THE LEGACY OF PRINCE ALBERT

When Prince Albert died on the 14th December 1861 the whole country went into mourning. Memorials were proposed across the length and breadth of Great Britain. In January 1862, George Burt wrote to the Rev. R. D. Travers, the Chairman of Swanage Vestry, suggesting that Swanage should have its own memorial, to be raised by public subscription. This was agreed, achieved and in place by the end of the year. As such it was the first in the country to be erected.

Many were planned but usually involved a statue of the Prince and sculptors had to be commissioned and the sculptures made. The Swanage memorial took the form of an obelisk which, since earliest times, was the form taken for memorials of this sort. The cost of the memorials, including the national one to be erected near the site of the Great Exhibition of 1851, was raised by public subscription.

The population of Swanage in 1861 was only 2,000 but the money was forthcoming. Other memorials followed in Aberdeen, Hastings, Oxford, Perth, Salford, Tenby, Belfast, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Wolverhampton, Glasgow, Cambridge, Exeter, Birmingham and, later, Edinburgh and Dublin. These were all towns and cities with far larger populations than Swanage.

This makes our memorial even more special - and unique. In Birmingham, Salford and Manchester the money was raised remarkably quickly, as they were all places the Prince Albert had visited several times and was extremely popular.

He had visited Birmingham first in 1843. He and Victoria were staying at Drayton Manor as guests of Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister. At the time the Chartist movement was in full sway and Birmingham was the centre of the movement. The previous year had seen violent rioting there. Against all advice Albert was determined to visit Birmingham as it was one of the great centres of manufacturing in the country. He had made arrangements to go to a glassware studio, a rolling mill for sheet metal, a papier-maché manufacturer, a gun and sword makers, a button factory and Elkington and Company, an electro-plating and electro-type works. Because of his interest in the various manufacturing processes and his scientific knowledge of the principles involved, he endeared himself to the working force and by the afternoon huge crowds had gathered to cheer him on his way.

His interest in the plight of the workers resulted in him accepting the Presidency of the Society for Improving the Conditions of the Labouring Classes when it was formed in 1844. In a speech to the Society in 1848 he said: "*When I accepted with great pleasure the offer of becoming President I saw in this offer a proof of your appreciation of my feelings of sympathy and interest for that class of our community which has most of the toil, and least of the enjoyments, of this world*."

He took great interest in the work of the society in building model homes for workers designed to the Prince's specifications by the society's honorary architect. He thought that the way to alleviate the suffering of the working classes was four-fold: "*Education of the children with industrial training, improvement in working-class dwellings, the granting of allotments along with their housing and the creation of savings banks and benevolent societies, if possible managed by the workers themselves."*

His first public engagement was to accept the Presidency of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery and where he gave his first speech in English on June 1st 1840 in which he said: "*I deeply regret that the benevolent and persevering exertions of England to abolish that atrocious traffic in human beings (at once the desolation of Africa and the blackest stain upon civilized Europe) have not as yet led to any satisfactory conclusion. But I sincerely trust that this great country will not relax in its efforts until it has finally, and for ever, put an end to a state of things so repugnant to the spirit of Christianity, and the best feelings of our nature."*

Such views did not endear him to the British aristocracy and together with the fact that he was German and therefore a foreigner, made him unpopular with that section of society. However, his interests in Art, Music, Science and Education and in many other areas endeared him to the rest of the population.

The politicians who at first distrusted him and feared he would meddle in politics eventually realised his worth. The Duke of Wellington said of him: "*His knowledge and information are astonishing, and there is not a department of the Government regarding all the details and management of which he is not better informed and more capable than the Minster at the head of it. That in foreign affairs particularly he has prevented a great deal of mischief and kept the Government out of innumerable scrapes."*

His election as Chancellor of Cambridge University in 1847 resulted in huge changes in the curriculum and subjects offered. He reformed what was virtually a Theological College for the training of the clergy, offering only courses in the Classics and Mathematics, into a University of world eminence - a position it has retained. His election was, of course, bitterly opposed as were his reforms.

Perhaps his greatest achievement was the Great Exhibition of 1851. This was a huge success and made a surplus of £186,000 (approximately £22m in today's money). As President of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851, set up in 1850, he made sure that these profits were put to good use by purchasing land in South Kensington and building a succession of museums on the site.

These include the South Kensington Museum (re-named in 1899 as the Victoria and Albert Museum), the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, the Royal Colleges of Art and Music, the Imperial College and after his death, the Albert Hall. An unusual decision was made to maintain the Royal Commission to use the profits charitably for the purpose of: *increasing the means of industrial education and extending the influence of science and art upon productive industry*. To this day it is making awards of fellowships, to the tune of £4 million annually, for pure research in science and engineering, applied research in industry, studentships in industrial design and Special Awards. A remarkable legacy indeed.

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