Victoria's Inheritance

Shaking Off The Past

The lineage of George III suggested at least one heir from his first three sons but it was not be. George, the eldest and Prince of Wales, delighted in debauchery and frivolous spending to the disgust of his parents. He died on 26th June 1830 but not before insisting that, as titular head, he led his regiment to glorious victory at the Battle of Waterloo. The Duke of Wellington tactfully replied, "so you have told me many times your Majesty."

Frederick, Duke of York, he of the 10,000 men, inveterate gambler on horses and cards, and second son, fared no better. His marriage to niece Princess Frederica Charlotte of Prussia quickly fell apart. There were no surviving legitimate children and he died on 5th January 1827. Enter William, third son of George III. He produced children in abundance but all five males and five females were illegitimate. The reign of King William IV, "dropsical, drunken and stupid" was brief. He died on 20th June 1837, two days after Waterloo Day.

Attention then turned to Prince Edward, Duke of Kent & Streatham, the fourth son. Known for his several mistresses, Prince Edward married Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfield in May 1818 but he died in 1820. They had one daughter by the name of Victoria. The problem was resolved. One might be tempted to say it was a royal bastard of a problem until the arrival of Victoria in, rather than out of, wedlock

On 20th June 1837 Alexandrina Victoria became Queen at 18 years of age and reigned for 63 years and 7 months until her death on 22nd January 1901, then the longest in British history. Raised by her German-born mother, Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfield, Victoria lived a hermit existence with few friends. Fiercely independent, she had a capacity for Darwinian survival comments historian A. N. Wilson. Victoria dismissed her domineering mother and the "sinister Sir John Conroy," both of whom had ambitions to be pivotal powers behind the throne.

From an early age, Victoria showed she had a quick and orderly mind. She was decisive as well as independent, Victoria worked hard at her lessons; she spoke and wrote German and French, understood Italian and some Latin too. She enjoyed the theatre and opera and less highbrow entertainment also. The young Victoria was equipped for a lifetime of duty, acutely aware of her responsibilities. All she lacked was a husband but Victoria would not have to wait long.

At nine o'clock precisely on 20th June 1837 Queen Victoria received Prime Minister, Viscount Melbourne, "OF COURSE, *quite* ALONE as I shall *always* do all my ministers." Thus began an intense and mutually enjoyable "amité amoreuse." Viscount Melbourne's biographer likened the relationship to that sought "by other girls … in some sympathetic schoolmaster or kindly clergyman."

These private and intimate meetings continued throughout her reign with exquisite decorum. Melbourne even had a private apartment at Windsor Castle. The one exception was William Gladstone whom she could not stand. Meetings were very formal, unlike those with Viscount Melbourne with whom she played draughts whilst conversing on constitutional matters.

Charles Grenville, noted diarist and clerk to the Privy Council, was fulsome in his praise for the young Victoria, "Everything is new and delightful to her. She is surrounded with the most exciting and interesting enjoyments, her occupations, her pleasures, her business, her Court;

all present an unceasing round of gratifications." We can add to this a strong sense of duty, high moral standards and determination. The scene was set for what became known as the Victorian era. It was defining period of monumental change and social progress in a world gathering pace, much like a steam engine.

Aristocratic Britain

At the top, just below the Royal Family, were the great titled families with extensive estates, inherited opportunities for political influence on the national stage, their armies of retainers and multiplicity of country houses. The Duke of Devonshire owned at least 200,000 acres in 14 counties of England and Ireland, bringing in a modest £180,000 per year. This equates to more than £20m today, but given huge population and economic growth this would be vastly greater. As well as large parts of Eastbourne and Buxton, and the stately homes of Chatsworth and Hardwick he owned three majestic London town houses as well as five other mansions.

The Duke of Buccleuch comfortably doubled this land ownership, but not wealth, as his land comprised mainly large estates in less populated parts of Scotland. Most famously of all, the Duke of Sutherland owned well over one million acres in a county bearing his name, leaving precious little for anyone else. The most wealthy of all, by a mile as the century progressed, was the Duke of Westminster. He literally sat on a fortune as London continued to grow and attract greater prosperity.

Securely perched on the ledges below this cluster of grandees were the major aristocrats. Far greater in number, their land holdings might range between 50,000-100,000 acres wth an annual income up to £100,000. Most magnates had more than one seat in Parliament and several 'territories' to their name. Below this elevated social strata, within touching distance, were leading landowners of the county set. Many were titled and had strong local roots. All had a command of at least 10,000 acres which historians seem to regard as the magic figure which divides the great landowners from the rest.

Rather lower down the social pyramid were those with compact estates of 3,000 to 10,000 acres. Then came squires whose estates came precariously close to 1,000 acres or £1,000 per year in rents, the minimum that any landed gentleman could manage on in style. The squire might well dominate a village, and be the local Justice of the Peace for the county.

French professor, Hippolyte Taine, who visited England several times in the 1860s, was most impressed by the English aristocracy and gentry who: "kept in touch with the people, opened their ranks to talent (and) recruited to their number the pick of the rising commoners." He adds, "They have made themselves into administrators, patrons, promoters of reform and good managers of the commonwealth; they have become well-informed and well-educated men who apply themselves to their work and are capable and who, as citizens, are the most enlightened, the most independent and the most useful of the whole nation."

These views did reflect fairly recent changes in attitude of the landed society, but England's established ruling class retained power, influence and prestige because it thought it deserved to. Others had a different view: a lack of enterprise, corruption, nepotism, and obstruction of new wealth, and social and technological advance too if it interfered wth their lifestyle and privileges. Leisure pursuits such as field sports, high culture and the countryside typified as did maximising profits at the expense of hard-working farmers and rural poor. For many, what seemed a benevolent paternalism was a veneer.

In 1873, a land ownership survey was carried out, the first since 1066. This was instigated by the Earl of Derby, keen to refute the whole of the United Kingdom was owned by 30,000 individuals only. To his great embarrassment he discovered that 80% of all land, excluding London, was owned by fewer than 7,000 people.

Even more staggering in some ways was 10 people owning more than 60,000 acres, 49 with more than 30,000 acres and 1,699 people with 3,000 acres or more. Professor John Walton states this elite owned more than 40% of all cultivated land in England.

It was not just a question of land in regard to political influence as some peers of the realm did not have such substantial land holdings but their lineage and cultured pedigrees were sufficient to maintain them in high office. This characterised the century up to the death of Queen Victoria with grandee Lord Salisbury in office as Prime Minister, and Foreign Secretary too, between 1895 and 1900. Gradually bankers, brewers and industrialists became part of the landed elite such as Samuel Hoare at Stourhead, the Barings and Rothschilds and John Guest of Dowlais steelworks and 39 cotton magnates, each owning 1,000 acres or more. Others moved in such as Sir William Armstrong, inventor, scientist and business tycoon, and Lord Ashton, the near dictator of Lancaster, otherwise known as Lord Linoleum.

As the century progressed so did the industrial economy with social pressure for reform that, not only included improved living and working conditions, but the right to vote and in secret.

Only gradually did inherited lifestyles change but by the time of Queen Victoria's death in 1901 a chill breeze was blowing across vast estates as society was transformed, thanks in no small measure to those who placed duty and service before personal gain.

Signs of Discontent

On 16th August 1819 in St Peter's Square, in the heart of Manchester, at least 60,000 people demonstrated to protest about lack of democracy. Underlying this was a genuine concern about social conditions. At the time just 2% of the population had the vote, and Manchester as with some other major towns had no MP. Whilst serious in intent the mood was peaceful; some say almost festive with music too. The leading speaker was Henry Hunt, a campaigner for democratic reform, and for authorities an agitator. Adorning the platform were banners, emblazoned with Reform, Universal Suffrage, Representation and, touchingly, Love.

Local magistrates panicked and read the riot act. 600 Hussars, several hundred infantrymen and an artillery unit were ready. So were 400 men of the Cheshire cavalry and yeomanry, drawn mainly from mill owners and shop-keepers. Their task was to arrest Hunt and the organisers but the surging crowd linked arms, whereupon they charged. About 18 people died and hundreds were injured, at least 80 -100 seriously. Hunt and his cohorts were arrested and tried for high treason but the charge was dropped by the prosecution.

The Times printed a stark account, touching the public mood of outrage. Unperturbed, the government passed the Six Acts to crack down on freedom of the press and public, including association and assembly. Any public meeting of more than 50 people had to be authorised by a sheriff or magistrate. It backfired as journalists developed ingenious ways to convey the necessity for electoral reform, whilst Conservative newspapers provoked satire and ridicule. Percy Bysshe Shelley felt compelled to pen, *Masque of Anarchy*, adding voice to public disgust at what was a gross over-reaction to events and an unwillingness to listen, let alone act.

The Peterloo Relief Fund Account book at the nearby John Rylands Library provides vivid and first-hand evidence of the Massacre. It shows the names of 350 injured people who received payments from the Fund, along with graphic descriptions of injuries and the causes, often by sabre slashes. The name Peterloo was coined, an amalgam of the location of the massacre at St Peter's Square and the Battle of Waterloo four years before. The Peterloo Massacre was a powerful, symbolic event. It is no coincidence the People's Museum is in Manchester.

In the years after the Napoleonic Wars, unemployed soldiers and sailors drifted into towns, flooding the labour market. Inflation, food shortages and factory system mechanising jobs, produced a climate of discontent and radicalism. Government concern about assembly and possible riots was hardly new as in 1799 they passed the Combination Acts. This forbade the gathering of working men for a specific purpose.

In 1820 a group led by Arthur Thistlewood protested against living conditions and repressive measures to prevent assembly to discuss economic reform. The downtrodden poor had no voice. The group met at Cato Street, near Edgware Road, London, and hatched a plot to assassinate the entire Cabinet whilst they were dining at the home of Lord Harrowby in Grosvenor Square. Their macabre intention was to behead all Cabinet members but the authorities had been tipped off and stormed the room in Cato Street. Five conspirators were hung for high treason and five transported.

Spectre of the Workhouse

Elizabethan poor relief gave grants of money, clothing or fuel, paid for by a tax on property. The workhouse gradually evolved as an alternative to save money, and to act as a deterrent. With this in mind, the Workhouse Test Act of 1723 was passed. The Gilbert Act of 1782 simplified the process for parishes to set up workhouses on their own, or by forming a group known as a Gilbert Union. Few were, as supplementing wages of the poor increased. The best known was the Speenhamland System that used a sliding scale, linked to the price of bread and family size. Supplementation escalated and costs spiralled out of control.

Under the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834, the 15,000 or so parishes in England and Wales formed into Poor Law Unions, each with a workhouse. A locally elected Board of Guardians would administer the system. By the late 1830s hundreds of new workhouses appeared. The Union workhouse was to deter the able-bodied and their families. Elderly inmates were considered to be 'guiltless," as distinct from "idle and profligate" paupers.

Segregation into the elderly, able-bodied, male, female and children meant little contact. Inmates wore a rough workhouse uniform and slept in communal dormitories. Hard and monotonous work was expected of the able-bodied, such as stone-breaking or picking apart oakum (old ropes). A clergyman pulled no punches, insisting: "The workhouse should be a place of hardship, of coarse fare, of degradation and humility. It should be administered with strictness and severity; it should be as repulsive as is consistent with humanity."

At Bishop's Storford, the hour of rising was 5 am in summer and 6 am in winter followed by prayer and breakfast, comprising bread and gruel. Inmates sat in silence at long tables, facing forward in regimented rows. On death, the body was taken to the 'dead room.' Under the Anatomy Act of 1832, unclaimed bodies were disposed of, often for medical research. At Bourne, the workhouse master reported that inmates declined to attend funerals which lent testimony to: 'rattle his bones, over old stones, he's only a pauper who nobody owns.'

The Fareham workhouse had a large school attached. Three bastard boys were sent there for special tuition. On return eight weeks later, whence they came, they could barely stand. One boy had wet the bed so his diet was reduced by half.   When this didn't work the boy was placed in stocks. An 1846 investigation at Andover revealed inmates resorting to eating potato peelings, dead horse-flesh, sucking the marrow from bones and eating candles.

All parish relief in the home was stopped. The workhouse beckoned. Women with bastard children were forced to wear a yellow stripe of shame sewn across a coarse grey workhouse gown. Boys were set to work on bone-grinding and making fertliser out of dead animals. As at Fareham, children were routinely thrashed for bed-wetting, some as young as three. Such incidents grabbed the headlines of The Graphic, Saturday Review and Oliver Twist, published in serial form in 1838.

Expectations were clearly set out in rules and orders such as those of Aylesbury Workhouse, dated 1831 A working day of 12 hours in summer, and maybe an hour less in winter, was punctuated by 30 minutes for breakfast, one hour for dinner and 30 minutes for supper. Workers kept 2p in every shilling earned with extra for a cook and nurse. Washerwomen had a morning half pint of ale and tea in the afternoon. Refusing to work, absence without permission and arriving back late meant foregoing the next meal. Stealing, selling provisions and clothes, being abusive, drunkenness, swearing, quarrelling and fighting was "punishable with the utmost severity." So was being "saucy." No liquor was permitted and smoking only in the hall. Those unable to work, generally the elderly and young children, had a hot dinner of meat and vegetables three times a week, "properly cooked."

The Poor Law Commission was abolished in 1847 but grim conditions remained for decades. Do spare a thought for the Master and Mistress in charge, with the thankless task of running a workhouse, literally 24/7. A few hours off was difficult, let alone a day or week. A meagre budget was reflected in a meagre diet for inmates, augmented if a workhouse had a garden and by philanthropic acts from the Board of Guardians.

What shocked Victorians was the disparity between rich and poor. Previously, the two had virtually no contact but the railway-age changed that. In his novel, Sybil, published in 1845, Benjamin Disraeli expressed concern about poverty, social conditions and the darker side of Victorian prosperity. The novel, set between 1837 and 1844, had the title: The Two Nations.

Aristocrat. Charles Egremont, sets out to investigate the conditions of the lower classes. He comes into contact with Sybil and her working class radical father, Walter Gerard who vents his wrath: "Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse or sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws." Egremont is shocked. "You speak of," he said hesitatingly, "THE RICH AND THE POOR."

The divide was exacerbated by laissez –faire. Those with land, property, industry and means kept wages low and living conditions poor, whilst their own lifestyle remained intact.