

## BLUE PLAQUE FOR KING CETSHWAYO

By Ian Knight

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On Monday 30 October 2006 English Heritage fixed one of its famous 'blue plaques' – marking the residence of a significant historical figure – to the imposing front of a Victorian town-house at 18, Melbury Road, Kensington, London. The plaque commemorates the fact that for two weeks in August 1882 the house was the home of the Zulu king, Cetshwayo kaMpande, and his entourage during his brief but highly significant visit to London.

In the aftermath of the British invasion of 1879, the king had, of course, been taken into captivity, lodged firstly in the old Dutch castle in Cape Town, and then at the farm Oude Moulén on the Cape Flats. Once he had recovered from the shock of defeat and exile, he had campaigned tirelessly to be allowed a voice in Zulu affairs. While British and colonial politicians who had supported the invasion remained reluctant to allow him any direct influence, his plight attracted the attention of a number of well-connected tourists, for whom a visit to the king became an essential part of a visit to the Cape, and who took up his cause on their return to England. Several times Cetshwayo asked to be allowed to visit London to put his case in person and each time he was refused but, as the post-war settlement imposed on Zululand slid into anarchy, he came increasingly to be seen as a viable solution to an increasingly volatile problem. The Government in London began to consider an extraordinary *volte face* in policy – the restoration of a man whom British troops had waged a six-month war to depose. It was argued that Cetshwayo was the only man with sufficient authority to impose order in Zululand, and that, since he would be entirely dependant on the British for his return, he would no longer be a threat to British interests.

The king was finally granted permission to visit London in 1882. He left Cape Town for London on 12 July, accompanied by three of his *izinduna* who had accompanied him in exile, by an interpreter, Robert Dunn, and – to keep a close eye on him – Henrique Shepstone, a member of the powerful dynasty who largely shaped colonial Natal's policies. The king arrived off Plymouth on 5 August, and was greeted by a throng of journalists, all keen to interview the man who had humbled British troops in the field. Throughout his trip, King Cetshwayo played the role of a consummate diplomat, receiving visitors with quiet dignity, always publicly regretting the war and apparently marvelling at the power and benevolence of his hosts.

From Plymouth he was taken to the house in Melbury Road, where a suite had been made available to him. News soon spread of his arrival, and curious crowds gathered outside in the hope of catching a glimpse of him. Cetshwayo was obliged to make frequent appearances at the window; he was nervous, at first, uncertain of his reaction, but when his appearance was greeted with enthusiastic cheers he accepted the obligation with good humour. Crowds, indeed, soon dogged his every move as Londoners became enchanted by the man whom they found very different in person to the scowling savage portrayed in the illustrated press in 1879. Although a large man, the king cut a considerable dash in a smart outfit of European clothes and carried himself with considerable majesty. When Cetshwayo and his attendants were photographed by the fashionable Society photographers Bassanos, such a crowd gathered outside that one young boy was heard to comment 'He ain't Ceta-wayo, for he can't get-away!'. Shown a statue of Achilles in Hyde Park, the king observed quietly 'you see; it was not so long ago that they fought as we do – without clothes'. Taken to the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich he was impressed – as his hosts intended – by the display of Imperial might. 'I feel that I have grown up, so to speak, in a day; that from the childhood of understanding I have suddenly sprung to manhood'.

From London, on 14 August the king was taken by special train and yacht for a brief audience with Queen Victoria at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. According to the press, a 'large crowd assembled to witness the departure' and the king and his attendants 'were greeted with hearty cheering'. In the event, the royal audience lasted scarcely fifteen minutes and was apparently cool – the Queen was, after all, one of Lord Chelmsford's most loyal supporters - but polite enough; the Queen presented Cetshwayo with a silver cup as a souvenir (it is now in the KwaZulu Cultural Museum at oNdini). Later, the Queen commissioned her portrait painter, Carl Sohn, to paint Cetshwayo's picture.

More importantly, the king had several meetings at the Colonial Office to discuss his political future. To his delight, it was agreed that he would be restored to Zululand – although the full conditions limiting his authority were not made clear until after his return to the Cape.

The king and his entourage left England at the end of the month. The mission had been a huge political and diplomatic success and, indeed, the impression Cetshwayo had created in the minds of the

British public did much to alter their opinion of the Zulu people. In the years since the invasion many had become uneasy about the justice of the war, and the king's apparent dignity in defeat helped to change the image of the Zulus from one of ruthless savages to noble warriors – a view which has continued to colour popular perception to this day.

Sadly, the king's restoration in fact proved disastrous. He returned to Zululand in early 1883, but such were the deep divisions engendered by the British invasion that he was unable to contain the existing rivalries and a spiralling cycle of violence. His return polarised opinion within Zululand – between royalists and anti-royalists – and a civil war broke out which led first to a crushing military defeat and then to Cetshwayo's death.

The prime mover behind the efforts to secure a blue plaque to recognise the king's visit to London was archaeologist Dr Tony Pollard, who in 2000 directed the battlefield survey at Isandlwana. Said Tony,

While in Africa I was told a story by a Zulu about the king's meeting with Queen Victoria in England, about how his magic was greater than hers. It struck me that if these events are still talked about in Zululand today we should certainly be remembering them here in Britain. People tend to think of events like the Zulu war taking place in some exotic, far off place but they also had an incredible impact in Britain and this plaque will hopefully remind people of that.

While it is true that each blue plaque has its own story to tell, few are quite so loaded with bitter-sweet irony as that to King Cetshwayo. A man schemed against and vilified by British politicians in his time, defeated by British troops in war, he was cheered through the streets of London just a few years later, rehabilitated politically but ultimately destroyed by the forces which Britain had unleashed, and which ripped the Zulu kingdom apart.

The plaque is, incidentally, one of only two so far which commemorate black contributions to London's history; the other marks the home of legendary rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix.

## ILLUSTRATIONS;

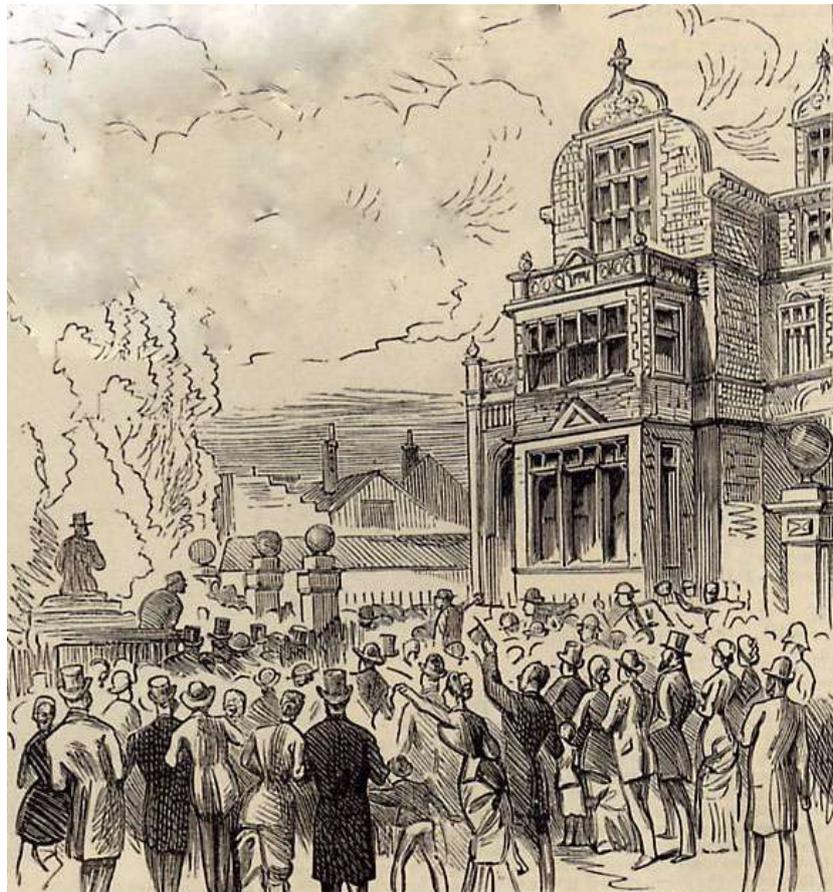
- 1). King Cetshwayo, photographed by Bassanos in London in 1882 (Ron Sheeley Collection).





2). Cetshwayo's impact on fashionable Society, satirised by Punch.

3). Crowds outside the house in Melbury Road during the king's visit.





4). 18 Melbury Road today.

5). The new blue plaque.

