

WINCHESTER RESIDENTS' MOMENTS WITH ROYALTY

By Ellen Knight¹

It may never be known how many locals watched the coronation of King Charles III or who rearranged their schedules for a virtual view of Queen Elizabeth's funeral. Likewise it is impossible to determine how many townspeople ever witnessed royal pageantry in person or had any interaction with Britain's royal family. However, while the known number of royal interactions is certainly not large, it is not zero.

Ten years after Winchester was incorporated, Queen Victoria sent her son, the future Edward VII but then the 18-year-old Prince of Wales, on a goodwill visit to Canada and the United States. One of his stops was Boston. People from Winchester might have joined the crowds gathered in Boston or Cambridge to catch sight of the prince. If they could afford the \$15 per couple tickets (\$545 today), they might have met him at a ball held in the Academy of Music. Edward Everett, who built a house in Winchester in 1859, was on one ball committee, and Peter Chardon Brooks, part of whose estate is now the Town Forest, was on another (but he was actually a Medford resident).² Since the Prince took a train from Boston to Portland, he may have had a glimpse of Winchester.



Charles Symmes

Much of this is speculative since there was no local newspaper to print Winchester news (if any) of the 1860 Boston visit. However, up in Canada a man born and bred in South Woburn (later Winchester) had a more certain opportunity. This was Charles Symmes (1798-1868), a nephew of Philemon Wright who sold his farm on Ridge Street to the Locke family and went off to found Ottawa. At age 20, Charles joined his uncle but soon left and founded the nearby town of Aylmer. In 1860, while Symmes was mayor, Aylmer entertained the Prince of Wales as he passed through on his tour.³

A single sentence in an issue of *The Winchester Star* of February 1901 reported that the flag on Winchester's Common was at half-mast for the funeral of Queen Victoria and similarly in May 1910 for King Edward. No such note was recorded for any of their successors.

GEORGE V

King George V may have been a more familiar figure to Americans, particularly since he was king during World War I, visited the Western Front a half dozen times, inspected the troops, and visited the wounded. In fact, after the king died, a correspondent to the *Star* signing himself "A

Veteran,” reminisced that “Many residents of Winchester saw the late King George of England during the war.”

“After the Armistice, King George and his whole family came to Paris and the reception given them was like that [of] a Roman Emperor.... The procession had hardly started when out of a side street rushed a taxi cab and joined the line. As it passed, who should be in it but Dudley Murphy [son of the artist] and Robert Coit [son of the architect], both of Winchester, then in the naval aviation service. Just what they were doing there no one seemed to know and I doubt if they did themselves.

“During the reception that followed, the Prince of Wales [and] his brother suddenly disappeared and the secret service of both France and England were sent in search of them.

“The writer decided after the parade to see the sights of Paris and while in a snappy cabaret two British Army officers entered and took a table next to his. Upon closer inspection, who should they be but his highness, the Prince of Wales, and his brother, the Duke of York, and they had no secret service men with them. They seemed to enjoy the whole affair greatly and finally went out discussing where they should go next. Late that night both of them arrived home in a taxicab and told King George and Queen Mary that they had had the time of their lives as it was the first time they had been able to see Paris as the ordinary citizen sees it.”⁴

GEORGE VI

Because Edward VIII abdicated before his planned coronation, his brother was crowned king in his stead. When the *Star* announced two fund-raisers for Winchester Hospital on the front page of its April 2, 1937, issue, one was the En Ka Fair and the other was the sale of coronation programs.

A shipment of 50,000 copies had reached New York aboard the Queen Mary. Hospital authorities obtained “a limited quantity” which were apparently quickly spoken for since the ad never appeared again. Other coronation merchandise was evidently available, for when Elizabeth was crowned, a doll of her father authorized at time of his coronation was put on display at the library, on loan from a resident.

News briefs stated that two students already in Europe were planning to attend the festivities in London as was a townswoman sailing for England. (Similar snippets appeared at the time of his daughter’s coronation.)

DECORATED BY A KING

King George VI was the first reigning British monarch to visit the United States. While in Washington D.C. in 1939, he and his wife, Queen Elizabeth, presented Winchester native Chester Barksdale (1900-1983) with the Royal Victorian Medal. Employed at the British Embassy since

1922, Barksdale had rendered such faithful service that the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood bestowed the medal on him, presented by the King and Queen.⁵

Back in England, in 1941 Jennie Cameron, a former Winchester girl married to a British man, became the first American woman ever awarded the Medal of the Order of the British Empire for Meritorious Service (or British Empire Medal).

“Under a hail of bombs during a German air raid on an English community,” the *Boston Globe* stated, Cameron got 165 persons to safety and “worked magnificently to provide shelter and food for the homeless.”⁶

Cameron described the medal presentation by the king at the palace in a letter, printed in the *Star*, to her sons evacuated to Winchester. “We stood waiting at one side until our name was called—then stepped a few steps forward in front of the King, turned left to face him and then made a curtsy—after which we stepped a few steps forward to be directly in front of him.” She wore her Women’s Volunteer Service uniform. “We had had a hook put on our uniforms, on the left hand side, so that the medals were easily hooked on (and not pinned).

“Then the King talked with me for quite a few minutes—seconds, I expect really.... After that he shook hands with me, I stepped back, curtsied, turned to the right and walked away. All the time there was a military stringed orchestra playing softly in the background.” At the conclusion they played “God Save the King,” the doors were opened, and he left. “He was so pleasant and looked so fine in his airforce uniform,” Cameron wrote.⁷

QUEEN ELIZABETH II

In 1976 Queen Elizabeth made her only visit to Boston. Her visit was filmed and televised, principally by WCVB whose footage was revived online at the time of her death. No great wonder then that when a group of 200 were invited to the royal yacht, one of them was Winchester resident Leo Beranek, founder of WCVB.⁸ But any number of Winchester townspeople may have flocked to the city to get a glimpse of the Queen, as well as a look at the Tall Ships in the harbor.



Leo Beranek

MET TWO MONARCHS

Perhaps the most remarkable revelation from research on royalty has been Chester Barksdale, who met not only King George VI but also Queen Elizabeth II. In October 1951, he was among 15 or more Blacks invited to a reception at the embassy for Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh, the list including Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Howard University President Mordecai W. Johnson, and heads of the Ethiopian, Haitian, and Liberian diplomatic missions in D.C., plus two messengers at the British Embassy, one being Barksdale.⁹

Six years later, during Elizabeth's first visit to the U.S. since becoming Queen, a garden party was held at the British Embassy, attended by representatives of each Commonwealth embassy. Staff from each embassy stood under their own flag, and each ambassador presented faithful staff members of his own choosing to the Queen. One chosen by the British ambassador had been their employee for 35 years. Thus it was that Chester Barksdale, bearing a surname attached to his forebears by Virginia slaveholders, son of a man who worked the meanest of jobs in a northern tannery to better conditions for his family, got to meet the Queen of England, again.¹⁰

¹ This article © 2022 by the author Ellen Knight was first published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on May 5, 2023.

² Lists of the committee members were printed in *The Daily Atlas*, Oct. 3, 1860.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 17, 1930.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 31, 1936.

⁵ This story is contained in his obituary in *The Winchester Star*, Dec. 29, 1983.

⁶ *The Boston Globe*, Feb. 22, 1941

⁷ *The Winchester Star*, April 18, 1941.

⁸ The guest list was printed in *The Boston Globe*, July 11, 1976.

⁹ *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 23, 1951

¹⁰ *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1957.