

Edmund Rack's 'A Disultory Journal of Events &c at Bath'

The original journal is held at Bath City Library (MS.1111)

Edmund Rack's journal takes the form of letters sent to his relatives at 'Old Samford', now Great Sampford in north-west Essex. Sewn into protective covers, each sheet has been folded once to make two leaves or four pages written on both sides. There is no definite sign of further folding as would have been expected of actually mailed letters, nor any indication of the intended recipient's name and address, so it remains possible that the document represents Rack's personal copies rather than the sent letters themselves. It covers the period from 22 December 1779 to 22 March 1780, but is in part defective, lacking sheets 12-13 and 18-21 which must have contained the entries for 31 January to part of 7 Feb, and 20 February to 9 March. Nothing survives after sheet 25, though Rack offers no hint that he is discontinuing his journal at this point.

In this transcript Rack's original spelling has been preserved, but his capitalisation and punctuation have been regularised to improve legibility. Editorial additions appear within square brackets and notes at the foot of the page. Some of Rack's favourite words have changed their meaning, e.g 'curious' for 'singular'; 'bravely' (in a health sense) for 'fine'.

The journal is an intriguing mix: partly a record of Rack's own day-to-day activities, from the most humdrum to the quite consequential, and his various encounters with other people ; partly his intimate musings on religion, morality, civilisation and other weighty matters; and partly a commentary on life in Georgian Bath – from a scandalous duel on Claverton Down or a performance of Handel's Messiah to the cost of provisions at the well-supplied market. His account of the founding and early meetings of the first Bath Philosophical Society is an especially valuable source. Because he was, despite recurrent ill health, such a busy person, always eager for knowledge, curious about his milieu, appreciative of the opportunities of Bath and the beauty of its natural setting, he is constantly illuminating. Something of a self-promoter, he also reveals a lot about himself, including his personal philosophy as an enlightened Quaker, but also his social ambition, prejudices, and occasional slyness of behaviour. All this bearing his correspondents in distant Essex in mind.

Brought up in modest circumstances by Quaker parents in Norfolk, Rack had formerly earned a living as a shopkeeper at Great Bardfield in rural Essex, marrying the proprietress there and first trying out his writing skills with articles in magazines and a volume of poetry. The circumstances of his move to Bath around the age of forty in 1775 are unclear, but he was soon active in the literary circles of Lady Miller at Batheaston and Catharine Macaulay in Alfred Street, and then gained further kudos in 1777 as the founder and first secretary of the Bath & West of England Society, an organisation aimed particularly at encouraging agriculture in the region. For this he was paid an annual salary plus a fee for housing the Society's models and samples, being also responsible for its voluminous correspondence and its published journal.

Two years later he took his cultural role a step further, becoming joint founder and secretary of a lively scientific club known to posterity as the first Bath Philosophical Society. Meanwhile he continued to write and publish on his own account – one of his books, *Mentor's Letters*, going through four editions. In the 1780s he undertook much of the local detailed research for John Collinson's *History of Somerset* which came out well after Rack's death in 1787 and, like his 'disultory journal', still testifies to his industry and inquiring mind. He seems to have been self-confident, personable, popular, charitable, and steadfast in his Quaker principles, a social upstart maybe, but still a figure from Bath's past it would have been good to know.