

Use of Beckett Park

In 1829, William Keppel became Viscount Barrington number six. After the fairly short reigns of the previous three, his was to be quite lengthy at nearly 40 years. During this time, he upheld the family traditions and life continued at Beckett much as it had done for the past 150 years. However, he was to mark his tenure of the manorial seat by the building of a new Beckett House, the one that still stands today.

There has been some confusion in the past over who designed the new Beckett House and when, but these are the facts.

George Viscount Barrington (7th) said of the old Beckett House, "*The old house was then standing, and I perfectly well remember it. Half of this house had been burnt down in the Civil Wars. What remained of it may been seen in a water colour drawing, given to me by the Rev Edward Bouverie, who during my boyhood was Vicar of Coleshill.*" (photo below). But there is still much doubt about the Civil War damage and the high probability that Beckett House has been confused historically with Henry Marten's family home at Longworth.



It was his grandfather, also called George, Viscount Barrington (5th) who had started the process of building a new family mansion house to replace the tatty old one. He started as early as 1816 when he employed local builders John and George

Knapp to start taking down the remains of the old house. His account books show that he was even buying gunpowder to blast stone in the quarry on the estate in readiness for the making of blocks for the new house. He is also shown as sending and receiving mail by the Post Coach from London with sets of plans. Unfortunately, he never got to see the new house as he died suddenly whilst on a visit to Rome in 1829.

George's eldest son William Keppel succeeded the title and took over the running of the Beckett Estate. He was determined to get on with task of building the new house. The money to do it had been provided by a legacy from Shute Barrington, the Bishop of Durham, who had left the sum of £30,000 for the project. The original plans that Shute had drawn up by architect William Atkinson were not looked upon favourably. The family members considered his drawings to be ugly. On a visit to Beckett, a friend of William whilst visiting said of Atkinson's plans and the old house; *"pull down the house and chuck it into the water and that will get rid of two damned ugly things at once."*

It was to his wife's brother that William turned to for the design of the new Beckett House. Of the Hon Thomas Liddell, he was described later by William's son George as, *"A man of singularly good taste, who at once saw that, with caution, a sound deal might be made of the place. Mr Liddell had great natural abilities as an Architect, and kindly undertook to design plans for the erection of an Elizabethan House."*

The site chosen was the flower garden of the old house called 'The Gem' which was immediately to the south of the old house. The first or Foundation stone was carefully laid by a young lad called George who was 5 years and 8 months old. He was William's first son who grew up to become the 7th Viscount. In his later years, George Barrington described his laying of the Foundation Stone in October 1829, assisted by the builders who constantly flattered him about the importance of the task. He described the location of the stone *"the stone will be found at the end of the cellar passage in the eastern wall, close to the flag stone floor duly dated."* (Photo below).



William Viscount Barrington (6th) moved into the new Beckett House in 1832. But it wasn't finished completely. Whereas the complete outer shell of the building was ready, only the inner rooms in the western part were habitable. The rest would not be fully completed until 1855.

As the 19th century progressed, the nearby town of Swindon grew rapidly with the coming of the Great Western Railway. This growth created the need for more communication and the Swindon Advertiser came into existence in 1853. This became a valuable source of information as to events that occurred around the area and occasionally Beckett was included. To date, I have searched these papers up to the end of the 19th century.

In 1857, it was clear that the Beckett Estate was still thriving as an advertisement in the newspaper confirms. Dated June 8, 1857, it announced that, *'next Thurs, 11 June at Shrivenham, Messrs Fidell & Dyke will sell by auction about 500 Oak Trees of 50 years growth, 5000 faggots & 12 tons of Bark of excellent quality, being off the above trees of 50 years growth. The whole of the above will be arranged in convenient lots at the side of the road near Wellington Wood at which place the sale will commence at 2 for 3 o'clock. The timber and bark will be delivered to Shrivenham Station on the G.W. Railway or the wharf on the Wilts & Berks Canal. Catalogues may be had a week prior to the sale of the Auctioneers, Faringdon, Berks, or at the Barrington Arms Inn, Shrivenham.'*



But later that year, the newspaper reported a more sinister story. Dated December 14, 1857, the article stated, *'An inquest was opened on Fri 4th Inst, before the Berks Coroner, on view of the body of a male child, which was discovered by some children as they were passing the water in Beckett Park on the Wednesday previous. The body, when found, was wrapt in an old cloth, with one of the hands protruding and appeared to have been in the water only a short time. The inquest was adjourned for a week, to allow further enquiries being made by the Police.*

The following year the paper reported on Aug 6, 1860, *'We hear that Viscount & Viscountess Barrington are about to receive a distinguished circle at Beckett House where their Royal Highness the Duchess of Cambridge, Princess Mary and the Hereditary Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz will honour the Noble Viscount & Viscountess by their company.'*

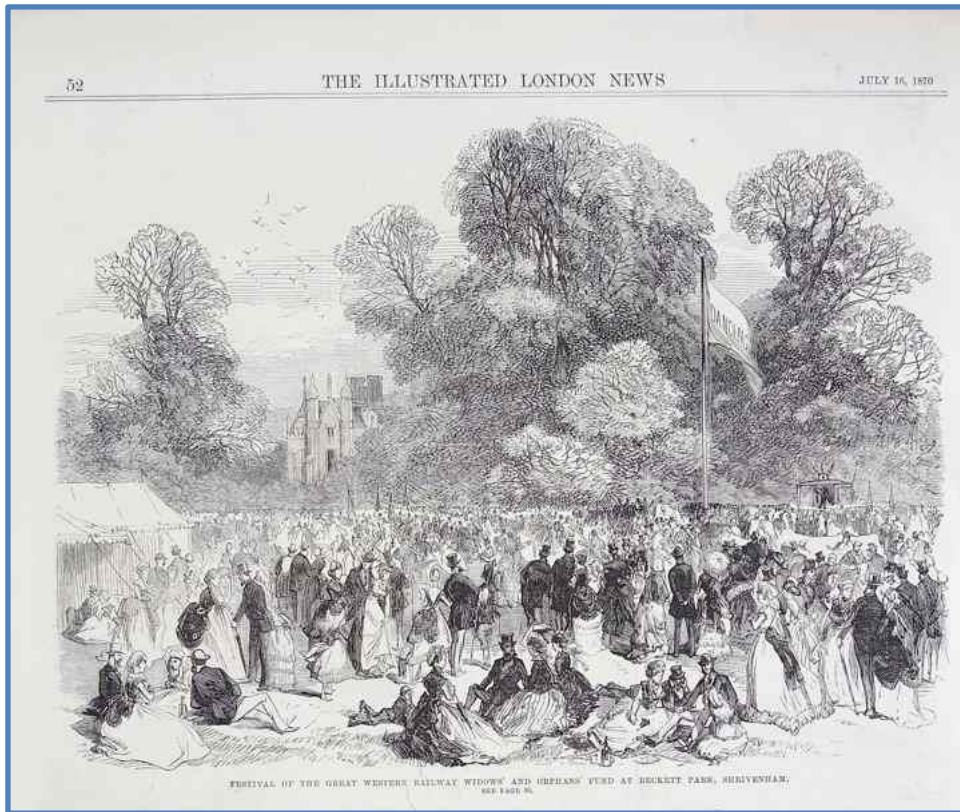
Beckett Park then continued to be used for all manner of events as the following Swindon Advertiser stories reported.

Edition dated July 29, 1861.

The Fete at Beckett Park.

'The annual fete in aid of the funds of the Great Western Railway Provident Society is appointed to take place tomorrow (Tuesday) in the delightful park and grounds adjoining Beckett House, the residence of Lord Barrington, and should the weather prove propitious,

there is every prospect of the fete proving the most successful yet held in connection with this very excellent society. It is customary for thousands of persons to be present at these fetes, and to participate in the amusements and pleasures provided for the occasion, and there is every promise of the attendance being as large this year as at any former fete. Both in Swindon and at Highworth the shops will be closed, and we have no doubt but that in other surrounding towns business on that day will be in a great measure suspended. Excursion trains will run from most of the stations on the Great Western Railway and arrangements have been made for the conveyance of visitors from the surrounding districts, so that we may look forward to one of the greatest gatherings of pleasure seekers ever assembled in this part of the country. It is well known to all who have attended these fetes that everything that can be done is done to render them satisfactory both to the society and to the visitors - that the amusements provided are such as are calculated to amuse everybody, without even once testing the nerves of the most fastidious; and as the arrangements on Tuesday are under the direction of Mr. Baker, the respected and able secretary to the Provident Society, we may rely upon a most pleasant and agreeable 'day out.' Provisions, which are always charged for at these fetes at a moderate and reasonable scale, will this year be provided by Mr. Reason, of Highworth, and in this department also we feel assured there will be many things to commend and none to censure. For particulars of the amusements to be provided, and also for the running of the excursion train, we must refer our readers to the advertisement in our first page. It is of importance, however, for intending visitors from Swindon and the neighbourhood to know that a two-shilling fete ticket purchased at the Swindon Station will entitle the holder to proceed by any second-class train from Swindon Station stopping at Shrivenham Station during the day to enter the grounds and participate in all the advantages of the fete, and to return to Swindon Station by any train in the evening. Those who prefer making the journey by water will have an opportunity of doing so, an enterprising individual having chartered and nicely fitted up one of the Wilts & Berks Canal barges. The barge will leave the Golden Lion Bridge, New Swindon, shortly after 9 o'clock in the morning. The trains from Swindon Station calling at Shrivenham, and by which holders of fete tickets may proceed, run as follows: - 9.6am, 1.35pm, 3.5pm, in addition to the excursion train. Trains from Shrivenham to Swindon run as follows: - 5.38pm, 8.8pm, and the excursion train.'



Edition dated, Aug 19, 1861.

School Treat.

'On Saturday last the annual feast given by Lord Barrington to the school children of this parish was held in Beckett Park. The day which had been originally fixed for the previous Thursday, was unavoidably postponed till Saturday, thus happily securing most beautiful and propitious weather. At half past one o'clock the schools (to the number of 170 children) assembled at the Vicarage where appropriate banners were given them and accompanied by the clergy of the parish, the master, mistress, and schoolteachers, they walked in procession to Beckett, where they found an excellent dinner provided. Grace having been chanted by the choirs; all heartily enjoyed the bountiful provision so kindly prepared for them. On this occasion most of the tenantry and neighbouring gentry were invited to participate in the festivity, and a most handsome collation was laid out in a tent for their refreshment. After dinner, sports, and games of all sorts kindly led by the Vicar, who devoted himself to the amusement of the children, were entered into with great spirit until 5 o'clock, when all were summoned to an excellent tea. The games were then resumed till nearly dusk, when the children being assembled before the house for their procession homeward, the National Anthem was sung, and hearty cheers given for the Queen, Lord and Lady Barrington, the Vicar and the Visitors, when all separated, highly delighted with the day's proceedings and the kind graciousness of their noble entertainers, who spared no pains for their enjoyment.' Visitors arrived at the park by train and barge on the Wilts & Berks Canal. (Photos below)



Edition dated Sept 29, 1862.

Shrivenham Harvest Home.

'Last Wednesday was the day fixed for the celebration of the harvest festival in Shrivenham. The morning opened gloomy, with a few spots of rain at intervals, and about 10 o'clock the country people began to arrive in great numbers and shortly after that hour the Wantage band entered the village playing some very spirited air. The playing of this band throughout the day elicited the warm approval of those who had the pleasure of listening to the 'sweet trains it discoursed.' About eleven the labouring people began to 'form' behind the vicar's house, and about half-past they marched out, headed by the Wantage band, the farmers and the clergyman and soon filled the capacious body of the old church. The lessons were read by the Rev Earle and the vicar. The sermon was preached by the vicar, and a most excellent sermon

it

was.

At the close of the sermon a collection was made, after which the labourers and their masters, accompanied by the visitors, proceeded to the tent which had been erected in the grounds of Beckett House by the kind permission of Lord Barrington. At the dinner-table we noticed Lord and Lady Barrington, the Vicar (Rev. G.W. Murray), the Hon. Miss Barrington, Lady Somerton, the Misses Constance Evelyn, and Florence Barrington, the Reods. Allsopps, Hill and Eagle; G.M. Atkins and F. Parker Esq, Dr Woolaston, Messrs Hewer, Pritchard, Wilson, E & J Plummer, J & W. Giles, Jefferies, Allaway, H. Cook, Edgington, Lewis, Streat etc; Miss Hewer, Miss Wilson, Miss Pritchard, Miss Skurray, etc, and about 350 others. In the afternoon, at the conclusion of dinner, the company left the tent and proceeded to enjoy the good old rustic sports of jumping in sacks, throwing the hammer, blindfold wheelbarrow racing, foot races and a host of other games which afforded vast amusements to a crowd of pleasure seekers. The rain, which had fallen nearly all day left off immediately the sports began, and although the grass was somewhat damp, the spirits of the people knew no damper, for a merry circle was soon formed and the light fantastic too sought the masses and intricacies of the Terpsichorean enchantment. The games being ended, Lady Barrington distributed the prizes to the successful competitors, to each of whom her ladyship kindly addressed a few remarks in reference to the prizes awarded.

At six o'clock the company again entered the tent, where an excellent tea was provided by Mr Canfield of the Barrington Arms, to which about 500 sat down. After tea, the Vicar, having said grace, proposed the health of the Queen in very appropriate terms. The vicar then proposed in a very nice way, the health of the farmers who had come forward and had given not only their time but their money, and with the toast he coupled the name of Mr Wilson, to which that gentleman suitably responded. The Vicar next proposed the health of Lady Barrington, truly observing that every poor person in the village had experienced her kindness. (This toast was drunk with three cheers and amid tremendous enthusiasm with

one cheer more for Mr Barrington and another for The Vicar). Mr Pritchard then proposed the health of the Vicar.

The Vicar, in reply, said: "I am much obliged to you for proposing my health so kindly. I return you my heartfelt thanks. Before we leave this tent I will say to you as I said this morning, that I pray you to be moderate in your enjoyments this evening. It is sometimes a rule to keep intoxicating liquors from these festive boards and though I respect the motive of those who hold this opinion, I disagree with them. I feel that in so doing we are depriving a man of the opportunity of using the Christian grace of moderation, if we take away from him those good things in the use of which he is to exercise that grace (loud cheers). If men are to be taught temperance and morality, we must not entirely withhold from them those temptations which would try and strengthen their resolution (tremendous cheering). At our last festival there was not one case of intoxication amongst the harvest labourers, although there was beer in abundance both in and out of the tent. I trust, therefore, that you will go back to your work on the morrow, refreshed by your rest, and not weakened by your debauchery. In conclusion, I beg to propose the health of the Managing Committee. I must also include the name of Mr Canfield, who has provided us with such an excellent spread." (cheers).

The toast having been duly honoured, the people proceeded to church, where a most impressive sermon was delivered by the Rev. J. Warneford. We deeply regret that our limited space compels us to pass it by for not printing it here.'