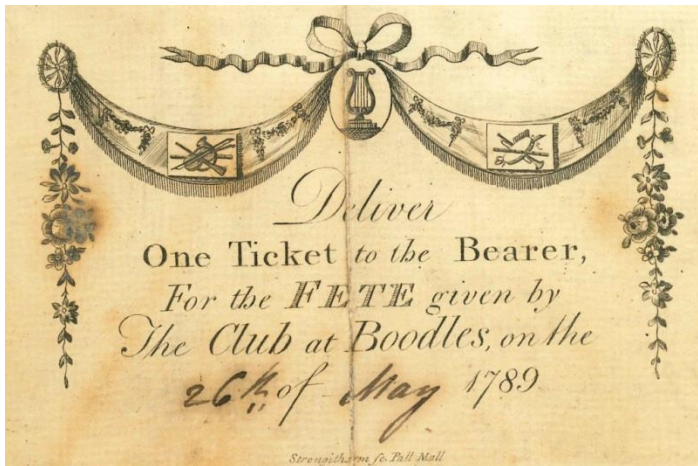


**Manuscript of the Month**  
**May 2013**

**Request for a ticket to Boodle's Fête, May 1789**



One hundred years ago this month, the Royal Horticultural Society held its first Chelsea Flower Show in the grounds of the Royal Hospital. In May 1789, however, part of the showground formed the backdrop for a very different occasion; a fête given by Boodle's Club at the Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens to celebrate the recovery of George III.

Six months earlier, in November 1788, George III had suffered a mental collapse that triggered a political crisis and

prompted calls for the Prince of Wales to be declared Regent. So great was the uncertainty, that the King's subsequent recovery in February 1789 was greeted with an outpouring of joyous relief. Some even went so far as to dub it the second Restoration. On the night of 9 March 1789, the façade of nearly every house, business and public office in London was smothered in illuminations – coloured lamps arranged to form shapes or words – or transparencies – enormous painted sheets that turned entire buildings into works of art. Variegated lamps suspended across East India House in Leadenhall Street spelled out 'Long Live the King'; the exterior of Drury Lane Theatre was obscured by a crown of golden lights, studded with diamonds, rubies and emeralds, resting on a cushion of crimson lamps; Lord Heathfield draped his home with a transparency depicting the Siege of Gibraltar; ironmaster and bank customer Alexander Brodie served roast beef and plum pudding to passers-by from a huge ship's stove, decorated as a Chinese pagoda, outside his premises on Carey Street. As the *London Chronicle* put it: *London might truly be said to have exhibited one continual blaze of exultation...from Kensington to Greenwich, and from Hampstead to Tooting. All the inhabitants seethed to vie with each other who should testify their loyalty in the most conspicuous manner...Every child in London seemed out of doors; and those who could not walk, were in the arms of their mothers. Only the Quakers desisted, the Barclay and Bevan banking families among them, although their abstinence was recognized as being exceptions from excess of a religious opinion, not from any deficiency of political zeal.*

For the next two months, Britain continued to celebrate. Thanksgiving services were held up and down the country, the grandest of which, at St Paul's Cathedral on St George's Day (23 April), was attended by the King and Queen. Mary Frampton, later a bank customer, wrote in her journal: *While they [the King and Queen] were coming up to the door of St Paul's, the band played God Save the King, and every hat was in the air, and the acclamations very great...On the King's entrance, the 6000 children in the dome struck up the Hundredth Psalm.* Among the countless local celebrations, Earl Waldegrave entertained 350 poor people to dinner at Navestock, Essex, Cambridge students were given a day's leave and the Colonel in charge at Woolwich provided a butt of porter for his soldiers to drink the King's health with. Most splendid of all, however, were the numerous receptions, balls and fêtes held in honour of the King's recovery. Another bank customer, Fanny Burney, Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte, attended the Queen's Grand Restoration Drawing Room on 26 March, noting in her diary that she wore *a suit in silks upon tiffany, most excessively delicate and pretty* and was later presented with a fan inscribed 'Health

Restored to One and Happiness to Millions'. At the Princess Royal's Windsor ball on 1 May, ladies wearing bandeaus emblazoned with the words 'God Save the King' danced all night, pausing only to partake of a sumptuous supper composed of twenty different soups, boned ducks, cygnets and landrails swimming in transparent jelly, confectionary arrangements standing four feet high and an abundance of hothouse fruits: pineapples, strawberries, nectarines, peaches, cherries *from the Kentish to the Morella* and raspberries. The gentlemen's clubs too made strenuous efforts to demonstrate their loyalty. White's, the leading Tory club, gave a ball at the Pantheon Assembly Rooms on Oxford Street (now Marks & Spencer), so popular that carriages laden with ladies decked out in white dresses and feathered white silk headdresses were forced to queue for two and a half hours. Not to be outdone, Brooks's Club, frequented by the Whigs, who, as vociferous supporters of the proposed Regency, felt obliged to make a particularly conspicuous splash, held a ball at the Opera House, swathing the auditorium in blue and buff silk, the Whig colours, trimmed with gold fringe. Surpassing them both, however, was the fête given by Boodle's Club.

Arrangements for Boodle's fête got underway as soon as the King's recovery was officially announced. The venue, Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens, Chelsea, was secured. Tickets, priced at 3½ guineas, were put on sale and the dress code decided upon: green coats over white waistcoats and breeches for members, Windsor dress (dark blue coats trimmed with scarlet) for non-members. By the end of April the subscription list was full and 1,600 tickets had been issued. Who the ticket requested on the card illustrated here was destined for is unclear, although one possible candidate could be Boodle's member Henry Merrik Hoare.

Events at Ranelagh took place in one of Georgian London's most familiar landmarks, the Rotunda. Larger than the Coliseum and modelled on the mighty church of St Sophia in Constantinople, the Rotunda had been hosting suppers, concerts and masquerades since the 1740s. Canaletto painted it in 1754 and seven year old Master Mozart – billed as *the most extraordinary Prodigy, and most amazing Genius that has appeared in any Age* – performed several of his own compositions there ten years later. Two tiers of painted gilded boxes lined the Rotunda's perimeter, enabling visitors to dine or drink tea, while the centre was dominated by a huge rococo style fireplace. On the night of Boodle's fête, the Rotunda was transformed into a supper room. Four boxes, decorated with roses and crimson swags, were set aside for use by the Prince of Wales, his brothers and friends, among them Mrs Fitzherbert, a twice-widowed Roman Catholic whom the Prince of Wales had secretly married in 1785. The remaining boxes were similarly laid up for supper parties and an additional four long rows of tables placed across the central floor. Among the novel touches remarked on by guests were the bowls of flowers along each table and the use of chairs instead of benches.

Not content with the Rotunda, however, the fête's organizers also erected two temporary buildings, the first of which was designated the Grand Saloon. Made from painted cloth and measuring 150ft by 100ft, it was reputedly the largest temporary building ever constructed in England. Twelve pillars, festooned with lamps, held the structure in place, while at either end multi-coloured lanterns formed a star and a crown. Most extraordinary of all, though, was the ceiling, where nearly 30,000 lamps merged to form a single blaze of variegated light. Its like had never been seen before. But no less remarkable was the second temporary building, the Temple of Flora. Here, under the steady gaze of Flora herself, pillars of imitation marble clad with honeysuckle and roses mingled amidst tubs of orange trees and other hothouse plants. Once again, the room was illuminated by a profusion of variegated lamps, some of which, shaped into a large star, glistened over a watery cascade.

On the night of the fête, many guests chose to make their way to Ranelagh by boat. Wind bands serenaded them as they glided along the Thames and military salutes greeted their arrival. Mary

Frampton recalled: *I was not out in the world then, but was permitted to go [to the fête] given by Boodle's Club at Ranelagh...I was dressed as a grown-up person for the first time, and wore powder, then the mark of distinction of womanhood. My dress was a black body and pink slip, with a crape petticoat, ornamented with pink bows, puffing, etc, and feathers in my hair.* Canopies were dotted around the gardens for the guests to walk under, military bands stationed at strategic points and two orchestras recruited for the dancing – country dances in the Grand Saloon, Cotillions in the Temple of Flora. At 1am the bands struck up 'Rule Britannia' and the doors of the supper room were flung open. Afterwards, according to The Times, *the company got very merry and some songs were sung.* The dancing, meanwhile, continued until after 5am.

Clearly the fête's organizers were determined to spare no expense. The supper alone was rumoured to have cost £1,200 (c. £120K today), while the temporary Grand Saloon added another £800 to the bill. For the guests too, the festivities were proving a costly business. As Lord Bute's daughter, Lady Louisa Stuart, wryly observed after paying £30 (c.£3K today) for her Windsor ball dress and £24 towards a dress for White's ball, *Loyalty is a most expensive virtue at present.* Surprisingly, however, once all the expenses had been paid, Boodle's was actually able to donate a surplus of £215-18-11 to the Philanthropic Society, a newly established charity that aimed to divert convicts' children and young offenders from a life of crime.

A week after the Boodle's gala Ranelagh was the scene of another fête, hosted by the Spanish Ambassador. *To particularize the elegancies of this Grand Gala would be endless, and almost impracticable,* enthused The Times, *it was the grandest entertainment ever seen in England, and shewed what the taste of foreign countries could accomplish.* The Rotunda's lower tier of boxes was shrouded by linen sheets painted to resemble Spanish tents, while part of the upper tier was disguised as a Chinese temple. Supper, featuring exotic fruits and wines imported from Spain, was served on gold plates, and the guests waited on by two hundred footmen, half of whom were dressed in scarlet edged with gold lace, the remainder in sky blue and silver lace.

The guest of honour that night was Queen Charlotte, resplendent in Garter blue and diamonds. The princesses hovered round her, while her sons held court in several boxes nearby, although it was noted that *The Duke of York came to Ranelagh House in boots, and consequently did not mix with the rest of the company.* (The Times, 3 June 1789) After a display of Spanish dancing given by thirty children, the guests moved to the back of their boxes and watched twenty sailing boats, illuminated with lamps, skim up and down the Thames, letting off fireworks as they went. But the highlight of the evening was a lottery. Six hundred prizes, one for each lady, were given away, among them rings, bracelets, fans, pearl pins, medallions of the King, commemorative boxes, etui cases, pocket books and sashes. The top prize, a gold watch studded with diamonds, fell to Miss Eliza Sturt and according to the Bath Chronicle: *When Miss Sturt was declared the fair winner...Mr H--re exclaimed, "Tho' party colours blaze in party eyes, Unaided beauty carries off the prize!"*

While the fêtes and balls each lived and died in a single evening, the Temple of Flora bloomed on for several years. The day after Boodle's fête, the public were admitted to view the Grand Saloon, the Temple of Flora and the Rotunda for just 3/6d, tea and coffee included. And so popular was the Temple in particular that a month later its creators installed a replica – the original having been reputedly bought by the Duke of York for his new garden at Oatlands – on the Surrey side of Westminster Bridge. For a shilling, anyone could spend the evening walking through *this elegant and ingenious Imitation of Nature, in her Floral Attire,* admiring the statue of Pomona in the hothouse and marvelling at the illuminations. *Orgeats, Lemonade, Confectionary, Strawberries, Cream and Fruits of every sort, with other Refreshments, will be served on the most reasonable terms* promised the management. Within months, however, the novelty had worn off and the

Temple's proprietors were forced to come up with increasingly bizarre ways of attracting people through the doors. Sales of artificial fruit, automatons, even a goldfinch trained to fire off a small cannon, all featured at the Temple over the next year or so, while in September 1791 Londoners were invited to watch Signor Valsuani the Celebrated Grimacer: *His inimitable Comic Expression of Countenance is truly beyond conception, and he is allowed, by the first Persons in the World who have seen him, to be the greatest Mimic ever beheld.* Ominously, the advertisements added, *The strictest care will be taken that no improper persons shall be admitted.*

It was too late, however. The Temple of Flora, once a magnet for London's elite, had become the haunt of prostitutes and other disreputable characters. The end finally came in May 1796, when the Temple's owner was convicted of keeping a disorderly house and imprisoned for six months. In his summing up, the judge commented that the Temple of Flora *was frequented by apprentices, etc from 13 to 18 years of age and by women of the town, and that many indecencies were practised there, and warned it was in such places, where youth contracted habits of debauchery and idleness.* The Temple of Flora closed its doors forever.

By then, though, the world seemed a very different place. Seven weeks after Boodle's fête, a Parisian mob had stormed the Bastille, plunging France into revolution and sending shock-waves across the world. By 1796, Britain was at war with France, battling political and social unrest at home and struggling against an economic downturn so severe that the Bank of England was forced to suspend payments for a time. Even the King's recovery proved to be short-lived. Three further bouts of madness followed that first one, the last of which, in 1810, was so severe that he never recovered. The Prince of Wales was appointed Regent and Britain looked forward to an uncertain future.