

IN SEARCH OF A STATUE

Sir William Peel V.C., K.C.B., third son of Prime Minister Peel, was the archetypical Victorian hero.

He was born in 1824 and entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman at the age of 14. He saw action at the siege of Acre in 1840 and was soon promoted until by the 1850s, he was the youngest Captain in the Navy. In those days, when there was no action, Naval Officers were laid off on half pay. William Peel took time off to organise an expedition to the Nubian Desert in Egypt and wrote a book about his adventures entitled 'A Ride through the Nubian Desert'.

At the siege of Sebastopol in 1856, he was one of the first recipients of the Victorian Cross for outstanding bravery. He went on to perform two other acts of bravery, which would have won him a bar to his medal today. He was commander of the Naval Brigade during the Crimean war.

In September 1856, he commissioned HMS Shannon, a powerful 50 gun steam frigate and sailed to Hong Kong with the governor, Lord Elgin. On his return, his ship was diverted to Calcutta on the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny. On reaching Calcutta, he unloaded the latest armaments from his ship and had them hauled to Allahabad and then Lucknow. The Naval Brigade's guns and Peel's cool leadership played a major part in the suppression of the Mutiny and the relief of Lucknow. During the battle for Lucknow, he was injured by a sniper's bullet. He was transferred to Cawnpore on a cart, which had previously been used for smallpox victims, which he contracted and died on 27th April 1858 at the age of 33. He was a brilliant leader, who would have undoubtedly gone onto an outstanding career.

Peel by his heroism and untimely death was much lauded. Three marble statues were sculpted by William Theed. One is in Sir William's parish church at Sandy, Bedfordshire, one in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich and one in Kolkata (Calcutta), India. At this time, Calcutta was the capital of British India.

Four members of the Peel Society committee, Frances and Roger Bragger and Jan and Nigel Morris were planning a visit to Eastern India and were intrigued to find out what had happened to the statue after Independence. The Chairman, Nigel Morris, contacted the UK High Commission in Calcutta and was told that the statue had been removed from Calcutta city to the garden of the Governor's House at Barrackpore, 25km north of Calcutta. We were recommended to apply to the Governor for permission to visit the statue in the garden. This we did in September 2015. The High Commission also gave us a name of a contact in Calcutta, who may be able to organise it.

We were allowed to visit the gardens at the very last minute. We drove from our hotel in central Kolkata to Barackpore. It took us well over an hour to thread our way through the traffic, which includes cows, dogs, goats and other animals as well as thousands of taxis based on the 1948 Morris Oxford.

Our initial attempt to enter the gardens failed but Mr. Kapur, our local contact arranged with the Governor at the last minute. What a treat it was! 13 statues from Kolkata city have been saved from vandalism and are safe in the garden. All are bronze except for the Peel statue, which is marble. The Peel statue is erected between two pillars of a Greek style temple, which is a memorial to those that lost their lives in the service of their country capturing Java and Mauritius in 1810/11. This was part of the Napoleonic wars.

The bewiskered generals and governor generals are all very impressive and were intended to show the Indians how brilliant their rulers were!

On the way to Kolkata, we stopped at Lucknow and visited the Residency, which was besieged by the Indian rebels for 87 days initially and then 61 days in 1857. The largest number of VCs, 24, awarded in a day were won at the relief of Lucknow.. It was near the Residency that Sir William Peel was wounded. The Residency was never rebuilt by the British and now it is a monument to India's first war of Independence.

We thought that the Indians would like to send the statue back to Tamworth as it is a reminder of their colonial past. Mr Kapur said that they might consider it if we returned the Kooh-in-Noor diamond, so no chance!

The find of a statue in an Indian garden of somebody who often visited Tamworth and enjoyed his childhood at Drayton Manor was a moving experience.

Roger Bragger gives an interesting illustrated talk on Sir William Peel



LUCKNOW

On The left is the Doctors House, which was in the middle of the compound, still a ruin since 1857.

On the right is the Residents House. You can see the shell and bullet marks. This is a small museum about the siege.



FLAGSTAFF HOUSE—BARACKPORE

The two upper pictures show the position of the Peel statue. The bronze statue in front is George V.

The two bronze statues on horseback are fine examples of equestrian art.





Upper left shows Roger Bragger, Frances Bragger, Jan Morris and Nigel Morris.

Pictures of Sir William Peel VC KGB.

All pictures can be supplied on J-peg

End

Nigel Morris
Sunday, 29 November 2015