



King Alfred's Statue, 1877

by Margaret Prentice

July 14, 1877 saw the fulfilment of the aspirations expressed in 1849 at the millennium celebrations of the birth of Alfred the Great in Wantage. Martin Tupper, the Victorian 'do-gooder' who instigated those festivities (vol.iv, 30-33), had proposed that a statue of King Alfred be erected in Wantage. Although a subscription fund was opened with a donation of £10 from Philip Pusey of Pusey House, very little money was forthcoming. Perhaps the people of Wantage preferred to support the refounding of the Grammar School which was the other proposal emanating from the 1849 celebrations?

Col. Robert Loyd-Lindsay decided to commission a statue of King Alfred and to donate it to the town of Wantage. He chose Count Gleichen (Prince Victor of Hohenlohe-Langenburg) as the sculptor and an eight-feet high piece of Sicilian Marble was purchased. It was decided that the statue should be placed on a granite block, positioned in the centre of Wantage Market Place. This necessitated the removal of the hideous Market House which stood near the centre of the Square. Col. Loyd-Lindsay also paid for a new Town Hall to be built on the corner of the Market Place and Mill Street, on the site of the old Falcon Inn. This opened in April 1878 and is now the Midland Bank.

Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales were invited to unveil the statue. Col. Loyd-Lindsey was a friend of the Prince, having been his Equerry, and Count Gleichen, the sculptor, was a relative of the Royal Family. Their Royal Highnesses travelled on the afternoon of Saturday July 14th in a special train of saloon carriages from Paddington to Wantage Road Station. They were met at the station by Col. Loyd-Lindsay, the Earl of Abingdon (Lord Lieutenant of Berks.), Mr W G Mount (High Sheriff), the Bishop of Oxford, and Mr Walter, MP, and Mr Wroughton, MP. The waiting carriages conveyed the royal party the two miles to Wantage with an escort of the Royal Berks Yeomanry. Crowds lined the streets and many triumphal arches and banners spanned Grove Street on the approaches to the Market Place.

On arrival in the Market Place, the Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandra were welcomed by the Hon. Mrs Loyd-Lindsay and her other guests from Lockinge House. The band of the Grenadier Guards played 'God Save The Queen' as the Royal Party took their places on the dais, covered with a canopy, close to the statue which was draped in a blue and white cloth. Mr H D de Vitre, the chairman of the Reception Committee, then welcomed their honoured guests and read an address, a copy of which was presented to the Prince of Wales. The address had been beautifully illuminated by the Sisters of S. Mary's Home.

The Prince of Wales then gave the following reply:-

"GENTLEMEN - It gives me the greatest satisfaction to receive your address, and the Princess of Wales and I thank you for the expressions of loyalty therein contained. I feel I cannot visit this town - ever memorable as the birthplace of my illustrious, though remote, ancestor, King Alfred the Great, without calling to mind his eminent virtues, his noble deeds, and his devoted patriotism. The fine statue which we inaugurate this day is indeed a

splendid gift, and the presentation of it to Wantage redounds to the credit of the generous donor, our gallant friend, Colonel Loyd Lindsay. Let me add that the pleasure I have experienced in unveiling it is enhanced by the knowledge that it has been executed by my cousin Count Gleichen. In conclusion, gentlemen, I beg to thank you for the hearty reception which you have given us on this occasion.”

The Rev Canon Butler, Vicar of Wantage, then led forward five little girls, each representing a different parish school, and Miss Emily Jotcham presented Her Royal Highness with a bouquet. The many school children present, (Nichols' Directory for 1878 numbers them at a thousand), then sang 'God Bless the Prince of Wales'. According to 'The Illustrated London News', July 22 1877, their Royal Highnesses then planted a lime tree in the Market Place, as a token of their visit. Nichols' Directory of 1878 states that the Prince and Princess each planted a memorial tree on either side of the Statue. The Prince then touched a cord and the blue and white cloth draping the statue fell away to reveal the marble statue of Alfred the Great, to the cheers of the assembled crowd and the playing of the National Anthem.

The statue shows King Alfred holding a battle-axe in one hand and a roll of parchment in the other, typifying the monarch's two-fold character of warrior and lawgiver; he wears on the head a close fitting helmet, encircled by the plain band that was the Saxon emblem of royalty, and by his side hangs a sword. The costume consists of a tunic ornamented with crosses of raised work, showing the Saxon king's Christianity, and a long mantle hangs over the left arm. On the feet are buskins, fastened by strips of hide. As no one knows what Alfred looked like, the face on the statue is reputed to be a likeness of Robert Loyd-Lindsay.

Soon after the unveiling, the Royal Party remounted their carriages, as Wantage Rifle Volunteers presented arms and the band of the Grenadier Guards played. The carriages then drove out of the Market Place towards Lockinge House. The bandsmen continued to play for the entertainment of the crowds and Wantage resounded with the noise of people out to enjoy themselves in spite of the grey day and wet afternoon.

Their Royal Highnesses spent the weekend as guests of the Loyd Lindsay's at Lockinge House. Because of the persistent rain, the garden party planned for the Saturday afternoon took place inside a large marquee and among the entertainers was a troupe of Indian jugglers. In the evening there was a dinner party given by the Prince for over eighty guests from all over Berkshire.

The following day being Sunday, the Prince and Princess of Wales with Col. and the Hon. Mrs. Loyd-Lindsay attended divine worship at the Wantage Parish Church. The Rev. William Butler preached from the well-chosen text "The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance". He spoke about King Alfred's character – "the wise, the pious, the brave and single-hearted king, whose name that day was in the minds and hearts of all".

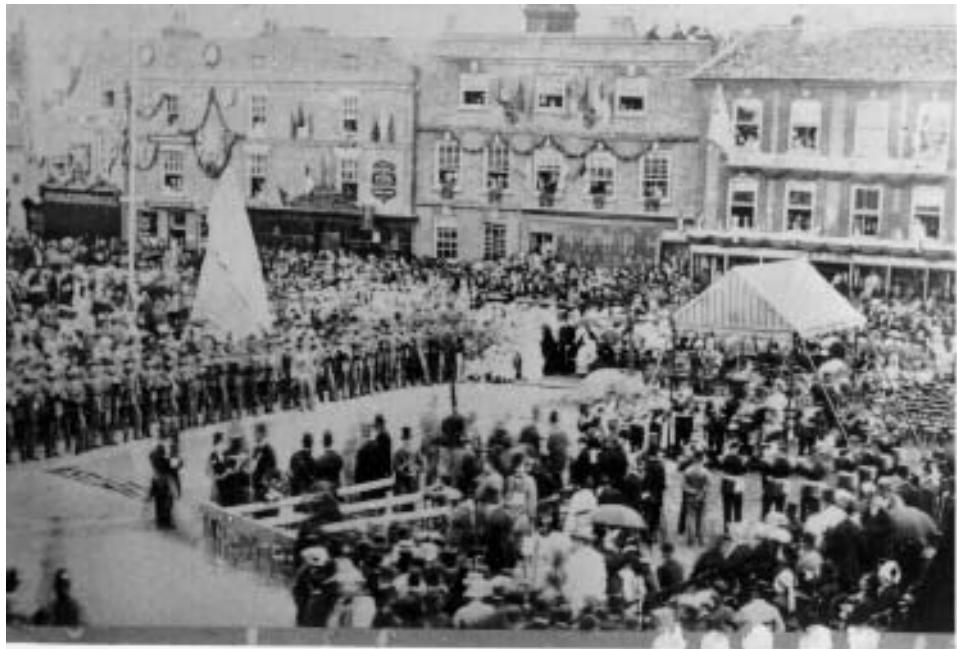
These sentiments are echoed in the words on the plaque, which is now attached to the granite block on which the statue stands. Originally the plaque was on the three supporting steps.

*Alfred found learning dead
and he restored it,
education neglected
and he revived it,*

*the laws powerless
and he gave them force
the church debased
and he raised it,
the land ravaged by a fearful enemy
from which he delivered it.
Alfred's name shall live as long as
mankind shall respect the past.*



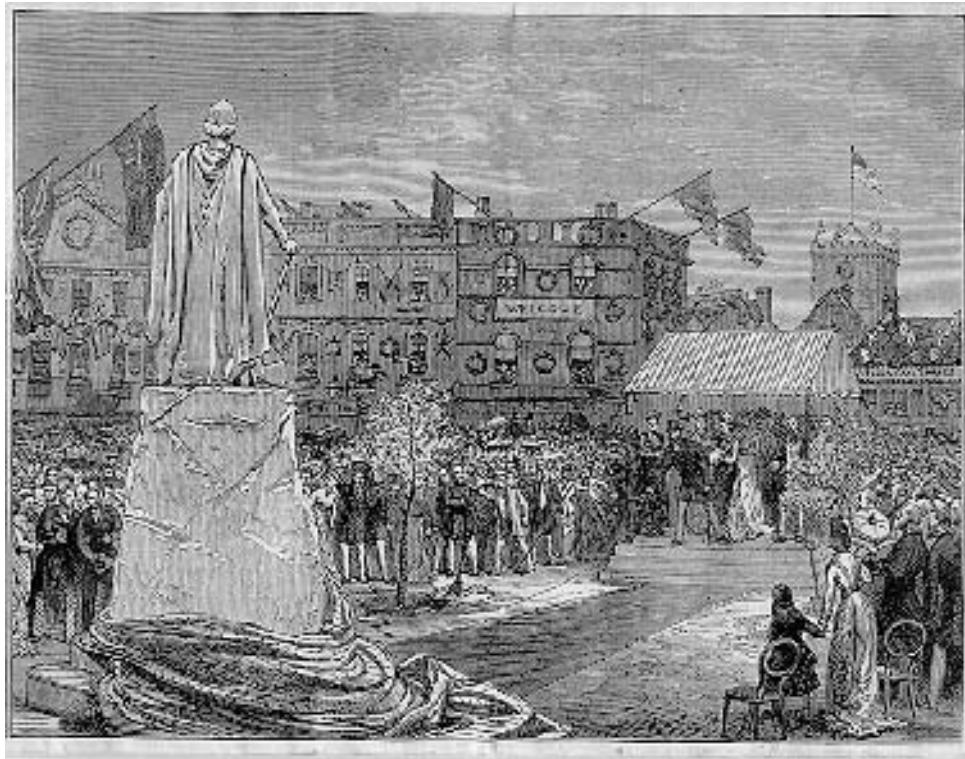
King Alfred's Statue - Oct 1876 - in grounds of St. James Palace, before transfer to Wantage.
Commissioned by Col. Loyd-Lindsay and
sculpted by Count Greichen (nephew of Queen Victoria). (mp117.jpg)



Wantage Market Place - 14 Jul 1877 - unveiling of King Alfred's Statue by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) on tented dais on right, band of Grenadier Guards beside, and Wantage Volunteer Corps opposite - large crowd. (poc003.jpg)



Wantage Market Place south side - newspaper cutting of drawing of "HRH The Prince of Wales Unveiling the Statue of King Alfred The Great at Wantage" on 14 July 1877 - tented dais on right, statue on left, large crowd.(poc025.jpg)



Wantage Market Place south side - newspaper cutting of drawing of "HRH The Prince of Wales Unveiling the Statue of King Alfred The Great at Wantage" on 14 July 1877 - tented dais (and Church) in background, statue in left front, large crowd. (poc026.jpg)

This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Winter 1989.

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