

# Out and About

## The Iron Duke in Bronze

**Dave Martin**, recently the author of a book on the French Revolution, takes us on a journey to discover some of the memorials to the Duke of Wellington, and asks what they tell us about the great man.



Wellington column and statue at one of the entrances to Stratfield Saye estate.  
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The Duke of Wellington is so clearly a national hero that it is no surprise to find statues of him in cities across the United Kingdom. To my knowledge there are at least ten, maybe more. So when I planned this journey I decided to apply some simple criteria to determine which ones to visit.

First I wanted a range of statues that illuminated different aspects of his long career as a soldier and politician. His military career started in 1787 and included victories in India, and in the Peninsular and Napoleonic Wars, Waterloo being his most famous. Meanwhile his political career began when he became an MP in 1806, a career he resumed after Waterloo and which saw him attain the office of Prime Minister in 1828 and again briefly in 1834, and remain an influential figure in the House of Lords until his retirement in 1846. Second I wanted statues that said something interesting about us, the people erecting them. Why was he commemorated and how was he depicted? And third, those statues had to be accessible by public transport.

That is why I could be found early one February morning standing by the A33, with the roar of traffic in my ears, gazing up at the statue of Wellington erected in 1863 by his 'son and tenants, servants and labourers on the estates' at Stratfield Saye. This estate was given to him by a grateful nation after Waterloo and this monument is a clear example of filial and local pride; although I'm not yet sure who actually paid for it. The statue itself is set on top of a column roughly 50 feet high. Here Wellington is very much the local hero to be looked up to both literally and metaphorically. In fact standing at the foot of the column you cannot see him at all; you have to move some distance away to see the statue itself. And if you want to see any of the detail you really need binoculars, which is a pity as the statue is a bronze by the renowned sculptor Baron Carlo Marochetti. His Duke is depicted standing, dressed in military uniform with medals and honours, and holding his hat in his left hand while his right hand rests on his hip. As part of my trip I might have visited the house itself but as it was closed for the winter I walked to the bus stop instead. I caught the 9.15 Horseman Coach Service bus to Reading, the reason for my early start. This is the only bus of the day to Reading, and it only runs on Thursdays and Saturdays, part of the general disappearance of rural bus services.

Conversely there are very frequent trains from Reading to London and so later that morning I emerged from Hyde Park Corner tube station into Hyde Park itself. There, not far from the Duke's

London home Apsley House, stands a massive 18-foot high statue of the Greek hero *Achilles* erected to honour, 'Arthur, Duke of Wellington and his brave companions.' In 1814, in the mood of national celebration of the victories over Napoleon, a subscription was begun by an upper-class patriotic society, the 'Ladies of England', to erect a monument in Wellington's honour. This raised more than £10,000. The convention at that time was not to erect statues of someone

Their Achilles is very much the angry brooding hero of Greek myth. He longs for his ships, his men, the smell of blood and complains that the smell of 'diesel fills my nostrils.' I know what he means. And there is no mention of Wellington at all.

Descending again into the underpass that leads to the tube station I carried straight on this time to emerge in the space of Hyde Park Corner, its arches, statues and memorials trapped within

the busy London traffic. Here stands a superb equestrian statue of Wellington by Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm. There was an earlier statue that stood on top of the Wellington Arch which was much criticised for its size and appearance and then moved.<sup>2</sup> Boehm's replaced it in 1888. He depicts the Duke in the full uniform of a Field Marshal, armed, carrying a telescope in his right hand and mounted on his favourite horse Copenhagen as though on the battlefield.<sup>3</sup> Like *Achilles* this statue has a dynamic quality to it. Its bronze cost £8,000, of which £6,000 was voted by Parliament.

One of the problems I encountered trying to photograph this statue was the sheer number of pigeons on it. I speculated that if I had asked the Duke what to do about them he would have given me the same answer that he gave Queen Victoria when she asked what could be done about the pigeons in the Crystal Palace of the Great Exhibition in 1851: 'Hawks, Ma'am.'

Apart from its artistic qualities what I like about this work is the way it attempts to commemorate those men who fought with Wellington. At each corner there is a soldier from respectively the 42<sup>nd</sup> Royal Highlanders, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Royal Welsh Fusiliers, the 6<sup>th</sup>



Wellington the hero.  
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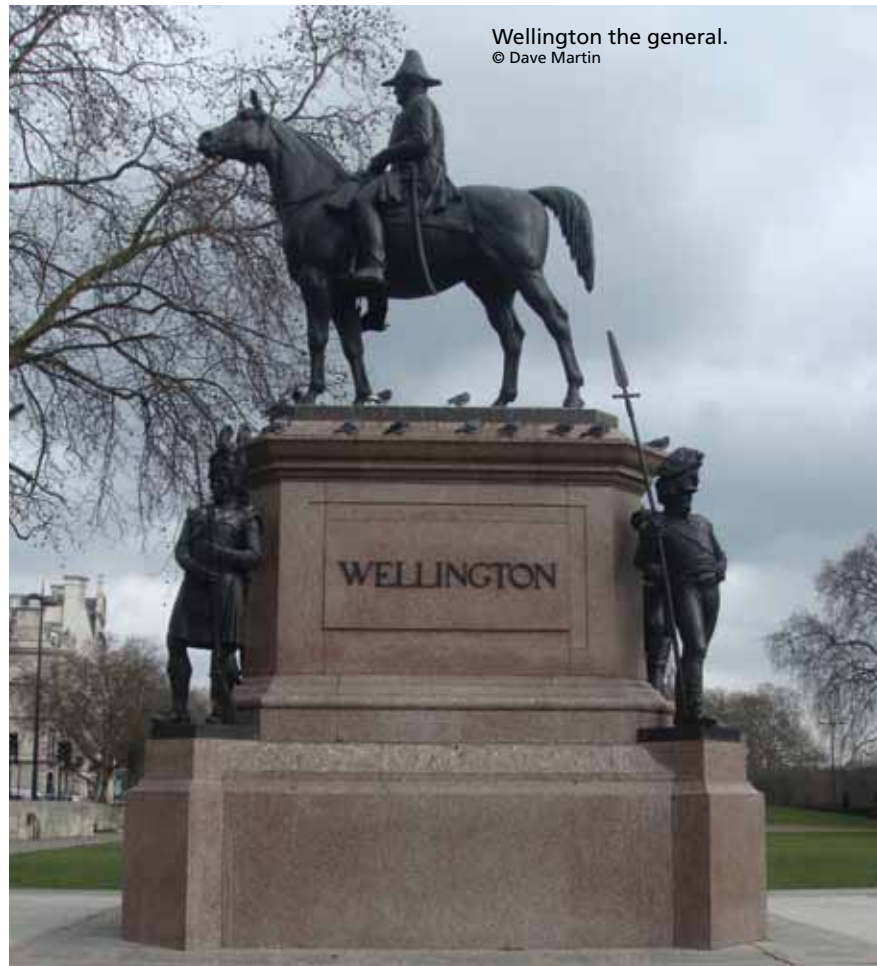


The Talking Statues is attached to railings some distance from the statue. You'll need to look carefully and take note that the project began in 2014 and runs until August 2015.  
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still living so they wanted a great statue of a symbolic horse modelled on part of the Horse Tamers, a marble statue group in Rome. Instead the sculptor, Sir Richard Westmacott, modelled his work on one of the male human figures in the group. When his great naked *Achilles* was unveiled in 1822 some were horrified and the statue was given a small fig leaf, a fig leaf that is still in place although it has reportedly been removed on two occasions in the past, 1870 and 1961.

The statue itself is very impressive, not just for its sheer size, but also for the quality of the sculptor's work which can be better seen down at this level. The classical influences are apparent not just in the choice of subject but also in its modelling upon the Roman work of art, itself a copy of an earlier Greek work. Meanwhile the triumphalism behind it is reinforced by the plinth inscription that records that it was 'cast from cannon taken in the victories of Salamanca, Vittoria, Toulouse and Waterloo'.

One recent addition to the statue is a *Talking Statues* project tab.<sup>1</sup> The *Talking Statues* project aims to do exactly that. You swipe your smart phone over the tab or type in the web address and make a phone call and *Achilles*, as scripted by Rebecca Lenkiewicz and voiced by Dominic West, talks to you.



Wellington the general.  
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Stone carving of some of Wellington's men.  
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Inniskilling Dragoons and the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards. They represent the four countries of the United Kingdom. At this date any statues or memorials to the dead focused upon the officers. If enlisted men appeared at all it was just as a number. So having these individuals physically represented feels like quite forward-thinking for the time.

It's interesting to consider how far things have moved on since then. Certainly today on any war memorial we would expect all those who fell to be named, something which became the norm after the Boer and Great Wars. Moreover with the more recent conflict, the Second World War, where leaders have been commemorated in bronze there has also been a trend towards memorials to the men who served below them too. For example on Raleigh Green in front of the Ministry of Defence in London there is a statue of Montgomery of Alamein unveiled in 1980 while in Whitehall Place there is the Royal Tank Regiment memorial, the five crewmen of a Comet tank, unveiled in 2000.

Descending into the underpass to return to the tube station there is superb artwork and stone carving showing incidents from the battle of Waterloo. One very poignant scene is, 'Waterloo The Morning After. Forty thousand men and ten thousand horses lay dead, dying or helpless from their wounds.' If we were to try and commemorate the battle in a sculpture today I wonder what we would do. Would we want to commemorate all the nationalities that fought and died on that day and would we want to commemorate all of the men? If so would the resulting sculpture need to be more like a work by Antony Gormley such as *Allotment* (1995)?

Back on the tube on the way to my last London statue of the day I found myself sitting opposite a fashionable young woman wearing a spotlessly clean pair of black shiny Wellingtons



Wellington the politician.  
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with a prominent white label and the name Hunter picked out in red. How appropriate. The Duke had his boot-maker modify the Hessian boot to make a boot that was both hard-wearing for military purposes, and also comfortable for evening wear, and it ended up being called the Wellington. Unlike her wellies the Duke's might have had tassels or extended up at the front to protect the cavalryman's knee. Mind you this was not something I'd seen on any of his statues so far.

Emerging again into the afternoon light at the road junction in front of the Royal Exchange I saw my second equestrian statue of the Duke. This one was begun by Sir Francis Chantrey, and after his death, completed by his assistant Henry Weekes. It was erected not as a tribute to Wellington the soldier but rather as a tribute to Wellington the politician for his help in getting the Act of Parliament passed for the rebuilding of London Bridge. This statue cost £4,200, plus a government donation of metal worth £1,520 and was unveiled on 18 June 1844.

Sited as it is at such a busy junction it can be difficult to stand back and look carefully at this statue. The best place to view it from may be the top deck of a number 25 bus stopped at the traffic lights. At the time some criticised this statue for the non-military nature of the Duke's clothing which is understandable bearing in mind the date chosen to unveil it but unreasonable bearing in mind its purpose. This illustrates the perennial problem. Once the decision to erect a statue has been taken it is necessary to decide how to portray that individual. Others at the time of the unveiling disapproved of the fact that while he is on horseback the Duke has no saddle or stirrups. Even to my modern eye this seems a little strange. And I must confess that while it struck me as a very elegant statue it was perhaps a little lifeless, or was that the fading light? Then the traffic lights changed and my bus moved off.

Next morning I set off on what had initially been planned as the last leg of my journey, to Manchester. Here there is another fine statue of the Duke but one that generated even more controversy at the time, much of it at the absence of a horse. This older Wellington is depicted in a military frock coat with honours as though speaking in the House of Lords and with his notes in his hand rather than reins.

The progress of this work from the idea to the unveiling mirrors the process followed in so many Victorian towns. Four days after Wellington's death in September 1852 a letter in the local press

called for a statue to be erected in his honour in Piccadilly gardens. By the end of the month a Wellington Memorial Committee had been set up and began to look for subscriptions. This produced a positive response, nearly £4,000 in the first week, a sum that rose to £7,000. Setting up a statue was an expression of civic pride and for the local dignitaries there was the opportunity for their names to be preserved for posterity alongside that of the 'great man'. And it was usually 'great man'.

Next stage was a competition for invited sculptors to submit their designs and instead of the whole committee deciding which to choose here a sub-committee of three were given the job. The competition attracted 29 sculptors who submitted 37 models. In November 1853 the three judges examined the models which had been placed on display in the Royal Manchester Institution. They selected a standing statue of Wellington, a decision subsequently confirmed by the general committee. When this result was published there was uproar largely because so many people wanted Wellington the military leader not Wellington an elderly politician. There was also criticism of the chosen sculptor, Matthew Noble, who was then relatively unknown and suggestions that one of the judges had fixed the competition in Noble's favour by excluding all equestrian models. The controversy rumbled on in the press but did not reach the law courts, the committee stood their ground and the sculptor got on with his work.

The resulting statue was unveiled in August 1856 in a ceremony that attracted a huge crowd and included a parade of Waterloo veterans. This statue is placed up on a plinth and on each of the four sides of the plinth there is a bas-relief panel. Two depict Wellington's victories at Assaye in India and at Waterloo and the other two depict him receiving the thanks of the House of Commons in 1814 and at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. So Wellington the soldier, diplomat and politician. Thereafter Noble's work was admired and the fuss died down.

So that was five statues and five Wellingtons and my planned journey was over. What had I learned? Well, there is more than one Wellington physically preserved in our national consciousness by a statue in the street. There is Wellington the local landowner and patron, Wellington the diplomat, Wellington the politician, Wellington the hero and Wellington the General and each erected at considerable cost for the varying motives of filial pride,

Wellington the elder statesman.

© Dave Martin



civic pride, patriotism, admiration and gratitude. Unsurprisingly there are no negative versions, so no reactionary Wellington as some of the Chartists might have viewed him for his part in the precautions that included moving Queen Victoria to the safety of the Isle of Wight when they marched through London to present their petition in 1848.

There are still a couple of dimensions to him that I want to explore further.

First is the version of the Marochetti statue that stands more accessibly in Leeds. I'd like to go and have a look at that. Second is the question of how Wellington's statues are treated and for that I'll need to carry on to Glasgow. As Hilary Mantel writes, 'There are no endings. If you think so you are deceived as to their nature. They are all beginnings. Here is one.'<sup>4</sup>

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Talking Statues  
[www.talkingstatues.co.uk/index.html#home](http://www.talkingstatues.co.uk/index.html#home)
- <sup>2</sup> This can now be seen in Aldershot.
- <sup>3</sup> Buried in the grounds of Stratfield Saye.
- <sup>4</sup> Mantel, H. (2012) *Bring Up the Bodies*, London: Fourth Estate.

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