

Trip to London

JOHN GURNEY and Elizabeth set off for London on a bright, frosty morning. There was a tearful farewell with the six remaining sisters bustling into the hall to watch as their sister waved from the chaise. It was their first major separation and as Elizabeth wistfully reminded herself, they were ‘sisters formed after my own heart’.

In no time the excitement of travel took over and her spirits restored. The chaise bumped along over the frosty ruts but it was well-sprung and cushioned so the occupants were comfortable. It was lined with fawn-coloured watered silk and contained large pockets for books, drinks and snacks. The carpet-covered steps were folded up inside the carriage. Elizabeth and her father and a companion were well wrapped up with a warm sheepskin rug over their feet which rested on tins of hot water. Elizabeth used a mitten occasionally to rub away the condensation on the inside of the window and looked out at the wintery scene. She saw bare trees with a bud here and there, flocks of birds grubbing for feed in the fields while hints of green appeared in the hedgerows promising the appearance soon of spring and a transformation of the landscape.

Soon it was time to stop and rest. They had arrived at the White Hart Inn at Thetford. Here their own horses would be rested and fed and for the remainder of the journey they would hire both horses and armed postilions. But first a welcome stretch in front of a roaring fire. The low-ceilinged parlour was bright with candles and firelight. Elizabeth and her father enjoyed their cheerful tete-a-tete meal of broiled chicken, a plover, a plate of sturgeon, tart, mince-pies and jellies – all for the princely sum of eighteen-pence a head. They drank beer with their meal and then had coffee by the fire.

As he watched his daughter's lithe grace while she carefully brought over the brimming coffee cup, John Gurney was filled with admiration and pride. Her flaxen hair was parted simply on the brow and arranged in a high knot behind. Muff, cloak and poke bonnet put aside, she wore a simple white muslin dress cut low in the neck, with a pale blue sash running under the armpits. It was a fashion unsuited to the billowing outlines of middle age, or to the angular, flat-chested woman, but ideal for enhancing the beauty of rounded, long-limbed, supple youth.

They were a striking pair. His red hair was hardly touched with grey and his handsome figure was well set off by the current fashion of knee-breeches and stockings, light waistcoat, dark buff tail-coat, and a high white stock, camouflaging any signs of a double chin. He smiled at his daughter then gazed thoughtfully into the glow of the fire. He had more than one iron in the fire on this trip to London. He was secretly of the opinion that if a young person of either sex of a certain age showed signs of serious disturbance, marriage was the best remedy. And watching Elizabeth now, her features enhanced by the firelight, he told himself with fatherly pride that she was eminently marriageable.

Relaxing now, replete and becoming sleepy, he talked to Elizabeth, as he often did, about her mother remembering the dark beauty he married for love [she had no dowry] and whose magical Gainsborough's canvas would keep forever young. Before long, the dreamy talk and the warmth and food had their effect. Gurney lit a candle for his daughter and Elizabeth said goodnight and went upstairs to lavender-scented sheets made snug with a warming-pan.

‘My father has been truly kind to me as he always is, but sometimes a little attention from him is quite delightful, he does it in so nice a way.’

The following day they passed numerous towns and villages and more travellers upon the road until at last, just as the sun set and the rain started, they entered the hurly-burly of London. The lamplighters were doing their rounds, running quickly up and down the ladders and lighting the oil-lamps which made London the best-lit, as it was the best-paved, city in Europe. All the main thoroughfares were flagged and had kerbs. The side-streets were paved with cobblestones but unlike the main streets had no sewers with gratings as outlets for the rain. The sedan-chair men were plying a lively trade and a few sturdy women clicked past stiffly on pattens – shoes or clogs with either raised soles or set on an iron ring for walking in the rain or mud.

The Gurneys were welcomed by Cousin Barclay in his solid and comfortable mansion where warmth and food lessened the strangeness of arrival for shy Elizabeth. Later she fell asleep to the unfamiliar cry of the watch – ‘Ten o'clock! Ten o'clock of a cold, wet night and all's well!’

The following morning, John Gurney left on business and for the first time Elizabeth found herself out on her own with just her maid as a companion. London in 1798 was a strange

mixture of elegance and violence. Manners were elaborate and polished but morals could be crude and loose. It was a city of dandies, wits and bluestockings, and the three famous clubs – Brook's, White's and Boodle's. Fashion was led by the Prince of Wales who, because of George III's poor health, became Regent. His friends were the playwright Sheridan and politician Charles James Fox. Beau Brummell, that fashion icon of simple birth, was using his extraordinary social daring to rise to such heights that he could censor the fashion sense of royalty. Brummell's views on the tying of a neck stock or the placing of a button, created an artificial world of comforting trifles for the prince and his circle in which the guns of the French sounded unimportant and the intimate horrors of the Irish rebellion seemed far away.

The King was a man of relatively simple tastes and his prime minister, William Pitt, was austere in his conduct and devotion to his country. War with France was sinking the country deeper into debt and prices were rising daily. But neither the King's example of sobriety nor fear of national disaster could check the extravagance of society.

The turf and the ring were popular. A government lottery encouraged the gambling spirit among the very poor. Cockfighting and bull-baiting were outlets for heavy betting and for the lust of cruelty present in the brutalised, uneducated and underfed lower classes of the time.

Everywhere there was evidence of cruelty and violence. The stocks and the pillory, public hangings and whippings were instruments of order. Both the Army and Navy were notorious for brutal punishments, and harmless men in the lower ranks of life were liable to be kidnapped by their press-gangs.

There were neither factory laws nor trade unions and the industrial revolution was creating its own problems. Long

hours, low wages, rising prices and illiteracy were making life miserable for working people who were reduced to a wretched level of existence from which drunkenness was the only relief. Child labour was widespread and both children and adults often worked twelve hours a day in the factories or down the mines. Gin shops in London openly invited people to 'get drunk for a penny, dead drunk for tuppence'. Workhouses, where the poor and destitute got board and lodging in return for work done, and the debtors' prisons, were filled to capacity.

The wealthy appeared unaware of this misery, or ignored it, still sheltered and protected from life's harsh realities although gradually this was changing. Rarely a word of this misery was mentioned in the introspective personal diaries of the time. Poverty meant keeping three servants or less. Even the poets and writers preferred more pleasing subject matter although the words of some, Blake, Wordsworth and others were beginning to penetrate the euphoria.

London for Elizabeth meant social exploration and gaiety. Advised by her fashionable relatives she went to theatres, dances, dinners, routs [large evening parties] and receptions. She had always been fond of dress and it proved impossible not to make fashion a study. Ah, vanity! Make-up was the fashion and Elizabeth submitted to it adding a little powder and rouge. Her mirror approved:

'I looked quite pretty, for me!' But to have her hair done in the fashionable Grecian mop of curls with a tall plume or bunch of feathers in front, proved too much. 'My hair was dressed and I felt like a monkey.'

She loved to dance, particularly lively, spirited square dances, but she was shy and her partners were strangers so it was not

as much fun as at home. And she was shocked by the banality of conversation at evening receptions. To what purpose all this crowding together and exchange of sharp glances and quite meaningless remarks? Even the theatre, never her favourite, was a sad disappointment. Drury Lane and Covent Garden, Hamlet and Bluebeard, received casual mention in her diary. She gazed at the hollow glitter of eighteenth century drama with her serious, sincere young eyes and found herself unimpressed.

‘I must own I was extremely disappointed. I had no other feeling when there than that of wishing it over...’

However, there was one evening which thrilled her to the core. She loved music and was always enthralled by glittering company so the evening she spent at the opera with her childhood friend, the writer Amelia Alderson and her fiancé, the painter John Opie, was magical. The combination of excellent music and amusing company quite bowled her over – and she was fascinated by a close view of the Prince of Wales. Perhaps it was exciting because with Amelia and John she entered a more glittering circle than when with her Quaker cousins. With her impending marriage, Amelia’s days were a bustle of writing, preparations for the wedding and forthcoming domesticity, and social engagements. Elizabeth was caught briefly in this current, swept along and left again upon the shore.

It was something of a relief to spend a fortnight with her old friends, the Hoares, the family of Sam, Louisa’s beau. Their home at Hampstead was cheerful and opulent. Its large gardens were bright with crocuses under the bare branches which swayed in the March wind and cast shadows across spectacular views of London. For Elizabeth, it was a second home, familiar and jolly, and reminded her of life at Earham. The parties of

young people, cousins and close friends who gathered for her entertainment were just the sort that she was used to and she made many new acquaintances and several good friends. One was a dark-eyed girl of her own age, Hester Savory who, despite the change in family name spelling, was related to William Savery and whose family were the American visitor's principal hosts.

There were admirers too. Principally cousin Hudson Gurney, an attractive man older than Elizabeth with an air of confidence and maturity which appealed to her. The attentions of the duller Frederick Bevan she did not encourage. On her return to the home of Uncle Barclay she begged for a return visit to the opera. It was wonderful, she recalled, when people in the dazzling crowd around her were paying and receiving visits between acts, to have Hudson Gurney approach with the self-possession of a man of the world.

'I was charmed to see him: I was most merry.'
Later she commented: 'I got out of the carriage before we got to the gates and met Hudson. It gave me quite a glow to see him. How very much I do like him, I think I would do anything to make Hudson happy...I always feel so much confidence in him.'

Occasional meetings with William Savery at both Meeting and private homes had, as she anticipated, prevented her from being too fond of gaieties. London was not all glittering company and fun and once again she fell under Savery's spell.

'May I never forget the impression William Savery has made on my mind. As much as I can say is, I thank God for having sent at least a glimmering of light through him into my heart,

which I hope with care and keeping it from the many draughts and winds of this life, may not be blown out, but become a large, brilliant flame.'

He was by now quite aware of his young admirer, his 'dear E.G.' She recalled, after hearing him speak at Westminster Meeting:

'He said the Deist and those who did not feel devotion looked at Nature, admired the thunder, the lightning and earthquakes as curiosities; but they looked not up through them to Nature's God... How well he hits the state I have been in.' She hoped she would never lose the little religion she had found. 'But if I cannot feel religion and devotion, I must not despair; for if I am truly warm and earnest in the cause, it will come one day... I feel there is a God and immortality, happy, happy thought. May it never leave me; and if it should, may I remember I have felt there is a God and immortality'.

Soon the time came to return home. Father, daughter and companion resumed their places in the chaise and rattled home to Earlham through the opalescent landscape of mid-April. The experiment was over and unknown to Elizabeth and her father it would have a major impact on her future.