

HENRY WEBSTER



Henry Webster (1793-1847) was responsible for an event made memorable by Lord Byron, with an appropriate measure of poetic licence. The first two stanzas of the nine constituting *The eve of Waterloo* are:

There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium's Capital had gathered then
Her Beauty and her Chivalry, and bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men;
A thousand hearts beat happily; and when
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes looked love to eyes which spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage bell,
But hush! Hark! A deep sound strikes like a rising knell!

Did ye not hear it?—No; 'twas but the wind,
Or the car rattling o'er the stony street;
On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined;
No sleep till morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet
To chase the glowing Hours with flying feet —
But hark! —that heavy sound breaks in once more,
As if the clouds its echo would repeat;
And nearer, clearer, deadlier than before!
Arm! Arm! It is — it is — the cannon's opening roar!

Whether cannon could be heard is not known. But it is known that the news of the French arrival at Quatre Bras was brought to the ball by a Battle man, resulting in the rapid withdrawal of all soldiers there to the battle threatened at Quatre Bras. This was in the night of 15-16 June and not, as suggested by the poem's title, 17 June. The man was Henry Vassall Webster of the Abbey family.

One writer states that Webster had been invited to the ball but was unable to attend:

Between 11pm & midnight, Wellington went to the Duchess of Richmond's Ball, he could not have been there long when (about 1 a m) Lt Henry Webster of the 9th Light Dragoons attached to the Prince of Orange's staff, arrived.

Breathless and covered in dust and foam, he was carrying urgent news. The message Webster was carrying had left Braine-le-Comte at 10.30pm covering the distance to Brussels at high speed. He had ridden first to Wellington's HQ in the Rue Royale in Brussels.

Finding that the Duke of Wellington and the Prince of Orange had already left for the Ball, a servant led him to its venue. They reached there after midnight. Here Webster handed the despatch to the Prince of Orange. The letter, from (Maj Gen Jean-Victor) Constant Rebecque contained the news that the French, who had crossed the Sambre river, invading Belgium early that morning, had that evening broken through to Quatre Bras.

Communications with the Prussian HQ in Sombreffe were therefore threatened. Napoleon was on the point of successfully driving a wedge between the two wings of the Allied forces which he then hoped to defeat in detail. A perplexed Prince of Orange passed the news to a dumfounded Duke. Now, and only now, did Wellington accept the seriousness of the situation.¹

The messenger himself wrote later:

I was in my saddle without a second's delay; and, thanks to a fine moon and two capital horses, had covered the ten miles I had to go within the hour! Such as the crowd of carriages, that I could not well make my way through them on horseback; so I abandoned my steed to the first man I could get hold of, and made my way on foot to the porter's lodge.

The message clearly related to the possibility of Napoleon's men advancing to cut off Wellington from Brussels and to force his withdrawal to the Channel ports.

Wellington brought the ball to an abrupt end by ordering all officers to report to their regiments, though he did allow those on the dance floor to finish their dances.²



The bringer of the news was Henry Vassall Webster, son of the erratic Sir Godfrey who died in 1800 and brother of the fifth baronet of Battle Abbey. At the time he was a Lieutenant in the 9th Light Dragoon Guards and ADC to the Prince of Orange. By 1824 he was a Captain, then Lt Colonel and finally a full colonel in 1831; he was knighted in 1843. Along the way he collected various medals, including the Waterloo Medal, and three non-British knighthoods: Willem of the Netherlands, and the Tower and Sword and St Bento d'Avis, both of Portugal. Born at Naples in February 1793, he had joined the Light Dragoon Guards as a Cornet in March 1810. He was promoted Lieutenant in June 1811 and was

Portrait of Henry Webster by Sir Martin Archer-Shee (1769-1850). (Hastings Museum)

was slightly wounded at Vitoria in June 1813. Webster was tall: 6' 8" by one account.³

Like his parents, Webster later became involved in a divorce, then a very public matter. In July 1824, Henry Baring MP accused him of seducing his wife. Webster did not defend himself and suffered damages of £1000, though £10000 had been sought. In October of the same year Webster married Grace Boddington (at St George's, Hanover Square) and they were to have two children. In 1847 he committed suicide at his house in Upper Brook Street, Mayfair, by cutting his throat with a penknife. The doctors attending the body attested to his unsound mind, and the coroner's jury agreed a verdict

that the deceased, Sir Henry Webster, died from the effects of wounds inflicted on himself while labouring under temporary insanity.

His body was interred in the Webster vault at St Mary's, Battle. His sword is in the possession of Ralfe Whistler of Battle.

Grace, by courtesy called 'Dame' Grace, lived in Upper Brook Street, Mayfair and died at Brighton in 1866. Henry and Grace's sons produced only daughters, thereby providing no heir when the direct line of the baronetcy failed in 1923.

George Kiloh
© BDHS 2016

¹ From *Wellington on Waterloo* by Peter Hofschroer.

² Christopher Hibbert: *Wellington* (HarperCollins, 1997).

³ Conversation with Ralfe Whistler of Battle, 2015.