

CLEVELAND, THE DUKE AND DUCHESS



To retell the life of the last Duke of Cleveland is to recall not only the power and influence of the British nobility, which is in a small part still with us, but also its dependence on the accidents of childbirth.

The phrase 'last duke' may suggest an inference that this peerage was of considerable lineage. Its number suggests four generations, but there were only two. The first duke had three sons who succeeded. None of them produced a male heir. So Lord Harry Vane was the fourth and last to bear the title, dying only 58 years after his father obtained it.

Lord Harry George Powlett (his original family name was Vane; Powlett was his mother's maiden name) was the owner of Battle Abbey and its estates from 1857 to his death in 1891 at the age of 88. Its 6025 acres housed his preferred residence out of the 100,000 acres he held. With this holding he was a rich man and he left over £1.4M, a vast sum by any calculation, particularly when one recalls that he died in the days before death duties. Powlett was an active politician and, quite apart from its attractions and associations, the Abbey was almost the closest to London of all his country properties. In London he lived at Cleveland House, 17 St James's Square.

The dukedom was the second creation, the first having been for Barbara Villiers, one of the mistresses of Charles II, whose eldest son succeeded to it on her death in 1709: Charles Fitzroy, Duke of Cleveland, Duke and Earl of Southampton, Earl of Chichester, Baron of Newbury and Nonsuch, Knight of the Garter. This line became extinct in 1774 on the death of the third duke. However, the first duke's daughter married into the Vane family of the earls of Darlington, thereby creating the opportunity for that family to recreate the old title when elevation was offered.

As might be deduced from the Darlington title, the family wealth derived from the north-east, not only from rentals but from mining. The eighteenth century saw a vast increase in the number and size of the coal mines of north-eastern England, with a consequent and parallel increase in the fortunes of their owners, and things were even better for them in the century following. Among these owners was the Vane family. With wealth and title came more wealth and title, and an implicit obligation to participate in the government of Britain. The then earl of Darlington was in 1827 created marquis, and in 1833 duke, of Cleveland. His seat was at Raby in County Durham.

The first duke was a prominent though largely silent Whig politician. He was MP for Totnes (1788-90) and Winchelsea (1790-92), then succeeding his father as earl and going to the House of Lords. He had a large family but the succession was limited to sons, of which there were three; none had any legitimate children. The first son was duke 1842-64; the second for a few months in 1864; and the third, Harry George, from 1864 to 1891.

Harry bought Battle Abbey from the desperate Websters in 1857 and moved there with his wife Catherine Lucy Wilhelmina née Stanhope (1819-1901), the widow of Lord Dalmeny, heir



to the Rosebery earldom; her Dalmeny son later became prime minister as Lord Rosebery, 1894-95. By all accounts she was a formidable character and she was presumably the driving force behind the partial restoration of the Abbey and its general improvement. Her walled garden has now been restored. Under the Cleveland's archaeological exploration continued, revealing more mediaeval walls. The Duchess was responsible for creating the walled garden of the Abbey, rescued and restored in recent years.

Portrait of the Duchess by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1883.

The Duchess's earlier life had been noticeable and had followed the conventional path of her class. But there were family elements that suggested that she would go further. Her aunt was Lady Hester Stanhope, a remarkable woman who made news in the early nineteenth century and whose life the Duchess was to write and publish. In her youth Lady Hester had helped run 10 Downing Street for her uncle, William Pitt the Younger, and after his death in 1806 she was awarded a substantial government pension. She then travelled, touring the Mediterranean and arriving in Egypt in 1811, dressed as a Turkish gentleman and scandalising the natives. In 1815 she turned to archaeology and excavated Ashkelon in Palestine. She may have been crude in her archaeological methods – deliberately smashing some of what was dug up, for example – but it was the first such excavation in the Holy Land. She then decided to live a little further up the coast, at Sidon in the Lebanon. Her British companions died or left for home and she died a recluse at the age of 63.

Her exile was entirely self-imposed and it hardly gave Catherine an example of conduct to follow. Catherine was a bridesmaid at the wedding of Queen Victoria and in youth (it was reported) was regarded as one of the most beautiful women in England.¹ It was at Buckingham Palace that she met Archibald Primrose, Lord Dalmeny (1809-51), the heir to the earldom of Rosebery, and they soon married. Their eldest son was also Archibald, born in 1847, who became a prominent Liberal politician and a close associate of William Gladstone. In due course he succeeded Gladstone as prime minister in 1894, when the Grand Old Man, now 85 and defeated yet again over Irish Home Rule, decided to retire.

As prime minister her son is perhaps remembered for only two things. During his office the Act was passed that instituted death duties for the first time, much to the disgust of the wealthy; and, rather more spectacularly (especially in that he was in power for only sixteen months) his horses won the Epsom Derby in each of the two years concerned. Later he was known as a 'Liberal Imperialist', a strong opponent of the movement within the Liberal Party towards the more collectivist approach typified by the work of David Lloyd George.

The Duchess's younger son, and the future prime minister's brother, was Lt Col Everard Henry Primrose of the Grenadier Guards, who died 'in the heart of Africa' on 8 April 1885. Everard had been military attaché at the British embassy in Vienna.² He died of a fever at Abu Fatmeh in the retreat from Khartoum, which had been reached by Garnet Wolseley's army after its fall to the Mahdi and the death of General Gordon there; Primrose commanded the advance party in the retreat. His kinship to the Duchess appears to have

been his only connection with Battle, and after his death she wrote a memoir of him. She caused a plaque in his memory to be fixed in St Mary's church.

The future fourth duke was a Whig, a party which by the time of his marriage in 1853 was changing into the Liberals: MP for South Durham 1841-59 and for Hastings 1859-64 (to the point at which he was debarred from the Commons by succeeding to his peerage) and chairman of committees in the House of Commons.

On his death at the age of 88 the *Northern Echo* wrote:

The Cleveland estates in this district are by far the most extensive in England, stretching northwards from Darlington to the borders of Westmoreland, a distance of about 80 miles without a break in the estate. Amongst his tenantry the late Duke was extremely popular, as he showed himself a most generous and considerate landlord; and twice, in times of agricultural depression, returned his tenants 50 percent of their rent, besides making permanent reductions all round. The tenants firmly believed that in any case in which they required a reasonable concession they were sure to obtain it if they could manage to see His Grace in person; but of late years he was somewhat difficult to approach. Up to within the last year or two it was his annual custom to reside at Raby for a few months, generally from about August until the end of November. His affection for landed property was so deeply rooted that he would never part with an acre, but took advantage of numerous opportunities to acquire any farms which adjoined his estates. In this way he a few years ago bought the Danton Estate, which is now the biggest farm on the Raby property, being upwards of 1,000 acres in extent. Similarly Battle Abbey, near Hastings, came into his possession, and was ever after his favourite residence. In the grounds of the Abbey is to be seen the brass plate marking the spot where Harold fell. It is worthy of notice that about three years ago the Duchess issued into book form "The Roll of Battle Abbey," which she had written after the estate came into His Grace's possession.³

Due care should be taken in interpreting the Duchess's *Battle Abbey Roll*. Too many people had been and perhaps still were anxious to stake a claim that their ancestors fought alongside William in 1066, and the veracity of the Roll has often been questioned. French scholars, who might have rather less of a personal ambition invested in such a search, later produced the *Falaise Roll* that today is taken as the standard document. The Duchess also wrote a history of Battle Abbey.

Harry had no heir to most of his peerages, and he was succeeded as Baron Barnard by a distant cousin. Two of his sisters married and had children but there appears to be no connection with Sussex.

He was buried in the family vault at Staindrop in County Durham, close to Barnard Castle. He left the Abbey estates for the use of his widow during her lifetime and then to a great-nephew. She died at Wiesbaden in 1901, and the estate was then purchased from her legatee by Sir Augustus Webster, thereby returning it to his family after some 45 years.

Little remains of the Clevelands' time at Battle except the walled garden, the plaque in the church and, inside the Abbey itself, the southern wing, now a library for the school, where the Duke's initials can be seen carved on the woodwork of its northern wall. Cleveland House, a late Victorian house in Upper Lake, set back from the other houses and next to the Abbey walls, was the estate office for the Abbey lands where rents were received, and the lower ground floor door is where the tenants entered every quarter-day to pay their dues.

From the front it is undistinguished and gloomy, a tribute to its time, and it must receive little sunlight from its street elevation. But the Duke and Duchess restored the Abbey into not just a habitable but also a comfortable residence at a time when other buyers might have pulled it down, including the walled garden that has been restored after years of neglect. If only for that they deserve praise.

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¹ Obituary in *The Times*, 20 May 1901.

² Ronald Sutherland Gower: *Old Diaries* (John Murray, 1902).

³ <http://www.knoxetal.com/duke/duke.asp>