

Whitelackington and the Duke of Monmouth in 1680

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IN November 1703 the Great Storm played considerable havoc in Whitelackington Park. It was described thus by Daniel Defoe : ' In this Park four or five tall trees were thrown ; three very large beeches, two of them nearly five feet thick, were broken off in the storm, one near the root ; another was shattered twelve feet above. A fine walk of trees before the house was all blown down, the roof of a pigeon-house destroyed, a rookery carried away into the lanes, the lodge-house damaged by falling trees ; of a fine walk of tall firs, belonging to the house, twenty were broken down.'

This was the storm which cost Somerset its bishop (Dr. Kidder), through the fall of a chimney stack in the palace at Wells.

The storm on Ash Wednesday, 3rd March 1897, will long be remembered by the inhabitants of South Somerset. It began about midnight and by four a.m. it was blowing a hurricane ; soon after that hour a lull took place, but by eight o'clock it again raged with a force which, culminating in a blast about nine o'clock, levelled many a large tree in the district. Coming from the s.e., it well-nigh wrecked the celebrated cedar lawn at Hinton St. George House ; and it brought down the historic sweet chestnut known as the ' Monmouth Tree ' in Whitelackington park.¹

¹ Still standing and in leaf a photograph of Monmouth's Tree may be seen figured in *King Monmouth*, by Allan Fea, p. 99.

The tree was probably many centuries old. Experts tell us that the sweet chestnut is a tree of slow growth, and very long lived. Its dimensions were as follows :

Diameter at foot	12ft. 3 in.
Girth at mid-trunk	25 ft.
Girth at top of trunk	25 ft.
Height from bole to top of trunk	17 ft.
Total height of tree	49 ft.

There is nothing extravagant in computing the age of the Whitelackington tree as bordering on eight hundred and fifty years ; and this would carry its infancy back to about the days when the Conqueror's brother, Robert de Mortain, ruled the whole of this west-country from his stronghold on the hill overlooking Montacute.

The tradition will be recalled that when the ill-fated Duke of Monmouth made his quasi-royal progress in the West, during the summer of 1680, he partook of a banquet under the sheltering branches of this ' monarch of the woods '. The late Dr. Hugh Norris used the word ' tradition ' advisedly, for though he was a firm believer in the truth of the story, he could not find that there was any definite record.

A scarce little book, of which there is a copy in the Somerset County Museum, entitled *An Historical Account of the Heroick Life and Magnanimous Actions of the Most Illustrious Prince, James Duke of Monmouth, etc.*, printed in London in 1683, affords some slight corroboration of the story in the following narrative :

In the month of August, 1680, the ' Duke went into the country to divert himself, visiting several gentlemen in the West of England, by whom he was received and entertained with a gallantry suitable to the greatness of his Birth, and the relation he stood in to his Majesty ; incredible numbers of people flocked from all the adjacent parts to see this great Champion of the English Nation, who had been so successful against both the Dutch, French and Scots.

' He went first into Wiltshire, and was pleased to honour the Worthy Esquire Thyn with his company for some days. (This was at Longleat.)

' From thence he went to Mr. Speak's in Summerset-shire, in which progress he was caressed with the joyful acclamations of the country people, who came from all parts 20 miles about, Lanes and

Hedges being every where lined with men, Women and Children, who with incessant shouts cried, God bless King Charles and the Protestant Duke. In some Towns and Parishes which he passed through they Strewed the Streets and Highways where he was to pass with Herbs and Flowers, especially at Ilchester and Pithyton (South Petherton); others presenting him with Bottles of Wine. When he came within 10 miles of Mr. Speak's, he was met by 2000 persons on horseback, whose numbers still increased as they drew nearer to Mr. Speak's, and when they arrived there, they were reputed to be 20,000; wherefore they were forced to break down several perch of his Park Pales to enlarge their passage to the house, where his Grace and all his numerous Company were entertained, and treated in an extraordinary manner'.

The evident object of the *Heroick Life* was to ingratiate the Duke with the populace, especially in the West of England, where the feeling of working-men, as well as the leading gentry, against the Romish church was particularly strong. Indeed it would appear, by the light of later events, as if even at this date some plan for the 1685 raid had begun to develop in the minds of Monmouth's friends and supporters, in anticipation of what was likely to occur on the death of Charles II.

We have seen that contemporary history records the Duke's visit to Mr. Speke at Whitelackington in the summer of 1680. The numbers given, though in all likelihood over-estimated, were certainly considerable; far too great indeed to favour the idea of their being entertained within the house. What then so natural as that a repast should be spread for them, in picnic fashion, under the wide-spreading branches of the venerable chestnut that crested the park almost within stone's throw of the squire's porch?

Following this the Duke went to Brympton, near Yeovil, on 26th August 1680, where he had sumptuous entertainment at the hands of Sir John Sydenham. The next day to Barrington Court, the seat of Mr. William Strode, an ardent follower, who also proved a lavish host. After dinner he passed on to Chard, which was reached at five; thence to Ford Abbey, where he was given 'a very splendid supper' by Edmund Prideaux, passing the night there. On the 28th August, the Duke rode to Ilminster and dined,—with whom it is not recorded; and in the afternoon returned to Whitelackington for the night.

The next day, being Sunday, he attended divine service at Ilminster Church.

The famous 'junket' at the White Lodge, in Hinton St. George Park, was an episode of this time. This treat was provided for the Duke by Sir John Sydenham, uncle by marriage to the youthful Lord Poulett. It is generally known how, at that junketing, poor Elizabeth Parcet made a rush at the Duke, tore off skin of diseased flesh with her glove, and touched the Duke's wrist above the glove he was wearing, and how the 'king's evil', to which she had been a martyr, yielded shortly to the virtue of that touch—an incident which in the eyes of many proved the Duke's legitimacy. Henry Clark, minister, of Crewkerne, and seven other reliable persons, signed a handbill, freely circulated, vouching the truth of the story.

Monmouth moved west on August 30th, to Colyton Great House, and thence to Otterton House and Exeter. From Exeter back to Whitelackington for the third time during the progress. He stayed for one day, and passed on to Clifton Maubank in North Dorset; thence to Longleat and on to London, where we must leave him.

After the Assizes held by Judge Jeffreys at Taunton Castle, Charles Speke, son of George Speke, of Whitelackington, was hanged with eleven others at Ilminster. It is said, that he did no more than make obeisance to the Duke, as he passed through Ilminster; which compliment the Duke returned with shaking him by the hand, and which, at his trial, was construed into an approbation of the rebellion. It was also proved that he was a protestant dissenter, and had lately purchased a profitable place in the King's Bench. The major of the first regiment of Guards asked Jeffreys whether any favour would be shown Speke; who replied, 'No, his family owes a life. He shall die for his brother, who is guilty being in the action, but has escaped'. He was greatly esteemed in his neighbourhood, and several of the spectators, who had assembled in crowds to take their last farewell of him, offered to die in his stead. A proclamation was issued against George Speke, his father, and John Speke, his brother; the former of whom was obliged to advance ten thousand pounds to be free from further perse-

cution, and the latter escaped beyond sea, where he spent his time in travel till the Restoration. John Speke, the brother of the unfortunate Charles, was elected representative in Parliament for the borough of Taunton in 1695.

A few days previously to the Society's meeting at Chard, I was told of a tradition that the remains of Judge Jeffreys had been brought down from London and buried in a vault at St. Mary's Church, Stocklinch Ottersey, that there were other coffins in the vault, and that the leaden coffin containing Jeffreys' remains was not inscribed with his name.

However, H. B. Irving closes his book on *Judge Jeffreys* by saying, 'On the Saturday or Sunday the body of Lord Jeffreys was buried in the Tower of London (1689). Three years later Queen Mary ordered the remains to be delivered over to his friends and relations, to bury him as they should think fit; and the following year, 1693, the body of the Chancellor was laid by the side of his first wife in Aldermanbury Church, according to the directions in his will'.