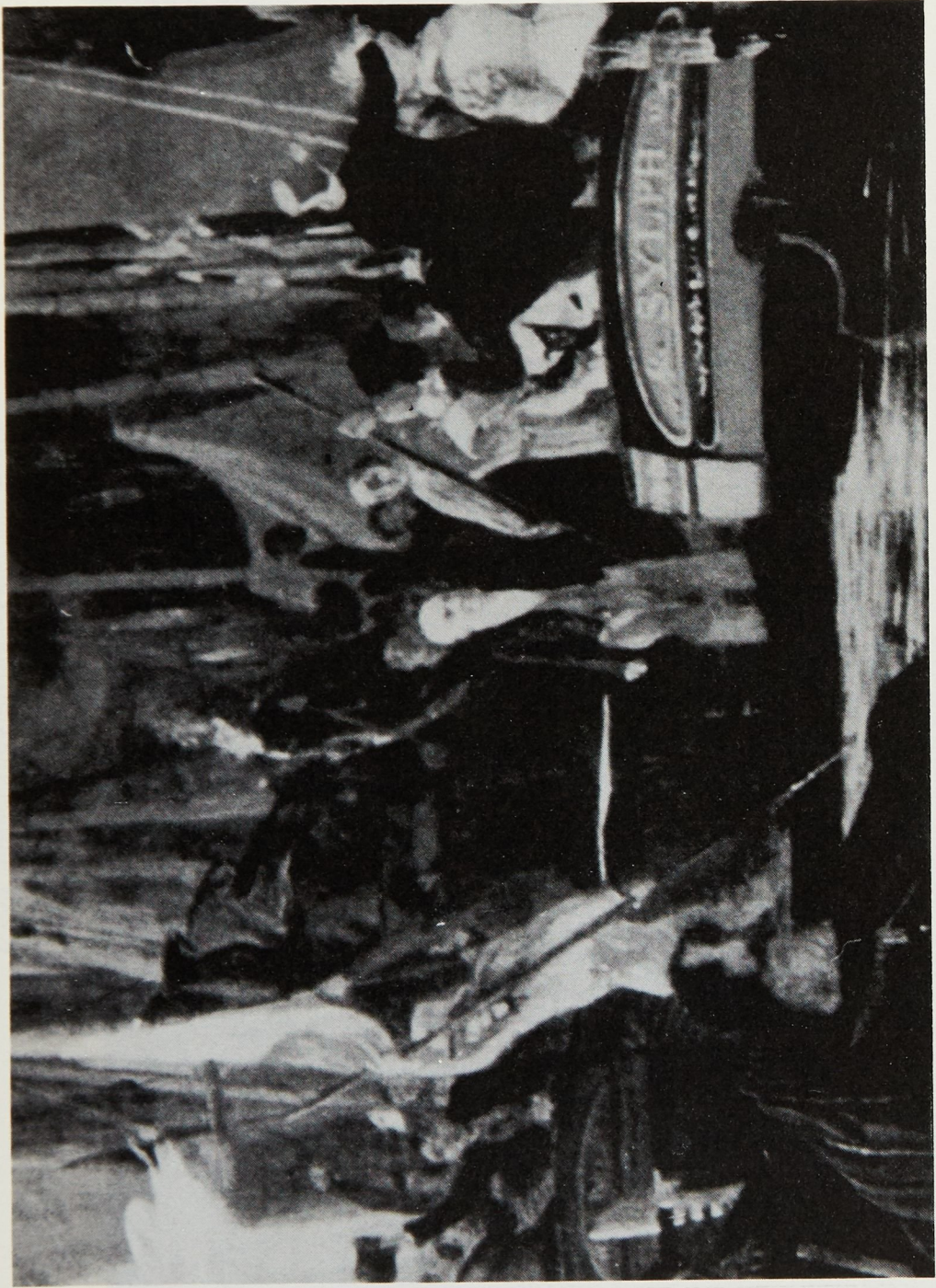


Plate II
Joseph Stannard *Water Frolic at Thorpe* (detail, John Harvey in his gondola)
Norfolk Museums Service



Plate III
John Opie *Portrait of John Harvey, c.1797* (as Captain of the Norwich Light Horse
Volunteers; Norwich Civic Portraits) *Norfolk Museums Service*

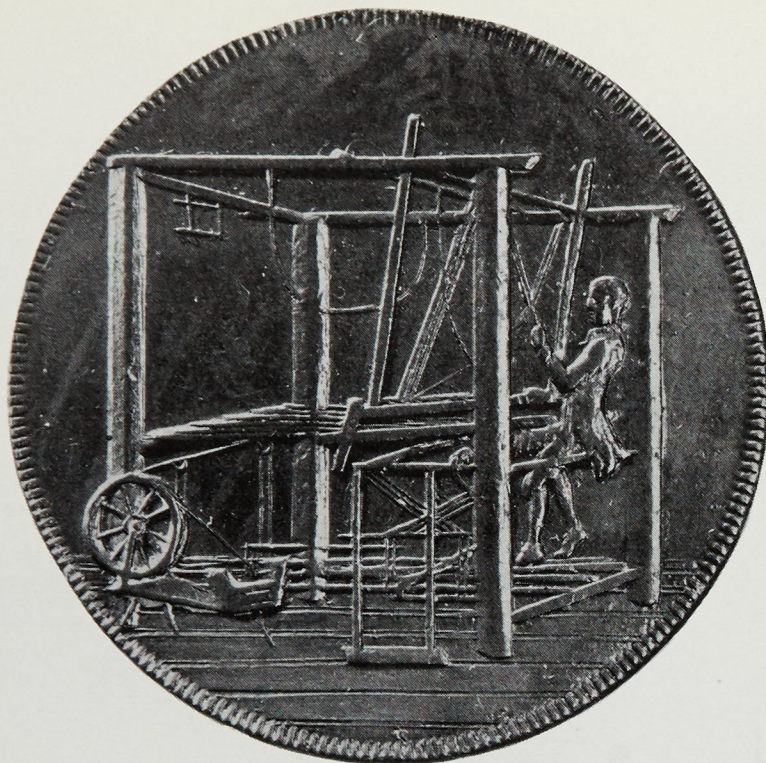


Plate IV

Token of John Harvey, 1792 (reverse, a weaver at his loom)

Photo by Hallam Ashley. Norfolk Museums Service



Plate V

Token of John Harvey, 1792 (obverse).

Photo by Hallam Ashley. Norfolk Museums Service