



John Wilkes 1727-1797

"A friend to liberty" (Epitaph on Wilkes' tomb).

The ancient town of Aylesbury has a habit of commemorating local heroes by erecting their statues. At the top end of the Market Place both Hampden and Disraeli watch resplendently from their plinths whilst the world walks past their feet. Fifty yards away, at the bottom end of the square, Major General Charles Compton PC, KCB stands holding his riding whip.

But there is no statue to John Wilkes, who died on 26th December 1797. Wilkes was an extraordinary man. He seemed to have no fixed principles. He came from a wealthy London family and initially sat in the House of Commons as Member for this Town. He was a Colonel in the Buckinghamshire Militia. For several years he lived with his wife Mary at Prebendal House in St Mary's Square.

As a member of the dissolute Buckinghamshire gentry he played a leading part in the orgies of the Hell Fire Club. These were held in the ruined abbey of Medmenham and in the caves of West Wycombe. He wrote salacious poetry. Even today his 'Essay on Woman' is kept under lock and key in some book shops.

Yet this man surely merits the inscription on his tomb in Grosvenor Chapel. At various times in his life he was declared an outlaw, exiled, imprisoned in London's Fleet Prison, sat in the House of Commons and was Lord Mayor of the City of London. It was he that established that an arrest warrant must specify the name of the accused person and should clearly indicate what offence he is charged with.

To the working people of London he was a hero. When the Government threatened him with imprisonment in 1768 he was returned as Member of Parliament for Middlesex by an immense majority. Middlesex, unlike Aylesbury, was one of the few 18th century constituencies which refused to be cowed by either the Government or the local gentry.

Although Aylesbury has no statue to this remarkable man it does have a very touching and largely unknown memorial which was erected by him. This is an epitaph on the wall between Prebendal House and St Mary's Churchyard, composed by Wilkes when his gardener died. It reads as follows:

To the Memory

Of

JOHN SMART Gardener

Who died the 16th day of Novr' 1754

Aged 54 years

Illum etiam lauri illum etiam flevit myrica

VIRG.

The last line translates as "even the laurel and the myrtle wept for him". We know that Wilkes composed this epitaph because on 15th March 1765 Wilkes and James Boswell set out from Naples, riding on asses, to inspect an Italian villa. As they jogged along they chatted and Wilkes told Boswell how this inscription came to be written. The vicar of St Mary's church had been angry at a proposal to put a heathen inscription by Virgil in a Christian churchyard. But Wilkes assured the vicar that Virgil had prophesied Christ's coming and so all was made easy. Boswell always wrote everything down in his famous journals which were discovered in an Irish Castle in the 1930s. So, in this very round about way, we know that an Aylesbury Churchyard wall bears an inscription composed by John Wilkes. The inscription is a touching one. It shows the respect which Wilkes had for a humble gardener.

Despite his showmanship and his debauchery, he really was a friend to liberty.

**Taken from an article by
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