

BRIGADIER FRANCIS JOHN COLMAN

His Death in Lisbon and its Consequences

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Francis John Colman was the son of Edward and Martha Colman of Gornhay near Tiverton in Devon and was the grandson of Sir Edward Seymour.¹ He was also related to the 1st Earl of Hertford, Francis Seymour Conway. He had two sisters, Martha and Seymour, and a brother, who also died while in the army. He joined the 1st dragoons as a cornet in 1786 and was promoted to Lieutenant in 1791. By 1802, he was the Lieutenant-Colonel of the 38th Foot. He served in Flanders and Helder and was wounded.

He resigned from the army in 1805 and, in October that year, took over from his father as Serjeant at Arms to the House of Commons.

In September 1809, the Times reported that 'Mr. Colman, Serjeant at Arms to the House of Commons, is now, to relieve the tedium of the vacation serving in the Portuguese army with the rank of Brigadier-General'.² Field Marshall Beresford immediately appointed him to command a brigade of the 11th and 23rd Regiments and also all other troops stationed at Leiria.³

He must have returned to England for in April, 1810 and, still holding his office at the House of Commons, he became embroiled in the Burdett case. The Speaker had issued a warrant for the arrest of Sir Francis Burdett, a member of Parliament, which Colman, as Serjeant at Arms, had to execute.⁴

¹ L. Manier & J. Brooke (Editors), The History of Parliament: the House of Commons, 1754-1790, web

² Times [London, England] 17 Sept. 1810:3. The Times Digital Archive. Web. 12 Nov. 2012.

³ [Beresford] Compilacao das ordens do dia do quartel geral do exercito, p154, 29/9/1809 (British Library 1444.2.1)

⁴ There is a satirical print, entitled 'Progress of the Warrant', in the British Museum (BM satires 11552, registration no. 1868,0808,7931)

In September 1810 of that year he was mentioned in despatches by Beresford for his role at Bussaco, in command of a brigade, consisting of the 7th and 19th regiments and the 2nd Cacadores.⁵ His brigade then fell back to the town of Torres Vedras and later moved to Cadruceira.

In early 1811, perhaps in February, he sailed to England on board the *Gorgon*, a 50 gun ship, in the company of Sir Stapleton Cotton, General Leith, Lord Tweeddale, Lord James Hay and Captain Dudley.⁶ It was perhaps this exodus of senior personnel that provoked Wellington to write to Colonel Torrens at the War Office on the 28th January 1811: 'I shall be very much obliged to you ... if you would tell any General officer who may come out in future to settle all his business before he comes out, for that he will get no leave to go home'.⁷

He re-assumed the command of the brigade of the 7th and 19th regiments in August, 1811.⁸ He died in Lisbon on the 12th December 'from fever and debility brought on by exertions in his profession too great for his constitution'. His funeral took place on the 14th December 1811. Among the senior officers present were his old travelling companions, General Leith and Sir Stapleton Cotton. The *Gentleman's Magazine* also noted 'by the death of this gentleman, the valuable place of Serjeant at Arms of the House of Commons becomes vacant'.⁹

Later that day, there was a curious incident 'when a party of Portuguese soldiers under the orders of the British Commander, Marshall Beresford, forced open the door of the cemetery in order to inter the remains of Brigadier General Coleman'.¹⁰ This

⁵ [Beresford] ob.cit. p.182 28/9/1810

⁶ Leith-Hay, *A Narrative of the Peninsular War*, Google Books.

⁷ Elizabeth Longford, *Wellington, The Years of the Sword*, 1970, p.241, quoting Desp. VII p.197.

⁸ [Beresford], ob.cit 12/8/1811

⁹ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Google Books, Vol. 110, p.659

¹⁰ *Minute Book of the Merchants and Factors*, National Archives, Kew FO/173/7

provoked the Merchants, worried that their cemetery would soon be filled with military dead, to protest to Wellington.¹¹ The Merchants, of course, were fully aware that there was an adjacent military burial ground, but this would not have been obvious to the Portuguese Army. If his body had been deposited on the upper part of the cemetery, the Merchants would not have been so put out.

Back in England, Hansard, on 8th January, noted that General Tarleton, member for Liverpool, 'pathetically mentioned the death of general Colman, late serjeant at arms of the House'

His death dealt a double blow to his family; not only did they lose their remaining son and brother, but it also ended the family's long tenure of the position of Serjeant at Arms. This valuable appointment had been held continuously from 1775 and Edward must have thought that he had secured it for many more years when he passed it to his son in 1805. Its loss threw the family's finances into disarray.

If Edward Colman did not have enough worries, he was also representing his son's estate in the continuing court proceedings arising from the Burdett case.¹²

Throughout 1812, Edward Colman sought financial help, particularly from Henry Addington, 1st Viscount Sidmouth, previously the Speaker and Prime Minister.¹³ In a letter of 7th March, 1812, Edward tells the Viscount that the new Serjeant at Arms, Henry Seymour, has agreed to allow him £500 p.a. from the 'profits of his place'. His letter goes on to ask for £6,000 'which the country has profited by the regulation in the office of Serjeant at Arms during the latter part of the time I held that office – the

¹¹ This story has been told more fully elsewhere: A.R. Walford, *The British Factory in Lisbon*, British Institute, Lisbon 1940 and Robert Howes, *The British Cemetery in Lisbon*, BHSP, Lisbon 2005.

¹² *Journals of the House of Lords* Vol. 51, p.367.

¹³ Devon Record Office holds seven letters, Viscount Sidmouth papers ref. 152M/C/1812/ OA3-5-9-15-39-41-169

money would be much more acceptable and beneficial to my family than any addition to my present income, as I am very much pressed by my creditors to pay a large sum which I am answerable for and which I cannot at present possibly raise’.

Three days later, and after meeting Viscount Sidmouth, he wrote ‘Lord Robert Seymour has been with me to inform me that Mr. Percival¹⁴ has written to Lord Hertford saying he should not consent to his appointing his nephew to the office of Serjeant at Arms unless his Lordship would give it under his hand that his nephew was to enjoy the whole profit of his place and not to allow me anything out of it. This as you may conceive has distressed me very much, but I doubt the truth of it and wish to know if Mr. Percival can have written such a letter...’.

In April, he wrote to a Mr. Hatsell, stating his annual income to be £869, made up of £19 from the Funds, £350 as pension and £500 from Mr. Seymour.¹⁵ However, the latter ‘must not be seen by Mr. Percival as he is not to know of my receiving this from Mr. Seymour’. He goes on to say that, ‘having granted new leases to my Tenants, I was obliged to put my Farm Houses, Barns etc in proper repair, which has cost me more than a year’s income, so that I have not received a sixpence this year on account of my landed property, and am now paying interest for nearly £3,000. This is the real and true state of my affairs at present, I mention this particularly to you, as I hear a report is circulating that I am by no means in bad circumstances and to add to my present distress my youngest daughter is in so bad a state of health that the Physicians have told me it is absolutely necessary for me to take her immediately to Tunbridge for the benefit of the Waters and Air there’.

In July, Nicholas Vansittart [Chancellor of the Exchequer] wrote to Viscount Sidmouth from Great George Street, the

¹⁴ Presumably Spencer Perceval, the Prime Minister, who was assassinated the following month.

¹⁵ Presumably this was John Hatsell, Clerk of the House of Commons

following letter, which is quoted in full as a fine example of bureaucratic language:

I do not wonder at your being strongly interested in poor Colman's situation. The unforeseen & irretrievable misfortune he has met with in the loss of Col. Colman must make every one desirous of assisting in any reasonable way to alleviate such of his misfortunes as admit of mitigation; & indeed I was not aware till I heard it from you that poverty was among the number.

I should have [been] very glad to propose to the House of Commons & I think they would have received with approbation a motion for his relief, formed on so fair a basis, as that of an actual saving derived by the public from his resignation in favour of his son.

But when the accounts came to be made up the saving appeared, as you know, to be too inconsiderable to be worthy of his acceptance, or fit for the House to bestow. It may be said indeed that in making up the account his pension ought not to have been noticed; but I am afraid that in comparing his actual situation with that in which he would have stood if the resignation had not taken place; it is impossible to keep it out of sight. This was the Speakers opinion, & in conversation with him I felt obliged to concur.

For this reason I felt myself precluded from making any proposition this session, not seeing any distinct ground on which it could be defended; & thinking at the same time that it might be brought forward with more advantage in another year. Some further saving will then have accrued; & though some thing like an estimate might now be made of the probable value of such savings during Mr. Colman's life they will be stated with much more advantage when they are confirmed by another year's experience. At any rate (supposing his life to continue) no harm can take place by the delay.

Edward Colman writes again to Viscount Sidmouth in August 1812, mentioning his 55 years of service, 25 in the Army and 30 as Serjeant at Arms. If he is not to receive any reward 'I shall be distressed to raise money, which must be taken from my wife and daughters fortunes'.

His final surviving letter to Viscount Sidmouth is dated 17th December 1812 from Hertford Street. In it, he repeats some of the arguments he has used before and adds 'I must be reduced to putting down my carriage & ... which considering Mrs. Colman's age of 78 and mine at 79 would be a serious inconvenience to us...'

His properties near Gornhay seem to have been sold before he made his will in 1814.¹⁶ He was then living in Queen's Street, Mayfair, but he eventually died on 29th July 1815 in Brighton, where perhaps he had moved as being almost as fashionable, while warmer and cheaper than London. He was buried in the cemetery of St. Nicholas, and when his tombstone was moved in 1949, the following note was made of the inscription:

In memory of EDWARD COLEMAN who departed this life July 29th 18__ aged 81 years. Also of MARTHA relict of the above who departed this life on October 26th 1823.¹⁷

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¹⁶ National Archives, Kew (prob. 11/1571)

¹⁷ Information kindly provided by Simon Bannister of Brighton & Hove City Council.

the Peninsular War in 1991. The Society included his article Mapping in Portugal by French Royalists in the British Army in its Annual Report for 1997. More recently he contributed a paper, A Few Days on the Lines of Torres Vedras in October, 1810, which was published by the Camara Municipal de Torres Vedras in A Vida Quotidiana, 2011.