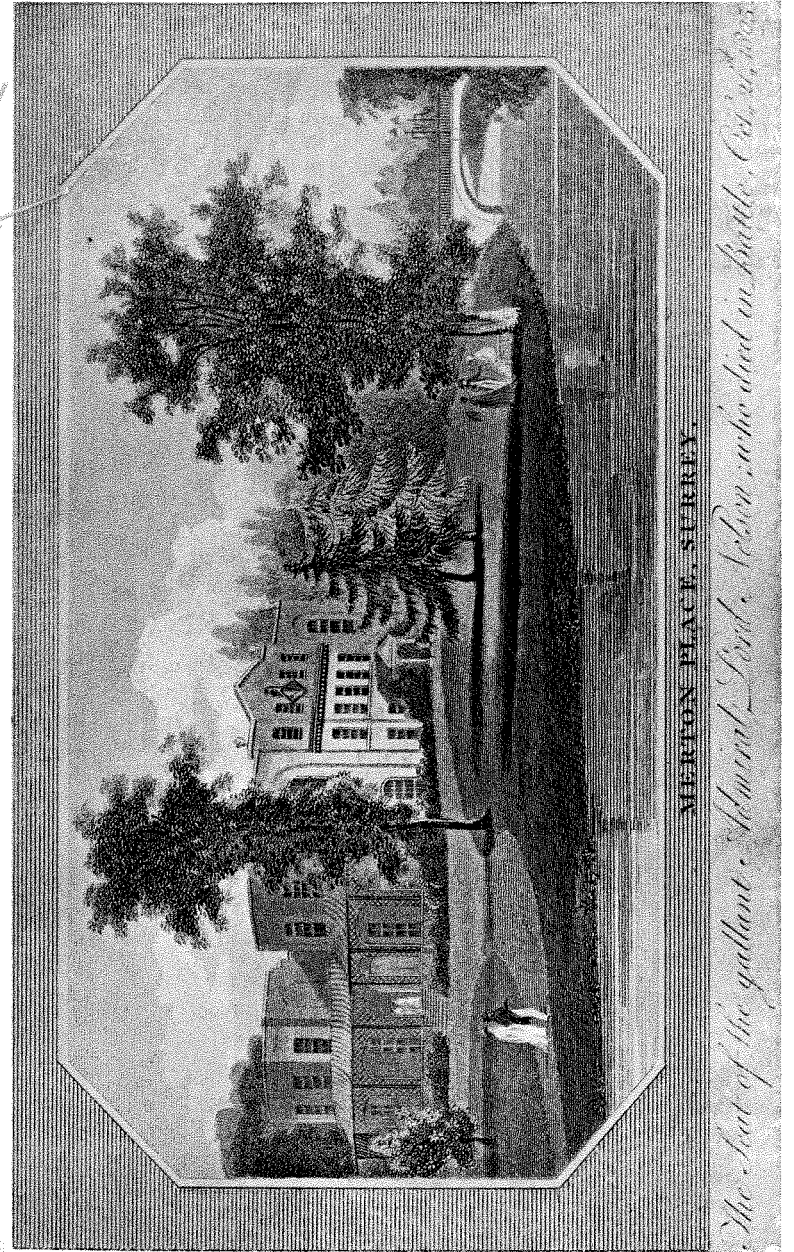


## NELSON'S HOME AT MERTON

**I**N July 1, 1801, Nelson landed at Yarmouth on his return from the Baltic, and spent the next few weeks at Staines, in the company of his friends, Sir William and Lady Hamilton. During this time it was agreed among them that Nelson should buy a house a little way out of town, which, with the Hamilton house in Piccadilly, would establish this remarkable trio with a town and country house at their pleasure. At the end of July, however, Nelson was appointed to command the squadron on the south-east coast, to guard against any possibility of an invasion from Boulogne or its neighbourhood; and being thus unable to attend personally to the business of house-buying, he deputed Emma—Lady Hamilton—to manage it for him. Sir William Hamilton was at this time a man rather over seventy, and much older in body and in mind than even seventy would seem to imply. His wife was about forty, and had been exceedingly beautiful, but was now getting very stout, though her face retained much of its former charm. Nelson, it may be added, was forty-three.



Lady Hamilton's first choice of a house was at Turnham Green, as to which Nelson wrote to her on August 4. 'Buy it; I can pay for it.' Finally, however, she fixed on the house at Merton, his ownership of which brings part of Nelson's story into this Magazine. 'Merton Place' was a roomy, comfortable house, dating back apparently to the end of the 17th or beginning of the 18th century, when the land, part of what had once been the estate of Merton Priory, was in the possession of William Hubald, of Stoke, near Guildford, accountant of the Navy Office. Hubald died in 1709, and his property at Merton was bought by Sir William Phippard, at whose death in 1723 it was divided among his children. From them, during the next eighty years, it passed through many hands, and in 1801 Nelson bought the house and about 70 acres of land from a Mr. Greaves for £9,000. On Sept. 15 he sent his agents an order to pay Messrs. Booth & Haselwood £6,000 'in part payment of my purchase of a little farm at Merton.' The rest of the money seems to have been advanced by Nelson's life-long friend, Alexander Davison.

It is difficult—impossible, indeed, without the plans of the estate—to name the boundaries of his 'little farm,' but roughly speaking it seems to have lain within the present Abbey Road on the east, and Morden Road on the west, High Path

on the south, and Quicks Road on the north; the Wimbledon part of it being now cut up by Trafalgar Road, Victory Road, Nelson Road, Hardy Road, Hamilton Road; names by which the modern builder has endeavoured to gild the hideous transformation of what—a hundred years ago—was lovely country. The house itself, having in front an ornamental piece of water, which is sometimes spoken of as a moat, sometimes as a canal, though in reality it was neither, stood near the west end of what is now Reform Place, but farther back, towards Nelson Grove Road; the entrance gate was where now stands the 'Nelson Arms' public house; and opposite to this, on the north side of the road, were the stables. Under the road a subway connected the garden immediately round the house with the shrubbery and pleasure grounds to the north. All this is now a thing of the past. The house has long since been pulled down, the garden and grounds built over and the moat filled up. Forty years ago—according to Bartlett's History of Wimbledon—some part of this remained as a pond behind the shop of Mr. Corke, butcher, of 61, High Street; but the building operations had probably stopped some natural drainage; it became stagnant and offensive, and had to be filled up. The well which supplied the house with excellent water is in Mr. Corke's yard. He tells me that he

has known the place since 1845; that he was shown the foundations of the house by a man, Saker, who had been Lady Hamilton's servant, whom he knew very well fifty years ago, and who had many stories about the great master of the house. The subway was still open within Mr. Corke's knowledge, and he has often been through it. Now all is gone. Apparently Mr. Corke's pump, or rather the well from which the pump draws the water, is the only vestige of Merton Place that remains.

By the end of September, Nelson was getting impatient to have everything settled. On the 28th he wrote to Lady Hamilton:—

'Pray write me where I am to direct my letters to Merton; is it a post-town? or are the letters sent from the General Post Office? I wish I could see the place, but I fear that is impossible at present; and if I could, you would not perhaps think it right for me to come, now Sir William is away. I entreat I may never hear about the expenses again; if you live in Piccadilly or Merton, it makes no difference, and if I was to live at Merton I must keep a table, and nothing can cost me one-sixth part what it does at present.'

And the next day, the 29th, he wrote again:—

'I send by the coach a little parcel containing the keys of the plate chest and the case of the tea-urn, and there is a case of Colebrook Dale breakfast set, and some other things. Will you have your picture carried to Merton? I should wish it, and mine of

the Battle of the Nile. I think you had better *not* have Sir William's books, or anything but what is my own. I have sent in the parcel by the coach this day, two salt cellars and two ladles, which will make four of each, as two are in the chest. You will also find spoons and forks sufficient for the present. If sheets are wanting for the beds, will you order some and let me have the bill. I also think that not a servant of Sir William's, I mean the cook, should be in the house; but I leave this and all other matters to your good management. Would to God I could come and take up my abode there, and if such a thing should happen that I go abroad, I can, under my hand, lend you the house, that no person can molest you; not that I have at present any idea of going anywhere but to Merton.'

Much of Nelson's correspondence at this time is to the same effect. On October 2 he wrote—still to Lady Hamilton :—

'I am sorry the lawyers should have been the cause of keeping you one moment from Merton. . . . I trust to your economy, for I have need of it. To you I may say my soul is too big for my purse, but I do earnestly request that all may be mine in the house, even to a pair of sheets, towels, etc. . . . I hope you are at this moment fixed. Damn the lawyers.'

The difficulties or delays were presently overcome, and on October 16 Sir William Hamilton wrote to Nelson :—

'We have now inhabited your Lordship's premises some days, and I can now speak with some certainty. I have lived with our dear Emma several years; I know her merit; have a great opinion of the head

and heart that God Almighty has been pleased to give her; but a seaman alone could have given a fine woman power to choose and fit up a residence for him without seeing it himself. You are in luck; for on my conscience, I verily believe that a place so suitable to your views could not have been found, and at so cheap a rate; for if you stay away three days longer, I do not think you can have any wish but you will find it completed here. And then the bargain was fortunately struck three days before an idea of peace got abroad. Now every estate in the neighbourhood has increased in value, and you might get a thousand pounds to-morrow for your bargain. The proximity to the capital and the perfect retirement of this place are, for your Lordship, two points beyond estimation; but this house is so comfortable, the furniture clean and good, and I never saw so many conveniences united in so small a compass. You have nothing but to come and enjoy immediately; you have a good mile of pleasant dry walk around your own farm. It would make you laugh to see Emma and her mother fitting up pig-styes and hen-coops, and already the canal is enlivened with ducks, and the cock is strutting with his hens about the walks. Your plan as to stocking the canal with fish is exactly mine. I will answer for it that in a few months you may command a good dish of fish at a moment's warning. Every fish of any size has been taken away, even after the bargain was made.'

To this house and the society of his dear friends Nelson repaired on October 22, as soon, that is, as he could get relieved from his duties in the Downs; and here, with one or two slight

breaks, he remained for the next eighteen months—till May, 1803—when the renewal of the war called him to the command of the Mediterranean fleet. During this time his chief amusement seems to have been the planning and directing improvements or—at any rate—alterations in the house and grounds. Writing from the information which he got first hand from Saker, Bartlett says :—

‘The house was roomy, not magnificent. Plenty of glass and light seemed to be the predominant taste of one who had spent much of his life in the open-air. Glass doors in front and a long passage with glass doors opening into the lawn behind, and even plate-glass reflecting doors to some of the principal rooms, must have thrown an appearance of lightness about the interior. . . . The grounds extended into Wimbledon parish to the fields opposite the present [in 1865] Waterloo and Somerset Villas, and from the present High Street, Merton, to the Quicks was a shrubbery with some fine specimens of yew trees. On the small mound in the paddock opposite Waterloo Villas was a rustic seat where the hero would enjoy the quiet prospect of what was then fresh, unbroken country; and when fancy dictated, he would take his rod and stroll down to the Wandle, where, undisturbed by passers by, he might take a good basket of fish; and then, perhaps, turn in for a chat with Mr. Perry of Wandlebank House [editor and proprietor of the ‘Morning Chronicle,’] with whom he maintained a hearty friendship whilst they lived as neighbours.’

This is a view from the outside, pleasant and wholesome, descriptive of the kind of country life which has always such charms to a sailor retired from the sea. The inside view is not so pleasant. We have it in a letter from Sir Gilbert Elliot, the future Governor-General of India and Earl of Minto, dated Monday, March 22, 1802 :—

‘I went to Lord Nelson’s on Saturday to dinner, and returned to-day in the forenoon. The whole establishment and way of life is such as to make me angry as well as melancholy, but I cannot alter it, and I do not think myself obliged or at liberty to quarrel with him for his weakness, though nothing shall ever induce me to give the smallest countenance to Lady Hamilton. She looks ultimately to the chances of marriage, as Sir William will not be long in her way, and she probably indulges a hope that she may survive Lady Nelson. In the meanwhile she and Sir William and the whole set of them are living with him, at his expense. She is in high looks, but more immense than ever. She goes on cramming Nelson with trowelfuls of flattery, which he goes on taking as quietly as a child does pap. The love she makes to him is not only ridiculous but disgusting; not only the rooms, but the whole house, staircase and all, are covered with nothing but pictures of her and him, of all sizes and sorts, and representations of his naval actions, coats of arms, pieces of plate in his honour, the flagstaff of *l’Orient*, etc., an excess of vanity which counteracts its own purpose.’

In one point as to which Sir Gilbert Elliot could merely write his impression, he was in error.

The expenses of the housekeeping were equally divided between Nelson and the Hamiltons; the accounts have been preserved, and are in themselves curious, not only for the amount, but for their very great variation. Not counting wine, coal, servants' wages, or indeed anything beyond what is ordinarily understood as housekeeping, we have—

				£	s.	d.
For the week ending	October	4,	1802	66	7	1½
"	"	October	11,	"	117	8 2½
"	"	October	18,	"	34	10 4
"	"	November	1,	"	37	16 10½
"	"	November	8,	"	73	0 2

and so on; an average of about £66, or £3,400 a year for housekeeping alone for three persons, one an old man longing for quiet, and one a man of frugal habits. The enormous expenditure was incurred solely for the gratification of Emma, who could not live without social excitement. Twelve, fourteen or more to dinner every day, and as the guests came from London, they staid the night and to breakfast. The expenditure for wines, liqueurs, etc., was on a corresponding scale, and indeed, looking down the bills the only item that strikes one as moderate is the 'washing,' which stands at about five shillings a week. Hamilton indeed grumbled at the bills, but it does not seem to have occurred to him that as Nelson was one, and they were two, equal division was not

a proper proportion, to say nothing of the fact of the expenditure so largely being incurred by and for Emma.

A month after Elliot's visit, Nelson's father died, an old man close on eighty. The relations between the two had always been most affectionate; but Lady Nelson had constituted herself the father's nurse and companion, and her husband absolutely refused to meet her; he did not even go to the funeral. A year later, April 6, 1803, Sir William Hamilton died; but the imminence of active service was already occupying Nelson's mind, and by the middle of May he was on board the *Victory* and away to the Mediterranean, leaving Lady Hamilton mistress of Merton, with an allowance from him of £1,200 a year, in addition to an annuity of £800 which she inherited from her husband. Of the details of her life, or the manner of it during the next two years and more, while Nelson was absent, we know nothing; we only know that in this short time, with an income of £2,000 a year, and living rent free, she contrived to incur debts to the amount of about £7,000, whether by gambling, feasting, entertainments, or general social dissipation. Nelson, of course, knew nothing of this, and pictured her as longing for his return as eagerly as he was longing to be again with her. That happiness came to him after his return from the West Indies.

It was August 21, 1805, when he reached Merton, and there he stayed till September 13.

Every life of Nelson tells how Captain Blackwood, sent home with the news that the French fleet had gone to Cadiz, called at Merton in the early morning of September 2. Nelson accompanied him to the Admiralty, and it was at once settled—as, indeed, had been previously arranged—that he was to resume the command. Afterwards, when Lady Hamilton was trying to get a pension from the Government for many important services which she had *not* rendered, she launched abroad one more group of lies, to the effect that Nelson was unwilling to go, and in fact was forming the determination not to go, but yielded to her representations, exclaiming, ‘If there were more Emmas there would be more Nelsons.’ That Nelson was loth to depart from the object of his idolatry may be freely conceded; that he had one moment’s hesitation about obeying the call of duty and honour is false, not only to all historical evidence, but to everything that we know of Nelson and Nelson’s character. So he went; his glorious death, purging his fame and his memory of the shadows which civil life had thrown over them, is part of the history of England.

By his will he left the Merton estate, with the house and furniture, valued at from £12,000

to £14,000, to Lady Hamilton, together with an annuity of £500 and a capital sum of £2,000. This, together with what she had inherited from her husband, seemed to represent a very handsome income; but the debts which she had already incurred made a serious hole in the property; and her one idea, now that she was her own mistress, with plenty of money, was to have a grand flare up. Within three years she had run through the whole. Her manner of proceeding is related by Mr. Scott, who, as chaplain of the *Victory* and Nelson’s private secretary, was on terms of some familiarity with her.

[A friend]—it does not appear certainly that it was Scott himself, though it is probable—‘was one day hailed from a carriage window in London by the voice of a lady whom he recognized as Lady Hamilton, who immediately requested him to return home with her to dinner. He pleaded an engagement, but was obliged to promise to visit Merton the following day. He had no expectation of meeting any company, and was therefore not a little astonished on his arrival to find what guests were assembled. Signor Rovedino and Mme. Bianchi, with other birds of the same feather, were regaled by her ladyship on this occasion with a sumptuous dinner, and after the ladies retired, the superb wines of the Merton cellars, gifts of crowned heads, etc., were liberally dispensed by Rovedino as master of the ceremonies. [The friend] . . . was in the garden next morning long before the breakfast hour, and was joined there

by Lady Hamilton, with whom he ventured to remonstrate on the mode of life she was pursuing, and the company she had treated him with. She attempted to justify herself by saying that it was a less expensive plan than taking Horatia to town for singing and Italian lessons. Her friend, however, would not admit her excuse, and at length extorted the sorrowful confession that her affairs were already in a state of grievous embarrassment.'

The story of Lady Hamilton's financial ruin and death is not to be told here. It is sufficient to say that about three years after Nelson's death the demands of her creditors forced her to sell the Merton estate. By that sale it passed out of touch with Nelson, and disappeared into the wilderness of bricks and mortar which at present cover it—cover the shrubbery, cover the site of that paddock and the small mound on which Nelson was wont to sit.

J. K. LAUGHTON.

## SOME NOTES ON WIMBLEDON AT THE ACCESSION OF QUEEN VICTORIA

**TO** look back for nearly seventy years is to pass in review the progress of our country during the period of its most rapid development. And not least is this progress noticeable in the growth of many a small hamlet or village to a town of considerable importance.

Almost a part of the great Metropolis itself, and having a population of more than 42,000, Wimbledon to-day is barely recognizable when compared with the little village when Victoria began her illustrious reign.

In 1837 the population of Wimbledon was said to be about 2,000, distributed in High Street, Church Road, South and West sides of Common, Crooked Billet as far as Woodhays and Lord Cottenham's at Copse Hill, West Place, South Place, a cluster of cottages and dairymen's houses where the Spencer Dairy buildings now stand, a few houses in Durnsford Road, and also a few near