

THE CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH

Emma Hamilton: England's friend



This year, 2015, is the two hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo; a defining moment in European history. It is also the 250th anniversary of the birth of Emma Hamilton and by an eerie coincidence the 200th anniversary of her death as well. Her eventful lifetime coincided with the Golden Age of the Royal Navy and straddled

the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Moreover, she died only a few months before the Battle of Waterloo, after which the world would never be the same again. She was one of the most famous daughters of her age. Her relationship with Horatio Nelson changed both their lives and reputations and secured her fame and notoriety. Nonetheless, she would have still been famous without him.

Emma (born Emily) Lyon, the daughter of a blacksmith on the Wirral peninsula, made wonderful use of her undoubted good looks and 'natural genius'⁷⁶ to further her station in life. She became first servant and then mistress to a number of gentlemen, including Charles Greville, Sir William Hamilton's nephew, until a contemptible arrangement between the two men saw her traded and packed off to Naples in 1786, aged 21. She duly became Sir William's mistress and, less predictably, in 1791, his wife.

As a consequence of her beauty, Emma was celebrated before Nelson met her. The portraitist George Romney painted her more than fifty times, and her 'attitudes' or *tableaux vivants* portraying classical mythology were a highlight of the Grand Tour. Goethe was among those captivated by her exotic and sensual talent.

The attraction between Nelson and Emma was not instantaneous. At first Nelson was simply bemused. He wrote to his wife Fanny that when Emma first came aboard *Vanguard* with the king and queen, clad à la Nelson with a dress embroidered with anchors, she immediately 'fell into my arms more dead than alive. Tears however soon set matters to rights . . . the scene was in its way affecting'.

Nevertheless, like Nelson, Emma was impetuous and impulsively affectionate. It is hardly surprising that in the heady atmosphere of adulation after the Battle of the Nile they fell for one another. She praised him. She nursed him back to health. She gave him emotional support. They shared danger together. In December 1798, during the evacuation of the royal family to Palermo, when a great storm made everyone seasick or terrified, Nelson was moved by the calm and courageous way Emma dispensed help and, in particular, how she cared for Queen Carolina's youngest child, who died in her arms. This was the moment

that melted his heart. At last in January 1800, during a cruise to Malta, they slept together. Writing exactly one year later, Nelson exclaimed, 'Ah! Those were happy times; days of ease and nights of pleasure.' Of the three children Nelson and Emma had together, twin girls were born in January 1801 and another girl in December 1803. Only one of the children, Horatia, survived.

Nelson had never experienced anything like the intimate pleasures he now enjoyed with Emma; "What must be my sensations at the idea of sleeping with you! It sets me on fire." This was not through innocence, since he had already had at least one mistress whilst married to Fanny – a far-from-secret relationship with Adelaide Correggia, an opera singer in Leghorn, who was described by Thomas Fremantle as Nelson's 'dolly'. But physical relations with Emma were very different from those he experienced with Fanny. Letters to his 'beloved Emma' convey his intoxication. In 1800 he wrote:

Separated from all I hold dear in this world what is the use of living if indeed such an existence can be called so. No separation, no time, my only beloved Emma, can alter my love and affection for you . . . it only remains for us to regret which I do with the bitterest anguish that there are any obstacles to our being united in the closest ties of this world's rigid rules, as we are in those of real love. Continue only to love your faithful Nelson as he loves his Emma. You are my guide I submit to you, let me find all my fond heart hopes and wishes with the risk of my life. I have been faithful to my word never to partake of any amusement: or sleep on shore.

Writing five years later, in March 1805, the passion was as powerful as ever:

The ship is just parting and I take the last moment to renew my assurances to my dearest beloved Emma of my eternal love affection and adoration. You are ever with me in Soul, your resemblance is never absent from my mind, and my own dearest Emma I hope very soon that I shall embrace the substantial part of you instead of the ideal that will I am sure give us both *real pleasure* and *exquisite happiness*.

Ironically, the lovers were hardly ever alone, since they lived with Sir William in an affable *ménage à trois* until he died in 1803. It also appears that Nelson believed that Fanny would be as accepting of his affair with his 'guardian angel' as Sir William had been. Fanny, however, did not believe in the long-term nature of the relationship. Her last memories of her husband, only two years earlier, had been amongst the happiest of her marriage. Lady Spencer had observed them behaving as if they were newly-weds. Bewildered at the turn of events, Fanny now wrote:

I love him. I would do anything in the world to convince him of my affection. I was truly sensible of my good fortune in having such a husband. Surely I have angered him – it was done unconsciously and without the least intention. I can truly say, my wish, my desire was to please him.

This letter was to Nelson's prize agent and confidant, Alexander Davison. Notwithstanding Davison's reassurance that her husband's ardour for Emma would cool, Fanny forced Nelson to choose between them. Nelson's new daughter, Horatia, may well have been the deciding factor in his decision to stay with Emma, but at the time it troubled his conscience severely.

He agreed to give Fanny a generous financial settlement, providing she agreed never to see him again. She reluctantly accepted his terms but nevertheless remained devoted to him, and to his memory after his death, never allowing a bad word to be said against him. Shortly before she died in 1831, Fanny told her granddaughter, 'When you are older, little Fan, you may know what it is to have a broken heart.'

On 26 April this year The 1805 Club acted as the catalyst for a series of events on the Wirral to celebrate Emmas' birth and extraordinary life. Organised brilliantly by Winston Leese the Club's visit witnessed the unveiling at Neston of the first monument to Emma in the UK and a birthday toast based on the simple epitaph reputed to have been written on the original plain wooden cross marking her grave in Calais – 'Emma Hamilton: England's friend'. While, we cannot be certain of the exact day of her birthday, Nelson always celebrated it on 26 April. Therefore, starting next year on this date, and every year in future, let us all raise a glass to this remarkable women and drink to, 'Emma Hamilton: England's friend'.

**With kind regards and best wishes to you all,
Peter Warwick, Chairman**
