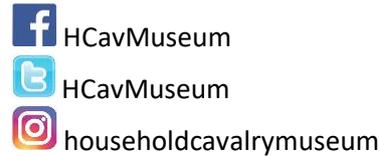




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THE ECCENTRICS

In this week's podcast, I am recounting the story of two notable Household Cavalry eccentrics...

By any standards, **Colonel Edward Hyde, Viscount Cornbury** (later 3rd Earl of Clarendon), was a very bizarre Governor of colonial New York. The grandson of the 1st Earl of Clarendon who, with Monck but on behalf of the King, had negotiated the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660, Cornbury was the nephew of King James II and so the first cousin of both Queen Mary II and Queen Anne.

Cornbury's mother died of smallpox when he was only three months old and this tragedy may have impacted on his later behaviour; but it didn't prevent him from eloping with Lady Katherine O'Brien, whom he married in 1688 and who gave him three children. Before that, after graduating from a Swiss university in 1683, Cornbury had joined the King's Own Royal Regiment (previously the Tangier Horse and later The Royal Dragoons) as a twenty-two-year-old Lieutenant Colonel. Despite his youth and inexperience, two years later he so distinguished himself at the Battle of Sedgemoor, where he came to the attention of the future Duke of Marlborough, that he was appointed Colonel of the Regiment.

But blood was thicker than his allegiance to his uncle-by-marriage and when, in 1688, the future King William III landed in England to seize the throne from King James, Cornbury was the first officer to defect to his cousin's husband. His reward was to be appointed Master of the Horse in the Household of Princess Anne and Prince George of Denmark, where Sarah Churchill was already installed as Groom of the Stole. Like her, but later and for different reasons, Cornbury fell foul of King William and Queen Mary in 1689 (during the debate on the Act of Succession he loyally supported Princess Anne's candidacy for the throne over that of the *de facto* incumbents) and was stripped of the colonelcy of the Royals and his appointment in Princess Anne's Household. Cornbury, along with the Churchills, only returned to full royal favour with the accession of Queen Anne in 1702.

Shortly after her Coronation, and on the advice of the Churchills, the new Queen appointed Cornbury Governor General of the royal colony of New York and, the following year, that of New Jersey as well. On paper, Cornbury was well-qualified for these roles and, initially, he did well, reinforcing New York's defences against the constant French threat. But trouble was brewing.

A committed High Church Tory, Cornbury decided unilaterally that the Church of England should be the official religion of the colonies in his care, despite the fact that Anglicans were in a minority. In 1704, on the grounds that it had been built with misappropriated public funds, he ordered the confiscation of a Presbyterian church and its lands and their transfer to the Church of England. It was a deeply unpopular move with the Low Church colonists. Then, in 1707, Cornbury ordered the arrest of the Rev Francis Makemie (known as the



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‘Father of American Presbyterianism’) on a charge of preaching without a license. In the subsequent trial, to Cornbury’s public fury, Makemie was acquitted. Meanwhile, questions were being raised about Cornbury’s own use of public funds.

Matters reached a head in 1708 when the New York Assembly wrote to the Whig Government in London asserting that, in addition to religious persecution, Cornbury had misused the Royal Prerogative, accepted bribes, embezzled defence funds and, through gross financial mismanagement, had landed both the colonies under his care and himself in debt. Were that not enough, Cornbury was separately accused of transvestism and sodomy. On his own later admission to the bachelor Whig politician and antiquarian, Horace Walpole, 4th and last Earl of Orford, he had taken to wearing women’s clothes in New York even when on official duty. As Walpole recorded:

[Lord Cornbury’s] great insanity was dressing himself as a woman. When Governor in America he opened the Assembly dressed in that fashion. When some of those about him remonstrated, his reply was, ‘You are very stupid not to see the propriety of it. In this place and particularly on this occasion I represent a woman (Queen Anne) and ought in all respects to represent her as faithfully as I can’.

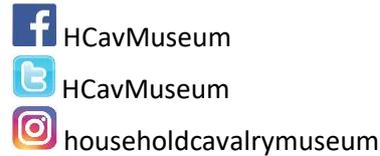
Whilst doubt has been cast on the veracity of this account (Walpole was not always a reliable chronicler), there is little dispute about the subject of a painting now held in the New York Historical Society, in which Cornbury is depicted in full eighteenth-century drag. For whatever reason, in December of the year of the New York Assembly’s petition, Cornbury was removed and recalled to London, but not before he had been arrested for debt; he was only released five months later when his former Lieutenant Governor and keen supporter, Richard Ingoldsby, was appointed Governor following a brief interregnum.

Despite his reputation, and thanks to the support of Queen Anne, this was by no means the end of Cornbury’s career. In 1709 he succeeded his father as 3rd Earl of Clarendon, took his seat in the House of Lords, was sworn-in to the Privy Council and, in 1714, was Queen Anne’s Special Envoy to the Court in Hanover. There, his perhaps appropriately named secretary, John Gay, recorded that Clarendon dined and spent his evening with the Hanoverian Royal Family, whose accession to the British throne later that year did him no harm. The Earl died in 1723 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, although whether or not in a frock is unrecorded.



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Not given to cross-dressing, but definitely towards the certifiable end of the insanity scale was **Captain William ‘John’ Cavendish-Scott-Bentinck, 5th Duke of Portland**.

Educated at home before joining the Grenadier Guards as an Ensign in 1818, he transferred by purchase to 7th Light Dragoons in 1821 as a Captain, then transferred again to the more expensive 2nd Life Guards in 1823. On the death of his elder brother the following year, John (as he was always known) became the heir to the dukedom and his brother's seat in Parliament, which – whilst continuing his military career – he held for two years until ‘ill health’ obliged him to resign. This brief foray into politics was followed by his resignation from the Army after which he seems to have led a rather aimless life travelling around Europe.

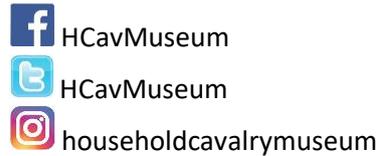
However, in 1854 he succeeded to the dukedom; although he did not take his seat in the House of Lords for a further four years, preferring to remain at Welbeck Abbey. There he commenced a programme of building works, employing thousands of locals, which included the construction of a twenty-two-acre kitchen garden, a vast riding school lit by four thousand gas lamps, stabling for a hundred horses (although, for some inexplicable reason, he never rode them in his new indoor school) and a roller-skating rink for the local children. Meanwhile, even more bizarrely, Portland stripped most of the rooms in the Abbey, had the contents put into store and then ordered that all the internal walls be painted pink. For himself, he reserved four sparsely-furnished rooms in the west wing, although he spent much of his life in the complex which he had created beneath the Abbey and its grounds. This subterranean ducal lair included fifteen miles of wide tunnels which not only connected the Abbey with the riding school but also linked together a huge billiard room, a large library, an observatory with a glass roof and a ballroom-cum-picture gallery, all of which were painted pink with the exception of the ballroom which had a huge sunburst painted on the 160 x 63 feet ceiling. Despite the fact that Portland had a hydraulic lift installed in the ballroom, which could transport twenty people together up to the ground floor, no balls were ever organised. In fact, like King Ludwig II of Bavaria and the Baronets of Calke Abbey, Portland abhorred human company; even his servants and employees had to hide when he approached and at all times were forbidden to speak to him. A workman who raised his hat to his otherwise benevolent ducal employer was sacked on the spot.

Quite how this neurosis, verging on mania, allowed the Life Guard Duke to carry out his duties as Lord Lieutenant of Nottinghamshire, interact with his fellow Peers in the House of Lords and father three illegitimate children is not known. What is on the record is the fact that he rarely ventured out of doors by day, preferring to go out at night preceded, forty yards ahead of him, by a maid carrying a lamp. When he did appear during daylight hours, Portland



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invariably – whatever the weather – wore two overcoats with large, turned-up collars and carried an open umbrella behind which he would hide if approached. On the occasions when he went to London, he was conveyed to Worksop railway station in a closed carriage which was loaded, with him in it, onto a flatbed truck. At the other end, the carriage would be unloaded, the horses re-harnessed to it and the coach driven to Harcourt House, his palace in Cavendish Square, where all the servants were instructed to become invisible.

One final ducal eccentricity is of note: the Duke demanded that 24-hours a day, throughout the year, a hot roast chicken be available for him to eat on demand. It is not now known if he ever ate anything else. The Duke of Portland died on 6th December 1879, possibly of a surfeit of chicken, and was buried in a plain grave in Kensal Green Cemetery.

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**‘NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS...’**

**A weekly series of podcasts about the Regiments of the Household Cavalry  
written and recorded by  
Regimental Historian, Christopher Joll, formerly of The Life Guards**

**These anecdotes are drawn from  
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