

THE LEOPOLD MEMORIALS

At St. George's Church, Esher

By Reg Crabbe

George III had nine sons and six daughters but in 1815, after more than 50 years on the throne, there was only one grandchild eligible to succeed to the throne of England. She was Charlotte, the daughter of the Prince Regent (later King George IV) and of his estranged wife Caroline. Small wonder, then, that her marriage in 1815 to Leopold, Prince of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, was marked by the grant to him for life of the mansion of Claremont. Sadly, his bride, Princess Charlotte, died two years later in child bed, delivered of a still-born son. Prince Leopold continued to be entitled to occupy Claremont until his death in 1865, even though he became King of the Belgians in 1831.

Following the death of Princess Charlotte the edict went out that an heir to the throne must be produced. As a result, three babies were born in 1819 - Victoria, daughter of the Duke of Kent and two boys to younger princes, one of whom became George V of Hanover. Victoria frequently visited Leopold at Claremont and regarded him as her favourite uncle - as witness the inscription on one of the memorials which are the subject of this article, where she describes him as "the uncle who held a Father's place in Her affection". Esher Parish has two memorials commissioned by her - one to Leopold and Charlotte in the North Aisle of St George's Church and the other in the west tower vestry of Christ Church.



The memorial to Leopold and Charlotte is very large - over 12 feet wide - and was originally mounted on the staircase at Claremont. It was commissioned by Queen Victoria as late as 1880 and was sculpted by F. J. Williamson, almost certainly in his studio at the rear of his house in Esher High Street, now The Grapes. It was given to St. George's Church in 1910 by the Duchess of Albany, Queen Victoria's daughter-in-law. It consists of three panels. The centre contains a scene sculpted in high relief depicting Charlotte and Leopold dispensing charity to the villagers of Esher. The scene in the left hand panel shows Charlotte on her death bed with Leopold kneeling at her side. In low relief above the bed appears the apotheosis of the Princess - an interesting revival of a practice which had been in abeyance since the time of the Stuarts. The right hand panel depicts Leopold accepting the crown while Britannia looks on approvingly.

The memorial to Leopold was first placed in St. George's Chapel, Windsor shortly after his death in 1865. It was later given to Christ Church by Queen Victoria. The main panel is in very high relief and depicts Leopold, wearing uniform and cloak which drapes his legs, lying in state on a couch. In front of the couch is a lion couchant while above the King's effigy are two winged angels carrying shields with the English and Belgian Royal Arms. Under the main monument are two inscriptions. That on the left summarizes Leopold's life and marriages and records that he lies buried at Lacken in Belgium by the side of his second wife, Princess Louise d'Orleans. That on the right is the inscription I have already quoted, expressing Queen Victoria's deep affection for her uncle.

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