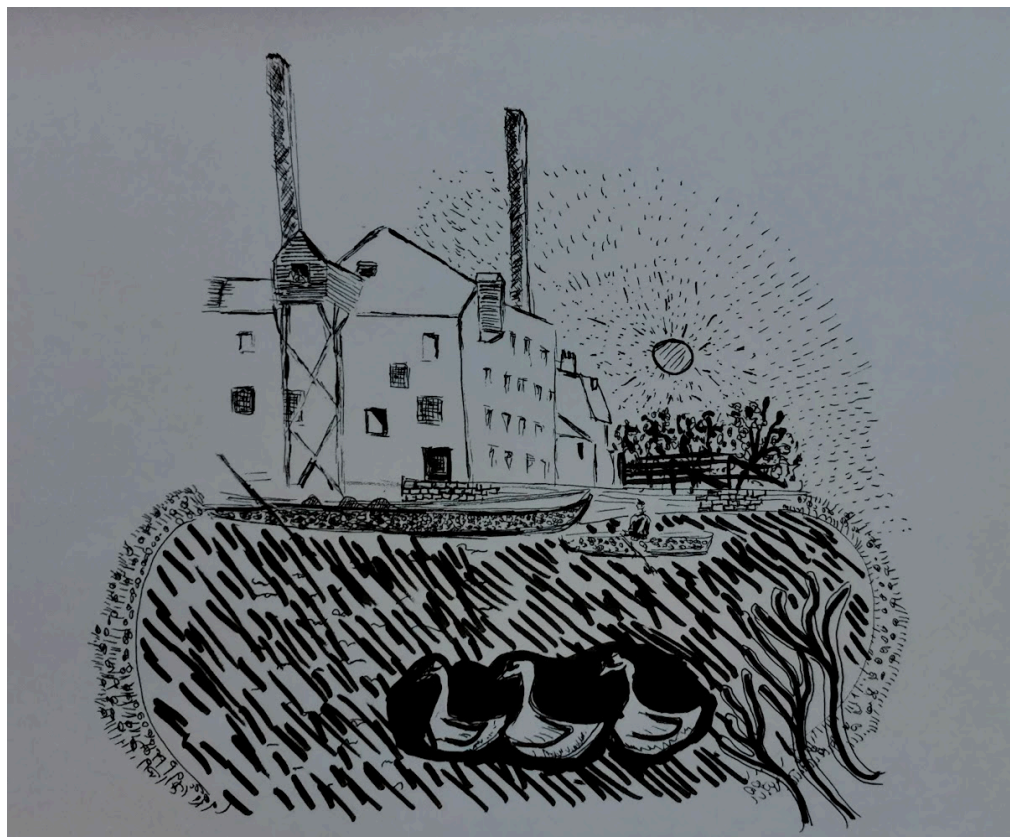


THE MILLER OF CAMBRIDGE





In the memory of James Nutter (1763-1829)
Miller, Baptist and father of five generations of Cambridge millers

Introduction

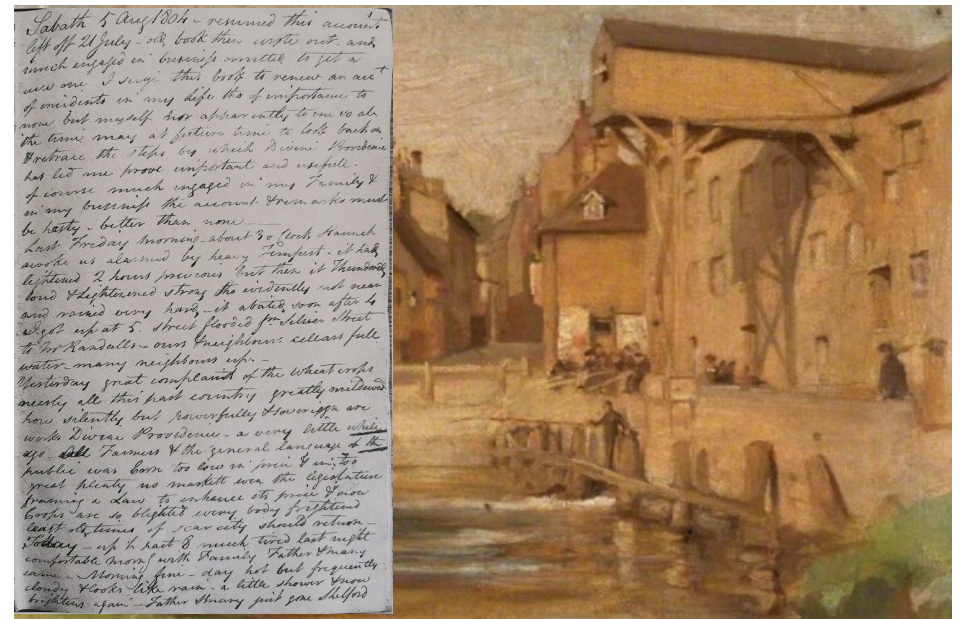
It's 1804. The war with France has been dragging on since 1793 when Napoleon decided to engage in a campaign to "save" the world from tyranny and promote the ideals of Libert , Egalit , Fraternit , by waging war in neighbouring countries.

Meanwhile, in the east of England lies the small town of Cambridge, famous for its university and its fine flour produced by the Bishop's and the King's mills that stand majestically over the river Cam in the centre of town.

The university feeds the mind but the mills fill the belly, say the people of Cambridge. The baker on Green Street would not use any other flour to make the bread that feeds the locals.

James Nutter, the local miller, is a central figure in Cambridge. He carries the responsibility to

provide the flour that makes Cambridge's daily bread. His diary, which he kept for several years, tells us about his work, his life and his hopes for the future.



The first page of James Nutter's diary for 1804-1806 (Nutter Family Archives) and the painting of the Bishop's Mill and King's Mills kept at the Museum of Cambridge.

James Nutter's diary for August 1804

James Nutter was owner and manager of the Bishop's Mill (freehold) and the King's Mill (leased from the corporation of Cambridge) that used to sit at the end of Mill Lane over the river where the little pedestrian bridge now stands, the sole remaining witness to the mills that were demolished in 1928.

Today the area around the mill pond has become a place for students and tourists to relax and sit for a picnic or a drink. Before 1928 the place was one of intense work. James' workmen could be seen hoisting bags of wheat from barges on the river up to the wooden granaries of the mills.

The two wheels of the mill that sat side by side were entirely powered by the flowing water of the Cam. James Nutter was therefore constantly

and anxiously recording rainfall levels and wind activity in his diary. Periods of drought or frost regularly hindered the work of the mills through the year, not only preventing the wheels from turning, but also affecting the transport of grain by barges on the river. It is therefore not surprising that James' diary contains detailed recordings of weather patterns, well before systematic recordings by the Meteorological Office started.



The diary entry for the 5th August 1804 shows that Silver Street and the cellars nearby were flooded after a heavy "tempest." The weather was so damp that the wheat crop was mildewed, triggering fears of scarcity and famine. The diary covers the period between 5 August 1804 and 4 February 1806, a time

marked by bad harvests and uncertainty caused by the long Napoleonic wars.

James would have been happy for his diary to be read by later generations. A very well educated man, he understood the importance of recording events so that one can “at a future time, look back and retrace the steps” by which “Divine Providence” had led him to be “useful” (his own words). There is no doubt that James Nutter was a useful citizen of Cambridge as his mills provided the local population with the flour they so needed in a time of war to make bread, the staple diet at the time. “Verily thou should be fed” James writes in his entry of 13th October 1804. He, indeed, made sure that this was true by importing wheat from as far away as Germany (via the port of King’s Lynn) when there was not enough wheat produced locally to grind at his mills. The diary is an important witness to the globalisation of the wheat market in the early 19th century when the sudden growth of the population could not be matched by local agricultural production.

James’ diary covers many themes that strongly resonate today: wheat and flour shortage, unpredictable weather patterns, destructive wars and mental health struggles. At the heart of this story also lies the river Cam, this force of nature that powered the watermills of Cambridge that supplied the people’s daily bread.

References:

- The unpublished diary of James Nutter, miller of Cambridge, 1804-1806 (Nutter family Archives)

For more information about the King’s and Bishop’s Mills see:

<https://capturingcambridge.org/centre/granta-place/foster-brothers-flour-mill-kings-mill-and-bishops-mill-granta-place/>

September 1804

September starts with James assessing the delivery of new wheat: “New wheat today - some good generally better than expected but great complaint it yields little” (8th Sept). The good quality of the wheat bought from local farmers is a relief but the poor yield is causing concern as this means that the mills might run out of wheat to grind before the next harvest in August 1805.

Another worry is the “very hot and dry” weather and most of all the “water getting very short” (8th Sept) which means that the wheels of the mills might not be able to run the whole day long. In times of drought the two wheels of the Bishop’s mill and the King’s mill had to take turns, one running during the day and the other at night.

The same applied to the two mills in Great Shelford which were also part of the business.

After a visit to Great Shelford, James notes in his diary: ‘Oil mill off today and continued going day times all week. Flour mill on nights and a little on days’ (3rd Sept). This is an example of sharing of renewable energy in early 19th century Cambridge. When water is in short supply, the mills have to alternate their use of it. The mills at Great Shelford produced oil from rapeseed to use in oil lamps (no electricity back then) as well as flour to make bread.



On Thursday 6th September James had a visit from a certain Mr Stewart who offered him the sale of Half Moon Yard. Half Moon Yard was a yard on Quayside and included a number of warehouses. One can forget that, for a long time, Cambridge was an important commercial port. Goods arrived from King’s Lynn on large boats and were then loaded onto smaller barges

to be taken further up river. A warehouse on Quayside would have been an interesting prospect for James who notes in his diary that he *does* need more storage room. However after much thinking and a discussion with his father-in-law, who kindly went to inspect the yard, they both agree, on Monday 10th September, that he should decline the offer: "He [father-in-law] went to look at it and seeing bad condition it is in [...] he agreed with me to let it alone". The yard will be sold later at auction to someone else. Another important event happens in September: James' birthday! "My birthday - 41 years old in years [...] another year's catalogue of blessings" (9th Sept.). What does he do on his birthday? As it is Sunday he goes to church (Saint Andrew's Baptist Church) where he reflects on his own mortality: "dependence and tendency to mortality". Forty-one years old was a good age in 1804 as many poorer people did not live past their forties. After church James has "a good dinner" with his wife, nine children, father-in-law and the wife of the latter. Then comes "tea" after which he spends more time with his family before writing his diary entry. He also plays the organ between

8 and 9 pm before having a rather late supper. There is no mention of a birthday cake and candles. Such a tradition, it seems, only becomes popular in England during Victorian times. James' diary entry nevertheless indicates that he had a very satisfying day with his family and male friends who also came to visit around 6pm and smoked pipes with him.

The rest of September is pretty much business as usual and eventless, except for the fact that the weather remains very hot: "dry weather very dusty and water very short" (21 Sept). This is very worrying for the business. October will bring some rain and will prove eventful with the spectacular psychotic episode of Jame's dear friend, the Reverend Robert Hall.

References:

- The unpublished diary of James Nutter, miller of Cambridge, 1804-1806 (Nutter family Archives)

October 1804 - The psychotic episode of Robert Hall

James Nutter, the miller of Cambridge, was part of a large network of wealthy businessmen and entrepreneurs who all attended the Baptist church of Saint Andrew's in Trumpington Street. There they met every Sunday without fail. These wealthy middle class men were the backbone of nineteenth century Cambridge and contributed to the flourishing of the town.

Amongst those attending the church were the Foster and the Finch families. Ebenezer and Richard Foster were very good friends of James. In 1804 (date of the James' diary) they founded the Foster bank that was to be taken over by Lloyds in 1918. Several members of the Foster family were to become mayors of Cambridge



(Ebenezer from 1836 to 1837). The Finch family had a foundry business that made small bridges for the colleges and also made the Magdalene street bridge in 1823. Charles Finch was James Nutter's best friend.

In his diary James does not use the word "church" when speaking about Saint Andrew's but he uses the term 'meeting house' because Saint Andrew's was a non conformist church. The term "non conformist" comes from the Act of Uniformity in 1662 that made a revised prayer book the only legal service book in England and also required from all ministers a declaration of obedience to the royal power. Such constraints were seen as unacceptable by some ministers who dissented and left their parish churches to

set up alternative churches. This explains why there is such a high concentration of church buildings in Cambridge and the surrounding villages. Some attribute it to the free spirited nature of the Cambridgeshire people: the non conformists essentially denied all human authority in matters of religion which was, at the time, rather revolutionary.

There had been clandestine meetings of non conformists groups close to the current site of Saint Andrew's church since 1689. At the time of James Nutter, the meeting house, that had started as a simple barn, was a chapel large enough to seat 600 people. The minister in charge was Robert Hall, a very learned scholar and a formidable orator who had been appointed in 1791, the year of the publication of his famous sermon on "Christianity consistent with a love of freedom". The published sermons had soon become a reference point for all non conformists as it had spelt out very clearly and elegantly the true principles they believed in:

"A full toleration of religious opinions, and the protection of all parties in their respective modes of worship, are the natural operations of a free government" (Sermon "Christianity consistent..." ed. Gregory Olinthus, p.125)

This was a stark reminder that non conformists ministers had been severely persecuted by the state between 1662 (Act of Uniformity) and 1689 (Act of Toleration) and that the government was still discriminating against non conformists by barring dissenters from civil office. This only ceased in 1824. It was difficult for dissenters like James Nutter to earn a living. The only option was to run your own business or be employed by a dissenter. Religious discrimination was part of 19th century life in Cambridge and it is no surprise that, when seeking a new pastor, the church of Saint Andrew's looked for someone who could challenge this.

In 1790 the church of Saint Andrew's sent Robert Hall a letter inviting him to become their pastor and described their community as follows:

“The church has no doctrinal covenant or any other bond of union that Christian love and virtue” (Bernard Nutter p. 138).

Robert Hall did become the pastor of the church and had many successful years there, attracting large crowds of businessmen, dons and undergraduates who came to Saint Andrew’s to listen to his elaborate and intellectually challenging sermons that were embroidered with metaphysical discussions and underpinned by his deep knowledge of Plato and the Greek and Roman classics. He really was a star in his time and one can imagine how his congregation must have felt when on Wednesday 31 October 1804, Robert Hall suffered a terrible mental breakdown. James Nutter’s account, in his diary, is probably the only detailed witness of this sad episode. In his entry of 31 October, James recorded how it all started. Here is the full entry with its unaltered text:

While we were at breakfast Father came in had walked over from Shelford surprised us-after breakfast told us had been disturbed at 3 o’ clock called up by Mr Hall- his maid & man & his

wife- he could not rest at home- house haunted & full of noises had been walking about village- asked bed at my father- wd readily had after smoking pipe- Father came instantly over to tell us leaving him asleep- all sadly surprised and overwhelmed with grief fearing this beginning serious as it turned out- went to C Finch- he engaged to go over & Mr Lyon and see- therefore with them I left the matter & went with James to Royston- in evening went C Finch- Mr Lyon soon came home- C Finch staid & dined at Shelford Mill with Mr Hall- he appeared confused- symptoms of slight derangement but slight- CF soothed him and left him- tolerably reconciled but full of the ideas of bewitchment and influence of the devil- his maid bewitched his house full supernatural noises- he staid at Mill till 9- Father went home with him & seeing him comfortably abed left him.

All the classic signs of psychosis are clearly recorded in James’ account: inability to sleep, agitation and irrational beliefs. The term “psychosis” was not coined until the 1840s and this is why the diary uses the word “derangement” instead. There was no state

mental health provision until 1845, the date of the County Asylum Act. Fulbourn mental health hospital did not open until 1858. There was very little help for mental disorders and most patients were cared for at home by their family. This is exactly what happened to Robert Hall, except that, because he had no family in Cambridge, his church community took over his care. It is very poignant to see James' father (who is actually his father in law, Joseph Ansell) welcoming Robert Hall in the middle of the night and caring for him at the Shelford Mill. Then the community of Saint Andrew's is mobilised to help. Charles Finch and Mr Lyon go to the mill.

The psychotic episode of Robert Hall is acknowledged in his biography written by Gregory Olinthus. However there are no details there. Gregory simply writes: "This noble mind lost its equilibrium, and he who had been the theme of universal admiration, now became the subject of as extensive a sympathy" (Gregory Olinthus p. 47). However this biography might offer us some clues on the causes of Robert Hall's illness. Gregory states that, it was in Cambridge that Robert Hall took to smoking

with a friend of his called Samuel Parr, who was "always enveloped in a dense cloud of smoke, from sunrise until midnight" (Gregory Olinthus p. 42). Robert Hall used to tell his friends that smoking helped to alleviate his back pain. The smoking and growing of opium was very common in the Fens at the time and it is not inconceivable that Robert Hall would have laced his tobacco with it like many did, which could explain the pain relief experienced. This is obviously just an hypothesis but could also partly explain the mental health crisis that followed. Gregory's biography tells that by 1803 Robert Hall's back pain had increased so much that his doctor, Mr Kerr, recommended that he moved from Cambridge to a village, so that he did regular trips on horseback to alleviate his back pains. Such medical prescription may seem strange today but did indeed lead to Robert Hall moving to Great Shelford in 1803. Village life probably did not suit him. Gregory is clear in his biography as to the causes of Robert Hall's mental breakdown, mentioning smoking, but most of all loneliness and isolation: Robert Hall had two excellent friends in Great Shelford, James Nutter and the Rev Thomas Thomasson

but "...it still left him too much alone, and too much exposed to all the morbid influences of a disordered body, and of a mind overstrained" (Gregory Olinthus p. 47).

Mental health illness in 19th century Cambridge was the same as today: same symptoms, same causes- stress, drugs and loneliness. Because Robert Hall was such a respected figure, he received the best community support one could have hoped for. His friends gave him a bed, stayed with him and listened to him. They soothed him. They instinctively did everything which is recommended by all mental health charities today- which is quite remarkable.

References:

The unpublished diary of James Nutter, miller of Cambridge, 1804-1806 (Nutter family Archives)

Gregory Olinthus, *The Miscellaneous Works and Remains of the Rev Robert Hall with a memoir of his life*, London, 1846

Bernard Nutter, *The Story of the Cambridge Baptists*, Cambridge, 1912

Virginia Berridge, "Fenland Opium Eating in the Nineteenth Century", *British Journal of Addiction* 72, 1977, pp. 275-284

November 1804 - Straitjacket and Leeches

At the end of October 1804, the Reverend Robert Hall, pastor of Saint Andrew's church in Cambridge, suffered a psychotic episode that left his friend, James Nutter, a miller, devastated and extremely worried. In his diary entry of Thursday 1st November 1804, James notes that Robert Hall has had "a very restless night- no sleep" and that he is "full of noises and fears of devil". James reflects on what might have caused his friend's mental breakdown and he writes:

...we thought it (the illness) might subside & little time & company of his friends would wear out the impression of what we all thought a temporary delusion the effect of his great attention to two very unaccountable occurrences in the neighbourhood excited general attention & talk - one at Sawston at Mr Adam's the Tanner - whose wife's maid his - and many persons who visited the house their clothes were torn unaccountably & invisibly

other occurrence at Bumpstead - an elderly woman (not best of characters) housekeeper to Mr Walford (of decent character) toads & other noxious reptiles all over her body - one day forced to undress 27 times- and clean herself - no account how produced - Mr Hall had lately been to see both these cases - closely investigated them believed them supernatural & made them subject of frequent conversation & dispute - we thought the delusion merely occasioned by & the effect of this. (Entry of 1st November- unaltered spelling, punctuation and grammar)

James Nutter is a man of the enlightenment, reasonably educated and open to the power of science and reason. Although he is very religious, there is no sign of conflict in his mind between religion and science. His approach to Robert Hall's illness is guided by reason and the conviction that the illness must have been triggered by some unusual event. The story of the torn gowns at the tanner's house in Sawston is also mentioned earlier in the diary, in the entry

for Monday 8th October 1804. Interestingly James writes there that one of the torn and slit coats “was brought to Dr Milner Master of Queens College & professor of chemistry to try if vitriol occasioned it” (entry of 8th October). Although superstition and belief in the supernatural was still very much alive in Cambridgeshire in 1804, access to authorities such as Dr Milner meant that these beliefs could be challenged by science - a fact James seems to be interested in. James’ search for the causes of Robert Hall’s illness is based on observations and logical analysis of the context in which it occurred.

Modern research on mental health is very much based upon the Stress Vulnerability Model which, as Geoff Brennan writes, “has moved us from seeing individual sufferers as alien to viewing them as people with extraordinary experiences” (Brennan p. 52). The Stress Vulnerability Model recognises that many people who fall ill with psychosis have often recently experienced a traumatic life event. James might have here identified traumatic events that might have contributed to Robert

Hall’s illness: dealing with supernatural unexplained phenomena. The Stress Vulnerability Model also identifies social isolation and physical diseases as contributing factors, two elements also pointed out by Gregory Olinthus in his biography of Robert Hall: the isolation of village life away from his Leicester family and the suffering his bad back inflicted on him. Genetic dispositions are also an important part of the Stress Vulnerability Model and this is indeed later uncovered by James in his diary entry of 18th November 1804 where he notes that Robert Hall’s disorder is “hereditary in the family”.

James’ efforts to understand the causes of Robert Hall’s illness are quite remarkable and reflect his inquisitive mind. Later biographers, such as William Willis, tend to romanticise the event, blaming the illness on Robert Hall’s disappointment in love:

Whilst at Cambridge, Robert Hall, unfortunately was disappointed in love. This disappointment very much affected him. For years it disturbed his mind. (Willis p. 11)

James Nutter's diary, without doubt, offers a more accurate account of the causes of Robert Hall's illness, especially if read alongside Gregory Olinthus' biography. Gregory, who was a contemporary of Robert Hall and knew him well, recalls a very revealing conversation with the pastor, during which it became apparent that Robert was deeply depressed in Cambridge. Asked by Gregory what he thinks of Cambridge, Robert replies:



Before I came to Cambridge, I had read in prize poems, and in other works of fancy, of "the banks of the Cam", of "sweetly flowing stream" and so on; but when I arrived here I was sadly disappointed. When I first saw the river as I passed over King's College Bridge, I could not help exclaiming: Why, the stream is standing still to see people

drown themselves! And that, I am sorry to say, is a permanent feeling with me. (Olinthus p. 27)

These morbid thoughts clearly indicate that Robert Hall had never really adapted to his new life in Cambridge and was rather depressed and disappointed. The poems he refers to here are most certainly those of Thomas Gray, William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, who all have portrayed the River Cam in their nostalgic poems recalling their youths spent in Cambridge colleges. The town that these poets associated with the joys of youth, had clearly failed to leave the same positive impression on Robert Hall.

In the first week of November Robert Hall's mental health rapidly further deteriorated. James in his diary notes Robert Hall's "frequent

paroxysms of madness” (entry of 4th November) and even writes down the content of his conversations with Robert, just like a good psychiatrist would do. James asks Robert Hall what makes him laugh so heartily and here is what he replies:

...the Angel Gabriel revealed to me - my head was always too small for my talents - and that my age should be dated back - instead of being 40 years I should now only be reckoned 20 years old and instead of the narrow small head heretofore I should now have two heads. (Entry of 4th November - unaltered)

James recorded this strange conversation in his diary as well as the fact that Robert Hall told him that he was “in great agony” and that:

...the brain at the back part of the head which before had lain dormant in an inactive and bemused state was pushing forward into vigorous action. (Entry of 4th November - unaltered)

Robert Hall’s brain was under serious strain. He was seriously ill. He could not sleep and was extremely agitated. Doctor Thackeray is sent for. The doctor offers to stay overnight in Mr Hall’s house to look after him and observe him. In the middle of the night the good doctor is woken up by Robert Hall who burst open the door of his bedroom and seizes the doctor’s leg. James describes what happens next:

Thackeray got up & went down & with assistance put on the straight waistcoat (which I think was very wrong and the more dictate of his fears but never said so to any person). And from that time to this poor dear man he has been in the most dismal state of derangement and violence except at intervals chiefly in my opinion owing to his confinement at least his violence. (Entry of 4th November - unaltered)

It is extraordinary to see here expressed James’ disapproval of the treatment inflicted upon Robert Hall. The typical treatment of mental illness at the time was a mixture of coercion and listening. After the listening there comes the coercion with the straitjacket. James notes that

this leads to a further deterioration in Robert Hall's mental health, probably correctly identifying coercion as a further distressing factor.

In 1804 there were, of course, no antipsychotic drugs available and actual medical treatment was rather basic:

Dr Thackeray advised a blister on head - Dr Davy a blister on the back the latter was adopted. (Entry of 4th November- unaltered)

It is also likely that Robert Hall would have been administered some narcotic to calm him down, probably laudanum, as this is mentioned in Gregory Olinthus' account (Olinthus p. 47) although there is no mention of it in James Nutter's diary.

The medical treatment was clearly not very successful as James writes at the end of his entry dated 4th November (but actually covering the whole week up to the 9th of November):

Day after day - much alike - Nights dreadful- days calm with sometimes a little sleep & returning temporary sense to know persons and circumstances. (Entry 4th November, unaltered text)

James' consternation at the illness of his dear friend contrasts with the reaction of the pastor's congregation when his mental health is revealed to all:

Wonderfull Shock - great sensation in the congregation - in the Town - throughout the University as well as in the village - "all held John to be a prophet"...(Entry 4th November, unaltered text)

The line between madness and greatness is always very fine. Whilst some might have been stigmatised by their illness, Robert Hall's talents and fame propelled him to the status of quasi prophet. His hallucinations and strange visions, no doubt, were seen as gifts from God.

Later in the month of November, Robert Hall's brother in law, Mr James, comes from Bristol

and arranges for Robert to be taken back to Leicester, near his native village, to be taken care of by Dr Arnold. His Cambridge friends look after his house and belongings in Great Shelford and regularly seek news on his health by letters.

It is clear from reading the detailed entries in James Nutter's diary that the miller of Cambridge felt that he had been the witness of an extraordinary event: the descent into madness of a great and famous man whose reputation extended far beyond Cambridge.

References:

The unpublished diary of James Nutter, miller of Cambridge, 1804-1806 (Nutter family Archives)

Gregory Olinthus, *The Miscellaneous works and remains of the Rev Robert Hall with a memoir of his life*, London, 1846

William Willis, *Lecture on Robert Hall*, 1901, printed for private circulation (Cambridgeshire Collections)

Graham Chainey, *A literary History of Cambridge*, CUP, 1985

Geoff Brennan, "Stress vulnerability model of serious mental illness" in C Gamble and G Brennan, *Working with Serious Mental Illness - A Manual for Clinical Practice*, Elsevier, 2006, pp. 43-53

December 1804 - Christmas

In Georgian times the festive season started on the 6th of December (Saint Nicholas' day) and finished on Twelfth Night (the evening preceding Epiphany). This meant that, at least for the middle classes and the aristocracy, there was during this period, a flurry of social activities as clearly appears in James Nutter's diary.

On Thursday 6th of December, Saint Nicholas' day, James writes:

Day fine - morning frosty, ice on river - up 7 - T Cook off for Stortford London & Colchester to see his friends. J Cooper off to Ely & Mepal - I only home all day - close countinghouse. Morning & evening occurrences interrupted in middle day as usual- Wife sister Hannah Mrs Archer Eliza Anne Betsy gone dine Bridge not yet home now

1/2 past 8. James just home from post office & leave countinghouse.

Saint Nicholas' day was probably as important as Christmas Day in Georgian times. James' two employees, Cook and Cooper, seem to have been allowed to take the day off to see their friends and family. James' wife, called Hannah, his sister Mary Gray from Saffron Walden, Mrs Archer and James' older daughters, Hannah (18), Ann (12) and Betsy (10) have all been out the whole

day. It looks like they have gone to eat with Thomas Nutter (James' brother) and his family in his house on Bridge Street, a house which incidentally belonged to James and for which Thomas paid rent. The younger boys and girls stayed at home with the nanny. The eldest son, also called James, is fifteen at the time and is



being trained by his father to take over the business. There is no time off for him. He spent the day in the countinghouse. The males in the Nutter family have very strong work ethics, probably from their Baptist background. The women, who are not expected to earn a living, are enjoying time together and probably exchanging small gifts like the Georgians used to do on Saint Nicholas' day. The fact that they went to "dine" (lunch) and are not yet back at half past eight probably shows how much fun they have had. Friday the 7th of December is also socially very busy. The Nutter family has guests the whole day long, to "dine" (lunch), have tea and supper. "Abed 12 - wearied" writes James (entry of 7th December). The miller of Cambridge is obviously finding all that socialising rather tiring.

More enthusiasm is displayed in James' entry for the 10th of December 1804 where he recalls attending the wedding of Charles Finch's daughter, Elizabeth, with Ebenezer Foster (of the Foster bank). The two were married on the 10th of December at Saint Mary's church, Cambridge, and then left the town to spend

their honeymoon in London. "I had pleasure to hear the bells because twas the daughter of my friend" writes James. The diary entry also tells that James was sent some "bride cake" and a card which he glued in the diary and which is now missing (reason unknown). The marriage celebrated the union of two very successful Cambridge families, the Finches and the Fosters. Just as the old aristocracy used to marry within their own circle, the rising middle classes of the early nineteenth century tied knots with each other through marriages that strengthened their success and wealth. However for Baptist families the choice was probably limited due to their religious identity that set them apart from the rest of society.

It is clear that Mrs Nutter had social aspirations as we learn, from an earlier diary of James, that she wanted to have one of the chief seats at church but was told off by her husband who did not want a conspicuous pew (see article by F. A. Reeve). Maybe James, like many other "middlocrats" of the Georgian period, thought that "social rising was best done with sensitivity" (P. Corfield p. 272). As an intelligent

and dedicated businessman, he was very aware of the uncertainties of middle class lifestyles. Bankruptcies were frequent and this was always at the back of his mind. In Georgian times, rising was just as quick as falling.

James Nutter has little desire to advance his social status by attending the fancy parties of the good and the great of nineteenth century Cambridge. However, like many middle class men of this period, he understands the importance of numeracy and literacy to sustain one's economic transformation. On the 10th of December James writes in his diary:

Carpenters began today put in new book cases each side of fireplace in parlour.

“Bibliomania” is one of the great features of the period, with people collecting, reading and reviewing books (P. Corfield p. 124). James is transforming his parlour, the room where guests were invited when visiting and dining, into a place of learning. On the shelves of the bookcases he would have, no doubt, proudly displayed the published sermons of Robert Hall,

especially his sermon on *Modern Infidelity Considered* which was printed in 1800 and was the new “block buster” (P. Corfield, p. 49). This sermon was very much a lamentation on the weakening of traditional religious values.

Christmas Day 1804

The parlour with its new bookcases was ready to receive its guests on Christmas Day. That day James gets up at 8 and goes to the countinghouse (the office) before taking a Christmas walk behind the colleges with his employees. He returns home for “dinner” (Christmas lunch) at 2. Here is the rest of his diary entry for Christmas Day 1804:

Father Octavus Molly & Nanny here. Wife father etc went to meeting at 11 home 1/2 past 12. Wife then with Mr & Mrs Randall went call on the Bride Mrs E Foster met room full of folks - Gossiping! Wanted me to go but no! Mr Cooper dined at home with his family came in afternoon to us. Mr Lambert dined in Parlour our only guest - Mr Kidman did not come as appointed -

*In kitchen dined Mr Thurlburn Fuller Larker
Matthew Mrs Bell.*

*After tea close countinghouse till 8. Writing
letters & calling over journals - leaving - now hail
& blow hard.*

*Wrote letter to Hannah at Walden - poor lamb
she thinks I'm offended & so I was when she
went there because not asked us to her going &
didn't approve manner etc but I write set all
comfortable distance proves affection &
reproves.*

Christmas Day is clearly a family affair with James' father in law and relatives going together to Saint Andrew's church for the Christmas service (the "meeting") before Christmas lunch. James' wife also attends the big Christmas gathering organised by the Fosters after the service. The bride referred to is Elizabeth Foster who married Ebenezer on the 10th of December. Christmas weddings were quite common in Georgian times as this allowed an "all in one" big social event on Christmas Day as seems to be the case here. People did not have paid holidays back then and there was not much time to attend wedding receptions

outside the Christmas period. James clearly disapproves of these kind of events: "Wanted me to go but no!" is a real cry from the heart of a man who dislikes gossiping and these kind of social events.

James' puritan spirit might explain why his diary entry for Christmas Day is so sober. The family had lunch together in the parlour with just one extra guest. What did they eat? We will never know for sure. According to Maria Hubert, the most common meat eaten at Christmas during Georgian times was mutton that was enjoyed in front of a roaring fire. The fireplace in the Nutter parlour would have been glowing, standing proudly framed by the two new bookcases.

Did the Nutters have a Christmas tree in the parlour? Probably not as this is a custom that develops mostly during the Victorian period. However Mrs Nutter and the children might have decorated the house with green leaves and pretty paper curls as described in many of Jane Austen's novels.

After Christmas lunch and tea, James goes back to the office to do more work. Feeding a family of nine children and employing five housekeeping staff (those who have their Christmas lunch in the kitchen in the entry above) is expensive and requires relentless work to keep afloat. James also spends time writing a letter to his eldest daughter Hannah who, without parental permission, went to spend Christmas with her aunt's family (Mary Gray) in Saffron Walden. Maybe it was more fun there, maybe there were dances and games, maybe they played cards, Snap Dragon, Apple Bobbing and Bullet Pudding just like Fanny Austen did in 1804 (M Hubert p. 75). After all James' daughter Hannah was only eighteen years old. She was carefree and she wanted to have fun that Christmas in 1804!

It did not snow on Christmas Day in 1804 but it did snow on the 26th of December that year: "quite large fall snow & sloppy night... roads slippery" (James' diary entry)

References:

The unpublished diary of James Nutter, Miller of Cambridge, 1804-1806 (Nutter Family Archives)

The lost diary of James Nutter 1802-1803 as described in F. A. Reeve's article "Problems which faced a local miller 150 years ago" *Cambridge Daily News*, 15 February 1962

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January 1805 - How do you feed Cambridge when there is no grain?

Christmas had been a non-event for James Nutter who, as a Baptist and a true Puritan spirit, had worked most of that day. After all, Christmas had been condemned and banned in the 1640s by the Puritan parliament who saw it as too Catholic.

The first of January is also a working day for the miller of Cambridge and his son. Here is the diary entry for that day:

Hard frost. Skating on river above mill - up half past eight - Mr Bosworth breakfasted dined & had tea here - Mr Cooper to Newmarket - Mr Howard called friendly - No alteration on flour - fine 84/-

coarse flour made 1/2 wheat 1/2 barley with 1/6 rye 12/cloth 56/ sack...[Entry 1 January 1805]

As a miller, James Nutter keeps a close eye on market prices for wheat and flour. The prices, regularly recorded by him, show that there is a sharp increase between October 1804 and January 1805. On 6th October James notes that wheat sells at 5 to 11 shillings per bushel and flour at 60 shillings per sack. On 13th November 1804 James writes that there is a steep advance in the price of corn and that flour is now

selling at 90 shillings per sack, a 50% price increase on October 1804. This food price inflation is due to the poor yield of the 1804



harvest: “only 5 bushels per acre at Fulbourn” notes James on 29th December 1804.

James’ diary is an important local witness on the very deficient harvest of 1804 that brought on high prices and a lot of distress among the lower classes who could hardly afford bread. How do you feed the people of Cambridge when there is no wheat and when prices are so high? The solution found by James was to import grain from Hamburg by boat, via King’s Lynn and the canals of the Fens. He could do so because of relaxations in the Corn Laws that regulated the import and export of grain. Faced with the potential risk of famine, the government allowed the import of foreign grain, duty free (D. Barnes, p.90).

Food security was in the 1800s as big a concern as it is now. The Times newspaper

published on Saturday 28 December 2024 an article titled “Poor harvest adds to food insecurity fears”, relaying the current government warnings on food security after this year’s poor harvest - the third lowest harvest since 1984 when national records began. This means that there could potentially be a shortage of flour later in 2025, although the shortfall will most certainly be compensated by a rise in imports, just as happened in 1805.



James Nutter clearly had contacts with grain merchants in Germany and, in December 1804, he receives a letter from Hamburg offering him a deal on grain. He feels rather “uneasy” (entry of 18th December 1804) buying from such a far away supplier but will eventually put in a large order. Although war is still raging between France and England, the British did establish

supremacy on the seas from 1803 to 1805, which meant that a cargo of grain would probably arrive safely at King's Lynn - but of course this was still risky. James was ready to take a chance, get a good deal and sell to the people of Cambridge the flour they needed for their daily bread.

Food security and food price inflation are common themes in 1805 and 2025. James' diary reminds us that nothing can be taken for granted and that bread does not grow on supermarket shelves.

References:

- The unpublished diary of James Nutter, The Miller of Cambridge (Nutter family archives)
- "Poor harvest adds to food insecurity fears", *The Times*, Saturday 28 December 2024, p. 13
- Donald Grove Barnes, *A History of English Corn Laws from 1660-1846*, Routledge, 1930

Photo of bushel measures kept at the Museum of Cambridge.