

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
KING EDWARD VII



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KING EDWARD VII

Prince Albert Edward was born at Buckingham Palace on 9 November 1841. He was the eldest son of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the Prince Consort. He was educated at Edinburgh University, Christ Church Oxford, and Trinity College Cambridge.

Sandringham

Upon entering Trinity College, the Prince's parents decided that he should move from the family home to a house of his own. His principle residence was to be Marlborough House in London but it was decided that he should also have a private house well away from town so that he would be able to escape when duty permitted and enjoy the benefits of a healthy country life.

Many properties were inspected and the search was still in train when the tragic and premature death of the Prince Consort brought it to an abrupt halt. However, Queen Victoria decided that everything must go on as her husband would have wished and so the Prince of Wales prepared for a visit to Sandringham. On inspection, the property was decided to be most suitable and so the purchase was concluded a few days later.

A Royal Romance

Whilst studying at Cambridge, the Prince was allowed to live with his Governor at Madingley, three miles from the University city. In addition, he and 11 other undergraduates were given private lectures by Charles Kingsley with whom the Prince became very close friends.

It was whilst at Cambridge that the Prince fell in love. It is said that he was enjoying a leisurely summer's afternoon with some friends when one of them mentioned having a photograph of his fiancée with him. However, when he reached inside his pocket to produce the photograph of his fiancée, instead he produced a carte-de-visite of a girl wearing a simple white gown with a black velvet ribbon around her neck. The Prince demanded to know who this lovely girl was and he then kept hold of the photograph.

In Autumn 1861, the Prince visited Germany. It was here that he was to meet the lady in the photograph: Princess Alexandra of Denmark. Their first meeting seems to have been an accidental one, as they were both staying in Worms and they happened to meet while visiting the cathedral there. Although this encounter lasted but a few minutes, it was said that the Prince fell instantly in love. They officially met in Heidelberg at the end of September when the Prince was staying with his sister, the Crown Princess of Prussia. The Prince's father noted that the young couple seemed "to have taken a warm liking for one another".

Albert Edward and Alexandra became engaged on the 9th September 1862 and the British and Danish people were in high spirits. The Prince spent his 21st birthday on board the "Osborne" yacht in the Bay of Naples and then the wedding took place the following March at St George's Chapel, Windsor. There were lavish celebrations and displays around London, and it was said that the City alone spent £10,000 on decorations.

One special gift that the Princess received for her wedding was a ring set with six precious stones - a beryl, an emerald, a ruby, a turquoise, a jacinth and another emerald. It was a popular idea in Victorian times to spell out names or messages in jewellery by using the initials of the gems; these stones spelt the Prince's family name "Bertie".

The couple honeymooned at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, Queen Victoria's private residence and then on their return, they settled at Sandringham. The Princess loved the Estate in Norfolk. She enjoyed the peacefulness and the steady outdoor lifestyle and was especially fond of the wild local scenery. She soon began visiting the cottages and schools on the Estate and suggested improvements and alterations regarding the living and working conditions of the poor.

A Family

Before long it became known that the Princess would be expecting her first child in March 1864. However, the baby had other plans and in January, whilst at a skating party at Virginia Water, the Princess suddenly went into labour. The birth was so unexpected that the baby had to be wrapped in cotton wool as the layette was still at Marlborough House in London. There were no doctors or nurses nor the official people that should traditionally be present at the birth of an heir to the throne in order to check that no "swapping" went on. However, all went well and the baby was delivered safely.

The birth was announced in the papers the following morning and took the nation by surprise. Everyone was overjoyed and the early arrival meant that the baby, named Albert Victor, could be christened at Buckingham Palace on March 10th, his parents' wedding anniversary. The birth of Albert Victor was followed on June 3rd 1865, by the arrival of a second healthy son who was to be called Prince George.

In 1867, their first daughter arrived, but this time the Princess's recovery was slower: she had developed acute rheumatism and her knee-joint had become inflamed. On the 6th July 1868, came their fourth child, Princess Victoria. This summer was spent at Sandringham where the Princess and her family could relax and enjoy the simple rural pleasures. In November 1869 Princess Maud was born at Marlborough House and then in April 1871, the Prince's last child was born, the little Prince Alexander, who sadly only lived for one day and was then laid to rest in the quiet churchyard at Sandringham.

Typhoid

Later in 1871 the Prince of Wales contracted typhoid (possibly picked up at a house party in Scarborough after which several other guests went down with the disease) and Queen Victoria came to Sandringham to be by his bedside. Bulletins were posted around the Empire and the people became subdued and anxious. However, by December 16th it seemed that the Prince was beginning to improve and it was announced that he was out of imminent danger.

On Christmas Day, the Princess of Wales and Princess Alice appeared as usual to take part in the distribution of gifts among the Estate workers. The Prince himself sent a message to his tenants and servants stating that he hoped to be among them again soon.

As a response to the problem of typhoid in the country, a watertower was built at Appleton (near Sandringham) in 1877. The tower was built principally of brick and carrstone and is still visible for many miles around.

The Appleton tower provided a supply of pure and wholesome water, free from contamination and well adapted for domestic requirements. Importantly, this supply also meant that Sandringham would be able to adequately fight any fires that may break out. This was a security that was enjoyed by only a few of the great country houses of England at the time. See the fire engine display in the Museum and read about the 2 great fires that the fire service tackled at Sandringham.

India

Meanwhile, the Prince had always dreamed of visiting India and in 1875-6 this wish was fulfilled when he undertook his most important and successful tour to date.

India was seen as a romantic and mysterious land and as travel and foreign trade began to open up during the Victorian era, so the interest in these far away lands began to grow.

The Prince was particularly looking forward to trying his hand at shooting Big Game and in fact, the conquests of his expeditions can be seen in Sandringham Museum. It must be remembered that in those days, shooting was seen as an acceptable pastime for the rich and affluent and trophies were displayed in all the Big Houses around the country. Thankfully, this is no longer the case, and the Royal Family today advocate conservation and preservation of wildlife.

Before leaving India, news reached the Prince that his mother, Queen Victoria, was assuming the title of Empress of India.

On his return, the Prince spent several months at Sandringham. He had brought back from India a vast accumulation of presents that were said to be worth half a million pounds. Later on the Prince permitted these gifts to be exhibited for a time to the public; some of the pieces went to Marlborough House but most can now be seen at Sandringham. They include magnificent armour and weaponry set with precious stones.

Besides these, the Prince brought back with him from India quite a menagerie including elephants, tigers, leopards, birds, monkeys, dogs, ponies and cattle. Some were sent to the Zoo but the majority were housed around Sandringham.

Home Life

The Princess of Wales was a wonderful, devoted mother. She loved spending time with her children more than anything else in the world and they were well known to the people on the Sandringham Estate, who often referred to them as the "uncommon likely".

When the Princess had first arrived in England it had been fashionable for ladies of the time to be seen out in the Park with a pet animal; the Princess changed this by driving out with her two little sons and soon other ladies followed her example and left their pets at home in the kennels and let their children accompany them instead.

Christmas at Sandringham was celebrated in good old English style with Christmas boxes and Christmas trees, holly wreaths and mistletoe. The young Royals, along with their mother, distributed toys for the poor children and gifts to the old people. The family were frequently seen driving through the villages in a light oak cart called the "Blues" cart with the bottom of it filled with oranges for the village children and packages of tea and groceries for the parents.

The Prince and Princess were both very charitable and took a keen interest in institutions aimed at helping those less fortunate. The Royal Family became less distanced and instead began to make themselves part of the common life of the people.

The Princess and her daughters were also fond of dancing and enjoyed many balls at Sandringham where they had more freedom than at the state balls in London.

Shooting parties were another winter entertainment. King Edward VII particularly enjoyed shooting on the Estate and in November of 1900, Frank Morriss - the pioneer of the motor industry in Norfolk - personally delivered two Daimlers to Sandringham "for the convenience of visitors, shooting parties, and for general use on the estate" (see the Daimler in the Museum).

The Princesses and their mother did not shoot but they sometimes accompanied the sportsmen and often joined them for an outdoor lunch which was brought by a vehicle known as the luncheon van.

Albert Edward as King

In 1901, Queen Victoria died and her long reign finally came to an end. The Prince who was by now nearly sixty years old, at last became King.

King Edward VII was the reigning sovereign for nine years until his death in 1910. During this time he gained enormous popularity and was known for his love of animals and sport, particularly racing. The King won the Derby three times and a statue of his favourite race horse, Persimmon, can be seen today standing outside the stud at Sandringham.

When King Edward VII died on 6 May 1910, his body was conveyed in solemn procession to Westminster Hall. The State Funeral was on Friday, May 20th and the dead king was carried through the London streets and laid to rest at St George's Chapel, Windsor.

After the King's death, Queen Alexandra spent the rest of her days at her beloved country home at Sandringham. The Queen is also buried at Windsor in St George's Chapel. By the effigies of the King and Queen is the King's favourite terrier, Caesar.

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The Edwardian era is remembered for its lavish luxury which replaced the Victorian dignified pomp and circumstance. Dress became more and more extravagant and the craze for bridge, poker, baccarat, betting and smoking spread. Women as well as gentlemen began to use the bicycle and motorcars became more common. Weekending became the fashion and everyone played golf. Hotels became more luxurious and restaurants and cocktail drinking became more in vogue.

King Edward VII had been known as a darling of Society (and rather notorious womaniser) as well as being extravagant with his indulgences in food, drink and gambling. He was also remembered for being a good father and grandfather, well travelled, a great linguist and a popular King.