

**Personalities.**

The most famous of all Wivenhoe personalities is Sir John Martin Harvey the actor manager. Although only in his youth did he live at Wivenhoe, where his father owned the shipyard, the people regarded him as one of them. They still look upon his career with great pride.

As a boy he spent much of his time at boarding school. This was due to the ill health of his mother. The whole family continually shifting around. Even in Wivenhoe they lived in three houses at various times.

After he had finished his education he was apprenticed to his father at Wivenhoe to become a shipwright. In his autobiography he describes his duties in the draughting room where the work was of little interest to him.

“Distasteful as it all was, these were happy times – times when I would sneak out a little volume of Fénelon’s *Télémaque*, which I kept in a private drawer, and translate it; times when I would paddle out on the river in what I maintained was the smallest craft afloat.<sup>1</sup>

So even then his mind was not on shipbuilding but on the arts and classical learning. He was not interested much in material things. Once he decided to run away but on reflection thought better of it.

Then came a critical point in his life namely his

1      Autobiography of Sir John Martin Harvey



Sir John Martin Harvey's House

estrangement with his father for it soon became obvious that he was not to follow him in his profession.

But his father swallowed his disappointment and did all he could to set him on the road of his chosen calling. Thus he started his career under no other person than Henry Irving who was to become his idol. From then on Harvey spent fourteen years of apprenticeship under Irving – fourteen years of frustration. Later Harvey looked back with bitterness on this period of his life. “As year after year passed away, as in each new production at the Lyceum I was cast with the meanest and most inconspicuous parts, though I had proved my capacity during the provincial tours – as for every step forward, I took four-fifths of a step back, my spirit at times would cry out with the Israelite of old, “How long, oh Lord, how long!”<sup>1</sup> But Harvey had to wait and work hard for many years before even his wildest hopes were fulfilled.

But he had his happy moments especially when he married Miss de Silva. “My wife and I were newly married, we were sharing our work in the art we loved. We were testing our wings in the great leading parts, enormously enlarging our experience and unconsciously preparing the ground for the serious business of management on a large scale; so that when the great opportunity came we were undismayed and toughened to endure”<sup>2</sup>

1 Autobiography of Mr John Martin Harvey  
2 “ “ “ “

82

The only reason that Harvey endured the fourteen years at the Lyceum was that as a school, and as an example of the highest in dramatic art, there was nothing in England to compare with the Lyceum.

Eventually Harvey broke with the Lyceum and started on his own meeting with considerable success as an actor. His first attempts as a manager were not successful financially and only by the help of his friends was he able to carry on. His main reason for his branching out on his own was that he felt the urge to create. He gives an interesting account on when an actor should turn manager. “When an actor has reached a certain point in his development – a certain limit in the opportunities for self-expression which engagements at various theatres have given him, - it seems to me that he must become his own manager.”<sup>1</sup> This is the advice which he passes on to others and can be seen to-day in the work of Sir Laurence Olivier.

Harvey tried hard to form a National Theatre. He collected £1000 to add to the £70,000 which Sir Carl Meyer gave. He tried to inspire wealthy men to follow Sir Carl Meyer’s lead but the funds of the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre did not benefit. It was many years before the theatre materialised.

He also brought new ideas to the stage especially to the problem of poetic drama. His production of Hamlet 1913 was acclaimed a great success. Sir Nigel

1 Autobiography Sir John Martin Harvey

83

Playfair wrote “What delighted me especially was to find that you, with all your inherited traditions, have yet obviously a deep sympathy with the ideas that the younger generation is trying to express and that you have allowed what is best in those ideas to influence you”<sup>1</sup>

These are only a few interesting extracts from Sir John Martin Harvey’s very full life. During that lifetime although overshadowed by people like Irving he brought considerable influence on the dramatic world. His life is best summed up in his own words. “I have enjoyed every moment of my life since I was eighteen. I have been given everything a man can desire. Love of my work, strength to do it, and opportunity to do that which has interested me”<sup>2</sup>

Another Wivenhoe worthy was John Hall a line engraver who was born at Wivenhoe on 21 Dec 1739. Early in life he came to London, and in 1756 he was awarded a premium by the Society of Arts. He was also employed in painting on china in the celebrated works at Chelsea. In 1763 his name appears on the roll of the Free Society of Artists, but in 1766 he subscribed the roll declaration of the Incorporated Society of Artists of Great Britain with whom he continued to exhibit until 1776. In 1785 he was appointed historical engraver to George III in succession to William

1 Autobiography Sir John Martin Harvey  
2 “ “ “ “

Woollett. His most important engravings were after the works of Benjamin West and comprise 'William Penn treating with the Indians for the Province of Pennsylvania', 'The Death of the Duke of Schonberg at the Battle of the Boyne', 'Oliver Cromwell dissolving the Long Parliament' and several others. Besides these he executed several portraits including those of Pope Clement IX, Edward Gibbon, Samuel Johnson and Richard Brinsley Sheridan and smaller portraits for the illustration of books. Hall who ranks as one of the best historical engravers died in 1797.<sup>1</sup>

These first two personalities were men who earned their fame in an unobtrusive way. The next personality is one who reached the headlines of the national papers for his eccentricity. His name was Jack Humphreys and he in the early years of this century spent much time at Wivenhoe experimenting with aeroplanes. His first attempts at flying were made with an aerohydroplane. In the first instances the steering of the plane presented the most difficult problem. In May 1909 "The Standard" published this report. "Mr Jack Humphreys was, however, still undaunted after this third trial, but it was not until the evening of Friday 14<sup>th</sup> May, that the Flier made her next appearance. Large crowds of cyclists had joined the watchers on

1 Dictionary of National Biography

(There is no page 85 in the original copy)

both banks of the river in the hope that this time the hydroplane would really show her paces and leave the water. The alterations to the structure were very noticeable making it much easier to handle. The airboxes alongside the lower plane had been replaced by two small canoes, each carrying a light strong rudder, which were controlled from the pilot's seat, occupied as usual by Jack Humphreys. With its usual shriek the eight-cylinder engine started, followed immediately by a terrific report, which caused the onlookers to think that there had been an accident. This was apparently only some whim of the engine, for it was seen that the long-bladed propeller was whirling furiously, but although the inventor at this stage detached the tug rope so that the plane moved steadily forward, she did not make sufficient speed to leave the water."<sup>1</sup>

Many months went by and little progress was made. All through the experiments there seems to be lacking a scientific mind to organise the project. The workmanship was good supplied by the finest proved engineers in the world. It appears that Humphreys like all eccentrics had to remain the centre of attraction and refused to call on the services of anyone who was likely to steal any of his limelight.

His conceit is shown in the extract from

(2 pages with the same number in the original)

"The Standard". It appears at this stage that the hydroplane was forsaken for a land monoplane for on the 9<sup>th</sup> October 1909 Jack Humphreys sent a telegram to the "Daily Mail" reading "please accept 48 hours notice for a circular mile at Wivenhoe"<sup>1</sup>. This as many will remember, was in response to the offer by that paper of a thousand pounds price for the first circular mile flight in the United Kingdom by an all-British aeroplane driven by a British pilot. This monoplane had an undercarriage built of bamboo and bicycle wheels, and it was fairly obvious that should the machine take to the air the undercarriage would not survive a landing.

Most of the work was hurried due to Humphrey's craving to be the first flier. Changes were made just as his fancy took him. He was strongly criticised for not making a trial flight before competing for the prize, and that he had not chosen a better trial ground.

On Monday 18<sup>th</sup> October 1909 Wivenhoe bade farewell to Humphreys and his machine with mixed blessings. Wivenhoe did not take kindly to a person who financed his experiments from the excessive profits he made in London as a doctor. It must be remembered that the experiments were made primarily for his eagerness to be the first pilot. He was a difficult man to understand for on the

1      The Standard      October 1909

87



Wivenhoe Park

88

evening before he left he addressed a large crowd in the Falcon Yard, not on flying, but on the political situation of the day.

Amongst the celebrated families the de Veres and the Corsellis families have already been mentioned in previous chapters. In this chapter another family bears mention, that of Rebow.

The ancestors of the Rebow family came from the Low Countries as did many other East Anglian families. They held for many years the land of Wivenhoe Park. In 1693 Sir Isaac Rebow was knighted by King William. He was High Steward and Recorder of Colchester. Colchester owes much to him and his father (John). Sir Isaac, being a man of antiquarian instincts, when the old castle at Colchester was sold for the material in its walls, purchased the ruin and prevented further demolition. For this alone he deserves well of his countrymen to the end of time.

The Rebow family provides Wivenhoe's only connection with John Constable, the renowned painter of the district. Constable stayed several times at Wivenhoe Park and painted four landscapes there. One is reproduced at the front of this history. The following extract from the Essex Review shows how important were Constable's connections with Wivenhoe.

89

In a letter dated August 21 1816, Constable mentions a visit to General Rebow at Wivenhoe, the object being to paint the two small landscapes. He says "the General will pay me for them when I please, as he tells me he understand from Mr Driffield that we may soon want a little ready money."<sup>1</sup> This refers to the approaching marriage of Constable which took place on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1816. Wivenhoe thus provided the means for Constable to marry.

The Rebow family also presented many other famous personalities at Wivenhoe including Prince Albert. A picture from The Illustrated London News of 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1856 shows the visit of Prince Albert to Wivenhoe Park 21<sup>st</sup> April 1856. He inspected the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment, the 88<sup>th</sup> Regiment and four Militia Regiments. The commanding officer of the whole force was Major General Gascoigne. Afterwards came the business of the day, a review of the whole force drawn up in line at Wivenhoe Park the residence of Mr John Gurdon Rebow M.P for Colchester. <sup>2</sup>

Punch at this time was not very civil to Prince Albert had this rather feeble joke in its issue of 26<sup>th</sup> April 1856.

"Military-Field Marshal Prince Albert has inspected all the troops in camps at Colchester. After the inspection His Royal Highness praised the highest encomiums on the condition of the men. He was pleased to say that, in all

- 1 Essex Review 1904
- 2 " " 1935

90

his military experience he had never beheld troops who stood so beautifully – at ease.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion it is worth quoting from Sir John Martin Harvey's description of the people of Wivenhoe. These people portray the character of Wivenhoe, the people who gave it its magnificent past.

"A procession of quaint characters passes across my minds eye. Here comes John Jones, the giant Welshman, with his great white beard and patriarchial hair, streaming in the wind, a veritable charon, who plied the ferry-boat across the river to the opposite bank. And here is Polly Kent, the crazy old fish wife whose articulations, in the absence of a roof to her mouth, are difficult to follow, and whose strange idiosyncrasy it is to throw herself into the river at every spring tide.

There stands old Jack Gardiner upon the threshold of "the Rose and Crown", whose answer to your morning salutation will imply a courteous correction, "Good mornin, to you sir". Backwards he will turn for liquid refreshment. Once to be sure he was lured to London by a 'daily excursion' ticket, but, terrified with the turmoil of Liverpool Street, he remained to the uptrain exit from the station, a bull for the wit of little gutter devils, till the railway took him back to rest at eventide in the secure haven of the Rose and Crown", "Never no more, Mas'r Martin, " said he, "Never no more".<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Essex Review 1935
- 2 Autobiography Sir John Martin Harvey