

Oxfordshire

AN IMPROMPTU ROYAL VISIT TO HENLEY PARK, OCT. 1785

Fawley, December 30th 1785: Well, my dear, I must then go back from December to October last. Perhaps you may have seen in the newspapers that our Fawley environs was then honour'd by the royal visitors. The servants at Fawley Court heard of them about two miles off; of course thought they were coming there but to the no small disappointment of the nephew [*Strickland Freeman, who had inherited Fawley Court from his uncle Sambrooke Freeman*], as well as the domestics, they pass'd by, and went up to the Dowager Mrs Freeman's at Henley Park, not so noble a house, but all elegance, and one of the most beautiful situations imaginable.

She most unluckily had been some time confined to her house with a violent cold; and the butler came running up to her dressing room, saying 'The King and Queen, Ma'am'. 'Don't alarm me, William' (you know her delicate manner); 'they are not coming here, but to Fawley Court, no doubt'. However, another footman followed immediately, saying the carriages were just driving up, and he had got a good fire in the drawing-room. She had only time to say, 'A smart breakfast, William', and to throw on a huge cloak, and was down just as the King, Queen, two Princesses, Lady Louisa Clayton, and two gentlemen entered.

They stayed two hours and a half, talked incessantly, seemed vastly pleased, and knew every family and their concerns in this neighbourhood, Mrs Freeman said, better than she did herself! The worst of these great visitors are that no servants must appear, and you are obliged to wait upon them yourself; this, ill as she then felt, was very fatiguing; besides, not knowing the art, one must do it awkwardly Mrs Freeman, in some agitation ... [forgot] that kings were to be served before ladies; but immediately rectified her mistake, and it was received in perfect good humour. After breakfast the King said they must see the house. 'Certainly,' Mrs Freeman said, and was going to the door to attend them, but he kept her back, and shut her in, saying, 'You shall not go out with such a cold; we will go by ourselves'. And so they did wherever they chose, as no servant was to attend Just before Mrs F's company departed, Lady Louisa had just time to whisper to her that she was quite unhappy not to let her know of their coming, but they never tell, and love to take people by surprise.

.... It happened to be market-day at Henley, so, of course, all the country some miles round heard of the great event

Extracted from Emily Climenson (ed.), Passages from the Diaries of Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwick House, Oxon, AD 1756 to 1808 (1899), 217-19.

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