

REMEMBERING WATERLOO IN THE REGIONAL LANDSCAPE

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The Battle of Waterloo was one of Churchill's 'punctuation marks in history', significant not only for bringing to an end twenty-two years of European war, but for its profound impact upon the map of the Continent. Local manufacturers were quick to capitalise upon the event, but it also left some more surprising legacies in the region.

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'A felicitously preserved moated manor'. Brinsop Court, Herefordshire, bought by David Ricardo in 1817. Ricardo fuelled and then profited from shareholder uncertainty over the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo.



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'Waterloo churches' perhaps made the greatest impact on the West Midlands skyline after the Battle. St George's in Kidderminster dates from 1824.

The importance of the Battle of Waterloo was not lost on the manufacturers of the West Midlands, who found immediately lucrative ways to celebrate the outcome. At Bilston they made enamel boxes, decorated with images of Marshal Blücher, the Prussian general. The pottery firms of Staffordshire produced figurines of Wellington, as well as souvenir plates, while the Birmingham ballad-makers dashed off newly minted songs to celebrate the demise of 'Boney'.

But the battle had a longer legacy than this, seen in many surprising ways. Let us take, perhaps, the most extreme of examples: a large hole in the ground in Hockley and a stately home in Herefordshire.

Depression leaves its mark

The post-1815 years marked one of the worst depressions in British economic history, as the government attempted to claw back the national debt, and trade and manufacture spiralled downwards. That impact was felt acutely in Birmingham, when the European market for its goods began to dry up. With unprecedented levels of unemployment and a workhouse

full to overflowing, the Birmingham overseers were forced to introduce labour schemes to find work for its jobless men.

One of those schemes carved out a permanent marker on the Jewellery Quarter, where applicants for relief were paid three-farthings a barrow to dig sand out of the Hockley sand mines and wheel it to the canal. Digging continued for more than twenty years, creating two cavernous excavations, which now form the central feature of the cemeteries at Key Hill and Warstone Lane. It is most clearly visible at the catacombs of the Anglican cemetery. Not everyone, however, found their lifestyle pinched.

Brinsop Court

Brinsop Court is one of Herefordshire's finest houses, six or so miles north-west of the county town. Pevsner describes it as 'a felicitously preserved moated manor', set in its own secluded valley. First built in the thirteenth century, the house and its 800 acres were purchased in 1817 by David Ricardo. Ricardo was one of the leading classical economists of his age, his theory of 'comparative national

advantage' forged in the years of Napoleonic turmoil. Ricardo made his fortune from stockbroking, and was not above rigging the market to his advantage. One particularly lucrative punt was on the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo. Ricardo scared shareholders into selling British stock, in the mistaken belief that Wellington would lose, and then bought them at a knock-down price.

By such means Ricardo turned his modest income into a fortune, which funded a land grab worthy of Napoleon himself.

Written in the streets

Waterloo is written through the fabric of our region, and the victory over Napoleon ushered in a string of street and house names across the nation. Across the West Midlands there are more than twenty streets named in commemoration either of Waterloo or the Duke of Wellington, a figure which could be greatly increased by widening the map. In Burslem there is Waterloo Road (completed in 1817), and in the Ivy House area of Hanley is Waterloo Street, Wellington Street and Wellington Terrace.

Waterloo Street in central Birmingham was at the heart of the Pemberton estate, while Wellington Road formed a cornerstone of the development of the Calthorpe estate in Edgbaston. Waterloo Road in Kings Heath, though created much later, takes its name from a farm built shortly after the battle. The Dukes of Cleveland cut Waterloo Road in the 1820s to open up their estate in Wolverhampton, while Waterloo Road in Smethwick provided a similar spinal cord to the expanding town. The marvellous Waterloo Hotel nearby (an Edwardian building, high on the 'at risk' register) takes its name from the road, rather than from the battle itself.

And in those many Wellington Roads it is not uncommon also to find an Apsley House, named in honour of the Iron Duke's London residence. Wellington Road in Edgbaston boasts one such, as does Wellington Street in Cradley Heath.

Churches, but no statues

What is absent in the West Midlands are memorials to the Duke, in striking contrast to the rest of the country. Perhaps Wellington's later political career, and his steadfast resistance to Reform, diluted or expunged any

lasting gratitude for his military exploits in our region. Perhaps the greatest impact of the battle upon the West Midlands was on its skyline, and the so-called 'Waterloo churches', funded as an act of thanksgiving by the government in 1818. St Thomas, Bath Row, was one such church, though a later European war has reduced it to little more than a tower. More striking and complete is St George's in Kidderminster, finished in 1824.

Local stories

Waterloo, then, left its mark, and no more so than in the stories it left behind, which only grew with the telling and the passage of time.

The artist, Benjamin Robert Haydon, it would appear, first tells the tale of the Birmingham button seller, who made an excursion from Brussels to Waterloo as a tourist, having never experienced a battle before. Wellington added his unexpected encounter with the man to his catalogue of after-dinner stories.

If doubts have been raised about that tale, so have they concerning the memorable exchange between the Duke and Henry William Paget.

At the exact moment of victory, almost the last volley of enemy grape-shot lashed into Paget who was riding close by the Duke of Wellington. 'By God, sir,' exclaimed Paget, 'I've lost my leg!' 'By God, sir,' replied the Duke, 'so you have!'

What is certainly true, however, is that Paget's famous leg, interred near the battlefield, became a tourist attraction in its own right, while the rest of him rose to become Marquess of Anglesey, with a family seat at Plas Newydd.

On his death, however, Paget chose interment beside his Staffordshire ancestors in Lichfield Cathedral. Having had one foot in the grave for almost forty years, the brave Marquess now had both.

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Further reading:

M. Port, *Six Hundred New Churches: The Church Building Commission 1818-1856* (Spire Books, 2006).

Read more about Bilston enamels on The History of Wolverhampton website at www.wolverhamptonhistory.org.uk by entering 'Bilston enamels' into the search box.

Friends of Key Hill and Warstone Lane Cemeteries at www.fkwc.org.