

Tell Me More—Hombey House

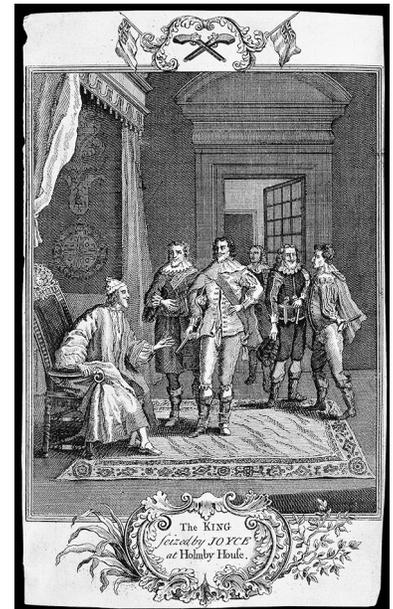
by Graham Christian

Beginning in the late 1950s, Pat Shaw began to create new interpretations of dances from Playford, Walsh, and later collections, a number of them to tunes by one of the 17th century’s musical geniuses, Henry Purcell (1659-1695). He presented “Hombey House” in July of 1961. The stirring 3/2 hornpipe in F major forms part of the score for Purcell’s semi-opera *The Indian Queen*, left unfinished at his death in 1695, to a revised version of the 1664 play by Sir Robert Howard and his brother-in-law, John Dryden. The dance first appeared as part of Walsh’s *New Country Dancing Master* 2nd book, c. 1710, and was reprinted in subsequent editions of Walsh and Playford collections until 1728.

But what is Hombey House? Hombey—more commonly Holmby—represents the typical pronunciation of Holdenby House. Holdenby House, in Northamptonshire, was erected in the late 1570s and early 1580s by Sir Christopher Hatton in rivalry with Longleat, Audley End, Theobalds, and the other “prodigy houses” of the period—piles of crushing grandeur meant to impress Queen Elizabeth on her annual summer tours of the realm. It was in excess of 350 feet in length and 250 feet in width, but for all that, was praised for its beauty and “lightsomeness.” After Hatton’s death, it passed to the Crown, and became part of the dower of Charles I’s bride, Henrietta Maria.

It was best known, however, as the site where Charles embarked upon the period of captivity that led to his beheading. A George Joyce, of the modest rank of Cornet, but supported by some 500 men on horseback, came to Northamptonshire in June of 1647 to demand that the King go with them under the protection of Cromwell’s Army.

Accounts of his conversation with Charles vary, and whether the encounter took place while Charles was semi-dressed, or out on the lawn, but the fullest of them says that Charles, after some guarantees of his personal safety, asked where Joyce’s commission was, and Joyce said, “It is behind me,” pointing to the troops. At this, Charles, with his typical freezing sarcasm, said, “It is as fair a commission, and as well written, as I have seen a commission written in my life: a company of hardsome, proper gentlemen as I have seen a great while.”



Charles I seized by Cornet Joyce at Holdenby House. Engraving after Peter Angelis (1685-1734). Courtesy of the Wellcome Trust

Parliament sold the house to Army officer Adam Baynes, who promptly demolished most of it; in 1660 it returned to the Crown and was sold in 1670 to Louis de Duras, a French friend of the future James II. But in 1709, at his death, it was sold to the nation’s hero, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, and so this dance, first published in 1710, is another of the many tributes to the great general and statesman, such as “Woodstock Park” or “Trip to Blenheim,” perhaps in the hope that Marlborough and his intrepid Duchess would restore the diminished estate to its former glory—but it was not to be; he gave it to his daughter Henrietta untouched. The building that now stands is a 19th century structure in “Jacobethan” style, incorporating the few remaining fragments of Hatton’s grand palace.

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Hombey House. Longways for as many as will.

Note: Each strain is to be play'd twice over.

The first Couple go the whole Figure of Eight, the second Couple do the same. Then the first Couple lead down and cast up and turn single, the second Couple do the same. Then the first Man change with the second Woman, and first Woman with the second Man, then Sett all four in, and turn single, and Right and Left quite round. Then the first Couple goes the half Figure of Eight, and the second Couple does the same, then Right and Left quite Round.

Hombey House, from *The Dancing-Master*, Vol. the Second, 1728