

Royals in Residence

A recent article in Bitesize described the events that led to the formation of Moor Park Limited in the 1920s to sell building plots on the Estate. Residents phoned, visited and emailed to say how much they enjoyed reading about Moor Park's early history. The same question was asked by several people: "Was Moor Park ever owned by Royalty?"

We asked Alan Jamieson, the local historian and Moor Park resident, to investigate and report. "Did Kings and Queens of England ever tread on Moor Park's hallowed turf?" Here is his response.

.....

When a resident stares out over his or her substantial expanse of lawn and sycamores in the back garden, a question might be asked: "Did any kind of royal, a King or a Queen perhaps, ever ride across my lawn?" The answer may well be "Yes". In the 16th century, Moor Park was a huge estate of over 288 acres of parkland with a mansion on its edge. Moor Park extended from Rickmansworth, taking in what are now three golf courses including today's Sandy Lodge Golf Club, and stretching across the whole area occupied by the Merchant Taylors' schools and the extent of the modern Moor Park Estate. The present grand Palladian mansion, built in the 1730s and 1740s, is on the deer park of the medieval Manor of the More, the original residence owned by Cardinal Wolsey in the 1520s. The Manor of the More was near the river Colne on the present-day Merchant Taylors' playing fields.

When Cardinal Wolsey, the owner of the More, was dismissed from office by King Henry VIII (dismissal was a favourite pastime of King Henry VIII, just ask his wives), Henry took possession for himself. He sent his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, to live in the Manor while he organised their divorce. Transport in the 16th century was by horseback and so it is likely that Queen Catherine rode regularly across the estate until she was moved out by the King to her final imprisonment at Kimbolton Castle. Henry was an expert horseman and visited often, galloping past spinneys of ash, maple, hornbeam and oak, accompanied by hounds and courtiers pursuing and killing deer to be served up later with a pint of ale at dinner in the More.

Other Tudor queens took up residence too. In 1540, Henry VIII gave the Manor of the More to his fourth wife, Ann of Cleves who came to view her inheritance before she was divorced. Yet another wife and owner, the fifth, Katherine Howard, also visited the Manor with an ailing King in 1541. However, she didn't come again for a very good reason - she was beheaded by Henry's order in the following year. On reflection, then, Moor Park cast something of a black cloud over Henry VIII's queens.

Henry VIII wasn't the only King to grace Moor Park with his presence. But we have to wait for over 300 years to pass before the next royal arrived. The Manor of the More fell into disrepair and was demolished. Its foundations remain below the cricket fields of Merchant Taylors' School. However, a later owner, the Earl of Bedford, did make his mark. In 1617 he built a substantial new house on higher ground, well away from the boggy river, on the site of today's Moor Park Mansion.

Later, Moor Park, almost but not quite, had another royal owner. Unfortunately, the pseudo-King was a bastard. Literally so. James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, was an illegitimate son of King Charles II. In 1685 the Duke of Monmouth, a Protestant, led a rebellion against King James II, a Catholic. It

did not end well. Monmouth was captured and executed. But this story has a happy ending – for Moor Park, anyway. The Duchess of Monmouth, a very shrewd lady who played no part in her husband’s antics, inherited the Moor Park estate. She built on it too, replacing the Earl of Bedford’s house with a large brick building where she lived for the next 25 years. Almost another royal owner then, but not quite.

Is the royal story finished? No. There are other royal visits. The Duchess of Monmouth married again in 1688 but only to a mere Baron this time - Baron Cornwallis. Four years later, Queen Mary, wife of King William III, came for tea at her new brick mansion at Moor Park. There is no record of this Queen going deer-hunting – possibly because she was elderly by then. After the Monmouth-Cornwallis years, ownership of the mansion was held by a host of aristocrats – the Russells, the Bedfords and, later, by Admiral Lord Anson. (Do you notice the names of Moor Park’s roads featuring in this story?).

Pressing on, the 18th century saw the construction of the present massive Moor Park Mansion, faced with Portland stone, by a new owner, the financier Benjamin Haskyns Styles (a mere Mister but he had the money). Sir James Thornhill was the architect (another familiar Moor Park road). This brings us to the final royal to grace the grounds of Moor Park. In 1832 the new owner, the 2nd Earl of Grosvenor (only an Earl but then he also owned most of Mayfair and a chunk of Westminster) invited King William IV and Queen Adelaide to ‘a grand party’ at his ‘place in the country’. We are told that the royal party enjoyed their dinner in the magnificent dining room with its remarkable 17th century ceiling designed by Robert Adam, with paintings by Giovanni Cipriani of sea gods. The almost 300-year old Moor Park ceiling is there still today and is greatly admired by wedding guests when they are tempted, just like Queen Adelaide, to raise their eyes from their plates.

Owned and visited by numerous Queens and an occasional King, Moor Park has therefore had more than its fair share of royals. What other ‘place in the country’ has been so favoured? Try naming them. Not many, or none. Moor Park is unique, as people say.

Residents who wish to know more about its history can purchase a copy of Susan Bennett’s booklet, *History of Moor Park Mansion*, from Moor Park Golf Club. Another booklet, *Moor Park, the story of how a Royal Palace became a Park*, can be obtained free for residents from the Moor Park (1958) Ltd office.

.....