

# The County Durham Parthenon

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Penshaw Monument was built to honour my great-great-great-grandfather, 'Radical Jack', a reforming peer with film-star looks

All my life, my heart has pounded with pride at the sight of Penshaw Monument, soaring high on a great hill over County Durham.

A tremendous Doric temple, with all the grandeur of the Acropolis rearing up over Athens, but here instead – until recently, that is – lording it over the coal-blackened landscape of England's north-east. Today, with all the mines closed, this has been transformed into lush, new post-pit greenswards.

The temple, based on the Theseion, also known as the Temple of Hephaestus, in Athens, but with unfluted columns and in fact only half the size, was designed by father and son architects John and Benjamin Green, who left a significant architectural legacy in the north-east.

In Newcastle upon Tyne alone, there is the neo-classical Theatre Royal, as well as the 130-foot-high column to the 2nd Earl Grey. Then there is the neo-classical Literary Philosophical Society – and all three buildings are winners.

Seven miles south, at Penshaw, this monument rears its singular beauty over the new towns, motorways and the new post-pit greenery under hyperborean skies. How I always strain – heart thudding – for the first sight of it when heading north; it is surely enough to stir the vitals of a cast-iron dog!

It was built in 1844, paid for by popular public subscription. Every contribution was recorded – a Mrs Smith of Shiney Row gave two pennies. And all to honour my great-great-great-grandfather John George Lambton, 1st Earl of Durham, the knee-weakeningly handsome Whig statesman, colonial administrator and liberal reformer, who, among his many triumphs, was made the first Governor General of Canada. He was also the prime mover and co-author – along with his father-in-law, Prime Minister Lord Grey – of the Reform Bill of 1831, which established the secret ballot, as well as gouging out the 'rotten boroughs' that up until then had so corrupted Parliament.

As radical as he was rich, Lord Durham was also quite astonishingly

good-looking, encouraging, I fear, a degree of arrogance: he had a reputation for imperious manners and 'distinctive bearing'. He was reckless and romantic, ardent and impetuous and emotional to a frenzied fault. 'If his discretion had been equal to his ability,' wrote his biographer Stuart Reid, 'he would not have made the enemies that he did.'

Treated by many of his fellow aristocrats as a traitor to his peers and denounced as 'a dangerous demagogue in a coronet', he was nicknamed Radical Jack. Surely no more glamorous figure could have entered Parliament. He was, though, much mocked for his pronouncement that 'a man may jog along comfortably enough on £40,000 a year' – roughly four and a half million pounds today.

He had inherited his immense fortune through coal mines in the north-east of England, with 2,400 miners in his employ. He was hailed as 'King of the Colliers' by the pitmen, thanks to his ever-active improving of their welfare. It was he who, for example, insisted that they establish their own unions.

He also put an end to the brutish

behaviour of the pit operatives who were regularly punishing the workforce by stripping them stark naked and flogging them through the village before the eyes of their women and children. It was in his mine that his friend Humphry Davy first successfully tested his safety lamp, with Lord Durham by his side encouraging the experimentation.

His upbringing had augured well in that, rather than having a conventional education, he had been dispatched on the decidedly unconventional path of living with a private tutor called Thomas Lovell Beddoes. A scientist and a physician, a poet and a dramatist, Beddoes was married to the writer Maria Edgeworth's sister – 'a woman of great charm of character who seemed to have impressed everyone who knew her with her rare union of thoughtful sympathy and vivacity of speech'.

It was Beddoes who discovered Michael Faraday working in a humble apothecary's shop in Penzance and bought him home to live with him at Clifton, near Bristol. Such, then, was the company streaming though Beddoes's house, fine-tuning the young Durham for excellence.

While his fellow youthful grandees were kept somewhat rigidly in the background, Durham's biographer wrote that 'the guiding principles of his manhood were imparted under the roof of Dr Beddoes, being educated on a broad enlightened plan which in those days found no favour in the great public schools'.

Such an excellent atmosphere could not have failed to have been of some consequence to a young man of immense fortune, giving him some inclination of the power to be useful. Furthermore the boy was brilliant, exceeding, according to Beddoes, 'any child I ever saw in industry, intelligence and active curiosity'. Aged ten and a half, he could write both poetry and prose in Latin and Greek, with 'eyes on fire and cheeks flushed and in a paroxysm; I have little doubt but he would run against a drawn



Knee-weakeningly handsome: the 1st Earl of Durham, mezzotint, 1838



**Athens comes to the north-east: the Penshaw Monument, based on the Doric Temple of Hephaestus in the Athenian Agora**

sword or jump down a precipice. He was like a person in liquor.'

He rose steadily and successfully in the world of politics, perhaps helped somewhat by his marriage to the Prime Minister's daughter Louisa. He was appointed Lord Privy Seal in 1833, and between 1835 and 1837 served as Ambassador to Russia.

How well I remember the velvet-covered Bible with enamel plaques, each surrounded by diamonds, that was presented to him at that time.

In 1838, as the newly appointed Governor General of Canada, he had been tasked with investigating the warring factions between the Upper and Lower Canadas. With his 'Durham Report – The Affairs of British North America', commissioned by Lord

Melbourne, he garnered so much praise that it was thereafter to serve as a template for how best the British Empire should manage its colonies all over the globe.

By recommending almost complete self-governance, it became one of the most important documents in the Empire; furthermore, this parallel nature of governmental organisation was continued until 2014 as ongoing proof of the long-enduring effects of its recommendations.

Hurrah for the brilliance of Beddoes, the Clifton physician whose liberal influences had weighed so well on the course of the Empire.

While Lord Durham relished the limelight of fame, so too did his beloved son Charles William, whose image was

– and still is – imprinted on the minds of the British nationwide: in 1825 he was painted by Thomas Lawrence as *The Red Boy*, which to this day still retains a wide popularity; on biscuit tins, chocolate boxes, calendars and the like. The picture hangs in the castle at Disneyland Paris. He was a bewitching child, who sadly died when he was only 14. 'My darling boy,' Lord Durham once wrote to him, 'shake Pol [his parrot] by the nose for me.'

By 1838, Durham was off to Canada as the Governor General, to quell the troubles between the English and the French settlers. Accompanied by two regimental orchestras to hail his glory, he entered Quebec mounted on a white charger, wearing a uniform adorned with silver lace – and was no doubt cheered to the echo! 🎶