‘Strategies of Condescension’: Taming John Bull Through the Inversion of Spaces, 1809-14.

In this paper I aim to look at one particular space – the quayside at Great Yarmouth – and one particular occasion in 1814 when the existing social hierarchy was ostensibly inverted so as to strengthen it further. But first, a word of context. 1809: Britain was diplomatically aligned with *Ancien Regime* Europe, suspicious of the recently-unleashed dangers of democracy, reliant upon a populace whose perceived morals, activities and political leanings it did not trust, locked in a war with an ideological enemy, France. It was sixteen years since Louis’ execution. British loyalists had, superficially at least, defeated the radical threat in the public sphere: rhetorical arguments of patriotism, monarchy, nation and constitution had been monopolised by proponents of the status quo, after a bitter war of words and, sometimes, blows.[1] Yet, though an alliance of political loyalists and Christian moralists had won this war of hearts and minds on paper, it was a different story on the ground.

This recently-united kingdom was not a strongly centralised state, lacking a police force to extend the short arm and myopic eye of the law. Moreover, Britain’s boast was its freedom and liberties; Bonaparte was the tyrant, after all. This put the administration and its adherents at a disadvantage when attempting to control the forms of entertainment and expression enjoyed by the mass of its subjects. From the early 1790s onwards, the solution employed had been a vast propaganda campaign initiated more or less spontaneously and simultaneously by groups across the country, best typified by Reeves’ Association, whose main goals were political, and Hannah More’s Cheap Repository Tract society, whose main goals were moral. By producing and disseminating ‘popular’ literature of all kinds, from songs to sermons, these groups sought to control the language, tone, and values of popular culture, even if they could not change its forms or supervise its spaces of action. But the shortcomings of omnipresence alone, without omniscience and omnipotence, were a constant worry.

The popular spaces regarded as alien and physically uncontrollable ranged from the obvious – pubs, rookeries, brothels – to the seemingly innocuous – hedgerows,

[1] The literature on this phenomenon is extensive; see H. Cunningham, ‘The Language of Patriotism, 1750-1914’, *History Workshop Journal*, 12 (1981), pp. 8-33 or K. Gilmartin, ‘“Study to Be Quiet”: Hannah More and the Invention of Conservative Culture in Britain’, *English Literary History* 70/ 2 (2003), pp. 493-540, for an introduction.

fields, and fairs. The *Belfast Monthly Magazine* grizzled that 'In every market and fair of our country villages, some itinerant musician bellows out a panegyric on debauchery, riot, and splendid ruin; and sells the destructive doggerel as fast as he can hand it out.'[2] This was clearly a problem. Yet to attempt to physically penetrate these spaces in the name of officialdom would arouse suspicion, and defeat the loyalist movement's mildly condescending aim: to educate and instruct the common man without his being aware of it.

On rare occasions, social groups *did* intermingle in cultural space. J. Plumptre, a Cambridge professor of music, unusual for a humanities academic in that his main hobby was temperance, stressed the importance of inclusive occasions such as harvest festivals, where responsible social superiors could influence general conduct: 'much good might be done, if the superiors would not only join in the songs, but occasionally sing a single song; it would recommend the best songs' – for Plumptre, that meant songs against, rather than in favour of, intoxication.[3] But, in the natural course of things, and especially in urban settings, these 'superiors' almost never ventured into popular spaces.

It might be thought an obvious solution to throw open private spaces of elite entertainment to the masses, spaces where messages could not only be tightly controlled, but where the surrounding iconography and splendour of theatre or pleasure garden would lend its weight to those messages. But the problem with letting in the rabble was its tendency to behave as such. George Davis' satirical poem *Saint Monday* described how the 'low-life' would grab a cheap seat in the gods at the theatre, ruefully observing that 'Each *Deity's* sublimest pleasure lies / In giving way to uproar, shouts, and noise.'[4] It was bad enough being exposed to ballad-singers in the streets; in the age of the Covent Garden theatre price riots, there were understandably no moves to democratise spaces of polite entertainment. For the 1814 Jubilee, when a hundred years of Hanoverian rule was celebrated alongside the General Peace, Vauxhall Gardens *raised* their admission price to three shillings,

[2] Belfast Monthly Magazine, 4/22 (1810), p. 321.
[3] J. Plumptre, *A Collection of Songs Moral, Sentimental, Instructive, and Amusing* (London, n.d.), p. 20.
[4] G. Davis, *Saint Monday; or, Scenes from Low-Life: A Poem* (Birmingham, 1790), p. 10.

rather than throwing open the gates to all and sundry.[5] Other bastions of high society followed suit.

If popular spaces could not be infiltrated in person, and private spaces could not be laid open, that left only public spaces. Large public festivals required suitable occasions, and in 1809 and 1814, two presented themselves – 1809 was George III's golden jubilee. These represented glorious opportunities to stage-manage popular, public celebrations. Such opportunities came with risks attached, of course. At that time, the word 'jubilee' had problematic religious connotations of redistribution, even revolution, that appealed to radicals, like Thomas Spence's circle.[6] And even a loyal crowd, once assembled, had the potential to be overzealous. The spectre of the Gordon Riots of 1780 loomed large in the public mind in this period. Some newspapers expressed fears of the elderly and infirm being dragged out and made to dance to death.[7] Illuminations were widely banned because they normally led to a worked-up crowd destroying public property. Therefore, in most British towns and cities, sober elements prevailed, and there were no inclusive jubilee 'gatherings' in 1809 *or* 1814.

There were other reasons for this, of course. Charity and thrift were the watchwords of the day. Most importantly, there was no central orchestration of celebration. The bodies responsible for commemorating the Jubilees were largely municipal corporations: conservative, business-like men not much given to experimentation. On the day itself, then, the usual story was that of Abingdon:

> From church the troops marched to the Market Place, where a *feu de joie* was fired. The Mayor entertained the better classes at the Town Hall, and the poor, to the number of 2,000 men, women, and children, were well looked after.[8]

'Well looked after' normally meant a charitable visit to individual homes. Thus civic, religious and military authority was combined in public spaces, but there was no especial attempt to entertain the masses in those spaces. The only major cities to offer something more were those with self-consciously distinctive local cultures:

---

[5] T. Preston, *The Jubilee of George the Third* (London, 1887), p. Li.

[6] For a full discussion, see M. Chase, 'From Millennium to Anniversary: The Concept of Jubilee in Late Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England', *Past and Present* 129 (1990), pp. 132-47.

[7] Semmel, 'Radicals, Loyalists, and the Royal Jubilee of 1809', *Journal of British Studies* 46/.3 (2007), pp. 543-69, p. 551.

[8] Preston, *The Jubilee*, p. 8.

Cambridge, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Brighton. In Cambridge, the halls of the colleges were used to dine the poor of the local parishes.[9] In Newcastle, local burgesses waited on the dependents of the recently-built Freemen's Hospital on the adjacent public green.[10] In Edinburgh, the ships in the harbour erected scaffolding, and opened their decks and rigging to the jostling crowds.[11] And in Brighton, the Regent, striking an oddly Biblical note, found some room in the stables. The Royal Riding House, part of the new Pavilion, hosted a typically opulent Saturnalian set of revels. One hundred of the city's 'principal inhabitants' acted as servants for more than two thousand 'poor people', regaling them with beer, beef, and plum pudding. Each steward served twenty people, and helped lead the toasts, singing, and conversation.[12] In this instance, the term 'poor people' is unhelpfully vague; yet it is consistently the case in these celebrations that the 'poor' are those deemed in need of charity: those on the parish, the families of absent soldiers and sailors, seasonal labourers – effectively, all those who would have fallen outside and beneath Sieyès' definition of the Third Estate, if that definition were transposed to England. The urban 'elites' were similarly heterogeneous, an alliance of burghers and gentlemen, distinguished by the occasional aristocrat; those who made up polite society and felt themselves bound by *noblesse oblige*, even if many were far from noble.

By temporarily inverting their social status, Brighton's elites were able to impose greater authority than usual on their inferiors, hoping to reap the benefits of gratitude and respect, from below and from their peers, for this highly visible act. This act was made possible by staging the event in what was at least a semi-public, urban space, where form and etiquette could be safely dictated. Pierre Bourdieu would refer to this as a 'strategy of condescension': one 'by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to exist, thus reaping the profits of the recognition granted to a purely symbolic denegation of

[9] Ibid, p. 37.
[10] Ibid, p. 168.
[11] Ibid, p. 69.
[12] Ibid, pp. xxi-ii, 31-2. The Prince was merely the host, the festivities being organised by one P. Mighell: see R. Sickelmore, *An Epitome of Brighton, topographical and descriptive…* (Brighton, 1815).

distance.'[13] For one day only, worthy citizens removed these distances. Indeed, they went further, casting themselves as mock-inferiors, servants more than hosts. Such a symbolic, Saturnalian role reversal, clearly only strengthens the true social hierarchies involved.

Five years later, however, even the Regent's grand Jubilee in Hyde Park reverted to conventional notions of space: the poor roamed as they wished, uncontrolled, whilst the polite element was corralled inside a sort of 'golden circle' – which meant many missed the mock sea-fight on the Serpentine. The occasion was universally denounced as a disaster, for various reasons; not least that

> For the eye, not the stomach,
> This was a grand treat;
> There was plenty to *look at*,
> And nothing to *eat.*[14]

Indeed, just about the only place in the kingdom that really seemed to impress in 1814 was Great Yarmouth. Spatially, there were two fascinating aspects to this celebration. One was this Saturnalian element of inverted social and physical space. But before that, the location of the festivities within the town merits special attention.

A helpful town plan may be found at the following address: http://adamscottage.co.uk/history/yarmouth1797.jpg. The date is disputable, as the same print was used in an 1819 history of the town, boasting of the improvements of the past decade.[15] Looking at this map, deciding where to hold an enormous public feast for the poor, the traditional, obvious choice is clearly in the north-east of the town. The church square of St Nicholas, the Market Place, and the yards of the Work House and Charity School, provide a connected, open, accessible site, surrounded by the physical incarnations of the institutions immediately associated with charity and the poor. But instead, Yarmouth's committee of citizens opted for the quayside – a longer, narrower, altogether less usual setting for such an event.[16] The burghers of Yarmouth were extremely proud of their quay – it was the second largest in Europe, and, as this sales pitch boasts, had just been extensively modernised and gentrified.

---

[13] P. Bourdieu, 'Social Space and Symbolic Power', *Sociological Theory* 7/1 (1989), pp. 14-25, 16.
[14] *Morning Chronicle*, 3 Sep. 1814.
[15] J. Preston, *The Picture of Yarmouth* (Yarmouth, 1819), frontispiece. It is from this work that the images accompanying this paper as delivered were taken.
[16] Though it was not uncommon for major ports to conduct festivities on their quaysides rather than in their squares, our only other example from 1814 is Edinburgh.

Not only was it the site of the town hall, coincidentally also enjoying its one hundredth anniversary, but it boasted a fine new custom house, and state-of-the-art bridge. The quay might be said to be the heart of the town, especially when one remembers the final detail: a host of shipping, Yarmouth's lifeblood, and a magnificent spectacle.

> His Majesty's Ships in the roads, and every ship in the harbour, had their colours flying; and a profusion of flags were suspended across the Quay, from the attic windows of the houses, to the masts of the ships in the river.[17]

Just across the river were the dockyards, naval yard and armoury, a suitable backdrop to the shipping itself, expressive of industry and martial might. Besides these institutional landmarks, the ordinary houses on the quay-front were mostly new, gentleman's residences, marks of power and taste. By choosing to hold the feast for the poor where they did, Yarmouth's elite were lifting the lesser inhabitants out of their customary space of essentially medieval charity and daily life in the north-east of the town, and symbolically including them in the modern, upmarket centre. This temporary relocation shifted the context from charity to prosperity, from market-trade to high commerce, from work-house to custom-house. It was civic zeal and local patriotism at its most inclusive – if also at its most temporary. And of course, this also solved Plumptre's propaganda problem: everything eaten and drunk, toasted and said, sung, seen, and done, carried a controlled patriotic message.

A full account of the festivities may be found in Yarmouth's invaluable commemorative pamphlet, a glowing testament to the town's pride at its own professed success: 'no city or town has celebrated its rejoicings in a more rational, benevolent, or novel manner, than the ancient burgh of Great Yarmouth.'[18] Of the fifteen scripted toasts at the dinner, the last four were to the town, corporation and committee. And the day had indeed been planned to perfection. Besides a feeding of four thousand, donkey races and an enormous victory bonfire were held, with processions of local youths dressed up in uniforms throughout the evening. All these additional events were planned with the admitted intention of preventing disorder and

---

[17] *A Narrative of the Grand Festival, at Yarmouth, on Tuesday, the 19th of April, 1814* (Yarmouth, 1814), p. 9.

[18] Ibid, p .2. That sentence alone, with its potent mix of connotations, would merit a full article's discussion.

rioting; the crowd was still to be feared. A glance at the table plan corroborates this idea of crowd management.[19] The tables are mostly strung out, each forming a discrete, controlled community within the whole, where two officials – referred to euphemistically as 'peace officers' in public, and more prosaically as 'constables' on the expenses-sheet – could assist each table's temporary servants in maintaining order.

We should not be overly cynical about a celebration with genuine charitable intentions. That said, the occasion certainly witnessed strategies of condescension. By holding the feast on the quayside, not the obvious squares, and adopting a Saturnalian mode of conduct, its organisers used a translocation and denegation of physical space, supplemented by an inversion of social space, to assert unprecedented control over those lower in the social hierarchy. This temporary illusion must have aspired to longer-term effects, as its target – the feasted inferiors – were meant to retain a sense of gratitude and common cause with their social superiors in the town, besides receiving a boost to their local and national sense of patriotism.[20]

Whether this was truly the case remains to be seen – for reasons of space and focus of argument, this paper must restrict itself to intentions. Our topic is the strategy itself. If the immediate and long-term effect upon the feasted poor is lamentably intangible for us, the feast's planners must also have been unable truly to gauge the success of their endeavours. Accounts spoke of 'the multitude of the poorer class of the inhabitants, with happiness beaming in their faces' at the table, yet it is probable that all the self-congratulation masked a wider array of responses, which the true social distance between 'host' and 'guest' rendered unknowable.[21] Yet the organisers also hoped to reap a profit of recognition among their peers – and to prolong this effect, the commemorative pamphlet numbered each table, proudly listing the benefactors of each for posterity. For an aspiring businessman, this was a chance to appear alongside nobility, united in charitable patriotism.

I shall end with a curious note on this matter of 'condescension'. At Great Yarmouth, as was also the case everywhere a public feast for the poor was held – from Newcastle and Brighton, to little villages like Petersham – the lowly revellers

[19] Ibid, pullout.
[20] See Chase, p. 142, for a fuller articulation of this loyalist attitude.
[21] *A Narrative*, p. 18.

had an audience, referred to in the literature as 'spectators'. Twenty thousand strolled round the tables at Yarmouth, indulging their 'curiosity'.[22] At little Petersham, Lord Kerry invited the worthies of the neighbourhood to his balcony, 'the better to see and witness the entertainment'.[23] The customary analogy for crowd surveillance in this period is Bentham's Panopticon: in this case, a petting zoo might be nearer the mark. Though the feasters were hopefully too concerned with their meal to resent being made an exhibition of, this inevitable element of the gawping Georgian bourgeoisie, goggling at 'the lowest order of society' stuffing its face, completes the picture of condescension nicely.[24]

Oskar Cox Jensen (Christ Church College, University of Oxford).

[22] Ibid, p. 17.
[23] Preston, *The Jubilee*, p. 187.
[24] *A Narrative*, p. 6.