



*The
Remarkable
Baroness
Burdett-Coutts*

*by
Elizabeth J Read*

She was born Angela Georgina Burdett, daughter of Sir Francis Burdett, the Radical MP for Westminster, and his wife Sophia, daughter of Thomas Coutts, co-founder of Coutts Bank. She was born in 1814, that is to say a year before the battle of Waterloo, and five years before Queen Victoria was born; she died in 1906, at the age of 92, five years after the death of Queen Victoria.

There was nothing remarkable about her until 1837, the year of the Queen's accession. In that year Angela Georgina first acquired fame when, at the age of 23, she inherited a vast fortune, quoted at £80,000 a year, together with a grand house in Piccadilly, and in due course Holly Lodge, Highgate. All this was left to her by her step-grandmother, the Duchess of St Albans, who had previously been Mrs Thomas Coutts, second wife of Angela's maternal grandfather. It was Coutts money and property that Angela inherited, and she was required to take the name as well; she was known henceforward as Angela Georgina Burdett-Coutts, and that was the first modification of her name.

From then on she lived in the limelight; everything she did was news. She entertained royally, in both houses; she spent an immense amount on clothes and jewellery and travelling, but she was a very devout and serious-minded young lady, and she regarded this vast fortune as a trust, and a moral and social responsibility. With the help of various advisers, including presently the Duke of Wellington, her neighbour in Piccadilly, she embarked upon a life-long programme of good works and extreme generosity to all sorts and conditions of men and women, all round the world. It is no exaggeration to say that her name was known in the five continents.

She had the welfare of children particularly at heart, and played a large part in the early stages of the NSPCC (and also the RSPCA); she founded schools, churches and three colonial bishoprics; she helped costermongers, market traders, ex-prostitutes, Irish fishermen and Turkish peasants. She was much concerned for the

welfare of soldiers and tried to improve conditions in camps and hospitals in the Crimean War and the Boer War. In 1871, just over a hundred years ago, Queen Victoria created her a Baroness in her own right, in recognition of all this philanthropy. She was gazetted Baroness Burdett-Coutts, of Brookfield and Highgate in the County of Middlesex, and that was the final modification of her name.

All this time she had remained single. She had received countless proposals and had refused them all. The only man she had really wanted to marry was the Duke of Wellington. In 1847 she had proposed to him, but he had refused, very kindly and tactfully, on the grounds that he was too old for her, which, as she was then 34 and he was 68, was reasonable enough.

In 1881 the Baroness who was by then 67, astonished the world and shocked Queen Victoria beyond measure by marrying a man nearly 40 years her junior. He was a young American called William Lehmann Ashmead-Bartlett, who had been educated at Oxford and had been acting as her secretary and helping her administer her charities. This time it was his name which was modified: he became William Lehmann Ashmead-Bartlett Burdett-Coutts. It was apparently a very happy marriage, and it lasted in mutual devotion for twenty-five years, until the Baroness died in 1906.

In recognition of her philanthropy and her work for the Church of England, the Dean of Westminster suggested that she be buried in the Abbey, on condition that her body was cremated. Her husband accepted the condition but subsequently had serious misgivings and refused. No doubt he thought that the Baroness would herself have disapproved of cremation, and indeed one could hardly imagine that someone born in 1814 would approve of it. After a rather unseemly and all too public wrangle the Dean gave in and the Baroness was buried in the Abbey. Her husband, who was by this time MP for Westminster, as his father-in-law had been before him, survived her until 1921.

As was mentioned earlier, Miss Coutts was much concerned for the welfare of unfortunate people, and particularly for the fate of ex-prostitutes. She founded an establishment for them in Shepherds Bush, where suitably repentant candidates were to be rehabilitated and educated in the domestic arts, before being shipped off to the colonies to find themselves respectable husbands and start a new life.

It was an uphill task and fairly heartbreaking at times, and her right-hand man in all this was none other than a famous Camden resident, Charles Dickens. As everyone knows, he lived at a good many Camden addresses in his time, notably at the house in Doughty Street, now the Dickens Museum, which he rented for two years in the early stages of his acquaintance with Miss Coutts. They were much of an age and they became very good friends. She stood godmother to his eldest son, Charley, in St Pancras Church (*new* St Pancras) and subsequently paid for his education at Eton, though Dickens would, so it seems, have preferred Harrow.

Miss Coutts herself became a Camden resident when she eventually came into possession of Holly Lodge, Highgate. She liked to spend the summer there, when she was not travelling abroad, in what her friends called her "rural retreat" or "rustic villa". The house had been built in the early years of the nineteenth century, and was eventually demolished in the 1920s. There are photos of it in the sale catalogues of 1907 and 1922, and in the Illustrated London News of 27 July 1827 there is a sketch showing it as it appeared on the occasion of a grand reception given by Miss Coutts in honour of the Belgian Volunteers.

The house itself was not large, but it stood in very extensive grounds, bounded on the west and north by Highgate West Hill and on the south and east by Swains Lane. Beyond the boundary in the north-east corner were St Michael's Church, the old part of Highgate Cemetery, and a nursery garden now recently built over; to the

south-east, beyond the boundary was built St Anne's Church. Miss Coutts had no hand in the building of either church, but she gave the peal of bells to St Anne's.

To the north of Holly Lodge Miss Coutts owned several houses which still stand, including Holly Terrace. The main carriage entrance to Holly Lodge has become Robin Grove; between Robin Grove and the road now called Holly Lodge Gardens lie the remains of her garden, where many of the splendid cedar trees that she knew still survive. At the top of the gardens may be seen an elegant wrought-iron gate with brick pillars, originally in the north wall of the orchard further down the hill.

The estate included a model farm, vine houses, fig houses, forcing beds, mushroom beds, even watercress beds. The Baroness kept cows, donkeys, sheep, goats and even llamas, which, not liking the climate of Highgate, died, were stuffed and taken indoors. There was a famous parrot and several hives of bees. (The Baroness was, of course, at one time President of the British Bee-keepers' Association.)

In St Alban's Road stands another building which dates from the Baroness's era. It is now the workshop of Brookfield Garages, but it once formed a small part of the stables and stud farm where Mr Burdett-Coutts made a name for himself as a breeder of carriage horses. Visitors to Holly Lodge were often taken down the hill to the stables to see the animals put through their paces.

In Swains Lane, not far from the stables, stands Holly Village. This is a group of twelve small domestic Gothic houses "erected by A.G.B. Coutts in 1865" to the plans of her favourite architect Mr Darbishire. There are two stories about their purpose; one is that they were intended for the employees of Coutts Bank; the other, perhaps more likely, that they were for the grooms and gardeners of the estate. In any case they provided a fashionably Gothic viewpoint from the house up the hill. They are now private freehold property, very, pleasant to live in,

probably unique, and particularly picturesque when there is snow on the ground. If there is a full moon as well, they look positively Dickensian.

In 1871, just before she was made a Baroness, Miss Coutts became the last lay rector of Old St Pancras Church. She was Responsible for repairs and improvements, but not for the major alterations of the 1850s, which were before her time. She was involved in the transformation of the old churchyard into a garden for public use, and a very beautiful, immaculately kept oasis it is to this day. Most of the graves were levelled, and the gravestones stacked to one side. A big monument, Gothic of course, was erected to bear the names of the most notable dead.

The Baroness took a special interest in two of the men buried there. First, Mr John Walker, author of an English pronouncing dictionary, whose stone still stands in a conspicuous position, with a testimonial from the Baroness on the back, and secondly General Paoli, the Corsican patriot whom Boswell admired so much, and who had died in exile in London in 1807. The Baroness thought that the patriot's bones should properly rest in their native soil. She

obtained permission to have his body exhumed, and, at her own expense, in her own yacht, escorted it back for re-burial in Corsica. At the time she was already over 80.

On hearing of her death in 1906 King Edward VII is reputed to have said that, after his mother, the Baroness Burdett-Coutts was the most remarkable woman in the kingdom. It can perhaps safely be said that she was one of the most remarkable women ever to be associated with that part of London which has now become the Borough of Camden.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express her gratitude to Mr Ellis, of Prickett and Ellis, Highgate High Street, for the loan of two Holly Lodge Estate catalogues; also to Mrs Gosling, of the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution, for help with information.

FURTHER READING

Hibbert, C.:
The Making of Charles Dickens (Longmans, 1967)

Lee, C.E.:
St Pancras Church and Parish (St Pancras PCC, 1958)

Patterson, C.B.:
Angela Burdett-Coutts and the Victorians (Murray, 1953)

Wellington, Seventh Duke of, (Editor):
Wellington and His Friends (MacMillan, 1965)

A reception at Miss Burdett-Coutts' rustic villa' in Highgate

