

The Concerts - Changing Times

As members of the aristocracy, it's not surprising that the Barringtons were involved with many things musical. It was quite normal for the younger members of such families to be taught the arts of singing and playing musical instruments. This is quite evident when one looks at local events. The Swindon Advertiser reported on Saturday, January 27, 1877, that a concert took place at Shrivenham in the schoolroom on the Thursday evening previous. It added that, *'At these concerts there is always a variety of talent of a high order.'* The singing at the concert was assisted by the Hon Florence Barrington and musical accompaniments were played by the Hon Augusta Barrington. Of Lord and Lady Barrington, it noted that they were not present, *'on account of the death of a cousin, but it was his lordship's wish that those members of the family who were engaged to take part in the concert should fulfil their engagements, so as not to let the concert suffer by their absence.'* During the concert it was noted that the Hon Eric Barrington played a solo on the instrument called a Zitta, *'an instrument not much known in this country.'*

The next concert reported by the newspaper in February the following year notes that it was, *'Crowded to excess,'* and added that, *'The fact that a number of distinguished personages were to lend their services caused a ready sale for the tickets.'* Such personages included the Viscountess Barrington and the Dowager Viscountess.

At the annual concert of February 12, 1879, it proved so popular that the main complaint was that the room was nowhere near large enough. As for Barringtons, both the Viscountess' were present as well as Florence Barrington. The other complaint the newspaper reported was that the concert was, *'too long. It occupied over three hours.'*



Instead of the Schoolroom in Shrivenham, the concert of January 5, 1888, was held in a different location. The Swindon Advertiser reported that, *'entertainments were given in the splendid and handsome hall at Beckett House (by the kind permission of the Right Hon Viscount Barrington), in order to clear off the debts remaining on the heating apparatus recently erected in Watchfield Church.'* (Beckett House above - the central windows of the ground floor are the saloon where the concert would have been held).

It was Walter Barrington, the son of the Viscount Percy, who put together the 'Choir Supper' of January 11, 1888. The Swindon Advertiser reported the event, *'Through the kindness of the Hon Walter and Mrs Barrington, the united choirs of Shrivenham and Watchfield churches, numbering about forty persons, were hospitably entertained in the Hall at Beckett House, on Wednesday evening, when a most substantial supper was partaken of. The hall was nicely decorated, and the tables were adorned with choice plants, which added much to the evening's enjoyment. The tables were presided over by the Hon W. Barrington, Rev G.W. Murray, Rev G.C. Wheeler, and Mr Olliver (organist). After the removal of the cloth, "grog" and "churchwardens" were introduced, but before "blowing up," the Hon W. Barrington stated the pleasure it gave him to see such goodly company and hoped each and every one would thoroughly enjoy himself. He had no intention of inflicting a long speech, therefore would only propose two toasts - the first of which was dear to the heart of every Englishman, and the second he felt sure would be most heartily received. "The Queen," having been duly honoured and the first verse of the National Anthem sung, Mr Barrington gave, "the health of the vicar, the Rev G.W. Murray," coupling with it the name of the Rev G.C. Wheeler, curate. Both these gentlemen suitably responded, after which the company "set to" in right earnest to propitiate the god Bacchus, and there being no lack of good things wherewith so to do, things passed off well. During the evening the healths of Lord Barrington, the Hon W. and Mrs Barrington, and*

Mr Olliver were enthusiastically drunk. For full three hours did merriment song abound - songs comic and sentimental, from "They are all very fine and large," to "The sailor's Grave." The National Anthem closed a most delightful evening.'

And this seemed to be the end of the organised concerts that had marked the previous two decades. One can suspect that this musical demise was contributed to by the fact that Miss Florence Barrington was no longer around to champion its cause.

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The decline of the English country house began in the period that became known as, 'The Great Depression,' between 1875 and 1894. Sadly, the Beckett Estate was not immune from its effects. It was to be the start of a process that would see a huge amount of large country houses in the UK completely disappear. This culminated during the 1950s and early 1960s with thousands of them being demolished.

The problem began in the early 1870s because of the decline in farm incomes caused by imports of grain from North America and of meat from South America and Australasia. Estate land could not easily be sold as it was often tied up in complex wills and trusts. The result was that the land-owning families could own huge tracts of land but be in serious debt. This is what appears to have happened to the Beckett Estate. The problem seemed to have come to the fore upon the death of George, the 7th Viscount Barrington on November 6, 1886. Very soon after, his wife, Lady Barrington and daughter Florence, both moved out of Beckett just before Christmas of that year. It was a sad occasion and the Swindon Advertiser newspaper of December 18, reported, '*The Hon Florence Barrington, prior to leaving Beckett House, was presented by the members of the Shrivenham Church Choir with a large handsome 'Empress' album, with a splendid silver shield thereon, engraved "Presented to the Hon Florence Barrington, by the Shrivenham Choir, December 1886," together with a letter expressing regret at her departure. For many years Miss Barrington has taken a deep interest in the welfare of the choir, and her musical attainments (not ostentatiously shown) have been a source of pleasure and instruction to the members thereof. Not only did she conduct the ordinary weekly practices, but instructed the juveniles many times at her residence, and these more especially will have great cause to regret the separation.'* The article concluded with an equally gloomy paragraph stating, '*On Monday and Tuesday a large number of villagers and tenants on the Beckett estate took farewell of Lady Barrington and Miss Florence. These ladies have endeared themselves in ways innumerable on the principle contained in the sermon- on- the- mount, and the parting, was sad and affecting. The poor of the village feel they have lost kind and beneficent friends.'*

More evidence of the economic downturn came from the lips of the Rev G.W. Murray. After dinner at the Foresters Fete, the Swindon Advertiser of Aug 11, 1888, noted that he said, *'They were passing through a very critical time, and they felt it most in agricultural districts. These bad times had robbed them of gentlemen well qualified to fulfil the duties of a landlord. The present cloud of depression was passing away, and he hoped that then the good esquire would live amongst them again.'* He was referring to Percy, the 8th Viscount Barrington, who discovered that he could not afford to reside at Beckett. In a reply to a toast at the same Foresters Fete the newspaper noted that, *'He was not addressing them as a Forester, but if they would accept him as an honorary member he would be only too happy to belong to the Order. The vicar had referred to circumstances which pained him to remember. Before he inherited the estate and title, he was aware that things were in a very complicated state, and when he came into possession, he found it more complicated than he had thought. He did his best to mend matters, but the income was not nearly sufficient for anyone to live at Beckett and keep up the estate. It would not be possible for him to live there in his life, but he hoped the next generation would be able to do so. He looked upon the property with very great interest, inasmuch as a great deal of money would have to be spent upon the estate, whilst the income would not meet the expenditure.'*

So, even though Beckett House was no longer occupied by a Barrington it would seem that it was let out to suitable tenants. Evidence of this was clear from a line in the Swindon Advertiser of July 16, 1892, when commenting on the Foresters Fete of that year it noted that permission was given to use Beckett Park, *'Through the kindness of the Right Hon Viscount Barrington and Colonel Davison, who now resides at Beckett House.'* And even in the final years of the 19th century, the tenancy of the estate change hands quite frequently. The Swindon Advertiser noted on October 26, 1895, *'We hear that Beckett House and Pleasure grounds have been let to Captain Hamilton for five years, much regret is felt at Mr Barrington leaving the neighbourhood.'* However, in less than five years, in an article written about the Foresters Fete that took place on August 1, 1898, the Swindon Advertiser stated that it was held, *'in the beautiful grounds of Beckett Park, Shrivenham, kindly placed at their disposal by Mr Robertson F. Bertram.'* And it seems he hadn't been there long, for after the dinner, which he attended, he was quoted as saying in a speech that, *'the twelve months he had been in Shrivenham had been the happiest twelve months in his life.'*

And then in the very last year of the century, another change, when an article appeared in the Swindon Advertiser's edition dated, Friday, September 8, 1899, *'Although September is with us, partridge shooting has not commenced on the Beckett Park estate, but Mr Whitehead and party are expected at the Mansion this week. The interior is now being decorated, a large number of workmen being busy here doing the decoration, and the putting in of concrete beds etc, for the erection of the machinery in connection with the*

electric light, which is being installed here by a London firm. There is also the erection of a residence at the stable yard for the chief coachman. All the work has been entrusted by Mr Whitehead's secretary, to Mr Charles Williams, contractor, of New Swindon. It is hoped Mr Whitehead's stay here may be long, which it is believed will be a benefit to the neighbourhood. A large number of horses will be kept here. It will, perhaps, remind the older inhabitants of the time (which the writer can remember) when the present Lord Barrington's father resided here, and when a long string of horses was to be seen along the roads in the early morning, out for their daily exercise.' For information on Robert Whitehead, please see SHS Listing No N623 & photo below).

