

## The Assassination of Thomas Parr, Resident of Bencoolen

by Joanna Cicely Fennell

Thomas Parr was the son of Dublin-born Lieut-Col. John Parr, 20th regiment of foot, and Sarah Walmesley. He was baptised on 20 March 1768 at Wigan, Lancashire. His father John Parr was appointed Governor of Nova Scotia in 1782, a position he held until his death in 1791. The Parr family claims descent from Sir William Parr, brother of Katharine Parr, the sixth wife of Henry VIII. Through his paternal grandmother Eleanor Clements, he was a descendant of Rev. Robert Clements, who settled in Haverhill, Massachusetts in the 17th century.<sup>1</sup> Parr's mother was a member of the Walmesley family of Ince Hall in Lancashire and his maternal grandmother Ann Braddyll was a descendant of Everard Braddyll, cup-bearer to Edward III.<sup>2</sup> Thomas was educated at the Macclesfield School and nominated to the Bengal Civil Service in 1783 by J. Clements of London.<sup>3</sup> He worked as a Senior Merchant for the Company for many years before his appointment as Resident of Bencoolen in April 1805. On 1 September 1798 he married Frances Roworth at Fort William, Calcutta.<sup>4</sup> Frances was the sister of Thomas Roworth, a wealthy Bengal merchant.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas and Frances Parr had issue as follows:

1. Frances Harriet Goodla(n)d Parr. She was allegedly born on 7 August 1801<sup>6</sup> in Bengal.<sup>7</sup> On 24 August 1824 she married Rev. Roger Carus Wilson at Bath.<sup>8</sup> She died at Bath on 24 February 1880.<sup>9</sup>
2. Thomas Clements Parr, B.L. He was born on 15 July 1803 and baptised on 16 August 1803 at St. George Hanover Square in London.<sup>10</sup> He married Julia Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Charles Abraham Elton, on 6 January 1836 at

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<sup>1</sup> Other notable descendants of the Clements family included Samuel Clemens (better known by his *nom de plume* Mark Twain) and Mary Clements Osgood, one of the last women accused in the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. One branch of the Irish Clements family went on to become Earls of Leitrim.

<sup>2</sup> Burke, John & Burke, John Bernard (1847) *A genealogical and heraldic dictionary of the landed gentry of Great Britain and Ireland*. Volume II. London: Henry Colburn. p. 1502

<sup>3</sup> IOR/J/1/11/160-2. J. Clements was probably John Clements of Upper Grosvenor St, who was Parr's cousin and godfather. He made provision for both Thomas Clements Parr and Frances Harriett Goodland Parr in his will. Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills (1384 - 1858). PROB 11/1596. Will of John Clements of Saint George Hanover Square, Middlesex. 3 September 1817. Accessed online 14 May 2012 <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline>

<sup>4</sup> IOR/N/1/5 p. 133

<sup>5</sup> Of Thomas Roworth & Co. He was described as an auctioneer in a list of European Inhabitants of Bengal dated 1805, which also recorded that he had first arrived in India in 1785. IOR/O/5/26. Vol.1. List 6

<sup>6</sup> Fortescue-Brickdale, Sir Charles (Ed) (1917) *Major-General Sir Henry Hallam Parr: Recollections and Correspondence, with a short account of his two sons A.H.H. Parr and G.R. Parr*. London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd. p. 35

<sup>7</sup> Census, 1861. England. Clifton, Christchurch, Gloucestershire. 369. ED 11. p. 63. Accessed online 16 July 2012 [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

<sup>8</sup> *Lancaster Gazette*. 4 September 1824. p. 3. col. 1

<sup>9</sup> England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1861-1941. 1880. W. Wi. p. 112. Accessed online 16 July 2012 [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

<sup>10</sup> London, England, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1812. Bishop's Transcript. Westminster, St George Hanover Square, 1803, p. 8. Accessed online 16 July 2012 [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

Clifton, Gloucestershire.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Clements Parr died at Clifton on 1 Dec 1863.<sup>12</sup>

3. Emily Ann Parr. She was born on 25 January 1805 and baptised on 24 February 1805 at Calcutta.<sup>13</sup> Emily Ann Parr died in Oct 1806.<sup>14</sup>

4. William Parr. He was born on 6 December 1806 and baptised on 6 Jan 1807 at Calcutta.<sup>15</sup> He died c. 1809.<sup>16</sup>

The East India Company company presence in Sumatra dates from 1685, when it established a small factory at Bencoolen. Prior to that the Dutch had enjoyed a monopoly on the pepper and spice trade in the area. The E.I.C. built Fort Marlborough between 1713 and 1719 to protect its interest in the pepper trade. Bencoolen remained under British control until 1825 (excluding a brief period of French rule in the 1760s), when it was ceded to the Dutch under the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824. Parr's appointment as Resident was no doubt due to his skill as a businessman; his background was not in administration but finance. The small residency of Bencoolen on the west coast of Sumatra had been a constant drain on the Company's finances. A memorandum written in 1809 outlined the deep-rooted problems, which the administration faced:

In the year 1785 the Presidency of Fort Marlbro' was reduced to a Residency, and made subject to the control of the Bengal Government.

In the year 1800 the Government of Bengal resolved to commit the charge of the Residency to a Civil Officer with the appellation of Lieutenant Governor who was to be appointed from Bengal, and in whose person were to be united the Civil and Military powers of the Settlement.

In 1801 however the Court observed that the Company has sustained an annual loss of £87000<sup>17</sup> by the Settlement of Fort Marlbro' they therefore resolved that the out residencies should be withdrawn and the permanent Establishment reduced to a Resident 4 Assistants and 4 Writers the whole expense of which including the Military was not to exceed Dollars 61,610<sup>18</sup> p. Annum.<sup>19</sup>

Both Thomas Parr, and his successor Richard Parry, would complain about the "embarrassment" they suffered by the lack of qualified civil servants at Fort

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<sup>11</sup> England, Marriages, 1538–1973. 6 Jan 1836. Clifton, Gloucestershire. FHL film no. 1595528. Accessed online 20 May 2012 [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

<sup>12</sup> England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1861-1941. 1864. P. p. 241. Accessed online 15 July 2012 [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

<sup>13</sup> IOR/N/1/7 p. 70

<sup>14</sup> *Asiatic Annual Register for 1807* (1809) Vol. IX. London: T. Caddell and W. Davies; Black, Parry, and Kingsbury. p. 218

<sup>15</sup> IOR/N/1/7 p. 240

<sup>16</sup> IOR/F/4/345/7982 p. 15

<sup>17</sup> Approximately £2.8 million, based on a conversion of £87,000 in 1800 to 2005. National Archives Currency Converter. Accessed online 28 May 2012 <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/>

<sup>18</sup> The Sumatran Dollar was the currency of Bencoolen at that time

<sup>19</sup> *Memoranda respecting the Establishment at Fort Marlbro'*. IOR/O/6/4 pp. 691-2

Marlborough.<sup>20</sup> An example of the disorganisation and corruption, which was endemic in the establishment at Bencoolen can be seen in the case of Thomas Blair, who was suspended in May 1806. Resident Parr recorded a minute outlining the impropriety of Blair's conduct as Resident of Sillebar. He drew particular attention to the "violent and unjustifiable exercise of his authority" and also to the "enormous expense he incurred in the construction of the public buildings at Poola Bay". He added that Blair had also neglected to pay the customs on pepper, which were owed to the Sultan of Maco Maco.<sup>21</sup> Parr's economic policies, though in the interest of the government of Bencoolen, were ultimately what led to his demise. Lady Sophia Raffles, second wife of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, who became Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen in 1817, wrote the following account of Parr's policies:

On the arrival of Mr. Parr great reductions took place in the all the public establishments, by which numbers of people were suddenly thrown out of employ, and many reduced to starvation. Trained in the strict practical forms of Bengal, and accustomed to unlimited obedience from a submissive and subjugated people, Mr. Parr unintentionally gave great disgust to by carrying the same arbitrary ideas and principles among a people who require an opposite mode of treatment. He made great alterations in the native courts, without the concurrence or advice of the Chiefs, and occasionally assumed an arbitrary and independent authority in it, which made them fear for their ancient institutions and customs ... In carrying into effect his plans of economy, he certainly proceeded with too much haste, and without due consideration; insults offered on various occasions of some of the principal Chiefs, produced a deep sensation in men of violent and vindictive tempers, and the attempt to coerce the cultivation of coffee appears to have brought the discontent to a crisis ... The country was in a state of revolt; but Mr. Parr was blind to the danger with which he was threatened.<sup>22</sup>

Parr's business acumen, while valued by the Bengal Government, incited hostility from local Malay chiefs. He managed however during his short time at Bencoolen to significantly reduce the residency's expenditure. His efforts to encourage the cultivation of coffee is generally considered the principal cause of his assassination:

It is well known that it [the cultivation of coffee] was extremely obnoxious to the local people, and has generally been considered as one of the causes which led to his unfortunate death. The true causes of this melancholy event perhaps lie deeper than the enforcement of a single order ... There seems no doubt that the whole of the chiefs of the country were perfectly aware of the attempt to be made on Mr. Parr's life ... The country was in a state of revolt, and the

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<sup>20</sup> IOR/O/6/4 pp. 691-2

<sup>21</sup> IOR/O/6/3 pp. 69-70

<sup>22</sup> Raffles, Lady Sophia (1830) *Memoir of the life and public services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*. London: John Murray. pp. 301-2

circumstances under which the assassination took place, would have justified, and seemed to call for more decisive measures than were used.<sup>23</sup>

Parr was murdered in an unexpected attack on his country home, Mount Felix, on 23 December 1807.<sup>24</sup> Frances Parr's account of the murder of her husband describes the brutal nature of the attack:

[M]y beloved husband was, on the night of the 23rd of December, torn from his bed by Malays and murdered in my sight, but do not believe that Parr's wife, and your sister, endeavoured, like a coward, to save herself by flight until she had used her weak efforts to assist the father of her children, the dear valued friend and husband of her heart. Not, my brother, until I had my hands and body stabbed did I think of my poor infant boy in the next room ...

Yes, they cut off the head of my Parr to take to their chief. Blessed head! blessed face! But his last breath was mine, He saw me struggle with the first monster who came into the room, to seize his creese<sup>25</sup> that I might gain it to defend himself with - all would not do. My hands were cut to pieces, my bosom had four stabs, and I was stamped on and kicked to the other end of the room ...

How I should have boasted of them [her wounds] had my Parr's life been spared, and he would have so flattered me for my activity. Why did I not always make him keep arms. But he was displeased when I ever urged it, and asserted: "I never did an injury to any man, I have nothing to fear." From a revengeful assassin he had everything to fear.<sup>26</sup>

Frances' letter also states that the Malays left Parr's head in the nursery, and they took instead a watch to present to Dion, the Malay chief she believed to have ordered Parr's assassination, as proof that his orders had been carried out. Thomas Parr was not the only victim of the Malay attack at Mount Felix. Both Frances Parr and the Resident's second assistant Charles Murray were injured. Murray died several days after the attack, as a result of his efforts to protect Parr. Frances Parr describes her affection for Murray:

My dear, dear brother, Mr. Murray was a second Parr; can I say more? But his manly heart burst with anguish, he became almost frantic at seeing the beloved form of his friend cut to pieces.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*. Vol. XIII. Jan-Jun 1822. London: Kingsbury, Parbury, & Allen. p. 471

<sup>24</sup> IOR/N/7/1 p.216

<sup>25</sup> An alternative spelling of *kris*, a ceremonial dagger typically worn around the neck

<sup>26</sup> Fortescue-Brickdale, Sir Charles (Ed) (1917) *Major-General Sir Henry Hallam Parr: Recollections and Correspondence, with a short account of his two sons A.H.H. Parr and G.R. Parr*. London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd. pp. 33-4. Letter from Frances Parr to her brother Thomas Roworth, then of Coombe Lodge, Blagdon, Somerset, dated 16 January 1808, in which she apprises him of the murder of his brother-in-law.

<sup>27</sup> Fortescue-Brickdale, op. cit., p. 33.

The unhappy event was widely reported, in dramatic fashion, by many British newspapers. The following report from *The Examiner* provides an account of the events at Mount Felix:

The Dispatches brought by the East-India fleet were opened on Monday at the India House ... A shocking murder was lately committed at Fort Marlborough. A party of about three hundred Malays, finding but few military in the place, attacked the Government House<sup>28</sup>, and barbarously murdered the Company's Resident, Mr. PARR. Their murderous assault was made in a manner the most sudden and unexpected, but the few troops in the place succeeded in defeating the assailants, and saving the lives of the other British inhabitants, upon the whole of whose lives the Malays are said to have had a design.<sup>29</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest, as this report claims, that the Malay contingent had any motive other than the murder of Thomas Parr, given that the death of Charles Murray was based solely on his attempts to protect his superior. Frances Parr's injuries were likewise incidental.

The most immediate consequence of the murder was the despatch of two Bengal Marine Regiments to be entrusted to the supervision of Captain James Templer Parlbly "for the defence of the settlement".<sup>30</sup> Local villages were razed and suspects "hung in chains" and "blown off from the mouth of a cannon".<sup>31</sup> Mount Felix, which overlooked the bays of Bencoolen and Pulo, was abandoned after the murder and let to fall into ruin.<sup>32</sup> Parr and Murray were buried in adjacent graves within Fort Marlborough, at the Ravelin.<sup>33</sup> The following death notice appeared in the *Lancaster Gazette* in 1808:

Lately, at Bencoolen, in the East Indies, Governor Parr (who was massacred by the Malays) son of Mrs. Parr, of Preston. Also the Hon. Charles Murray, son of the late Bishop of St. David's, and nephew of the Duke of Atholl, and of the late Lord Charles Aynsley. He fell a sacrifice to the great exertions he used in the defence of Mr. Parr".<sup>34</sup>

It appears that Parr's personal finances left something to be desired, as the East India Company offered to pay for the passage of Frances and her son William on their return to England. Thomas Parr's widow and children were provided for in the will of his mother Sarah Parr who died in 1813.<sup>35</sup> Thomas' brother Major John Parr of Burrow

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<sup>28</sup> The attack actually took place at Mount Felix, the country seat of the Resident, located several miles from Fort Marlborough.

<sup>29</sup> *The Examiner*. 21 August 1808. p. 11, col. 2.

<sup>30</sup> IOR/F/4/324/7414 p. 1

<sup>31</sup> Heyne, Benjamin (1814) *Tracts, historical and statistical, on India*. London: Robert Baldwin; Black, Parry, & Co. pp. 872-3

<sup>32</sup> Heyne, op. cit., p. 400

<sup>33</sup> IOR/F/4/345/7982 p. 45

<sup>34</sup> *Lancaster Gazette*. 10 Sep 1808. p. 3, col. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills (1384 - 1858). PROB 11/1557. Will of Sarah Parr, Widow of Preston, Lancashire. 7 June 1814. Accessed online 2 June 2012 <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline>

Hall, Tunstall in Lancashire also made provision for his nephew Thomas Clements Parr, who was educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford.<sup>36</sup>

The will of Thomas Parr reveals some interesting information, about Thomas' pre-marital (or extra-marital) affairs. On 30 July 1806, prior to a voyage to Calcutta aboard the *Perseverance*, he made a codicil to his will in which he stated that, in the event that both he and his wife and their children perish, he wished to leave the residue of his estate to his natural children George & Francis Halifax.<sup>37</sup> He also requested that a sum of 2,000 rupees be put aside for the purchase of a "piece of plate for Thomas Roworth [his executor and guardian of his surviving, legitimate, children after the death of their mother] in Testimony of my regard and affection."<sup>38</sup>

Frances Parr and her youngest son William sailed for Calcutta after the murder of Thomas Parr, arriving in March 1808. In April of that year Mrs. Parr addressed a memorandum to the Bengal government, which led to some suspicion regarding the conduct of William Byam Martin, Head Assistant to the Resident, who had also been at Mount Felix when Parr was murdered.<sup>39</sup> Martin had escaped when the house was under attack, but was subsequently cleared of any wrongdoing.

In a further cruel twist of fate, Frances and William Parr never arrived in England after setting sail from Calcutta in 1808 or 1809. In 1810 a Company Minute declared that Frances Parr appeared to have been "on board one of the ships which have been so long missing".<sup>40</sup> Some accounts record that Frances died on board the *Georgiana*, however that particular ship was not one of the many vessels lost during 1809. The Company expressed concern for the two remaining orphans of the late Resident and declared its intention to compensate them.

A fine monument was erected in memory of Thomas Parr and Charles Murray, outside Fort Marlborough, at some considerable cost to the EIC. Known as the Thomas Parr Monument, it is still standing to this day and is one of the few architectural reminders of former British colonial presence in Bencoolen. A wooden plaque within the mausoleum, which was still extant in 1963, read:

Here are deposited the Remains of Thomas Parr Esquire  
Resident and Representative of the Honourable E.I. Cy.  
at Fort Marlborough in Bencoolen who although a benevo-  
lent Father to the Malay Inhabitants and solicitous to  
improve their Freedom and Prosperity in the prudent and  
gradual Introduction of Spontaneous .....  
fell with(out sent)ence of the ... and (unr)ivalled  
atrocit(y) under the misguided and barbarous Fury of a Band  
of Assassins in the Night of the 27th of December A.D.

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<sup>36</sup> Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills (1384 - 1858). PROB 11/1706. Will of John Parr of Tunstall, Lancashire. 24 December 1825. Accessed online 2 June 2012  
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline>

<sup>37</sup> IOR/L/AG/34/29/20 no. 28

<sup>38</sup> IOR/L/AG/34/29/20 no. 28

<sup>39</sup> IOR/O/6/7 p. 793

<sup>40</sup> IOR/F/4/345/7982 p. 15

1807 in the ...th Year of His Age.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Harfield, Alan (1985). *Bencoolen: The Christian Cemetery & The Fort Marlborough Monuments*. Putney: BACSA.