

A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

“India has always had a strange way with her conquerors. In defeat, she beckons them in, then slowly seduces, assimilates and transforms them.” William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in 18th C India*

This month J&T 175 looks at a tragedy in the heart of Victorian London, the last Saxon king, some plundering and piracy from those proto-colonialists, the East India Company and then some Americans on camels.

THE REGENT’S PARK DISASTER¹

The Victorian Londoners loved ice-skating; in 1844 over 5,000 people were counted on the Serpentine. Surprisingly, Health & Safety had been thought of and an institution known as the icemen of the Royal Humane Society was established for the recovery of persons apparently drowned or dead.

The lake in Regent’s Park however was more dangerous than the Serpentine as it was fed by the Tyburn which could cause dangerous currents. In 1867 the icemen thought the ice was dangerous and asked the police to keep the public away. The police demurred as although it was dangerous to skate it was not illegal. The Park Superintendent began breaking up the ice by the islands *as it has been done ever since I was a boy*. The ice then began to crack in squares which caused panic among the skaters. Ladders were deployed but some skaters fell off and were drowned in the freezing water. The remainder skated to the centre where the ice was thickest, but a huge sheet of ice broke off plunging some 250 into the water which was 12 feet deep in places.



The Humane Society’s ten icemen deployed their ropes, wicker iceboats, sledge, ladders, drags, boathooks, ice axes and cork belts but there was no way to get to the skaters. Meanwhile the women around the edge of the lake looked on in horror as their menfolk drowned, dressed in sodden, woollen three-piece suits and overcoats.

By 4:00pm it was dark and flares were deployed but no searching could be carried out until daylight. Some 200 men and boys managed to struggle to shore where the surgeons of the Humane society were joined by doctors from the nearest hospitals. Unlike today, none of the victims possessed identification so the bodies were laid out for their families to recognise. Some 350 men were employed at two shillings a day to recover the bodies, some forty dead in all, mainly boys and young men.

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THE CANONISED KING²

Edward The Confessor was the last Saxon king of England, and he reigned from 1043 to 1066. According to *Lives of the Saints* (Fr Alban Butler, Tan Books 1995): *The virtues of his earlier years, simplicity, gentleness, lowliness, but above all his angelic purity, shone with new brightness.... though he married to content his nobles he preserved perfect chastity in the wedded state.when he saw a servant robbing his treasury he let him escape, saying the poor fellow needed the gold much more than he.* The Concise Dictionary of National Biography is rather more prosaic and points out that he *built Westminster Abbey as the price of papal absolution for breaking his vow to make a pilgrimage to Rome.* The West Minster monastery church was so named to distinguish it from the East Minster of St.Pauls. The word Confessor in those days referred to a saint who had not been martyred.

Edward was pale complexioned (possibly even Albino), spoke Norman French (he had been in exile most of his young life) and spent hours in prayer - so very much the outsider amongst his hearty Anglo-Saxon nobles. Power in that time lay with three great earls: Siward of Northumbria, Leofric of Mercia and Godwin of Wessex. Godwin, being the pushiest had Edward marry his daughter Edith and give her brother Harold the earldom of East Anglia. However, after six years Edward rebelled against the Godwins, sending them into exile and Edith to a nunnery.

Edward is understood to have been pro-Norman in his politics, and gave his nephew, Ralph 'The Timid', large estates in Herefordshire. He also showed favour to William of Normandy which worried the earls, especially as it was rumoured that Edward had promised the throne of England to William in gratitude for his hospitality. Harold became Earl of Wessex on the death of his father in 1053. He thereupon sailed up the Thames in force, giving Edward no opportunity to refuse him. Edith even came back from her nunnery, though I expect she did not notice any difference.

Edward passed on his military power to Harold and devoted himself to his beloved Abbey (along with 10% of his income), building himself a neighbouring palace, now the site of the Houses of Parliament. At this point he began the practice of laying on of hands to ameliorate the King's Evil (scrofula) which became traditional and lasted to the eighteenth century. Queen Anne was supposed to have attempted this with the young (Dr.) Samuel Johnson in 1712. The Abbey was dedicated in December 1065 and Edward died a week later. His tomb, later greatly embellished by William I, became an object of veneration and pilgrimage.

With no heir it was left to Harold and William to fight for the crown in 1066. The rest as they say is History.





SERINGAPATAM

Arthur Wellesley (one day to become the Duke of Wellington) in 1799 assembled an army he believed to be *the finest which ever took the field in India*. It was however slow and unwieldy; 4 East India Company battalions under Colonel James Dalrymple, 4 battalions of Hyderabad sepoys, 10,000 Hyderabad cavalry which now joined General Harris's Company army. Believe it or not they were accompanied by 30,000 sheep, 100,000 carriage bullocks and at least 100,000 camp followers. Tipu Sultan's army amounted to 37,000 men and a small French corps of some 450.

Wellington's heavy artillery soon breached the walls and a 4,000 strong storming party broke through the defences, fatally wounding the brave Tipu Sultan in his *gallant last stand*. Some 10,000 of the Mysore troops lay dead against 350 of the Company and Hyderabad sepoys. That night the 100,000 population of the city were subjected to an unrestrained orgy of rape, looting and killing. It took Wellesley a deal of hanging and flogging to restore order.



Tipu was allowed a state funeral with full military honours surrounded by his adoring survivors. The Prize Committee now began to amass what was left of Tipu's treasures. The sheer amount was staggering including some £2 million of gold plate (200 million today), jewellery, palanquins, arms, armour, silks and shawls. The greatest treasure was Tipu's gold throne, inlaid with precious stones and with bejewelled tiger head finials *superbly decorated...howdah supported on the back of a Tyger, the solid parts made of black wood and entirely covered by a sheet of purest gold, about as thick as a guinea, fastened on with silver nails, wrought in tiger stripes, curiously indented, and most beautifully and highly polished*. Unfortunately, before Wellesley got to hear of it the prize agents had cut it up into small pieces!

For those of you who have read Wilkie Collins great 1868 novel *The Moonstone*, it is at this point where the narrator's cousin steals the yellow diamond, murdering its guardians and thereby incurring a terrible curse.



Later Clive's daughter-in-law, Henrietta, Countess of Powis, becoming bored by her dim husband Edward Clive, now Governor of Mysore, toured Tipu's former lands. She was constantly approached by infantrymen who wanted to turn their 'loot' into cash. She was happy to oblige which resulted in Powis Castle ending up with Europe's most impressive collection of Indo-Islamic art as the Clives' already had the loot from Siraj ud-Daula's palace at Murshidabad.

For this murky tale of the proto-British Raj I am indebted to historian William Dalrymple. I can thoroughly recommend his very readable history of the East India Company, *The Anarchy* (Bloomsbury 2020). Painting courtesy of Warfare History Network.

THE LAST STRAW

The US Army had long wrestled with the problem of how to supply their troops in America's desert south-west until along came Major George H Crosman who had been a quartermaster and understood the difficulties.

Crosman had been given the idea of camels by the son of a general and decided that this was the way forward. However he was laughed out of court but General Henry Constantine Wayne (1815–1883) of Savannah begged to differ. Wayne got on board Jefferson Davis who became Secretary of War in 1853. Davis managed to get funding of \$30,000 so the Camel Corps was born and General Wayne put in charge. Wayne joined up with Navy Lieutenant David Dixon Porter and they set sail for Europe in the USS Supply. They visited England, France and Italy before shopping in Tunis, Malta, Greece, Turkey and Egypt. They returned home with thirty-three camels, nineteen females, fourteen males including Dromedary (one hump) and Bactrian (two humps) breeds and a cross-breed known as a *Booghdee*. Five experienced camel handlers were hired, two of which became legendary and known in the US as Hi jolly and Greek George.

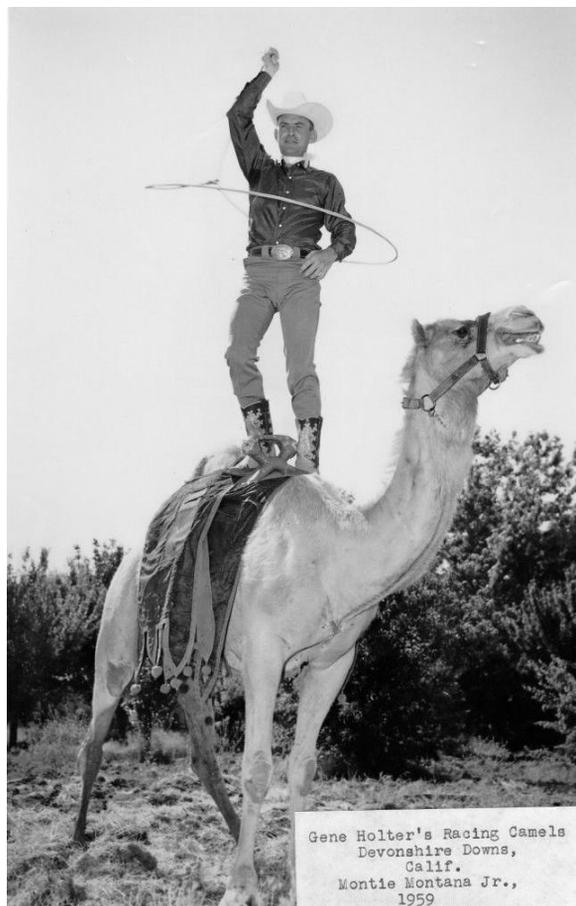




The herd moved inland to their headquarters at Camp Verde in Kerr County, Texas where tests showed that camels could carry double the load of mules. In one experiment six camels carried 3,648 pounds of oats from San Antonio to Camp Verde in two days - in took mule teams five days. In 1857, explorer Edward Fitzgerald Beale took twenty-five camels on a 1,200-mile survey from Fort Defiance, Arizona, to the Colorado River. The animals hauled heavy loads over mountains, crossed rivers, and went days without water, winning Beale's admiration. He declared the experiment a complete success. He used camels for the construction of *Beale's Wagon Road* which later became part of Highway 66 and the route for the Transcontinental Railroad. Hi Jolly served as his lead camel driver.

A second shipment of camels now arrived and were despatched to California. Soldiers disliked their smell, bite, stubbornness, and unsettling gait. Horses panicked at their sight. Soldiers did not take too kindly being labeled "camel drivers," and there are reports they would turn their camels loose hoping they would run away. All was going well however until the 'last straw that broke the camel's back' - the American Civil War. This was followed by railroads across Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. some camels were sold to circuses and in 1895 some were rounded up and sent to Chicago for an exhibition. The last known Camel Corps veteran, "Old Topsy," died in 1934. Old Topsy had an interesting life. She was featured in several early films when she lived at the Selig and Griffith Park zoos. Later, she was a part of a menagerie at Ringling Brothers Circus.

Major Henry C. Wayne experiment left its mark, he was awarded a gold medal by the Société Impériale Zoologique d'Acclimatation of France in 1858. The camel driver known as Hi Jolly remains a folk hero in Arizona, where his grave is marked by a pyramid monument. The plaque at the monument states, "*The last camp of Hi Jolly, [birth name: Philip Tedro], born somewhere in Syria about 1828, died Quartzsite, [Arizona] December 16, 1903. Came to this country February 10, 1856. Camel driver, packer, scout over thirty years, a faithful aid to the U.S. government.*"



Who knows, if the Civil War hadn't intervened, Hollywood might have featured cowboys on camels?

1. I am grateful to the fascinating *The Victorian City* by Judith Flanders (Atlantic Books 2012). Illustration: The British Newspaper Archive Blog *The Regent's Park Skating Tragedy of 1867*.
2. Taken from *Great Tales from English History* by Robert Lacey (Little Brown 2003). Photograph of Edward's tomb courtesy of Westminster Abbey.
3. A nugget from SKY History. Photo by Southworth & Hawes, in the Public Domain.
4. Courtesy of Lisa Land Cooper and others. In June 1859, while attempting to climb a sloping bare rock in southwest Texas, one of the Army's camels lost its footing and fell, smashing one of the precious water barrels it was carrying. An officer accompanying the expedition quickly cut the lines ensnaring the camel, preventing a bad situation from becoming worse. (*Camels in Texas*, by Thomas Lovell, courtesy of the Abell-Hanger Foundation and the Permian Basin Petroleum Museum, Library and Hall of Fame of Midland, Texas).