



People News

Orcheston St. George

JAMES HARRIS

And Social Life in Salisbury

By J.P. Farrard

During the relatively peaceful political times of the 18th century and the prosperity that increasing trade had brought, for the first time cultural and social events became organised and familiar events in Salisbury. Wiltshire had a prominent and wealthy aristocracy, who looked to the county town as a place to meet, and as a place for “genteel amusement.” An edition of the Salisbury Guide late in the century spoke in praise of the amenities available. There were several coffee houses, the most notable being the Parade Coffee House in Blue Boar Row, which was bought by subscription in 1770 to make a new Concert and Assembly room, at a cost of £5,000. Two Assembly Balls were held in the winter, one supported by the City and the other by the Close and until 1777, when a theatre was built in New Street, travelling companies would perform at the Vine Inn in the Cheese Market. A catch club was held at the Spread Eagle Inn in the High Street every Tuesday evening in winter and at the Maidenhead Inn there was a social club for men and women, with “cards and conversation and supper later at members’ houses.” The annual races were a big social event and on the last night there was a ball in the Assembly Rooms. Since 1730 fortnightly concerts had been held and a grand musical festival was held annually in honour of St. Cecilia. It was probably the most popular and widely attended event of all and the man primarily responsible for its organisation was James Harris, who lived at Malmesbury House in the Close.

For nearly fifty years Harris was the central figure in these activities and in the august and beautiful surroundings of his Queen Anne house, he held social and musical evenings and helped “by his conversation and company he entertained, to refine and improve the taste and manners of the place in which he resided.” Hatcher in his volume on Salisbury had much to say in praise for him, as an “enlightened Christian, a man of letters and polished gentleman, who influenced the manners, habits and in some degree the sentiments of the community and shed a lustre over his native city.”

He was born in the Close in July, 1709, the eldest son of James Harris and his second wife, Lady Elizabeth Ashley, daughter of the Earl of Shaftesbury. The family was of Wiltshire origin, being descended from a Mr. Harris living in the small village of Orcheston St. George, and his father was well-known in

Salisbury as a businessman. Harris received his initial education under Mr. Hele at the Grammar School in the Close and when he was 16 he entered Wadham College, Oxford, as a gentleman commoner. His father later sent him to Lincoln's Inn not to read law but merely to conclude his education. He remained in London until 1733 when his father died and he inherited an independent fortune which enabled him to retire to Salisbury and pursue his first love, classical study. He lived in the Close until his death in 1780 and during his long residence dominated the social life of the city, particularly the musical activities, as well as establishing himself as an eminent scholar and copious writer on classical authors. This son, the Earl of Malmesbury, said that he frequently rose in winter at 4 or 5 in the morning, so that "he could insure a command of time to himself" and for many years re-enquired deeply into the Greek philosophy, aiming to facilitate and promote the passages of ancient writers. His most noted work was *Hermes* a treatise on grammar published in 1751 and praised in one quarter as "the most beautiful example of analysis since the days of Aristotle."

In local affairs Harris was a county magistrate, acting, we are told, "regularly and assiduously and displaying a manly spirit and firmness," and in 1761, helped no doubt by this position and his connections, he was elected to sit as Member of Parliament for Christchurch. He was later appointed Lord of the Treasury and a Lord of the Admiralty but still managed to spend time in Salisbury or his house in Durnford, "His marriage in 1745 to Elizabeth Clark, daughter and heiress of John Clark, a Somerset businessman, produced five children, two of which died young and a son and two daughters who survived him and his son wrote that "his time was divided between care of his family in which he placed his chief happiness, his literary pursuits and the society of his friends and neighbours, with whom he kept up a constant and cheerful intercourse."

He frequently entertained, mainly those who were "distinguished by intelligence and refinement" and his most important guest was the Duke of York, who attended the Concert in the Assembly Rooms in 1761. He was a close friend of Handel, who gave his first concert in this country in the room above the St. Anne's Gate, which was attached to Harris's house and was the frequent scene of concerts and theatrical productions. At the annual music festival and the subscription concerts, either held here or at the assembly Rooms, selections from the best Italian and German composers were played. Sometimes they were adapted by Harris to selected words from scripture or from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and occasionally his own compositions were played. He formed a small drama group, consisting of his daughters and their female friends among the country aristocracy and their productions were attended by all who "constituted the fashionable society of Salisbury and vicinity." The *Salisbury Journal*, founded in 1729, gives details of one such evening in October 1776, "several of the young ladies of this place performed in a theatre prepared for them in Mr. Harris's house in the Close, the Tragedy of the Earl of Warwick and the musical entertainment of *Cymon and Sylvia* . . . their acting and singing, as well as the taste, elegance and variety of their dresses have been justly admired by the first people of quality, rank and fashion."

Four years later Harris died in his 72nd year and was buried in the north aisle of the Cathedral, the home of so much good singing and music. Johnson was prompted by his death to write that he thought him "a prig and a bad prig" but perhaps his judgement is a little hard. Although after his death quarrels among the managers of the Assembly Rooms and alterations to the Cathedral prevented regular concerts, the foundations had been laid and Salisbury had achieved a reputation for good music that it has never lost. In the middle of the century his place was taken by William Aylward, who owned a piano and music shop in New Canal, who organised subscription concerts and brass-band playing in the Market Place in the summer. He founded a local philharmonic society and in 1885 his daughter, who herself played the piano, organised a series of Chamber Concerts. The *Salisbury Journal* has frequent reference to the Concerts held, ranging from a Viennese Ladies Orchestra to Ethiopian Harmonists, who in 1847 gave a concert on "bones, banjo, tambourini and violins." The theatre in New Street continued until 1871 and was the scene of many notable productions, ranging from the concert commemoration of Nelson's Victory at the Nile in 1798 to the popular comedy, farce and tragedy programmes held three times a week. In 1808 John Vanderhoff, son of a Salisbury dyer, later to achieve greater fame in London, appeared as Osmond in "The Castle Sceptre" and in 1836 Robert Wyndham paid the manager £20 to play Norval in "Douglas." After 1871 visiting companies performed at Hamilton Hall and at the Assembly Rooms, occasions much anticipated by the local population.

Today Salisbury has a flourishing Rep Theatre, with a resident company and its musical tradition is maintained at the Cathedral and by the local music society, with its winter concerts. This year Salisbury is host to the Southern Cathedrals' Festival, at which choirs from Chichester and Winchester will sing at the Cathedral and for the first time Salisbury will be having a festival of Arts, containing drama, ballet, opera, music and singing. It seems the culmination of a great development and tradition and its originator, James Harris, would I'm sure loved to have been here now.