

How Leicester and Leicestershire celebrated the Coronation of King George V

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This year is the centenary of the coronation of King George V. Although he acceded to the throne on 6th May 1910, the coronation was not celebrated until 22nd June 1911.

From the moment of the proclamation of the new reign, it seems that there was a growing determination locally to celebrate the coronation in a style and on a scale hitherto unsurpassed. Royal visits and Queen Victoria's jubilees had seen crowds thronging Leicester's streets on several occasions from the 1880s. Leicester had also turned out in force for the coronation of Edward VII in 1902 to see parades of troops, firemen and floats depicting scenes from the nation's history, as surviving images attest. There remained, however, a lingering feeling – perhaps occasioned by the delays following the uncrowned king's serious illness – that Leicestershire could have done better.

In 1911 however, Leicester was in the mood to push the boat out further than ever. As befitted the county town, Leicester provided its citizens with a bewildering variety of celebrations and entertainments.

A committee chaired by the mayor, Alderman William Wilkins Vincent, had raised £3,400 by subscription and proceeded to spend its way to what the *Leicester Daily Post* termed: 'a programme of festivities...that, for interest and general effectiveness, will compare most favourably with anything arranged in sister towns in the Midlands. It was a programme thoroughly in accord with the democratic spirit of the age, in that it left out absolutely no section of the populace...'

Coronation Day began in Leicester with church services. There was an official service at St Martin's, involving representatives of the town's council, magistracy, and Board of Guardians. A Free Church service was also held at the Belvoir Street Baptist Church, while the town's Roman Catholics gathered at Holy Cross Priory.

By 10.15 am however, the civic dignitaries were in place on Western Boulevard, ready to join a remarkable procession through Leicester to Victoria Park. The parade represented Leicester both new and old; its civic status and pride as well as its colourful royal history.



The religious service in Leicester's Market Place; remembered for 'its simplicity and its reverence'. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland).

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Over 400 Church Lads and 150 of the Boys' Brigade paraded through Leicester. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland).

The procession began with the town's military might: two guns of the Leicestershire Royal Horse Artillery, the Yeomanry, the 4th Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment (with their Band and Drums) and other Territorial units including the Army Service Corps and 5th Northern General Hospital. (1) Following them were representatives of the town's Friendly Societies, Leicester's and various other volunteer fire brigades, and what would now be termed 'youth groups'. Surviving postcards show the Church Lads Brigade, in pill-box caps and white sashes, marching with carbines at the slope past crowds packed five or six deep on the pavements. (2) They were accompanied by the Boys' Brigade, Boy Scouts, and messengers of the Post Office.

There then followed the highlight of the procession - its historical section. As the *Leicester Daily Post* explained: 'that the average Britisher still loves a procession is a fact that even the most pronounced of cynics will scarcely deny. In these go-ahead times he is not, of course, content with the kind of procession that did duty a generation or two ago - nothing but a picturesque historic pageant now satisfies him...' (3)

In 1902 Leicester had been treated to a variety of regal scenes from Edward the Confessor, through Queen Eleanor, to the Wars of the Roses and beyond. Surviving photographs at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR) show an array of bristling moustaches

and Quixotic 'harness'. Now, for the 1911 coronation celebrations, the emphasis was upon historical accuracy and vivid colour.

The 1911 pageant was on the theme of royal visits to Leicester. It had been managed by two stalwarts of the Leicester School of Art, B. J. Fletcher and H. R. Steer. To the critic of the *Leicester Daily Post* it was 'nothing short of a triumph...Unlike many pageantries of the kind the dressing was no mere medley of garments more or less picturesque but of quite negligible [sic] value as a real reproduction of the past. In this case great care had been taken to ensure that the costumes should be as near the real thing as it was reasonably possible to get.' (4)

The first group represented the Emperor Hadrian, impersonated by Mr A. L. Hames. A lantern slide (5) survives of the emperor, flanked by two attendants, with ten legionaries in support. The dignity of Rome was maintained until the group reached the Victoria Park, when as the *Daily Press* observed: 'He looked very imperious until someone quite unnecessarily hailed him by his Christian name. Then he wrinkled his face into a smile, and replied...'How Do'.'

Rome was succeeded by the court of Duke Ethelred, whose wife, Ethelfleda, is credited with driving out the Danish invaders and re-establishing Christianity in Leicester. The Duke was played by Mr R. Roberts, whose daughter,

Miss G. Roberts, acted the part of Ethelfleda. Once again the scene is captured on a lantern slide (6), though it also shows a kneeling lady in picture hat and Edwardian (or should we say Georgian?) dress undertaking running repairs rather in the manner of Rolf Harris's 'fascinating witches who put the scintillating stiches in the britches of the boys ... of the court of King Caractacus'.

Henry III and Richard II then followed in a fine display of heraldry and horses. Intriguingly, the youthful Prince Edward was played by Edgar Armitage, who was to go on to represent Prince Rupert in the Pageant of 1932.

Richard III (Mr H. H. Peach) followed, accompanied by the Duke of Norfolk and Earl of Northumberland. That unfortunate monarch was depicted twice, each incarnation captured on the glass of a lantern slide. (7) The first slide shows the last Plantagenet riding with his knights, while the second reveals his fate – a corpse slung across a horse's back. The first of the Ricardian slides also shows clearly one of the banners which preceded every group, announcing to the crowds what they were about to see.

The next two royal visitors have also been immortalised on lantern slides. Miss V. Burgoine appeared as the inevitable Lady Jane Grey (Leicester's only truly local monarch) deep in conversation with H. W. Benson's Roger Ascham; while

Charles I arrived with his queen, closely followed by Prince Rupert and a company of halberdiers. The visit of Charles and Henrietta Maria in 1634 had been peaceful; the later intrusion of Rupert rather less so. The *Leicester Daily Post* noting that 'Charles was welcomed loyally...and attended St Martin's church on the Sunday. Rupert, who gave the town such a battering...in 1645, was seen with the trumpeter whom he sent to demand the surrender of the town. Which summons the doughty Parliamentarians of the garrison declined to entertain.'

The final group recalled the fleeting visit of Anne of Denmark, who stayed one night in Leicester whilst fleeing the court of James II her father, in 1688. It appears that the princess arrived by hackney coach but left for Nottingham the next morning riding pillion behind a corpulent mercer named Mason. Alas, a photographic record of the double act of Miss Wesson, as the princess, and Mr A. H. Butler, as the tradesman, seems not to have survived.

The pageant procession was followed by the carriages of the civic party. It was a dignified end to as impressive a procession as Leicester had ever seen. With the Historical Section's performers, the *Leicester Daily Post* could not have been more delighted: 'All were excellent, and played their parts admirably. It was Leicester's first bit of pageantry. Let us hope it won't be the last.'



Mr H. Lyner and his horse draw Ethelred and Ethelfleda into the limelight. No one seems to have noticed the lady from a different millennium, who seems to be busy with running repairs. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland).

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Mr H. H. Peach made a jolly Richard III; presumably unaware of his return journey to Leicester - slung across a horse. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland).

Their destination was the Victoria Park, where (at noon) the Leicestershire Royal Horse Artillery's four new 15 pounders began a deafening twenty-one gun salute. Echoing across the town, the gunfire drew the crowds away from a religious service in the Market Place to see the Mayor plant a commemorative oak tree.

The afternoon was given over to bands and sports, one of the most popular events being a clowns' cricket match. Schoolchildren danced and gymnasts performed. It was a programme broadly repeated at Western Park, where huge crowds also enjoyed trick cyclists and comic acrobats before gazing upwards at twenty tons of fireworks propelled upwards by the Borough Fire Brigade. The Abbey and Spinney Hill Parks also benefited from bands and entertainment.

For the more peacefully inclined of Leicester, the ideal resort must have been the Granby Street Picture House, where a film of the real coronation procession was advertised for the 4.30 pm (or thereabouts) showing. The pioneer aviator, Monsieur Charles Hubert [Latham] had been engaged to fly the films to Rugby, from where a motor car was ready for the dash to Leicester. Sadly the rain, which became heavier as the day wore on, put paid to the plan; having thwarted Hubert (a rival of Bleriot) who known also as the 'Storm King', and should have been able to deliver the film on time if anyone could.

Instead, the film was shown the following day, having travelled up by train. The Palace Theatre was also advertising the Bioscope film of the Royal Progress, though without specifying delivery by air. Even without the adverse weather, the railway can hardly have been much slower than the air and road route and was always, presumably, far more reliable.

The Mayor, William Wilkins Vincent, can almost be seen waiting to wield his silver presentation spade – made by Curtis & Horspool, of Leicester. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland).



PLANTING THE OAK TREE. CORONATION DAY 1911. VICTORIA PARK, LEICESTER. T.E.S.L.



While the Borough Workmen's band plays in Leicester's Western Park bandstand, a large crowd watches a demonstration of boys' physical drill perhaps, or the Mantle Road School maypole dances. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland).

The county was eager to celebrate too. It would appear that in almost every parish 22nd June began with a peal of bells and a celebratory church service. Village brass bands were everywhere in evidence, though as Measham's surviving coronation committee minutes attest obtaining the services of a band could be problematic (8), and teas and sports were provided for sustenance and entertainment.

Loughborough's celebrations followed Leicester's model, with a civic parade to church, rival nonconformist services, and a procession in the afternoon of the borough's seven thousand or so children – all proudly sporting their coronation medals.

At Market Harborough there was an imperial theme to the celebrations, with a series of tableaux demonstrating the variety of produce and gifts to Britannia from her colonies and dominions. A succession of local children impersonated (amongst others) Maori 'belles' and dancers, gum diggers, sheep farmers, Zulus, Nautch girls, and Rajahs; whose gifts included a dreadnought battleship, a casket of jewels, Chinese fruit, wool, corn, and South African gold.

At Groby the quarry struck work, while Croft's Concrete Company's sheds were surrendered to celebratory diners. Barkby enjoyed the usual mixture of church, sports and food; though while the men of the village sat down to a substantial dinner, their wives and children were served a meat tea. The village's young ones did particularly well, receiving not only a mug but also, through private generosity, a medal and a shilling each invested in the Post Office Savings Bank.

Mugs were a frequent souvenir of the occasion. Many villages, including Stanton under Bardon, Stoke Golding and Battleflat, presented their children with mugs by way of celebration. It was a cup and saucer each however at Higham on the Hill, where the Hon E. H. Pierpoint, of the hall, also presented canisters to the parishioners; tea for the ladies and tobacco to the men.

An epidemic of measles led to the postponement of festivities at Bardon Hill, while the harsh economic times threatened to blight Coalville's day. As the *Leicester Daily Post* rather unkindly reported 'Coalville does not lend itself to artistic display, nevertheless the residents made a brave show, and the main streets were a blaze of red, white, and blue, the only tinge of regret was the scarcity of employment in the collieries, for, as one of the workers said: We can't *Coronate on two days a week.*' (9)

Scalford is unusual, not for what it did, but because the records of the celebrations survive – even down to the individual receipts for mutton, cakes and other supplies purchased. At Scalford, it would appear, nothing was left to chance. Funds were raised and spent (a balance sheet records that the Coronation Fund broke even at £27 16s. 3d.). Committees were formed for every aspect of the day and lists produced of tea makers, carvers (each bringing their own tools), water carriers, bread butterers and cutters and so on. Finally, a record of the celebrations was made, detailing the time-table of teas and presentations (each child receiving a mug from the parish and a medal and flag from a Mr William Wright). The day concluded at 6.30 p.m. with sports - after which the children all received a bag of nuts and sweets. (10)

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Market Bosworth raised fifty guineas for the celebrations and after a church service, treated the residents of both Bosworth and Coton to lunch in the Park. At Melton too there were free lunches, followed by sports and illuminations (to the sound of the Town Band) on the town's new park. Barwell's organising committee made the village's children happy by hiring four traction engines, each hauling a truck, to take them on a tour of the neighbourhood.

A rare survival of a programme (11) enables Wigston Magna's day to be constructed hour by hour. At 8.30 am, an hour's peal rang out from the parish church. Then, an hour later at 9.30, a procession departed from The Orchard (where the Wigston United Brass Band played), consisting 'of Territorials, Scouts, Ambulance Men, Firemen, Friendly Societies, School Children, Vehicles, Cyclists, Mounted Men in Fancy Dress and others'. There was another peal at midday, followed by a service at 1 o'clock. Tea was at four, with sports before (for the children) and after (for the adults). The day's programme closed with fireworks at 9.30 and the National Anthem at 10 pm.

The festivities continued throughout Friday 23rd June, although heavy rain seems to have driven most indoors. Bonfires and fireworks were planned at Hinckley and Grace Dieu, though rain dampened most of the squibs and the events were cancelled. A performance of *As You Like It* came to an abrupt halt at Mountsorrel. However, the Desford Industrial School Boys' Band proved both their mettle and superiority over the thespians, by playing on from the cover of a spreading chestnut tree.

Yet more celebrations were held on the Saturday despite heavy rain. Disabled children were entertained by Punch and Judy at Leicester's Abbey Park, and there was a garden party for the blind at the Wycliffe Hall in Gwendolen Road. Over on the East Coast, the poor boys and girls from Leicester enjoying a spell at Mablethorpe, were invited to join in the local village celebrations.

One way or another, there can have been few children in Leicestershire who did not finish that coronation week, richer by a mug, or a medal, or a memory of sweets and sports.

At Oadby the glow of success lingered longer than in most communities. The surviving minutes record general satisfaction with the occasion and the decision to purchase a barometer for the secretary, as a token of the committee's

thanks for a job well done. Fund-raising had resulted in a surplus of over £65 which when augmented with another £10 from Mr J. A. Corah, was enough to establish a parish nurse scheme. The coronation minute book thereby became the nursing minute book, just as a day's celebration gave rise to a valued community asset. (12)

As the bonfires died down and the sparks of the last rocket vanished in the night sky, there was a feeling that Leicestershire had done well by their new King and Queen. The *Leicester Daily Post's* editorial summed up the jollity of the occasion: 'Not only did *all sorts and conditions of men and women* join in the entertainments, but all ages as well, the children as well as the *children of a larger growth* alike revelling in the amusements of the day.' (13)



Granby Street, Leicester – hung with bunting and thronged with crowds. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland).

References and Notes:

- 1) *Green Tiger*, June 1911, p.108.
- 2) Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR): DE3736/104 & 105.
- 3) *Leicester Daily Post*, 24th June 1911, p.6.
- 4) *Ibid.*
- 5) ROLLR: LS2610.
- 6) ROLLR: LS868.
- 7) ROLLR: LS2609 & 1391. LS 1078 shows both Richard II and Richard III.
- 8) ROLLR: DE1050/1. Measham's celebrations were finally rescued by 'a lady' who offered to pay the cost.
- 9) *Leicester Daily Post*, 23rd June 1911, p.8.
- 10) ROLLR: DE3091/92-98. The parish balance sheet is somewhat misleading. A surplus of 8s. 1d. was made and transferred to the Parish Bier [sic] Fund.
- 11) ROLLR: DE4619.
- 12) ROLLR: DE1383/65. The minute book survives amongst the records of the parish council.
- 13) *Leicester Daily Post*, 23rd June 1911, p.4.