

Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son* and its Real-Life Counterparts

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In Charles Dickens' novel *Dombey and Son* (1848) the titular character Paul Dombey visits Leamington after the death of his son where he meets and subsequently proposes to Edith Granger. Several locations in the town feature in the book. These include the Copps' Royal Hotel (since demolished to make way for the railway) and the Pump Rooms, both of which are both referenced in the accompanying illustration for this chapter. Another depiction is of a "pleasant walk, where there was a deep shade of leafy trees, and where there were a few benches here and there for those who chose to rest".¹ Some town historians have taken this to refer to Holly Walk, though others remain unconvinced.² Nevertheless, while we might not know exactly where he set his story, what we do get from Dickens is a sense of how Leamington became joined to the British colonies by the commercial and military sinews of empire.

Dombey was the head of a colonial trading company that operated out of London and many references in the book are made to the West Indies and India. One employee to whom Dombey takes a dislike is exiled to the company's counting house in Barbados, while in another scene Dombey hosts a lavish dinner party to ingratiate himself with directors of the East India Company. It was the wealth acquired through this colonial trade that funded his lifestyle in Leamington, where he stays for several weeks in the Royal Hotel.

Accompanying Dombey on his trip was his friend Major Joseph Bagstock, a retired military officer who is described by an associate as having done "all sorts of things in the Peninsula, with every description of fire-arm; and in the East and West Indies, my love, I really couldn't undertake to say what he did not do".³ Bagstock also brings with him to Leamington his long-suffering servant, known only as 'the Native'. Since Dickens does not give this character a name, let alone a voice, we learn little about his personal story or perspective. The narrator only informs us that the Native is "dark brown" in complexion and "currently believed to be a prince in his own country", thereby suggesting that he could be from India.⁴

Though Dickens had spent little time in Leamington prior to writing the novel, his words about the presence of wealthy traders and retired military officers in the town certainly rang true.⁵ Two such people lived one after another at the top of Holly Walk in Byron Lodge, in the site now occupied by Imperial House, a 1960s office block for the food division of Imperial Tobacco. One of these was Frederick Manning, partner in the West India trading firm Mannings and Anderdon.⁶ Manning had joined his father and brother-in-law in the family firm and through this acquired ownership or management of 14 slave plantations across the Caribbean islands of St Kitts, Nevis and Trinidad from 1817 onwards. By 1831 it was estimated that 4,000 slaves were directly dependent upon supplies of food and clothing shipped by Mannings and Anderdon.⁷

¹ Charles Dickens (2008) *Dombey and Son*, edited by Alan Horsman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 403.

² Bryan Homer argues that Dickens' description of the walk as "not being a place of general resort at any hour" meant that it was unlikely to be Holly Walk since this was a public place for genteel recreational purposes. Homer, B. (1998) *Charles Dickens and Leamington Spa: Fact, Fiction, and Fancy*. Coventry: Jones-Sands Publishing, p. 5.

³ In the 2008 OUP version this passage is left out of Chapter 10, but appears in others such as Charles Dickens (2020) *Dombey and Son*, with Appreciations and Criticisms by G. K. Chesterton. Bristol: Read and Co. Books.

⁴ *Dombey and Son*, edited by Alan Horsman, p. 294.

⁵ Dickens and Hablot Knight Browne ('Phiz') stayed at overnight at the Copps' Royal Hotel on 29 October 1838 on a journey from London. Dickens later returned in 1858 and 1862 to give readings.

⁶ A key figure in the firm was Frederick's father, William Manning, who was also an MP from 1794-1830 and Governor of the Bank of England from 1812-1814.

⁷ Sheridan, R. B. (1961) 'The West India Sugar Crisis and British Slave Emancipation, 1830-1833', *Journal of Economic History*, 21: 4, pp. 539-551.

Like *Dombey's* firm, which is ultimately bankrupted, Mannings and Anderdon also folded when its speculative expansion into sugar failed to reap rewards. However, Manning Junior remained relatively wealthy. The first record of him at Byron Lodge is in July 1849, aged 54, living with his wife Elizabeth.⁸ He quickly became established in the town, presiding over meetings of the Leamington Literary and Scientific Institution and serving as patron of the Warneford Hospital annual ball. Among other causes, over the next few decades Manning would also make large donations to the local military corps and the building of the St Paul, St John, and Parish churches. When he died in Byron Lodge in 1880, his obituary in the *Leamington Spa Courier* called him "a thoroughly practical philanthropist" and remarked that "no man in Leamington was more highly or deservedly esteemed".⁹

After Manning died, Byron Lodge was taken up by William Mellish Parratt. He had served as an officer in the 12th Regiment of the Madras Native Infantry since 1848, and, after writing to the Secretary of State for India in 1862 complaining that his juniors had been promoted ahead of him, subsequently rose through the ranks to Lieutenant Colonel, retiring to Portland Place in Leamington in 1874.¹⁰

Parratt's regiment was part of the Madras Army in the southeast of India; one of the armies initially established by the East India Company to extend its military dominance in India and beyond. During his time in service, Parratt would have seen control of the army pass to the direct authority of the British Crown. This happened after the Indian Rebellion of 1857 in which a series of mutinies among Indian infantry and civilian revolts led to the effective nationalisation of the East India Company and the establishment of the British Raj. During the Rebellion, Parratt's own regiment was sent to Singapore and Hong Kong as panic spread that Indians in those colonies would destabilise British rule too.¹¹ Parratt lived at Byron Lodge till his death in 1892, fathering five children in Leamington, all of whom were declared beneficiaries of his Madras Military Fund Pension.

And finally, what of the nameless servant in *Dombey and Son* – the Native. Did he have any real-life equivalents? Though people of lower social status are much harder to trace in the archive, newspaper records do show evidence of *ayahs* in Leamington. These were Indian women employed as nursemaids and nannies to British families in south Asia, and who sometimes also accompanied children on journeys to the UK. In 1856 an *ayah* is listed as a guest at the Crown Hotel alongside Mrs Woodward Eaton and her two children, while in 1863 an advert was placed in the local newspaper stating: "An AYAH wishes for an ENGAGEMENT with any Lady proceeding to Calcutta by the Overland Route".¹² A contemporary book called *The Tropical Resident at Home* spoke of the "little communities of old Indians and Colonists" that resided in spa towns like Bath, Cheltenham and Leamington. We might thus suppose that they provided not only a means by which the wealth and values of empire were brought into the town, but in some cases, the people who had been colonised too.¹³

⁸ There is a record of a Mr and Mrs F. Manning at 64 Portland Street in November 1833. By October 1840 he was living at Douglas House, albeit for a few months only. Elizabeth Manning (nee Turnor) died at Byron Lodge on 20 September 1868 aged 73. She was buried in in the vault at Tachbrook, as was her husband upon his death.

⁹ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 17 January 1880, p. 4.

¹⁰ 'Letter from Lieutenant William Mellish Parratt to the Right Honourable the Secretary of State for India in Council' (1863) *Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons*, Volume 40, p. 58; *Homeward Mail from India, China and the East*, 21 March 1892, p. 4. Records show that Parratt also married in Leamington on 13 February 1869 in St Mary's Church.

¹¹ '12th Madras Native Infantry, Madras Army' (2012) India Netzone, available at: https://www.indianetzone.com/63/12th_madras_native_infantry.htm. See also Rai, R. (2012) 'The 1857 Panic and the Fabrication of an Indian 'Menace' in Singapore', *Modern Asian Studies*, 47: 2, pp. 365-405.

¹² *Leamington Spa Courier*, 26 July 1856, p. 7; *Leamington Advertiser and Beck's List of Visitors*, 3 September 1863, p. 1.

¹³ Edward J. Waring (1866) *The Tropical Resident at Home*. London: John Churchill and Sons, p. 49.