

Return of the King

by Tom Sykes

The Foreign Ministers have taken part in these rejoicings, and I also, in addition to the illuminations have kept before the door a fountain of wine and other liquors, according to the custom of the country, much to the delight of the people amid acclamations. In these three days, in my journey to and from the court and in previous celebrations at the proclamation etc. I have spent just 75l. sterling, an insignificant sum in comparison with what others have expended, Denmark alone having spent over 200l. on illuminations these last three evenings. As all of these expenses are extraordinary I hope the Senate will allow them in my accounts.

London, the 11th June, 1660.

Francesco Giavarina (Venetian Ambassador to England), to the Doge and Senate

Francesco Giavarina was not alone in waking up on the 30th May with a hangover and the creeping realisation that someone would have to pay for the party. On Tuesday 29 May 1660, his thirtieth birthday, Charles Stuart returned to London for the first time since he left as a boy at the start of his father's long and bloody civil war. He rode into a city which a decade previously had looked on unblinking as Parliament severed his father's head from his body and the nation from its monarchy. He had attempted to return before, but many plans and plots came to nothing. Even his invasion at the head of a Scottish army had failed. It had taken the death of Oliver Cromwell two years earlier, the crumbling of Parliamentary authority, and a distinct lack of options for his time to come.

Parliament had only declared him as King on the 8th May yet he found himself at Blackheath, on that Tuesday morning, face to face with an army he now commanded which was still coming to terms with its former enemy at its head. From Blackheath, the King made his way to London Bridge and into the City proper. The route itself was a straightforward one. From London Bridge Charles made his way across the City via old St Pauls, along Fleet Street to Charing Cross and then down the Strand to the Palace of Whitehall. Although the old medieval buildings on the route were swept away by the fire of London in 1666, the ghosts of these streets live on today, and his walk can be easily followed. The final destination that day, the magnificent Banqueting House built by Charles I, still stands. To get a feel for the crowd and chaos in 1660, try doing the walk on a Monday lunch hour amidst the workers, tourists and traffic of modern London.

The route may have been familiar but London was transformed that day. Cramped and claustrophobic, the medieval streets - intimate at the best of times - were choked with people eager to glimpse a man so unknown to them. A path through

the people was carved by militia men and by the members of the Companies of the City, resplendent in their Livery. Above their heads, the streets were festooned with tapestry, velvet, streamers and May flowers, each proud household undoubtedly trying to outdo its neighbours. Between the uniforms of the bands, the liveries of the companies, and Charles' own entourage, it would have been a Technicolor day in the wooden, creaking City.

Remarkably, it took the King and his procession several hours to travel the route. Adding to the difficulty of manoeuvring a King and his cavalcade through the crowd, Charles was keen that his subjects got a good glimpse of him: bare headed and beaming, he waved his hat at the passers by. Along the way various dignitaries demonstrated their respect for the King in symbolic, orchestrated events. At a specially-built stand outside St Pauls, the King received from the ministers of the City a bible worth £150 pounds. Earlier in the procession, the Lord Mayor had presented his sword in fealty, which the King returned, restating his authority in the process.



The Banqueting House, Whitehall

continued...

The Return of the King (cont.)

Contemporary accounts offer a picture of wonderment and amazement at the manner of the king's return and the reception of his procession. There had been no bloodshed in this act of returning, it looked to all like an act of Providence, at least that is what the authorities hoped. What marks this day from later celebratory acts, such as the coronation in April 1661, seems to have been the sheer vitality, noise and communality of the day. All the contemporary accounts reflect this feeling, and in particular the great noise in the City:

...he entered London on horseback between his two brothers... with great pomp and triumph... amid the acclamations and blessings of the people.

Francesco Giavarina

Such shouting as the oldest man alive never heard for the defence of his Majesty

Diary of Thomas Rugg

Of course, the events of 29 May did not solve England's problems, and not all of the people were happy with the return of the king. In the weeks preceding his arrival and for many weeks afterwards, the delicate task of establishing a lasting restoration settlement was pursued. The smoking out of those suspected of having been involved in the regicide of Charles I added a bloody tinge to the time. This was reflected in the many effigies of Cromwell that sat enthroned atop celebratory bonfires.

The King's triumphant parade ended with those bonfires littering the streets and extravagant fireworks, which wowed the City (one display being so impressive the man responsible was knighted for it). In a letter to his sister and in his statement to Parliament at the end of the procession even Charles, the consummate performer, appeared overwhelmed by the reception he had received:

To Princess Henriette-Anne (Minette)
May 26, 1660

My head is so prodigiously dazed by the acclamation of the people and by the quantities of business that I know not whether I am writing sense or no...



My Lords

I am so disordered by my journey, and with the noise still sounding in my ears (which I confess was pleasing to me, because it expressed the affections of my people), as I am unfit at the present to make such a reply as I desire.

Charles had returned victorious to his capital, and for one day at least it seemed that all Londoners were indeed his people.



About Tom Sykes

London Historians member Tom Sykes is an historian, researcher and writer with a particular interest in the Seventeenth Century. He holds a Masters degree in Ancient Jewish History and Culture. Tom's blog is called *In Pursuit of History*, inpursuitofhistory.com.