

# Oxfordshire

## HENLEY GALA WEEK JANUARY 1777

### **Account of a Gala Week in the Neighbourhood of Henley-upon-Thames, Oxfordshire, January 1777 (which I wrote of in two letters to Mrs –).**

**December 1776.** But I must take you up no more time, my dear, on other subjects, as we have one in this county at present will furnish out a letter of length sufficient to *tire you*. 'Tis of a play to be performed by Lord Villiers and some company at their house about ten days hence. You know Lady Grandison, his mother, who married Sir Charles Montagu, took Phyllis Court (Oxon) of Mr Freeman some time since. The Villiers live with them, and their house is generally full, and to make it gayer than usual this Christmas they talk'd of performing 'The Provoked Husband', at first, I imagine, intending the audience to be merely their own family; but such interest has been making among people of fashion for admittance, that at present 'tis the sole object of the neighbourhood for miles around ....

... The plan of the week is as follows: Three nights the play is to be perform'ed. The first only as rehearsal, on Saturday the 4th, it being young Mr Hodges' [*of Bolney Court in Harpsden*] birthday, and the day of Mr Hodges' tenants' feast, to whom 'tis supposed 'twill be a high entertainment, and perfect the performers for the grand exhibitions of the Monday and Friday following, when there are to be balls, and supper given by Lord Villiers at the Bell, at Henley, after the plays, and a grand ball at Freeman's [*Fawley Court*] on the Wednesday after the plays. The famous Monsieur Tessier is to perform Pygmalion; if you inquire what theatre, I must inform you a very neat one, fitted up by Lord Villiers at Bowney [*Bolney*] (Mr Hodges') — a barn and coach-house laid together, hung with green baize, the seats the same, scenes from the Brighthelmstone Company, and the whole lighted with wax. It holds 300, so that the number of tickets is given for each night .... Hedley's [*the Bell Inn*], the inn where the balls are to be, is already so fully engaged, that he has bespoke forty private beds in the town; the other great inn [*the Red Lion*], too, entirely bespoke, and every lodging in Henley; fourteen and sixteen guineas given for the three nights. A band of ten musicians have been down at Sir Charles Montagu's these ten days, the best hands from Italy.

**Hardwick, January 13th 1777 [about the same]:** .... On Monday, the 5th, we got there in time, you may be certain ... The house was very soon filled, and you'd hardly imagine such an audience in the country. As the company was nearly the same both nights, I'll set down those I knew to be there on either, tho' there were numbers of fine men behind, whose faces I was not acquainted with. The Duke of Argyle, Lord Frederick Cavendish, Count Brule, the Lords Tyrconnel, Beauchamp, Harrowby, Sefton .... [*the list goes on ...*]

... On the Wednesday, Mr and Miss Pratt, my brother, and ourselves got to Freemans' [*Fawley Court*] a little after eight. So great a crowd, or so fine a house to dispose them in, you don't often see in the country. I need not mention the company, as it was nearly the same as that of Monday night, as they sent cards to all the people of fashion who

were at the play. Their usual eating-room not being large enough, the supper was in the hall .... [the red-damask drawing room] was soon so crowded as to make us return to the saloon. This likewise very soon fill'd, and as the tea was carrying round, one heard from everyone, 'Fine assembly', 'Magnificent house', 'Sure we are in London'. They danc'd in the saloon ... Two card-rooms, the drawing-room, and eating-room. The latter looked so elegant lighted up; two tables at loo [*a card game*], one at quinze, one vingt-une, many whist .... The orgeat, lemonade, capillaire, and red and white negus, with cakes, were carried round the whole evening.

At half an hour after twelve the supper was announced, and the hall doors thrown open .... as you know 'tis so fine a one, and was then illuminated by three hundred colour'd lamps round the six doors, over the chimney, and over the statue at the other end. The tables were a long one down the room ... a most pleasing effect, ornamented with everything in the confectionary way, and festoons and wreaths of artificial flowers prettily disposed; all fruits of the season, as grapes, pines etc; fine wines (Freeman is always famous for); everything conducted with great ease - no bustle. Their servants are particularly clever on these occasions .... Ninety two sat down to supper. .... After supper they return'd to dancing, chiefly then cotillons, till near six.

... The Friday morn Henly town was just like any public place, such different sets of company walking about it. Never before was it so gay, or so much money spent there; provisions rose each day immoderately.

***Extracted from Emily Climenson (ed.), Passages from the Diaries of Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwick House, Oxon, AD 1756 to 1808 (1899), 178-91.***

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