

## BARNETT 'BARON' NATHAN - 1793-1856

### *Entertainer and dancing instructor*

© David R Lewis 2015<sup>1</sup>

Barnett Natham was born in Canterbury in the 1790s<sup>2</sup>, son of the cantor to the local synagogue<sup>3</sup>. His father, Menechem Mona<sup>4</sup>, was Polish by birth but had been sent from Poland in the 1770s to be raised by German Jewish friends of his parents<sup>5</sup>. Menechem came to England at the age of 20 years, where he married Mariana Mary Goldsmid<sup>6</sup>. Barnett, born in Canterbury in 1793, was the last of their five children<sup>7</sup>. An elder brother, Isaac Nathan (1790-1864) achieved fame for his musical work in Australia, and is the subject of a separate note in the CHAS web site<sup>8</sup>.

Barnett became a dancing teacher and moved to Kennington near Lambeth. Here he adopted a new name 'Baron Nathan', partly to impress but partly to mimic the well-known Baron Nathan Rothschild. By 1834 he was leading the dancing at the Tivoli Gardens in Margate (opened in 1829), styling himself as Baron Nathan, Professor of Dancing, King's Theatre Opera House<sup>9</sup>. Five years later he was introducing the latest new dance, The Graces, to clients at the Assembly Room, Kennington Cross<sup>10</sup>. In 1841, now 48 years old, he made a career move to the Rosherville Gardens, Gravesend<sup>11</sup>, where he spent every summer until his death in 1856<sup>12</sup>.

His fame at Rosherville Gardens as Master of Ceremonies and Managing Director grew year on year. As a dancing instructor, he had the ability to get shy members of the opposite sex to participate, whether in polkas, waltzes, or other new dances. This was despite the objections of attending Roman Catholic priests<sup>13</sup> who 'tabooed such dances as dangerous to the morals of the rising generation'. The attractions of the Gardens grew over time - by 1858 they were inviting visitors to enjoy: 'Amusements wet or dry' that extended to: 'dancing (before 11 o'clock); Airs by the

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<sup>1</sup> My interest in the Nathan family owes much to research undertaken initially by Jonathan Butchers, who has shared his knowledge and enthusiasm with other through the medium of Canterbury Festival Walks and a recent (March 2015) lecture at Kent University.

<sup>2</sup> This Canterbury birthplace is supported by entries in the 1851 census; if the often quoted birth year of 1793 is correct, Barnett appears to have been lying when giving his age to census enumerators in 1841 and 1851; in both cases he was under-estimating his age by a wide margin.

<sup>3</sup> This synagogue was situated in St Dunstan's - it was built around 1762 and demolished in 1846. No drawing of it survives - perhaps as it was described as 'not very substantial' and approached from St Dunstan's by 'a low and miserably narrow and dark passage'. It was nevertheless the only synagogue in Kent at this time. The South Eastern Railway Company acquired the St Dunstan's synagogue in 1845 to construct the level crossing which still operates today. A return for 1829 shows that the synagogue then catered for a congregation of 30 to 40 (Kent History and Library Centre, Quarter Sessions, Q/C/R/E/24)

<sup>4</sup> the reason for different surnames between father and son is unclear; Menechem died in London in 1823; for more on the circumcision records of Barnett and older brother Isaac, see Ancestry rootsweb pages under BRITISH-JEWRY-L Archives

<sup>5</sup> Menechem apparently believed that his natural father was an illegitimate son of Stanislaus II, last King of Poland

<sup>6</sup> Genealogical sources and family traditions suggest that Mariana (1779-1842) divorced Menechem and, after an affair with the Prince of Wales (George IV), married William Lewis

<sup>7</sup> the genealogy outlined here is based more on family tradition than on records - the royal links are disputed; the scarcity of Jewish records presents problems; the existence of Barnett Nathan (buried in the Canterbury Jewish burial ground in 1866) is another

<sup>8</sup> [www.canterbury-archaeology.org.uk](http://www.canterbury-archaeology.org.uk)

<sup>9</sup> Kentish Gazette 1 July 1834

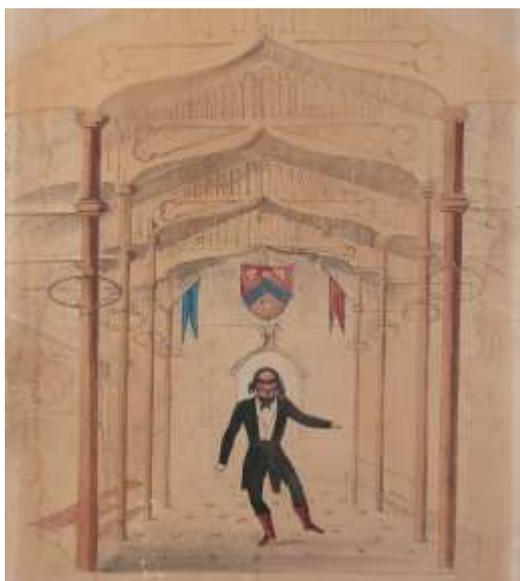
<sup>10</sup> West Kent Gazette 4 May 1839

<sup>11</sup> Rosherville Gardens opened in August 1837

<sup>12</sup> Smith (2006) details below

<sup>13</sup> West Kent Guardian 3 June 1854

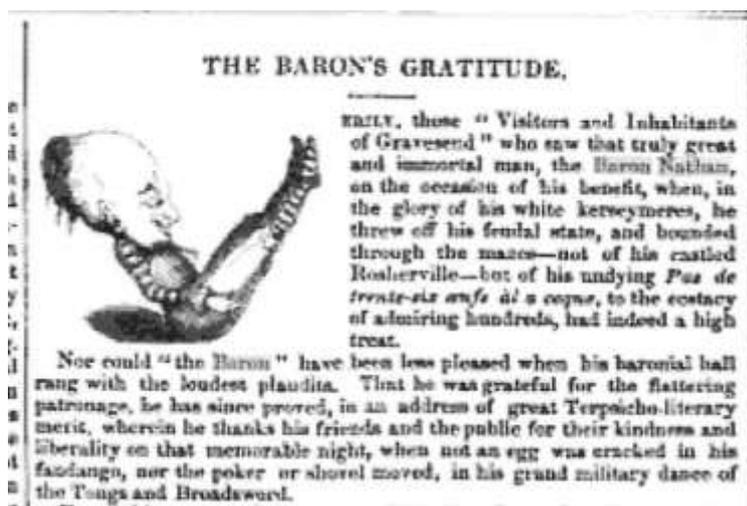
band; performances in the Private Ball Room; Dancing in the Gothic Hall; Ballet performances; more dancing; concert; Exhibition of Dissolving Views by Ozy-hydrogen gas; even more dancing'; concluded with a Grand Scenic Ballet and fireworks<sup>14</sup>. The Baron drew attention from Punch magazine and appears in several of their articles.



Baron Nathan performing at Rosherville  
courtesy Jewish Museum London



Cartoon Baron Nathan performing the egg hornpipe  
*Punch* (volume 5 1843 pg 57)



another extract from Punch  
(volume 5, 1843 pg 114)

Moreover, Barnett gained esteem as a dancer who could perform the 'egg hornpipe'<sup>15</sup>. This involved dancing over a layout of several dozen raw eggs, without breaking any of them. Not content with this, the Baron showed he was able to complete the challenge whilst wearing a blindfold. Beyond this, the act often degenerated as members of the public stole his eggs, to leave the Baron dancing intricately up and down the stage over eggs that were no longer there.

During the final 15 years of his life, Baron Nathan found his niche - each summer Master of Ceremonies at Rosherville and, for the winter months, teaching at his dance academy in Kennington. He lived in Kennington with his wife Caroline<sup>16</sup> and three girls Angie, Laura and Emily<sup>17</sup>. It seems at least one of his daughters inherited their

<sup>14</sup> Kentish Independen 1 August 1858

<sup>15</sup> claimed by some to be forerunner of the children's hop-skotch game - see Knowles (2002) below

<sup>16</sup> married 6 July 1816 Streatham St Leonard

father's dancing skills. Punch magazine reported in 1841 "Mr. Baron Nathan and family are still at Kennington. The Baron danced the college hornpipe, last Wednesday, on one leg, before a party of private friends; and the Honourable Miss Nathan went through the Cracovienne, amidst twenty-four coffee-cups and an inverted pitcher, surmounted by a very long champagne-glass. Upon inspecting the cups after the graceful performance was concluded, there was not a chip upon one of them. The champagne glass, though it frequently rattled in its perilous position, retained it through the whole of the dance, and was carefully picked up at its conclusion by the Baroness, who we were happy to find looking in more than her usual health, and enjoying her accustomed spirits."<sup>18</sup>

Baron Nathan died suddenly on 6 December<sup>19</sup> in 1856 at Kennington, following a broken blood vessel in his head. He was aged 63 years. His son Henry took over for the following year, followed by a 'Mr Frost', but both struggled to make an impact<sup>20</sup>. This was not an area where easy money was there to be made<sup>21</sup>.

#### General Sources:

Lynda Smith *The Place to Spend a Happy Day - A History of Rosherville Gardens* (Gravesend Historical Society, Lynda Smith et al, 2006)

Cohn-Sherbok, Rabbi Dan (1992) *Jewish Canterbury - Trail no. 7*, Canterbury Environment Centre

Cohn-Sherbok, Dan (1984) *The Jews of Canterbury*, Yorick Books

Knowles, Mark (2002) *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing*, McFarland & Company

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<sup>17</sup> see census returns for 1841 and 1851

<sup>18</sup> Punch 13 November 1841

<sup>19</sup> Kendal Mercury 27 December 1856; also The Era 28 December 1856

<sup>20</sup> Oxford Journal 11 April 1857; Kent Independent 30 May 1857; Kent Independent 18 September 1858

<sup>21</sup> critics wrote of Baron Nathan's 'virtuous poverty' Coventry Herald 7 January 1859