

The British Royal Family in Bordighera

The Earls of Strathmore, the future Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and the Duchess of Leeds

By Gisella Merello, translated by Marcus Bicknell



Claude Bowes-Lyon, a Scot and the 13th Earl of Strathmore¹, great grandfather of Queen Elizabeth II, lived from 1824 to 1904 (he died in Bordighera).

Photo: Claude Bowes-Lyon, 13th Count Strathmore



In 1896 he bought an elegant villa with a large park on the Via Romana in Bordighera on the Italian Riviera. The house he bought from Raphael Bischoffsheim, a wealthy banker, was very special; it had been designed and built by Charles Garnier, one of the most famous architects of the time. Having completed his most famous buildings, such as the

Paris Opera, he settled in Bordighera. Here he built for himself the outstanding Villa Garnier, as well as the Villa Bischoffsheim, completed in 1878.

Photo: The first Queen of Italy, Margherita di Savoia



Bischoffsheim and his new villa were honoured within a year by a royal visit. The first Queen of Italy, the young Regina Margherita di Savoia,

stayed there a month with her little son as the guest of Bischoffsheim to restore her confidence after the assassination attempt on her husband Umberto I.

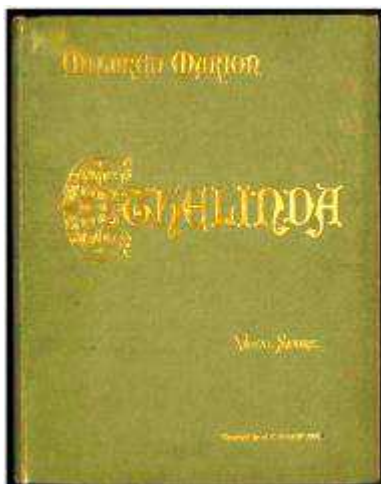


Photo: Lady Mildred Bowes-Lyon Jessup

After acquiring the villa, the Earl of Strathmore immediately changed the name to Villa Etelinda. This was the name



of an opera, a lyrical tragedy in three acts, by their daughter Mildred Marion Jessup (Lady Mildred Bowes-Lyon Jessup, 1868-1897). The opera was surprisingly successful, especially as she was one of only very few female composers in the world. She wrote the music to *Ethelinda*² and her wealthy American husband, Augustus Edward Jessup, wrote the libretto. *Maestro* Leopoldo Mugnone arranged the opera accompaniment for piano and directed the successful first performance in April 1894 at the *Teatro Della Pergola* in Florence, but the creators remained anonymous. Only during the curtain calls of the second evening did the shy female composer, Mildred, make her entrance on stage, much to the astonishment of the appreciative audience.



Five years after the opera's debut, Mugnone was again the conductor at a unique performance of *Ethelinda* in Bordighera. Present was Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (1840-1901), eldest daughter of the Queen of England, Queen Victoria. Vicky was the widow of Frederick III of Germany and therefore referred to as the former Empress Federico. This royal performance probably took place on 1st March 1899 in the New Museum, now called the Museo Bicknell, funded and built by Clarence Bicknell eleven years earlier. This performance was most likely to have been sponsored by Vicky to raise funds for Mrs. Fanshawe Walker's new Cottage Hospital home for the sick. Mildred was not present; she had died two years previously. As a girl her health was so bad that doctors advised her to leave the damp cold of Glamis Castle, her home in Scotland, for warmer climes. She spent long periods in Egypt, and other parts of Africa and Europe, often stopping off at Bordighera to stay with her family. She died at the tender age of 29, on the Riviera, at the Residence Valescure in St Raphael leaving two little boys.



Photo: Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha



Mildred's father, Claude Bowes-Lyon, was in the meantime adapting the Villa Etelinda to the tastes of the family. He commissioned the local painter Giuseppe Ferdinando Piana to paint frescos of rural scenes on the walls of the entrance hall, which are still in good condition today. The Earl, a devout Christian, was very active in Bordighera. In 1890, with Rosa Fanshawe and Henry Lowe, he contributed towards a sizeable donation to extend All Saint's Anglican church to accommodate the growing numbers of the faithful.

The Strathmore family usually spent their winter and spring in this villa in Liguria to enjoy the mild climate and to immerse themselves in the delights of the English community in Bordighera.

The Earl, from 1898 until the end of his days, was president of the Tennis Club of Bordighera, the first sports club of this kind in Italy. His son Herbert (1860-1897), a passionate tennis player, died in Bordighera, two months before his sister Mildredⁱⁱⁱ. The Earl himself died after a brief illness in the Villa Etelinda in 1904. Many British residents in Western Liguria attended their funerals which took place in Scotland, and numerous wreaths of flowers were sent from Bordighera.



In memory of the late Earl and his generosity, the English community of Bordighera gave two windows made by the British firm James Powell & Son to enhance the Anglican Church. Two wrought-iron candlesticks were also presented by his widow. An annual gentlemen's tennis tournament, "The Strathmore Cup" was established in his memory at the Tennis Club which he had loved so dearly.

His widow Frances Dora Smith ^{iv} (1832/1922) and his daughter Maud (1870-1941), who was talented violinist, continued to live in the Villa Etelinda. They regularly organised fund-raising concerts and other events for local causes, and were well-known for their generosity within the English community for their charitable initiatives.

Claude Bowes-Lyon, the 13th Earl of Strathmore, was the grandfather, and Claude Bowes-Lyon, 14th Earl of Strathmore the father, of Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, the mother of today's Elizabeth II. The 13th Earl who lived in Bordighera is therefore the great-grandfather of the current sovereign of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.



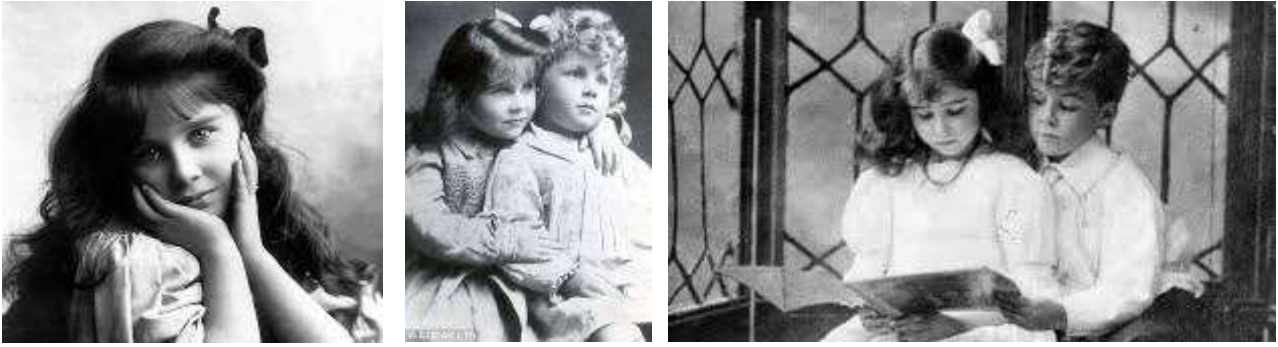
Claude Monet, *Villas at Bordighera*, oil on canvas, 1884, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (1900-2002), came to Bordighera as a child on several occasions, always with her youngest brother David ^v. Together with her mother, Cecilia Cavendish-Bentick ^{vi}, she visited both her paternal grandmother Frances at Villa Etelinda, and her maternal grandmother, Caroline Louisa Burnaby Scott (1832-1918), who owned an imposing house between Bordighera and Vallecrosia, the Villa Poggio Ponente (built by another famous Englishwoman, Mrs Boyce, originally named the Villa Bella Vista). It now belongs to the *Comunità Educativa Gilardi* part of *Padri Somaschi*, a charitable religious congregation.



Photo: Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in about 1990





Photos: Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, the future Queen Mother aged 7, with her younger brother David aged 5.

The presence of Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, in Bordighera is confirmed by several written sources. Her father writes to her mother about the impending arrival of his daughter, Cecilia and little Elizabeth, only six years old, leaving from Charing Cross train station in London on February 15th 1907. A few days after her arrival, the child described in a letter to her father, who was still in Scotland, her grandmother's garden as an "adorable place", where he usually went before breakfast to pick flowers and oranges.

Cecilia Bowes-Lyon Countess of Strathmore and Kinghorne (1862-1938)



We know another interesting fact linked to Bordighera. In 1909, during a stay at Villa Poggio Ponente, little Elizabeth purchased two rather refined period angels for three lire. These antiques were lovingly kept and displayed in a corner of her bedroom at Clarence House many years later. In the official biography of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, it is somewhat surprising to learn that the happiest memories of her childhood date back to her travels in Italy, to Bordighera, Sanremo and Florence. She felt free of worries during these trips to the Riviera, whether she was in the large gardens of the family villas, on the beach and rocks near the sea, or driving a cart pulled by a donkey.

A plaque installed in 1948 in the atrium of Villa Etelinda commemorates these memorable stays in Bordighera. Some mistakenly believe that this plaque refers to the current sovereign Elizabeth II, an error which is excusable given the similarity between the two names, Elizabeth II and Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother.

Lady Katherine Frances Lambton (1862-1952)

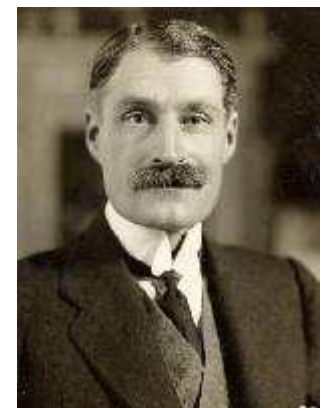


The future consort of King George VI had many other family links within the English colony in Bordighera; for example the Duchess of Leeds (1862-1952) was the mother-in-law of Patrick Bowes-Lyon (1884–1949), Elizabeth's elder brother. Katherine Frances Lambton^{vii}, The Duchess of Leeds, lived permanently in Bordighera and, like most of the British, found the climate of great benefit to her health.

Patrick Bowes-Lyon, 15th Earl of Strathmore and Kinghorne (1884-1949)

Initially, she rented the villa La Loggia on the Via dei Colli. Subsequently she built the Villa Selva Dolce, with its very large cypress-filled garden and a collection of 150 species of irises. The duchess was a skilled musician and a refined letter-writer; she published some short stories, including *A lover of the Beauty* and *Capriccios*.

Besides her deeply intellectual side, she loved botany and the sea very



much. In fact, she shared an interest in boating with her husband, so when he was there, they would go and discover the Mediterranean coast together by boat. John Francis Osborne, his only son and the heir to the title, was born in Bordighera in 1901. The notorious Duke of Windsor (who had abdicated the British throne) and Wallis Simpson, during a visit to Cannes, stayed briefly with the Duchess of Leeds in the Villa Selva Dolce in 1949.

It is interesting to note how Bordighera is inextricably linked to the English royal family; there were so many relationships between visitors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the House of Windsor. It is curious to think that the villa where the future wife of George VI of England (in her childhood) was inhabited for a short time, a few decades before, by the little Vittorio Emanuele III of Italy.

Vittorio Emanuele III of Italy as a teenager

The Villa Etelinda was sold by the Countess of Strathmore to Margherita di Savoia, now the Italian Queen Mother, at the outbreak of the First World War. This was well before Elizabeth got engaged to the Duke of York (the future George VI) whence she became queen consort, in 1936, after the abdication of Edward VIII and then mother of Elizabeth II. The Villa now belongs to the *Associazione Nazionale Famiglie dei Caduti e Dispersi in Guerra*, to whom it was given in 1928 by King Vittorio Emanuele III, the son of Queen Margherita (who died in 1926).



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A shorter version of Gisella Merello's paper was published in Pier Rossi's series *Racconti di Bordighera* (Alzani, Pinerolo 2017) and on the Bordighera website at www.bordighera.it/news/un_po_di_storia_di_villa_etelinda.

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The map of Bordighera is from *MARVELS: The Life of Clarence Bicknell* by Valerie Lester

Endnotes:

ⁱ Claude Bowes-Lyon, 13th Earl of Strathmore and Kinghorne (Redbourn, England 21 July 1824 – [Bordighera](#), Italy 16 February 1904), styled The Honourable Claude Bowes-Lyon from 1847 to 1865, was a British peer.^[1] He was the 13th holder of the [Earldom of Strathmore and Kinghorne](#). He was born in [Redbourn](#), Hertfordshire. He was the second surviving son of [Thomas George Lyon-Bowes, Lord Glamis](#) (son of the [11th Earl](#)), and his wife [Charlotte Grimstead](#). His paternal grandparents were [Thomas Lyon-Bowes, 11th Earl of Strathmore and Kinghorne](#), and his first wife Mary Elizabeth Louisa Rodney Carpenter. His maternal grandparents were Joseph Valentine Grimstead and Charlotte Jane Sarah Walsh. Born Claude Lyon-Bowes, he altered the family name to Bowes-Lyon. Bowes-Lyon also played [cricket](#) to a high level, making four appearances in [first-class cricket](#), appearing three times for the [Marylebone Cricket Club](#) from 1843–46, and once for the [Gentlemen of England](#) in 1846. His son, also called Claude born 14 March 1855, died, 7 November 1944 married Cecilia Cavendish-Bentinck (1862–1938). They had 10 children including Elizabeth, later Queen Elizabeth, mother of Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The children were...

Violet Bowes-Lyon (1882–1893)

Mary Bowes-Lyon (1883–1961)

Patrick Bowes-Lyon (1884–1949)

John Bowes-Lyon (1886–1930)

Alexander Bowes-Lyon (1887–1911)

Fergus Bowes-Lyon (1889–1915)

Rose Bowes-Lyon (1890–1967)

Michael Bowes-Lyon (1893–1953)

Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother) (1900–2002)

David Bowes-Lyon (1902–1961)

ⁱⁱ The title of the opera is with H. The villa is sometimes spelt H, but then with time the Italian version Etelinda prevailed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Claude's younger brother [Patrick Bowes-Lyon](#) was a tennis player who won the 1887 [Wimbledon](#) doubles.

^{iv} Frances Dora Bowes-Lyon, Countess of Strathmore and Kinghorne (née Smith; 29 July 1832 – 5 February 1922) was a British noblewoman. She was the paternal grandmother of [Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother](#), and thus a great-grandmother of [Queen Elizabeth II](#). Her father was Oswald Smith (7 July 1794 – 18 June 1863), of [Blendon Hall, Bexley, Kent](#) (Bexley being annexed to London only in 1894) and her mother was [Henrietta Mildred Hodgson](#) (6 January 1805–19 November 1891). Her paternal grandparents were [George Smith](#) and wife Frances Mary Mosley, daughter of Sir John Parker Mosley, 1st Baronet, and wife Elizabeth Bayley, granddaughter of Nicholas Mosley and wife Elizabeth Parker, and sister of [Oswald Mosley, 2nd Baronet](#), great-great-grandfather of [Oswald Mosley](#). On 28 September 1853, she married [Claude Bowes-Lyon](#). He became the 13th holder of the [Earldom of Strathmore and Kinghorne](#) following the death of his brother [Thomas](#) in 1865. Frances then assumed the title and style of Countess of Strathmore and Kinghorne. Together the couple had 11 children.

^v Elizabeth was younger than all of her siblings, except for her much-loved brother David.

^{vi} Cecilia Nina Bowes-Lyon, Countess of Strathmore and Kinghorne [GCVO DStJ](#) (née Cavendish-Bentinck; 11 September 1862 – 23 June 1938) was the mother of [Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother](#) and maternal grandmother and godmother of [Queen Elizabeth II](#).

^{vii} Katherine Frances (née Lambton), Duchess of Leeds (1862-1952), Wife of 10th Duke of Leeds; daughter of 2nd Earl of Durham

^{xx} Mary Strathmore, wife of the 17th Earl, was at the wedding of Marcus Bicknell and Susie Raw on 28th June 1975.

