

THREE WEEKS OF JOURNEYS, ECCLESIASTICAL CEREMONY AND ENTERTAINMENT IN KENT: LETTERS FROM MARY YORKE, 1774

ANTHEA JONES

James Yorke, Dean of Lincoln and newly-appointed bishop of St David's, was chosen to assist Archbishop Cornwallis in his Visitation of his diocese of Canterbury in June/July 1774.¹ Yorke (1730-1808) was the younger brother of the 2nd Earl of Hardwicke,² whose wife was Marchioness Grey. Yorke's wife, Mary (c.1744-1823), wrote three lengthy letters to the Marchioness and her eldest daughter Amabel describing her experiences during the Visitation. The Kentish correspondence, part of a much larger collection, was preserved amongst the De Grey letters at Wrest Park.³ Two of the three letters quoted below were penned immediately after the Visitation had ended, but the first was sent early on in the journey, from Sittingbourne.⁴

Mary Yorke's letters covering the three weeks spent in Kent display not just a personal picture, but give readers today an illuminating insight into the life of the upper echelons of the Church of England at that time. Spelling, abbreviations, capitalisation and punctuation are mainly modernised in these extracts, to avoid reducing their immediacy, with a few exceptions including Ld for Lord and Bp for Bishop, and underlinings to give a flavour of the originals. She always signed herself simply 'MY'.

The James Yorkes left their home at Forthampton, Gloucestershire, for London in late June and then set out for Rochester and Canterbury.

June 30th 1774 12 o'Clock Sittingbourne [to Marchioness Grey] [L30/9/111/49]

This place is in as fine a fuss Dear Madam as you can suppose, however the Bps are now gone to church & I am sat down to compose myself by thinking of your Ladyship & at the same time returning my thanks for your very kind note received just before I set out. Our tour sets out very successfully, the Bp of St David's & myself are both very well except a little limp in the foot, which gives an air of dignity proper for the occasion. The road we came on is beautiful beyond anything I am used to see, & the weather as favourable as could be wished. The first scene that struck my eye was Black Heath & its environs particularly Sir G Page's.⁵ The road from thence to Rochester runs almost all the way upon the banks of the Thames, noble views of which are continually opening between the gentle declivities of the neighbouring hills. One delightful scene broke in upon us at once near a Seat that did belong to Lord Besborough



Fig. 1 A miniature by Philip Jean (1755-1802) is held by family tradition to be of Mary Yorke, painted about 1790, when she would have been 45 years old. Jean was patronised by George III and other members of the royal family. A lock of thick fair hair at the back suggests Mary was younger than the impression given by the conventional powdering. (Reproduced with the kind permission of John Yorke.)

& which I should have liked to have walked over if I had had time.⁶ After that we descended into a lower part of the country & pleased ourselves with observing the neat enclosures of hop gardens & cherry orchards, when suddenly rising out of this retired part of the road Chatham & the Thames in all its glory ornamented with ships of all sizes appeared before us; we never lost sight of it again for many moments till we reached the winding Medway & Rochester. This town is I think not a pretty one ...

This morning we sallied forth from thence [*Rochester*] at 8 o'Clock & whipped up with his Grace before ten. Our airing here was very entertaining in a different way. Indeed soon after we left Rochester we commanded a near view of the noble scene of Chatham which had appeared at some distance from us the night before & could now count 17: 3 mast of first rate ships besides small ones innumerable (alas the poor Severn how I shall despise you when I return?).⁷ From this time forward my attention was entirely confined to the road itself, which now began to have evident marks of a visitation. Sometimes we passed a reverend Divine upon a sober Pad,⁸ sometimes two stuffed into a one-Horse Chair; then four or five tidy lads with silk handkerchiefs round their necks, some in clean white frocks, others in fustian suits, perhaps as many lasses in straw hats & clean linen gowns all trudging on foot, till we came nearer the town [*Sittingbourne*], when the plot thickened & we drove before us Girls in Waggons, on Foot, Horseback, every way surrounded with Boys, old Women, Clergy, Church Wardens, & Parish Clerks without end, the Bp himself bringing up the rear. Thus we entered the town in the midst of dust noise & bustle, I must confess to my no small amusement, though I am desired to keep the muscles of my face in the greatest composure throughout the whole Visitation, & not betray any risibility of disposition.

The room I am in is over the Gateway where the carriages are continually rumbling, over head is I believe half the Clergy of the Neighbourhood & their Valets de Chambre preparing themselves & their wigs for the dinner, on each hand of me are apartments taken, & separated only from me by a folding partition, & the passages & staircase continually occupied.⁹ However my room is my castle. Hark I hear somebody bouncing at the door.

'Who's there?'

'I beg your pardon Madam'

'Sir this is my Room'

....

Adieu Dear Madam. The Church is up & there is an hundred tongues under my window

....

My Bp is come in, he says not much tired but his hands very greasy owing to the quantity of pomatum upon the young gentlemen & ladies' heads; he has confirmed about 200. I hear his Grace calling out through the partition 'where is my Lord Bishop of St David's?'. So I suppose they are going to dinner. I would advise them to talk no secrets.



Fig. 2 James Yorke was painted in 1792 by Jean-Laurent Monier (1743-1808, who worked in London 1789-95). After his death in 1808, an engraving was made by C. Turner and published in 1810. (Reproduced with the kind permission of John Yorke.)

The following two letters, one to Marchioness Grey and one to Amabel (less formal in style) were penned immediately after the visitation.

July 18th 1774 Upper Brook Street [*London*][L30/11/339/16]

Guess where I have been Dear Lady Bell since you last heard from me? By the length of time you will be apt I am afraid to say, 'beyond Sea no doubt': and indeed you would be very near in the right, for it is but a very few days

ago since I was in a neat little packet boat with another lady in the harbour at Dover, every thing convenient about us & above half tempted to sail over to Calais, but our Beauxs were not at leisure to attend us, & we thought our party too small without them. To explain this riddle you must know Mrs Cornwallis [*the Archbishop's wife*] & myself have taken the 'Tour of Kent', & made part of a noble Cavalcade of the Arch Bp's. We have been exceedingly fortunate in the mildness of the weather; & the beauty of the country, which is really very great in many parts, made me ample amends for some little inconveniences of removing from one inn to another, dust, crowds etc.

The Bp has indeed had more to do & when I consider the fatigue he went through at Canterbury, & indeed for the whole three weeks, I rejoice he is not ill ...

In the course of my tour nothing struck me more than the awful beauty of the sea (an object intirely new to me). I think I saw it to the best advantage at Kingsgate [*Broadstairs*] where Lord Holland had built a romantic kind of flint castle, surrounded with ruins of the same materials;¹⁰ several ships being in view, full sail, at the same time made the scene more complete. Mrs Cornwallis & I spent one whole day very agreeably at Deal, close by the sea; an 'India Man' being arrived there the day before added much to our entertainment, the numbers of little boats trading about it & running their goods in shore, with at last a chase by the custom house officers a mile into the sea driving the poor frightened creatures before them, was no bad sport. You may guess we did not entirely resist the temptations this same India man flung in our way. We visited Ramsgate and Margate, the former famous for a Pier built at the expense of 150,000£ half a mile into the sea;¹¹ it was intended to secure a good harbour for ships but has failed; the latter for its fine Assembly Room, & good bathing. But if you would wish for a particular account of my travels I refer you to a little book entitled the History of Rochester which is I believe in the hands of all the family, only I must observe the scene of Dover so near the sea with that beautiful castle rising above it, & the uncommon richness of the valley beneath was striking beyond description. We spent a very agreeable day there, while the poor gentlemen laboured, & in the course of three hours saw & conversed with French, Americans (who were in barracks), Norwegians, & honest English Tars, almost as different a people as any of the others.

As for Canterbury itself it is an ugly town. The Cathedral is irregular, but the outside may be called fine; the inside is spacious, but all the elegance of the arches taken off by vile white wash; & the choir fitted up in a modern manner by no means suited to the gothic. In short Lincoln spoils me for all these old churches, I see some impropriety or other that I cannot now find is in our own.¹² Becket's Shrine is only now remembered by being shewn the spot it once stood on.

As for giving you an account of our life at Canterbury & what we did there, I don't think if I was to attempt it, a quire of paper could contain all the particulars; if you are acquainted with Mrs Berkeley,¹³ who is the most busy of



Fig. 3 Amabel, James Yorke's niece, was painted about 1776; the artist is unknown. She did not become the Countess de Grey, the name she is usually identified by, until 1816; in 1776 she had recently married Alexander Hume-Campbell, Lord Polwarth, created Baron Hume of Berwick in 1776, possibly the occasion for this portrait. (Unknown collection; photograph National Portrait Gallery, London, reproduced with permission.)

women, you will easily conclude the rest. She was very obliging and desired to show me every thing & every body so that without exaggeration I was in a bustle from 8 in the morning till 12 at night, for we always had numbers to supper as well as dinner, except when we were at a neighbour's from whence we twice walked home by candle light at the same late hour. One night I own I could not help rallying her on her hospitality, I had been out all the morning seeing sights, dined with a roomful of gentlemen & ladies, received a fresh set of visitors, friends etc at tea, to a catch club (in all I think about 25 of us besides performers), the Bp of St David's had that same day confirmed near a thousand with his own 2 hands,¹⁴ and at half past nine the music being over I ventured to retire to my room to read a letter I received from your mama two hours before, was pursued by my good hostess who came to see if I was ill and upon my asking her if all the company was gone, she answered very cheerfully, 'yes'.

'What all?' says I.

'Yes all but the sixteen that sup with us! & I hope you and the Bishop wont be crowded'.

This answer I own made me laugh, indeed had I been a little more tired than I was, I am not sure whether it would not have had a contrary effect, & have made me cry. I often thought of your phrase of being diverted to death & never was in greater danger.

I don't comprehend what was the reason but every body visited me just as if I was to live there for ever, & the neighbouring great folks & small folks all honoured us with their company; most of them I returned, all indeed in some way or other, but you may be sure we had many invitations we could not accept, of which Lord Sondes' was one to spend the day, so if there is a fine place I lost it.¹⁵ Mrs Cornwallis left her place of residence the Deanery, just four hours after poor Mrs Moore was brought to bed (another consequence of the delays of the visitation), however it was lucky we were all near going ...¹⁶

We dined last Sunday at Maidstone at Lord Romney's¹⁷ at one O'Clock, Church at 3 & Confirmation Church in the morning at 10, brim full both times, was not that another busy day?

The next day 'Lady Marchioness Grey, Wrest', had a final letter rounding off the Canterbury experience.

July 19th 1774 Upper Brook Street [*London*] [L30/9/111/50]

I know Dear Madam you will rejoice with us that we are returned from his Grace's Fete de Champetre & neither of us the worse for our expedition. Indeed had I known beforehand the fatigue the Bishop was to go through, I should have been alarmed for him, the least part of which was his duty in the Church, the greatest the entertaining and receiving new people & faces from morning till night (for the attending Bishop must be his Grace's right hand in every sense of the word & upon every occasion, dinners as well as prayers). If a Mayor & Corporation for instance were entering the Inn door, his Grace would take care to secure his aide-de-Camp by his side before the Mace bearer had ascended the last step of the stairs. Indeed he expressed himself very happy in the assistance he had received,

& both himself & Mrs Cornwallis showed us every civility in their power. She did not join the party till the second night, so was no way concerned in what passed at Sittingbourne, where the history of my travels commenced.

Your Ladyship really received it so favourably that if I had had time you would scarcely have escaped a regular Journal, which however would have consisted of a repetition of the same scenes over & over again at 16 different places, with every little variation but what the beauty of the country afforded. In the evenings if we had time we enjoyed it by half an hour's walk, or if that was not practicable contented ourselves with a Pool at Quadrille with our two youngest Beaux, the Bp of St David's & Dr Calvert the Vicar General. This was at the Inns. How we spent our time [at] Canterbury it is impossible to tell you, only this that my head turns round whenever I reflect upon it. Dr Berkeley & his Lady were indeed very kind & obliging, & did all in their power to amuse us, their spirits are certainly of the most active kind & that added to their zeal for us will sufficiently account for the bustle we lived in eight days, from nine in the morning (or sooner) till 12 at night ...

I don't know whether the account of our pompous entry into Canterbury appeared in any other paper but their own, but I must say I was surprised in that & other instances with the parade & magnificence of the Church of Canterbury so far exceeding what I am used to see in other Churches. When we approached within 4 miles of the town I was told the Mayor & Corporation would meet us; our own Cavalcade was a coach & six, three chaises & 12 out riders. At the appointed spot we were met by six coaches, out of each of which flew three or four persons & stood upon the bank in a body collected. At the same moment alighted with equal activity their Lordships & the Chaplain, & advanced to the bank (& now I found I had been led into a mistake for this goodly company were all dressed in the gown & cassock & were no other than the Dean & Chapter of Canterbury come to pay their duty in all the dust to his Grace). After a few moments spent in the usual compliments they all took coach & led the way to the town. We had not advanced in this grand manner above a mile when we were met by another carriage containing an Alderman in his robes & his attendants presenting the compliments of the Mayor & Corporation to their Lordships etc & begging they would do them the honour of stopping at the Town Hall where they should be ready to receive them & had prepared some slight refreshments. This carriage likewise joined the Cavalcade & followed us into the town. As we approached it was entertaining to see the crowd of people, but when we got actually into the streets they were lined with faces from the tops of the houses to the coach wheels, so that the horses could hardly move. In this manner we proceeded within a hundred yards of the door of the Town Hall, when the first coach stopped & in a quarter of an hour all the eleven had unloaded. The Church was received with great grace by the Corporation, the Mayor making a genteel speech to his Grace upon the joy with which he had filled the hearts of the people by his arrival. The entertainment was a dessert of the finest fruits Ices etc (very refreshing after the loads of dust they had swallowed for the last three miles). As for Liquor, Burgundy & Champagne flew about most delightfully, & when they were all satisfied they proceeded to the Deanery where his Grace was housed.

The next morning we all went to the Choir where there was something solemn & fine in procession of the Arch Bp to his Throne: first arrived the Mayor & Corporation as usual two & two, then began the Gentlemen of the Choir in their surplices two & two. When those of the Chapter entered the Choir door at the bottom, the organ played solemn music, & when their Lordships appeared the Boys accompanied it with their voices, till they arrived near the Throne when the procession opened & his Grace etc walked through the middle of the Chapter, they bowing respectfully. This account you will say would not be at all pleasing on the other side Tweed & therefore I have not ventured to send it to Lady Bell, indeed I did not think there had been so much form still left in our reformed Churches.

The next Sunday the Bp of St David's 'hancelled'¹⁸ his Lawn Sleeves in the pulpit by preaching before a noble large congregation, it was computed there was above a thousand people in the choir, however it was a great pleasure to me and what I did not suppose possible, to observe that they were all so perfectly quiet & attentive I could have thought myself the only one present if I had not seen rows of faces sticking up before me. He did indeed meet as you mention many civilities from the gentlemen of Dover & other places, particularly there I believe his Grace was obliged to him entirely for a visit from the Mayor etc; it seems there had been some difference, & they had declared they would not pay him this usual compliment, however the Bishop of St David's received a letter from them the day before that they would wait upon them both. We might there have lain at a Mr Russels¹⁹ if we had chose it, & indeed had the offer of private houses almost all the way, but we chose to decline them whenever we could, Mrs Cornwallis & I both agreeing we were more at our ease at the Inns than with entire strangers, especially as the gentlemen could not be with us often. We were just three weeks upon our Tour reckoning today as one, & found it upon the whole more agreeable than we expected. The Bishop bore the fatigue with spirit, & I hope won't be the worse for it tho' he complains of feeling more tired now it is over than he did at the time.

Dramatis Personae

The Archbishop in 1774 was Frederick Cornwallis, archbishop from 1768 to 1783. He was by far the most aristocratic of the eighteenth-century archbishops of Canterbury. His wife, Caroline, who gave the ladies of the party the tour of the sea coast of east Kent, was also well-connected, the daughter of William Townshend, third son of Charles, second Viscount Townshend. She had a reputation for 'roust'. She also had a reputation for learning.²⁰ The Archbishop was accommodated in the Deanery during the Visitation, the Archbishop's palace being 'uninhabitable'.

The episcopal scene was familiar to Mary Yorke, who was the only surviving child of Isaac Maddox, bishop of Worcester from 1743 until his death in 1759. Mary married James Yorke on 29 June 1762, when she was 18 or possibly 19; her date of birth has not been found.²¹ James was 32. It proved to be a long and happy marriage.

ENDNOTES

¹ A Visitation by the bishop of a diocese was made every four years, its purposes being to visit the principal church in each deanery, to confirm all those ready to become communicant members of the church, and to meet the clergy of the area.

² Hardwicke was one of Archbishop Cornwallis's patrons. See G.M. Ditchfield, 2012, 'A neglected archbishop of Canterbury? Frederick Cornwallis (1768-1783)', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, CXXXII, 215-34. He was instrumental in securing the bishopric for James.

³ The letters of Mary Yorke have been deposited in Bedford Archives, catalogued L30/9/111 for those addressed to Jemima, Marchioness Grey and L30/11/339 for those to Amabel. Transcripts of the letters were kindly made available to the author by John Yorke of Forthampton Court.

⁴ It was routine on the archbishop's Visitation to conduct confirmations at Sittingbourne (and next at Faversham) before proceeding to Canterbury. See Ditchfield, 2012, 'A neglected archbishop of Canterbury', 221.

⁵ Sir Gregory Page built a magnificent mansion on the edge of the heath. It was illustrated in *Picturesque views of the principal seats of the nobility and gentry in England and Wales* (1788). Sir Gregory died in 1775, and his heir, Sir Gregory Turner, became Sir Gregory Page Turner. He sold all the ornaments in the house, and then sold the house itself, which by 1788 had been demolished. https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection accessed 22/1/2019.

⁶ 'Ingress is a seat, built on the bank of the Thames, adjoining to the hamlet of Green-hithe'. It was acquired in 1748 by William Viscount Duncannon who 'greatly improved this seat and the grounds belonging to it, with much elegance and taste, and resided here, with his lady ... till her death, which happened in 1760'. He then sold the property, and in 1774 it was owned by John Calcraft esq. Edward Hasted, 'Parishes: Swanscombe', in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*: ii (Canterbury, 1797), pp. 399-421. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol2/pp399-421> [accessed 22 January 2019]. Did Mary Yorke have a guide to the various Kentish seats?

⁷ Having launched *HMS Victory* in 1765, the 1770s saw considerable expansion of Chatham Dockyard and its further development as a shipbuilding centre.

⁸ A slow-paced horse.

⁹ Mary Yorke's party were almost certainly staying at the *Rose Inn*. Hasted states that 'the principal inn in [Sittingbourne] is the Rose, perhaps the most superb of any throughout the kingdom, and the entertainment afforded in it equally so ...'. *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, vi (Canterbury, 1798, reprinted 1972), p. 152.

¹⁰ Henry Fox, 1st Baron Holland, built a second Holland House at Kingsgate (Broadstairs) between 1762 and 1768. On either end of the cliffs above the bay he built what is now the Captain Digby Public House and Kingsgate Castle. The 'castle' was one of several follies in the grounds of Holland House, intended as its stable block and staff accommodation.

¹¹ The modern development of Ramsgate harbour had begun in 1749 and was not completed until the mid nineteenth century.

¹² James Yorke retained his office as Dean of Lincoln in addition to becoming bishop of St David's.

¹³ Wife of Sir George Berkeley one of the Six Preachers at Canterbury Cathedral and so had a house in the Precincts in which the Yorkes apparently stayed.

¹⁴ *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1774) 330-331 has a list of the churches visited and the dates during the 1774 Visitation of the churches in the diocese. Confirmations were held at Faversham, Canterbury, Ashford, Ramsgate, Sandwich, Dover, Elham ('where there had been no confirmation since Archbishop Wake's time'), Hythe, New Romney, Tenterden, Maidstone and Lenham. Over four days in Canterbury 2,500 were said to have been confirmed. In the 1778 visitation, 7,478 people altogether were confirmed. (*pers. comm.*, Prof. G.M. Ditchfield, acknowledged with thanks).

¹⁵ Lees Court, Sheldwich, near Faversham, was the house MY missed seeing. The estate reaches into three parishes: Badlesmere, Selling and Sheldwich. It was bought in 1600 by Lord Sondes and the house was built in 1652; it is now listed Grade I. The estate has passed through daughters as well as sons and there have been a number of changes of family name. In 1760 Lewis Monson Watson was created 1st Baron Sondes. Edward Hasted, 'Parishes: Sheldwich', in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, vi (Canterbury, 1798), pp. 481-498.

¹⁶ The Dean of Canterbury was John Moore, 1771 to 1775; in 1770 he had married his second wife, Catherine, who was 'brought to bed' at the end of the Visitation. She was the daughter of Sir Robert Eden of West Auckland.

¹⁷ Charles Marsham, 3rd Baron Romney (1744-1811), created Earl of Romney 1801, whose seat was at Mote Park.

¹⁸ Meaning damaged or rubbed?

¹⁹ Michael Russell was mayor of Dover in 1755 and 1762. In 1781 he was painted by George Romney with Dover Castle in the background and was described as Agent Victualler of Dover. Maison Dieu House, built in 1665, was originally the office and house of the Agent Victualler of the Navy who controlled the supplying of the Channel Fleet, and was used as such from the reign of Queen Elizabeth until after the Battle of Waterloo.

²⁰ Ditchfield, 2012, 'A neglected archbishop of Canterbury', 218.

²¹ The marriage settlement dated 25 and 26 June 1762 stated that she was '18 or thereabouts'; one of the properties included in the marriage settlement, a house in Arlington Street, London, was to be passed to trustees within six months of her attaining her majority to form part of the provision for their children. She was 21 by 12 April 1765 when the house was transferred. Gloucestershire Archives D2240 Box 14. The monument in Forthampton Church should possibly have said that she was in her 81st year when she died on 30 December 1823.