

**Cornwall in the World Conference 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021, University of Exeter****J'ai vécu<sup>1</sup>: the impact of the French Revolution on the lives of two Cornishmen, John Pollard and James Quick.**

I have been working my way gradually through the archives at the Morrab Library whilst researching for my PhD. The letters, journals and notebooks held in the Morrab archives are a real window into the past and offer a fascinating view of not only daily life in Cornwall and elsewhere, but contemporary views on the wider world too.

Two of the most interesting documents I have read recently give us insights into Revolutionary France and the Napoleonic Wars from ordinary Cornishmen. John Pollard, a ship's Captain from Newlyn, was a prisoner of war in France from 1794-95 who kept a journal for a large portion of his time in captivity. James Quick was held captive from 1810-14. He wrote a series of letters to his wife in St Mawes detailing his life as a prisoner. Through reading Pollard's journal and Quick's letters it is possible to gauge just how much these men knew about what was going on both locally, with the political situation in France, in relations between France and Britain, and their ongoing links back to Cornwall. The first page of Pollard's journal is dated 15<sup>th</sup> August 1794, thus after several months of captivity and so it is unclear whether his account of the period prior to this is copied from elsewhere or based on memory. That it is all dated implies he has copied from an earlier notebook or pages.

In January 1794 John Pollard and a crew of three sailed from Newlyn to Guernsey in the Lark with a cargo of potatoes and fish. Pawlyn believes it is far more likely their actual purpose was to collect and smuggle back contraband: brandy, rum, tea or tobacco.<sup>2</sup> On the 12<sup>th</sup> January they left Plymouth, and, Pollard says, "that night half past 10 o'clock we saw some ships to the windward of us which we thought to be English but to our great mistake they were 5 French frigates, 1 20 guns ship and 1 cutter."<sup>3</sup> They were captured, their cargo was seized and their ship was stripped and scuttled. Pollard tells us that they were amongst 26 ships captured as prizes by the same group of ships. On the 16<sup>th</sup> they arrived at Cherbourg, on the 17<sup>th</sup> they were put onto a guard ship, then on the 18<sup>th</sup> they were marched inland to Valognes prison.

James Quick and his father John were shipwrecked near Douarnenez in the far west of Brittany in the Autumn of 1810. His first letter to his wife, dated 15<sup>th</sup> November and written at the prison in Quimper describes the shipwreck and the details of their capture. As Quick describes how he and the ship's boy are the last to leave we are reminded of the relationship between Britain and France at this time, they are on the "enemies coasts." However, Quick goes on to describe the "Natives [as] very civil. They put us up to a farmhouse... and got a fire made to dry our clothes."<sup>4</sup> They are then taken to the

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to the Abbé Sieyès, author of *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?* (What is the Third Estate? 1789).

<sup>2</sup> Tony Pawlyn, 'Potatoes and Fish: Cornish Fishermen Smugglers in the late Eighteenth Century,' *Troze* 2.1 (2010), 3-13 (p.3).

<sup>3</sup> Penzance, Morrab Library, Pollard, John, *POW Journal in France 1794-95 with later events to 1828*, MS MOR HIS 19, pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Penzance, Morrab Library, Quick, James, *Quick, James Captain of brig Hopewell lost Douarnenez 1810, Copies of letters to his wife during his imprisonment in France 180-14*, MS MOR HIS 23, letter 15<sup>th</sup> November 1810.

public house in town where they are given “jin, which is very scare in this countey.”<sup>5</sup> A couple of days later, having been able to dry most of their clothes they are marched to Quimper, and imprisoned.

Both Pollard and Quick were moved to different prisons during their imprisonment. Pollard gives details of the towns he passed through on the march from Valonges to Pontoise. He places Pontoise to the North North East of Paris.<sup>6</sup> Quick is sent even further to the other end of the country at Longwy.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, neither man tells us anything much about the towns and countryside, the state of the nation they pass through, but I find it astounding that they travel so far within France, admittedly against their will. Similarly, Pollard never indicates how he converses with his jailors, employers, nor in which language the newspapers he sees are written. Quick does tell his wife that he is learning French, and phrases begin to creep into his writing. He begins by signing off a letter with Adieu on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1812, and in his letter of 8<sup>th</sup> June 1812, in what must be a response to a question about how he passes the time from his wife, writes: “to pass away a painful and miserable experience, which I endeavour to make as short as possible by studying French.”<sup>8</sup> The longest phrase written in French is in the letter dated 30<sup>th</sup> July 1811. Quick gives his new address at the prison in Longwy as “Anglois prisonner de Guerre, Longwi, Dep. Moselly.”<sup>9</sup> In the letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> January 1813 Quick tells his wife “I can read and wright French, but cant speak it.”<sup>10</sup>

Whilst prisoners were given a certain food allowance each day, Pollard was also able to work and earn money. Although there were times when he was unable to work due to illness, the weather or changes in regulations within the prisons in which he was held, at various times Pollard works as a gardener, builds roads, repairs fishing nets, heaves rubbish and works in a grocers grinding pepper and coffee. By studying Pollard’s journal we are also able to track the effects of inflation and food shortages on France at this time as he makes notes of the price of foodstuffs, amount of food prisoners received, and quality of the food. “Historians ... analyze the French Revolution in terms of political and social transformations, but contemporaries experienced and understood those upheavals as inextricable from questions of currency and value.”<sup>11</sup> If we follow the price of bread, as a staple of Pollard’s diet, we can see how it steadily increases. First a note on French currency. The livre was the standard unit from 781 to 1794, when it was replaced by the franc, however Pollard continues to use the term, as did many others. One livre was divided into twenty sous. In 1794 the National Convention fixed prices as a means of preventing food shortages, but in 1795 they abandoned this policy and began printing more assignats (paper money).<sup>12</sup> Pollard was given one and a half pounds of bread and ten sous food allowance daily.<sup>13</sup> The first mention of the price of food comes on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1794, when Pollard mentions the cost of two small apples and a piece of bread, he does not say how big, is two sous.<sup>14</sup> It is in 1795 that we can trace the effects of inflation in France. At the beginning of February, with the price of bread at fifteen sous per pound, Pollard notes that there are disturbances amongst the poor regarding the price.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of March the price has risen to one livre per pound, but Pollard

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<sup>5</sup> Quick, MOR HIS 23, letter 15<sup>th</sup> November 1810.

<sup>6</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, pp. 24-28.

<sup>7</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter dated 29<sup>th</sup> June 1811.

<sup>8</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letters dated 10<sup>th</sup> April and 8<sup>th</sup> June 1812.

<sup>9</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter dated 30<sup>th</sup> July 1811.

<sup>10</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> January 1813.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Spang, *Stuff and Money in the time of the French Revolution*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 219.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 221 & 224.

<sup>13</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 54.

notes that in some places this has risen to four livres per pound.<sup>16</sup> By the end of March, not only has the price risen to thirty sous per pound, but Pollard describes the bread as containing sand and notes that the poor have no more than half a pound each daily.<sup>17</sup>

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, Pollard mentions an incident in Rouen where eleven women are shot by soldiers as they attempt to stop carts of corn from leaving the town.<sup>18</sup> The incident must have taken place before this, and Pollard does not say how he has heard about it. He continues to note prices, and by the beginning of July, the price has risen to fifteen livres per pound, as a comparison, this is what Pollard earned for one day's work in mid-July loading rubbish onto carts.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, the bread shortages also impact the lives of the prisoners, by the end of April Pollard notes his daily allowance has been cut from a pound and a half per day to one pound of poor-quality bread, and by the middle of May they receive no bread at all, just three ounces of rice.<sup>20</sup> The situation changes again by the end of May when their prison allowance is two pounds of bread and five ounces of rice to last three days.<sup>21</sup>

Pollard reports on the effects of food shortages on the population of France. On the 11<sup>th</sup> March 1795 he says "the pepel of Cane [Caen] rose and took all the corn that was in the store houses and divided it among them selves and they sent a petishan to Paris to have a King."<sup>22</sup> The very next day he reports that "the pepel rose at Rouen and beat the menesepalaty [municipality] and sais they can not live with out they mack peace."<sup>23</sup> Again, Pollard does not impart his source but when we combine these accounts with the later report of women attempting to stop corn leaving Rouen and being shot, mentioned already, we see a picture of a nation where the ordinary people are starving, unsettled and desperate for a return to more peaceful times.

Pollard's journal provides insights into events happening in Revolutionary France, both actual and rumour. He is not always accurate, although his dating of the death of Louis XVI can be ascribed to an easy mistake, the reversing of the digits 21 for 12.<sup>24</sup> Rumours of the death of Louis XVII were evidently rife at the beginning of January 1795, Pollard notes that he does not know if the young King died a natural death.<sup>25</sup> However, he records Louis' actual death in the journal only two days after it occurred so we can see this news reached the prisoners quite quickly.<sup>26</sup> On 20<sup>th</sup> October 1794, Pollard mentions "There is a great many harey stockrats [aristocrats] in this prison with us and have been here a long time."<sup>27</sup> Only three days later he reports "All the harey stockrats are clere [clear] out of this prison and sent to there home."<sup>28</sup> This took place a couple of months after the execution of Robespierre on 28<sup>th</sup> July and during the Thermadorian Reaction which ended the Reign of Terror.<sup>29</sup> In January 1795 Pollard comments "There was 27 million of people in France before the wor commenced 17 thousand

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<sup>16</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Pool, 'The Journal of John Pollard of Newlyn, 1794-95,' *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall New Series II*, 1.2 (1992), 194-210 (p. 202).

gulentend at Paris. 16 thousand English prisoners in France. 25 thousand Frach prisoners in England.”<sup>30</sup>

Pollard also records further observations regarding the effects of the Revolution on everyday life in France. In the entry of 20<sup>th</sup> November 1794 he writes:

“In Pontoise there is 6 curchis and the convechan [convention] has holed [hailed] down som of them and destressed them all as much as they can with out hollen them all don they have no religion in this contrey they goes to one church in this towne every 10 days which they call the dead day and reeds the newes papers and sings songs and at night they has a band of meuseck [music] and that dance all over the church till the next morning.”<sup>31</sup>

By 28<sup>th</sup> February 1795 Pollard comments that “I here that they are goin to hould there old relegon again,” and on 21<sup>st</sup> March he records that “mas held here and many other plases.”<sup>32</sup> He does also make the later observation that “on Sunday the 12 June 1795 prayers read in the Church of Pontoise being the first time sense the Revelushan.”<sup>33</sup>

Quick’s letters discuss the practicalities of sending and receiving post and money between two warring nations. He sends one, possibly two, letters via some American prisoners who are being released after only a few days captivity.<sup>34</sup> By April 1812, Quick has evidently received letters from his wife in St Mawes, sent via Dover, America and the Transport Board.<sup>35</sup> In the letter dated 8<sup>th</sup> June 1812, Quick mentions that sending letters via the Transport Board seems to be the most reliable means.<sup>36</sup> This was the British Navy’s organisation responsible for transporting supplies and men, and in 1799 responsibility for the care of prisoners of war also came under their remit. However, the letter of 8<sup>th</sup> June 1812 Quick tells us, is to be sent back with the wife of a brother Mason who is leaving France that week for England. Quick goes on to mention that there are several Englishwomen there, as well as some Englishmen who are married to French women. In the letter of 1<sup>st</sup> August 1812, he names “a Mrs Hickman, who was home from this” and that he is sending this particular letter via Mrs Harmstrong who again, he describes as “going home from this.”<sup>37</sup> Quick even suggests to his wife that she come over to France.<sup>38</sup> These comments raise many interesting questions. How were these women able to travel between France and Britain, was this through the Transport Board and an understanding that women were not to be held as prisoners, and was using the wife of a brother Mason to carry a letter pure chance or evidence of a Masonic network helping its members? As to the former, Quick mentions in the letter of 30<sup>th</sup> July 1811 that there are approximately 1500 prisoners at Longwy, including women and children.

Quick’s letters also give us an insight into contemporary networks within Cornwall. In his letters he lists other Cornishmen with whom he is held captive and their hometowns in order that his wife can get word to their families of their situation. As well as men from Mevagissey we hear of several men from St Ives. The letters of 10<sup>th</sup> April and 8<sup>th</sup> June 1812 both contain a plea for his wife to write to a Mrs Mary Morton in Padstow to let her know that her son is well and would like to receive a letter

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<sup>30</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, pp. 58 & 61.

<sup>33</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter dated 1<sup>st</sup> December 1810.

<sup>35</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter 10<sup>th</sup> April 1812.

<sup>36</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter 8<sup>th</sup> June 1812.

<sup>37</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter 1<sup>st</sup> August 1812.

<sup>38</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter 8<sup>th</sup> June 1812.

from her. As well as correspondence within Cornwall sharing news of those held captive, there is correspondence between the Cornish prisoners in different prisons in France. Quick's father was sent to Cambrai and in the letter of 10<sup>th</sup> April 1812, Quick mentions receiving correspondence from both him and another Cornish prisoner in Verdun. Indeed the letter of 25<sup>th</sup> January 1813 is to be sent home with a prisoner being sent home from Verdun having been discharged from the hospital there as an incurable by the Minister for War.<sup>39</sup> Pollard makes less mention of letters in his journal, on a couple of occasions he notes that he has sent a letter to his wife Margaret in Newlyn, or to Penzance. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1794 he notes that he has received a letter from the first group of prisoners with whom he was imprisoned updating him on their news.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the most intriguing entry comes on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1794 when Pollard writes "I sent another and paid 15 sue to post it in the post office."<sup>41</sup> The period of the 1790s saw the beginnings of the nationalisation of the French postal service. Were they able to send letters to England whilst at war? The entry of the 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1795 perhaps sheds some light on this. Pollard tells us a packet of letters arrives from Liverpool, being the first letters any of them have received from England since they were taken into captivity.<sup>42</sup> Some news must have eventually got through to Cornwall of his fate.

These documents offer both a fascinating glimpse into life as a prisoner of war in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France but offer potential for future study. Both men mention many other Cornishmen imprisoned and their ships, details of escape attempts and networks within Cornwall and thus could be used in studies tracing particular men and their captivity, as well as offering further insights into life as a prisoner at this time and contributing to studies of journals and letters of the period and the means by which they were sent.

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<sup>39</sup> Quick, MS MOR HIS 23, letter 25<sup>th</sup> January 1813.

<sup>40</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Pollard, MS MOR HIS 19, p. 59.