

# Elizabeth II - A Life of Service

*This is an extract of a much longer obituary of the late Queen which appeared in The Times of London on Friday 9 September less than 24 hours after her death at Balmoral Castle in Aberdeenshire, Scotland.*



In more than a thousand years of British history, no monarch reigned longer than Queen Elizabeth II. No other head of state today is as well travelled, as politically experienced or as astute as was the Queen. She was one of the most recognised figures in the world. For two generations of Britons, she was the embodiment of our nation, the figurehead of our democracy and the stable symbol of continuity in an increasingly turbulent and rapidly changing world. She was that for many subjects, not only in Britain but around the Commonwealth that she so dearly cherished. The nation mourns her passing.

Britons born after the Queen's accession are already pensioners; four out of five alive today remember no other monarch. Those who can still look back to 1952 would see a country unrecognisable today. Britons still struggled through post-war austerity. Cities were black with coal soot. Schooling was dominated by the 11-plus examination. There were few foreign holidays, no motorways and limited television. Deference to authority, to religion and to the monarchy was axiomatic. Murderers were hanged, children were caned in schools and homosexuals were imprisoned.

In more than 3,500 acts of parliament to which the Queen gave royal assent, Britain has been utterly changed. Her subjects, too, became a different people; decades of immigration have made Britain a multi-ethnic, multicultural nation. More than two million Britons are Muslims. London, still the capital of a global empire in 1952, is now a capital of vibrant diversity, where more than a



third of the population was born outside the United Kingdom. Throughout one of the greatest periods of change this country has ever known the monarchy has endured, and is as popular today as it was during the heady days of the 27-year-old Queen's coronation in 1953. This is because the Queen knew that continuity was possible only if it embraced change. Steeped in the nation's history, traditions and ceremonies, she dedicated herself to her lifetime's role with all the seriousness, self sacrifice and modesty that she promised in her prophetic speech on the 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday: "My whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service" – a vow privately repeated to God beneath the canopy of her Coronation oath.

Change, though immense, was steady and almost imperceptible. Things once taken for granted were quietly dropped when the mores of the nation changed: early in her reign she stopped receiving debutantes at Buckingham Palace. Instead, she held tea parties in the gardens to more than 1.5 million Britons from all strata of society and allowed in thousands of tourists every summer.

Men, and increasingly also women, were invited to dine with her to celebrate their achievements, not to perpetuate a class privilege. For the first 65 years of her reign she never gave a television interview; yet in 2018 she gave two, reflecting on a Coronation crown she had not seen since she wore it, and strolling among the trees of Buckingham Palace with Sir David Attenborough.

Change came sometimes at a cost. Divorce led to unhappiness in her family as much as it does in any family. At the start of her reign, the Queen had struggled when duty, public opinion and social propriety clashed with her wish for her sister Margaret's future happiness in wanting to marry a divorced man; later she was herself to see three of her children divorced, often in hurtful and difficult circumstances. Her son's unhappy marriage with Diana was to take a toll on the monarchy's popularity, on her own feelings as a mother and on the stability of the throne. At a crucial moment, the Queen drew on her faith and shrewd understanding of the national mood to assert her role and pay a televised tribute to Diana after her death.

The monarchy became very much an institution shaped in her image. Her attention to the detail of monarchy gave her complete mastery of the royal household. Its diurnal pattern was efficient and well established, as was the calendar of events, with the regular punctuation of fixed visits, occasions and functions: Trooping the Colour, Ascot, the summer visit to Balmoral, the State Opening of Parliament, Remembrance Day, Sandringham and the Christmas broadcast. Yet she remained the person to whom the country turned in moments of crisis. Her broadcast in 2020 at the start of a terrible year of the coronavirus was inspirational in bolstering the nation's morale. And the image of her sitting alone in St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle during the funeral of Prince Phillip when lockdown rules had forbidden contact between separate households, symbolised the stoicism and willingness to lead by example.

Britain has been profoundly influenced by her reign. The new king has had to serve a long apprenticeship. He will now have to grapple with the challenge of change, renewal and different expectations. Her shoes will be almost impossible to fill. But he would not want to do so. Her achievement was her own. The King will undoubtedly acknowledge how conscientiously she filled and moulded her role and would be wise to apply these lessons. But he will want to reign in his way, for his time. The nation will surely echo the ancient and totemic incantation that follows the acclamation of each new monarch on the death of his or her predecessor: God Save the King!