

The 1669 visit to Axminster of Cosimo de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany

Introduction

In 1669 Cosimo de Medici III, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1642 to 1723, and therefore in his late 20s at the time) travelled through several European countries, including England. After visiting Spain, Portugal and Ireland¹ he stopped briefly in the Scilly Isles before disembarking at Plymouth on 1 April 1669. During his relatively leisurely progress from Plymouth to London he spent one night in Axminster.

Throughout his travels in England the Grand Duke was accompanied by Count Lorenzo Magalotti (1637 to 1712), whose task it was to produce a travel diary detailing the places that the Grand Duke visited and the people that he met. The Grand Duke's party also included at least one artist (whose name we do not know) who was charged with making a series of drawings of all the towns where they stayed, including Axminster.

However, the versions of these drawings which are relatively well-known today are actually 19th century Indian ink copies which were made by Thomas Hosmer Shepherd and lodged in the British Library. In 1821 Count Magalotti's text was also translated into English and published (with Shepherd's drawings) by J Mawman of Ludgate Street under the title 'Travels of Cosmo the Third, Grand Duke of Tuscany'².

The Grand Duke's progress through Axminster

In the early afternoon of 8 May 1669, the Grand Duke boarded his coach at Exeter, and his party set out for Axminster. Count Magalotti's text describes the road as passing "*... through an uneven country, divided into fields under the plough, and spacious meadows for feeding cows, in which this district abounds. At first we suffered a good deal of inconvenience, because they had to travel a road full of water, and muddy, though not deep. We passed through Honiton, a small, but populous village, situated in a valley, and having ascended a hill, from which we could see the sea, we arrived at Axminster, where we found the master of the horse of Henry Howard, brother of the Duke of Norfolk, and of my Lord Philip, grand almoner to the Queen, who delivered to Colonel Gascoyne a letter from his master, in which he excused himself for not coming in person to pay his respects to his Highness, in consequence of his approaching departure on his embassy to Fez; and informed him that he had sent his carriage to Salisbury, to be at the service of his Highness.*"

¹ In fact his visit to Ireland was unplanned, certainly at the time that he visited. The Captain of his ship sailed to the north of Land's End by mistake, and the navigator then mistook the Irish channel for its English counterpart.

² Count Magalotti's original text was deposited in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence under the title 'Un Principe di Toscana in Inghilterra e Irlanda nel 1669'. By the 18th century its existence and content were both relatively well known to the sort of young British aristocrat likely to embark on a 'Grand Tour'. Both a modern re-print of the original Italian text and the 1821 English translation can relatively easily be found on-line.

Later, the Grand Duke “... went out to walk, and passed the evening in seeing some ancient medals, which had been dug up in this neighbourhood, and were brought for his inspection by the minister of the church.”

Count Magalotti’s comment on Axminster is quite brief. He describes the town as “... a collection of two hundred houses, many of which are made of mud, and thatched with straw. It contains nothing considerable, except the parish church, which has a tower, in which are bells so well tuned, that their sound is exceedingly harmonious and agreeable. The trade of the inhabitants consists in the manufactory of woollen cloth.”

The following morning the party “... travelled twelve miles through a country more cultivated, pleasanter, and more fertile than on the preceding day ...”, before stopping at Hinton St George, where they were entertained by Lord Poulett.

The size of the town

Count Magalotti’s description of the town as comprising 200 houses³ in 1669, 25 years after the town had been burned to the ground during the Civil War, is interesting, though open to interpretation. If the figure of 200 came from the vicar (and we know that the Grand Duke talked to the minister of the church: see above) then it probably referred to the parish as a whole, rather than the town, and this would mean that the town was very much the same size as it had been prior to the Civil War. If it really did refer just to the town, then post-war expansion had been substantial (from about 140 houses to 200 in a generation).

³ At least one later source claims that he gave a much larger and more precise number: 289 houses. In fact both the 1821 English translation and the later Italian re-publication of his text agree that the number he wrote was 200.