

The City of Stanley

Extracts from the Reign of George VI

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From Chapter 4

..... Hitherto his time had been engrossed by more weighty concerns; but now that peace left him the master of his time, he displayed a taste and genius in more arts than that of war. London, though the wonder of the world, never pleased the King. Its prodigious size was its only boast; it contained few buildings that did honour to the nation; in a word, it was a city finely calculated for trade, but not for the residence of the polite arts. The meanness of his Majesty's palace disgusted him; he had a taste for architecture, and determined to exert it in raising an edifice, that should at once do honour to his kingdom, and add splendour to his court.

In Rutlandshire, near Uppingham, was a small hunting box of the late King's, which George admired; not for the building, but its beautiful situation. In his hours of rural amusements the King formed the design of raising a palace. Few parts of his dominions could afford a more desirable spot for such a purpose. The old seat stood on an elevated situation, which commanded an extensive prospect over the adjacent country. It was almost surrounded with extensive woods; which, having been artfully planted, added the greatest beauty to the prospect, without intercepting the view. On one side there was an easy descent of about three miles, which led into an extensive plain, through which a river took its meandering course. Many villages seemed to rise here and there from out the woods, which gave a great variety to the scene, and the fertile plain was one continued prospect of villages, groves, meadows, and rivulets, and all was in the neighbourhood of a noble and capacious forest.

This charming situation must have struck any person of less taste than the King; he was charmed with it at the first sight, and soon after thought of building a palace on so advantageous a situation. The famous Gilbert, whose name is immortalized by so many works of genius, was, at that time, architect to the King. He drew the plans of several palaces, out of which his Majesty chose one; and immediately set him about the work. Many difficulties were to be over-come before even the first stone could be laid; the fabric was to be built with Portland stone, which could not be brought to the spot without an infinite expense over-land; to remedy this inconvenience, the parliament passed an act to make the River Welland navigable to the very plain, at the bottom of the hill on which the intended palace was to be raised. The same sessions also granted his Majesty a million sterling towards the expense of building this magnificent pile. The King spared no cost to render this edifice the most magnificent and superb palace in the universe.

In the plain above described his Majesty formed the scheme of raising a city; but was staggered at the thoughts of the expense; however, Moor the architect hinted to him, that if his Majesty was to raise a few public edifices, and remove some of the courts from London thither, they would alone occasion numbers to build near their residence; that his Majesty's fixing his own residence there, would also occasion a vast increase of building.—The King was pleased with the thought, and determined to execute it. The great Gilbert drew the ground plot of that part which now reaches from St. Mary's church quite to Great Hollis-Street and Scotland Square. St. Stephen's was his work too, and is a beautiful monument of his taste and genius; that church and the academy, for architecture, ^[4] were the two first public buildings that were raised; Moor was the artist who erected the latter; but this deserves a more particular mention.

Architecture was one of the King's favourite studies; but its being an art was recommendation enough for that great Monarch to encourage it. The plan on which this academy was formed, was finely imagined to secure a perpetual protection. It consisted of a President, with a salary of two thousand pounds a year; Gilbert was the first: Six^[5] senior and twelve^[6] junior professors, the former five, and the latter three hundred pounds a year each. What a noble institution was this. Worthy the Monarch who formed the out-line, and the Minister that finished the design.^[7] George had the satisfaction of seeing Stanley increased beyond what his most ardent wishes could have desired. Most of the nobility, and many of the rich commoners, in imitation of their Sovereign, erected magnificent palaces; it grew the fashion among the higher order of his subjects to erect houses at Stanley. The Dukes of Suffolk, Buckingham, Richmond, Kent, and Bridgewater, the Earls of Surry, Winchelsea, Middleton and Bury, and Mr. Molesworth, particularly distinguished themselves by the splendour of their palaces, amongst many others. But what gave a prodigious increase to this noble city was the erection of the senate house: that noble building, which is now the admiration of all Europe, was the master-piece of the celebrated Moor. The front is certainly one of the finest pieces of architecture in the world. It was finished in 1713. The same year the parliament assembled in it; and here I cannot help quoting a passage in their address, as the praise it contains was perfectly merited by this great Monarch.—"Assembled in this edifice, which is one of the many marks of your Majesty's magnificence, and princely encouragement of the arts and sciences, we cannot omit congratulating your Majesty on the completion of so noble a monument of your grandeur and the nation's glory. And we return your Majesty our most dutiful acknowledgements, for so splendid a mark of your esteem for your parliament, which led you to erect so magnificent a senate house out of your private revenue. We join with the rest of your Majesty's subjects in expressing our admiration of your royal and princely virtues; your noble encouragement of the arts and sciences, adds a fresh lustre to the title of hero, which your Majesty's great actions had before most justly conferred."— This session voted the King a million sterling for the senate house, and granted five hundred thousand pounds a year *till his Majesty's building should be finished.*

Nothing could exceed the magnificence of Gilbert's plan for this glorious city. The houses were all built to form one general front on each side of every street. Nothing was used but Portland stone. The streets were broad, well paved, and the buildings not too high. Many noble squares were marked out; and some finished. The theatre was the work of his Majesty himself, who drew the plan, and showing it to Gilbert, that great man told the King it had not a single fault;—but this compliment had not sincerity enough in it. It certainly contains some blemishes, but is undoubtedly a work of genius. The three centuries before his Majesty's reign did not produce so fine a building. Its simplicity and grandeur are admirable.

The academy of painting was another institution which would alone have rendered the memory of any Monarch dear to the arts and sciences. It was reserved for the age of George VI. to be graced with a list of great artists in this country, whose works should render their own names as well as his immortal. From the foundation of the English monarchy to the age of George, Britain had never seen a painter that could rank in the first class of foreign artists. But though this great King could not create, yet he drew by his encouragements and rewards, artists from their retirements, and set them to work. No genius ever met with even a rebuke from George; merit was sure to be rewarded; and excellence in any art the certain road to fortune. Gilbert was the architect of the building, and its grandeur is well known; the President of this academy had a salary of two thousand pounds a year; ten seats, each five hundred; and forty young artists were maintained, and had apartments allotted them, with pensions of one hundred pounds a year each. Nothing was ever better planned to promote the progress of this delightful art; and its success in England under this reign was accordingly prodigious. Nicholson, an English artist, and whose name will for ever stand foremost in the list of painters was the President of the academy. Besides which appointment he was loaded with riches, and created a Baronet. The battle of the angels, in the salon of the palace, which this great man painted, is second to no picture in the world. Tomkins, Vere, and Norton, were all English artists, and not inferior to the celebrated Italians of the age of Leo X. The first was equal to Correggio himself, and the last exceeded Dominichi and Guido. Who does not glow with ardour at the remembrance of the works of these divine masters? Who does not regret their loss?—they are gone, and have left but few behind them that can pretend to any degree of competition. The other artists that had seats in the academy are well known: Simpson painted the Jupiter Olympos in the salon of Apollo; a picture which would alone have immortalised him. The most splendid court in Europe was sure to be attended with a multitude of foreign artists. Spinoza, Martileat, and Carvianté, were received in the most distinguished manner by the King, and had each pensions of five hundred pounds granted them, besides being liberally paid for their works. Never was any art so much obliged to a Sovereign, as that of painting to George VI.

The palace itself, which has for so many years been the delight and wonder of Britain, was finished in 1915, eight years after its foundation. Never was any building raised so

expeditiously.—It was, indeed, astonishing; but, the King sparing no expense, Gilbert finished this superb edifice in so short a time, by means of the infinite number of hands he kept constantly employed on it. It would be endless to describe this amazing pile of building; and it has already been done in all the languages of Europe. The famous Escorial of Philip the Ild. of Spain, and Versailles of Lewis XIV. of France, of both which we read such pompous accounts, were infinitely exceeded by Stanley. The shell of the building alone cost the King above eight millions sterling. The adorning and furnishing it was the work of above fifty years, and the expense infinite. The ceilings and apartments were painted by Nicholson, Tomkins, Vere, Norton, and many other celebrated artists. The King had no sooner begun to build than he sent connoisseurs through all Europe to collect paintings, statues, rarities, books, and manuscripts, and in these commissions he spared no expense. He even dispatched Ambassadors to Constantinople, and throughout all Asia, to make collections, and always choosing the properest men for executing his commands, he succeeded better than any Monarch that ever attempted to tread in his footsteps. The palace of Stanley thus became the repository of all the curiosities which the world afforded. No wonder his palace became so celebrated, and drew such numbers of foreigners into England, when the collection of pictures and statues it contained were almost equal in value, and number of capital pieces, to what remained throughout all Europe; and his library contained above thirteen hundred thousand valuable books and manuscripts.

This glorious building was not only the residence of royalty, but might properly be called the Temple of the Muses. In his hours of relaxation from business the King here conversed with Reynolds, that great genius, who united the elegance of Mason and the genius of [Shakespeare](#): with Young, whose comedies far exceeded those of the celebrated Symonds: with Pine, who, to the inventive imagination of [Milton](#), added the correctness and harmony of [Pope](#). What a memorable epoch was it in history, when a George VI. conversed with three great poets, in a palace built by Gilbert, and painted by Nicholson....

From Chapter 9

..... But there was one circumstance which pleased the King in this, as in some other sessions—its meeting at Stanley; where he had summoned them. He there found himself in the midst of his own creation, and was never so well pleased, as when he was engaged in raising noble piles of architecture; in conversing with men of genius, and planning future establishments in favour of the arts and sciences. Had the other Princes of Europe been possessed of such a philosophic disposition, George would never have attacked his neighbours; he was far more pleased to be at the head of an academy at Stanley, than of a victorious army, conquering a great kingdom.

Four years were now elapsed since George had been able to attend his buildings at this noble city with that care and over-sight which he desired. His residence there was but by

snatches; he now and then caught a month flying, but the city was much enlarged in his absence. He had entrusted the management of the buildings to Gilbert; but every one who built houses, were left at liberty in every point but the front; the side of every street formed a regular one, and fancy itself could not form an idea of any thing more truly magnificent than all the streets of Stanley: they exhibited all that was great and elegant, with the utmost variety, that genius could invent; and as this superb city was evidently become the metropolis of the three, or rather four kingdoms, the streets increased prodigiously: most of the nobility and gentry spent their winters at Stanley; the seat of every thing that could charm the wise, the rich, and the luxurious. London was already degenerated into a mere trading capital; and the King was every day planning the removal of those offices, which it was in his power to transport to his favourite city.

His Majesty ordered Comins, the architect, to draw the plan of an edifice designed for the Chancery: that ingenious architect brought him the sketch of the building as it now remains; but it was not equal to some other works at Stanley, nor indeed to several churches of Comins's raising, in which he was peculiarly excellent.—Yet the Chancery is a very noble building, and does honour to its author. It contains immense apartments for the several courts of law. But the grand design which drew the attention of the whole kingdom; was, the cathedral of St. John, which was raising by the great Gilbert;—that great man, whose invention perhaps was never exceeded, was indebted to nothing but his imagination for the design of that astonishing edifice: the architecture, grandeur, and extent, far exceed St. Peter's at Rome; and is certainly one of the greatest monuments of George's magnificence, and even a wonder of the world. In the year 1721, Stanley, besides this superb cathedral, containing forty-three parish churches, many of them famous over the whole world for their architecture and magnificence; and was four miles in length, and near as much in breadth.

Among those glorious establishments which reflect so bright a lustre on the reign of this great King; one of the most distinguished was the academy of polite learning. It was certainly very wonderful, that all the kingdoms in Europe, should have their academies near four centuries before Great-Britain, but George supplied the want of every thing that reflected an honour on his country. This noble institution, consisted of a president, but the number of members was not limited; the former had two thousand pounds a year, and the latter three hundred each; the first creation was of twenty-three members: and perhaps no period of time can display a brighter union of geniuses. The most distinguished were, How, whose essays, letters, discourses, and poetical pieces, gained him such a great reputation, both for his learning and genius; he was the president. Reynolds, whose tragedies are so famous.—Young, the comic writer.—Price, the author of our British epic.—Minors, Wilson, and Philipson, all wrote both admirable tragedies and comedies,—Walpole, whose sketches on many subjects are so elegant and pleasing—Crouse, Charlton, and Earle, in history: Charlton's History of Britain was perhaps never exceeded.—But it would be tedious to name all their celebrated works,

which are now in every body's hands. Never was any institution better calculated for refining the English language, or for promoting literature in all its branches. The prizes which were every year given for the best tragedies, comedies, and essays, on variety of subjects, at the same time that they raised a spirit of emulation, were a means of enriching the votaries of genius.

George was solely bent on rendering the city of Stanley, the seat of every thing that was either useful or elegant: the Duke of Suffolk, his favourite Minister, hinted to him one day in conversation, the foundation of a university. The King considered of the scheme, and liking a plan that would adorn the city with so many noble buildings as the colleges; determined at last to put it in execution. The academy of architecture furnished plans, and the King gave each member a noble opportunity of rivalling each other. The author of each plan that was approved, was permitted by the King to be the architect. Nothing could excel the magnificent establishments which were made in favour of this new university: the professors, masters, &c. were all appointed with the utmost consideration; none but men of unblemished morals, and great learning, were advanced to any posts in it. Scholars, not only from all parts of the King's dominions, but from all Europe, flocked to be admitted in the university of Stanley, which had many advantages, that could be enjoyed by no other: what still increased this ardour, was its cheapness, the bounty of the King, made it one of the cheapest seminaries for the education of youth, in the world.— No plan could have ornamented Stanley with a greater number of noble edifices: all the colleges, but particularly St. George's, are admirable, and perhaps the world cannot boast such a number of buildings with so few faults. St. John's is the worst; but St. George's, of which Gilbert was the architect, is inferior to no edifice of its kind in the world.

The Arsenal was the work of Salviola; and is undoubtedly the most stupendous building of that nature in Europe: the plainness of the front is admirable: and the situation, making one side of that noble square^[2], was chose with great judgement. It was kept constantly filled with artillery, and all sorts of ammunition, to an immense amount: another front was composed of the War Office; a third of the Admiralty; and the fourth of the Barracks; all buildings that would challenge the world for rivals, and which together formed the most perfect and beautiful square in Europe.

But while these celebrated piles of magnificence were raising: the King was employing some part of his time in laying out the gardens of his palace; he neglected any such additions for some years, the woods which almost surrounded him were of themselves so beautiful: but at last he formed the scheme of sketching gardens equal to his palace: he drew several plans himself; these amusements and employments were worthy such a Monarch as George, and no man could succeed in them better: behind the palace, the vast woods of oak and beech, almost joined the building. The King laid out a grass lawn, to the back front, half a mile long, and a quarter broad, and round it to a considerable distance, made it beautifully picturesque: the appearance of art was entirely banished;

nature was never forced, but assisted: he dug an immense piece of water, of one hundred acres, and raised a mountain by it; which is certainly one of the most beautiful spots in the world: by means of a prodigious quantity of masonry, he formed many precipices, which in some places almost hung over the water, these were covered with mould to a great depth, and the whole hill presented the view of one beautiful hanging wood of beech, here and there adorned with a little temple, or spire, peeping just above the trees; which made the whole most beautifully romantic: from off the hill, was seen at some distance, a noble prospect, and you looked down on the lake, surrounded with woods and lawns.—Nothing unnatural was seen throughout the whole garden: no studied magnificence: very few fountains, but many cascades, which tumbling down artificial rocks, lost themselves in meandering currents, through the embrowning shades. In this beautiful garden, there was scarcely one strait walk, except the grand lawn above-mentioned: every thing was irregular and natural. In many places sheep, and other cattle were feeding; and as many foreign birds, and harmless beasts, as possible were procured to run about the woods, which were full of hares, rabbits, and pheasants. In short this garden, which may be considered as a work of eminent genius, was formed on the mere plan of guiding nature: the grass was almost every where kept in beautiful order; but the woods had no other improvement, than intermixing the most beautiful flowering shrubs irregularly among the trees; and instead of letting the surface be generally flat; hills, and a thousand imperceptible variations were made, to render it more pleasing: the water naturally ran in one channel, but the King threw it into many, and it fell down a variety of cascades; but all without any appearance of art. Never was any thing on the whole more beautiful, or more truly picturesque; these gardens, which were about five miles in circuit, may be considered as the finest in the world, and far beyond those celebrated ones of Versailles, of which historians speak so highly.—It may perhaps be thought below the dignity of history, to give any account of these things; but the true use of history is to describe mankind; and the hero of this work, no where appears to greater advantage, than in his amusements at Stanley; for all the glorious works which there are the wonder of the world, were but the diversion of George, and his relaxation from more necessary concerns.....