

The Visit of Queen Victoria



The church had been consecrated on 2 July 1846 by the Bishop of Chester. Just six days before that (27 June), its patron, Lord Francis Egerton, was elevated to the peerage with the title Earl of Ellesmere, and, within the same year, took up residence in his new home - Worsley New Hall. 3 major events in a short space of time.

Then, five years later, on 16 August 1851, it was announced that Queen Victoria would visit Worsley, Salford and Manchester from 9 to 11 October and that she was to spend her two nights here in Worsley with the Earl and his family. Formal dinners were held at the Hall on both nights, attended by about 100 people. On the first night, the party was joined by Mr. James Nasmyth (local engineer), and on the second by Mr. Edward Staite (patentee of the electric light). On one of those evenings, they were also entertained with The Ellesmere Polka - a piano piece specially composed by Heinrich Blümer.

Just now, preparations are in progress for adding a north aisle at the church erected recently by the noble earl for the use of the inhabitants of Worsley; and it may be suggested that to lay the foundation stone of the addition would be a means of commemorating her sojourn on the spot acceptable to the feelings of all concerned. Should this not be done, perhaps a tree planted by her hand may live to flourish on some part of the domains, and be pointed out in future ages as the "Queen's Tree." Undoubtedly Her Majesty will inspect the beautiful building which the noble earl has erected for the specific instruction of the people around him, and while speaking of it, a thought comes over us, that it is not a little singular that the Rev. St. Vincent Beechey, the incumbent, will have been brought into close communication with her Majesty on the two occasions she has been to this county, as incumbent of Fleetwood, when her Majesty landed there, and now as incumbent of Worsley.

(The Manchester Courier; Saturday 23 August 1851)

As we now know, no such tree was planted! After visiting Salford and Manchester on Friday 10 October 1851, the Queen wrote in her journal:

"At 4 we walked out with the Children and the whole party, 1st visiting the Church, built by the Ellesmeres, which is very pretty, then the Parsonage and Poultry Yard, a nice little house built near a pretty piece of water and afterwards through a wood, along a little stream round by the Dispensary to the old house, in which the Duke of Bridgewater lived, now occupied by the Agent, M^r Locke, and in which the Ellesmeres lived till 5 years ago. There were a great many people out, who frequently rather crowded upon us, but were very well behaved. We lastly went to the Garden, on the other side of the house. Came home a little after 6."

(Queen Victoria's Journals: Friday 10th October 1851: vol.32 p.144)

This is how *The Morning Post* began its article which covered specifically Queen Victoria's visit to Worsley Church. *"There was a large party accompanying the Queen as she made her way across the road and into the church grounds at about 4 o'clock. The royal party consisted of Her Majesty and Prince Albert, the Countess of Ellesmere, the Viscountess Brackley, the Ladies Alice and Blanche Egerton, the Marchioness of Westminster, the Earl and Countess of Wilton, together with other members of the party at the Hall. The Queen and the Prince Consort were greeted at the church door (south porch) by the incumbent, the Rev. St.V. Beechey, and they proceeded down the main aisle. Victoria seemed very pleased by the architecture and sculpture of the church, and its rich stained-glass windows".* It is wonderful today to walk down the same aisle, knowing that one of our greatest monarchs, whose name has come to define a particular age in British history, once walked the same way.

The church today does differ from the 1851 building in one particular respect - namely the addition of the north aisle which, at that time, had not been started. The royal party left the church by the west door (then the vestry door), and preceded by the incumbent, they passed through the vicarage gardens into the private walks of the Earl of Ellesmere, and then to Lady Brackley's poultry yard, through the woods to the dispensary at Kempnough Hall. From there, the party returned to the New Hall via the Old Hall, where Her Majesty was received by Mrs. George Loch, with whom she conversed for some time. The royal party finally returned to the Hall at about 6 o'clock.

A report in *The Manchester Courier* (Saturday 18 October) gave a similar but, in places, differing account of the visit to the church. It was reported that the royal party left the church "*unobserved at first and unrecognised by any one.*" It continued to tell the readers that it quickly became known that Her Majesty was walking in the locality, and that a gathering of people soon collected, and followed the party at a respectful distance, "*testifying their delight by frequent outbursts of loyal exclamations.*" Seemingly, no attempt was made by the constabulary to restrict the movement of the people, who followed Her Majesty through the private walks "*in close proximity to her person.*" The newspaper was pleased to pay tribute to the respect shown by the people and wished that such respect might be copied in other quarters of her dominion.

It then went on to describe an incident as her Majesty left the church, '*which deserves to be recorded.*'

"An aged woman, named Ann Rigby, 79 years of age, formerly or at present resident at Street Gate, was near the church when her Majesty left, and discovering the fact hurried after her, and earnestly asked the privilege of being permitted to touch her Queen. The request reached the ear of the prince, who instantly made way, and the old woman having gently placed her hand on her Majesty's shoulder retires; her wish was gratified. The reader may perhaps expect to hear that the reason for this somewhat odd movement was merely the promptings of fancy, or perhaps some superstition that disease could be cured by the touch, but it was a deeper and more hallowed feeling. Ann Rigby had been a victim of that horrible slavery, which, up to within a few years, bound the women of this district to work in coal pits; for 33 years she had toiled in a mine for one master; the act abolishing the abomination had passed within the reign of our most gracious Sovereign, its promoters had all her sympathy and all her support, her sign manual was appended with the deepest pleasure; and it was the wild overpouring of gratitude which thus singularly developed itself."

The Act of Parliament referred to in the report was The Mines and Collieries Act (1842) which contained three main provisions. 1. that no female was to be employed underground. 2. that no boy under 10 years of age was to be employed underground. 3. that Parish apprentices between the ages of 10 and 18 could continue to work in the mines. The Act was a response to the working conditions of children described in the Children's Employment Commission (Mines) 1842 report. That commission had been headed by the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury.

