

Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington.



Wellington c1813 by Francisco Goya

Early Life and Military Career

Born in 1769 in Dublin, he began a military career at 17 in the 73rd regiment of Foot, but was soon assigned as aide-de-camp to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Buckingham. Within two years, he was elected MP in the Irish House of Commons for Trim, a Rotten Borough, which he represented until he left for India in May 1796. It was during this time that he met Kitty Pakenham, daughter of the Earl of Longford. Her family would not let her marry an impecunious 3rd son, so Arthur focussed on his military career, and they did not marry until his return from India 10 years later. They had two sons, and adopted four more children, but his military career meant they saw little of each other for years. Indeed, not until after Waterloo was he more than very short periods in Britain or Ireland.



Wellington at Waterloo, Jan Willem Pieneman, 1824

Peacetime Activities

Ennobled by his war exploits, first an Earl, then a Marquis, he became Duke upon being appointed as Ambassador to France in 1814. He re-entered politics when appointed Master-General of the Ordnance in Lord Liverpool's Government in 1818. He became Governor of Plymouth in 1819, and was appointed C-in-C of the Army in 1827, a post he relinquished when he decided to accept the PM role in January 1828. He, along with Robert Peel, had become increasingly influential in the Tory Party, finally being asked to take on the top role by George IV after being passed over in favour of Canning and Lord Goderich.

Until he decided after some seven months that his own London home, Apsley House, needed extensive renovations he declined to make use of 10, Downing St., declaring it too small. During his first year in office, he was instrumental in the founding of King's College, London, and in January 1829 was appointed Warden of the Cinque Ports, a sinecure his predecessor Pitt had also enjoyed.



Satirical Cartoon, 1829

Wellington's administration is best remembered for the emancipation of Roman Catholics in the UK. The change was triggered by the landslide by-election win of Daniel O'Connell, a Roman Catholic Irish proponent of emancipation, who was elected despite not being legally allowed to sit in Parliament. In the House of Lords, facing stiff opposition, Wellington spoke for Catholic Emancipation, and according to some sources, gave one of the best speeches of his career. Irish-born, and having spent his early career there, as well as commanding a great many Irish troops during his military career, he had at least some understanding of the Catholic majority's grievances.

In 1811 Catholic soldiers had been given freedom of worship but it was to be 18 years before the Catholic Relief Act 1829 was passed with a majority of 105. Many Tories voted against the Act, and it passed only with the help of the Whigs. Furthermore, Wellington had to threaten to resign as prime minister to get the King to give Royal Assent. The Earl of Winchilsea accused the Duke of "an insidious design for the infringement of our liberties and the introduction of Popery into every department of the State". Wellington responded by immediately challenging Winchilsea to a duel. They met on Battersea Fields that March, but when the time came to fire, the Duke fired wide (deliberately or not we don't know, he was a poor shot) and Winchilsea kept his arm down, and after Wellington's shot he discharged his weapon into the air, as he probably planned to do all along. Honour was saved and Winchilsea wrote Wellington an apology.

Wellington lost a vote of confidence in November 1830 over political reform. The Whigs, out of power for much of the previous half-century, saw this issue as a way back in. Wellington stuck to the Tory policy of no reform and no increase in suffrage and lost the vote. The Whigs could not get their Reform Bill through which triggered a General Election, which they won with a landslide. Initially they still could not get their Bill through the Lords, which triggered widespread riots. Eventually William IV threatened to fill the Lords with Whig peers if they did not approve the Bill.

Thus the Great Reform Act 1832 became law.



Portrait by John Jackson, 1831

Wellington was gradually superseded as leader of the Tories by Robert Peel, while the party evolved into the Conservatives. When the Tories were returned to power in 1834, Wellington declined to become prime minister because he thought membership in the House of Commons had become essential. The king reluctantly approved Peel, who was in Italy. Hence, Wellington acted as interim leader for three weeks in November and December 1834, taking the responsibilities of prime minister and most of the other ministries. In Peel's first cabinet (1834–1835), Wellington became Foreign Secretary, while in the second (1841–1846) he was a Minister without Portfolio and Leader of the House of Lords. Wellington was also re-appointed Commander-in-Chief of the British Army on 15 August 1842 following the resignation of Lord “Daddy” Hill. Wellington served as the leader of the Conservative party in the House of Lords from 1828 to 1846, when he retired from politics.



*Wellington aged 74/5 – Daguerreotype by Antoine
Claudet, 1844*

Later Life

He died at Walmer Castle, his residence as Warden of the Cinque Ports on 14 September 1852, aged 83 and was given a State Funeral before being buried in St. Paul's Cathedral.