

SOCIETIES

Journey to Coburg

SALLY LAMM LEARNS ABOUT THE FASCINATING LIFE OF PRINCE ALBERT ON THE RECENT GERMAN SOCIETY STUDY TRIP TO THE FRANCONIAN CITY

On 6 September, in tropical temperatures, the German Society came from the four points of the compass to gather in the historic and beautiful town of Coburg in Franconia (northern Bavaria). Soheila Dayani, Membership Secretary, joined us and discussions with her were highly fruitful. Sadly, Heidi English, who had put such effort into organising the trip, could not be there due to an unfortunate accident, but she is now on the mend.

Bavaria is renowned for its cuisine and hospitality, and this was our concern on the Friday evening. But on Saturday we turned to the topic of our weekend: Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg und Gotha. We began with a guided tour of Schloss Rosenau – the palace where the prince was born. Our witty and informative guide, who was to accompany us round the Veste on Sunday, brought the history of the palace to life and made many apposite comparisons with the present day.

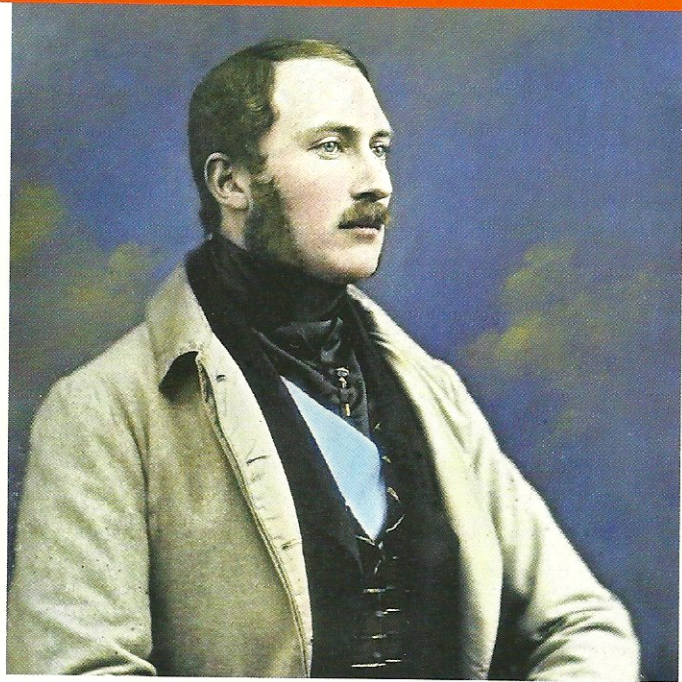
We then heard talks on Prince Albert by two knowledgeable speakers, who might be described as Prince Albert's greatest fans. Baron Lexden, the official historian to the Conservative Party and the Carlton Club, spoke on the topic of Prince Albert and politics. Beginning with constitutional monarchy, he stressed the important part played by Prince Albert in this transition – a contribution much discussed in his lifetime. While the young Queen Victoria initially paid little attention to constitutional matters, showing a marked preference for the Whigs, Albert sought to lift the monarchy above party politics, while maintaining a strong interest in political matters.

The Prince made an eloquent plea for the monarch's right to take an interest in affairs of state, and introduced the Queen to the concept of following what her ministers were doing – a tradition that persists to this day. This was not always welcome and he was often subjected to harsh criticism, but by the time of his death, Prince Albert had won the respect of politicians and was widely mourned.

Our second speaker was John Davis, Head of the School of Social Sciences and Professor of History and International Relations at Kingston University. He is also involved in the Advisory Board of the Prince Albert Society (see www.prinz-albert-gesellschaft.de).

Professor Davis started by saying that Germany had already had a strong cultural impact in Britain by the time Albert arrived there. Many British scientists went to Germany to study, and German artists were consulted on the rebuilding of the Palace of Westminster following a fire in 1834. It was against this backdrop that Prince Albert took a keen interest in education. In 1843, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Cambridge, and then set about reforming it. When he became chancellor, he had the outmoded curriculum reviewed and was able to add a number of subjects, for which he was widely praised.

Albert also advocated education reform in Ireland, and was instrumental in the establishment of Queens University. History and modern languages were included in the curriculum, but not two



MAKING AN IMPACT

Early, hand-coloured daguerreotype of Prince Albert in 1848

other subjects whose study he advocated: Celtic languages and English history. Among Albert's achievements was the Great Exhibition of 1851. He supported the abolition of slavery and the repeal of the Corn Laws, made Buckingham Palace efficient, and his Oxbridge reforms relaxed the theological hold on the curriculum.

After lunch, we enjoyed a stroll around the grounds of Schloss Rosenau before returning to Coburg. We had dinner in the town and there was then ample opportunity to sample its cultural delights on a night when all the museums were open and offering a broad spectrum of entertainment.

The balmy weather changed overnight, and we set off in the morning rain for the Veste fortress, which was the winter residence of the Saxe-Coburg und Gotha family. Known as the Crown of Franconia, it is visible from all directions for miles around. The building has many interesting exhibits and associations – for example, Martin Luther was given refuge here following his stand against Rome. The museum's collection of paintings, glass and weaponry merits a far longer visit.

After a final meal in another of Coburg's excellent restaurants, we set off home at the end of an enjoyable and informative weekend. Thanks to Heidi English for arranging the trip, and to Jadwiga Bobrowska for taking over and coping so calmly with all the problems thrown at her over the weekend. She deserves a medal for services rendered.

Alas, there isn't sufficient space to cover the challenging locks to the hotel rooms, the surprise appearance of the fire brigade during our visit to Schloss Rosenau, the blushing brides dotted around Rosenau Park, or why Johann Strauss was in fact a Coburger. Yes, dear reader, you should have been there.

For the full text of Lord Lexden's talk on Prince Albert, see his website at www.alistairlexden.org.uk.

DATES FOR THE DIARY

Anglophoner Tag: 20-22 June, Potsdam.

Contact Stephanie Tarling: setarling@t-online.de.

'Royal Hanover' German Society Study Weekend: 5-7 September, Hanover. Contact Brian and Ursula Rouvray: bu.rouvray@web.de.