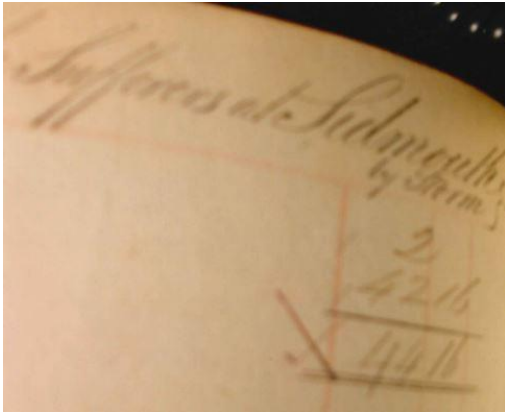


Manuscript of the Month
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Subscription account re Sufferers at Sidmouth by Storm, 1824



On the night of 22nd-23rd November 1824, the fashionable seaside resort of Sidmouth, Devon, was laid low by one of the worst storms in living memory. Throughout the hours of darkness hurricane force winds and torrential rain ripped through the normally tranquil town. Then just before dawn the sea, whipped to fever pitch by the gales, surged ashore in huge waves, overwhelming everything that lay in its path: *...the whole lower town was inundated, and the inhabitants of houses on the beach had nothing but death staring them full in the face, all retreat being cut off...the shrieks and supplicating attitudes of the females and children, the dreadful roar of*

the sea, and the general wreck which presented itself on every side, are the prominent parts in this awful picture, the remembrance of which will never be erased from the mind while memory holds her seat... (BL, 19th century newspaper collection, Trewman's Exeter Flying Post, 2nd Dec 1824) The proprietor of the Royal Marine Library later recalled that he had been unable to sleep, so violently had his bed shaken with each surge of the sea. Only with the arrival of daybreak, however, could the full extent of the devastation be revealed: *several [houses] are destroyed, others unroofed and most seriously injured; the fine gravel promenade which used to be the admiration of all visitors is totally destroyed.* (Ibid) Those living nearest the seafront, meanwhile, marooned in the upper storeys of their houses, had no choice but to lower themselves into boats by their bed sheets.

Sidmouth's experience was shared by communities up and down the coast. Nearby Lyme Regis similarly endured flooding and the loss of its promenade. Further afield, Penzance's lighthouse was shorn in two, Polperro's fishing fleet reduced to a mass of finger-sized splinters and Brighton's bathing machines dashed to pieces on the rocks. From Southampton came news that a man had been whirled to his death from the roof of the London mail coach. Some of the most dismal reports, however, came from Chiswell on the Isle of Portland, which had been bombarded not only by the sea but by a barrage of pebbles from the famed Chesil Beach. Here upwards of 100 houses were swept away or irreparably damaged, nearly 30 people lost their lives and many others were left destitute. Not that the damage was restricted to the coast. Salisbury cathedral parted company with one of its turrets and numerous inland rivers, swollen beyond endurance by the incessant rain, burst their banks, flooding villages and fields, washing away hayricks and drowning livestock.

Similarly dramatic scenes were played out on the open sea. Countless ships fell prey to the weather, their shattered remains mingling with the bodies of unfortunate mariners. The loss of the *Corvile*, a large West Indiaman laden with rum, which went down off Fleet with all hands on board, was only discovered because a crewmember had had the presence of mind to tear a piece off his shirt, write his name and address on it and tie it around his neck. And for weeks afterwards local beaches remained choked with the wreckage and cargoes of these lost ships. The residents of Mount's Bay reportedly reaped a rich harvest of coffee, while those at Mousehole found themselves amply supplied with oranges. Amidst the destruction, however, there were remarkable tales of heroism and survival. At Lyme Regis, the efforts of three local men in rescuing the crew of a stricken barque resulted in their being awarded some of the first medals ever issued by the newly

established National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck (now the RNLI). Perhaps the strangest survival story, though, only came to light a fortnight later, on 5th December, when the coal carrying *Dart* was piloted into Portsmouth after being spotted floating off Selsey under a flag of distress. Rescuers reported that on boarding the vessel, at considerable risk to themselves, they found no sign of either her passengers or crew. In fact, the only living creature they encountered was a cat, a chance survival that turned out to be a lucky omen for the *Dart's* owner. For without the cat both vessel and cargo would have been declared abandoned and seized by the Admiralty.

Despite the horrors endured by those caught up in the storm, there was no attempt to apportion blame for what had happened. Nor was there any expectation that parliament should relieve the sufferers from their difficulties. Instead, the storms were deemed an act of Divine Providence and people set about doing what they could to ease the plight of those worst affected. In Sidmouth, where the total damage was estimated to exceed £20,000 (c.£1.5M today), a meeting held in the immediate aftermath of the storm raised enough money to meet the immediate needs of the very poorest sufferers. But at a second meeting on 28 November it was deemed necessary to form a committee, chaired by local West India merchant Emanuel Baruh Lousada, to facilitate a wider-reaching subscription *in aid of those distressed Tradesmen whose heavy losses the former subscription proves inadequate to repair. Subscriptions will be thankfully received by the Committee, or...at the Bank of Messrs Hobhouse and Co [Bath]; and in London, at Messrs Hoares Bankers, Fleet Street.* (BL, *The Morning Post*, 6th Dec 1824) The account at Hoare's (pictured) was duly opened on 7th December and within a few weeks had raised £44-16-0 (c.£3.5K today).

Sidmouth's example was imitated throughout Devon and beyond. An Exeter based subscription, supported by the leading men of the county, raised nearly £6,000 (c.£420K today) within three months, helped in part by sales of a pathos-laden glee for four voices, 'The Coast Storm', by Devon born composer Thomas Billington: *Hark how the South-west wind doth blow/A hurricane hurls all below/Dreary midnight tears and sighing/Moans and groans and bitter crying.* In London, meanwhile, merchants and ship-owners opened several subscriptions aimed at providing temporary relief to the widows and children of lost mariners. But it was Portland's plight that struck the deepest chord. For as the committee charged with relieving that particular community was at pains to point out, a great number of people, mostly poor fishing families, had lost not only their homes, their belongings and the meagre stores they had laid up against the onset of winter, but also their boats and nets, rendering them incapable of sustaining themselves or their families. Subscriptions on their behalf were opened at Weymouth, Melcombe Regis and London as well as on Portland itself, while the ladies of the local Dorcas Society: *in the most prompt manner set themselves and their servants to work in making the most requisite articles of clothing. Their kindness did not end there, but on different days some of the Ladies came to Portland themselves as a Committee, to see their charity properly dispensed as far as in their Power. They came by water, and brought their clothes with them; an undertaking at this season of the year, that nothing but great warmth of feeling and goodness of heart could have enabled them to undergo.* (BL, *The Morning Chronicle*, 16th Dec 1824) By early January 1825, the Portland subscription, bolstered by a personal donation of 200 guineas by George IV, had exceeded £2,000.

Such tragedies notwithstanding, it soon became clear that England had fared much better than her Continental neighbours. For by the end of November, reports of misery and woe began arriving from across northern Europe: shipwrecks off Jutland, inundations in France and Holland, entire Swedish forests laid waste. In Russia, four hundred troops had to be drafted in to bury the dead, estimated at over 50,000 in St Petersburg alone, after the Neva burst its banks, their gruesome task made more difficult by the mountains of debris – furniture, logs and rubble – that clogged the city's

streets. Germany too suffered greatly. A prolonged spell of rain at the end of October caused major flooding, particularly in Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria and Hesse. Great swathes of farmland were submerged in water, while along the mighty rivers – the Rhine, Elbe and Danube – mills, manufactories and bridges were swept away. Almost overnight, 50,000 people were left with nothing but the clothes they stood up in. And with temperatures plummeting and the price of basic foodstuffs soaring, their prospects looked bleak. The situation was summed up in a letter by a Frankfurt lady to her friend in London: *You will probably have learned from the public papers, how heavily the hand of God has pressed upon the flourishing countries around us, and how, for the space of fifty leagues, everything has become the prey of inundation...Thousands of human beings are wandering on the high roads, without shelter, without clothing, without food...Collections have been made throughout the whole City; the Ladies have formed a Society for the supply of clothing; hundreds of dresses have been cut out and made. I have begged for the purpose from house to house, and have exceeded everywhere beyond my expectation. The whole city, the servants not excepted, animated by one general sentiment, gave what they could spare. In money and clothes there has been collected to the amount of 33,000 guilders; but, alas! in so overwhelming a calamity, this sum is quite inadequate to defend the sufferers from hunger and despair.* (Ibid, 6th Dec 1824)

Within days of these reports surfacing, an appeal had been launched in London by merchant banker Nathan Meyer Rothschild. A committee was formed at the Baltic Coffee House, Threadneedle Street, and subscription accounts opened in London as well as in cities boasting significant trading links with Germany, notably Leeds and Manchester. *Such an appeal, exhorted the committee, cannot fail to be heard in a country which has not only at different times proved an asylum for all the exiles and unfortunate of the earth, but has conveyed aid to the Distressed on whatever land they were found to exist. British sympathy has never slept, and will be found on this occasion, we are convinced, as wakeful and as fervent as ever.* (BL, The Morning Post, 2nd Dec 1824) By 10th December some £1,400 (c.£104K today) had been remitted to Germany, although as estimates of the total damage ran into many millions, this was but a fraction of what was required. And worse was to follow. For in February 1825 a new spell of prolonged rain caused the dykes protecting George IV's Hanoverian dominions from the sea and the upper reaches of the Elbe to give way. Yet again, farmland was laid waste, cattle swept to their deaths and thousands of villagers left homeless. More ominously, sea water poured into the wells and cisterns, causing severe shortages of drinking water and virulent outbreaks of disease. And so the cycle of committees, appeals and subscriptions swung into action once more, headed this time by the Duke of York and backed by a £2,000 donation from George IV himself.

It was this latter tragedy that stirred the hearts of Hoare's Bank and its customers most. For by the end of January a subscription account opened on 23rd December in aid of 'Sufferers in Germany by Inundation' had only succeeded in raising £33-2-0. But after news of the Hanoverian disaster broke in early February donations poured in thick and fast. Typical entries included: Messrs Hoare (£50); the Earl of Pembroke (£20); Hon Rev L Powys for the village of Titchmarsh, Northants (£2); collection by the Countess of Chichester at Stanmer, Sussex (£47-3-6); two collections by Viscountess Cremone (£4-4-0 & £10-10-0); Rev Gould's collection at Beaconsfield Church (£3-12-0). In all, by June 1825 nearly £700 (c.£48.5K today) had been received at Hoare's, making it one of the bank's most successful subscriptions of that period.