

A Romance of the Coaching Days

POLLY PAGE'S MARRIAGE

A FLIRTATION between a prince and an innkeeper's daughter, with sugary music to taste, was a popular ingredient of the old type of musical comedy. We had a somewhat similar whiff of romance in the Pageant, when Polly Page paid a tearful farewell to Louis XVIII as he rode off in a magnificent coach-and-four. But this wasn't fiction; it was a very accurate representation of an actual happening.

Mary (nicknamed Polly) Page was one of the most remarkable women in local history, and her fame spread far beyond her home town. She was the eldest of three sisters, and I have checked the date of her birth in the church register: 'Mary, daughter of John and Mary Page, born on September 21, 1787.' Sarah followed in 1789 and Catherine in 1795. There was also at least one brother: Richard Frederick, born in 1792.

THE COACHING DAYS

The head of the family, John Page, had the good fortune to move into the King's Arms in time for the Coaching Days. For him it was literally a golden age. His inn, the rich man's port of call, was as busy as the railway station which took much of the traffic off the highway in 1837, three years before he died at the age of 92.

His three daughters were noted for their good looks, but none was so fair as Polly. Henry Nash, in *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted*, extolled her 'unvarying attention, charming manners and great conversational powers.' She 'had a great admiration for the aristocracy and held the peerage at her tongue's end. She could trace the pedigree of almost every family of note that honoured her with a call.'

Polly was about 20 years old when she first met Louis XVIII, who, after years of wandering from one country to another, came to England and established his exiled court at Hartwell House, near Aylesbury.

THE EXILE'S RETURN

On his frequent journeys to and from London, Louis, a sad little man in his fifties, was impressed by the lively young woman who assisted her father in running the King's Arms. Louis always contrived to see Polly Page while the horses of his coach were changed, and habitués of the King's Arms were not to be denied a little gossip.

BY

'BEORCHAM'

For seven years Louis lived at Hartwell. Then, in 1814, the fall of Napoleon opened the way for his return to France. The end of 24 years' exile was marked by celebrations at Aylesbury, where six young men mounted their horses to form a small bodyguard on the first stage of the king's journey to London, Dover and Calais. There were cheers, cheers all the way, and no town displayed greater enthusiasm than Berkhamsted.

The leader of the king's bodyguard was a young man named Fowler, who had attended Berkhamsted School and was said to have been the only Aylesbury resident who spoke French fluently—a facility which made him the confidant of many members of the exiled court. His son, J. K. Fowler, wrote *Echoes of*

Old Country Life in 1893 and said it was 'well known that a quarter of an hour or so would be spent in the ostensible act of changing horses while the king would flirt with the fair Polly.'

THE KING'S GUEST

After bidding Polly farewell—and inviting her to visit him in France—Louis continued on the next stage of the journey to Stanmore, where, at the Abercorn Arms, the Prince Regent, several royal princes from the Continent, officers of state and a guard of cavalry assembled to receive him.

And Polly did indeed go to France. She was the king's guest at the Tuileries and returned home with 'many valuable souvenirs of the interesting event, which were treasured with as much care as family relics.'

But once again the gossipers were unkind to Polly, and she published a denial of the scandalous rumours that were circulating about her friendship with Louis.

A newspaper cutting dated October 1830, preserved at the County Record Office, Hertford, states that Polly's conduct was 'perfectly correct.' She had been as 'remarkable for meeting with extraordinary circumstances as for maintaining an irreproachable character in the course of her life.'

POLLY'S MARRIAGE

The writer of the article then gives some information which is new to me: 'Some years ago she was addressed with a view to matrimony by a young man in the neighbourhood, and, after a due time of courtship, was married. The young man was possessed of handsome property; and his next of kin, being averse to the union, applied to the Ecclesiastical Court for a dissolution of the match, and obtained a sentence of nullity on account of the young man being under age and not having had the concurrence of guardians at the period of his marriage.'

'Not very long afterwards the young man's love, suspended only by the ecclesiastical process, revived . . . and he sued his former bride to renew her union with him. She consented . . . but insidious fate has decided that the parties . . . should never, uninterruptedly, be one.'

'The young man, from what caprice or cause it is difficult to ascertain, was pleased to halt in the pursuit of his original object and to take another fair one as his second wife; and she con-

tinues under her resumed name of Miss Page.

'She, however, possessed a spirit which could not submit . . . without seeking some solace in redress. Miss Page brought an action against her quondam husband, Mr. Monk, for breach of marriage-promise, and the quondam wife obtained a verdict against the man who had formerly been her husband, with considerable damages.'

'To complete the character of these singular proceedings, which romantic as they appear are not coloured, it may be added that the latter proceedings were, it is said, promoted and assisted by a character no less curious than the occurrences themselves—the late eccentric Earl of Bridgewater.'

WHO WAS MR. MONK?

I invite the help of others in tracking down Mr. Monk, Polly's erstwhile husband. Is it possible that he or his family owned or at least gave their name to Monk's House and Monk's Cottage, near the Post Office?

The article from which I have quoted appeared in October 1830, a few weeks after our parish clerk wrote the following in the register of burials: 'Mary Page, September 1, 1830.' Presumably this referred to John Page's wife, who bore the same name as the daughter nicknamed Polly. A similar entry in the register, dated April 28, 1865, presumably recorded the death of Polly.

By the way, a year after John Page's death in 1840, his second daughter, Sarah, was so excited when Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort called at the King's Arms that she collapsed and died.



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BERKHAMSTED REVIEW . JULY 1966

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