

Short stories from the archives on a single topic

This issue: monarchical accessions and coronations

Woodstock: Accession of Charles I

CHARLES I ASCENDED the throne on 27th March 1625. The accounts of the chamberlain of Woodstock reveal that his proclamation cost 10s., followed by an additional 3s. for 'wine then spent at the townes chardges'. On Coronation Day, which took place nearly a year later on 2nd February 1626, the town spent another 18*d.* on wine. Unfortunately, the documents provide little detail about who drank this wine or what festivities accompanied it. However, it is clear from these municipal records that wine was a common feature of civic celebrations. The importance of alcohol in gifts and entertaining was so significant that it was given its own section in the accounts by Edmond Hiorne, the town clerk who wrote them out; which was perhaps not surprising in an area dominated by the victualling trade. Quarts of sack and claret worth 6s. were sent to justices at the quarter sessions in 1625; the king's trumpeters were not only rewarded with the payment of 10s, but also wine worth 3s. 4*d.*; and anyone who came to Woodstock to preach a sermon was usually rewarded with around 20*d.* worth of wine. In all, 48s. 1*d.*, or £2. 8s. 1*d.*, was listed in the 'wine section' of the accounts, around 4% of a yearly outgoing of £57. 6s. 9½*d.*, with still more spirit-related expenditure documented elsewhere. These outlays did not consist of one big expense, but multiple small ones, and were on a par with similar towns. It demonstrates that entertaining and being able to provide suitable gifts for guests and those providing a service was seen as important for maintaining the dignity of the town, and local social harmony.¹

Oxford: Accession of James II

The coronation of James II in 1685 took place on St George's Day, which happened to fall upon a Thursday that year, only a couple of months after his accession. In Oxford Anthony Wood tells that the heads of the colleges of the University, accompanied by the fellows, repaired to the University Church of St Mary the Virgin at 10 a.m. to hear a sermon, after which a bonfire was lit outside the door of the church. That evening there were 'bonefiers thro [sic] most parts of the city, in every college quadrangle, and before some of the gates', while twenty-four lights burned from the top of the tower in Merton College and candles shone in the windows of University College. The celebratory ringing of church bells, lighting of bonfires and holding of church services to mark royal occasions had developed as part of the Protestant calendar of annual festivities supposed to replace the old Catholic cycle of saints days swept away by the Reformation. Key dates marked with such celebrations included 5th November (the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot), 17th November (the anniversary of the accession to the throne of Elizabeth I), 29th May (Royal Oak Day and the anniversary of Charles II's escape after the Civil

War), and ‘crownation’ day (the anniversary of the accession of the current monarch). In this case, the celebrations were particularly tense, as James II was a Catholic, and the sermon instructed the congregation ‘not to hearken [sic] in the least after popery’ and to ‘pray for the king that God would open his eyes to see the light’. Famously, James II did not ‘see the light’ and was deposed three years later, replaced by his son-in-law and daughter William and Mary. Despite this underlying tension, the commemorations in 1685 were not all serious, with ‘Great extraordinaries in eating and drinking’ also taking place in each college and toasts made to the health of the new Royal Family.²

Deddington: Accession of Victoria

The ringing of bells in celebration continued at the coronations of the nineteenth century (and of course those held ever since). *Jackson’s Oxford Journal* records that in Deddington near Banbury the day of the coronation of Queen Victoria was ‘ushered in here with the ringing of bells, and mounting of flags and banners’. At midday 200 children ‘of the National and Sunday Schools’ were ‘regaled with roast and boiled beef, plum pudding and ale’, followed by further ‘good old English fare’ being provided to ‘the whole of the poor... upwards of 700 in number’ at 3 p.m. and later ‘divers rustic amusements’, a ‘festive dance’ and a ‘display of fire works’ for entertainment. This festive fare had been paid for by the local vicar, and such benevolence of local gentry or town worthies to the lower classes was common, with the same page of the *Journal* recording similar dinners in the nearby hamlets of Clifton and Hempton, as well as Bicester, Faringdon, Wallingford, Witney, the villages of Longworth and Marcham, and a particularly extravagant affair in Abingdon. These events acted to reinforce the social hierarchy. Before drinking the Queen’s health, Deddington’s ‘worthy Vicar’ gave a speech that ‘reminded the poor that they were not always forgotten by their respectable neighbours (as some of them wrongly supposed)’, who instead ‘were ever ready on every suitable occasion to administer to [the poor’s] comfort and enjoyment’. Such magnanimity, he ‘trusted would generate in them feelings of good will, attachment, and respect, towards their superiors’. These events took place during the aftermath of the implementation of the controversial Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. In 1832, Deddington had one of the highest costs of poor relief per head in the area and the mid-1830s saw tensions with neighbouring hamlets over how to share such financial obligations, the closure of the local workhouse to be subsumed into the Woodstock Poor Law Union, and a scheme to deal with those facing destitution locally by supporting them to emigrate overseas. The period was also marked by riots, arson and the killing of an overseer’s sheep. It therefore seems optimistic to conclude that the *Journal*’s assessment that Deddington’s coronation celebrations ‘passed off with the greatest harmony and good feeling amongst all parties’ applied beyond this event.³

Bicester: Accession of Edward VII

By the next coronation, that of Edward VII some sixty-four years later, the celebrations remained local and communal, still held before radio and tele-

vision allowed those outside London to witness the coronation ceremony in real time. According to an historical scrapbook later compiled by pupils at Bicester Grammar School in 1955 (pictured below), the planned programme of day-long celebrations in Bicester for the coronation of Edward VII on 26th June 1902 retained elements familiar from previous occasions. These included an opening church service, meals for attendees, dancing in the Market Square and cheers for King Edward and Queen Alexandra at midnight. Other elements of the Bicester celebrations were indicative of new technology, such as a parade of dressed up cars and pedestrians at noon, and a later torchlit procession with prizes ‘for the best illuminated and decorated vehicles’ and ‘the best bicycles or mail carts’. Another unprecedented popular feature of the celebrations was the brass band from the nearby village of Oakley, which had been engaged to play throughout the day. Brass bands, like sports clubs and choirs, had grown in popularity during the societal changes driven by the industrialization and urbanization of the nineteenth century. They provided community engagement, entertainment and identity in a way that was ordered and non-threatening to employers and authorities. Initially starting in the north of England, they spread to the south after 1860. Although often linked to workplaces, the Salvation Army or the temperance movement, they could also just be a village leisure activity, as appears to have been true in this case. The initial plans for the Bicester celebrations were disrupted by the King’s ill health, which forced the postponement of his coronation. However, when postponed coronation festivities were held in August (the highlight this time was a cricket match in fancy dress), the Oakley Brass Band seemed even more prominent. They accompanied a morning church service and went around the town at least twice: once seemingly on their own and once to accompany a procession. The tradition of brass bands in Oxfordshire continues with the City of Oxford Silver Band today.⁴

Notes

- 1 *Woodstock Chamberlains’ Accounts 1609–50*, ed. M. Maslen, (Oxford, 1993), 103; Baggs, A. P., Blair, W. J., Chance, Eleanor, Colvin, Christina, Cooper, Janet, Day, C. J., Selwyn, Nesta and Townley, S. C., ‘Woodstock: Economic history’, in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 12, Wootton Hundred (South) Including Woodstock*, ed. Alan Crossley and C R Elrington (London, 1990), 360–372; *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol12/pp360-372>, accessed 15 Aug. 2023.
- 2 *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary of Oxford, 1632–1695, described by Himself: Volume III: 1682–1695*, ed. Andrew Clark, (Oxford, 1894), 140–141; Cressy, David, *Bonfires & Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England*, (Stroud, 2004).
- 3 *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, 30 June 1838, *British Library Newspapers*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/Y3202669578/BNCN?u=oxfshlib&sid=bookmark-BNCN. Accessed 6 Aug. 2023; Baggs, A.P., Colvin, Christina, Colvin, H.M., Cooper, Janet, Day, C.J., Selwyn, Nesta, and Tomkinson, A., ‘Parishes: Deddington’, in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 11, Wootton Hundred (Northern Part)*,

ed. Alan Crossley (London, 1983), 81–120, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol11/pp81-120>, accessed 3 Oct. 2023.

- 4 Oxfordshire History Centre POX0646939: Coronation Day 1902. Item in scrap-book *Bicester within living memory* compiled and produced by 5th and 6th form pupils of Bicester Grammar, for the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council Village Scrapbook Competition, 1955 (see below); Daunton, Martin 'Society and economic life', Flint, Kate, 'Literature, music and the theatre' in Colin Matthew, (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century: The British Isles: 1815–1901*, (Oxford, 2000), 57, 249.

2 p.m. Sports in the cricket field for which a programme of twenty four events is arranged with prizes varying from 10/- to 1/-.

3.30 p.m. Tea for children in the cricket field. Children were all provided with coronation mugs.

4.30 p.m. Tea in the cricket field for all persons over fifty if they have tickets.

8 p.m. Dancing in the Market Square

10 p.m. Torchlight Procession starting in the Bland Lane. Prizes at £2, £1 and 10/- will be given for the best illuminated and decorated vehicles, and prizes of £1, 10/- and 5/- for the best bicycles or motor cars.

11 p.m. Resumption of dancing at the Market Square.

12 p.m. United singing of the National Anthem and cheers for the King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra.

The Oakley Brass Band has been engaged for the day and handbills are in circulation containing the programme of sport.

June 22nd. (from "Advertiser").

News from London of the king's illness caused anxiety at first, but the king assured people that the celebrations were to go on, whether he was better or not, so celebrations proceeded in Bicester. Each child was given a certificate by the school he or she attended. Owing to the king's illness certain changes in the programme were made. Racing for the children was held first which was followed by Teas for both children and adults.

Extract from a handwritten account of the coronation celebrations in Bicester in 1902" (© Oxfordshire History Centre POX0646939)