

THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

BIRMINGHAM'S KING EDWARD VII STATUE

Edward VII had been a popular king. As Prince of Wales he had visited Birmingham on many occasions. In 1874 he had been received by the Lord Mayor, Cllr Joseph Chamberlain and had visited Joseph Gillott's Pen Work; in 1885 he visited to open the Art Gallery and Museum and in 1891 he opened the Victoria Law Courts. In 1904 he opened Elan Valley to supply water to Birmingham and his last visit, just 9 months before his death was to open The University of Birmingham.



21st July 1904 - Opening of Elan Valley Reservoir to supply water to the City of Birmingham

The king died on Friday 6th May 1910, thus bringing to an end a short but glittering reign and the Birmingham Mail on the following Monday stated it was willing to become the medium for a Memorial Fund to the late king's memory and thus creating the first Memorial Fund in the kingdom.

The Birmingham Mail duly published a booklet stating the objectives of the fund, which were to raise a statue to late Sovereign and to build

a new hospital. There was a dramatic response to the fund and the opening list of donations published on 8th June 1910 already amounted to over £5,000, which was already enough to cover the cost of the statue, which eventually cost £2,700.

The Birmingham-born sculptor, Albert Toft (1862-1949), was given the commission. Toft was born in Hunters Lane, Handsworth and in 1913 was 41. Toft was a highly regarded artist who had already produced a marble statue of His Highness Rajah Sudhal deb Bahadur of Bamra as well as the statues to Queen Victoria at Leamington Spa, South Shields and Nottingham and the South African War Memorial in Cannon Hill Park in 1906.

The design for statue was approved by the Memorial Committee, which was chaired by Alderman W.H. Bowater. It would be a statue wrought in Carrara marble on a stone plinth and allegorical bronzes. However, Toft initially met with problems in selecting a suitable piece of marble for the statue due to the size of the finished piece.

The statue was to be unveiled by Edward VII's sister, HRH Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll and on the day of the unveiling, St George's Day 1913, the weather provided a glorious blue sky and golden sunshine. All children in the city had been given the day off in celebration.



Albert Toft with the statue

The Duke & Duchess had been staying at Hewell Grange, Tardebigge, the seat of the Earl of Plymouth and were due in Ladywood to lay the Foundation Stone to the new hospital at noon. The Earl & Countess and the Duke and Duchess drove in motorcars along the Bristol Road and then Priory Road and at various points along the route locals cheered and waved flags. After the laying of the foundation stone the party left for Victoria Square in a procession of open carriages preceded by mounted police.



Victoria Square – 23rd April 1913

In Victoria Square, the band had concluded the serenading of the throng who stood in their countless thousands, the civic addresses were done with and the Princess pulled the cord and unveiled the statue to the assembled crowds, whereupon there was a loud outburst of acclamation as the guard of honour saluted and the National Anthem was struck up by the band. Princess Louise declared it to be an excellent likeness.



Shortly after unveiling in 1913

The statue represented the King as at his coronation in 1901, wearing the uniform of a Field Marshal under his coronation robes and carrying the royal sceptre and the orb.

In addition to the statue, there were three cast bronzes mounted on the stone pedestal which resembled the shape of a lyre and which is buttressed on both sides, each supporting life-sized bronze panels in high relief. The one bronze was symbolic of Peace – or the peacemaker – and the other represented Education and Progress. The figure of Peace is represented by a draped feminine figure encircling the globe with one arm and holding over it a sprig of olive, whilst in her other hand she holds roses and other floral symbols, cornucopia-like, to underline the rich harvest of peace. The opposite group has a central figure instructing a child from a scroll and there were also other symbols carved in rich detail. On the front of the pedestal was an intricate and elaborate imperial crown surmounting a figure of St George slaying the dragon and beneath this was the simple inscription:

**KING EDWARD VII
1901-10**

On the rear of the pedestal was an inscription, which went as follows:

“This statue together with the King Edward VII Memorial Children’s Hospital was erected by public subscription in loyal commemoration of the beneficent life and reign of a beloved monarch and was unveiled by H.R.H Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll April 23rd 1913”

It was here that the King would remain resplendent for the next 38 years until 1951 when the increasing traffic of Birmingham dictated that such civic adornments needed to be thinned out to enable greater vehicle flow and so it was that Edward the Peacemaker was removed from Victoria Square, restored and, for some inexplicable and what now seems wholly inappropriate reason, placed in the wilderness that we know as Highgate Park.

Sadly, in 1986 the bronzes were stolen never to have been recovered and neglect combined with the British weather and vandalism have all conspired to have reduced this grand memorial to a “beloved monarch” to a piteous shadow. Today the statue stands with a cross less orb and a shattered sceptre and the fine detail wrought so painstakingly by Mr Toft have been lost.

In 2002, Stephen Hartland complained of the state of the memorial and the City Council spent £8,000 removing the graffiti. However the Birmingham Group of the Victorian Society maintains that the situation for this statue is wholly inappropriate for the memorial to a former sovereign and fine piece of Edwardian sculpture and thus supports the City Council’s moves to re-locate the statue in the city centre.

Conservation work will include re-instatement of the orb and sceptre and facsimile copies of the stolen bronzes.

The Birmingham & West Midlands Group of The Victorian Society is launching a fund-raising initiative and members of the public are invited to contribute towards saving a piece of Birmingham’s sculptural heritage by making donations via The Victorian Society.

People wishing to donate should send their cheques (made payable to The Victorian Society) to:

Stephen Hartland, The Victorian Society, Birmingham & West Midlands Group, 36 Clarendon Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B16 9SE.

The Victorian Society is the national society responsible for the study and protection of Victorian and Edwardian architecture and other arts and is a Registered Charity No. 1081435.

Stephen Hartland
The Victorian Society
Birmingham & West Midlands Group

June 2007



January 2007
shortly after having graffiti removed
- all of which has since returned.