

Chapter 2

FRANZ LUDWIG VON BIBRA

FRIEDRICH AUGUSTUS ANTON DIETRICH VON BIBRA (1746-1816) was the father of Franz Ludwig, who emigrated to Van Diemen's Land and from whom the Australian, English and South African families descend.

Friedrich was Lord of Gleicherwiesen, that manor house set in extensive meadowlands in Thuringia about ten miles from Irmelshausen and owned for five centuries by the Bibra family. He was a major in the Bavarian Army, and was in need of money with which to secure the future of his growing family. Therefore, reluctant as he was to take such a step, he sold Gleicherwiesen to a



Village of Gleicherwiesen, with the Gleichberg in the background.

cousin, Wilhelm Ernst Lothar von Bibra, receiving 1250 guilders in Rhenish currency for it. During the legal arrangements he made it a condition of sale that each of his sons would receive a proportion of income from the very large grounds in the estate and retain hereditary rights so that they would always be assured of a home there. Friedrich had done the best he could for his sons, but of necessity fell far short of a certain Bibra a century earlier who had left his five sons a castle each.

The new owner of Gleicherwiesen was already the possessor of the delightful little castle of Adelsdorf, which is set in a village of the same name in Upper Franconia. In 1850 the then Lord of Adelsdorf was forced to sell Gleicherwiesen, and for the first time since 1354 it passed out of the hands of the family. Adelsdorf, too, with no heir to inherit it, has been sold quite recently to the local council, and is in process of being turned into a museum.

With only a small income from the Gleicherwiesen estate as a means of support, in time each of the seven sons of Friedrich Augustus Anton Dietrich von Bibra took up a government position, the money from the sale of Gleicherwiesen having been partly used to give each one an extensive education and train them for a career.



Adelsdorf Castle.

Karl Wilhelm (1773-1809) had reached the rank of Captain of Horse in the Austrian Army when he died at the age of thirty-three.

Ludwig Karl (1778-1843) ended his career as Governor-General of Silesia, a region in Germany. He also became Lord of Possnitz, Kaldaum and Krug.

Adelbert Wilhelm (1789-1873) was an officer in the Custom House and became Imperial & Royal Chief Inspector of the City Police at Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Friedrich Augustus Karl (1786-1873) was colonel commanding the fortress of Leopoldstadt in Hungary; he was also Imperial and Royal Chamberlain.

Ernst Friedrich (1776-1858) joined the Austrian Army and retired as Imperial & Royal Lieutenant-Colonel.

Adam Friedrich Heindrich (1775-1851) became Head of the House when his elder brother, Karl Wilhelm, died in 1809. By this time Adam had joined in the fight against Napoleon by enlisting in the British Army, which at that time employed many foreign armies and volunteers. As a captain in 1811 he transferred to another regiment and helped garrison the Isle of Wight, Guernsey, Malta and Sicily.

Franz Ludwig, the fifth son, had been born on 10th February, 1783 at Bamberg in Germany - a year after his father had sold Gleicherwiesen. His godfather was doubtless Prince-Bishop Franz Ludwig von Bamberg.¹ From the age of twelve until he was fourteen Franz Ludwig was educated in the Chilianium - the Military Academy - and later joined the Prussian Army, where, in 1801, he became second lieutenant. He resigned in 1804, and two years later emulated his elder brother, Adam Friedrich Heindrich, by enlisting in the British Army. He returned briefly to Bavaria in 1806 to give this brother Power of Attorney regarding Estates, Capitals and Rights of the joint Baronial family of Bibra. Back in England again, he joined the Royal Corsican Rangers.²

In 1807, while still a cadet in the British regiment of Colonel Froberg in Kilprochan, and quite resplendent in his green uniform with scarlet facings, he married Elizabeth Reily of Ireland.³

Franz Ludwig commanded the cavalry in his five-hundred-strong regiment and took part in much active service in the Mediterranean. While in Capri in 1808 the island was attacked by an overwhelmingly strong French force, and after a gallant defence was forced to surrender, the garrison marching out with all the honours of war. The regiment of the Royal Corsican Rangers was then based in Sicily, and gradually through the years drove the French from the

Ionian Islands, which are situated off the West Coast of Greece in the southern part of the Adriatic.

As was usual for wives in those days, Elizabeth accompanied the regiment on its journeys, making life comfortable for Franz Ludwig at the various bases. In Sicily in 1809 she became pregnant, and it is said that during that time she was chased by bandits, from whom she was rescued by Benedictine monks; they reputedly took her to their abbey and cared for her until she recovered, and when her son was born in Messina she called him 'Benedict' in recognition of their kindness. At Ithaka, an island in the Ionian group, Elizabeth became so immersed in Greek legends that when their second son was born in 1811 though his father named him Friedrich, she added Ulysses to this. Time would tell whether, like his namesake, he was to live an adventurous and roving life.

Corfu, another of the seven islands making up the Ionian group, was the last to fall into British hands. It surrendered in 1815 following the defeat of Napoleon, the accession of Louis XVIII and the Treaty of Paris.⁴ The regiment of Royal Corsican Rangers was disbanded in Corfu the following year and Franz Ludwig's commanding officer, Colonel Hudson Lowe, became Governor of St Helena during Napoleon's captivity there.

During these years of war two more children were born to Franz Ludwig and Elizabeth – Mary Josephine in 1813 and Carl Louis in 1816. In this year, 1816, Carl's grandfather, Friedrich Augustus Anton Dietrich von Bibra, died at Römhild, Germany.

Franz Ludwig, discharged from his regiment as a lieutenant on half pay,⁵ was restless. Trained only in the techniques of war, he found it impossible to find employment. Others like him, disillusioned and disheartened at future prospects in Britain, considered attempting a more promising life overseas. However, reports were coming back from America of a bad system of justice, high taxes, and grants of land which required many years of hard work to make arable, especially in the north where a half-year-long harsh winter prevailed. News from South America, too, was discouraging, as it was in a state of ferment, especially in Brazil where a civil war threatened to break out. And so it was that Franz Ludwig's thoughts turned to the colony of New South Wales, and especially to the southernmost part of it, Van Diemen's Land.

Unwilling to risk taking his family to a country about which little was known, he determined to see for himself if the conditions for settling there were promising. He was unable to afford to pay his passage so in 1816 decided to work his way on a ship bound for the island.⁶ A certain vessel due to sail to the colonies was carrying convicts – such prisoners being known

contemptuously as 'rattlesnake cargo' - and as more guards were needed, when he applied to become one of these the authorities accepted his application, only too pleased to get someone used to commanding men rather than the usual pensioners - who, besides getting a free passage, were given a few acres of land on arrival.

Franz Ludwig spent over a year in Van Diemen's Land, exploring the possibilities of his settling there and gathering all the published and unpublished material he could find about it. On his return to England in the winter of 1817 he spent a good deal of time marking certain passages in this material and seeking out men who had been to Van Diemen's Land in order to gain additional information from them. He added his own observations and then returned to Germany and asked an academic friend, Dr C. N. Röding of Hamburg, to compile the appropriate passages into a book, which was to bear the name of F. L. von Bibra as author while acknowledging Dr Röding's contribution. This work took several years to complete, and was published in Germany in 1822.

In 1818 the author-to-be was living mostly in Römheld. There his fourth son was born, and the continuation of the child's father's name was assured by his being christened Franz Ludwig. These names, however, were only two of those given to him, his uncles being represented strongly in his complete name - Augustus William Charles Francis Louis Ernest von Bibra - though then in their German form.

Sometimes Franz Ludwig and his family stayed at Irmelshausen with the widow of his uncle, Leberecht Gottlob von Bibra,⁷ but it was very apparent that he would have to find permanent employment. His success in this direction occurred in a most unexpected way.

In England King George III, who had been so moral and conscientious a ruler, was now a pathetic figure. Deaf, blind and behaving strangely, he was labelled as mad but probably suffered from porphyria, an hereditary metabolic disease.⁸ He had been unable to undertake his duties since 1811, so his son George, fat and middle-aged, clever but lazy, and universally known as 'Prinny', became Regent, and was only crowned King George IV in 1820 when his father died. The new king's marriage to Mrs Fitzherbert had not been accepted, so he had married Caroline, a German Duchess. It was said that they slept together on their wedding night and never again. Nevertheless a daughter, Charlotte, was born and became the next in line to the throne. She married the ambitious Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, whose nephew Albert would in years to come marry Queen Victoria. In 1817 disaster struck when

their first child was stillborn and Charlotte died, leaving the Royal Family in turmoil, with no apparent heir in view.

George IV's ageing brothers, not all so moral as their father, had contracted alliances but none had married. Now there was a rush to find suitable brides in order to ensure the continuation of their line. They looked to Germany to supply spouses, as Royalty had done for generations past. Edward, the Duke of Kent and father of the future Queen of England, chose Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, the widow of a Prince of Meiningen in Thuringia, while the ex-sailor William, Duke of Clarence, selected Adelaide Amalia, Princess of Saxe-Meiningen, the province set within the triangle Gotha-Fulda-Würzburg, and close to where the Bibras lived. In 1818 the Royal brothers were married in a double wedding at Kew.

Adelaide, that pale little German princess '*with fine silken hair that hung long and straight as rain almost to her knees*'⁹ had married into a delicate situation when she became unofficial step-mother to the ten illegitimate children born of her husband's twenty-year association with the Nell Gwynn of her day – that tiny, fascinating and most successful comedy actress, Mrs Jordan. However, the new arrival was extremely kind to the healthy, boisterous and loved offspring, and, being somewhat of a 'blue stocking', decided that the two youngest girls should have a tutor to replace their present elderly one. She looked to her homeland for such a man.

For many centuries members of the Bibra family had held court positions, and Franz Ludwig was known personally to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and to his sister Victoria, the Duchess of Kent¹⁰. Because Coburg was close to Gleicherwiesen and Irmelshausen, presumably Adelaide also knew him. It was realised that he was highly educated and well versed in the classics¹¹ as well as being fluent in both written and spoken English, so it was arranged that he would join the English Royal Household as tutor to the two young Fitzclarence girls, then aged eleven and fourteen. He took up his appointment in 1819,¹ and when his second daughter was born in that year he named her Amalia after the future Queen Adelaide, her other names being Caroline Louisa. Two more children were born while he was there – Wilhelm Carl in 1821 and Jane the following year.

Franz Ludwig remained a member of the Royal Household until 1822, at which time his two pupils had completed their education. He then returned to Germany, where he lived in Altona, in the province of Hamburg, for a short time. While there he attended a lecture given by his friend Dr Röding, who spoke at length on Van Diemen's Land. This served to renew Franz Ludwig's enthusiasm for the island and he resolved to make his future home there, his

decision helped by the realisation that he was without the financial means to settle in the Fatherland.

This same lack of finance posed the problem of how he could pay his and the family's passage, for this would amount to over £500. He had been able to save £200 and a small amount from his Army pension of £72 a year, but was no longer eligible to draw any money from his share in the Gleicherwiesen Estate, for in 1819, finding himself in need of money with which to finance the expenses connected with his removal to the Royal Household, he had borrowed a large amount from the fund and renounced any further income from it until the sum had been liquidated. He approached the English *Charge D'Affairs* in Hamburg, a man well-known to him, requesting that he ask the Secretary of State in England to dispense with the regulations and allow the sum he actually had to suffice for the passage. This Mr Mellor did, mentioning the fact that both His Royal Highness Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and his sister, the Duchess of Kent, (mother of the future Queen Victoria) had supplied letters of recommendation for '*Lieutenant von Bibra*'. He ended the letter by begging that the Earl of Bathurst would '*listen to the application*' and '*confer a lasting obligation*' on the writer of the letter. His Lordship listened to the application and was gracious enough to confer on Mr Mellor the lasting obligation he requested.

'*Mr Bibra*', accompanied by his wife and eight children, boarded the *Morley*, a transport ship carrying fifty male prisoners, '*accompanied by the very good wishes of all who knew and esteemed him*'¹² They sailed from the Downs in Kent on the 25th September, 1822.

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