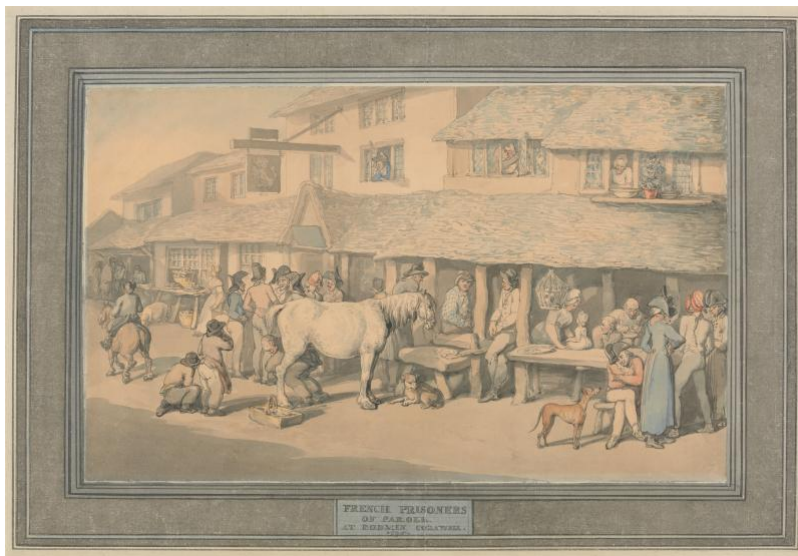


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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Parole towns in Britain

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Abstract

During Britain's war with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France (1793-1815), thousands of captured French officers and other captives were placed on parole in towns across the British Isles. Paroled, sometimes for many years, these captives organised social functions, created theatre productions and started Masonic lodges with their British hosts. They became a familiar presence in many communities across Britain and the parole town became a social space and contact point between British communities and their paroled 'guests'.

Parole was a form of captivity used by Britain for certain types of prisoners who had been captured because of war. During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, thousands of men, women and children arrived in Britain as prisoners of war, and many were sent to live on parole in specially designated parole towns. Not every British town or community

accepted prisoners of war to live amongst them although around 64 did. The numbers of prisoners accommodated by the towns could vary enormously. Larger towns like Reading in Berkshire could accommodate hundreds of prisoners whilst smaller communities like Hambledon in Hampshire were able to accommodate much fewer numbers.¹

Life on parole in these communities came with both cultural and sociological implications. For those on parole there were constraints under which they had to live which included a nightly curfew, a small allowance, and limitations on their movements. For the parole town's inhabitants, sharing their spaces, and occasionally their homes, with those whom they may have seen as the enemy must at times have felt challenging and unsurprisingly there were occasionally tensions between the two communities.

One such incident recorded in Wincanton in 1806 involved a group of French officers attacking a local farmer and then threatening to burn the town down.² This was a frightening incident for the town and the farmer, yet prisoners could also be subjected to abuse by the community. At Bishops Waltham in Hampshire the local constable was reported for bullying the French prisoners paroled in the town and was reprimanded by the local magistrate (Chamberlain 130-131).

Given that there were many thousands of paroled prisoners living in communities across the British Isles, it is remarkable that there were not much larger disturbances or even uprisings. Many parole towns came to accept their paroled guests and, perhaps, even to understand that occasionally they may have needed to let off steam. As Mr Taylor at Forton Prison wrote in February 1797 in response to reports of bad behaviour by French prisoners, he had managed to diffuse the prisoners' high spirits and went on to downplay their behaviour by describing it as '[...] too trifling to make the subject of a letter'.³ Perhaps this understanding was replicated in other communities and allowed for the prisoners' need to occasionally test their boundaries.

Renaud Morieux calls the parole town a 'captivity zone' where those paroled occupied a liminal space within the community where they were neither friend nor enemy. Parole, suggests Morieux, worked best when everyone in the community conformed to the established social hierarchies and adhered to social norms.⁴ Certainly, this can be seen in surviving letters written by French prisoners of war residing in the Hampshire town of Petersfield in the 1790s, where French men of rank socialised with the Bonham family. Their use of the Bonham's library and the taking part in convivial dinners were cultural activities shared by both French and British men of rank.⁵ In Selkirk (Scotland) French prisoners of rank shared similar cultural pastimes and mixed with British men of rank. The town allowed them to access the local subscription library and they then read their way through nearly four thousand books. Titles borrowed included volumes of military history, travel writing and novels.⁶

Another activity undertaken by paroled prisoners was the establishment of Masonic lodges, often done in association with British lodges, thereby providing venues that brought out a

spirit of mutual co-operation and sociability between the two nationalities rather than the enmities of war.⁷ The establishment of theatres and the associated performances were also an important distraction for the prisoners as well as a way of creating a sociable interface with local communities. In Kelso (Scotland), French officers held a performance of the Barber of Seville and, whilst paroled in Odiham, the French officer Baron de Bonnefoux witnessed the theatricals put on by French officers in that town which were attended by the local community.⁸

Not all sociable interactions were between the prisoners and the communities in which they were paroled. Prisoners were also able to write home, although letters had to be sent through the parole Agent in each town.

A small collection of intercepted letters from paroled French prisoners of war takes us away from the sociabilities of those prisoners who were recorded setting up Masonic lodges or creating theatrical performances.⁹ These intercepted letters give us a rare insight into the familial networks and private sociabilities of those paroled in Britain. The letters form a private space in which the writers expressed their anxieties about life on parole and allow us to gain a brief insight into how some of them were feeling.

In 1812 one young man, Frédéric Guérin, wrote to his parents in Marseille whilst paroled in Bishops Waltham. TNA ADM 105/61 intercepted letter dated 10th January 1812. In the letters, Frédéric describes his anxieties on learning that he is to be moved to a new parole town, Whitchurch in Shropshire. The sudden move had been sprung on him and, in his letter, Guérin expresses his worries about the costs involved with being forced to travel 147 miles and whether he would find suitable employment to keep himself busy once he was settled in the town. To both parents he expresses his disappointment at the move; it had come as a blow because he had been certain that he was to be released and sent home to France. Instead, he was being moved to a new town far inland and the letter suggests that he was severely disillusioned. All his hopes dashed, young Frédéric ended his letter, and wrote bitterly, '[...] if it were not for this cursed change, I would have certainly been able to embrace you in February or March at the latest'.

Image

mother to send money. However, it is on his conduct in the aftermath of Napoleon's return from Elba and events at Waterloo that he dwells at length. It was clearly playing on his mind and, perhaps, time spent isolated on parole in Britain far away from events in France may have given him too much time to ruminate. Uncertain about his future and with a wound troubling him, the Baron unburdened his troubles in the letter to his mother.

Whilst Baron Cambronne may have felt isolated, others as we have seen above threw themselves into activities and tried to make the best of parole life. Most of the source materials reveal only a male experience of life in a parole town. However, another intercepted letter, albeit one from what appears to be a wealthy family, provides a rare insight into what life may have been like for a young woman, paroled with her patents in the Hampshire town of Alresford in 1812. In her letter to a friend, a young woman named 'Henriette', gives a brief, vivid insight into gossip and life in a parole town, as well as into the giddy whirl of her social life which included a ball to celebrate her parents' 25 years of marriage. Of course, that the letter had been intercepted suggests that British authorities believed it may not have been genuine, or perhaps Henriette had tried to send the letter without first obtaining permission from the towns' parole agent. Whatever the reason, the letter is written in an arch, slightly giddy style and, if taken at face value, it provides us with an interesting account of what life could have been like for a young woman on parole. Henriette's social life appears to have encompassed both French and British individuals, thereby allowing us to envisage how a young woman who was also a prisoner of war need not completely hamper her social life.¹⁴

What impact the parole towns had on British culture in the eighteenth century is difficult to quantify as there has been only a few academics who have researched the subject. Much of the material on these towns and their paroled guests can still only be found in archives, where letters and reports reveal a rich thread of wartime social and cultural interactions between the paroled prisoners and their British hosts. The end to the parole town came in 1814 with the cessation of hostilities between Britain and France, although it was briefly re-established in 1815 for captives taken at Waterloo. In future wars, parole would no longer be used by Britain to manage its higher-ranking prisoners of war. In the nineteenth century, the treatment of prisoners of war entered a period of transition before the eventual establishment of greater protections in the Hague (1899 & 1907) and Geneva Conventions (1949).

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