

The Duke Who Detested Daylight (News Item)

The story of the lonely, eccentric Duke of Portland, who was seldom seen by anyone but builders during his lifetime, is one of the strangest to be found.

Born in 1800, he lived what appeared to be a reasonably normal life as a young man. But he was awkward in the company of woman and a confirmed bachelor. And gradually, his acute shyness took over his whole personality.

From the moment he moved into Welbeck Abbey until he died, he went to the most extraordinary lengths to avoid contact with people.

For years he was completely absorbed in building underground rooms and tunnels. The whole place looked like a construction site with mountains of builders' rubble, wheelbarrows and shovels. Hundreds of workmen were employed at a time.

The underground ballroom alone measured 174 feet long and 64 feet wide and had a lift able to carry 20 guests at a time from the surface. Two thousand people could have danced with ease under giant chandeliers and a ceiling painted to resemble a glowing sunset.

Why did this lonely man build a ballroom? Presumably, in his heart the Duke longed to be a different kind of creature altogether – a man who gave parties and balls and received his guests with lavish hospitality. But he never summoned up the courage.

But the Duke's greatest delight was to build tunnels. There were 15 miles of them running underneath his park, linking the rooms with each other. One tunnel, a mile and a quarter long, was wide enough to take two carriages and was eerily lit by domed skylights during the day and hundreds of gas jets by night.

The Duke was said at one time to be one of the best judges of horseflesh in England and his stables at Welbeck Abbey held nearly 100 horses, none of which he ever rode.

For some obscure reason he ordered all the great, bare unused rooms in the Abbey to be painted in a most unsubtle shade of pink and in the corner of each, exposed to full view, was installed a lavatory.

The only time he would venture out for a walk was in the dead of night when a woman servant carrying a lantern was sent ahead of him, with strict orders not to speak or look behind.

He had a most peculiar style of dressing. Sometimes on sweltering hot summer days he was glimpsed wearing a full-length coat. On other occasions he put on three coats of different sizes, all at once, one on top of the other. Whatever the weather, he carried with him an old umbrella and a heavy topcoat. He took to wearing a dark brown wig – he had boxes of them in his bedroom – and on top of it he would perch a hat, nearly two feet high.

In spite of his strange behaviour, he was a good and thoughtful employer. His workmen were paid good wages and were given, in addition, an umbrella to protect them from the rain and a donkey on which to ride to work.

Welbeck Abby was in a state of utter chaos when he suddenly died in his 80th year. His cousin, arriving with his family in a carriage to take up the inheritance,

found the drive overgrown with tangled weeds and grasses, and strewn with rubble.

When the great front door was thrown open, the sixth Duke was staggered to see that the hall had no floor. He went on to discover the strange pink rooms with the lavatories, and then to find all the treasures of Welbeck Abbey stuffed away like worthless bric-a-brac.