

THE GOVERNOR'S TABLE

A curious link with James Boswell at Chelsea Hospital

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DINING and wining are matters of some moment, especially in these days of food rationing, yet it cannot be pretended that they are regarded in the ceremonious light that they were by *our forefathers*. The change in habits and outlook in this respect during the past 250 years is well illustrated by the decline and eventual suppression of the Governor's Table at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea. This once typical, though now long forgotten, institution is lent additional interest through James Boswell's own racy accounts of the proceedings when he attended on several occasions as a guest.

When the Royal Hospital was founded in 1682 it was still customary, as it had been in feudal times, for a person of standing to keep a public table. Thus Sir Stephen Fox, the Treasury Commissioner whom Charles II entrusted with the management of the Hospital, kept such a table at his lodgings in Whitehall. He must have appreciated that some such provision would have to be made for the Governor, and the precedent, then so dear to the heart of the civil servant, soon became available. When Kilmainham Hospital, the Irish precursor of Chelsea Hospital, was taken into use in 1684, it was laid down that the Governor, or Master, "was to reside in his lodgings and dine constantly in the Common Hall at a table with the chaplain and other commissioned officers, and such other officers of the Hospital as he shall admit thereto." This was duly carried out, and some years later it was stated that "there was an allowance settled of £200 a year for a Publique Table to be kept in the Hall of the Hospitall there, which was called the Masters or Governours Table, and att which the Principall officers belonging to the said Hospitall did constantly eat."

In November, 1690, Sir Thomas Ogle, the first Governor of *Chelsea Hospital*, who had then been two years in residence "without," as he said, "any allowance for his Table and other Extraordinary Expenses that he is oblig'd to be at," asked for a grant in aid. His petition was supported by the Paymaster-General, the ex officio Treasurer of the Hospital, but was set

aside by the Treasury, "to be considered when the Hospitall is settled." Two years later, when the Hospital opened, approval was given for the twelve senior officials, or "Officers of the House" to be allowed "every Day three Dishes at Dinner, as also a Loaf of Bread and a Quart of Ale or Strong Beer each; but to have no Suppers; The whole Charge of the said Diet not to exceed ten shillings a day." The Officers concerned were the Lieutenant-Governor, Major, Chaplain, Second Chaplain, Physician, Secretary, Deputy Treasurer, Steward, Comptroller, Clerk of Works, Surgeon and Apothecary. The Governor was not included, probably owing to his age and infirmities, and it may be assumed that he and his successors only attended the Table on special occasions. Nearly half a century later, after the creation of the appointment of Adjutant, that officer also became a member of this mess, and the daily allowance was raised to a shilling a head per diem. Otherwise there were no changes throughout the 18th century.

The Governor's Table was placed in the Great Hall, "on the Steppe att ye upper ende"; the dais being paved with black and white marble whereas the body of the Hall had plain Purbeck paving. The board itself was described as a "wanscott table, with 2 formes covered with Blew Cloth," and there were also "2 Great Cane Chairs with Blew Cushoons." The Table probably resembled those at which the In-Pensioners sat, but the position of the trestle legs must have been differently arranged, as the design of the latter would not allow anyone to sit at the head or foot. Though all the tables were furnished with cloths, only those privileged to sit at the Governor's were allowed napkins. Each table had a copper cistern, the precise function of which has not been determined; and a service of pewter, that at the Governor's being three dozen plates, three deep and three shallow dishes, and six small dishes. This Table was also furnished with a dozen white-hafted knives and the following silver: a dozen spoons and forks, six salts, six large flagons, and six cans, all marked with the royal cyphers, W.M. Three more cans and a large tankard were added before 1702.

The plate was kept in two oak cupboards, in charge of the Master Butler, who laid the Table and waited at dinner, assisted no doubt by the officers' personal servants. Provisions were bought by the Steward, whose bills were checked by the Comptroller to see that they did not exceed the authorised allowance. The hour of dining was at first between 11 o'clock

and noon, and the Master Cook began dishing up on the beat of the drum. He "delivered out" first the dishes for the In-Pensioners, and then those for the Governor's Table; the food being carried from the Great Kitchen along the open Colonnade and so to the Great Hall. The ceremony of dining was regarded at the time as an interesting spectacle, and visitors who wished to view the proceedings were taken up to the Gallery by the Usher of the Hall.

The routine remained unchanged until 1740, when Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Rich, shortly after his appointment as Governor, transferred his Table to the "Officers' Hall" in the middle of the northern wing in Infirmary Court. This is a finely proportioned apartment, panelled in deal and with a bold bolection moulding round the fireplace. It measured 38 by 24 feet, and was formerly lit by windows at both ends, but one end has since been partitioned off to make an entrance lobby and stair to some rooms above. On being taken over in 1740 it was provided with a new floor, and the walls were painted white as they still are. The room then became known as the "Governor's," or "Gentlemen's," Hall, and was placed in charge of the Second Butler. A sideboard is first mentioned in 1753, and eight years later a dozen "wallnuttree Framed Chairs with stuff seats" were bought for twelve guineas and two "Elbow Chairs" for three guineas.*

The messing at the Governor's Table was strongly criticised by Dr. Phillip Francis, the Second Chaplain, in 1766. He was a testy individual, who when appointed to the Royal Hospital at the instance of his patron, Henry Fox, Lord Holland, two years previously, had been not at all pleased, having hoped for an Irish bishopric in view of his services as tutor to Charles James Fox. On the occasion of his complaint, he sent to the Great Kitchen to enquire why a quarter of lamb had been supplied that was "mere carrion." The Master Cook, obviously a man of spirit, returned word that "it was a Dinner for a King, and he would knock any man down who would deliver any Message from that Table" in future. He should have known what he was talking about, for after graduating, as it were, 36 years earlier, in the kitchen of the late Princess of Orange, he became chef successively to George II and Princess Amelia.

* Two photographs of this Hall are given in *L.C.C. Survey of London*, Vol. XI, Plates 96, 97.

Dr. Francis now brought the matter before the Commissioners of the Royal Hospital. He complained that the best pieces of meat were never served at the Governor's Table, and that "the Pastry in General is bad, except when it is made by the Master Cook himself, and that the Custards, Puffs and Cheese Cakes he verily believes are bought from Criers' Baskets when going accidentally thro' the College," as the Hospital was often called. He added that the messing was so bad that few officers attended, and that the Steward, who was supposed to buy the provisions, was usually away in the country. Summoned from his rural retreat to answer these weighty charges, the Steward stated that "a Soup and two' Dishes, One of boil'd and the other of roasted Meat, with a Pudding, Pye or Tart" were served daily; and that there was enough food for four or five servants to dine on the leavings. As to why officers abstained from dining, he attributed it to the disagreeable manners of the Second Chaplain. He mentioned that on his inviting the clergyman who had acted as *locum tenens* before Dr. Francis's appointment, to dine as his guest, Dr. Francis had threatened to complain to the Governor. Further, the Chaplain had "utter'd such disagreeable and ungentlemanly Expressions, that had debarr'd him from dining there since," although "it had always been customary to introduce a friend to dine without any Exceptions."

After much discussion, during which the Commissioners adroitly evaded being drawn into adjudicating on the nice issue as to whether maiden ewe lamb was fit for human consumption, they dismissed the complaint. A few months later Dr. Francis was said to be "very feeble and languid"; and he was stricken with palsy the following year and died at Bath in 1773. There may have been some grounds for his dissatisfaction with the management of the Governor's Table, because in 1780 the Lieutenant-Governor reported that "very improper Company were invited to dine." Such irregularities were to be explained no doubt by the unsatisfactory way in which successive Paymasters-General exercised their patronage in *making appointments to the Royal Hospital at this period*. Indeed it was alleged that "a man by shaving the Paymaster, brushing his coat, or marrying his mistress, became the companion of a General, a Knight of the Bath, a Physician or a Divine!" Be that as it may, the Chelsea Board restricted the privilege of messing at the Governor's Table to the Officers of

the House, Adjutant, and officiating clergymen, that is to say clergymen acting as deputies to the Chaplains.

The hour of dining was gradually set back, and by 1781 was 2 p.m. in winter and 3 p.m. in summer. Fifteen years later, in view of complaints from several officers, the Chelsea Commissioners conducted an enquiry into the messing at the Governor's Table. They found that although fruit and vegetables were supplied from the Hospital kitchen garden, and bread from the Bakehouse, as formerly, the expenditure on other provisions had risen to £327 per annum. This figure they considered excessive, particularly so as not all those entitled to dine at the Governor's Table did so. But they were still more amazed at the consumption of wine, which amounted to 19 bottles of port and three of claret, besides six pints of sherry, each week. At the request of several officers the Chelsea Board therefore authorised an allowance of three shillings a day for each dining member, which incidentally was continued until 1833, and ordered the Governor's Table "to be abolished from Christmas next, excepting the two annual festivals."

These two Festivals, which had been kept without a break since the opening of the Royal Hospital in 1692, were Oak Apple Day, commemorating the birthday and restoration of King Charles II, the Founder, and the anniversary of the reigning Monarch's birthday. On these grand days the In-Pensioners had a double quantity of food and beer, while the staff fared correspondingly well. The expenditure on these celebrations in 1810, a typical year, included £50 for provisions and a similar sum for wines and spirits. Four years earlier the drinks served at the Governor's Table were claret, Madeira, port, Lisbon, sherry, cider, spirits, porter, ale and beer. Small wonder that these functions became quite celebrated, and that James Boswell, with his peculiar zest for new experiences, should have sought an invitation. He first obtained one in May, 1783, through his friend Edmund Burke, who had been appointed Paymaster-General the previous month. Boswell relates how he drove to the Paymaster's on Oak Apple Day, the 29th May, where he found:

"There was a card from him to me requesting my being with him this day at two to go to Chelsea College, which had not yet been sent and was delivered to me; so that I found there was no wavering about my having the anniversary feast of King Charles II's restoration with him in his official capacity, for which I had staid in London some days. I was apprehensive his uneasy

state of mind on account of Powell's melancholy exit* might have prevented him from attending. . . . The Paymaster, his son, Mr. St. Marie and I drove in a hackney coach to Chelsea College. Mr. Burke's own horses were ill. . . .

"Sir George Howard was very courteous to me at Chelsea College during the whole repast, and after it was over asked me to dine there every anniversary as long as he was Governour. I sat between Mr. Burke and Dr. Mounsey, Physician to the College, who in his eighty-ninth year was quite entire in his mind. I had a good deal of conversation with him. He professed his belief in a future state. He told me brandy was very pernicious to the Stomack. I asked him how one might attain to such an old age as his. He referred me to Celsus, who advised not to observe any constant regimen. Mr. Burke was very attentive to old Captain Grant, son of the Minister of Auchinleck in my Grandfather's time, who is Adjutant to the College; so that the Captain, who has the oldfashioned enthusiastic attachment to THE LAIRD, was much pleased to see him so intimate with Mr. Burke. We had an excellent dinner, and a great deal of good wines. I drank liberally, was in high spirits and very happy in my talk, being much encouraged by Mr. Burke. I got acquainted with General Trapaud. He (Burke) and I, his son and Mr. St. Marie drank tea at Mr. Champion's."

Boswell left for Scotland the very next morning, no doubt ruminating on his new acquaintances. Lieutenant-General Sir George Howard, the Governor, on whom he had made such an instant impression, had been commissioned as an Ensign when only eight years old, had commanded the Buffs at Fontenoy, Falkirk and Culloden, and also seen service at Rochefort and in the Seven Years' War. A man of great stature, he was said to be "an accomplished courtier and a gallant soldier"; and in the House of Commons, where he sat as an M.P. in 1762-96, he was regarded as George III's mouth-piece.

Boswell's next-door neighbour, Dr. Messenger Monsey, a notable character, must have reminded him in some ways of Dr. Johnson, for he was equally careless about his appearance. Dr. Johnson, as Boswell relates elsewhere, did not like Monsey, being "vehement against him as a fellow who swore and talked bawdy"; and it was possibly to test the accuracy of this verdict that Boswell caused the conversation at Chelsea to take the turn it did. There are many amusing anecdotes about the old physician, who had a most malicious sense of humour, which he retained up to the last. Thus in his will, when disposing of a fortune of £16,000, he bequeathed an old velvet coat to one friend, and the buttons on it to another.

Captain Grant had been Adjutant since 1761, having previously

* John Powell, Chief Accountant at the Pay Office, and Secretary and Register at the Royal Hospital since 1777, had committed suicide.

been Lieutenant in a Company of Invalids. He suffered much inconvenience owing to "the annual increase to his Expenses from a Numerous Family." Although he managed to secure several rises in pay he never succeeded in catching up with his "annual increases," and at his death in 1791 left two daughters "wholly unprovided for." The story ends happily, however, for the Chelsea Board, in benevolent mood, granted the two maiden ladies an annuity and allowed them the use of a cottage in the grounds. No doubt they had many interesting stories to tell of Boswell's visits to their father, to which Boswell himself briefly alludes in his diary.

General Trapaud had no connection with the Royal Hospital, but was no doubt a friend of the Governor's. The Mr. Champion, with whom Boswell had tea, must have been Samuel Champion, the Master Baker. He was an old man of 82, and later that same year his appointment, described as "a sinecure place," was abolished. He was probably related to Richard Champion, an old friend of Edmund Burke's, who had been manager and later owner of the Bristol China Factory and was made Deputy to Burke at the Pay Office.

Boswell did not keep a record of his attendance at the Festival Dinner in 1784; but on the 11th July, 1785, he notes telegraphically that he "dined Chelsea College, instead of 29 May (Anniversary), as room new painted. Sir George Howard and I at head of table in Arm Chairs. Did not riot." Omitting any reference to his visit the following year, Boswell next mentions how on the 29th May, 1787, he "went to General Paoli's and accompanied him to Chelsea College; General Trapaud, General Tonym, Colonel Skene, etc., there. Old Captain Grant seemed glad that we met. There was no high glee, but I liked my annual feast." General Paoli needs no introduction to the reader, and the other senior officers named were, like him, guests.

Six days later Boswell found himself once more at the Royal Hospital, for George III's birthday fell on the 4th June. As he relates, "Sir George Howard had kindly asked me to dine this day again at Chelsea College. I went and found General Paoli, Colonel Leland, Colonel Skene, Mr. Drummond (son of the Provost), whom I had never seen before, a sensible well-behaved man. Came to town in the General's Chariot." The Governor, it may be observed, did not live at his house in the Royal Hospital, but in Grosvenor Square. Boswell gives a

long description, on the 29th May, 1790, of what was apparently his last Festival Dinner, as follows:

"I was engaged to the Anniversary of Charles the Second's Restoration at Chelsea College, to which dinner I had an invitation from Sir George Howard, the Governour for fifty years, from 1785, having been introduced to it by Mr. Burke in 1783 when he was Paymaster of the Army, and having been absent only in 1788 when I was in Scotland on account of my dear wife's illness. I wish I had kept an account of the Company present each year.

"Dr. Mounsey, the Physician, and Mr. Adair, the Surgeon, had been succeeded by Dr. Moseley last year and Mr. Keate this. Today the company was Sir George Howard, Major Buckley, Major Dawson, Dr. Burney, Mr. Keate, the Rev. Mr. Blayney, Mr. Graham, of the Establishment; and of guests Sir George Osborne, General Trapaud, General Pattison, Colonel Teesdale, Major Da Costa, Rev. Dr. Steevens, Mr. George Drummond, Captain Buckley of the Guards, and myself. Poor Captain Grant was unable to attend. There is generally a change of Generals each year.

"It was an excellent dinner, as usual, and I drank of all the liquors: Cold drink, small beer, ale, porter, cyder, Madeira, sherry, old hock, port, Claret. I was in good spirits at the Festival, talked well, and was pleased, as the table began to thin, to find Mr. Keate come and sit by me and carry on some intelligent conversation. Sir George was called away. Major Buckley took the chair, and we circulated the glass a long time. I never saw candles there before, I think. Trapaud, Dacosta and I drank a glass of Cherry brandy at Dawson's and went to town in Trapaud's coach. . . . I was much intoxicated, and I suppose talked nonsense (at another function he then attended). Very irregular this; but I thought the festival an excuse."

The following day, Sunday, the first entry in Boswell's diary is: "Awaked somewhat feverish." Of those named on this occasion Dr. Moseley was an authority on tropical diseases. He had served in the West Indies, and may have acquired a liver there; for although "he could be very entertaining," so it was said, "he was certainly of the 'genus irritabile,' and dipped his pen in caustic often and deeply." By contrast, Robert Adair, the late Surgeon, the Robin Adair of the popular ballad, had been a man of irresistible charm. His successor, Thomas Keate, had attended George III during his temporary insanity, and later became Surgeon-General.

Captain William Bulkeley, or Buckley as Boswell spelt his name, was the popular Major of the Royal Hospital; and an unusual entry in the Church Registers, at his death in 1801, testifies to his "Elegant Manners, Inflexible Integrity and universal benevolence." Major Dawson assisted Captain Grant, and on the latter's death in 1791 succeeded him as Adjutant. As he had to be supplied with a special "gouty chair," one may infer that he drank port as well as cherry brandy. Like Dr.

Burney, the Organist, and Mr. Blayney, who was officiating for the Chaplain, he was not a regular member of the Governor's Table and so evidently attended by invitation. Mr. Graham, on the other hand, was present by virtue of holding the office of Apothecary, to which he had succeeded on his father's death. He was quite unqualified, and did not occupy his apartments at the Royal Hospital, but performed his duties by deputy. His portrait as a boy appears in the delightful conversation piece of the Graham children, by Hogarth, now in the National Gallery.

In 1806 the guests were Dr. Burney, Mr. Justice Read, Magistrate for Oaths to the Royal Hospital, and four others introduced by the Governor; but no details are available for other years. The Festival Dinners were eventually discontinued about 1846, though why is not known. Possibly the Governor, Sir Edward Paget, who died in 1849, did not feel equal to them owing to age and infirmities, for he had lost an arm in action many years before. The Festival Dinners do not pass wholly unremembered, however, as in lieu of them, each officer still receives a plum pudding on Oak Apple Day and another at Christmas.

An inventory taken in 1847 shows that the mess equipment then included a large quantity of silver, pewter, cutlery, china and glass, as well as eight brass and eight large silver-plated candlesticks; but unfortunately none of these articles have been preserved, nor indeed has the Governor's Table itself. The old Officers' Hall was used as a Board Room for the Chelsea Commissioners from 1797 until the present war, during which it has been utilised for various purposes, including temporarily housing some ladies who had been bombed out of their club. Though all the windows have been blown out, no structural damage has been done. Thus the discerning visitor may still people it in his imagination with the bewigged diners of long ago, and among them the shade of Boswell—rioting!

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