

Taxes a La Godiva: Legend portrays Lady Godiva as a proficient horsewoman who enjoyed the hunt. A lady of personal wealth and good fortune with a strong interest in the arts and society, she was widowed in 11th century Coventry, England. Her second husband, Leofric, earl of Mercia, had been given a public affairs position in government with responsibilities for matters of finance. In this role, he developed a manic involvement in public works programs which he funded by placing taxes on every commodity possible.

Together as a couple, they generously endowed several monasteries to serve the spiritual needs of the town. Individually, Lady Godiva attempted to foster an interest in art among the peasants to serve their cultural needs. She achieved little success, however, because the peasants did not have time to pursue cultural interests. They needed to work endlessly just to survive due to the heavy taxes Leofric had placed on necessities such as food, clothes, and shelter.

Lady Godiva sympathized with the peasants and wanted to enrich their lives. She did not approve the total repression of cultural art programs by the numerous taxed municipal water works projects. She chastised “men” for their functional priorities that completely ignored the social and artistic needs of citizens. According to her philosophy, public responsibilities and appreciation of the arts did not cancel out each other, but were necessary and compatible in tandem partnership for civic development and enrichment. Taxes would have to be lowered.

She presented a tax reduction proposal to Leofric at his village hall bureau. It is written he broke out in loud and insulting laughter from which he fell off his stool, injured his wrist, and had to be assisted upright. Not only would he not sanction a tax reduction, he added a new tax, a tax on paintings. Since only Lady Godiva and the church owned paintings, with the church tax exempt, his new tax befell only her.

Their different perspectives grew into a marital war of wills. And although Leofric continued to resist her pleadings, she did not relent. Eventually he conceded, but with a clause. He would reduce some of the tax burdens on the peasants for whom she advocated, but not without a compromise on her part.

Leofric asserted how the highest form of art proclaimed by the ancient Greeks was that of the nude body. If his wife truly believed in her cultural cause for the poor, she would present herself to the town as an example of this highest form of art and ride naked upon a horse in full light of day to prove her intentions honorable. His proviso simulated a common practice for penitents who would publicly process through town in shame, nearly naked, in a sleeveless white garment.

Aware that her long tresses could cover her discreetly, Lady Godiva held Leofric to his word. She issued a proclamation that all people were to remain indoors with windows shuttered during her ride. Thus, she rode with dignity, in the manner of a penitent, that a reduction in taxes could be achieved. Touched by her benevolent act, Leofric agreed not just to lessen taxes, but to remove all that he had imposed during his tenure. According to legend, a tailor named Tom bore a hole in his shutters to peep as she rode, and was struck blind.

Lady Godiva is celebrated in countless words and works of art for her beauty, her nakedness, her indecency, her daring in the year 1067. But little acknowledgment is given to her purpose of lessening the oppressive tax burden placed on the poor, nor to the proviso of her ride placed on her: Both put in place by her husband.

Sources: <http://abacom.com/~jkrause/godiva.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Godiva