

# Royal Connections in Gayton, Heswall and Parkgate

by Roger Lane and Jenny McRonald

The relative remoteness of the Wirral Peninsula from the capital meant it did not enjoy many royal visits until modern means of transport made such events more commonplace. The influence of the distant monarchy was felt when the Saxon lands were confiscated after the Norman invasion, and when the Hundred of Wirral was made into a Royal Forest between 1120 and 1123 by the Earl of Chester, which caused much suffering to the local population. Farming was restricted, deer could not be killed, and dogs had to have their front paws trimmed to stop them chasing game. This continued until the land was gradually released back to agriculture by Edward III, starting in 1376.



The earliest records of a visit to Wirral by a monarch occur in 1275, and again in 1277, when Edward I travelled to Flint to build the first castle aimed at subduing the rebellious Welsh. He is reputed to have used the ferry from Gayton (at the bottom of Cottage Lane) to cross the Dee to Flintshire, landing at a point near Basingwerk Abbey. While on the Wirral he visited Stanlow Abbey, Birkenhead Priory, and, en route in Cheshire, he laid the

foundation stone of Vale Royal Abbey, which he founded to celebrate his safe return from the Crusades in the Holy Land. His Queen spent several weeks staying at Shotwick Castle in July 1277, while Edward was visiting Birkenhead.



William of Orange

There was to be no further royal presence on Wirral until 1690 when William of Orange stayed at Gayton Hall en route to Ireland.

William's presence in Gayton was due to tumultuous historical events which still have an uncanny echo in the current controversy regarding Brexit, namely the authority of Parliament, and the impact of political divisions in Ireland. William of Orange ascended to the throne as William III of England together with his wife

Mary in 1689 after the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688. He was encouraged to invade England by a group of Parliamentarians who were concerned about King James II of England's support for Catholicism and his close ties to France, England's traditional enemy. The Bill of Rights, which enabled his ascension to the throne as joint monarch with Mary, has become one of the most important documents in the political history of England, and never since has a monarch held absolute power. James gave up the throne without a struggle after the invasion and fled to France, where Louis XIV gave him protection. After the revolution, the Irish upper class Catholics raised an army to restore James and by 1690 controlled all of Ireland except for the Protestant province of Ulster. James saw Ireland as an opportunity to regain the monarchy. William was determined to thwart the power of Louis XIV and to protect the Protestants, and so decided to invade Ireland to fight the Catholic army, which was led in person by James. It was a sad family conflict as Queen Mary was the daughter of James and William was his nephew.

William departed Kensington Palace on 4th June 1690 en route to lead his army's invasion of Ireland. He reached Peel Hall, Ashton, on the evening of the 9th June – remarkable progress given the state of the roads at that time. Next morning, he attended divine service at St Werburgh's Cathedral and then proceeded up the Parkgate Road to Gayton Hall. No doubt he stopped to inspect a detachment of his troops camped at Hinderton. Other detachments were stationed at Leasowe, totalling 10,000 men. The decision to overnight at Gayton Hall was no doubt influenced by the Glegg's family's strong opposition to the Stuarts, which was in contrast to other landed families nearby.

William Glegg, the occupant of Gayton Hall at the time of the visit, was the grandson of the William Glegg who sided with Parliament during the Civil War and was imprisoned until he paid a large ransom. He was imprisoned a second time until exchanged for a Loyalist leader. He avoided a third attempt to imprison him by springing out of bed, grabbing his clothes and hiding in a cornfield. William the younger was obviously a good host to King William, who knighted him on the morning of 11th June. The King also reputedly planted two trees in the front of the house. These evergreen Holm oaks were known as 'William' and 'Mary' and survived until one was uprooted in a gale in 1936, and the other felled shortly after when it became unsafe.



Gayton Hall



The Old Smithy

At the time of the King's visit, Gayton Hall was a much simpler timber-framed house. It was re-cased in red brick in classical style in the early eighteenth century to give its current appearance. There is long-held local tradition that the Smithy in Dawstone Road (now demolished and replaced by Sandstone Walk) was used to shoe the King's horse.

William embarked to Ireland from Hoylake (then known as High-Lake) and the disembarkation area is commemorated in the name 'The King's Gap'. On passing through West Kirby there is a story that arriving at Grange Hill in advance of his entourage, he asked an old lady why the place was deserted. She replied: "Oh, they have all gone to see some fool of a king sail from the Gap." He had another encounter later with the general population when he was watching his troops embark and a member of the crowd tried to touch him to cure their tuberculosis, a practice encouraged by the Stuart monarchy. This was too much for William and his matter-of-fact Dutch outlook, and he responded: "God give thee better health and better sense."

William did not have a good sea journey. Having left on a Wednesday with 280 transports accompanied by six men-of-war, the fleet commanded by Rear Admiral Cloudesley Shovell suffered from two days of poor winds and eventually landed at Carrickfergus in County Antrim only on Saturday 14th June, from whence William marched his army, augmented by troops already present in Ireland, south towards Dublin. James chose to place his line of defence on the River Boyne about 30 miles from Dublin. The actual Battle of the Boyne took place on 1st July for control of a ford on the Boyne near Drogheda. William's