

The Visit of King George III and Queen Charlotte to the Axminster Carpet Factory

Introduction

In 1789 King George III was recovering from an episode of the illness which affected him for much of his adult life¹. In early August he, together with Queen Charlotte, three of their daughters, Lord and Lady Courtoun, Lady Waldegrave and Colonels Digby, Goldsworthy and Gwynne, spent several days at Weymouth, before travelling on to Exeter and then to Plymouth to review the fleet². Between Weymouth and Exeter they stopped at Axminster, where they viewed the carpet factory.

The following text is drawn from a range of contemporary sources, including Thomas Whitty's own account, which he submitted to the Sherborne Mercury newspaper straight after the visit. A copy of his text was given by his grandson, Samuel Ramson Whitty, to James Davidson in 1834, and is included in his unpublished 'History of Axminster'³. It is also reproduced on pages 55 to 56 of Major W H Wilkins' 'Notes on Axminster'⁴.

According to Thomas Whitty's account, "... on Tuesday evening last we were informed from Weymouth that their Majesties intended on the Thursday following to honour the manufactory with a visit, and that it would be agreeable for them to walk through the Town from the George Inn, if it could be done without their being much incommoded by the crowd."

Much of the rest of his text is reflected in the various published accounts which are quoted below. It is not known to what extent the newspapers checked the accuracy of the account with which they had been furnished, though the fact that they provided their readers with significant additional details about the journey suggests that they would have noticed any egregious claims on behalf of Axminster and the carpet manufactory.

From Weymouth to Axminster

On Thursday 13 August 1789 the Royal party left Weymouth. The 'Bury & Norwich Post' (issue dated Wednesday 19 August) carried the following description under a headline of 'Postscript: Royal Tour'.

"At nine o'clock⁵ on Thursday last, their Majesties and suite left Weymouth. All the respectable inhabitants attended them to the end of the town; they proceeded through Upway and Winterburn⁶ to Bridport, where they were met by thousands of all rank; waggons laden with people came from Sherborne, and other parts above 30 miles distant, to hail their

¹ Whether the cause was porphyria or mania is still disputed. It is of no consequence to this account, because by mid-1789 the King was well.

² Source: A Concise account of the City of Exeter, its neighbourhood, and adjacent watering places' (Shirley Woolmer, 1821, accessible on-line).

³ This can be consulted in the Devon Heritage Centre. The account starts on page 700.

⁴ This source can be consulted in Axminster library.

⁵ The source cited above gives the time of departure as 8am. The distance to Exeter was between 55 and 60 miles, and carriages seldom travelled faster than 10mph, so even without scheduled stops this would have been a significant journey, and 8am seems more likely.

⁶ i.e. Upwey and Winterbourne Abbas, which was on the toll road from Dorchester to Exeter.

Sovereigns. They were met at the entrance by the magistrates, and a society of near four hundred gentlemen and respectable inhabitants, with white wands, bells ringing, etc.

“Two triumphal arches were erected; one of which, at the Town Hall, was in a very good style, with rose wreaths, laurels, etc etc and an inscription ‘Health and prosperity to the House of Brunswick.’

“In the evening⁷ the town was illuminated: the roads to Axminster were literally speaking, lined with people, pedestrians and equestrians.”

The ‘Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Review’ carried further details of the journey from Bridport to Axminster⁸, as follows.

“In their journey, on Thursday, his Majesty and most of his attendants walked up Chadwick⁹ and Charmouth hills, where the country people had a fine opportunity of appreciating the Royal Presence, which several of them embraced. With those nearest him the King talked familiarly, and on those at a greater distance he smiled graciously. The villagers at Charmouth had erected a lofty triumphal arch of oak-boughs, decorated with a crown of laurel. With the curious construction of this rustic arch his Majesty could not help expressing his admiration.”

The stop at Axminster

There is a hand-written document in the Devon Heritage Centre which was written on 5 September 1789 to record the Axminster segment of the Royal visit¹⁰. Part of it is reproduced in ‘The tale of two weavers: the life and times of Thomas Whitty and Harry Dutfield, Axminster’s two most famous carpetmakers’¹¹, from which the following transcription is taken.

“When their Majesties arrived at the Turnpike Gates¹², they were met by Sir John Poole¹³ of Shute House and the principal gentlemen of the town with white rods, cockades etc and a Band of Music who escorted them to the George Inn¹⁴. His Majesty having been previously informed of a curious Manufactory of Carpets that is carried on in the town, graciously signified his intention of visiting it and immediately walked to the Manufactory, attended as above¹⁵.”

“When they arrived at the Front Gate, they were met by the Proprietors Messrs Whitty & Son who conducted the Royal Visitors to the Work-shop, the avenues to which were cover’d with a variety of rich beautiful carpets, and the work shop, which their Majesties enter’d, was

⁷ This is a bit misleading on first reading, because the illumination occurred many hours after the Royal party had left.

⁸ Source: ‘Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Review’ Vol.59, Part 2, page 1047 (accessible on-line).

⁹ This should be Chideock and Charmouth hills.

¹⁰ DHC Ref: Z19/15/20.

¹¹ This short book, co-written by Dr John Church, one of the founders of Axminster Heritage, was written in 2004. Copies are available in Axminster Library.

¹² The turnpike gate was on Lyme Road, at the junction with Sector Lane.

¹³ This was Sir John William de la Pole (1757 to 1799), formerly Sheriff of Devon and until recently an MP. He had recently bought the Shute estate, but died the following year. The Bury & Norwich Post account, cited above, not only mis-spells his name, but describes him as ‘of Chard’.

¹⁴ Thomas Whitty’s own written account states that the musicians later played for the Royal party at the factory, and that “... some good men singers ... sang ‘God Save the King’” while the Queen and Princesses joined in the chorus.

¹⁵ The heading of the document lists the members of his party, as described at the start of this account.

likewise carpeted, and decorated with several elegant pieces of the Manufacture, so that it made an agreeable appearance.

“There were Twenty young women who work’d in the Shop selected, who were all neatly dress’d in clean white gowns, aprons and handkerchiefs, and a purple ribbon round their waist, with ‘Long live the King’ in gold letters. These were ranged in two rows, ten on each side, withoutside their several looms, for their Majesties and Princesses to walk between them.”

The account in the ‘Bury & Norwich Post’, cited above in the context of the approach to Axminster, adds the following information.

“The King and Queen refused to be drawn in their coach, but walked on the platform. An order was given for several pieces, and a liberal sum left for the work-people.”

The account in the ‘Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Review’, also cited above, confirms this, as follows.

“At Axminster the Royal Party stopped to see the carpet-manufactory, and were shewn the whole process. The Queen have orders for several pieces, and a handsome sum was left to be distributed among the work-people.”

As at Bridport, the celebrations at Axminster continued long after the Royal party had departed. The ‘Bury & Norwich Post’ reports as follows.

“The town was illuminated on Thursday and Friday evenings; on the latter there was a grand ball upon the occasion. Sir John’s house¹⁶ was likewise illuminated both nights; and on Friday evening he gave two hogsheads of cyder to the populace.”

The onward journey

On leaving Axminster, the Royal party continued through Honiton (more triumphal arches, music and flags) to Escot House, which they reached at about 2 o’clock, and where they were given lunch. They stayed at Escot for about 3 hours, and reached Exeter at 7 o’clock.

Escot House had been built for the Yonge family in 1677-8, but had been sold by them to Sir John Kennaway in 1794, and substantially altered in about 1795. Nevertheless it was Sir George Yonge who “... *had the honour of entertaining their late Majesties, and three of the princesses, at dinner, on the 14th of August, 1789*”¹⁷. The house and all of its contents were destroyed by fire on 28 December 1808.

After a short stay in Exeter the Royal party continued to Plymouth, where the King reviewed the fleet on 18 August 1798.

¹⁶ i.e. It is not clear whether this is a reference to Shute Barton or to the new Shute House, which Sir John built at around this time.

¹⁷ Source: ‘Magna Britannia’, section on Devon, by Daniel Lyson (1822, widely available on-line).