

Nelson at School

Not a great deal is known about the school-days of Nelson. In his own "Memoir" he states: "I was born September 29th, 1758, was sent to the High-school at Norwich, and afterwards removed to North Walsham; from whence I went to sea with my uncle Captain Maurice Suckling."

Apparently he went also for a while to a school for small children at Downham Market where he was remembered by a contemporary, Captain George Manby, who recorded various stories of him. It seems that Nelson usually wore a green coat. Is it significant that the suit we have at the School, reputed to have been worn by Nelson at an early age, is a green one? Of his life at Norwich School no stories seem to be known, but there are several of Nelson at Paston School.

Nelson entered school here, with his brother William, soon after the death of his mother in December, 1767. According to a statement of William, quoted in Clarke and McArthur's "Life of Nelson," first published in 1809, Horatio left here in the March or April of 1771, when, on a cold morning, his father's servant arrived for him with the summons to join the 'Raisable,' captained by his uncle. He had been entered on the books of the ship as a midshipman in January of that year.

Two anecdotes of Nelson are told in many biographies. They probably first appeared in print in the 'Life' quoted above from which the following extracts are taken:

"The Master, the Rev. Mr. Jones, had some remarkably fine pears which his scholars had often wished for; but the attempt to gather them was, in their opinion, so hazardous that no one would undertake it; when Horatio, on seeing all his companions staggered, came forward and offered to brave the danger. He was accordingly one night lowered down from their dormitory by some sheets tied together, and thus, at some considerable risk secured the prize; but the boldness of the deed was all that the young adventurer regarded; for, on being hauled up again, he shared the pears among his schoolfellows, without reserving any for himself; and added, 'I only took them because every other boy was afraid.' Five guineas were offered the next morning to discover the plunderer, but young Nelson was too much beloved for any boy to betray him."

It is recorded that the pear tree was still standing in 1850. Tucker's "Life of Nelson" is embellished with rather crude pictures, one of which is a representation of the young Horatio being lowered from the dormitory window!

“When the brothers, William and Horatio, were once going to school on their ponies, William, who did not much like the journey, having advanced a short distance from his father’s gate and found that a great deal of snow had fallen, returned to the Parsonage with his brother and informed Mr. Nelson ‘That the snow was too deep to venture.’ ‘If that be indeed the case,’ replied the father, ‘you certainly shall not go; but make another attempt, and I will leave it to your honour.’ They accordingly proceeded, and although various difficulties presented themselves, which offered a plausible reason for their return home, Horatio was proof against them all, exclaiming ‘We have no excuse! Remember, brother, it was left to our honour!’

Anecdotes of Nelson soon became widespread in the School. Pettigrew, in his “Memoirs of . . . Nelson,” records that his ‘learned and excellent friend, Mr. Dawson Turner of Yarmouth, was at North Walsham school in 1783, twelve years after Nelson had left it, at which time there were those who had been well acquainted with his schoolfellows, and who delighted in telling anecdotes of Nelson, who had then already risen into notice, and excited interest. They enumerated many of his odd doings and daring tricks. His name was also cut upon one of the seats in the church, but that is now lost.’

The tradition of the brick cut by Nelson with his initials and which is now in the Nelson Room must have grown up at this time. It was known in 1827 to William Rider Haggard, then a pupil here, the father of the novelist, Sir Henry Rider Haggard, and whose memory of it on a visit to the School with his son in 1881 caused the brick to be preserved.

Further memories of Nelson are found in the following: In May, 1801, Nelson wrote to William Earle Bulwer of Heydon, who was at school about 1770 and became the father of the novelist Lord Lytton, a letter in reply to one of his in which he stated ‘I not only remember you most perfectly well at North Walsham but am made happy in this opportunity of receiving a letter from an old schoolfellow.’

Mr. William Loades, who was a pupil here in the last century, wrote to the School a letter published in the fifty-second issue of the *Pastonian* in which he stated that his grandmother, Mrs. Crosswell, formerly Miss Gaze, nursed Nelson through an attack of

measles when he was at school. Mr. Loades records that the old lady used to relate proudly the story to her enthralled grandchildren.

The Headmaster at the period was the Rev. John Price Jones, of whom we get a picture in a letter from Levett Hanson, a contemporary of his, to Nelson. This letter, of which the following is an extract, is interesting because it tells us just where Nelson's desk used to be :

"Your Lordship, though in the second class when I was in the first, was five years my junior, or four at least, and at that period in life such a difference in point of age is considerable. I well remember where you sat in the schoolroom. Your station was against the wall, between the parlour door and the chimney the latter to your right. From 1769 to 1771 we were opposites."

Another master was probably James North who was Usher in 1770. Miss Carola Oman, in her recent 'Life,' states that he also had an elderly French master, known by young tormentors as "Jemmy Moisson," but she does not give the source of her information.

Mrs. Elizabeth Harland, in her guide book to "Norfolk and the Isle of Ely," states that a wreath is, or was, placed annually on the wall above the spot where Nelson sat and that the wreath is made by the boy who sits in Nelson's place. This place is now covered with bookcases. She says her information came from an Old Pastonian, but we do not know anything of this custom and would like information on it.

The final object we have which illustrates Nelson's life here is the pencil-box which remained unknown to the School until it was offered for sale at Messrs. Christie's in 1932, and bought by the School. It had belonged to Nelson's Captain Hardy and had passed to his descendants, one of whom sold it to another person who in turn offered it for sale, whence it came here. The plate fixed to it which states that it was used by "Horatio Nelson at his School at North Walsham, Norfolk, 1770," was probably added by Hardy.

There is in the Berney Library a plethora of lives of, and books referring to, Nelson. From these, and from the School History, the material used in this article has been drawn.

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