

Queen Victoria's Visit to Stoneleigh.



June 1858. It had been hot weather for months, and there had been much activity throughout Warwickshire as the county prepared to welcome its most important visitors in years – Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, no less. On this occasion it was a momentous day for the city of Birmingham.

The grand seventeenth-century Aston Hall, home of the Holte family - whose name is still commemorated in a football stand at Aston Villa Football Club - had fallen on hard times. Since its glory days in that century, when King Charles I had stayed, it had fallen into decline following the death of the 6th Baronet Holte. His daughter Mary had merely retained some portraits and other family heirlooms after the contents of Aston were sold at auction in 1817.

In addition to this, Mary's husband, Abraham Bracebridge of Atherstone, lost his fortune in industrial speculation and Mary had to sell Aston Hall in 1818 to settle her husband's debts. Sadly, the building was left empty until being tenanted for the next thirty years by James Watt, the son of the great engineer.

After James Watt died in 1848, there was a great auction of the house's contents, and consideration was given to what was to be done with the park. Ultimately "The Aston Hall and Park Company" aimed to buy the lot, hoping to do so by subscription. Industrial Birmingham, they argued, needed a place of quiet recreation among trees and flowers.

At first money came in slowly, until in a master stroke they persuaded Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to open the park in June 1858, calling it a “People’s Park.” Immediately more subscribers were recruited in anticipation of the Queen’s visit.

The scene was set for a splendid occasion.



Aston Hall

The royal couple were to spend a few days in Warwickshire, and their host was to be William Henry, Lord Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey, who was Lord Lieutenant of the county.

Naturally the visit was covered extensively in local and national newspapers, but in addition to this, a diary was kept by Lord Leigh’s sister Georgina, and a scrapbook by another sister, Augusta. Both these writings survive, along with the Queen’s own journal recording her stay.

All was a hive of activity at Coventry Railway Station which was the Queen’s destination from London. Although she would almost immediately transfer to a carriage to be driven the few miles to Stoneleigh Abbey, the station itself had been decorated with welcoming banners and a triumphal arch erected outside. Choirs and an orchestra were assembled.



Coventry Station

Equally, at the abbey itself, preparations had been ongoing for the six months since the visit had been arranged. The priority was security, as there had been attempts on the Queen's life in previous years. Bills exist which reveal that ironmongery was ordered: locks were fitted to all windows and doors. The same firm fitted new grates and fenders to the fireplaces – no doubt all looked very shiny! Painting, repairing and polishing was undertaken throughout the house in general, both inside and outside.

In particular, attention was given to painting furniture in the Queen's apartments – the family had heard that she liked it to be gilded, and perhaps rather enthusiastically this was extended to a Chippendale bench in the Queen's bedroom. The furnishings themselves were provided by the Queen's upholsterer, Charles Moxon, though the royal bedspread was created from a splendid ballgown which had in earlier days belonged to a Lady Leigh.



The Queen's bed, with the painted and gilded Chippendale bench

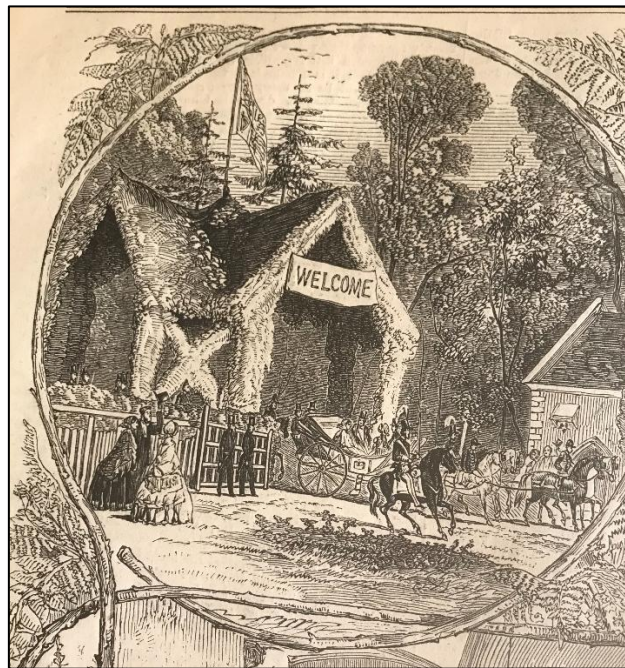
The grand total of the Leighs' preparatory expenses was £5,661.15.5...an astonishing £652,525 in today's money.

Georgina's journal described in detail the ways in which the rooms had been arranged for Victoria and Albert, and then the great day arrived.

Monday June 14th, she wrote, "was ushered in by a cloudless sky" and she and her mother set out to inspect the rooms which were to be given over to the Queen during her stay. "The royal bedroom was beautifully panelled and fitted up with white and gold" as was her dressing room, and her sitting room "very tastefully and prettily fitted up with Chinese

silk and a rich bird paper.” Most of the valuable pictures in the house were brought together from different rooms and hung in this room; amongst others the beautiful picture of Charles I by Van Dyck was brought out of the dining room and placed over the fireplace.”

Outside, artillerymen were arriving to take up position for the firing of Royal Salutes when the Queen arrived, and villagers were “hurrying with garlands, boughs and flags.” The Deer Park, through which the royal party would travel to the house, was decorated, but outside it “for fear of rabble no-one was admitted inside without special permission”, she said, “booths, waggons and carts of every imaginable kind were drawn up...the crowd was so dense as the rustic population anxiously expected the arrival.”



Inside the Deer Park entrance

Georgina’s brother, Captain E Chandos Leigh had escorted the party from Coventry – three Royal carriages and four, with outriders and servants in scarlet liveries, and “the whole of the tenantry on horseback”. The band of the Second Life Guards struck up the National Anthem as they all arrived through the gatehouse, and the artillery fired their Salute.

Along with various equerries and other important members of the “Royal Suite”, as Georgina put it, there were eighteen servants – the Queen’s Dresser, Her Lady’s Maid, two Pages in Ordinary, the Prince’s Valet, eight Menservants in Livery, a Coiffeur, a Clothes Brusher, an Upholsterer, a Special Messenger and an Inspector of Police. All these were accommodated within the house but in addition the Queen’s Coachman, “who came down to inspect the roads”, ten grooms and eighteen horses were put up at Coventry.



The grand arrival at Stoneleigh

We discover from Georgina, too, that there had been an attendant who had arrived two days earlier to perform the office of Taster, “and selected the wine.” One might have wondered at the role of Upholsterer, and he is described thus “his duty was to pack and unpack the Queen’s boxes and superintend the making and arrangements of the Queen’s bed. She had sheets and blankets of her own with her, and the Upholsterer had to sew them together in a peculiar way according to Royal fancy.” So much for the special bedspread created for the visit! Perhaps generations of royal visitors realised that their stays in various stately mansions might be accompanied by damp bedsheets or even worse, vermin?



The Royal party are welcomed into the Long Gallery

One of the servants was responsible for “minute directions as to the preparing of the Royal breakfast.” One hopes that Victoria appreciated the breakfast service which Lord Leigh had bought specially from Minton, “ornamented with the Royal Ciphers.”



That evening the first of two banquets was served in the Saloon, the Queen occupying the seat in the centre of the table, after which she was formally introduced to many guests and to the older Leigh children, “who made their bows and curtsies so prettily and loyally that they were rewarded by many kisses.”



Georgina's journal gives a vivid account of what happened after dinner, "the shutters being suddenly opened a coup d'oeil presented itself." The *Illustrated London News* gives further detail:

"In the evening (Monday) there was a grand illumination, by Mr Freeman of Piccadilly, London.

The old Cistercian Lodge, which faced the windows of the Queen's Drawing Room, was illuminated according to its architectural design, which comprehended the entire building and had an exceedingly pleasing effect. On the Terrace entrance of the Abbey there was a very beautiful crystal crown, lighted from inside...From sixteen to eighteen thousand lamps were employed in these decorations, and those at the Lodge were carried out in a very novel and ingenious manner. The entire building was environed by thin iron bars, into which were screwed, at suitable distances, pins for holding coloured lamps. The process of lighting the lamps was carried out during the time the guests were at dinner

On Tuesday evening the illuminations were carried out on a still more extensive scale, being extended to the Park railing, the shrubs and flower borders."



It had been "a day most perfect," Georgina wrote, yet the following day was "brilliantly fine but tremendously hot, 96 degrees." This was the day the party set out for Birmingham to perform their official duty of opening the People's Park.

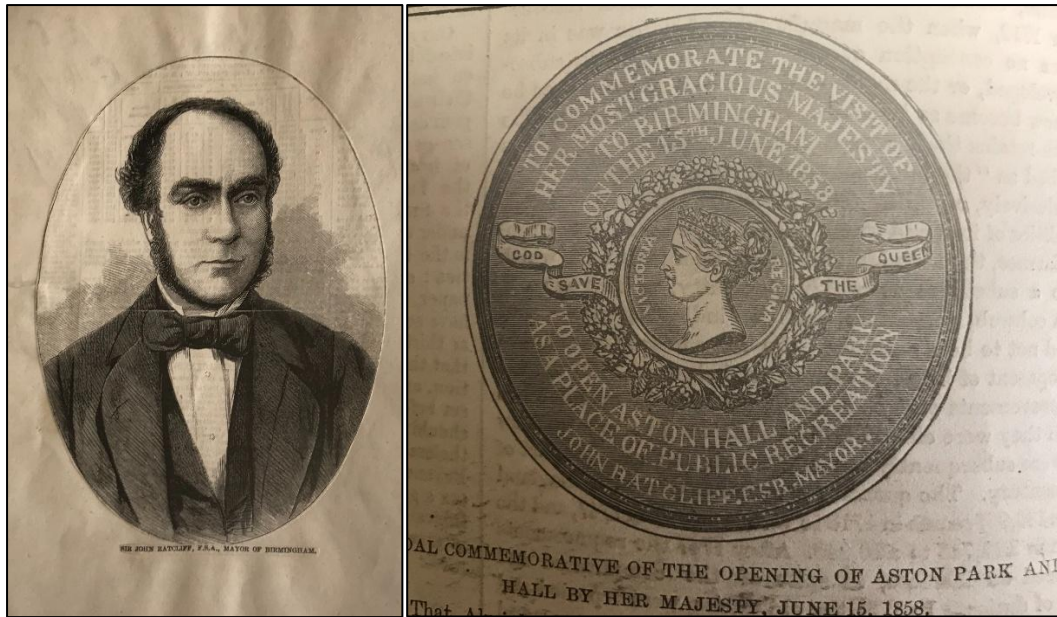
The weather continued to be oppressive. The Queen herself had remarked upon it in her diary the previous day, when the heat had been overpowering in her railway carriage to Coventry. Birmingham, she wrote, "after half an hour's broiling in the railway, shone clear and bright, without a particle of smoke." Evidently, she had expected it to be grimy, but the townspeople had resolved to forbid the lighting of fires for the day. She was particularly delighted by the welcome accorded to Albert: "Dear Albert is so beloved

here...his love for the Arts and Sciences, and the moral improvement of the working and middle classes and the general enlightenment of all, being well-known.” More banners and triumphal arches were to be seen, one in particular being constructed by the city’s gunmakers. It was eighty feet tall, at the foot of each pillar there being a star formed with swords, bayonets and ramrods. Georgina wrote that “200 pistols, 400 muskets, 8,000 ramrods, 1,000 bayonets and 200 lances” had been employed, together with a wreath of laurels.



The Gunmakers' Triumphal Arch, Birmingham

Before travelling to Aston Hall, the Queen made her way to the Town Hall where she knighted the Mayor, John Ratcliff, who had headed the subscription appeal. Then to Aston, where many speeches were made and a light luncheon prepared. Finally, the Queen appeared on the balcony of the house and performed the opening ceremony before walking along the terraces. The Queen wrote that she had been “much oppressed by the heat by the time we left the hall” and returned to Stoneleigh via Kenilworth, once again making her way through throngs of cheering crowds in the Birmingham streets.



John Ratcliff, Mayor of Birmingham, and commemorative medal

Once arrived at the castle ruins, “Albert got out...but I had seen them as a child”, Victoria wrote, and “being very tired”, she stayed in the carriage. More ceremony was ahead of her at Stoneleigh, however, when after another great banquet, numbers of people lined up to be presented to the monarch. The illuminations of the previous night being repeated, she walked through the gardens whilst the band played, retiring at 11.15pm.

The Stoneleigh visit was nearly over, but on her final morning the Queen, who had earlier expressed her intention to attend morning prayers, went out walking instead and then, no doubt to some consternation, “sent a message to Lady Leigh that she would go all over the house, and every servant was soon busily employed in putting the different rooms in order.” It must have been a relief when, according to Georgina, “she seemed much pleased and interested with all she saw”, having “visited every part of the house even to the bedrooms”!

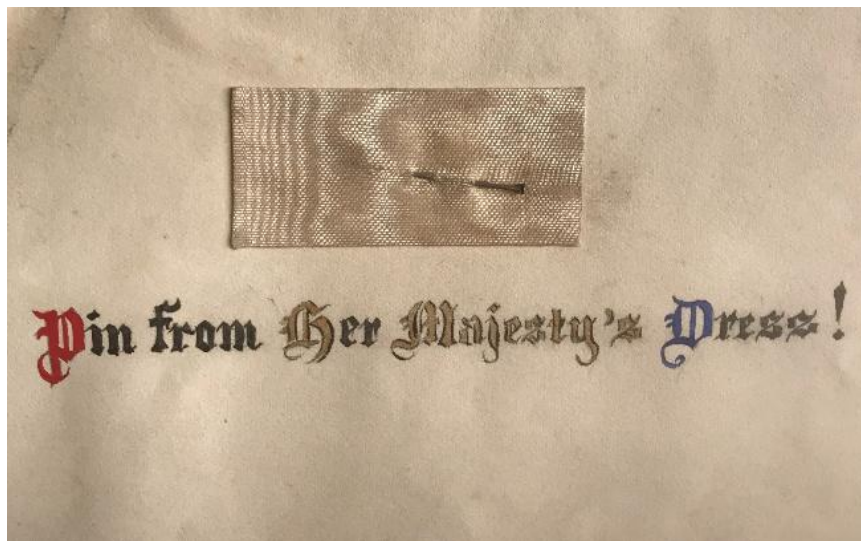
Before her departure the Queen planted an oak in the grounds, and Albert planted a Wellingtonia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). Many courtesies were expressed, and gifts given, and indeed the Queen left money for the abbey’s servants: “£100 to be distributed amongst the household and £50 for the stable department. In addition to this every servant in the house received a present in remembrance of the Royal visit.”

The final visit was to Warwick Castle, via Leamington. Georgina herself did not take this journey but wrote “The decorations in Leamington were profuse and very good but not equal to those of Birmingham and I was told that the reception was reserved, the fashionables of the Spa were not equal to hearty cheering.” Nevertheless, the Queen granted the boys of Leamington College a holiday and there were festivities in Jephson Gardens which included music and fireworks and extended to a balloon ascent by the intrepid aeronaut Mr Henry Coxwell, who, rising during the inevitable thunderstorm after

such great heat, found himself in peril as he approached the spire of the local church. Thankfully he was grounded somewhere near Chesterton, with no harm done.

Lunch was taken at Warwick Castle and once again the Queen requested a complete “house tour” followed by a walk in the gardens and more tree planting. Leaving the castle at 4.40 the party was escorted to the station where, unfortunately, the storm was breaking overhead, and the royal couple had to hurry aboard the train. “We had barely got into the railway carriage before the rain came down with fearful violence,” wrote Victoria...”so hot, it had been 90 degrees in the shade and the people half-smothered.” Despite this, Georgina was to conclude that “everything had gone off perfectly...the preparations which had been very costly were thoroughly appreciated, the weather gloriously fine, the reception most enthusiastic and our good Queen all smiles and amiability.”

Remaining at Stoneleigh Abbey is Augusta’s commemorative album, containing a page complete with pressed flowers from the Queen’s bouquet, the pen with which she signed her name in the visitors book, and even a pin retrieved from the Queen’s gown (woe betide the Dresser!). A plaque commemorates the planting of the oak, though sadly the tree did not survive. The Minton breakfast service takes pride of place, and “Queen Victoria’s bedroom” is proudly displayed. Thus, those three days in June 1858 are stored in the folk memory of Stoneleigh Abbey.



Pages from Augusta’s album

Sources:

Diary of Georgina Leigh, June 1858
Album created by Augusta Leigh
Queen Victoria’s Diary
The Illustrated Evening News
The Coventry Standard
Warwick and Leamington Advertiser

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