

DR. HENRY CHARLES BOISRAGON
Cheltenham's eminent physician
1778—1852

by Dr. A. Bruce Wallace



Dr. Henry Charles Boisragon, pronounced Bo-ragon, who practiced medicine in Cheltenham in the early nineteenth century, came from a distinguished mediaeval family of French aristocrats having both military and landed connections. The staunch Huguenot family were persecuted and eventually exiled to Denmark and the Netherlands. They saw service with the House of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne. Eventually they settled in England in the nineteenth century. The family named Chevalleau de Boisragon adopted the 'nomme-de-terre' Boisragon when Louis Boisragon and his wife, Marie Henrietta de Rambouillet, settled in England.

Louis and Marie had three daughters and two sons, Henry and Gideon Charles. The eldest daughter, Susanne Henrietta, married into another exiled Huguenot family, the Layards, and was mother to the very Reverend C. P. Layarde, Dean of Bristol.

Gideon Charles married Mary Patterson of County Down, Ireland. It is with their son, Henry Charles, who was born in 1778, that this biographical sketch is primarily concerned. He spent his early years in Ireland before enrolling in 1795 at Edinburgh University, then considered to be one of the foremost medical schools in Europe. While in Edinburgh, he became a member of the Natural History Society. His literary interests, evident in later years in his own extensive library, led to his becoming co-founder of the Cheltenham Literary and Philosophical Society with Dr. Edward Jenner. Here he presented his paper 'The Importance and Advantages of Philosophical Enquiry'.

Henry qualified M.D. in 1799. Records suggest that he lived in London between 1799 and 1805. Here he married Mary Annetta Fanshawe June 8, 1803. She had been born February 11, 1783, the only daughter of John Gascoyne Fanshawe of Parsloes, Essex, and Wyersdale,

Commissioner of Bankruptcy (1746—1803) and his wife Mary (1747—1811). The names Bamber, Gascoyne, Cecil, and Fanshawe are among the most important and aristocratic family names of the time in the Barking area. The first of the couple's three sons, Charles Henry Gascoyne, was born April 27, 1804.

Between the years 1805 and 1807, the young doctor conducted his practice first from 18 Seymour Street and later from Green Park Buildings, Walcot, Bath. At this time, Bath was one of the most popular and fashionable resorts for those wishing to take the waters and to participate in the social round, a fact which doubtless contributed to the plethora of famous and fashionable doctors who practised here.

By the 1820s, Bath was losing much of its popularity with the elite; hence, the nobility and character of the town and its residents changed considerably.

We must assume that this shrewd young doctor quickly realised the potential of the rapidly developing, though erstwhile sleepy little town of Cheltenham. Following the visit of George III and his entourage to take the waters in 1788 the town's repute was considerably enhanced. In 1801, Cheltenham attracted 3,000 visitors; by 1811 this number had tripled. The resident population in 1840 was 36,000, many of whom were trades people, shopkeepers, hoteliers, and lodging-house keepers rather than the former nobility.

As the type of resident changed, so too did the type of medical practice change from a high class consultancy to a domestic type of general practice. The industry of Bath was repeating itself in Cheltenham.

By 1800, following a regal example, the aristocracy of all nations was flocking to what had been only a few decades earlier a small country town. Where better than Cheltenham to take the cure and engage in the social round of this time of unrest on the Continent? Assembly rooms, hotels, lodging houses, terraces, and villas shot up overnight to present a most prosperous, though short-lived, facade. Medical men with varying experience and backgrounds hastened to the town. None was more successful than the young Dr. Henry Boisragon who, with his fine qualifications, his *savoir-faire*, his aplomb, and his family background seized the opportunity to establish himself.

When he arrived in Cheltenham in 1807, Dr. Boisragon was to find a kindred spirit, Dr. Edward Jenner, a man of similar tastes and interests who lived close by. Each was interested in literature and possessed a large library; each was a keen musician, having a fine singing voice and being talented at the piano, the harpsichord, and the violin.

Dr. Boisragon was already familiar with the technique and rationale of vaccination, although, strange to say, there is little reference to such in his diary during the years 1830 to 1832. It is highly ironic that his eldest son, Captain Charles Henry Boisragon, was to die of confluent smallpox in Etwan, India in 1837, leaving a widow with two sons and two daughters, whose lineage are today the sole descendants of this ancient and noble family. It appears that the East Indian Company was slow to recognise the value, and tardy in the implementation of, vaccination.

Dr. Boisragon took up residence initially in Winchcomb Street where he remained until the completion of Royal Crescent, the first of such terraces to be built in Cheltenham. This was a fine address from which to practice, abutting at the rear on the 'Harley Street' of Cheltenham, St. George's Place where Dr. Jenner and Dr. T. Howell—surgeon extraordinary to the king—and several other doctors of note conducted their practices. In 1811, Dr. Henry Charles Boisragon moved into the newly completed 11 Royal Crescent and proceeded to build a large and lucrative practice.

It is of interest to note that 11 Royal Crescent was then valued at £3,500 and that in 1820 Dr Boisragon

signed a thirty years lease at £180 per annum. [In 1945 it changed hands for £3,000 and in 1969 for £10,500.]

During this period of Cheltenham's peak development, greater numbers of royalty and nobility flocked to the spa than ever before. Among these were the Prince Regent, his cousin the Duke of Gloucester – a near neighbour at 18 Royal Crescent – and several members of foreign royalty including the Duc d'Orleans, who visited for three months after Waterloo. These in turn attracted members of the nobility, dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, counts and countesses, a list of whose arrivals and departures was published weekly in the Cheltenham *Looker-on*. The Duke of Wellington himself visited on four separate occasions between 1805 and 1828, first as Arthur Wellesley.

Goding's *History of Cheltenham* notes that in 1823 visitors arriving included 4 dukes, 3 duchesses, 6 marquises, 5 marchionesses, 4 bishops, 10 earls, 8 countesses, 53 lords, 70 ladies, besides a host of honourables, baronets, and foreigners of title.

With his family background, his aristocratic bearing, his social graces, and his sound medical training, Dr Henry Boisragon was well suited to serve such a clientele. Always hard-working, he was a popular figure as a young man, present at many of the private parties, public balls, and musical evenings. His distinguished appearance, his polished manners, and his liberal education, together with his colourful personality provided a ready access into the best society at a time when many French nobility in voluntary exile from oppression were seeking refuge in England.

The following announcement appeared in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* on June 9, 1814:

The Prince of Wales has been pleased to appoint Henry Boisragon of this place M.D. to be one of His Royal Highness' Physicians Extraordinaire. The influx of company more and more continues, which gives to this town an aspect of peculiar gaiety and animation. The crowded state of the Metropolis, by the arrival of allied sovereigns will doubtless occasion many to seek the freshness of the open air. Cheltenham, with its combinations of healing springs, healthful atmosphere, and fashionable attraction, will very generally form the point of their retreat.

Prior to this announcement, Dr Boisragon had in 1813 been appointed to the staff of the newly formed Dispensary in St. George's Place. This later moved to Edmiston House on the High Street – Cheltenham's first General Hospital – which received in-patients. The Dispensary continued to operate for the relief of the poor for several years. Its services were augmented in 1816 by the Society For the Relief of The Deserving Poor. Dr Boisragon's name appears on the list of those who attended the inaugural meeting and served on the committee.

About this time in 1813, Dr Boisragon and Dr Jenner together established one of the many Literary and Philosophical Societies which were then so popular. In 1817 Cheltenham's first Masonic Lodge was formed, meeting at Sheldon's Hotel off the High Street. Dr Boisragon was the first Worshipful Master. Dr Jenner was made an honorary member at a later date. Dr Boisragon was doubtless involved in the May 1825 laying of the Pittville Pump Room foundation stone on which occasion the Provincial and local Masons proceeded in full Masonic regalia to the Parish Church where a service was first held. He also attended other Masonic functions, one of which was performed by the High Sheriff, Mr H. Norwood Trye of Leckhampton.

On February 6, 1810, six years after the birth of their eldest son Charles Henry, their second son Theodore Smith Gurenstone was born to the Doctor and his wife. Like his father, Theodore graduated in medicine from Edinburgh where he presented his thesis

“Hypochondriasis” in 1835. For a short time while he lived in Cheltenham he served on the staff of the Dispensary. The Cheltenham *Looker-on* contains this account of his social life:

Mr Theodore Boisragon attended the Bachelors' Ball in 1836 in the Assembly Rooms. The Ball opened at 10 p.m. At 1.30 dinner (a banquet) was served in the Supper Room upstairs. At 2.00 a.m. the festive throng returned to the Ballroom, dancing recommenced with renewed vigour and hilarity. At 4.30 the merry dancers partook of a second collation and again returned to the Salon de Dance where they continued to “foot it fealty” until 6.30 o'clock when the band struck up “God Save The King”, and those who remained hied them to their morning pillows. Altogether, this fete may be pronounced as decidedly the most brilliant that has ever taken place in Cheltenham ...splendid costumes ... well supported characters, ... elegant dresses. Some of the bandits' dresses were also particularly good: while Dr Theodore Boisragon in the sable garb of Paganini (a character which was admirably sustained) and Mr I. S. Cox in the robes of a Rosicrucian appeared as they moved through the motley throng, like the phantoms of Night and Day, so perfect a contrast did the hues of their respective costumes exhibit.

In 1836 when his father was President of the Literary and Philosophical Society, Dr Theodore Boisragon, a fellow member of the Society, presented his address on “The Blowpipe.”

On January 21, 1812, Mrs Henry Boisragon gave birth to a third son, Conrad Gascogne. He, like his father and his brother Theodore, evinced this same love of music, and together they enjoyed many musical soirees. Conrad later studied music in Italy and became a professional singer, assuming the name Conrad Boranni which may have been an Italianised form of Boisragon. He became a celebrated opera singer who sang major roles at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. He married Hannah Ball in 1851 and died in 1890 leaving no family.

Dr Henry Boisragon's importance to the developing town extended beyond the realm of medicine. His advice was sought in all major affairs relating to town welfare, and few decisions were taken without his prior consideration. His own private speculations, however, were not always propitious, a fact which doubtless accounted in part for his later parsimony.

During the years 1830 to 1832 when his wife and two younger sons were on extended tour (the eldest son, Charles Henry, being then a Captain in The East Indian Company) Dr. Boisragon was meticulous in maintaining a diary which today provides a clear picture of his professional life, containing a daily record of names, addresses, diagnoses, treatments, the number of patients seen, and the fees charged – invariably one guinea. Fees were totalled daily and comparative records maintained. Money was becoming an important factor, his diary in 1830 noting that his income was £3,135, a very substantial figure in those days. There is no doubt that he was kept busy. The May 14 entry notes ‘This is the best day of single fees this year’ £16-12-0, yet two days later he earned £20-13-0 and on June 1 £27-10-0. On November 25 he notes, ‘Not one fee: this has not happened for three years.’

Dr Boisragon's practice was mainly consultant; there seemed to be little of today's continuity of treatment, little family practice and although he was a great friend and admirer of Dr Jenner, only one reference to vaccination is recorded. Despite his fondness for children, he makes reference to neither obstetrics nor pediatrics.

Many of the diseases which he diagnosed such as congestive heart failure, ascites, and gout remain common today. However, erysipelas, typhoid, and phthisis being more easily controlled are seldom encountered today. His asides concerning his patients, as with most doctors, are most amusing. Mrs Massey, "the old bitch," Sir Arthur Faulkner, "the wretch." Another is charged £2 "for endeavouring to see his maker." Caldwell is "the most awkward among human beings that has ever presented an exterior of dirt and filthy habits and aggravated state of disease to any professional observation; the hands and feet are distorted by gout and himself with every stigma of disease possible to imagine ..."

That the diary should make no reference to treatment by hydrotherapy is strange, particularly as in 1830 he included a balance sheet for the sale of Cheltenham Effervescent Salts for the period June 1827 to June 1830.

To wholesale at sundry houses (discounted deducted)	£1761- 4-1
To retail in shop	971- 1-4
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	£2732- 5-5
To cash from various houses	558-19-9
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	£3291- 5-2
Deduct total expenses	-1818- 6- 9
	<hr/>
	£1409-18-5
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My half for three years	£704-19-2½

Meticulous to the last half penny!

The diary provides an insight, too, into his private life.

Despite his 'impecunious' state, he lived well, at times perhaps too well in the absence of his 'Dearest Missis' and his sons. His expenses in 1830 were £2,991 of which at least £350 was spent on liquour. He cites the instance when 'That everlasting old Tuxbelly, Josiitti, brought his infamous fat friend to dine, a cleric with one leg and a key volume of the encyclopaedia, and drank six bottles.' The diary also lists Cheltenham's many visitors of note during these years—Lord Byron, Princess Esterhazy, the Earl of Cork, and the Duc d'Orleans, later to become King Louis Philippe of France with whom Dr. Boisragon established an intimate relationship during the Duke's extended stay. Others mentioned are the Marquis of Exeter, Lord Thomas Cecil, Lord Segrave, and Lord Dillon.

On the Doctor's 52nd birthday, his diary reads:

May God grant me to support the anxieties and labours of this life of privation and responsibility and by His gracious aid so to employ the remainder of the years granted to me through His mercy as to benefit my dear family and fellow creatures, and to ensure me in the world to come life everlasting.

There can be no doubt that he felt sad and lonely in the absence of his wife and his second son, 'Dear Theodore' when they left from the Plough Hotel by coach, L'Hirondel, for Liverpool en route for Edinburgh. He consoled himself, however, with the occasional dinner party, musical evening—Paganini perhaps—or race meetings at Cleeve Hill. On Theodore's birthday he wrote in his diary: 'Dear Theodore's birthday; may Heaven support, help, and preserve him'. He gave each of the servants a glass of wine to drink his son's health and later 'went to the church alone; missed Dear Theodore.'

During these years the diary makes no reference to the eldest son Charles Henry who had been born in 1804.

He had joined the East India Company at the age of eighteen. In 1827 he married Ellen Maxwell, the daughter of General Maxwell, Indian Army of Dalswinton, Dumfrieshire, Scotland.

Little is known about Mary Annette, nee Fanshawe, the 'Dear Missis' of her husband's diary. She died in 1840, three years after the death of her eldest son. The *Looker-On* noted:

On September 13, at his residence in the Crescent, Mary Annette, the beloved wife of Dr. Henry Boisragon and only daughter of the late John Gascoign Fanshawe, Esqre. of Parsloes in Essex. She was loved by the poor and was the ever-ready friend of the afflicted.

She was laid to rest in Leckhampton Churchyard where her tombstone bears the inscription, 'Here by her own desire, near to those she loved, are deposited the mortal remains of Mary Annette Boisragon.'

Within the space of ten years, 1830 to 1840, Dr. Boisragon experienced great anxiety and sorrow. Gone was the music and gaiety of the old family home. His practice, with the influx of many new practitioners, was dwindling, his investments were not always sound, and his income was decreasing. Having practiced in Cheltenham for thirty-three years, he was unaccustomed to the new type of family practice. Cheltenham became, as Bath had become much earlier, over-doctored.

In 1845 Dr. Boisragon deemed it wise to cut his losses and offered for sale the contents of his home. Although much of the space had been devoted to professional use, yet he had been able to house a wide range of personal effects: his extensive library; various collections; two pianos; a harpsichord; and the myriad possessions with their wealth of memories all came under the hammer. The six day sale at 11 Royal Crescent comprised 1,600 lots and evinced unprecedented attraction. He now moved around the corner to a boarding house at 14 Bayshill Terrace.

In November 1846, he married in the Parish Church of St. Margaret's, Westminster, Jemima Thompson, spinster of Cheltenham. His address at this time was given as Leckhampton, Cheltenham.

Shortly after this he moved to Paris where he continued to enjoy his friendship with the former patient, King Louis Philippe until his dethronement in 1848 at which time Dr. Boisragon returned to England. After a brief stay in London and after Louis' death in 1850, he retired to Bideford where he died in 1852 aged seventy-five. His widow died one year later at Bideford.

The *Looker-On* carried a touching tribute to his memory, which reads in part:

His memory will continue to be honoured and respected by all who were personally acquainted with him. He was not exempt from the common failings of humanity, for he had his weaknesses and his foibles, but of these it may be said with truth "they generally leaned to virtue's side" while the generosity of his nature, and the rectitude of his principles, commanded the esteem and admiration of all who came within the sphere of their operation. With a highly cultivated mind, and an ardent attachment to the pursuits of art, literature, and science, he united the polished manners of the gentleman, and a charity that "thinketh no evil."

He had acted well that part of his family motto which quotes from Terence: 'Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto.' (I am a man; I count nothing concerning man as outside my orbit.—Ed).

Sources: Dr. H. C. Boisragon's Diary; *Cheltenham Chronicle*; *Looker-On*; Goding 'History of Cheltenham.'