

MICHAEL HOY, 1758-1828: RUSSIA MERCHANT

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ABSTRACT

Michael Hoy was a successful Russia merchant who lived and worked for many years in that country. Subsequently he resided at Walthamstow, trading from an office in the City, and serving a term as Sheriff of London. His last years were spent in Southampton and the Isle of Wight where he owned large houses and much land. He married twice but died childless and his fortune was dissipated. Records of many London institutions and his bank accounts reveal him to have been an astute businessman associating with many prominent financiers, bankers and politicians of the day. In addition he was a well-known philanthropist.

The name Michael Hoy is not unknown in Southampton. An article on the great houses of the area refers to him as owner of Middanbury House and builder of Thornhill Park (Vale, 1983) in the early nineteenth century. He is also mentioned in various registers, and occasionally in a local newspaper. His name is more often heard on the Isle of Wight, where he erected a monument rising 72 feet above the Northern end of St Catherine's Down. Its conspicuous position ensures that he is not forgotten. It is usually only the keenest walkers, however, who climb the steep slopes to see its commemorative plaque. This reads:

In commemoration of the visit of His Majesty, Alexander I, Emperor of all the Russias, to Great Britain in 1814. In remembrance of many happy years residence in his dominions this pillar was erected by Michael Hoy

Michael Hoy's story is not easy to trace as no letters or diaries, and few personal papers have been found. His biography is gleaned from such sources as official lists, bank accounts and newspapers. His associations with Southampton were more for leisure and retirement than as his work base. However, his life-style is typical of the successful businessman of Regency times, and he lived in the

city at one of its most popular and prosperous eras.

Hoy was born, probably in London, about 1758 (SRO, PR1/1), the son of 'Richard Hoy, Merchant, of Piccadilly' (CLRO, CF1/1220). In his youth he went to St Petersburg, and set up as a general merchant (Cross, 1973, 242) serving the British community there. He was accepted as a member of the Russia (or Muscovy) Company (one of the Merchant Venturer Companies founded in the sixteenth century) in July 1786 (GL, MS 11741, Vol 8, 195).

Succeeding Tsars had granted special privileges to this Company which, by Hoy's time, was well established importing the manufactured goods needed there, and exporting raw materials such as iron, timber, and furs. About 500 British men, women and children, lived and worked in Russia in the latter half of the eighteenth century (GL, MS 11192B).

Returning to England at the end of 1786, Hoy married Hannah Ramsay of South Stoneham at All Saints Parish Church, Southampton (SRO, PR1/1), in January of the following year. He went back to Russia, presumably taking his wife with him, and was still there five years later when he became a member of the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers (CLRO, CF1/1220).

Soon after that, however, he returned to England, and from 1797 to 1822 leased Shern Lodge, Walthamstow (WFRO, W55.61, 28-54). He went into business as a Russia Merchant with offices at Bishopsgate (GL, Holdens Triennial Directories; PO Annual Directory). In September 1798 he bought his Freedom of the City of London, so becoming eligible for public office and establishing himself as one of the capital's leading citizens (CLRO, CF 28/8).

For some years he was in partnership with a man named Bellis, first in Russia (Cross, 1973,



Fig 1. Michael Hoy. By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

242), and then in London (GL, Holden's Triennial Directory 1799-1801, 355). Little is known of this man, and the association ended about 1807. Hoy then opened an account with the Bank of England (BERO, DO Ledgers). This account shows him to have been very prosperous, the turnover running into thousands of pounds each month at a time when £300 a year was considered a substantial income. His clients and colleagues included many people whose names predominated in banking and business then and are still well-known to-day, including Coutts, Barclay, Hoare and Lubbock. He also bought shares in two modern enterprises, the Thames and Severn Canal and the Wilts. and Berks. Canal, and in the Albion Fire Insurance Company (WFRO, W96 Col 4/1).

Michael Hoy obviously wanted to be known socially, too, and joined some of the societies for self-improvement that were springing up in Georgian England. Among these was 'The London Institution for the Advancement of Literature and the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge', which established a library and arranged such events as lectures on scientific subjects. It was inaugurated in May 1805, and Hoy's name appeared as a member in 1807 (GL, MS 2822). He was elected also to membership of the Society of Arts (later the Royal Society of Arts) (RSA, MS Subscrip. Books). And when shares were sold to raise money to rebuild the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, Hoy invested in five £100 shares (WFRO, W96 Col 4/1), entitling him to a free seat there for life (*Times*, 2 Sept 1812).

He bought land, as did so many merchants, and no doubt this helped to raise his social status. His first purchase, in 1809, was part of the Worsley estate on the Isle of Wight (IWRO, Hermitage Box). He gradually increased his land holding till he owned some 1,700 acres in the South of the Island. From about 1810 Hoy began to interest himself in local affairs both there and on the mainland at Southampton. So he became one of the Highway Commissioners as road improvements began on the Island (IWRO, HC/1, 2), and, in 1811, joined the Isle of Wight Institution

which was similar to the one in London and founded the same year (IWRO, Newport Institution). He later bought shares in the Building Fund for the construction of the Institution's Headquarters, still to be seen in Newport. Hoy was a shareholder in the Ryde Pier Company from 1813 (IWRO, HG/2/611, 2), which was to improve access to the Island in the early part of the nineteenth century. Steam packets were introduced in the 1820s for the Solent crossing and he was among shareholders in two of these, the 'Medina' and the 'George IV' (WRFO, W96 Col 4/1). Southampton was one of the first towns to be lit by gas, and Michael Hoy, quick to see the possibilities of the system, had shares in the Gas Company (WFRO, W96 Col 4/1).

Perhaps 1812-13 marked the peak of his career when he became one of the two Sheriffs of London, the other being his friend, John Blades, of the East India Company (*Times*, 25 June 1812). That year must have been very busy and exciting as Hoy participated in many Royal and civic occasions. There were banquets, receptions, and processions, and all the usual business of the Mayor and Corporation. The background in international affairs was, of course, dominated by the Napoleonic Wars, and the part played in these by Tsar Alexander I of Russia.

It was the following year, June 1814, that the Tsar visited London and Portsmouth. Alexander was hailed as the Saviour of Europe from Bonaparte. The *Times* reported an ecstatic welcome to His Imperial Majesty (*Times*, 7 June 1814). On this wave of enthusiasm Hoy constructed his monument. It is elegantly built of local stone, and, with its curved dressed blocks, a tribute also to the skills of the masons he employed.

Hoy was spending a great deal of money on other projects, too. He extended and lavishly refurbished his house, which stood at the foot of St Catherine's Down (IWRO, Hermitage Box). An indenture dated 1795 called the property 'Armitage, Hermitage or Snape End'. Hoy no doubt chose the name 'Medina Hermitage' partly after the river that rose in its grounds, and partly to remind him of the

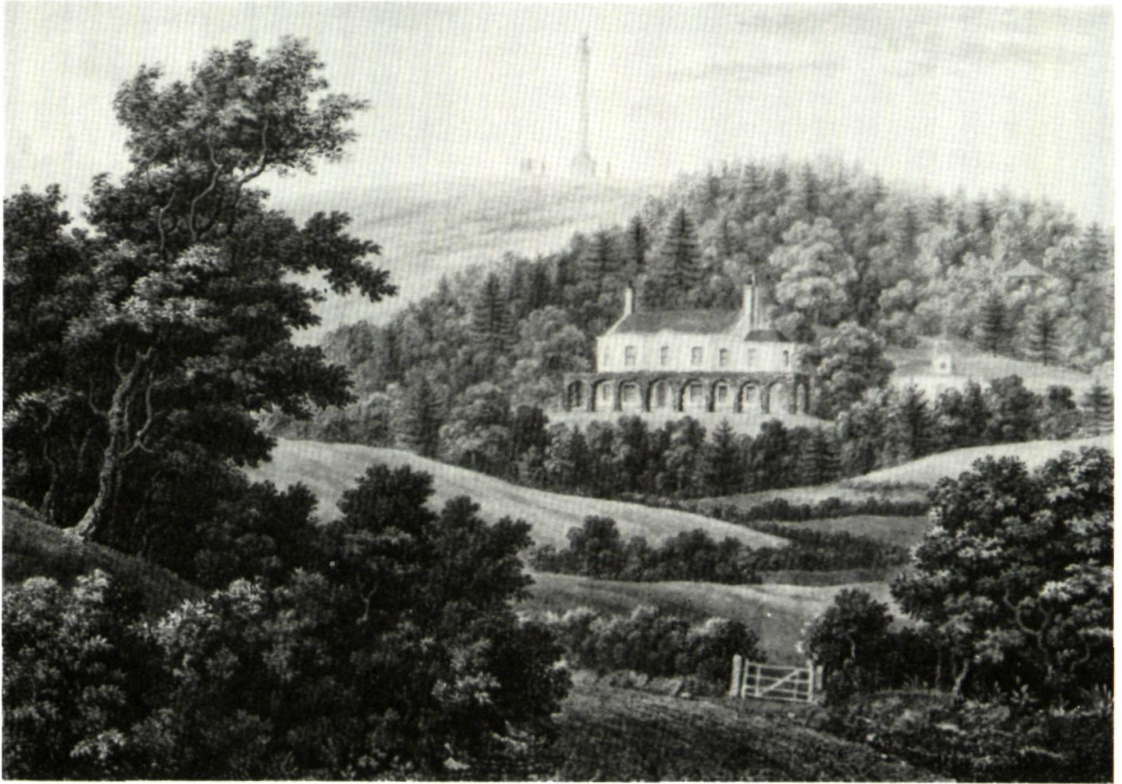


Fig 2. Medina Hermitage, from an engraving by George Brannon. Hoy Monument appears in the background, although in reality this would not have been visible from Medina Hermitage.

Hermitage Palace in St Petersburg. He bought Middanbury House on the outskirts of Southampton between 1815 and 1818 (SRO, PR9/15/36 & PR 9/15/37), and this became his principal residence. Hoy's last land acquisition was made three years before his death, when he purchased the Thornhill Estate, some 430 acres quite close to Middanbury House (IWRO, BD145, 16).

Lack of personal papers means little is known of Hoy's domestic life. His wife, Hannah, was eleven years his senior. She was 41 when they married, and they had no children. She died in 1822 (St George's, Hanover Square). In May 1825, Hoy remarried (*Annual Register* 1825, 200). His bride was Elizabeth Bradley who came from an aristocratic Kent family (Burke, 1853, 134). Perhaps to place a

further seal on his social standing, and as a gift to his new wife, he then set about building a sumptuous mansion to be known as Thornhill Park.

In his latter years Hoy seems to have withdrawn from London and active participation in business, and settled in Southampton to enjoy his money and his position as a country gentleman. He opened a local bank account with Atherley, Fall & Atherley, from which he made regular withdrawals for personal use (housekeeping?) and for 'servants wages' (Lloyds Bank Archives, A43/2b/2, 203). He continued to support William Shayer, a local artist, and was said to have covered his walls with Shayer's work (*Hants. Town & County Herald*, 13 Oct 1827). When the Hampshire Picture Gallery opened in 1827, Hoy became a

subscriber (HC 25 June 1827). Besides this Hoy bought furniture, books and wine (WFRO, W96 Col 4/1). His cellar was certainly extensive being later divided between his widow and his heir, the latter's share being: 1 pipe of port; 1 hogshead of Madeira in wood; 40 doz of Port Wine in bottle; 20 Doz Madeira in bottle; and 10 doz bottle of other wine (WFRO, W96 Col 4/1). He interested himself in the cultivation of his estates and became an Honorary Burgess of Southampton and a JP for the County (Temple Patterson, 1965, 38). No record has been found of Hoy visiting the Isle of Wight after his second marriage; perhaps his wife found the social life of Southampton more pleasing.

Michael Hoy died at Middanbury House on 26 June 1828 (WFRO, W96, Col 4/1), and his remains were interred in his family vault at St George's, Hanover Square. Thornhill Park was not then completed though Elizabeth moved there in the following year (WFRO, W96 Col 4/1), and with her second husband, Captain G H C Mainwaring (SRO, S Stoneham PR), made it her home until her death in 1839 (IWRO, BD145, 38).

Hoy's obituary says he was '... much beloved by his Friends, most esteemed by an extensive acquaintance, and ... will be deeply regretted by them and by a large number of poor dependents, who have been long employed and supported by his liberality and bounty' (HC, 30 June 1828). He showed this liberality by leaving each of his 8 servants a year's wages. His generosity is further confirmed by entries in his bank account showing substantial donations to various local fairs. He also gave his sister-in-law, Jane Ramsay, a home for many years, and left her an annuity of £500 (WFRO, W96 Col 4/1).

Michael Hoy was probably slightly eccentric. The building of the monument suggests this. Also the names of three of his houses had his own initials, M H, Medina Hermitage, Middanbury House, and another on the Isle of Wight called Millbrook House.

His prosperity confirms his excellent business skills. The lack of children to inherit his wealth may have been a great disappointment (he had made quite elaborate arrangements for any possible off-spring in his will). But if he longed for a family, it is strange that he did not choose younger wives. The considerable residue of his estate, however, finally went to his cousin's son James Barlow, who as James Barlow Hoy was to become MP for Southampton in 1830. Even after numerous gifts and annuities to relatives, friends and servants, and paying a substantial sum in Legacy Duty, there remained cash, stocks and shares etc. to the value of £87,663 7s 11d (WFRO, W96 Col 4/1), (in today's terms around £2.5 million), plus houses and over 2,000 acres of land.

The end of Hoy's story seems rather sad. Two of his mansions, Middanbury House and Thornhill Park, have been demolished to make way for housing estates. The Medina Hermitage was destroyed by fire and rebuilt in a less graceful Victorian Gothic style in the late nineteenth century. The furnishings, pictures and books are scattered or destroyed. His land has been sold off, and his tomb, in the former burial ground of St George's, Hanover Square, bulldozed for development. But while the Monument stands on St Catherine's Down he will be remembered – a wealthy merchant, a Georgian gentleman and a notable resident of both Southampton and the Isle of Wight.

REFERENCES

Abbreviations

BERO Bank of England Record Office
 CLRO Corporation of London Record Office
 GL Guildhall Library
 HC Hampshire Chronicle
 IWRO Isle of Wight Record Office
 SRO Southampton Record Office
 WFRO Waltham Forest Record Office

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 Ironmongers
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 Ticket of Personal Admission, No 434.
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 British Factory from Archangel to St
 Petersburg, and other miscellaneous
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BD 145, Large bundle of papers including will and
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 Hoy's second wife, also miscellaneous
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W96 Col 4/1 Collard family papers (M Hoy's execu-
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