

The Duke of Wellington his House and His Horse

A presentation to the Wokingham Society by Mr. Andrew Powell in the Town Hall on Wednesday March 18th 2015

Mr. Andrew Powell, a guide at Stratfield Saye House, the historic home of the Dukes of Wellington, entertained a large audience with an informative and detailed account of the 1st Duke's country estate and his famous horse Copenhagen.

He illustrated his talk with photographs of portraits, paintings and precious historical artifacts in the House, many of which were acquired by the Great Duke himself. He explained how the Duke bought Stratfield Saye estate from George Pitt, the first Baron Rivers, with money given him by a grateful nation after his successes against Napoleon in the Peninsular War and the Battle of Waterloo. He had intended to build a magnificent country house to be called Waterloo Palace, but, for personal and financial reasons he did not carry out his plan and Stratfield Saye House was saved from demolition.

The Duke added a number of features to the original Jacobean/Carolingian house and used it as his country retreat where he could enjoy country pursuits, not least fox-hunting, a sport he enjoyed into his old age. He had been presented with many gifts by many European heads of state in gratitude for the defeat of Napoleon, amongst them a magnificent malachite vase from Tsar Nicholas of Russia. Many of the gifts are displayed in the house together with furniture he had bought from the sale of goods and chattels by impoverished French aristocrats.

Mr. Powell took his audience through the house room by room, pointing out the provenance and significance of the most important personal and historical artifacts. He provided his audience with a fascinating insight into the Duke's life and character by inserting into his narrative anecdotes and witty asides which helped to put both the Duke and the house into perspective. He referred to the portraits liberally hung throughout the house, many of them of the Duke and his family by Hoppner, the illustrious 19c portrait artist. He told the story of the meeting between Wellington and Nelson at a meeting shortly before the Battle of Trafalgar and he noted the importance of the bust of the Prussian Field Marshall Prince Blucher, without whose arrival at the battlefield of Waterloo, the day might have been lost. There were of course many references to the Battle itself illustrated by a number of paintings at various

points in the house. Mr. Powell referred specifically to two paintings in particular: the conversation piece by Haydon in which the Duke is showing the fantasist King George IV the battlefield at Waterloo, and the striking portrait by Hoppner of Major General Wellesley and his magnificent horse Diomedes in India. He also drew the audience's attention to the significant number of paintings and portraits connected to the Duke's nine years in India and the defeat of his main enemy, Tipoo Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore, at the battle of Seringapatam.

Mr. Powell also made a number of references to the Duke's private life, with particular reference to his relationship with his Duchess, Kitty Pakenham. He informed the audience that it was an unhappy relationship and that they led effectively separate lives, perfectly illustrated by the fact that they lived in different wings of the house at Stratfield Saye. The Duke was, as we were informed, attracted to and adored by many women and the portrait by Thomas Lawrence of the American heiress, Maryann Patterson, was commissioned by the Duke as a sign of his love for the woman he had hoped to marry and who may well have been the love of his life.

Throughout the presentation there were many references to the architectural features in the house, dating from the house as designed and built for the first owner, William Pitt, through the major structural additions and modifications effected by William Pitt in the mid 18c to those made by the Duke himself. The speaker felt that the most notable addition to the structure made by the Duke was the orangery built along one side of the house. The classically designed room was turned into a swimming pool in the 1970s by the late 8th Duke and it contains classical pillars and sculptures originally intended to grace the palace.

Amongst the many interesting facts put before the audience was the information that the Duke was the one of the first major landowners to have flushing lavatories and central heating built into his house. The handsome large wooden wardrobes in a number of the bedrooms and elsewhere in the house conceal the finely crafted original Wedgwood porcelain lavatory bowls and the somewhat cumbersome plunge handles used to operate the flush. There are two large iron radiators on the ground floor which were built for the Duke and which still work today on the modern central heating system.

Mr. Powell concluded his tour of the house by talking about the splendid examples of Boule-style furniture acquired by the Duke and on display throughout the house, most notably in the gracious and stylish long gallery,

which also contains on the walls copies of prints by Boydell, primarily of scenes from Shakespeare's plays, which gave the Duke the inspiration to cover the walls of many of the rooms in the house with contemporary prints of battles, classical scenes and stately buildings. Finally he told the story behind the presence in the house of so many fine paintings by Spanish, Dutch and Flemish masters, given to the Duke by King Ferdinand of Spain after his soldiers had saved them from the treasure looted by the fleeing Louis Bonaparte after the Battle of Vittoria.

As a postscript to his engaging tour of the house, Mr. Powell completed his presentation by telling the story of the Duke's magnificent charger Copenhagen. Named after the battle of Copenhagen, the great horse was ridden by the Duke throughout the whole of the battle of Waterloo. The audience was told that the Duke was so delighted with the horse's performance he forgot its reputation as a kicker and when he approached it from behind to stroke it, he came within inches of being kicked. As Mr. Powell said, Copenhagen nearly achieved what the French had failed to do in the battle. However, eventually he was brought to Stratfield Saye where he lived to the grand old age of 28. He was buried with full military honors and his grave may be seen in the grounds near the house under a majestic Turkey oak tree, which grew from an acorn planted at his funeral by the Duke's housekeeper.

There was no doubt from the generous applause at the end of his talk that the audience fully appreciated Mr. Powell's tour of Stratfield Saye and the many anecdotes he told about the great Duke and his association with the house, and it would not be at all surprising if visitor numbers from Wokingham to Stratfield Saye increased greatly in future.

John Griffin

March 26th 2015