

# A BROTHER IN EXILE: LUCIEN BONAPARTE IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

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*Between 1811 and 1814 the Midlands played host to a surprising visitor when Napoleon's brother Lucien was detained as a prisoner of war en route to voluntary exile in America. After six months in Ludlow, Lucien bought Thorngrove in Worcestershire, where he lived with his family and an extensive retinue.*



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An unexpected visitor to Worcestershire. Lucien Bonaparte, brother of Napoleon, was detained as a prisoner of war in the county. He remained there under parole from 1811 until his brother, the Emperor, abdicated in 1814.

*Portrait of Lucien Bonaparte by François Xavier Fabre.*

In January 1811 Lucien Bonaparte (1775-1840), the man whom Walter Scott would describe eighteen years later as the ablest of Napoleon's brothers, arrived in the Midlands. He and his family had set sail from Rome in August 1810, en route to voluntary exile in America. Napoleon owed to Lucien the success of his coup d'état of November 1799 (18 Brumaire in the Republican calendar), which drew the Revolution to a close and established Napoleon as First Consul. However, an increasingly fractious relationship over Napoleon's imperialist tendencies had deteriorated to the point of rupture some months previously: the 1811 imperial almanac omits Lucien from the list of the Emperor's brothers.

The British, fearing that Lucien would become involved in a plot on American soil, had intercepted his ship off the Sardinian coast. After a two-month detention in Valletta, he was conveyed to England as a prisoner of war under parole, along with a forty-strong entourage: his wife, seven children (including two by his first wife Christine Boyer and his wife's daughter from a previous marriage), his nephew, his secretary, a doctor, chaplain, tutor and painter, and twenty-three Corsican and Italian servants. The whole entourage landed at Plymouth in December 1810. Despite the circumstances, relations were more than cordial. Lucien presented the Captain with a diamond watch and received in return a double-barrelled shot-gun, which became his hunting weapon of choice while in England.



Lucien Bonaparte's forty-strong party at Thorngrove House included his second wife, seven of his children, and his nephew. This family portrait was commissioned by Mme Bonaparte in 1815, a year after the family left Worcestershire.  
*Portrait of the Family of Lucien Bonaparte by Jean-August-Dominique Ingres, 1815.*

**Prisoner of war in Ludlow**

After 22 weeks of travelling, Lucien and his family, along with 33 tons of baggage, arrived at Dinham House in Ludlow, the occasional town residence of Lord Powis (the son of Clive of India). This was only intended as a temporary measure: he had been due to go to Lymore Hall, another of Lord Powis' residences. This was in Montgomery, one of Britain's 50 'parole towns'; several French officers already housed there had been moved out in preparation for Lucien's arrival, but at the last moment the house was deemed to be in too much of a state of disrepair.

The Bonapartes stayed in Shropshire for six months, hosting concerts and lavish dinner parties and drawing tourists into the town. Yet the local population was at best ambivalent towards its new celebrity guests. Kidderminster Library holds a collection of manuscript notes extracted from the voluminous diaries of Katherine Plymley (1758-1829) of Longnor, which record the following incident:

*At a ball at Ludlow he gives his arm to Lady Powis - Mr Bather remarks 'this fellow thrusts out his republican elbow to an English Countess of one of the 1st families & she condescends to take it & is to consider it an honor.'*

There were more public expressions of disapproval: stones were thrown at Lucien's children, and there were altercations between two of his servants and some of the townspeople.

**THE PAROLE TOWNS OF THE WEST MIDLANDS**

*In eighteenth-century Europe it had been common practice for countries in conflict to exchange prisoners of war of equivalent rank, using vessels known as cartel ships. Officers were commonly released under oath not to fight again. This system largely broke down during the Napoleonic era, partly as a result of a 1793 decree that French officers should not honour their parole, their Republican duty outweighing their duty as a gentleman.*

*Consequently, the decade of the Napoleonic Wars saw a huge increase in the number of French prisoners of war held in Britain. They were housed in existing prisons such as Portchester or Norman Cross, new buildings such as Dartmoor, or held in squalid conditions in hulks off the southern coast.*

*Approximately 4000 officers were permitted to live under parole, in receipt of a small allowance from the British government, in one of fifty designated towns. There were eight parole towns in the West Midlands, in Ashbourne and Chesterfield in Derbyshire, Bishop's Castle, Bridgnorth, Oswestry and Whitchurch in Shropshire, and Leek and Lichfield in Staffordshire.*

### Move to Thorngrove

After a lengthy search, and not before he had beseeched the Prince of Wales for permission to proceed to America, Lucien placed himself at a greater remove from local attentions. He

acquired Thorngrove in the parish of Grimley in Worcestershire. What was once a motley jumble of meadows, pastures and assorted buildings had been transformed two decades previously, by an ambitious young man, William Cross, into a 130-acre country estate with a mansion house fitted with hot and cold baths, stables, coach houses, hop kilns and a pleasure ground with a lake and ornamental lawns. The brewing enthusiast had fallen into bankruptcy following an unwise investment. Lucien purchased Thorngrove for £13,500 from its subsequent owner, John Lagier Lamotte, a former trader in the East Indies, whose parents had fled to London in the wake of France's persecution of Huguenots.



With Lucien at Thorngrove House were his second wife, Alexandrine Jouberton (top), who created a comfortable and lively family home, and two of the children from his first marriage to Christine Boyer (bottom).

### Life on the estate

At Thorngrove, Lucien lived the life of a country gentleman, applying for a licence to shoot game, and maintaining a large stable of horses. Under the supervision of Colonel Leighton, he enjoyed a four-mile range of parole, which included the city of Worcester. Leighton received Lucien's mail in a locked portfolio and vetted the contents before passing it on.

Lucien lavished attention upon the estate, with the help of Thomas Knight, President of the Horticultural Society, whose acquaintance he had made while in Ludlow. The particulars of sale in 1814 would seem to indicate that he added 'graperies' and melon pits to the existing hothouses and walled gardens; he may also have stocked the lake with fish. He certainly commissioned the construction

of 'une jolie cabane', as his *Memoirs* record, a mile away from the main residence, to use as a writing retreat. He purchased 'a large commodious Pleasure Boat' to take out on the lake, and an elegant gig, lined in blue, with red Moroccan upholstery, and lamps. That part of his art collection that he had taken into exile was finally unpacked, including three works by Raphael and copper engravings by Fontana, Pistrucci (who was to become the Chief Medallist at the Royal Mint) and Carattoni.

The family led an impressive *train de vie*, extending lavish hospitality, much to the delight of the local shopkeepers. Liveried servants welcomed several prominent Whigs as houseguests, among them the Duke of Norfolk, the Marquess of Lansdowne and the future Lord Chancellor Lord Brougham, along with artists and academics from Oxford. Not all the visitors appreciated what they found. In a letter to her son in 1813, Melesina Trench reported that an acquaintance had seen Lucien 'Buonaparte' writing 'another epic in his observatory', but does not admire him.

An article reproduced in *The Times* in August 1811 gives us an insight into life on the estate:

*About a fortnight ago the whole family were employed in making hay before the house. They used nothing but their hands in throwing it about; and laughed at the English of the neighbourhood who have a different custom. LUCIEN appears to be always wrapped in thought and gloom; he moves gracefully to such people as salute him, but never speaks. The latter may be owing to his being almost ignorant of the English language. Madame is agreeable and chatty; and very particular in making the young part of her family observe the strictest politeness to strangers.*





The county town of Worcester lay within the four-mile range of Lucien Bonaparte's parole. It was an important regional religious, cultural and economic centre. *Picturesque Views of the Severn*, Thomas Harral, 1824.

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### **Madame Bonaparte**

*Madame* had been the chief cause of the breakdown in relations between Lucien and his brother. Alexandrine Jouberton (*née* de Bleschamps) had been of uncertain marital status when she married Lucien in 1803. Her husband had died in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, but no death certificate had arrived. Napoleon had urged Lucien to divorce her, had indeed passed a statute in 1806 declaring marriages of the imperial family to be 'null and void if contracted without the permission of the Emperor', and refused to acknowledge the succession rights of the children. Lucien had been offered his pick of European thrones in return for relinquishing her.

Alexandrine appears to have thrown herself into life at Thorngrove. She established a family home full of music and laughter. The house boasted 'a sweet-toned harpsichord', a guitar, and – quite a novelty in English society in 1814 – a four-pedalled French pianoforte and a barrel-organ. There was a billiard table and a library.

The family staged plays and held concerts. Alexandrine doted upon her young family and dressed them finely, much to the delight of the local newspapers (*plus ça change*): 'The youngest child has so much gilt and glitter in its dress, that in the sunshine it resembles an orb of moving fire.' In 1813, she gave birth to her son, Louis Lucien. The child's baptism is recorded in the Roman Catholic registers of Mawley Hall in Shropshire, the home of the Blount family, with whom the Bonapartes had forged a friendship whilst in Ludlow.

Managing such an extensive household of course brought its complications. In December 1811, *The Times* reported that *Madame* Lucien's governess had arrived in Plymouth, intending to return to Italy 'in consequence of ill health'. There were further reports of servants deserting, quarrelling violently or being banished from the premises. On its departure, the entourage had dwindled to half its original number. There were family troubles too: Alexandrine's younger stepdaughter Christine suffered from what Lucien's supervisor

Colonel Leighton described as 'a tendency to deformity', for which she occasionally received treatment while in England. This explains the presence, when the house was cleared, of 'two elegant mahogany reclining frames to correct deformities in the human body'.

Meanwhile, Alexandrine was pursuing ambitions of a literary career, writing a work in decasyllabic verse entitled *Bathilde, reine des Francs* (Bathild, Queen of the Franks). The thought of Lucien's wife achieving fame greatly exercised Napoleon, who took steps to prevent the publication of *Bathilde*, as the Duchesse d'Abrantès' memoirs record. In the summer of 1811, a mysterious visitor spent ten days with the household, claiming to be an admirer of *Mme* Lucien and her work. Thirty-six hours later, one *Mme* Simons-Candeille was commissioned by the Emperor to write a historical novel bearing the same title, using extensive notes provided by the spy. The work was published by the end of the year, putting an end to Alexandrine's ambitions.

### Lucien's scholarly pursuits

Lucien pursued his own intellectual ambitions while at Thorngrove. He wrote a work on Etruscan art, and a tragedy called *Clotaire*, which was performed to owners of neighbouring properties. He developed an interest in astronomy, cultivating the acquaintance of William Herschel, from whom he ultimately purchased a ten-foot telescope. This explains why his writing retreat at Thorngrove is often referred to as an observatory. One of the more surprising visitors was a young Charles Babbage, who had met Lucien through his future bride, Georgiana Whitmore of Dudmaston Hall in Shropshire. Babbage's biographer, Anthony Hyman, attributes both Babbage's sense of style and his 'militant approach to science' to the acquaintanceship. Lucien shared his brother's belief in the ability of science to reform society, and his conversations with Babbage were influential in cementing the latter's drive to bring England into a new technological age, culminating in Babbage's invention of the difference and analytical engines, ancestors of today's computers.

### Leaving England in secret

Lucien was liberated as the terms of Napoleon's abdication were being laid down. The *Memoirs* record that on the day of Napoleon's departure for Elba, Lucien's secretary arrived in Paris to request from Talleyrand safe-passage across France for his employer.

He met with a flat refusal, so Lucien's chaplain hatched a scheme: he obtained from the British a passport for himself and a 'secretary', and it was thus disguised that Lucien passed through France, arriving in Rome at the end of May.

The family followed on in August; Thorngrove was placed on the market and its contents sold off by the Birmingham auctioneers, Robins and Terry. The effects were described at length in the *Worcester Herald* and included approximately thirty bedsteads of varying types (rather exceeding the number of bedrooms), 'a great number of handsome Brussels and other floor, and bed-round carpets' and a full 650lbs of 'good, family cheese'. The auctioneers gave prominent place to a mangle, which perhaps seemed to them a rather new-fangled piece of equipment. They were most aggrieved, on arriving to conduct the sale, to discover that the horses had already been sold, and the 300 copies of the *Galerie de Lucien Bonaparte* (containing engravings of his paintings) sent to London.

### Postscript

Throughout his stay in Worcestershire, Lucien had worked on his epic poem, *Charlemagne ou l'Église délivrée* (Charlemagne or The Church Delivered). Early reactions to the text were promising: Byron declared himself 'electrified' by a work which 'really surpasses anything beneath Tasso', and offers to translate it into English were plentiful. By the time of its publication, however, the initial enthusiasm had been stifled by Lucien's decision to reconcile with his brother after his escape from Elba. Consequently, sales were disappointing: Lucien had met, as the *Memoirs* put it, his poetic Waterloo in England.

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### Further reading:

**Francis Abell**, *Prisoners of War in Britain, 1756-1815* (Oxford University Press, 1914).

**Gavin Daly**, 'Napoleon's Lost Legions: French Prisoners of War in Britain, 1803-1814.' *History*, 89:295, 2004, pp.361-380.

**Eileen Holt**, *The Exile of Lucien Bonaparte 1810-1814*, a translation (1986). Available in the Worcestershire Archive.

**Barney Rolfe-Smith**, *A Gilded Cage: Lucien Bonaparte, Prisoner of War 1810-1814* (Stonebrook, 2012).

*Notes by Mrs. Marie Corbett of Longnor from a voluminous diary by Miss K. Plymley, the sister of Archdeacon Owen (1924).* The notes are bound and available at Kidderminster Library, in the Local Reference section.