The Disappearance of Benjamin Bathurst

[from *Fortean Times* 54 (Summer 1990) pp.40–44]

Charles Fort called it the shortest story he knew. That Benjamin Bathurst, a British envoy to the Austrian court at Vienna, stopped for a meal at an inn in the Prussian town of Perleberg. That after finishing his supper, he went outside to look over his coach, that he 'walked around the horses' — and vanished[1].

Bathurst's disappearance, on 25 November 1809, has become one of the classics of the Fortean genre. Almost every author who has cited the case, including Fort, stresses both the suddenness with which the young diplomat vanished, and the presence of witnesses who looked on as he stepped into the unknown. But, unfortunately, none has checked the story against the original sources.

Most modern accounts are based on an essay written by the nineteenth–century British clergyman and oddity–hunter Sabine Baring–Gould. This article, which first appeared volume 55 of the *Cornhill Magazine* and was later reprinted in the first part of Baring–Gould's *Historical Oddities*[2], is itself based largely on a history by Bathurst's sister, Tryphena Thistlethwayte, in her biography of her father[3]. Although Mrs Thistlethwayte's book appeared in the 1850s, the author was alive at the time of Bathurst's disappearance and actively participated in the hunt for him. From her account, and from papers in the Foreign Office archives, it is possible to piece together a fuller account of Bathurst's last journey.

Benjamin Bathurst was born in September 1784, the third son of the Bishop of Norwich. He married Phillida Call, daughter of the Cornish landowner Sir John Call, and joined the diplomatic service. Early in 1809, during a relative lull in the Napoleonic Wars, he was sent to Vienna by the Secretary of State for the Foreign Department, Earl Bathurst (a distant relative) with instructions to help rebuild the alliance between Britain and Austria and encourage the Emperor Francis to declare war on France. This Francis agreed to do in April, sending Austrian troops across the frontier into Italy.

Bathurst's mission thus had important consequences for the balance of power in Europe. Its very success convinced Bathurst that Napoleon and the French government would stop at nothing to lay their hands on him, and it soon became clear that they had every chance of doing so. The Austrians — outmanoeuvred by Napoleon, forced to abandon Vienna to the French, and heavily defeated at the Battle of Wagram in July — sued for peace, and Bathurst was hastily recalled to London.

According to his family, Benjamin considered going south to the Adriatic, but decided that the route was too dangerous. Instead, he went north, through the nominally neutral German states of the Confederation of the Rhine, heading towards Berlin and the port of Hamburg.

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[1] Fort, *Complete Books* (New York, 1974) p.681.
[2] Sabine Baring–Gould, *Historical Oddities* (London, 2 vols., 1889)
[3] Mrs F. Thistlethwayte, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Dr Henry Bathurst, Lord Bishop of Norwich* (London, 1853). Except where indicated by footnotes, the remainder of this article is based on the very full account on pages 175–91 and 556–604 of Mrs Thistlethwayte's book.

To throw off possible pursuers, Bathurst travelled as a German merchant, adopting the name of Koch and instructing his personal secretary to pass himself off as a courier. He made no contact with the British consul, Galway Mills, when he arrived in Berlin, but delivered important letters to two other gentlemen[4]. After spending some time in the city, Bathurst continued on his way through Prussia — then a nominal ally of France — to Hamburg. He arrived in Perleberg, to the west of Berlin, at midday on 25 November 1809.

Perleberg, which lay on the river Stepnitz at the western extremity of Prussia, was very much a frontier post. It housed a Prussian military garrison, and there were French troops to the south at Magdeburg, and (reportedly) only a few miles away at Lenzen. The town swarmed with former army men, vagabonds, deserters and refugees.

Bathurst and his companions stopped at Perleberg's post house, where they ordered fresh horses for the next leg of their journey, and then went a hundred yards up the road to an inn called the White Swan. After ordering an early dinner, Bathurst is said to have spent several hours writing in a small room set aside for him at the inn. Then he burned some papers, slept fitfully on a table for a few hours, and went out to the courtyard to supervise the loading of his carriage.

Several second–hand accounts of the circumstances surrounding Bathurst's disappearance still exist. According to a report made to the authorities at Postdam by the civilian Mayor of Perleberg, the diplomat and his companions were overseeing the preparation of their coach at about 9pm when 'one of the travellers absented himself and returned no more. Waiting for him, looking for him, calling him — all were in vain.' Another account, by the third member of Bathurst's party, his manservant, alleged that the diplomat had been 'standing before the kitchen fire, in the midst of the postillions, ostlers &c., and carelessly pulling out his watch, and likewise his purse, containing a considerable sum of money, before these people, one or two of whom were suspected of having taken an opportunity of hustling him away, and afterwards robbing and destroying him.'

It is difficult, examining these accounts, to understand why the disappearance of Bathurst ever became a Fortean *cause célebre.* The answer to this conundrum appears to lie in a passage of Baring–Gould's[5]: that the Englishman 'stood outside the inn watching his portmanteau, which had been taken within, being replaced on the carriage, stepped around to he heads of the horses — *and was never seen again.*' [Baring–Gould's emphasis.]

Note Baring–Gould's use of the phrase 'stepped around to the heads of the horses', which has become closely identified with the case. Note too his dramatic use of the hyphen, which implies that the disappearance was both sudden and utterly mysterious.

In his very next paragraph, however, Baring–Gould himself puts the event in its proper context. 'It must be remembered,' he writes, 'that this was the end of November. Darkness had closed in before 5pm, as the sun set at four… The landlord was at the doorway talking to the secretary, who, as courier, was paying the account. *No–one particularly observed the movements of Mr Bathurst at the moment.* [My emphasis.]

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[4] Phillida Bathurst to Galway Mills, 28 July 1810, Foreign Office papers FO 64/82 ff.96–9, National Archives, Kew.

[5] Baring–Gould, op.cit. pp.7–8.

Mrs Thistlethwayte makes it clear that Bathurst's disappearance did not give immediate cause for concern, as it must have done if the diplomat had been seen to vanish into thin air; with the statement of her brother's manservant before her, she wrote: 'After waiting for him for nearly an hour, his attendants began to make enquiries for him.' Similarly, an account in the periodical *New Pitaval* — published some time after 1830 and cited in *Henry Bathurst* — says that after the Englishman went into the courtyard, 'the general supposition [was that he] absented himself from the carriage for some purpose or other. Where he went nobody knows; whether he had already been sitting in the carriage and got out again we cannot ascertain.'

Given this very clear description of events — and leaving aside the question of whether Baring–Gould was exaggerating or elaborating his account — it might certainly be suggested that Fort chose to mystify an essentially mundane event when he wrote his account of it in *Lo!*. He had read Baring–Gould, if not Mrs Thistlethwayte, and must have been aware that two perfectly logical motives — robbery and a kidnapping organised by French agents — could explain *why* Bathurst disappeared. Both must now be dismissed if any more exotic hypothesis is to be entertained.

Bathurst knew that he was not safe in Perleberg. The French were far too close for comfort, and the next stretch of his journey, on the road to Domitz, would be particularly dangerous. The party decided to delay their departure until 9pm in the hope that the darkness would protect them, and, according to Kraus, the Englishman's manservant. Bathurst had frequently expressed a fear of arrest on the journey from Vienna. Gossip in Berlin — where his presence seems to have been a poorly–kept secret — suggested the diplomat had been driven literally mad by fear, and Galway Mills reported that 'Mr B. had been *for some time* previous to his reaching P. *in a very alarming state*.'[6]

Bathurst's first action, after dining at the Swan, was to visit the Prussian military commander at the German Coffee House in the town. He asked for an armed guard and the officer, Captain Klitzing, assigned him two Brandenburg cuirassiers. These men stood watch until Bathurst had finished writing and burning papers, but they were dismissed at about 7pm, leaving no–one to protect the diplomat when he stepped into the courtyard at nine.

An exiled French nobleman named D'Etraigues, who was later exposed as a double agent working for Napoleon, told Mrs Bathurst early in 1810 that her husband had been seized in the yard, spirited away from Perleberg by a party of French cavalry, and incarcerated in the fortress at Magdeburg. A variation on the same story, which appeared in the *European Magazine* at the same time, added the detailed that the troops had just passed across the Elbe at Lenzen, and suggested that they had been instructed to kidnap Bathurst in the hope of capturing Austrian court papers[7]. This Mrs Bathurst attempted to verify when she visited Europe in search of her husband, only to be assured by the governor of Magdeburg that a chance remark had been overheard and misinterpreted.

Tales of French intrigue nevertheless remained widespread in Perleberg for years. Local opinion held that French secret police had been pursuing Bathurst since he passed through the town of Kyritz, 25 miles south east of the town, and suggested that the men who had seized him had been hidden in the house of a local magistrate, and well–known French sympathiser, which stood directly opposite the post house.

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[6] Mills to Mrs Bathurst, 10 August 1810, FO 64/82 fols. 100–01.

[7] *European Magazine and London Review* vol.57 (January 1810) p.67.

Perhaps not surprisingly, no trace of French activity was found at Perleberg. Napoleon, whose ministers granted an audience to Mrs Bathurst, denied absolutely that he had had a hand in her husband's disappearance[8]. But the French secret service had certainly been active in the vicinity of Perleberg, and had already been accused of kidnapping another British diplomat, in Hamburg[9].

Prussian investigations also turned up suspicious characters among the townspeople themselves. After Captain Klitzing was notified of Bathurst's disappearance, he took immediate steps to mobilise his troops and conducted a vigorous search, apparently working on the initial assumption that the missing man had vanished of his own accord. On the 26th the river Stepnitz was dragged, and civilian officials ordered a second search of the village.

It was not long before the searchers discovered that Bathurst had not disappeared in any paranormal sense. On 27 November 1809 the Englishman's valuable fur coat — worth 200 or 300 Prussian thalers — was discovered hidden in an outhouse owned by a family named Schmidt. Then, on 16 December, two old women out scavenging in the woods near Quitzow, three miles north of Perleberg, came across Bathurst's pantaloons.

Investigation quickly revealed that one Auguste Schmidt had been working as ostler in the courtyard of the White Swan on the night Bathurst disappeared, and that his mother, who also worked at the inn, had taken the Englishman's coat. Frau Kestern, a woman employed at the German Coffee House, testified years later that immediately after Bathurst had visited the establishment, Auguste Schmidt had come in, asked her where the visitor had gone, then hastened after him and (she supposed) taken some opportunity to destroy him.

It is possible that the Schmidts were innocent and that Bathurst left his fur coat in the inn before he disappeared — but the discovery of the diplomat's trousers seemed to confirm the authorities' suspicion that he had been murdered. Not only did the pantaloons give every appearance of having been deliberately 'planted' only a day or two before their discovery; there were also two bullet holes in one of the trouser legs. Careful examination revealed no trace of blood, but this, Klitzing decided, was proof that Bathurst's assassins had fabricated evidence to suggest that French troops were involved in his disappearance.

And there the matter seems to have rested. Klitzing's investigation, Mrs Bathurst's enquiry, and the efforts of at least three gentlemen employed by the Bathurst family to scour Perleberg for evidence[10], failed to produce firm evidence that could point to the Englishman's murderer. Several skeletons were later unearthed in the area, however, of which the most interesting was the body of an undoubted murder victim discovered in the cellar of a local mason named Kisewetter in April 1852.

He dead man appeared to have been killed by a single heavy blow to the back of his head. Which had fractured his skull. All his clothing had been removed, and he had been buried underneath the kitchen floor. Kisewetter was questioned, and declared he had

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[8] Galway Mills to the Foreign Office, 17 February 1810, FO 64/82 fols.38–9; Mrs Bathurst's account, cited by Thistlethwayte, op.cit. pp.183–4.

[9] *Times* 20 January 1810.

[10] One of these men, Herr Rontgen, disappeared himself only a few years later after setting out from Tunis in search of the fabulous city of Timbuctoo. He was reportedly murdered only two days after setting out.

bought the house in 1834 from one Christian Mertens. Mertens had inherited it from his father, who had himself bought it in 1803 from a local shoemaker.

Attention was immediately drawn to the fact that Mertens senior had been employed at the White Swan, and had been working at the inn as a serving man in November 1809. Despite having only a poorly paid job, moreover, Mertens had settled substantial dowries of £150 and £130 on his daughters[11], and the dead man was strongly suspected of having robbed Bathurst of his jewels. By chance, Mrs Thistlethwayte herself visited Perleberg in August of that year, but after being shown the skull declared that it could not have been her brother's, lacking as it did Benjamin's high forehead and Roman nose.

Perhaps Mrs Thistlethwayte was mistaken. She had not seen her brother for almost 50 years, and it is difficult for a lay person to reconstruct a dead man's looks from his skull. On the other hand, at least two other bodies unearthed in the Perleberg district over the years were also immediately identified as Bathurst's for no better reason than that their owners appeared to have met with violent deaths[12].

More definite information is unlikely to emerge at this late date. Mrs Bathurst's journal, which surfaced in Paris on the mid-nineteenth century and contained 'a very curious and interesting' account of her own investigations[13], may yet turn up in some library or other, and it would be worthwhile searching the German archives for any relics of Klitzing's military administration at Perleberg[14]. I seriously doubt, however, that a definitive solution to this famous mystery will now ever be found.

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[11] Baring-Gould pp.19-20.

[12] The *Morning Post* (London), 13+14+16+18+22 December and *The Observer*, 18 December 1910, reported that a skeleton had recently been found buried face down in a field near Perleberg. There was a large hole in the forehead and 'a large key, believed to be of old English workmanship', was found by the body. Letters from several members of the Bathurst family appeared in the correspondence columns of the *Post* for 24 December. See also *Notes & Queries* 11th Ser., 3, 21 Jan + 4 Feb 1911.

[13] *N&Q* 2nd Ser. 29, 19 Jul 1856.

[14] Anyone interested in Benjamin Bathurst will find further accounts in *The Athenaeum* 26 Apr 1856 p.451, the *Wilts & Gloucester Standard,* 13 May 1922, John Hall, *Four Famous Mysteries* Nisbet, 1922) and Ludovic Fortolis, *Les Anglais en France*(Paris 1923). The story was also turned into a novel, *The Traveller in the Fur Coat*, by Stanley Weyman.