

The Edinburgh Tree

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Some while ago Devon Gardens Trust was asked what their researchers knew about the ‘Edinburgh Tree’. The answer was ‘very little’ or, in fact, ‘nothing’! Questions were asked of local historians for Exeter and most were unable to help. However, by coincidence, a map being used for a display at the Devon and Exeter Institution Library provided the first piece of evidence, see Figure 1. The map shows Bury Meadow Pleasure Grounds, with its trees, fountain and lodge and, opposite the main gates at the junction of Hele Road and New North Road, the ‘Edinburgh Tree’. The map is dated 1876 so it was then a simple business to search through local newspapers for important events prior to this date to find information about the tree, why it was planted, and what happened to it subsequently. This article records the history of the tree, long forgotten by many of Exeter’s citizens. In fairness the tree was only in its location for about thirty years. Although its presence in the city was transitory, its planting involved several businesses and many people in Exeter.

Introduction

It is not unusual today for the citizens of towns and cities to plant commemorative trees. It was the same in Devon in the nineteenth century. Planting a tree or trees, especially to celebrate royal occasions, was an important part of Victorian life. Organised by councillors and clergy, tree planting for great occasions, together with their associated events, could be enjoyed by people of all classes, from special meals or picnics for children to congratulatory dinners and balls for the gentry and aristocracy. These events involved parades through decorated streets to gather to listen to speeches, copies of which were printed in local newspapers. In the days before television important events such as royal weddings or Jubilee celebrations were occasions for people to share the festivities and take part in both local and national events.

Trees, usually planted in public places such as parks and churchyards, were a constant reminder of a shared event and, in case people did forget, there were often more tangible

reminders in the way of stones or plaques explaining why they had been planted; railings safeguarded the trees or special names given to the trees helped keep those memories alive. Unfortunately, as specimen trees were often chosen, they were not always suitable for the site where they were to be planted. Even where native species were chosen, a lack of knowledge of their required care led to many dying or having to be replaced later in a much quieter manner.

Why was the Edinburgh tree planted?

On 10 March 1863, the Prince of Wales, Prince Albert Edward, eldest son of Queen Victoria, married Princess Alexandra of Denmark. To celebrate the occasion in Exeter, several trees were planted in Bury Meadow Pleasure Ground. The first to be planted at ‘the extreme left of the meadow on entering’, was a ‘Caucasian pine (*Picea Normaniana*)’, supplied by Mr Pince of the Lucombe and Pince nursery. This was planted for Queen Victoria and named ‘The Queen’s Tree.’¹ Two ‘*Wellingtonia gigantea*’ [*Sequoiadendron giganteum*], introduced into this country by plant hunter William Lobb for their supplier, James Veitch and Son, less than ten years previously, were then planted either side of the central path and named ‘The Prince’s Tree’ and ‘The Princess’s Tree’ respectively (see Figure 1).² A few days earlier, Mr Pince had also planted a *Cedrus deodara*, in honour of Princess Alexandra, ably assisted by several ladies who helped by pressing down the earth with their ‘twinkling feet’.³ The nurserymen were present at the ceremonial planting, but the trees were officially planted by the Mayor, William Barnes, the Sherriff, Dr Blackall, and the ex-Mayor, Mr William Kendall, whose task ‘simply consisted of shovelling a little soil over the roots of the trees’.⁴ The marriage of the Prince of Wales inspired a large number of celebrations throughout the county and some of these included planting commemorative trees elsewhere. For example, two oak trees were planted in Crediton, donated by Mr Pince; two oak trees were also planted on Dawlish Lawn, these supplied by Mr Sclater.⁵

When Queen Victoria’s second son, Prince Alfred the Duke of Edinburgh, announced his marriage there were far fewer calls for celebrations in Devon. However, the then Mayor of Exeter, Charles John Follett, decided that public celebrations should be arranged in Exeter to commemorate the Prince’s marriage to Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna of Russia. One of the amazing things about the arrangements for the day was the speed with which the events were organised. On 14 January 1874, the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* reported that the Mayor of Exeter had suggested that celebrations should take place on the 23 January ‘to show loyalty and attachment to the Queen’.⁶ The following day it was reported that a committee of Aldermen and Councillors had been proposed to organise the festivities. Alderman Gidley had reported that ‘Mr [Robert] Veitch had offered to present the city with a tree if it was intended to plant one in commemoration of the occasion as was done when the Prince of Wales was married’.⁷ This was accepted. From the first suggestion the local and daily newspapers all contained updates on the forthcoming festivities in the city. People were exhorted to decorate their homes and streets with greenery and lights. The Royal Artillery and the Volunteers were invited to take part in a procession through the city centre; celebratory speeches had already been written and illuminated by Mr

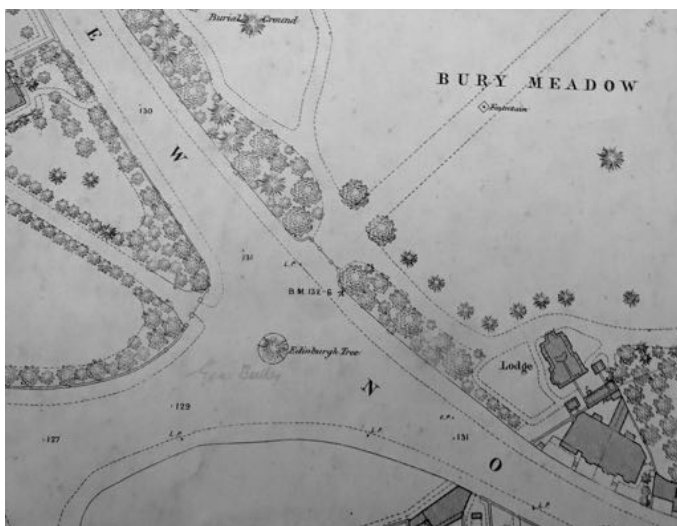


Figure 1. Detail from 1876 OS 50" LXXX 6.11 map.
Courtesy of Devon and Exeter Institution Library

Clark at a cost of six guineas (£6.30p) in November 1873. The address of congratulations on the forthcoming marriage had already been sent to the Home Office for the Queen, her son and his new wife.⁸

Almost from the first it had been decided that a key feature of the celebrations would 'be the planting of a young tree in the open space between St David's Church and Bury Meadow', the ceremony to be carried out by the Mayor,

which would not only be a pleasing memorial of the good wishes expressed by Exeter towards the Queen's second son on the occasion of his entering the married state, but the furnishing of one of the city's chief avenues with an ornament the advantage of which is more fully realized in the faubourgs of continental towns – and with happy effect in the outlying thoroughfares of English cities.⁹

Celebrations would begin at 1 pm at the Guildhall with parades through the city centre of the Mayor and Corporation of the Guildhall accompanied by the bands of the Rifle Volunteers and Engineers and citizens of Exeter, eventually gathering outside the gates of Bury Meadow Pleasure Ground for the tree planting. Following prayers, the tree planting and speeches, the procession would return to the Guildhall and from there disperse to take part in the rest of the celebrations. These included a public dinner at the New London Inn 'to which [gentlemen] citizens generally will be invited' and at which 'the Mayor will preside, and the Earl of Devon, the Bishop, Sir Lawrence Palk, M.P. and Archdeacon Woollcombe, amongst others, are expected to be present'.¹⁰

The streets of the city were to be decked out with flags and illuminated, the responsibility of individual action by citizens, and to 'guarantee the fair sex their proper share in the festivities' a ball was to be held in the evening at the Victoria Hall.¹² The *Western Times* was not quite so enthusiastic about the plans commenting that there were no celebrations planned for the working classes, that the Balls, Dinners etc were only for the 'Conservative wealthy'.¹³



Advertisement for the celebration dinner.
Exeter Flying Post,
21 January 1874

Reporting on the event, the *Exeter Flying Post* noted that the 'chief feature of the day's proceedings' was the planting of a Wellingtonia tree by the Mayor of Exeter. The site had been prepared earlier by Messrs. Veitch and Son, who had also put together 'a large glass bottle, corked and sealed' to be placed under the roots which contained copies of the speeches, several silver coins of the realm and copies of the three Exeter newspapers.¹⁴ This was deposited first, then, using 'a handsome spade', donated by Messrs Garton and King of Exeter, handed to the Mayor by the City Surveyor for the purpose, the tree was planted.

The blade of the spade was steel, and on the handle was a silver shield bearing the following inscription:- "This spade was used by the Right Worshipful the Mayor of Exeter (Charles John Follett, Esq.) in planting a tree in the New North-road upon the occasion of the marriage of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh with her Imperial Highness the Grand Duchess Marie of Russia, January 23rd 1874".¹⁵

After the planting, speeches and prayers, there was a twenty-one gun salute by a battery of Royal Horse Artillery, the band played the National Anthem and the procession was reformed and proceeded along the New North Road down the High Street to the Guildhall. Various celebrations followed. The grand banquet, with table decorations supplied by Veitch nurseries, was held at the New London Inn. It

was attended by between seventy and eighty gentlemen, all worthies of Exeter and surrounds, and listed in the *Exeter Flying Post*. Inmates of the workhouse were regaled with a supper of roast beef and plum pudding, the children having a plentiful supply of cake.¹⁶ Over 600 people were present at the ball at the Victoria Hall. Others attended the Russian festival at the theatre.¹⁷

Why Bury Meadow?

Bury Meadow Pleasure Ground had been laid out as a public park in 1846 from land that had been in the possession of the Corporation of the Poor since 1703 when it had been bequeathed by Sir T Bury for the use of the city so long as the



Detail from The Marriage of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, 23 January 1874 by Nicholas Chevalier. Royal Collection Trust © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019

Corporation of the Poor existed. The pleasure grounds were a place of recreation for children and adults alike, somewhere for the children to play and for adults to walk in the evenings. Only five minutes' walk away from the city centre, it was a meeting place for citizens and where important events were held such as the Peace Celebrations in 1856 to celebrate the ending of the Crimean War, which involved sports, games and dancing.¹⁸ Exeter Council was proud of its parks and gardens and hoped to enhance them by planting avenues of trees in the city leading to their pleasure grounds.

The Wellingtonia had been deliberately chosen to remind Princess Marie of her northern homeland. It was supplied by Robert Veitch and Son, whose nursery was at New North Road, but they were not the only businesses to be involved in the story of the tree. Unlike the 1863 wedding celebrations, where a budget of £300 was allocated for the total cost of the public festivities, the Council in 1874 itemised individual costs of the event.¹⁹ As mentioned above, Garton and King had provided the spade; a Mr Woodman was paid £13. 8s 5d for railings to surround and protect the tree.²⁰ The firm of Easton and Sons, monumental masons of Northernhay Street, chosen because they already worked closely with the council to provide most of the headstones in Exeter's cemeteries, provided the inscribed granite stone for which they were paid £7. 16s on the 14 October.²¹

There was some controversy regarding the charge of £15. 4s that Robert Veitch had made for digging the eighteen-foot square hole in which the tree was to be planted. This sum was queried and referred back to the Borough Accounts Committee for a report to be compiled. However they eventually resolved that it should be paid despite being considered a 'monstrous sum' by Councillor Courtenay.²² Payment was finally approved on 8 April 1874.²³ The total cost of the tree planting incurred by the Council was £36. 8s 5d, approximately £4,000 in today's money (2019).

Regrettably, the original tree did not thrive. As early as July 1874, it was noticed that it 'present[ed]the appearance of a tree at the latter end of Autumn'.²⁴ At some point, 'the original Edinburgh Tree was removed and its substitute planted at dead of night in order to draw as little attention to it as possible', costing the Council an additional £10 to replant a healthy tree.²⁵

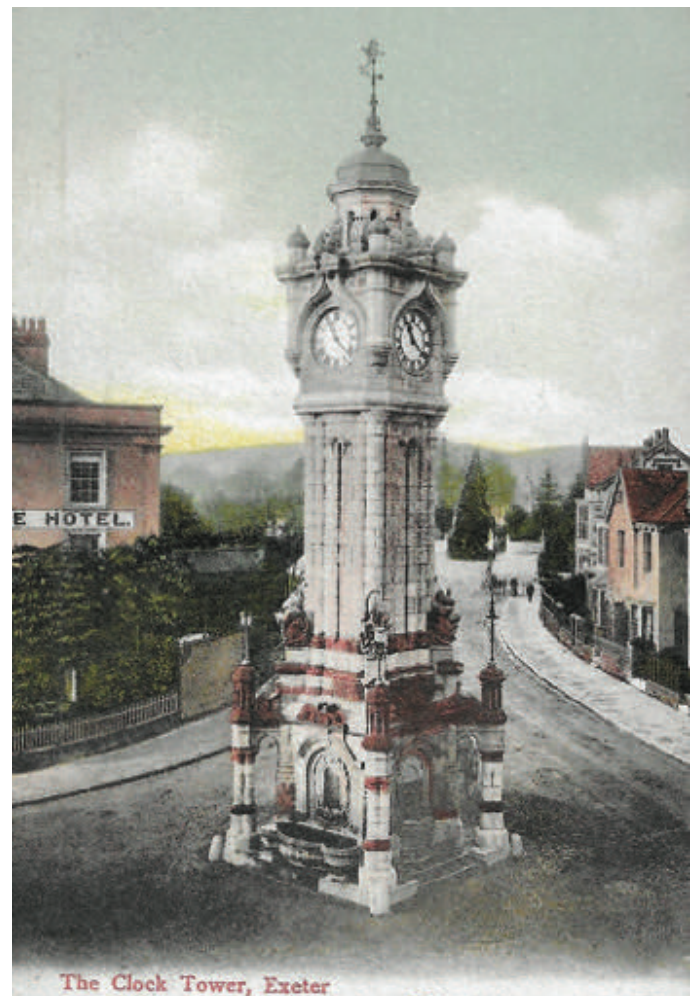
Despite the demise of the first tree, in 1875 a sub-committee of Exeter Town Council, set up to consider street numbering, 'had resolved to name the road from the New North Road to St David's Hill between St David's Church and Hele School be styled "Edinburgh" after the tree'.²⁶ This was not a popular move as it was thought that there seemed to be little connection with the city. The road was named 'Edinburgh Road', and even had a nameplate fixed but the objections were such that the name was changed early in 1876 to Hele Road after Elize Hele, who had in the seventeenth century left money in trust to set up a school in Exeter.²⁷

Having finally settled the costs for the planting of the Edinburgh tree, and the resolution of the street name, there was little in either the council minutes or the local newspapers about the tree until 1891. A couple of letters in the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* criticised the neglect of the trees in Bury Meadow, related the history of the tree opposite the gates, and commented on the poor state of

its surroundings including 'a rather unsightly black fence' guarding the tree, and 'the faded inscription of the stone at the foot of the fir that now thrives there'.²⁸ Although the tree itself was deemed to be healthy, it was soon to face a substantial threat, this time from the Buller Testimonial Committee.

Demise of the tree

By 1901 the Victorian era was over. Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, had died in July 1900 and for many the Edinburgh tree had little relevance to the new century. In March 1902 it had been suggested that funds raised by the Mayor of Exeter 'for the purpose of commemorating the services of Sir Redvers Buller will be devoted to a statue'. This was to be an acknowledgement of the 'heroic part played by Buller during the wars'.²⁹ The Buller Testimonial Committee was formed and further subscriptions were raised towards a pedestal for the statue. Mr Adrian Jones (1845-1938), a sculptor famous for his equestrian work, was chosen to undertake the commission. Jones was a former army veterinary surgeon who had served in the Royal Horse Artillery. Once the design had been agreed the committee walked around the city to find the most appropriate place for the bronze statue set on a pedestal ten feet in height. The site chosen by Jones as 'the most favourable to such an equestrian work, which will probably be 24 feet in height, and, therefore require some distance to properly view the



Postcard of the Miles Memorial Clock Tower showing the Edinburgh Tree in the background. Author's collection

work and appreciate its merits' was opposite the gates of Bury Meadow.³⁰

At present [1903] it is occupied by a tree which is associated with an event 30 years ago, of much interest at the moment, but not requiring to be commemorated in perpetuity. ...The Duke has passed away, and we shall not be wanting in any respect for his memory if the somewhat unsightly tree which was planted on his marriage day is now removed.³¹

By this time the local newspapers were supporting the idea of a statue in place of the tree, the *Western Times* declaring on the 19 September that 'the Buller statue and the Miles Clock Tower [completed 1898] will give strangers an excellent impression on entering the city.'

The tree remained in place for a further twelve months, but on the 9 August 1904 the *Western Times* reported:

Exeter will soon have an addition to its monumental attractions, the equestrian statue in honour of General Buller, V.C. The work of preparing the site opposite to the entrance to Bury Meadow was commenced yesterday, when labourers were set to work removing the tree, which was planted in celebration of the marriage of the late Duke of Edinburgh with the Archduchess Maria of Russia in 1874. The disappearance of the tree will cause no grief. It was not the tree which was originally planted by Mayor Follett. That one died early, and the one which was being felled yesterday, was put in its place. It was hardly worthy of the object which it was sought to commemorate, and it added little to the attractiveness of the locality ...

For an epitaph the reporter wrote 'Nobody will regret the disappearance of the tree...It will now, I suppose, be cut up for firewood'.³²

It took a further year before the pedestal was erected and the statue was placed in position. This was finally unveiled, with many speeches and great ceremony, by Lord Ebrington on 6 September 1905.



A sketch of the Buller statue as illustrated in the Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 31 March 1905

Conclusion

Trees are ephemeral; Wellingtonias, in particular, do not like 'town air'. The remaining two trees that were planted in Bury Meadow in 1863 were finally removed in 1899 after much remedial attention from local nurserymen.³³ Some commemorative trees can still be found around the county, but as the world and tastes changed so did commemoration of important events. An occasion such as the planting of the Edinburgh Tree took little more than days to organise and cost comparatively little. Its replacement, the Buller statue, was paid for by subscriptions from thousands of people, it took years to create, and many months to organise the unveiling. The Edinburgh Tree survived just thirty years, the Buller statue remains in place after one hundred and fifteen.

Acknowledgements:

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