OLD TOWNS RE-VISITED—XLVIII

THE ANCIENT PORT OF LYMINGTON

By BRYAN LITTLE

1.—THE SALTERNS WITH THE TIDE EBBING. The Yacht Club is on the right and the Isle of Wight in the distance

NOWADAYS it is far from easy to envisage a time when between Poole Harbour and Southampton Water no larger places existed than Christchurch, Milford and Lymington. Yet a century and a half ago no Bournemouth had come into being, and on the New Forest side of Christchurch the coastal strip had yet to witness the dire subtopia that has now swept most of the way from the mouth of the Salisbury Avon to the outskirts of the old town of Lymington itself. But when one reaches old Lymington (a mere segment of the vastly expanded modern borough) the picture is far more that of an ancient town that has, for centuries and in varying ways, made all or part of its living from its sinuous river haven and from the tidal flats that stretch down to the waters of the still unsullied Solent.

Like many of our old seaports, the town of Lymington was once the seaward limb of an older, more rustic parish. In Lymington's case that older settlement was Boldre, two miles up the Lymington River or Boldre Water; till 1870 the status of Lymington's large church was only that of Boldre's chapel of ease. In the Middle Ages, however, the port and manorial borough of Lymington ran far ahead of the town's ecclesiastical status. The main factor in local prosperity was salt; the manorial lords who granted Lymington its civic privileges were the successive Redvers or Courtenay holders of the earldom of Devon.

It was Richard de Redvers, the father of Baldwin de Redvers, the first holder of the Devon earldom, who obtained the grant of Lymington from Henry I. Along with it went Christchurch and the lordship of the Isle of Wight. Thus the Redvers family, already owning great estates in Devon, were also established as powerful figures in the highly strategic area of the coast commanding the most convenient approach to Southampton Water. They soon became the founders both of Plympton and Christchurch priories. About 1200 William de Redvers gave its first charter to the borough of Lymington, which must already have become a harbour-side town of some consequence. Isabella de Fortibus, the last of the Redvers line, disposed of many of her family's Hampshire holdings to the King. But Lymington, with a few interruptions, remained for some three more centuries with the Courtenays, who succeeded to the earldom of Devon, and the Courtenay arms are those that hang from the mainmast of the mediæval ship in the town's arms. As a borough Lymington long sent its Members to the unreformed House of Commons; among them were the historian Gibbon, and the father of Cardinal Manning.

2.—LOOKING UP RIVER FROM THE YACHT CLUB. One of the Isle of Wight ferries is coming in

Mediæval Lymington spread back, up the steep beginning of the hillside and then over its more gentle slope, from the focal point of its Town Quay; a few quay-side buildings like the Stone Cellar still show some rough stonework that may be of so early a date. The prosperity of Lymington was doubly based. The quay was the place for the handling of ship-borne merchandise. Down river the estuarine flats were divided into the expanses of the salterns (Fig. 1), which for centuries produced a good proportion of the salt consumed in the southern counties of England. The town, like other Channel ports, would send off its ships on royal service. As a rival of Southampton, it

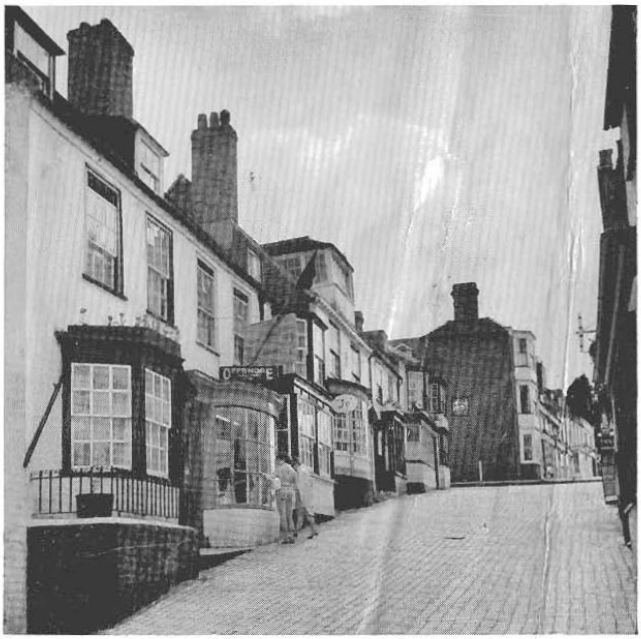
3.—THE EAST END OF THE CHURCH AND A GROUP OF GEORGIAN HOUSES. (*Right*) 4.—LOOKING UP THE HIGH STREET FROM THE LOWER END

shared in the wine trade, and it acted as a port for Salisbury. New Forest timber was among the cargoes shipped out from the little quay, but no commodity was more typical of Lymington, or more important for its welfare, than locally produced salt.

Some of the flat expanses of Lymington's salterns were close to the town, but for the most part they were spread over the wide flats between Lymington itself and Keyhaven or Hurst Castle. Production was by means of open-air evaporation in the wide, shallow pans, and then by boiling, which was the final process by which the briny water was treated indoors to become a fine powdery salt of excellent quality. The water would evaporate in the open air till it attained seven times its natural salinity. It was then drawn off into rows of shallow, oblong trays, and these trays, in the salty steam of the barnlike salthouses, were kept boiling, over fierce fires that never went out from Monday morning to Saturday night, till the solid salt could be raked away for final drying. Like the sugarhouses of Bristol, the salthouses of Lymington were something to show visitors. Celia Fiennes has given us an excellent description of them in the 1690s. When Rowlandson came in 1782, his drawing of the inside of a salthouse was among the most vivid of those with which he graphically recorded Georgian Lymington. Some of the salthouses would have nearly 30 trays at work; they stood, as one now disused for such purposes still stands, at the end of lodes cut in from the open estuary to bring them their coal and bricks and to take away their salt. About 1804, when the Lymington salterns were beginning to decline, they still made about five thousand tons of salt a year, most of it for consumers in this country, but some of it sent out to Newfoundland for use in the curing of the salted cod produced there by the fishermen of Poole. But in time the competition of Cheshire's mineral salt proved overwhelming, and in 1865 the last Lymington saltern raked out its final pans.

In our own century the salterns of Lymington are no more than a place name (in King's Saltern Road, for example) and a historic memory. More obvious are the activities of Lymington as a shopping centre and as a famous yachting port. For the first of the two we have, in the main, to walk from one end to the other of Lymington's spacious High Street (Fig. 4). The curvature of its profile, flat for some way at the top, and then the slightest of downward gradients before a steep drop towards the river, prevents one from scanning the whole length of this street at one glance. Only in the topmost section does one fully enjoy the admirable sense of defined enclosure that is caused by the position of the church, not sited away to one side of the street but endways athwart its eastern end. So there is no complete vista as one looks west past the delightful Georgian houses of the upper town. The kink in the road and the tower and east windows of the church arrest one's glance and demand an architectural inspection.

The church of Lymington was dedicated to St. Thomas the Apostle, not to Becket, who was later honoured as its patron. Its architectural changes have been strongly pronounced. Embedded in the chancel's masonry are some graceful 13th-century lancets; the "Decorated" north chapel was built by the Courtenays. The



5.—MONMOUTH HOUSE AND QUADRILLE COURT NEAR THE CHURCH. (*Right*) 6.—PROTRUDING BAYS AND BOWS ON QUAY HILL, THE STEEP COBBLED STREET DESCENDING TO THE HARBOUR

body of Lymington church is now, in the main, a galleried and pillared late-Georgian building. But the church's boldest feature is the tower on the south side, with a sturdy cupola that is conspicuous in the view down the street. The base, like the chancel's east window, is of the 15th century, but the simply designed upper stage, resembling the 17th-century tower of Portsmouth Cathedral, was built in 1670, when a Southampton builder named Michell ran it up for just over £380. Among the church's Georgian memorials is one by the younger Bacon to three Naval officers named Rogers who all died in the West Indies, in 1794 and 1795, of yellow fever contracted while they were serving in the same ship. Another tablet is to a young son of Sir Harry Burrard, the locally dominant baronet, an ensign in the Guards who was Moore's aide-de-camp at Corunna and who died of his wounds on passage home. Artistically more notable is Rysbrack's fine draped bust to Charles Colbourne, a prosperous lawyer, who died in 1747. This legal worthy had come to Lymington on some important business in the 1730s, and remained there till the end of his days, a popular figure, devoted to bull-baiting and carousals, and accustomed to drive around in a "handsome gingerbread carriage with four black Flanders mares."

7.—NEAT GEORGIAN FRONTS IN NELSON PLACE

West of the church few Lymington houses are of any architectural note. Close to it, however, are some of no small charm. In Church Street the pleasant little late-Georgian row of Serampore Place is a simple foil to the more solid bulk and deeply mellow red brick of a much larger house, of about 1770, which lies across the way. Still nearer to the church an older grouping is composed of Monmouth House and the "Queen Anne" ensemble, sympathetically restored in 1911 and set behind wrought-iron gates, of Quadrille Court (Fig. 5). The main block of Monmouth House, with stone-framed oval windows, a heavily rusticated front doorway, and an inner staircase of the late Stuart period, must be of about 1670; a block at the back is slightly later but assimilated to the "Restoration" façade. The house has no certain links with the Duke of Monmouth himself, but Lymington had many Monmouth sympathisers, and its Mayor led a troop of locally raised horsemen in the rebel army. The story runs that after Sedgemoor a few of these Lymington rebels were gathered in this house, and that Mrs. Knapton, its lady, helped them to escape.

In a guide to spas and watering places that came out in 1810 the compiler notes that Lymington mainly consisted of one long street and that "the buildings are in general decent, and some of them rather elegant." We too, despite the ravages of later shopfronts, may likewise admire the taste of the Georgian builders who refaced or newly built the houses of High Street. Just east of the church three houses in a delightful group have "Adam" details, while, a little lower down, Old Bank House shows Doric columns as an element in its early-19th-century frontage. Close to it, a tall, striking house, in yellow brick, and with all four storeys curving out in a vertical bow front, was once the Post Office, News Room and Circulating Library when Lymington was frequented by "company"; its library was said, in the 1810 guide, to "furnish a tolerable invitation" to reading in a place which boasted "few amusements . . . which can engage the gay, or relieve the languor of the old." Across the street some individual houses are of note. No. 47, for instance, is an excellent brick mansion of about 1750, with cross arches to dignify its hall and an oak staircase with nicely fluted newels and two twisted rails for each tread. Grosvenor House, by way of contrast, has a dignified Grecian façade with Ionic three-quarter columns so much like those of the Baptist Chapel of 1835 that one may safely hazard the same designer for the two. But the Congregational Chapel, set back from the street, with its pinnacled silhouette and a plaster vault behind its imposing giant arch, is Gothic in the manner of the "Commissioners'" churches designed by Francis Goodwin. Surprisingly enough, it was built as late as 1847.

Of the various market houses and town halls that once stood in the central sector of Lymington's High Street none now survives. The last of the town halls, a free-standing, early Georgian structure on piers and arches, succumbed in 1858 to the needs of Victorian wheeled traffic. The leading building in this area is now the Angel Hotel, with its disused Assembly Rooms and attractive Regency façade.

The previous hostelry of that name, to say nothing of its charming landlady, figures much in the lively set of Lymington drawings that Rowlandson did during his visit in 1782 while he and a friend were on a devious journey from London to Portsmouth to view the wreck of the *Royal George*. Below the Angel are more Georgian frontages, some specially charming little houses in a beautiful red brick, and now at last the steep roadway, its picturesque high pavement on one side, drops sharply down to the more assertively nautical district of Lymington.

The short thoroughfare of Quay Hill (Fig. 6) is the perfect approach to any harbour-side quarter. It is steep, cobbled, and unvehicular. Its houses are charmingly bow-windowed and have Georgian pedimented doors. Along Quay Street one is soon at the Quay, and there, where Rowlandson sketched protesting cattle being

8.—THE QUAY AT HIGH WATER. (*Right*) 9.—THE CROWDED HARBOUR: LOOKING DOWN RIVER FROM THE QUAY THROUGH A MAZE OF MASTS AND STAYS

10.—THE YACHT CLUB AND PIER. (*Right*) 11.—THE HARBOUR MASTER'S OFFICE. This hexagonal building of 1833 was originally one of the bath houses for indoor bathing

shipped to the Isle of Wight, one looks along the river gaily crowded with yachts and smaller craft. A little way up the hill the "tolerable thoroughfare" (to quote a local writer of 1825) of Captains' Row has charming little houses, perhaps of about 1730, for retired skippers. Round the corner, of a rather later date, is the "neat and uniform terrace" of Nelson Place (Fig. 7) with its prospect towards the Isle of Wight. Down river one passes the building yards and the Harbour Station, whence rectangular car ferries ply gingerly down the fairway and so past the many swaying masts of the yachts at anchor. For yachting, above all, is now the mainstay of the estuary that once shipped little but salt.

By 1830 the seaborne trade of Lymington had fallen on evil days. A century earlier, the building of a solid dam, or causeway, across the tidal stream had caused the lawsuit that brought the jovial Charles Colbourne to Lymington. The case went against those who objected to the dam, and the absence of a tidal flow silted up the river and for long ruined its capacity to receive ships as large as 500 tons. Compensations had thus to be found. They came in Lymington's attractions as a residential neighbourhood, as a minor watering place, and still more from its eventual yachting fame.

A reasonable nearness to Portsmouth and its views over the Solent and its passing ships made Lymington a place of some attraction for half-pay or unemployed Naval officers who looked for a home ashore. Behind the town the New Forest had charms for both residents and visitors. For these last the salt water baths were developed. No bathing was possible in the Solent itself, but, as at Southampton, sea water was pumped to indoor baths and there became available irrespective of tide or season.

The earliest of the bath houses no longer stand. But the one near the modern Yacht Club, now used by the Harbour Master, is a most admirable little building of 1833, hexagonal, with projecting wings and a Roman Doric portico (Fig. 11). The architect, who is otherwise unknown to fame but who may have been responsible for the Baptist Church and Grosvenor House, was named William Bartlett.

When this bath house down by the estuary and the salterns was built Lymington had started on its career as a yachting haven. Merchantmen and revenue cutters had long been built there, and then a new impetus came from an important private source. Joseph Weld, of Lulworth Castle, had recently succeeded to his family estates, which had been made over to him by his widowed elder brother, Thomas, who now started on the clerical career that eventually saw him a Cardinal. The Welds had another house at Pylewell, not far on the eastern side of the river's mouth; it became Joseph Weld's chief summer rendezvous for his passionately pursued hobby of yachting. In 1820 Weld started to build a yacht at his private hard, but he later moved his operations to Lymington itself.

He was there joined by many well placed yachting friends whose requirements for new vessels could give ample work to a local building trade. So Thomas Inman securely established his famous yard. For Joseph Weld he finished or built the *Arrow*, *Lulworth* and *Alarm*, which all won great fame. These vessels, along with others for prominent owners, for a time made Lymington England's chief yacht-building port. It now shares the work with many other harbours in the Solent area and elsewhere, but maintains a high place among the yachting harbours of the South Coast.

12.—THE OBELISK COMMEMORATING ADMIRAL SIR HARRY BURRARD-NEALE. Designed by George Draper

Our last visiting point, not in the town itself but on the gentle Walhampton slopes across the river, must be the tall obelisk, which rises in the middle distance exactly in line with the descending High Street (Fig. 12). When Joseph Weld was building his first racing cutters at Lymington, the leading naval resident was Admiral Sir Harry Burrard-Neale. He was a baronet, who had added the Neale name to his own and held the place in local society long held by the Burrards of Walhampton. He was often an M.P. for Lymington at a time when the Burrard dominance of the borough was past challenge.

His naval career had been of some distinction; its glorious peak was in 1797 when at the mutiny at the Nore his ship, the frigate *San Fiorenzo*, was the only unit in the fleet wherein loyalty was unbroken. For this achievement, as we find from the obelisk's interesting if wordy inscriptions, Burrard-Neale received the friendship of George III and the thanks of the City of London. In 1797 the *San Fiorenzo* was the man-of-war in which the Princess Royal was taken over to the Continent on her way to become Queen of Würtemburg, and a few years later, Sir Harry twice entertained George III, Queen Charlotte, and a bevy of the young princesses at his Walhampton home.

The Admiral died in 1840, and to commemorate him the obelisk was put up on a site that was scenically approached, from the river side, by a charming avenue of trees. With its concave cornice and winged scarab devices, it is of markedly Egyptian type, and a handsome achievement of its architect, George Draper, who exhibited the design at the Academy and had earlier designed various buildings in the neighbourhood of Southampton. The money was partly found by local people, but royal friends were not unmindful of Sir Harry, and the plaques inform us that contributions came also from two of George III's surviving daughters, the Princess Augusta and the Duchess of Gloucester, and from the Dowager Queen Adelaide. A private person cannot often have been so honoured by such a consortium of royal ladies.