

JOHN PARRY (1727-54) – AN INFAMOUS EARLY FIVES CHAMPION

At the age of 27, John (or "Jacky") Parry had every reason to consider himself a success in life. From his humble (though respectable) origins in Pontypool, Monmouthshire, his education and personality had brought him to London. He had worked for a career diplomat, and had also seen 14 months service aboard HMS Eagle in the Mediterranean as the Captain's clerk. After a spell of unemployment, he had fallen on his feet and landed a job as household steward to a titled aristocrat which gave him ample leisure about London to indulge his favourite sport of fives, at which he was no mean performer – some said that he was the best player in Europe. He was also very much a success with the ladies and no doubt attributed this to his fashionable clothes, tall slender physique with light eyes and his modish curled wig. And yet Parry was to throw all this away and end his days as the most notorious fives player ever.

The cause of his downfall may well have been the women (if not, then it was the gambling). After his service in the Navy, there was an unfortunate episode with the wife of a London publican. The lady stole £60 from her husband and absconded with Parry. Seven weeks later, she returned; without the money and without Parry, to be reunited with her spouse. When Parry himself reappeared in London, he spent his time hanging around the fives courts and other louche venues near the gambling dens of Covent Garden. But it brought him his great opportunity.

One of his cronies about the fives courts was the steward to the recently widowed Dowager Marchioness of Rockingham, who had decided to resign to go into business on his own account. Parry applied for the vacant post, and with the benefit of a recommendation from the outgoing steward, secured the job himself. At the age of 23, in the London household of the mother of a future Prime Minister, life must indeed have seemed on the up to the young Parry.



Lady Rockingham's house was in fashionable Grosvenor Square.

But this was the London of the 1750s and the veneer of Georgian civilisation could hide depraved undercurrents. The fives courts operated by Mr Higginson in St Martin's Lane, near Leicester Square, were noted as a centre of gambling where young men might easily be led astray and Parry was known to sample the delights of the "nymphs" at Haddock's notorious "bagnio" near Covent Garden, his favourite being an obliging wench called Molly G***e.

In July 1753, Parry succumbed further to temptation. He embezzled a considerable sum of money from his employer – said to have been as much as £1,100 – and fled. Departing in the dead of night, he hired a post chaise and headed for the Channel, arriving at Dover at 10-00 am the next morning. There he took a packet boat to Calais and posing as a Welsh gentleman by the name of Lewis, he proceeded to Paris. Here he intended to remain, but first he needed to obtain fashionable clothes, as befitted a person of his assumed status, and that of the manservant he had acquired en route. An order was placed with an Irish tailor in the city "Monsieur Murphy". Parry characteristically lost no time in attempting to seduce the tailor's 18 year old daughter, the delectable Sukey.

Paris in the mid 18th century was not short of fives courts and Parry was soon to be found on the European fives circuit. "He cut a great Figure at the Tennis-Court there, and beat the best players in Paris; and 'tis thought he was the best Players [sic] at Fives and Tennis in Europe. In this, if I may say so, he had an excellence; but 'twas such a one as a man of his station in life had no reason to be fond of; for this among others proved his ruin."

Meanwhile, back in London, Lady Rockingham realised that her steward had absconded and the scale of his defalcation soon became apparent. The Dowager was not inclined to let matters rest. She advertised in the press for news of her errant servant, offering a reward of £50 and giving a description of Parry, down to a recent cut over his right eye, another cut on his right hand, and his light scratch wig with one curl. Private detectives were hired, who swiftly got onto Parry's track, identifying each coaching inn where he had changed horses as he headed for the Channel coast.

Despite his assumed name, Parry was arrested at the request of the British Ambassador to France and thrown into jail under a lettre de cachet. This enabled some of the stolen money to be recovered, but as this was essentially a civil matter and no crime had been committed in France, Parry was released on paying the appropriate fees to the French authorities. He lay low for a time and then set sail from Marseilles for Venice, with the residue of the money. Here he again got entangled with a married woman and there were ugly stories that he had played a hand in her husband's death in a duel. Certainly he left Italy hurriedly and returned to London, disembarking at Woolwich on 22 March 1754.

WHEREAS John Parry, a Servant out of Livery to the most Hon. the Lady Marchioness Dowager of Rockingham, hath absented himself since Seven o'Clock at Night, Monday July 30, and has carried off a considerable Sum of Money belonging to her Ladyship, this is to give Notice, that whoever will secure and bring the said John Parry, Servant to her Ladyship's House in Hill-Street, shall receive Fifty Pounds Reward. He is a remarkably tall, thin Man, with light Eyes, and generally wears a light Scratch Wig, with one Curl, and has a Foretop of his own Hair; he has lately had a Blow and Cut over his right Eye, and another on the middle Finger of his right Hand, and the Marks are at present very visible. Among several other Sums of Money, he has taken Eleven Bank Notes, to the Amount of 395 l. The Numbers of the following are only known at present, viz

No. 98, for 50 l. payable to E. Hutchinson, dated to June, 1752
 99, for 50 l. payable to ditto ditto
 145, for 25 l. payable to Matt. Collett, dated 5 July 1753
 222, for 25 l. payable to James Newton, dated 1 June ditto
 11, for 25 l. payable to Matt. Collett, dated 28 June ditto
 601, for 25 l. payable to S. Barnes, dated 24 July 1752.

The remaining Notes are, one of 100 l. three of 25 l. each, and one of 20 l.

August 1.

Lady Rockingham offered a reward for news of her thieving steward in the London press.

As he was now practically penniless, Parry needed money desperately, and he was not concerned as to how he got it. Two nights later, he borrowed a brown mare and held up a Miss Murrell who was returning home in her chariot. He presented his pistol to the lady and relieved her of 7 guineas, her gold watch and a diamond ring. Parry had become a highwayman, whose brief career was to throw London society into turmoil.

Over the next two nights, Parry held up and robbed five more private coaches passing through the fashionable streets of London. One contained Dr Ambrose Dawson, the prominent Old Giggleswickian society physician, who was being driven down Berkeley Street. The gold watch purloined on this occasion was promptly pawned at Gilbert Scriven's establishment in nearby Swallow Street for 9 guineas.

Ambrose Dawson described the incident thus: 'On the 27th of March, between seven and eight at night, my chariot was stopped as I was near my Lord Bath's in Piccadilly, it moved on, and then stopped again; on hearing a noise in the street I imagined there might be another coach before mine; soon after I perceived a man on horseback at my chariot door, and heard words which seemed to be directed to me; I thought it was "Let down your glass": I let it down, and then I saw a man with a pistol in his hand; I think I said, "What would you have, sir?" He said, "Your money, sir;" I gave him two guineas into his hand, he then asked for my watch, which I gave him.'

These exploits, and those which followed, caused consternation in the West End of London. Never before had the gentry and quality in the City been held up at gunpoint in their own carriages in the streets so close to their fashionable residences. The constables were ordered to patrol the streets and vigilantes accosted single men on horseback demanding to know their business. It was one of these patrols, led by William Norden, which, with the aid of a large bitch which could scent out and detain a rogue, captured Parry. He was taken before Henry Fielding, the magistrate and early novelist, and thrown into the Tothill Fields Bridewell. The following Monday, he was brought back before Fielding, who committed him to Newgate for trial at the April Sessions at the Old Bailey.

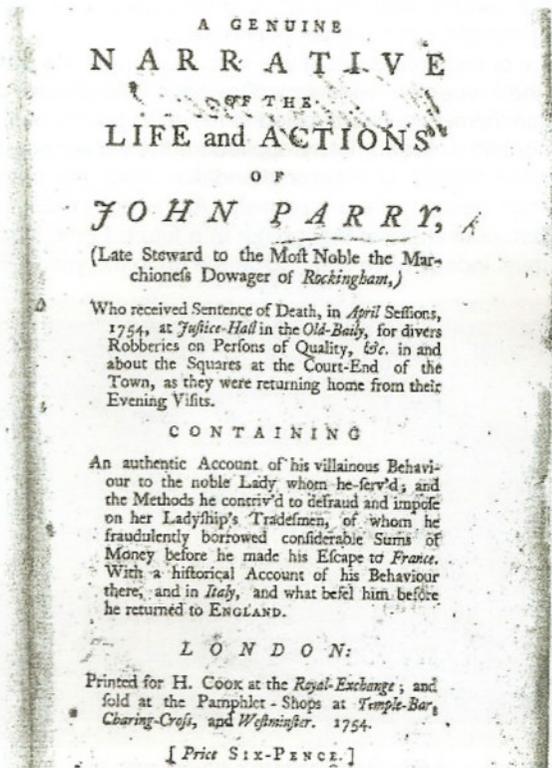
His case came up for hearing on 24 April 1754, when he was indicted for the assault on and highway robbery of Dr Dawson. Dawson, the pawnbroker Scriven, and the constable Norden gave evidence against him. When asked for comment, Parry could only reply "As these people have sworn so positive to me, I can say but little". It was not

necessary to proceed with three other charges. Parry was found guilty of the robbery of Dr Dawson. He was immediately sentenced to death, and returned to Newgate to await execution.



*Dr Ambrose Dawson.
His evidence sent Parry to the gallows. © TIR*

News of Parry's exploits aroused great public interest and he became something of a popular hero. A sixpenny pamphlet was published, giving (so it claimed) authentic details of Parry's life and exploits. Parry had mixed feelings about this, and when interviewed by John Taylor, the Ordinary (i.e. prison chaplain) of Newgate after his sentence had been passed, gave his own version of events for the record, and in particular vehemently denied that he had been involved in any murder in Italy.



Parry's life story was sold at 6d a time

On Wednesday, 5 June 1754, at about 9-00am, John Parry and another convict, a thief called David Edom, were taken from their cells and put into an open cart for their final journey to Tyburn for execution. There was "... a vast Crowd of People, the Streets all the Way being crowded on both Sides as they passed along. When they came there, they were ty'd up to the fatal Tree, and some Time was spent in Prayer, as usual, and recommending their souls to God, who gave them. They both behaved very much as became their unhappy Case. Parry prayed aloud, and very fervently. Edom did the same, but not with so audible a Voice; and so they continued to do, till the Cart was drawn from under them. After hanging the usual Time, their Bodies were delivered to their Friends."

Thus perished the most notorious fives player ever. John Parry was described thus: "Perhaps there was a not a man of greater agility in England, nor one who understood the game of Fives better, or could play it so well; yet the frequent and expensive excursions he made to these places of rendezvous, often drain'd him of his cash, and put him on such expedients to replenish himself as was sure, one time or other, to end in his certain ruin."

"Parry's favourite game was fives, which is a diversion and exercise as well as Tennis, and was formerly a game but for few Gentlemen, as that was; but as men and things are generally grown worse and worse, so is this too, and strangely degenerated from an innocent, inoffensive diversion to be a perfect trade, a kind of set calling and occupation for cheats and sharpers."

Any biography of our modern fives champions would surely appear colourless by comparison with the life and career of the notorious Jacky Parry!

Ian Roberts

The report of Parry's trial which prompted this research is available on the Internet in Old Bailey Trials. The sixpenny pamphlet chronicling Parry's life is preserved in the British Library, which also has microfilm copies of the newspapers containing Lady Rockingham's adverts. Ambrose Dawson's portrait is owned by his direct descendent Robert Bell to whom I am indebted for permission to take the photograph which accompanies this article.