

The Biggest Tobacco-Box in the World.

BY HARRY HOW.



THE BOX AND ITS SIX CASES.

And from his pocket next he takes
His shining horn tobacco-box,
And, in a light and careless way,
As men who with their purpose play,
Upon the lid he knocks.

Wordsworth.



“W

AAL, sir,” remarked an enthusiastic gentleman from Nebraska to Mr. J. E. Smith, the vestry clerk of Westminster, “we can show you the biggest thing in waterfalls,

rivers, and mountains, and I guess we can beat you in fires and railway smash-ups; but we'll give in over tobacco-boxes. This is the biggest, and I'll stake the entire States on that.” Our friend from America was certainly not far out in his calculations. The famous receptacle for the fragrant weed which is faithfully guarded by the overseers of the united parishes of St. Margaret and St. John the Evangelist, Westminster, is not only the biggest in the world, but unquestionably an historical curiosity into the bargain.

Some idea of its size may be formed from the fact that the combination of boxes weighs very little short of a hundredweight; and, when these are regarded from an historical point of view, they become ab-

solutely unique, for they practically chronicle the story of the doings of this nation—or, at any rate, the principal events—for the last 181 years.

Old Henry Monck was fond of his pipe, and when his work as overseer was done in the daytime, he would adjourn to a neighbouring tavern, and, with his fellow-parochial officers, sit and talk over the business of the parish, as they idly enjoyed the luxury of their respective real, unadulterated “churchwardens.” He lived in Boreman's Court, on the south side of Gardner's Lane, and was in many ways a fortunate individual, for he was exempt from being rated; a common custom, by-the-bye, in those days, when all gentlemen serving as parish officers—from the churchwarden to the “Amen” parish clerk—were never worried by the irrepressible rate-collector; for their services to the parish were considered of such importance, that “rates” was a thing which never appeared in their personal account-books. Old Henry Monck, therefore, decided to perpetuate his memory in a peculiar way.

Tradition hath it that he purchased the horn tobacco-box at Horn Fair, Plumstead, for the small sum of fourpence, and presented

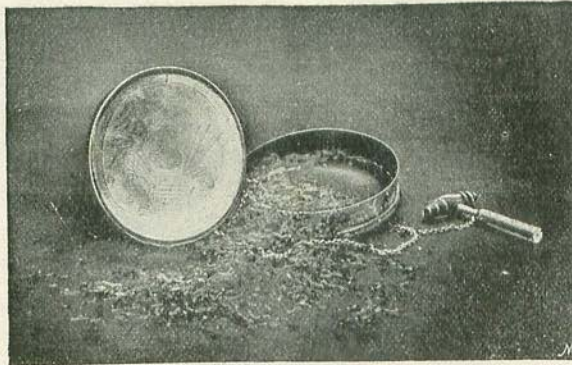
the box to a society formed of the past and present overseers of the parish. The original box is only $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. long by $3\frac{3}{4}$ in. wide; $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. outside, by $\frac{3}{4}$ in. inside depth; and it weighs $10\frac{1}{2}$ oz. The members were so delighted with the old fellow's gift that they ornamented it with a silver rim, on which his name was engraved. It was religiously committed to the custody of the senior overseer for the time being, who handed it to his successor with some additional silver ornament. So, year after year, the box has grown bigger and bigger. The gentlemen who followed old Monck in the office of overseer thought fit, at the end of their term

of service, to chronicle on the box events of importance which had occurred during their period of office. A similar act has been carried on year after year, and the original fourpenny tobacco-box now rests within no fewer than six massive cases; the last case and pedestal being octagonal in shape, and constructed out of an oak beam taken from Westminster Abbey. It is surmounted by a beautifully chased silver statuette of the Queen, which cost £50, and was added as a memento of Her Majesty's year of Jubilee.

The ceremony of annually passing over the box from the out-going overseer to the incoming one is very elaborate, and has a distinctly pleasant savour of "the good old times." It takes place after the customary dinner at the annual general meeting.

The usual toasts have been proposed and drunk with enthusiasm, when, amidst silence, the senior churchwarden rises, and solemnly demands the restoration of the box and its appurtenances. Then the secretary examines it, and has to declare whether it is in as good a condition as when delivered; what is the nature of the last ornament added, and, what is more important than all, if the original box contains a proper quantity of tobacco. Should the secretary's report be a satisfactory one, the box is placed in front of the chairman, who immediately proposes a toast: "The late overseers of the poor, with thanks to them for their care of the box, and the additional ornament."

"Are you willing to accept the box and cases upon the usual conditions?" is the question asked of the senior overseer. Of course, he says "Yes." Then is the box and its cases handed over to him, with the following charge: "This box and the several cases are the property of the Past Overseers' Society, and delivered into your custody and care, upon condition that they are produced at all parochial entertainments which you shall be invited to, or have a right to attend, and shall contain three pipes of tobacco at the least, under the penalty of six bottles of claret. And also upon further condition that you shall



THE ORIGINAL BOX.

restore the box, with the several cases belonging to it, in as good a state as the same now are; with some additional ornament, at the next meeting thereof after you shall go out of office, or sooner if demanded, under the penalty of two hundred guineas." This charge having been given, the chairman proposes "The new overseers, wishing their health to go through their office," and the ceremony attending another transfer of the famous box is over.

A reference to the minute-books of the Past Overseers' Society shows that on several occasions the chairman has been fined the aforementioned six bottles of wine. Here are a few extracts: "January 13th, 1831. The tobacco-box, having been called for by the chairman, was not produced at a quarter before ten o'clock. It was then moved and seconded, and carried unanimously, that Mr. Overseer Page be fined six bottles of port." "August 9th, 1832. Mr. Overseer Lucas produced the tobacco-box, containing what was not considered by a majority of the society 'tobacco.'" Mr. Overseer Lucas was accordingly fined six bottles of wine, but allowed to mention the occurrence in arrest of judgment at the next meeting. Mr. Lucas was acquitted. It seems, however, that Mr. Overseer Downey was the most unfortunate individual in the way of having to pay the fine, for on no fewer than three occasions—on May 13th, 1847; September 10th, 1847; and Novem-

ber 11th, 1847—he failed to produce the tobacco-box, and was fined six bottles of port for each offence. Mr. Overseer Downey, notwithstanding the fact that the society carried the fine unanimously, did not pay up till April 3rd, 1848.

The box has passed through quite a number of vicissitudes. Until recently it was the custom for its possessor for the time being to keep the treasure at his own house. In 1785, when the box was not worth a tithe of its value to-day, some enterprising burglars made arrangements to annex it. Mr. Gilbert, overseer at the time, however, had it securely put away in some corner of his house, where the burglars failed to find it. In 1793, when in the custody of Mr. Overseer James Read, the vestry refused to pass his accounts. He therefore threatened that he would not deliver up the tobacco-box, and an application was made in the High Court of Chancery against him. The Court ordered that the box be delivered into the charge of Master Leeds, pending the result of the suit. For three years it remained in his possession, until on the 5th of March, 1796, the case came before Lord Chancellor Loughborough, who decreed that the box and cases should be restored to the plaintiffs. This event in the history of the Westminster Tobacco-Box involved a bill of £376 13s. 11d. for costs, £300 of which was paid by the defendant and the balance by the society.

So delighted were the society at once more obtaining the possession of their much-loved treasure, that they caused a special plate to be added to the box, on which appeared the inscription: "Justice Triumphant! Fraud Defeated!! The Box Restored!!!"

In the year when Her Majesty ascended the Throne, the box came very near being destroyed by fire. Mr. Milns, the then custodian of the box, kept a draper's shop in Bridge Street. The place caught fire, and his wife, knowing

how much old Henry Monck's legacy was valued, rescued the box from its perilous position before anything else, and conveyed it to a place of safety. In 1887, fifty years after this event, the old lady made a special visit to the Town Hall, at Westminster, to see the box. She was then ninety years of age.

The box has frequently been exhibited, and has been examined by many eminent people. In 1860, the overseers had the honour of submitting it to Her Majesty the Queen, His Royal Highness the late Prince Consort, and the Royal children for their inspection, and a letter was received from Buckingham Palace stating that "Her Majesty the Queen and the Prince Consort were very much interested in the examination of this very curious and interesting box, and I received the commands of Her Majesty and His Royal Highness to thank the members of the society, in their name, for affording them an opportunity of seeing it."

On the 18th of January, 1877, the overseers exhibited the box before the assembled members of the Society of Antiquaries at Somerset House. In describing it, the printed "Proceedings" remarks:—

"The humble horn tobacco-box had now become of great value and bulk. It was ornamented within and without to repletion, and there was no longer room for any additions. But each senior overseer (with

one or two exceptions) showed a desire to emulate the example of his predecessors, and so it became necessary to manufacture a new outer case for it. This was then ornamented, and, when there was no longer room for additions, a new case was added, which was in turn ornamented, until, at the present day, the original trumpery horn tobacco-box reposes in six massive and embellished cases, each case fitting one in the other; so that the whole is of greater bulk and worth than any other tobacco-

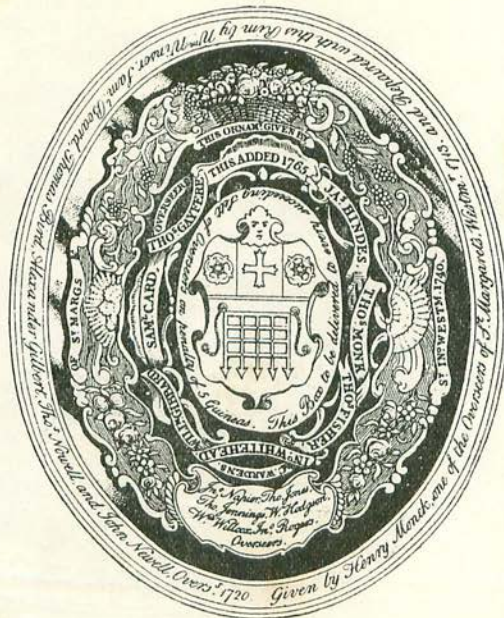


FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.

box in the United Kingdom—probably in the world.”

The amount of history which is chronicled on the original box and the six cases will be readily understood when it is mentioned that it has no fewer than 133 silver plates, and to carefully examine and note every one would occupy from four to five hours. As one takes up the original tobacco-box, and goes on from case to case and plate to plate, they not only show how the art of engraving has developed, but reveal what may be termed the pardonable conceits of the gentlemen who had the box in their possession from time to time, together with the diversity of their notions as to what should be considered events of national importance. Portraits pre-

dominate, though stirring events are by no means lacking. It would be impossible within the limits of this paper to make mention of all the chronicles. The most curiously interesting and important will suffice.

The top of the original tobacco-box (Fig. 1) bears the arms of the City of Westminster and surrounding ornaments. Inside the lid is an engraving by Hogarth of a bust of His Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland, with a prefix commemorative of the Battle of Culloden. On the bottom of the box is a figure of Charity (Fig. 2). In 1749 the big event of the year, in the opinion of the then overseers of Westminster, was the fireworks exhibited in the St. James's Park on the occasion of the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle. In 1779 parochial ideas seemed to have advanced to the battle stage, for we have depicted the engagement between the English and French fleets off Ushant on the 12th July, 1778—the wooden walls of Old England being very cleverly engraved, and the whole scene very effective, with unlimited smoke as befits a tobacco-box—and the picture of a court-martial held at the instance of Sir Hugh Palliser, the Rear-Admiral, on the conduct of Admiral Keppel in that action, by which he was most honourably acquitted. The



FIG. 3.

gallant admiral is shown receiving back his sword, and his right foot firmly crushing down a six-headed dragon (Fig. 3).

A portrait of the notorious John Wilkes is inside the bottom of the second case. The seventh plate added tells that the box and its case had been repaired by the overseers—a statement which is subsequently frequently repeated—together with a picture of the governors and directors of the poor, assembled in the board-room, administering relief. We are told, as per Plate IX. (*i.e.*, the ninth plate added), that His Majesty King George III.'s health was restored on March 10th, 1789, the same being celebrated by a general illumination. The plate for 1790 bears a by no means unworthy reproduction of the altar-piece of St. Margaret's Church, representing the Supper at Emmaus, in basso-relievo, by Adkin, from a painting by Titian.

Another plate not only bears the aforementioned fact that Justice was triumphant and the box restored, but the statement that it was in this year—1800—that the naval glory of this country was again in the ascendant, with portraits of Howe, Vincent, Duncan, and Nelson. In 1807 the plate bears a facsimile of the Old



THE FOURTH BOX.

Sessions House at Westminster, and Plate XIV. shows the Lord Chancellor sitting

in Lincoln's Inn Hall in the act of pronouncing in favour of the restoration of the box and cases to the Past Overseers' Society (Fig. 4).

This latter plate is a very characteristic piece of workmanship of the day, and equally well executed are the pair of plates—which form the sides of one of the early cases—of Charing Cross at the time of the Proclamation of Peace in 1802 (Fig. 5) and the interior of Westminster Hall, showing the St. Margaret and St. John's Volunteers attending Divine service on the 19th October,

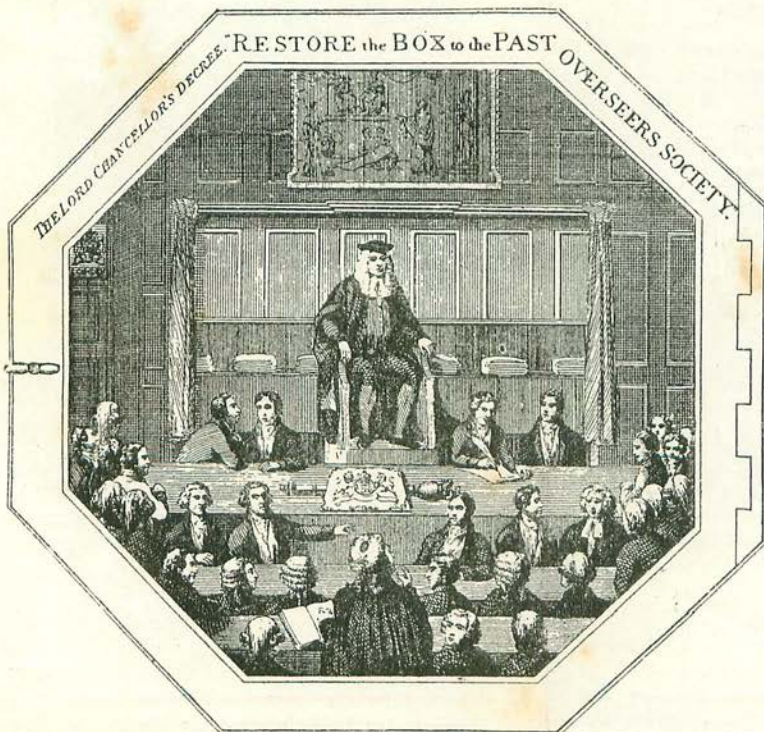


FIG. 4.

1803, the day appointed for a general fast, the service being performed at the drum-head by the Rev. W. W. Dakins, Minor Canon of St. Peter's, Westminster (Fig. 6).

"The wooden walls of Old England" seem to have been in high favour with the overseers, for we have on successive plates a report of the naval engagement between His Majesty's ship *St. Fiorenzo*, of thirty-six guns, and the French frigate, *La Piedmontaise*, of fifty guns; the Battle of the Nile; the Battle of Trafalgar, with a good portrait of Nelson,

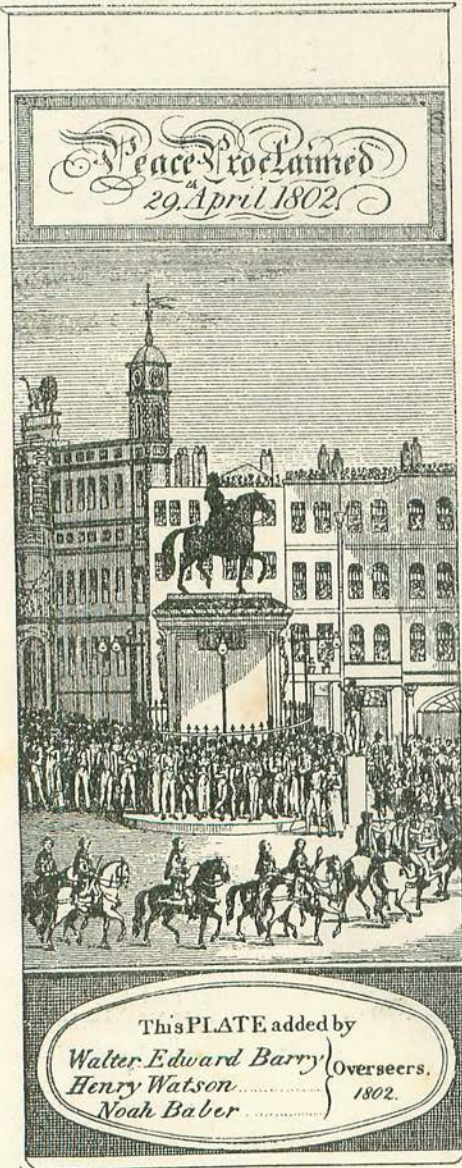


FIG. 5.

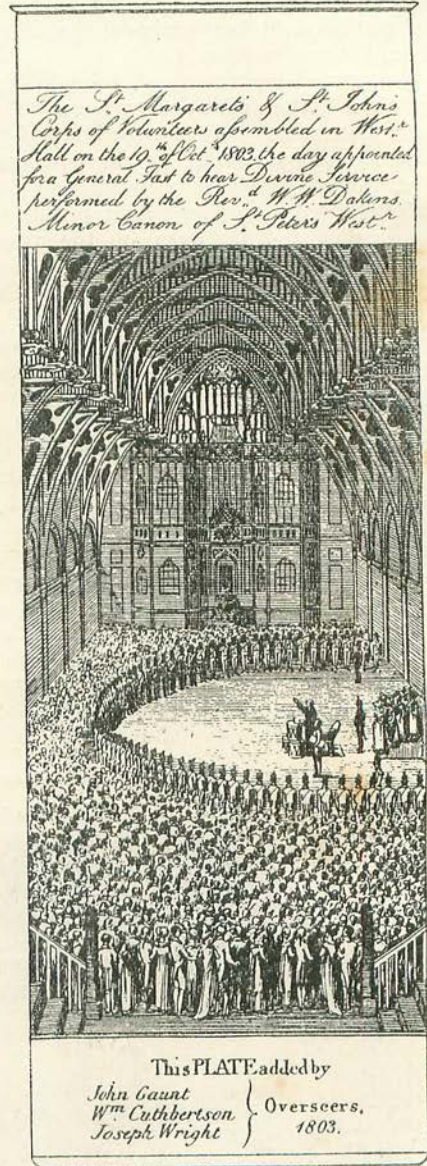


FIG. 6.

surrounded by his words: "England expects that every man will do his duty" (Fig. 7); and the China Fleet repulsing the French Squadron, commanded by Admiral Linois.

Our heroes on land, however, are not forgotten, for they form the subject of the Conquest of Egypt: a somewhat curious plate, by-the-by, the leader of the British troops being presented in the act of riding desperately on horseback, the horse and commander being almost as big as the two pyramids in the foreground.



FIG. 7.

There are portraits of Pitt and Fox ; whilst one plate gives a capital view of Westminster Abbey and St. Margaret's Church, and the announcement of the Jubilee of His Majesty King George the Third, "entering the 50th Year of his Reign in, as well as over, the hearts of his people." The following plate bears emblematical figures, in testimony of the departed worth of His Majesty and His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent.

A representation of the Battle of

Waterloo (Fig. 8) is, perhaps, the most elaborate piece of engraving which had been placed on the box up to that time. Wellington is in the centre of the picture pointing his instructions with the bâton. The dead and dying are in the foreground, and there is heavy

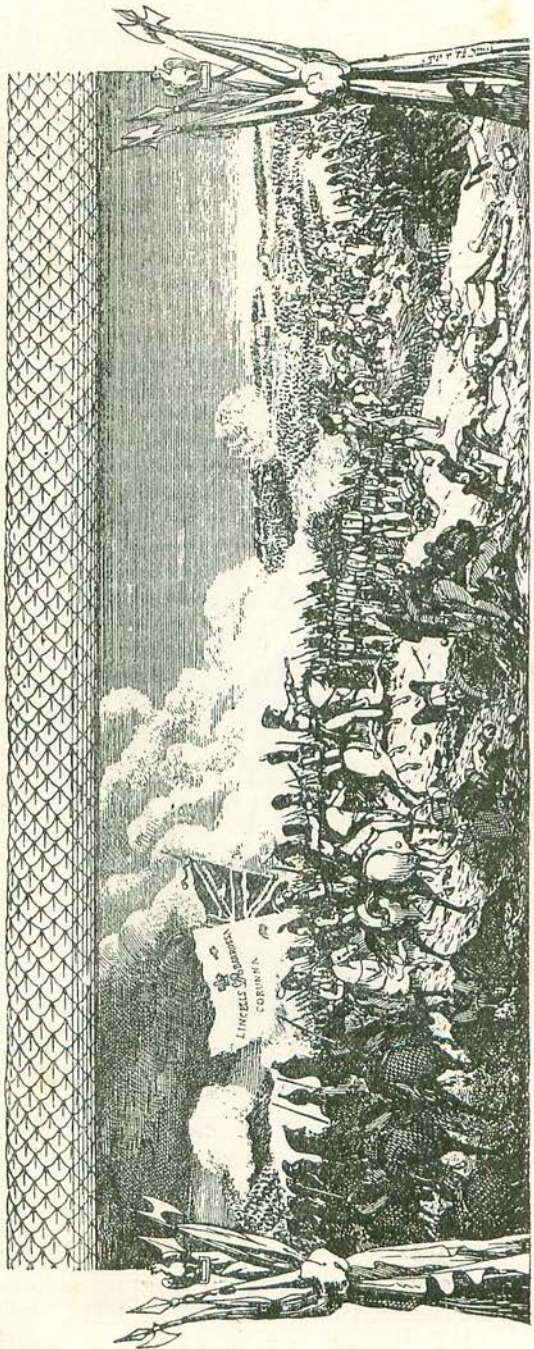


FIG. 8.—THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO.

fighting away in the distance. The inscription which accompanies this plate is somewhat striking, and distinctly expressive. It reads: "This plate commemorates the Glorious Victory achieved on the 18th of June, 1815, near the Village of Waterloo, by the British Army, under the Command of Field Marshal His Grace the Duke of Wellington, who, with the united aid of Prussia and Holland, completed the downfall of the odious tyrant Bonaparte, and the destruction of that military system of terror and devastation, which had under him been the scourge of Europe, the disgrace of France, and the abhorrence of mankind, thereby securing, under Providence, the

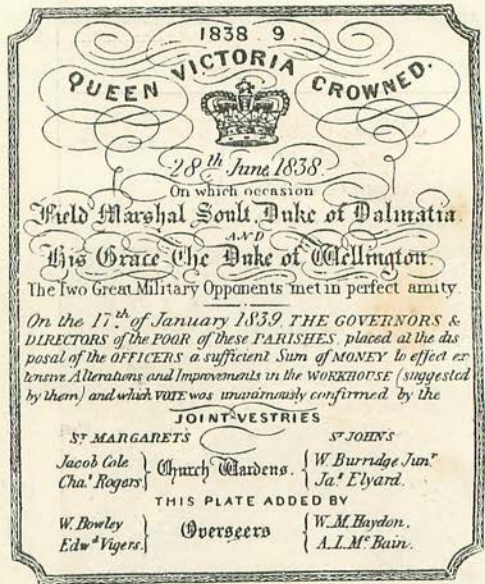


FIG. 10.

blessings of Peace and Civilized Order to a long-suffering world, and reflecting immortal Honour on the Wisdom and Valour of the British Nation." This plate was added by "John Pepper and John Simpson, Overseers of the Poor of St. Margaret and St. John the Evangelist, Westminster, 1815 and 1816." A number of Royal pictures here follow, notably those of Princess Charlotte of Wales and one in memory of the death of Queen Charlotte of Great Britain, consort of George III. The quotation from Shakespeare which accompanies this latter picture is a very beautiful one:—

I saw a blessed troop o' Spirits
 Invite me to a Banquet, whose bright faces
 Cast thousand beams upon me, like the sun,
 And promised me eternal happiness.

George III.'s visit to Scotland is appropriately commemorated (Fig. 9), and the interior of the House of Lords during the trial of Her Majesty Queen Caroline is given considerable prominence in a large and well-engraved picture. The passing of the Reform Bill; the opening of Westminster Hospital; the destruction of both Houses of Parliament on the evening of the 16th October, 1834; and the fact that John Johnson, Esquire, Senior Churchwarden of St. John's, was elected Sheriff of London and Middlesex, are duly set forth; whilst the plate for 1837-38 is a most important one, for it bears record of the following memorable events: The death of His Majesty King William IV.; the Acces-



FIG. 9.

August 15th 1822
 In Commemoration
 of His MAJESTY'S Visit to
 SCOTLAND.
 A. Ascarelli, } Overseers.
 G. T. Thatcher, }
 A. Michie. }



THE FIFTH BOX.

“the Governors and Directors of the Poor of these Parishes, having approved of a scheme recommended by the officers for cooking the food for the inmates of the Workhouse by steam, voted a sufficient sum of money for the purpose of carrying the same into effect” (Fig. 11). The births of the Princess Royal (Dowager-Empress of Germany) and the Prince of Wales are loyally set forth (Fig. 12), and, whilst learning that the Queen and

sion of Queen Victoria (who was born at Kensington Palace, in the Parish of St. Margaret); the consecration of St. Mary’s Chapel, Vincent Square; the embankment of the River Thames preparatory to the erection of the new Houses of Parliament; and the total destruction by fire of the Royal Exchange.

The crowning of Queen Victoria is on the same plate which commemorates that: “The Governors and Directors of the Poor of these Parishes placed at the disposal of the officers a sufficient sum of money to effect extensive alterations and improvements in the workhouse” (Fig. 10); whilst the marriage of Her Majesty is announced with the statement that, on the 17th October, 1839,

Prince Consort paid a visit to the King and Queen of the French in 1843, we are reminded that “Simon Stevenson, Esquire, the Vestry Clerk of St. Margaret’s, died suddenly in the vestry-room whilst discharg-

1839 Vivite Felicitas 1840

<p>S<small>AIN</small>T M<small>ARG</small>ARET Church Wardens <i>James Burt</i> <i>John Litcham Elliot</i> Overseers <i>James Pike</i> <i>William Wyproo</i></p>		<p>S<small>T</small> J<small>OH</small>N E<small>VA</small>NGELIST Church Wardens <i>James Edward</i> <i>Samuel John Noble</i> Overseers <i>Alex. L. H. Bain</i> <i>George Burrudge</i></p>
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21 JAN^r 1840 WILLIAM EVANS Esquire, and JOHN WHEELTON Esquire,
Sheriffs of London, committed to the custody of the Sergeants at Arms, by order of the House of Commons for an alleged breach of privilege in executing a writ of FIERI FACIAS against LUKE HANSARD and another, for the amount of Damages recovered against them, for publishing certain proceedings of the House of Commons containing a libel on JOHN JOSEPH STOCKDALE.

17 OCT^r 1839 *The Governors and Directors of the Poor of these Parishes having approved, of a scheme recommended by the Officers for cooking the Food for the Inmates of the Workhouse by Steam, voted a sufficient sum of Money for the purpose of carrying the same into effect, and which was unanimously confirmed by the joint Vestries.*

FIG. 11.

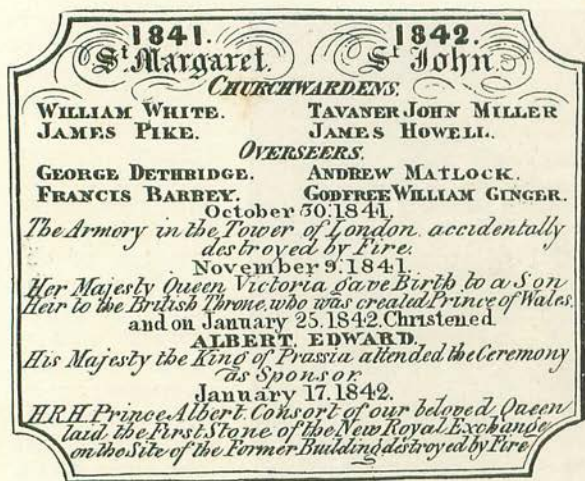


FIG. 12.

ing his duties, and having held the appointment for upwards of 46 years."

A good word is given for the special constables, 3,752 of whom were sworn in these parishes, for their services during the Chartist Riots. St. Stephen's Church, consecrated, built, and endowed at the sole cost of Miss Burdett-Coutts; the death of Sir Robert Peel, the result of a fall from his horse (Fig. 13);

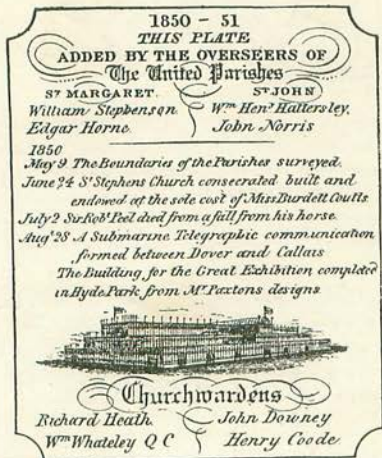


FIG. 13.

and the huge success of the great Exhibition in 1851 is substantiated by the statement that "it was visited by 6,063,986 persons (110,000 being admitted on one day), and the total receipts were £505,107 5s. 7d." (Fig. 14).

The Battle of Balaclava; the Battle of Inkermann; the death of Joseph Hume, M.P., father of the House of Commons; the arrival of "Big Ben" in the Palace of Westminster, October 21st, 1856, in the twentieth year of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, and first sounded on the same day; the cracking of the same big bell on October 24th, 1857; the Indian Mutiny, May 18th, 1857; the marriage of

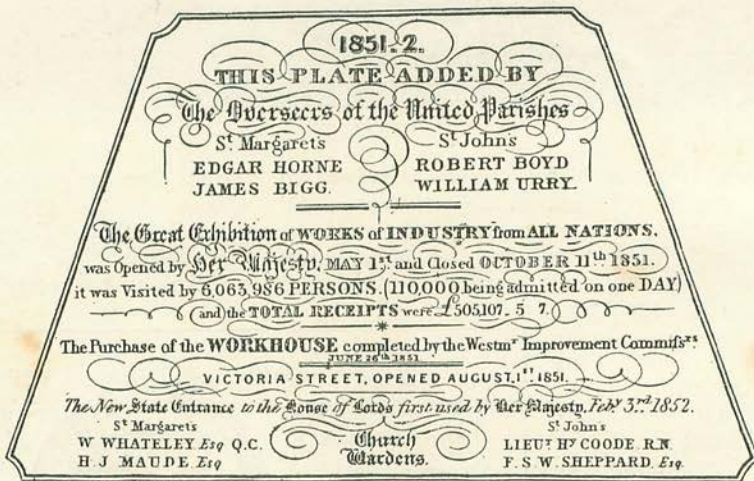


FIG. 14.

the Princess Royal, and the birth of Prince Frederick William of Prussia (Fig. 15); the deaths of Lord Macaulay, Robert Stevenson, and Brunel, and that of the Duchess of Kent, are chronicled on various plates. The plate in memory of the death of H.R.H. the Prince Consort is a plain but beautiful one, and bears an admirable likeness of the late Consort of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, "who terminated a life of exemplary virtue and usefulness on the 14th of December, 1861, eliciting national sorrow for his loss and universal sympathy for our beloved Queen" (Fig. 16).

The marriage of the Prince of Wales (Fig. 17); the birth of His Royal Highness Prince Albert Victor; the death of Viscount Palmerston, and of George Peabody, the great philanthropist; the illness of the Prince of



FIG. 15.

Edinburgh; the loss of H.M.S. *Eurydice*, 24th March, 1878; the erection of Cleopatra's Needle; war between England and Afghanistan; the blowing down of the Tay Bridge; assassination of Alexander II., Czar of Russia, in 1881; and the deaths of Beaconsfield, Lord Hatherley, and Dean Stanley, are all extensively noted.

A portrait of General Gordon, and the announcement of his death, January, 1885, at Khartoum, is recorded (Fig. 18). In 1885 the revised Bible is published and sixpenny telegrams come into force; 1887 is the year of the Queen's Jubilee, and "the jubilant voice of a loyal

Wales, his recovery, and the thanksgiving at St. Paul's, February 27th, 1872; the Tichborne trial; the marriage of the Duke of

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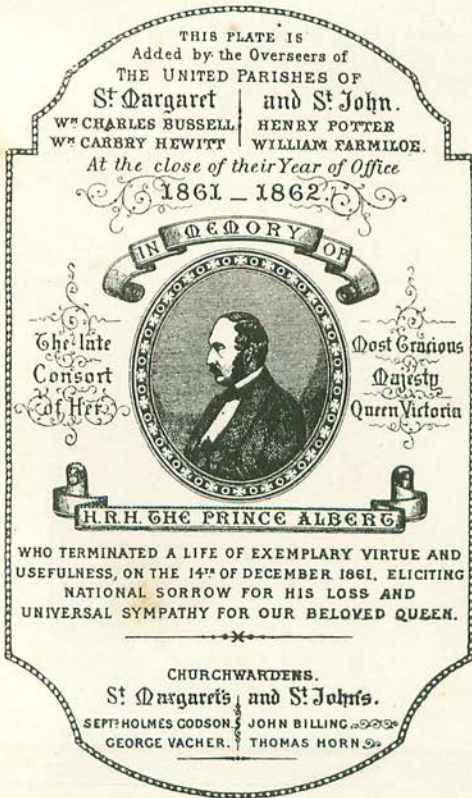


FIG. 16.

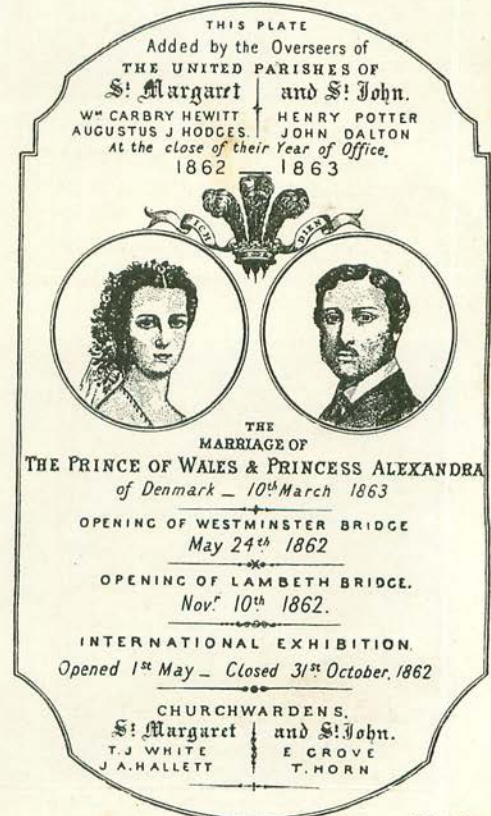


FIG. 17.

and mighty people is heard throughout a world-wide Empire proclaiming the completion of Queen Victoria's Fifty Years' Reign. By gorgeous decorations and the entertainment of the poor by day, and by a thousand beacon fires on the hill-tops and countless illuminations in the streets by night, all England, rural and urban, kept the festival."

The plate for 1891

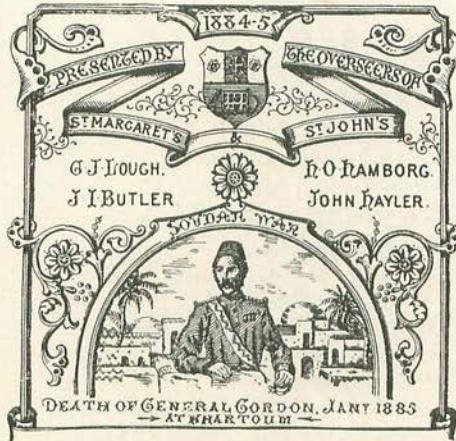


FIG. 18.

nounces the marriage of the Duke of York to Princess May, and the opening of the Imperial Institute by Her Majesty, but the fact of the completion and opening of new public libraries and public baths and washhouses in Great Queen Street, August, 1893.

The plate for 1894 is yet to be added, but it may interest readers to know that one announcement has

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON.
Poet Laureate
"CROSSED THE BAR" OCTOBER 6TH 1892.
Interred in Westminster Abbey

GENERAL ELECTION
Lord Salisbury's Government defeated
BY A MAJORITY OF 40
For Mr Gladstone and "Irish Home Rule"

PRINCE GEO FRED^K OF WALES
Created
DUKE OF YORK &c
25 May 1892
CHURCHWARDENS.
1892-3.
ST MARGARET.
HENRY A HUNT
ZEPH KING, F. RIBA
ST JOHN.
M. HOLMAN BISHOP
THOS W^M DAVIES

THE "MEMORIALS" OF
ST JOHN'S PARISH
Compiled by the Vestry Clerk
MR J E SMITH
and the work
was generously
acknowledged
by the Vestry.

EMANUEL HOSPITAL
FOUNDED BY ANNE, LADY DACRE 1594. VACATED AND SITE SOLD 1893

OVERSEERS.
1892-3
ST MARGARET.
C SPENCER SMITH
GEO FRED^K DANIELLI
ST JOHN.
GEO JOHN CHAFFLE
HENRY W^M BUDD

12. BREVET 87

and 1892 contains the announcement of the decease of Cardinal Manning and Lord Tennyson. The plate for 1893 not only an-

already been decided upon, that of the birth of a little son to the Duke and Duchess of York.



THE PRESENT DEACONS.
MR. F. BARNES. MR. JOHN RORKE (CHAIRMAN). DR. R. W. JONES. MR. R. TUNSTALL.