

Period of national mourning declared for Queen Elizabeth II

Full coverage

Queen Elizabeth II

Elizabeth II: an appreciation by Simon Schama



The UK's longest-serving monarch was so much more than a head of state — she was quintessential Britain

Simon Schama 13 HOURS AGO

The message due to go out from the Queen’s private secretary was “London Bridge is down”: code for the death of Elizabeth II. When her father George VI died in February 1952, the code had been “Hyde Park Corner”. But the choice this time was more than an arbitrary pick from London topography; rather, words denoting profound collapse.

The nursery-rhyme prompt seems apt, since the nation now feels itself orphaned. It matters not how long anticipated the death of a mother figure might be; the time can never be right for her actual passing. In this case the shock of reality is especially acute, because Elizabeth II seemed to embody in her personal longevity the reassuring continuity of British history; of the four-nation United Kingdom and, beyond, of the Commonwealth.

She was, to us and to much of the rest of the world, quintessential Britain; not all of it, of course, but more than the head of state — the heart of the matter, the personification of a common, idealised identity. The sustaining myth of the monarchy is that while kings and queens are mortal, the institution is not — the Queen is dead, long live the King.

But at this particular moment of mourning, for this particular sovereign, the magnitude of the loss overwhelms the truism of continuity. People are sorrowing as much for themselves as for the royal family and for the country.

It was the deep personal steadiness beneath the bright hats that provided fortitude in everyone else

For most of the British population, the Queen has been the only monarch they have known. It would be natural, then, to take for granted that the balancing act required of a monarch in a constitutional democracy — between remoteness and familiarity, the extraordinary and the ordinary, between a guarded mystique and the common touch, the magical and the mundane — is no more than the

expected delivery of a singular if exacting job description: decent value for taxpayers’ money.

In 1867, Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution* defined the value of monarchy as being intelligible to ordinary people, as well as the conductor of august ceremony and the embodiment of an ideal family, to which the entirety of its subjects could then

the embodiment of an ideal family, to which the entirety of its subjects could then feel, to some degree, related. But even Queen Victoria had challenges in all those departments. The personal conduct of her eldest son fell notoriously short of the virtues expected of a Prince of Wales, and the long years of Victoria's seclusion following Prince Albert's death (shortly after upbraiding his son for yet another scandal) removed her from the public gaze. Queen Elizabeth, on the other hand, lived, over the seven decades of her reign, by her conviction that you "have to be seen to be believed".



Surrounded by crowds in the Midlands in 1968. Throughout her reign the Queen was convinced she had to be 'seen to be believed' © Eve Arnold/Magnum Photos

Twice, though, at moments of stunning calamity, she withheld, for just a few days, that visible presence — in 1966, when 116 children and 28 adults died in the coal slurry collapse at Aberfan, and in 1997 when Diana, Princess of Wales was killed in the Paris car crash. Soon enough the Queen came to Aberfan to mourn and comfort, as best she could, the bereft mining community; and soon enough she made a live televised broadcast eulogising the dead princess, and walked unguarded along a line of keening crowds, as the flowers piled up at the gates of Kensington Palace.

Other than those fateful moments, the Queen's instinct for public mood seldom failed her or the country. This was just as well, since her time was marked by challenges not faced by any of the comparably long-reigning monarchs who preceded her. Elizabeth I (45 years on the throne), George III (almost 60 years) and Victoria (almost 64 years)

(45 years on the throne), George III (almost 60 years) and Victoria (almost 64 years) all presided over periods of national and imperial expansion.



In Aberfan in 1966, following the disaster that claimed the lives of 144 children and adults © Mirrorpix/Getty Images

It's true that, in the first instance, the cult of England's Gloriana, in imagery and writing, was mobilised to give the country confidence when it was still fighting, within and without, the religious civil war triggered by the Reformation. Likewise, the endearing image of Farmer George, plain-speaking and homely in manner, helped Britain overcome the shock of losing the American colonies and prevail in the long wars against Bonaparte's France.

But at the end of each of those reigns, notwithstanding economic crises and hardships unequally borne, Britain was measurably more powerful, more prosperous and more expansively vigorous than it had been when they first occupied the throne.

This was not destined to be the case for Elizabeth II. For all the talk, during the Festival of Britain in 1951, of "new Elizabethans", her reign will be remembered

(Beatles, World Cup and Cool Britannia notwithstanding) as a time of national contraction marked by the loss of empire; perennial flailing around for some act of national reinvention (first European and then anti-European); retreats into historical nostalgia; questions raised about the integrity of the union itself.



In a formal photograph released in 1959, just six years into her reign © Donald McKague/Camera Press

The slow, inexorable decline was, moreover, punctuated by acute short-term crises: the Suez fiasco in 1956; the seven-week miners' strike of 1972; the regularly unnerving collapse of sterling. There was too the relentless drumbeat of terrorist atrocities: 21

murdered in Birmingham in 1974; 52 in London in 2005; 22 in Manchester in 2017; an IRA bomb that took the life of her husband's uncle, Lord Mountbatten, in 1979 and, in 1984, another that came close to assassinating Margaret Thatcher; incendiary riots in the heart of British cities; the horrifying deaths of 72 people in the Grenfell Tower fire.

In the face of all those traumas, it was well nigh impossible for Britain to Keep Calm, much less Carry On. But the Queen almost always did. It was not so much the sedative effect of her imperturbable annual round — investitures, Trooping the Colour, the openings and the launchings, the palace garden parties, the Christmas message — as the deep personal steadiness of the Queen, the humane sympathy beneath the bright hats, that provided comfort and fortitude in everyone else.





Arriving at Aberdeen airport in 1974, en route for Balmoral with some of the dogs . . . © Anwar Hussein/Getty Images





... that were constant companions © Tim Ockenden/AFP/Getty Images

Through thick and thin, bitter division and unpredictable turmoil, and for all the rarefied social class from which she came and the palace formalities, rituals and arid conventions that encircled her, Elizabeth II managed, when it counted most, to be the idealised personification of the nation, immune to hysteria but open to social empathy. It only takes a glance around at the parade of authoritarians who, from one end of the world to the other, make militarised xenophobia the measure of national self-esteem to be grateful that the Queen supplied a more benign focus of national allegiance.

None of this means that, on her accession 70 years ago, the Queen took up this most testing of public roles defensively or fatalistically. At 25, bright, beautiful and — for a royal — easily outgoing, there could be no sense that her reign would be consolation, much less compensation, for all the vanishings that would befall Britain: colonies, marriages, industries. But from the outset, even before she became Queen, in what she later called her “salad days” when she was “green in judgment”, Elizabeth was strikingly touched by the gravity of her vocation.





Princess Elizabeth on her 21st birthday in 1947, broadcasting to the Commonwealth and pledging that 'my whole life ... shall be devoted to your service' © Getty Images





In more carefree mood, playing tag on board HMS Vanguard that same year © Bettmann Archive

On her 21st birthday on April 21 1947, while touring South Africa with her mother and father, the “heiress presumptive” took the opportunity to broadcast to the Commonwealth and empire her own redefinition of the calling of monarchy. It was nothing that had occurred to Bagehot. It was, as Elizabeth herself said, quite simple, although she invoked the ancient oaths of knighthood, as well as the sacrifices made by an older generation through years of economic depression and terrifying war. “Now that we are coming to manhood and womanhood it is surely a great joy to us all to think we shall be able to take some of the burden off the shoulders of our elders who have fought and worked and suffered to protect our childhood.”

Then came the solemn climax of the speech: “I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our

great imperial family to which we all belong. But I shall not have the strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me as I now invite you to do.”

It was a kind of self-crowning before the actual act of the coronation six years later, both weighty and noble, suggesting a reign that would bond together crown and people. There is no reason to suppose that on every future occasion when the Queen reiterated that statement of dedication, it was not, as she often implied, the whole point of her life.

This precocious certainty about the path to follow was all the more remarkable given that Elizabeth was still in her childhood when both her uncle and her father made it clear, in their different ways, that the throne was an unwelcome burden.





The young princess at Glamis Castle, Scotland, in 1931, five years before her father reluctantly assumed the throne © Getty Images
For Edward VIII, choosing marriage to the divorcée Wallis Simpson, a royal vocation took second place to the consummation of personal happiness. For George VI, distressed almost to the point of social paralysis at having to succeed his older brother, fearful of public occasions that would expose his stammer and his shyness, becoming king was sacrificial torment. His smoking became heavier, his life shorter. When the imminent change of address from the relative cosiness of the Duke and Duchess of York's residence at 145 Piccadilly to Buckingham Palace became clear, the 10-year-old Elizabeth's reaction was "What — you mean for ever?"

But the shift from the charismatic vanity embodied in Edward VIII to the (relatively) plain domestic idyll of George VI, Queen Elizabeth and their two daughters, from dandy tailoring and French perfume to the whiff of damp dogs and sweating horses, came at the right time for Britain's efforts to keep its collective chin up during the stern trials of the war. It was family happiness as national service.





Princesses Elizabeth, a Girl Guides patrol leader, with her sister Margaret in 1943... © Shutterstock





... and with her father in 1942. The shift from the glamour and vanity of Edward VIII to the domestic idyll of George VI 'came at the right time for Britain's efforts to keep its collective chin up during the war' © Lisa Sheridan/Studio Lisa/Getty Images

That image could also be helpfully exportable when Britain desperately needed allies. In October 1940, the 14-year-old Elizabeth made a short BBC radio broadcast to evacuated British children in Canada, the US and elsewhere. “Thousands of you . . . have had to leave your homes and be separated from your fathers and mothers. My sister Margaret Rose and I feel so much for you as we know from experience what it means to be away from those we love most of all . . .” but “we know, everyone of us, that in the end all will be well.”

This may have been solid-gold PR genius on the part of the writer, designed, as it was, to tug shamelessly at the heartstrings of the Americans and pull them closer to the beleaguered island kingdom in the year of the Battle of Britain. But it could not have worked had it not been for the way in which the high, fluting voice of the distant teenage princess conjured up a family idyll riding out whatever the war brought.

That family romance continued after VE Day. Nineteen-forty-seven saw the coldest winter in living memory. What better antidote, then, to the bitter freeze and the bleak austerity of rationed Britain than the wedding of Philip and Elizabeth? A grateful popular press gorged on details of the multi-tier cake and silk wedding dress. When it was suggested that the dress was made from French “Lyons silk” — unpatriotic as well as staggeringly expensive — the Palace replied that though it might have been silk originating in China (not France), the yarn had been woven in Scotland and Kent.



The wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Philip Mountbatten in 1947 — ‘the impossibly handsome prince wed to the smiling heiress presumptive’ — was a boost for bleak postwar Britain © Keystone Pictures USA/eyevine





A London store displayed a replica of the royal wedding cake ... © Gamma-Keystone/Getty Images





... while gifts from around the world went on show at St James's Palace © Gamma-Keystone/Getty Images

The public hardly begrudged the extravagance. On the contrary, they ate it up. Wedding gifts from around the world, more than 2,000 of them, were put on display at St James's Palace; entry tickets a shilling a head. The day itself was filmed.

It did no harm that the couple were an advertisement not just for the monarchy but for the fable of the perfect conjugal fit: the no-nonsense, impossibly handsome, stateless and penniless prince wed to the smiling heiress presumptive. Other states in the raw postwar world had parades of tanks and artillery; Britain had a royal weddings and a coronation. Other states had massed, synchronised gymnastics, human automata and roars of loyalty; Britain had knees-ups and Lambeth Walks, street parties awash with beer and bright with bunting.

The three-way wiring between media, crown and public that reshaped the modern monarchy did not, in fact, begin with Elizabeth II, but with her grandfather George V. For all his notoriously forbidding gruffness, the old king inaugurated the annual Christmas radio broadcasts in 1932, and his silver jubilee in 1935 was so

stupendously successful as a public event that it astonished even George himself. The crimson-covered silver jubilee commemorative book was a prized item on my parents' bookshelf as it was for millions of other Britons of their generation.

But the move from radio to television for the coronation of June 1953 was a quantum leap forward and an audacious gamble. It was, in fact, resisted at first by the young Queen herself. But once the new medium was embraced — with the retention of much royal control of what could and could not be televised — she took to her role.



The televising of the coronation in 1953 was a spectacular drama watched by millions © ITV/Shutterstock





For the British people, the coronation was a chance to celebrate, with commemorative souvenirs ... © Roger-Viollet/Topfoto



... and 'street parties awash with beer and bright with bunting' © Gettv Images

... and other pages about... and other pages about...

Misgivings that the medium would rob the ceremony of its ancient mystique proved misplaced. If anything, the spectacular drama, from entry down to the nave, to the climactic “Vivats”, all narrated in the mahogany baritone of Richard Dimbleby, enriched rather than diluted the magic. Britain’s latest speciality thus became history refreshed by technology. Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was moved to reflect on the monarchy’s power to enhance the spiritual life of the nation. It was true that devotion to the Queen filled a void in an increasingly materialist and secular Britain.

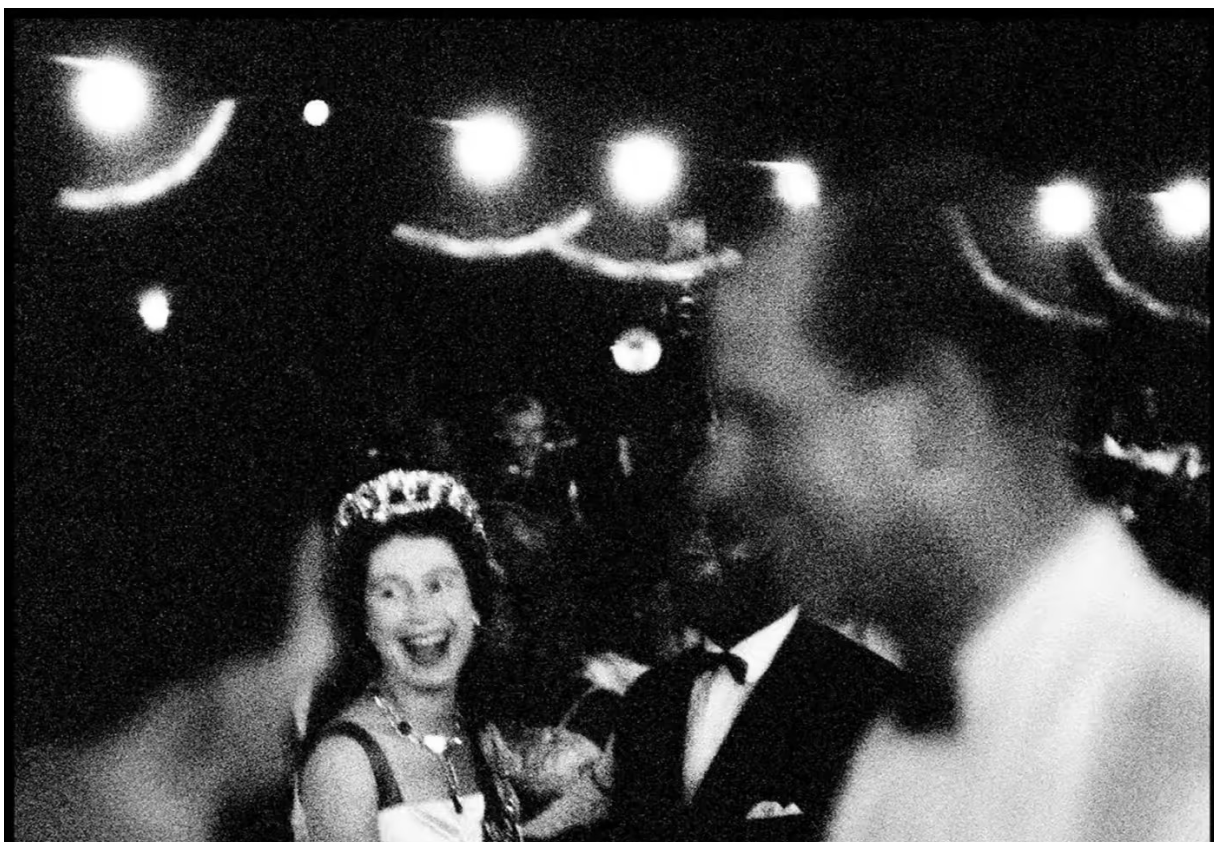
Not that Elizabeth herself demanded worshipfulness, or was content to be some sort of animated national diadem. Her instincts for moral example — being seen to be believed — were often bracingly practical. In 1957, against the tide of uninformed alarm and apprehensiveness over the safety of the Salk polio vaccine, the Queen let it be known that Prince Charles and Princess Anne, eight and six respectively, had been inoculated. She thus aligned herself with 200,000 British mothers who had accepted medical and scientific advice to vaccinate their children — the age group most at risk from contracting the terrible, life-long disabling disease.



For the Queen — seen here in Pakistan in 1961 — the Commonwealth was a ‘family of nations, one that went well beyond a chummy club of white dominions’ © Popperfoto/Getty Images

In those years following the coronation — a final effulgence of nostalgic imperial grandeur — the Queen was already looking not just forward but outward, beyond her immediate realm. For a while, the Commonwealth (founded in 1931) seemed to be a psychological salvage operation for the loss of empire, a wishfully imagined fantasy of comity, when the reality of empire’s end in colonies like Kenya was that of war, torture and terror. But Elizabeth (somewhat like the surprisingly easy adjustment made by George III following the loss of America) genuinely believed in that “family of nations” and one, moreover, which went well beyond a chummy club of white dominions.

At the heart of the Queen’s belief was the optimistic notion that, whatever misfortunes, misdeeds and catastrophes had happened in the days of empire, there was in fact some sort of surviving residual affinity, flowing from shared history (even when that history might be one of brutal exploitation) between the former rulers and the ruled. Accepting, even welcoming, the independence of former colonies, not grudgingly but enthusiastically, meant that when Elizabeth spoke of a Britain that might be the enabler and mentor of a multiracial and democratic global community, she was not called out by those who had led the battle for independence as a shameless hypocrite.





Dancing with President Kwame Nkrumah during a state visit to Ghana in 1961 © Ian Berry/Magnum Photos

The Queen's genuine passion for Commonwealth equity more than once put her on the side of racial justice, sometimes to the discomfort of British governments. It was one thing for her to go along with Harold Wilson's insistence that white Rhodesian resistance to independence with democracy was in effect an act of disloyalty not just to Her Majesty's government but to Her Majesty. But when she seemed to be as warm in her support for sanctions against apartheid South Africa as Thatcher was cool, the Queen was held by some to be unacceptably breaking the accepted boundaries of the royal prerogative.

When, even more startlingly, the Queen used her Christmas broadcast in 1983 to insist that the great affliction of the modern world was the shocking inequity between developed and undeveloped economies, Enoch Powell criticised her for appearing to have "the affairs and interests in other continents as much, or more, at heart than those of her own people".

**If the country ever gets
over its post-imperial**

But it was the Queen's forthright willingness to decentre the Commonwealth which made possible moments of genuine and profound

Over its post-imperial hangover, the Queen's own example will have had much to do with that welcome metamorphosis

reconciliation such as the warm meeting with Nelson Mandela in 1991, and which saw many former colonies that had exited the organisation in alienation return to membership. All this had implications of course for an increasingly multiracial United Kingdom.

There is another side to the story, of course: take the refusal of courtiers to contemplate more diverse appointments in the 1950s and 1960s. But if the country ever manages to get over its post-imperial hangover and become an unapologetic, unresentful plural society, the Queen's own example will have had much to do with that welcome metamorphosis.

For a monarch whose childhood tutors were determined she should never be confused with an intellectual — something they assumed was unbecoming in a queen — she has thought much about history and has spoken sensitively about it. Steeped in history, deriving her position from its prescription, Elizabeth II was never its prisoner. Some of the most affecting moments of her reign involved dramatic gestures of remembrance and expressions of tragic regret.





In Amritsar In 1997, where she laid a wreath at the memorial site of the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre by British soldiers © Tim Graham Photo Library/Getty Images

In October 1997, during a visit to India, the Queen bowed her head — as she had done at the funeral of Princess Diana barely a month earlier — and laid a wreath at the memorial site of one of the most horrific atrocities in imperial history: the Jallianwala Bagh site in Amritsar where, in 1919, General Reginald Dyer had 50 soldiers shoot directly into a crowd of peaceful protesters and people celebrating the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi. After the continuous 10-minute slaughter, at least 379 lay dead and more than 1,000 wounded. Some estimates put the number of casualties much higher.

Striking a note of tragic candour, the evening before her visit to Amritsar the Queen said, while referring directly to the massacre, that “history cannot be rewritten, however much we might sometimes wish otherwise”. But conscious, as always, of the symbolism of appearance, she dressed for the wreath-laying in saffron, the colour sacred to both Sikhs and Hindus. Thus attired, she was wrapped in one of the hues of India’s national flag. That eloquent gesture, however, did not preclude an intruder, discovered in the Windsor Castle grounds on Christmas Day 2021 armed with a crossbow, declaring he wished to take revenge on the Queen for the catastrophe at Amritsar.

There have been times when the beckoning of history descended into set dressing, never more so than in the elaborate investiture of the 20-year-old Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle in July 1969. When his mother had voiced her solemn dedication to public service on her 21st birthday, that declaration seemed wholly natural and touching. But the oath sworn by her son, on his knees before the sovereign, to be her “liege man of life and limb and of earthly worship, and faith and truth I will bear unto thee to live and die against all manner of folks”, seemed, to many, so much cod-medieval chivalry.





The Prince of Wales's investiture at Caernarfon Castle in 1969... © Mirrorpix/Getty Images





... a cod-medieval ceremony that was met with mixed feelings in the principality © Mirrorpix/Getty Images

After centuries of abeyance, the ceremony had been reinvented largely by the fiendishly opportunistic Welsh prime minister David Lloyd George, in a time of brutal postwar economic hardship, to cash in politically on the then Prince of Wales's popularity. The modern 1969 event followed a programme of studiously intensive Welshification for Prince Charles, including a term at the University of Aberystwyth, where he acquired an acceptable smattering of the admittedly challenging language.

While the spectacle was watched by millions on television, there were mixed feelings in the principality itself (not least because it seemed to evoke memories of the *conquest* of Wales by the English king Edward I, also the builder of a chain of castles). On the evening before the investiture, a bomb that two nationalists had meant to plant at Abergele exploded prematurely, killing both of them.

But when the Queen opened her speech at the state banquet in Dublin Castle in May 2011 in Irish, *A Uachtaráin agus a chairde*, the effect was exactly the opposite of what had happened in Wales: a moment of conciliation, coloured with a kind of brave humility on the part of the Queen and deeply stained with the marks of inescapable historical truths.

The opening had been the idea of the Irish president Mary McAleese, who had issued the invitation, only, of course, for it to be instantly vetoed by the Palace guardians. So it was extraordinary when they were overruled by the Queen herself. Disarming though the rhetorical gesture was, and favourably taken aback as Irish opinion was, when earlier she had bowed her head at Dublin's Garden of Remembrance honouring "all those who gave their lives in the cause of Irish freedom", nothing could quite have prepared Ireland — or Britain — for a speech that was the most eloquently thoughtful of her entire reign. That the Queen of the United Kingdom delivered it was a healing astonishment, the capstone on the Good Friday Agreement. And only she *could* have done so in good faith precisely because her dignity and authority were free from any suspicion of political advantage.



The Queen bows her head at the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin in 2011, honouring 'all those who gave their lives in the cause of Irish freedom' © Associated Press

Referring to the visit to the Garden of Remembrance and in an inspired formulation possibly suggested by the press secretary, Ailsa Anderson, with whom she wrote the speech, the Queen spoke of “the complexity of our history . . . of being able to bow to the past, but not be bound by it”. She went on to give full measure to the dark side of Anglo-Irish history. “It is a sad and regrettable reality that through history our islands have experienced more than their fair share of heartache, turbulence and loss.”

When she said “these events have touched us all, many of us personally, and are a painful legacy”, everyone knew she was remembering Prince Philip’s uncle Dickie Mountbatten, murdered by a Provisional IRA bomb on a fishing trip off the Irish coast in the summer of 1979. But the Queen made a connection with everyone else in Ireland, north and south, who had been similarly stricken. “We can never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. To all those who have suffered as a

consequence of our troubled past I extend my sincere thoughts and deep sympathy. With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all.”

It was not exactly an apology. But it was certainly a reckoning. And being the Queen, and wanting to celebrate the miracle of the Good Friday Agreement, she then spoke warmly and positively. “It is also true that no one who looked to the future over the past centuries could have imagined the strength of the bonds that are now in place between the governments and the people of our two nations . . . What were once only hopes for the future have now come to pass: it is almost exactly 13 years since the overwhelming majority of people in Ireland and Northern Ireland voted in favour of the agreement signed on Good Friday 1998.”



At the Royal Windsor Horse Show in 1968 . . . © Tim Graham/Fox Photos/Hulton Archive/Getty Images



... and in 2021, watching one of her own horses compete © Max Mumby/Indigo/Getty Images

The power of the Dublin speech was a reminder, perhaps, of the truth voiced by John Grigg, who as Lord Altrincham (and therefore all the more scandalous for the popular and conservative press) had, in the 1950s, been one of the sharpest critics of her hidebound horse-and-hound world and the narrowness of her education, witheringly comparing the Queen to the captain of a school hockey team. In 1977, the year of her silver jubilee, Grigg sounded an entirely different note: “Her bearing is both simple and majestic — no actress could possibly match it . . . These outward graces reflect the exceptionally steady character which is her most important quality . . . She behaves decently because she *is* decent, and it is almost impossible to imagine her causing pain to anyone close to her for the sake of gratifying a selfish impulse.”





Londoners celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 with street parties ... © Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum



... and Union Jack attire © Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum

But 20 years later, at the appalling nadir of the reign, there were many who thought the Queen had, however unintentionally, caused pain: to the memory of her dead daughter-in-law, perhaps to her grandchildren, and by the withholding of her presence, and the failure to fly a half-mast flag at the palace immediately afterwards, to the great wash of grieving Britons.

It was at that moment that the original vision of the royals acting as an exemplary first family, the image projected in Richard Cawston's 1969 BBC observational

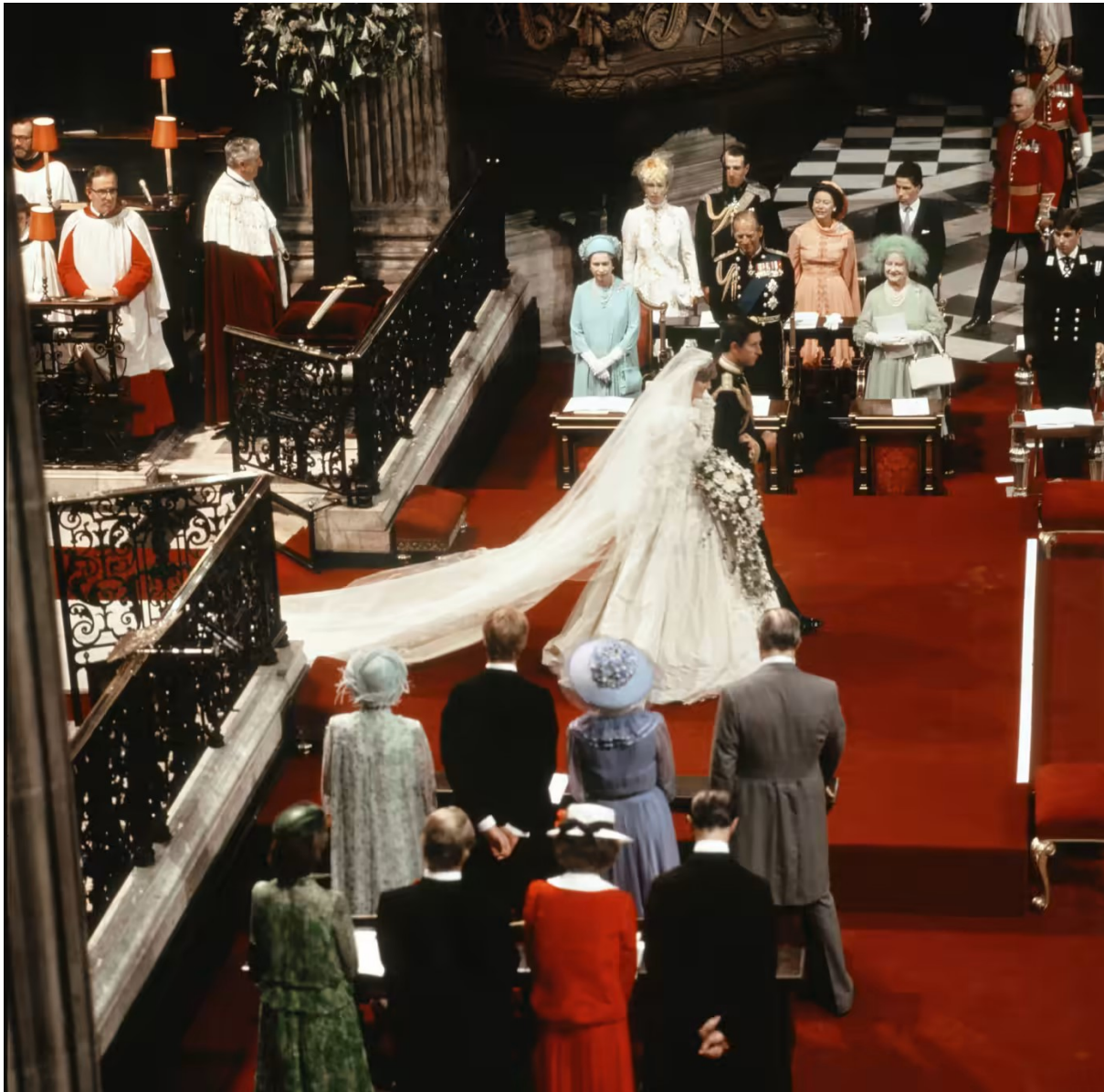
documentary, was all but buried under an avalanche of marital scandals and collapses. The damage was done not just by the disastrous mismatch of Charles and Diana. The marriages of three of the four children of the Queen and Prince Philip had foundered and had become, as she probably felt, the *indecent* matter of public sensation.



Filming Richard Cawston's 1969 'Royal Family'. The documentary led to overconfidence that 'The Firm' could control its public image
© Getty Images

It was in some ways, a Faustian pay-off for the fateful but inevitable decision to wire together press, public and crown. The Cawston *Royal Family* film seemed to demonstrate that active engagement was possible without compromising The Firm and its brand. But in the end it led to overconfidence that the Palace and the Queen could manage the outward face of the monarchy — especially Diana's very photogenic persona — rather than risk the tabloid media running away with whatever sold papers or drew audiences. Royal weddings, above all *that* royal wedding in 1981, seemed proof positive of the wisdom of that engagement.

What could possibly go wrong? The wedding at St Paul's with the princess clad in a vast, frothy meringue of a dress, and the wedding rituals, at once commonplace and magnificently arcane, must all have seemed a throwback to the marriage of Elizabeth and Philip 34 years earlier, the event that had launched the glamorisation of the British monarchy. That, too, had been food and drink in a lean and hungry time, and the docile press of the period was duly grateful for any rationed titbits graciously thrown its way: an off-coupon-book treat.



The 1981 wedding of Prince Charles to Diana Spencer, who would 'emerge from the Sloane chrysalis to become the sensual superstar with the popular touch' © Mirrorpix

But Margaret Thatcher's country was very different from Clement Attlee's. In the combative, punk-pierced, snarling Britain of the 1980s, deference was over, and as Diana emerged from the Sloane chrysalis to become the sensual superstar with the popular touch, everything that had looked charmingly useful for the royal brand seemed to have escaped from its allotted billing. The shy look from beneath the fringe, the endless finishing-school legs, the enormous doe eyes, morphed from

gauche and winning simplicity into flashlight fodder. Faced with a runaway mass cult, the rest of the royals blinked, balked or sulked.

For its part, the press scented something faintly amiss. There was definitely something odd about Charles declaring to television cameras that yes, he was in love, “whatever in love means”. At that point, the comment seemed jarringly gnomic, though it was put down to royal aversion to gush. But it took not very much time for it to become apparent, even before the rumours and the gossip rose on an incoming surf of toxic foam, that the Wales marriage might go dramatically off-script. It occurred to resourceful editors that the film noir beginning to play might pay even more dividends than the fairy tale. Thus began the fateful hounding.



Princess Diana with the young princes William and Harry in 1986 © Mirrorpix

For a while, the arrival of Princes William and Harry, along with winning pictures of the growing boys, postponed the disintegration of the royal family idyll. But Andrew Morton’s *Diana: Her True Story*, published in 1992 and written from conversations with the princess, along with sources she had told to co-operate with the author — the grim epic of adultery, bulimia, self-harm, a lost soul grappling with her husband’s affair, wandering the halls of Kensington Palace, unsupported, as she believed, by the royal family — detonated whatever was left of the myth. Duelling television interviews, a disastrous one given by Prince Charles to Jonathan Dimbleby, and Martin Bashir’s startling conversation with Diana, finished off the remaining

MARTIN BASNIR'S STARTLING CONVERSATION WITH DIANA, FINISHED ON THE REMAINS.

A blazing fire at Windsor Castle and the publication of photographs of a topless Duchess of York with an American businessman piled the calamities sky high. But the Charles-Diana debacle also brought to the fore the Queen's hard-headed side, pressing for a divorce that would at least clarify, somewhat, the terms on which princes and princesses could be separated without destroying the whole institution.

The Queen went on, fulfilling to the very end the promise she made in South Africa in 1947

That exercise in damage limitation, seemingly successful when Diana withdrew from public engagements, was undone by the catastrophe of her death on the last day of August 1997. Immured in their Balmoral summer, the Queen and — especially Prince Philip — made the mistake of thinking that William and Harry would be best protected

from trauma by isolating them from the tidal wave of grief that was drowning the country.

It took a week, and co-operation between Charles and the new prime minister Tony Blair, to bring the royal family back to London, display the half-mast flag of mourning, and for the Queen to address the nation “as your Queen and as a grandmother” from the balcony of Buckingham Palace beneath which huge crowds were still lost to deep distress. Diana was, the Queen said, “an exceptional and gifted human being”. When she added that “there are lessons to be drawn from her life and from the extraordinary and moving reaction to her death”, most of the country, despite the vagueness of what those lessons might be, was prepared to give the Queen the benefit of the doubt.





Addressing the nation 'as your Queen and as a grandmother' on the eve of Princess Diana's funeral in 1997 © Peter Marlow/Magnum Photos

In any other country, with any other monarch, the mishandling of the aftermath of Diana's death, including the brutally poignant spectacle of the two boys walking behind their mother's coffin, might have finished off the institution. But when, in his funeral eulogy in Westminster Abbey, Diana's brother Charles pointedly contrasted the monarchy with his sister's authentic nobility, the polemic hit a national nerve, and not in a good way. Monarch and monarchy recovered their footing; Prince Charles made official the relationship with the person who had made his marriage to Diana "crowded", as she put it, by marrying Camilla Parker Bowles in Windsor Guildhall.

But the Diana tragedy has cast long shadows, not least in Prince Harry's replay of some of the chapters in his mother's life: separating himself, along with his wife Meghan Markle, from the royal vocation and public service and being willing to use the glare of public media to voice grievance at the stony indifference of the Palace Brand.





The Queen in February 2022, at the start of her Platinum Jubilee year © Camera Press/Rota

But the Queen went on, fulfilling to the very end the promise she made in South Africa in 1947, sustaining the combination of majesty and personal human sympathy that made her reign durable against all the odds. The shocking scandal of Prince Andrew’s association with a convicted sex offender only seemed to throw her fundamental goodness into sharper relief. If anything, in old age, the temper of her speeches became warmer and more informal.

On Christmas Day 2021 she spoke to the country for the first time as a widow, not clothed in the dark weeds of inconsolable sorrow as Queen Victoria had been, but with a smile of remembrance, sweetly conjuring up the “mischievous twinkle” in the eye that she’d seen when she first encountered Philip and which never left him. As usual the Queen managed to personalise the moment. In a time of pandemic isolations and family separations she reflected — as she had, aged 14 when broadcasting to evacuated children — on Christmas as, above all, a time of childhood wonder. Thus the old Queen closed the arc with the young princess, the “heiress presumptive” of 145 Piccadilly.





With Prince Philip at the rain-lashed Thames pageant staged to celebrate her diamond jubilee in June 2012 © Chris Jackson/Getty Images

What is it that a nation wants from its royal personification? Expectations that its symbolic head of state can both somehow rise above the abrasions and aggravations of contemporary life and yet instinctively understand and connect with the common lot? A person who emerges from the flow of the past, but who extends a guiding hand to the future? Perhaps someone who, amid the drift and drone of the digital world, represents anchorage and substance; someone impervious to hustle, embodying integrity; sticking selflessly, come what may, to promises long made, to the job at hand?

I saw that person on a rain-lashed day in June 2012, aboard the royal barge as crowds lined the banks of the Thames, determined, in a deeply British way, to celebrate the diamond jubilee, the biting cold and the drenching notwithstanding. Hundreds of boats, small craft, barges and launches, rowers and scullers, crowding the river as they would have done in the time of the first Elizabeth. And multitudes waving and shouting, singing and clapping as the foul weather got fouler.

There she stood beside Prince Philip, ostensibly sheltered by a canopy. But by mid-afternoon the rain was sweeping in almost horizontally, forming puddles on the throne-like chairs meant to give the couple a reprieve. So they stood and stood in the bone-cutting downpour, waving and for the most part smiling. The next day Philip was in hospital while another huge and ecstatic crowd gathered for a show in front of the palace. And at some point during the relentless drenching, beneath the leaden London sky, I asked myself, “Why does she do it?”, before answering right away, “because she said she would, and because, really, what would Britain be, without her?”



Smiling in the rain in Manchester in 1968: 'Through thick and thin, bitter division and unpredictable turmoil, she managed, when it counted most, to be the idealised personification of the nation' © Eve Arnold/Magnum Photos

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