

MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

TRAFALGAR BICENTENARY 1805-2005

NELSON AT MERTON

Admiral Viscount Nelson bought a house in Merton in 1801. It was the only house he ever owned and lived in. It was known as Merton Place, and to Nelson it was his 'dear, dear Merton'.

Admiral Horatio Nelson

Late in 1800, Nelson, aged 42, had come home from the Mediterranean on leave from harassing the French fleet. He had lost his right arm (1797) and the sight of his right eye (1794), but he had risen to be Rear Admiral of the Red, and had been created a baron after his victory at the Battle of the Nile. The King of Naples had gratefully conferred on him the title Duke of Bronte, in Sicily.



Nelson, a print from a portrait by John Hoppner 1800-01

Sir William Hamilton

With Nelson came Sir William Hamilton, aged 70, who had been the British envoy in Naples, and Hamilton's wife Emma, aged 35. Sir William, a cultivated man, had become an expert on volcanoes, having been able to study Vesuvius at close range. The Naples area was also rich in antiquities, and he had amassed a large collection of ancient Greek vases. These would later come to the British Museum.



*Sir William Hamilton,
from a drawing by Gugnion, made at Naples*

Emma Hamilton

Emma, noted for her beauty, had had a remarkable career. Born the daughter of a Cheshire blacksmith, she arrived in London in her teens, and briefly worked as a maid before she was discovered by George Romney, the painter, whose favourite model she became. Emma had had several lovers, and it was one of these, Charles Greville, Sir William's nephew, who dispatched her to Naples to his uncle's household. She became Sir William's mistress, and then, in 1791, his wife. Her beauty, charm and confidence enabled her to fill the role of ambassador's wife with style. Some observers mocked her singing voice and the theatrical 'attitudes' she performed, but artists still found much to admire.

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Nelson and Emma had fallen violently in love. Hamilton knew all about the affair, but the three of them claimed in public that only a pure bond of friendship united them. Emma's husband and her lover were both Knights of the Order of the Bath, and Emma liked to refer to the household as *Tria juncta in uno* – 'three joined in one', which is the motto of the Order.

However, now Emma was pregnant with Nelson's baby. Her height (she was a tall woman), her plumpness (she was no longer Romney's slender model) and the new loose, flowing fashions helped to disguise her condition, but there was plenty of gossip. There was gossip too about Nelson's dismissal of his wife Fanny. She was a quiet, ladylike woman; she remained devoted to him and behaved throughout with dignity and restraint.



Emma, a print from a drawing by Frederick Rehberg 1794

Horatia

On 1 January 1801 Nelson was promoted to Vice-Admiral of the Blue. He was away on board ship when, on 29 January, his daughter Horatia was born in the Hamiltons' house in Piccadilly. The baby was smuggled out, to be cared for by a trustworthy woman in Marylebone, and Emma's robust health enabled her to resume her usual social life almost at once. Nelson wrote to her, "You know, my dearest Emma, that there is nothing in this world I would not do for us to live together, and to have our dear little child with us..."

He snatched three days leave in February to see Emma and visit baby Horatia. But then it was back to sea, and the battle of Copenhagen. After this triumph he was created Viscount Nelson of the Nile and Burnham Thorpe (his Norfolk birthplace).

Merton Place

It was now that Nelson, still at sea, asked Emma to find him "a little farm", somewhere this unconventional household could live secluded from spiteful tongues, but somewhere close enough to London for him to keep in touch with the Admiralty and public affairs. He gave Emma full responsibility for choosing the right house, knowing, he said, that he would be happy with any choice of hers.

She looked at a house at Turnham Green, which came to nothing, before finding Merton Place, which was advertised as "an elegant and very commodious brick edifice", and which she seems to have liked at once. The house faced Merton High Street from the south. It had been built about 1750 as Moat House Farm, by a man called Henry Pratt. In 1764 it had been bought by Richard Hotham, who had made a fortune as a hatter and is best known as the developer of Bognor as a resort. Hotham enlarged the house and later leased it to Charles Greaves, who was a partner in a local calico-printing works. Greaves had bought the house, but he had now died, and it was his widow who had put it on the market. There was 21 hectares (52 acres) of land.

The price asked was £9400. Nelson's offer of £9000, to include the furniture, was accepted. However, his lawyer insisted on having a surveyor's report before finalising the purchase, and the surveyor thought the house shoddy, damp and inconveniently arranged. It was badly situated, on flat clay soil, and most of its land was on the other side of the road, with a tunnel giving access.

Nelson ignored all advice. Emma liked the house, and that was good enough for him. He could put down £3000, and borrow the rest from his friend Alexander Davison. Everything in the house was to belong to him, and running expenses were to be shared, with him paying two thirds and Hamilton one third. He wrote to Emma about the happy life they would have at Merton: "We will eat plain, but will have good wine, and a hearty welcome for all our friends".

In September the Hamiltons moved into Merton Place, and at once began installing pigs and poultry, stocking the moat – 'the Nile' they called it – with fish, and planting shrubs and trees. At last, on 23 October 1801, Nelson arrived in Merton and entered his longed-for house. He was earlier than expected, and the villagers lost their chance to garland him and drag his carriage to the door.

Life at Merton Place

Nelson had previously owned a house in Suffolk, but had never spent even a night there, so Merton Place meant everything to him. Emma would sometimes call it 'Paradise Merton'. Guests included Nelson's brother and two sisters, with their families, and his old father, naval friends, diplomats, acquaintances from Naples, musicians, artists and actors.

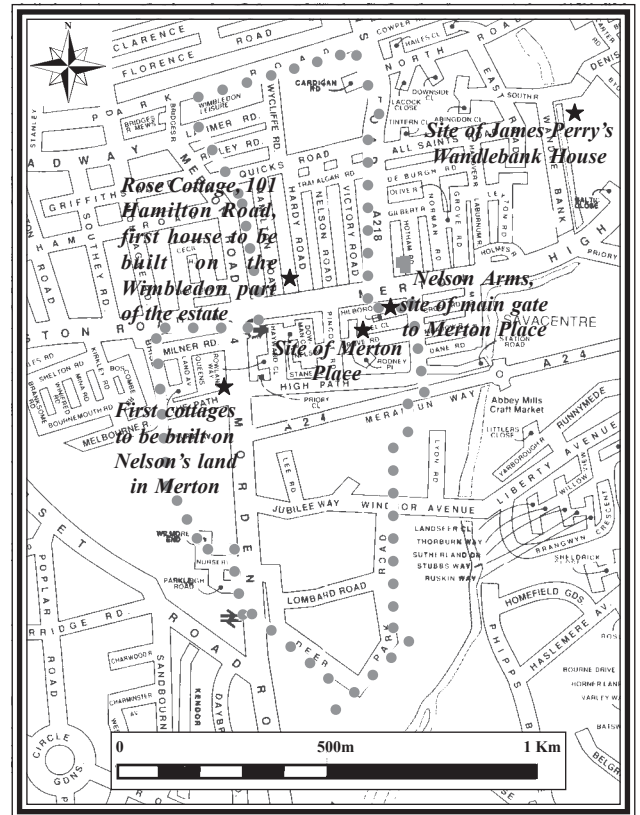
They got to know some of their neighbours. There was James Perry, the editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, who lived at Wandlebank House; the Newtons and the Halfhides, who were calico printers nearby; Mr Parrott of Mitcham, the local medical man, and Abraham Goldsmid, a financier, whose summer residence was Morden Lodge (predecessor of the present building). There was no parsonage in Merton then, and Thomas Lancaster, the perpetual curate, lived at what is now called Eagle House, Wimbledon, where he ran a successful boarding school. He welcomed the Merton Place household, and Nelson is said to have given money to the poor of Merton, through Mr Lancaster.

Money

Nelson lost no time in acquiring more land, 47 hectares (115 acres) on the Merton side of the High Street, thus ensuring his privacy. He had to borrow the full price of £8000. His estate now ran from present day South Park Road in the north to the site of the Tramlink route in the south, and from Merton Road, Brisbane Avenue and Morden Road in the west to the line of Haydons Road in the east.

Meanwhile he gave Emma a free hand in improving the house. She added two great bays on the east side, where the front door was now located, refurbished the bedrooms, added to the number of water closets (previously only one) and reorganised the domestic range on the south side. She filled the house with pictures – of herself, of Nelson and of his battles – and with mirrors.

In July 1802, leaving Emma's mother in charge of the workmen, the trio set off for a six-week tour to Wales and the west. At Worcester they ordered a set of china



Outline of Nelson's Merton Place Estate traced on a modern street map produced by Merton Design Unit, Merton Council, reproduced by permission

for use at Merton, to be decorated with Nelson's very elaborate coat of arms.

All this was costing a lot of money. Nelson had made a generous financial gesture to his wife, paying her £1800 per annum. He complained, in a letter to the Prime Minister that he was much worse off than others of his rank, being left with less than £800 a year to live on. He was still borrowing from Davison, and from his rich brother-in-law George Matcham.

Changes

Sir William was becoming frail. In March 1803 he moved to his own house in Piccadilly, and the next month he died, under his own roof, as he wished. To preserve appearances, Nelson asked his sister-in-law Sarah to join him and Emma, as chaperon, and soon this role was taken on by Sarah's 15-year-old daughter Charlotte.

The fragile Treaty of Amiens ended in May, and Nelson returned to sea for blockading work as Commander-in-Chief for the Mediterranean, hoisting his flag in *Victory*. He hoped that in his absence Emma would settle to a quiet life at Merton, with small Horatia. But Emma took a house in Clarges Street and led a merry life in town with Charlotte. She saw little of her daughter, who was still in Marylebone. Emma's mother kept an eye on Merton Place, where more work was in hand.



*Merton Place
Nelson's hatchment hangs on the front.*

Nelson, appointed Vice-Admiral of the White (his final rank) in April 1804, was now, month after month, chasing and trying to outwit the French Admiral Villeneuve in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. He sent loving letters to Emma, and tender messages for Horatia, while Emma was enjoying herself and running up ever more debts in London and in Merton.

‘The 25 days’

Finally Nelson obtained leave to return home briefly. He arrived at Merton at 6 am on Tuesday 20 August 1805. Emma had hastily collected Horatia and Nelson’s family the day before, and was ready to greet him. Between visits to town to the Admiralty, the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister, Nelson filled these precious days with family parties, visiting and receiving friends, settling bills and planning for the future. His friend Davison promised to advance the money to pay for the next lot of work at Merton. And he made his gardener Francis Cribb, whose wife was expecting a baby, promise to call it Horatio or Emma (it was Emma), and gave him money for a christening robe. He visited Mr Lancaster’s school, and the boys were given a holiday in his honour.

Trafalgar

So it was from Merton Place that Nelson departed on the evening of Friday 13 September 1805. He hired a chaise, probably from the King’s Head, and arrived at Portsmouth early the following morning. What proved to be his final voyage took him to the seas off Cape Trafalgar, Spain, where on 21 October 1805 the ships under his command in *HMS Victory* decisively defeated a combined French and Spanish fleet, and where he died, shot by a French sniper.

Postscript

It was at Merton on 6 November that Emma received the news of her lover’s death, and at first she was prostrated with grief. But she did recover, and quite soon resumed her pleasure-loving way of life. Both Sir William and Nelson had left her enough money to live comfortably if she chose. But, hospitable and

extravagant, she ran up more and more debts. Merton Place and 28 hectares (70 acres) of the land were hers, and in 1808 she tried, and failed, to sell them. A consortium of friends bought the property, to help her, but still her debts grew. Finally she went abroad, to Calais, where she died in poverty in 1815, aged 49.

The house, which stood empty, never did sell, though parcels of the land were disposed of. In 1823 it was pulled down and the last piece of land sold off. Most of the Wimbledon part of the estate was not developed until late in the 19th century, but much of the Merton part was soon covered with small cheap houses in narrow roads, collectively known as Nelson’s Fields. These have now gone.

Horatia married a clergyman and lived a long and contented life. She is buried at Pinner, where she died aged 80. Lady Nelson, unlike Emma, received a generous government pension. She died in 1831 and is buried at Littleham, near Exmouth.

Some local Nelson ‘myths’

Nelson may have fished the Wandle, the old millpond at Wandlebank, even Waddon Ponds, but there is no record of it. It was Sir William who was the keen angler, but he liked the Thames and the Mole.

It is not known if Nelson watched cricket at Mitcham.

It is very unlikely that he planted any trees in the Merton neighbourhood.

The mounting-block (if that is what it is) near the church gate used to stand outside old Church House opposite, and is nothing to do with Nelson.

The ‘Nelson’ bench in the church may have come from the Merton Place pew.

Nelson and the Hamiltons did not visit Southside House, Wimbledon. This building dates from about 1750 and consisted of two dwellings until it was acquired by the present family well into the 20th century. It does have a Romney portrait of Emma, but it was painted long before she knew Nelson. There is also a child’s cot very like one in a drawing of Horatia.

Further Reading

P Hopkins **A History of Lord Nelson’s Merton Place** Merton Historical Society 1998

This contains much new material, not found in the standard biographies, and corrects some common errors that have appeared in accounts of Nelson’s life at Merton.

Morden Reference Library holds a good collection of works relating to Nelson.

Merton Historical Society has a programme of monthly lectures in the winter and visits in the summer, and welcomes anyone interested in the history of the Borough. Members receive the quarterly *Bulletin*. The Society also publishes a wide range of titles, at discount prices to members. Membership is £7 a year (£1 for students). Membership enquiries: The Membership Secretary, 195 Robertsbridge Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 1 DD. For a list of publications send s.a.e. to The Publications Secretary, 57 Templecombe Way, Morden, Surrey SM4 4JF. All other enquiries: The Secretary, 100 Cannon Hill Lane, London SW20 9ET.