

MS 362

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Diary of Samuel Holt Beever of his travels in Portugal and Spain, 1812

Manuscript diary of Samuel Holt Beever, from a Manchester merchant family, providing an account of his travel through Portugal and Spain during the War of Independence or Peninsular War, 17 Aug - 4 Nov 1812. The volume contains 183 pages.

Holt Beever describes the countryside, towns and pueblos, buildings and fortifications, the corruption of drivers and muleteers, agriculture, the lack of provisions, the problems of flies and mosquitoes, visits to recent fields of battle still scattered with corpses and the detritus of war, including a visit to the field of the battle of Salamanca, costs and expenses. There are numerous references to recent military actions.

A synopsis of the contents is as follows:

13 Aug 1812: Departure from Manchester to London

- p.7 Arranged letters of credit for £500 in Cadiz and £500 in Lisbon
- p.12 Boards ship at Falmouth
- p.19 Companions on board ship
- p.20 Two brothers from Gibraltar named Smyth
- p.26 Arrives at mouth of Tagus
- p.27 Arrival at Lisbon "to a person who has seen Dublin and London... Lisbon is a village."
- p.30 Fruit market
- p.39 Cintra
- p.59 Villa Franca
- p.62 Monasterio Batalha
- p.63 Leiria
- p.65 Pombal
- p.66 Portuguese army conscripts bound together  
Condeixe
- p.67 Coimbra
- p.70 Albergueria  
Oporto
- p.75 Prisons and prisoners  
Peñafiel
- p.82 Canaveyes [?]
- p.83 Peza
- p.85 Wine making: "a most disgusting sight... 6 men up there B—s in the juice... they had on short kind of drawers just to cover those parts that decency requires."

- p.86 Larrego
- p.87 Mormenta de Beira: “This place has suffered from the French who were here a year ago.”
- p.88 Villada Ponte [?] “of all the places this was the worst, being quite in ruins... the roof with as many holes as tiles... the fleas were in great abundance...”
- p.90 Members of the party quarrel over a bet as to who could shoot a partridge first. Pínhel. Only accommodation is one large room in the house of the Juez: “The French had been 3 times to his house and taken away everything... the whole village had suffered a great deal...”
- p.91 Almeida
- p.93 Ciudad Rodrigo. “Met a quantity of French prisoners, miserable objects escorted by some Portuguese soldiers... met an English officer wounded...”
- p.95 Inspects fortifications and describes the siege and death of General McKinnon
- p.96 Profile plan of the ramparts
- p.97 “All the ground is strewn with broken shells, balls, grape shot and on the slope of the hill are many holes where shells or shot are struck.”
- p.98 “We are told that fever is prevalent here and up the country near to Salamanca, many people have died of it... Early in the morning we fell in with near 100 German soldiers going to join [ord] Wellington.”
- p.100 French prisoners; English officer escaped from Salamanca because he owed money to his landlady. Arrival at Salamanca.
- p.101-3 Visit to the battlefield:
- p.101 “When we got to the Plaza Mayor, we had to wait near an hour before we got any quarters, for it is a fact that no such thing as an inn is in Salamanca. After Francisco had been in every part of the town, we were oblig’d to take up with one room — we paid for this room 2 dollars a day — not large, and rather dark, the windows being small, they were whitewashing it when we took possession. In less than an hour we found the fleas attacking in all directions, I tonight was obliged to sleep in my clothes on some boxes, my bed being so wet. I however did very well.  
8 [October 1812] We got our mules about eleven o’clock and in the town spoke a soldier of the 48th and got him to go with us to the field of battle of the glorious 22nd of July 1812. It is about a league from the town where the first charge was made by the British on the French, who were on some rising ground. The country here is all corn and is a succession of gently rising hills (or rather then ground rises and falls every hundred yards) the whole plough’d for hundreds of acres. There are two or three small villages in the scene of action. They’d suffer’d a good deal from the firing but are now refitted. According to the information our guide gave us (and he was an eyewitness (as also he had been at Talavera, Albuera, Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajos and other places), the British gave the French possession of 2 important hills and other advanta[geous] ground, in order to induce them to give battle. It was however commenc’d (after the armies had been [p. 102] many days in sight of each other and all this day very near) by some parties from both armies going for water to the wells in the villages before mention’ed and some skirmishing ensued which gradually brought on a general engagement. Our troops continually drove them from one height to another, the French firing grape and musketry until we were within about a hundred yards, then our soldiers fired a volley and advanc’d with the bayonet, the French retreating again to another eminence wherever our men came up with them dreadful carnage ensued. After the battle our army pursued the French many days and the dead were left to be buried by the Spaniards, who however only stripped the bodies and interr’d the English, leaving both French and Portuguese naked on the ground; when we were there near three months after, we saw great numbers of bodies in various parts, some complete skeletons, others in different states of decay, sometimes horses and their riders lay side by side. This was the prospect for many

hundred yards that we went over, but the stench became so strong that we did not go the place where the greatest slaughter was made in a wood about a mile farther. Many bodies had been put under ground a few days before [by] the peasantry, purely because they want to plough the ground as usual, and I suppose the rest will now get interr'd on the same account, except those that are in the woods. There were many kites and some vultures [p. 103] feeding on the carcasses, and also a great number of pigs and dogs were in various parts."

- p.104 Fortifications built by the French, who had destroyed the nearby houses to use the building material
- p.105 Many bones all around the trenches "whether they were ever interred and sorted up again by the pigs or whether they were never buried we could not learn".
- p.107 Meets with another English party of noblemen, news of Soult.
- p.108 Coach for 6 people could take them to Madrid for 150 dollars. Salamanca cathedral would have been pulled down, but priests paid a ransom.
- p.109 Merino sheep
- p.110 Peñaranda
- p.112 "We had a grand dispute with one of our muleteers today about a poor sick soldier, we overtook almost fainting under his knapsack and firelock, we insisted on the muleteers taking these."
- P.113 Arevalo
- p.114 Food provisions on good supply having acquired meat at Salamanca
- p.116 Segovia
- p.122 "We went out to the castle, which is one of the most ancient and curious places in Spain... here the French planted 2 cannon but did not make much use of them... one room was called the library, the man said the French had taken away the books some time since."
- p.123 Room where Gil Blas was imprisoned  
Aqueduct
- p.124 Bull ring not finished, the French came before it could be done
- p.126 La Granja, San Ildefonso [small plan of the chapel]
- p.132 Guadarama. The inn full of troops. The Alcalde had had five houses, but only one was habitable, the others destroyed by the French.
- p.133 El Escoril
- p.134 Monastery occupied by only 7 sick monks. A division of the British army had been billeted there after the French were driven away.
- p.135 Book cases empty, all books carried away by the French.
- p.138 Bandits in the Guadarama mountains
- p.139 Arrival at Madrid
- p.148 Strongly advised to make immediate departure from Madrid for Badajoz, Soult being within 20 leagues of Madrid

- p.151 Wellington expected to arrive from Burgos... “If Soult does risk an action he will suffer handsomely...”
- p.152 Depart Madrid, arrive Mostoles
- p.153 French depredations at the village. Valmojado. Santa Cruz de Latemar
- p.154 El Bravo - Talavera de la Reina
- p.155 “We went on foot to the field of Battle that is about a league North of the town... “
- p.156 Pigs rooted the graves “and laid the skeletons quite bare & exposed, also a number of skulls bones to be seen... these & few balls, Caps, &c & broken shells...”
- p.157 Several English officers had died of fever in Truxillo
- p.158 Trujillo. Description of the action. The ground is still littered with balls and shot
- p.159 Puerto de Miravete. A driver abandons his cart. A soldier was sent after him with a pistol.
- p.160 Soldiers unable to obtain wages. Bandits. Fleas and mosquitoes. Las Casas del Puerto de Santa Cruz
- p.161 Mérida
- p.166 Badajoz
- p.170 [small profile drawing of the defences]
- p.171 Tertulia “30 people there, the women ugly in the extreme, except two one of which was a Marquesa, the other was said to have been Lord Wellington’s mistress sometime after the siege.”
- p.172 Journey to Elvas
- p.174 Arrive Elvas
- p.176 Financial problems, shortage of cash
- p.178 Estremos
- p.180 Los Pregones. Aldea Gallega
- p.183 Lisbon after 48 days of travel.