

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge

– *the past revisited*

By

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Previous holders of these titles in the UK have had interesting lives, especially that of the last Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, and Dane Garrod's postal history collection explains how and why.

When The Queen conferred the title of Duke of Cambridge on Prince William of Wales on the morning of his wedding day in April 2011, a break of 107 years was bridged to the last holder of that title, H.R.H. Prince George, Duke of Cambridge. Apparently, this last Duke was a prolific writer, or so it seems because his correspondence can be found without great difficulty in the collections of postal historians as well as with postal/stamp dealers. This article will look briefly at the history of the first three creations of this dukedom, and then more closely at the fourth, this erstwhile George, and the postal history linked to him, as well as his Duchess, who in fact was not legally his Duchess at all...

The first two creations of Duke of Cambridge died in infancy, these being the one year old eldest son of the future King James II, in 1661, and his second son six years later in 1667 aged 4 years. The third creation was George, Electoral Prince of Hanover, who in time became King George II, when his honours merged in the crown. This takes us to more recent times, philatelically, and to the creation prior to the current holder of the dukedom, Prince William. Prince Adolphus was the seventh son of King George III, and because of the King's large family, a number of dukedoms were required to be created, and Adolphus was given Cambridge. When he died in 1850, his only son, George aged 31 years, became Duke of Cambridge.

George had been educated in Hanover, and like his father, he embarked upon a military career, one which lasted a long lifetime. Serving in Gibraltar, Ireland, the Ionian Islands, and then in the Crimea (but apparently never in Malta), no-one could say he didn't see military engagement, as he was present at the battles of Alma, Balaclava and Inkerman, and at the siege of Sebastapol. The Duke was appointed commander-in-chief of the British Army, a position he held for 39 years until he was obliged, some will say forced, to resign his post. The problem was that although the welfare of his soldiers was a great concern, he earned a reputation for being resistant to change. The consequence was that the British Army remained unchanging and lagging behind its counterparts in Europe.

Perhaps of more interest was his private life, the Duke of Cambridge making no secret of his view that "*arranged marriages were doomed to failure*". He married privately and in contravention of the 1772 Royal Marriages Act to actress Sarah

Fairbrother in 1847, by whom he already had two illegitimate children, and who previously had had two children by other men. Perhaps not a suitable wife one could say, but we should not judge in hindsight and at a distance. As the marriage did not exist in British law, although it had taken place in St. John's Church in Clerkenwell, Sarah was not entitled to be known as the Duchess of Cambridge or accorded the style of Her Royal Highness. In fact, her very existence was ignored by The Queen. Sarah called herself 'Mrs. Fairbrother', and later 'Mrs FitzGeorge'. The Duke was a weak man where women were concerned, and it is likely that Sarah, then pregnant for the fifth time, cajoled him into marriage, she herself having obtained the licence. George had other affairs and was quite unworthy of her steady attachment.

Since 1837, when he was 18 years old, he had known Mrs. Louisa Beauclerk whom he later described as "*the idol of my life and my existence*". He saw much of her in 1847, the year he married Sarah, and she was his mistress from at least 1849 until her death in 1882. As early as 1849 he had decided that he would be buried near Mrs. Beauclerk and it was solely on her account that Mrs. FitzGeorge and he were buried in Kensal Green Cemetery (Fig.8), about sixty feet away from Mrs. Beauclerk's grave, where they can be seen today.

When writing letters, even in a semi-official capacity, the Duke would sign them 'George', but on the envelopes he would sign 'Cambridge' in the bottom left corner. This included letters delivered by messenger rather than through the collection and delivery of the Post Office, and the first example here shown (Fig.1) is an undated envelope addressed to The Lord Harlech at his home address of 30 James Street, Buckingham Gate, London. This is from the period 1876 to 1904, the latter year being when Prince George, Duke of Cambridge, died at age 84 years.

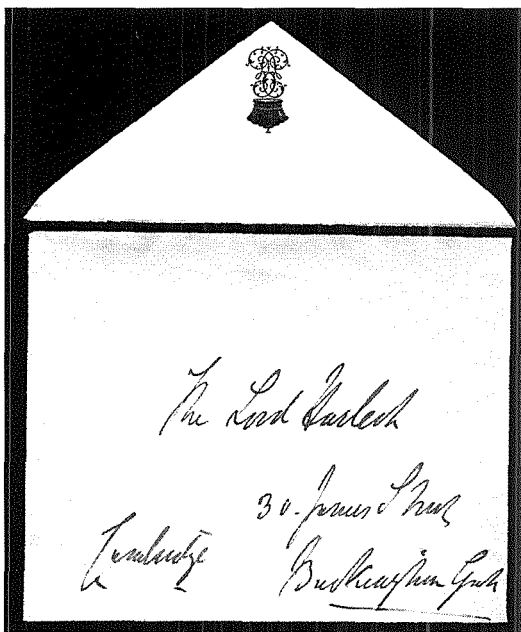


Figure 1. Envelope with initials and crown, and signed 'Cambridge'

This personalised postal stationery is black-edged, and has his entwined initials surmounted by a crown on the envelope flap.

In 1877, Sir Dighton Probyn VC had been appointed Comptroller and Treasurer of the Household of The Prince of Wales, and Prince George wrote to him on 12

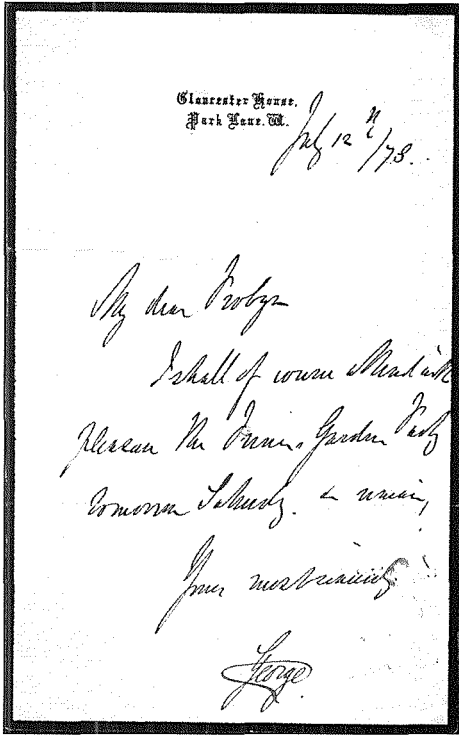


Figure 2. Letter to Sir Dighton Probyn VC, and signed 'George'

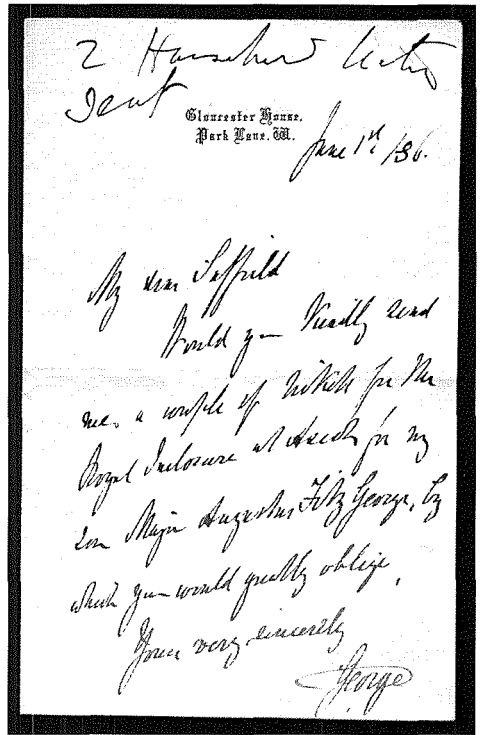


Figure 3. The Duke of Cambridge writes for tickets to the Royal Enclosure at Ascot

July 1878 as “My dear Probyn” to say “I shall of course attend with pleasure the Garden Party tomorrow Saturday.” (Fig.2). Written from his home at Gloucester House in Park Lane, London, as the headed writing paper shows, it confirms that although his wife was apparently unacknowledged in some society, the Duke was within the Royal circle and was what we today would call ‘a minor royal’. In this capacity, he wrote in June 1886 to Baron Suffield (Fig.3) saying “Would you kindly send me a couple of tickets for the Royal Enclosure at Ascot for my son Major Augustus FitzGeorge..” This is also from Gloucester House, but this time not on black-bordered writing paper, and Baron Suffield, or his secretary perhaps, has scrawled at the top “2 Household tickets sent”. With his ‘Duchess’, the Duke of Cambridge had three sons, all of whom had military careers, and took the surname FitzGeorge.

Finally, for the Duke’s correspondence in this article, we have the Prince’s May 1889 letter and envelope addressed to Mrs Edward Mildmay (Fig.4), returning a signed document and commenting on her health improvement. The blue envelope is simply addressed to 131 Cromwell Road with no postal transit markings, and

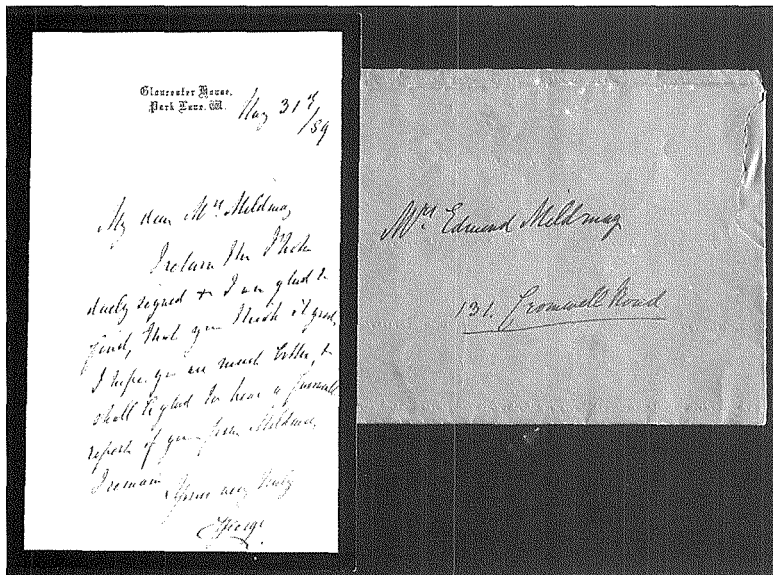


Figure 4. Taken by messenger from Park Lane to Cromwell Road, in London

would therefore have been delivered by messenger, either by coach or on horseback.

So what did this Victorian gentleman actually look like? We can see him in a collodion photograph taken in 1855 when he was aged 35 years (Fig.5), and from a portrait in full uniform in startling red (Fig.6), not dissimilar from that worn by Prince William, the current Duke of Cambridge, at his April 2011 wedding. As to Prince George's demeanour and style, a contemporary account will provide the answer, and one hopes that it was kindly. He was *"a bluff, fresh, hale, country gentleman, with something of the vigorous healthy frankness of the English skipper, and something, too, of the Prussian martinet; industrious, punctual, rising early, seeking rest late, fond of life and its pleasures, of good dinners, good cigars, pleasant women, of the opera, of the play."*

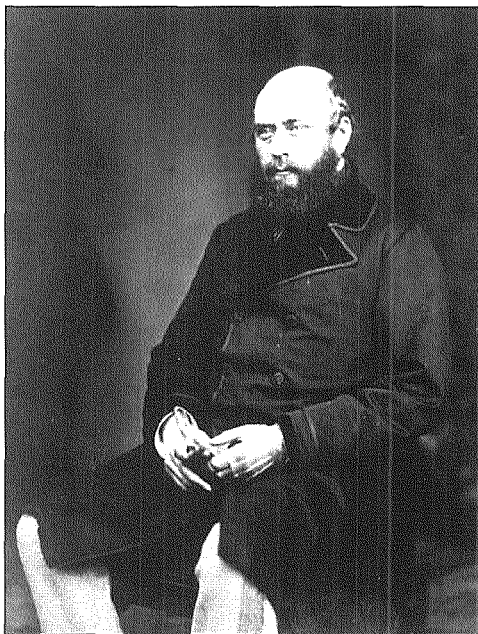


Figure 5. George, Duke of Cambridge, in 1855 aged 35 years



Figure 6. In full military uniform, the commander-in-chief of the British Army

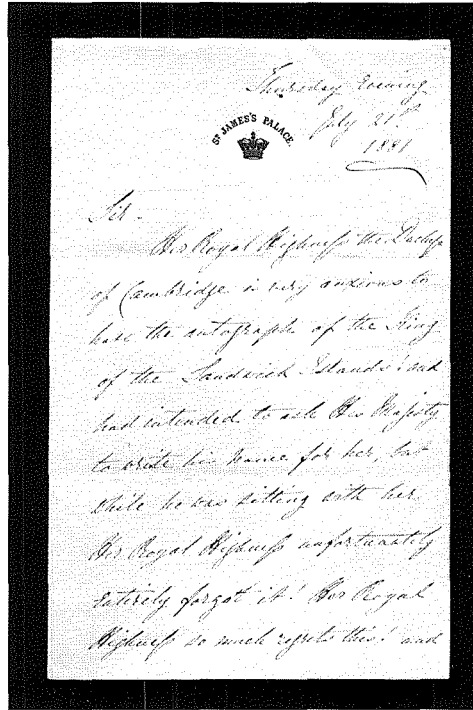


Figure 7. The Duchess of Cambridge requests King David Kalakaua's autograph



Figure 8. Funerary monument in Kensal Green, London

Let us now turn to his Sarah, apparently not the only love of his life, but the one with whom he had been joined in illegal matrimony. An extant letter (*Fig. 7*), fortunately saved 130 years ago, was written from St. James's Palace on 21st July 1881 by Lady Geraldine Somerset who was Lady-in-Waiting to the Duchess of Cambridge. Perhaps Sarah did use the title after all, even if not in an official or legal right. It bears quoting in full, even though without paragraph break, due to the interest of content:

“Sir,

Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cambridge is very anxious to have the autograph of the King of the Sandwich Islands! and had intended to ask His Majesty to write his name for her, but while he was sitting with her Her Royal Highness unfortunately entirely forgot it! Her Royal Highness so much regrets this! and has commanded me to send you her autograph-book and also a fan that was given her for the purpose of collecting interesting autographs, and to ask you whether you think you could ask the King, without giving His Majesty too much trouble! if he would very kindly inscribe his name for Her Royal Highness? If you think you can do so, will you kindly find the page in the book that bears the date of the King's own Birthday, & on that page get His Majesty to write his name, & beneath it “St. James's Palace, July 21st 1881” (the date of his visit here). On the fan, if His Majesty will kindly write his usual signature on one of the cards, - with today's date. Perhaps on the card next that one bears the Queen's signature? Her Royal Highness would be greatly obliged if you could do her this favour and if you think you could obtain this kindness of the King without indiscretion or trespassing too much on His Majesty's time.”

This letter accompanied the autograph book and fan of the Duchess, and we can but assume that the King was gallant, and granted her wish. The letter had been kept in a Victorian/Edwardian album, as evidenced by the lines of residue glue on the fourth page – regrettably these early collectors did not value the envelope/cover as we do today, and these were often consigned to waste.

As to George and Sarah's successors in their role as Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, I believe we are generally agreed that we are fortunate. Two young people who appear content and appreciative of their position in life, and who are already serving the UK and British Commonwealth with distinction. They will, for sure, appear on very many British Royal Mail issues through the coming years.