

# The life and times of King Edward VIII



## Educational Resource

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# King Edward VIII

Prince Edward was born in 1894 and succeeded to the throne in 1936. He was King for 325 days between January and December 1936 when he then abdicated. In his childhood, much of which was spent at Sandringham, he was known as David.

## Growing Up

In 1907, at just 12 years old, David entered the Royal Naval College at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight and from there he graduated to the senior Royal Naval College at Dartmouth.

David spent about 3 months at sea and then went to Oxford University. He was not particularly intellectual but was popular and charming.

During the First World War when the Prince of Wales and his brother Prince Albert were still little more than boys, they joined the Services. Whilst on leave in 1915 he fell in love for the first time. He was 21 and fell in love with Lady Coke, a married woman who was 12 years older than him. The affair lasted for three years. Later, David met Freda Dudley Ward who was to become his next great passion. The affair lasted for 16 years.

The Prince mingled with London's Society Set and dressed in outlandish clothes. His incredibly successful foreign tours made him a glittering international celebrity with almost film star status and he had a reputation for having a girl in every port. Privately he was said to be a sad and often lonely figure.

## Mrs Wallis Simpson

In 1931, David was to meet Mrs Wallis Simpson. She and her husband Ernest were invited to a party held by Viscountess Thelma Furness, a mutual friend of theirs and the Prince of Wales. The following year, Wallis and Ernest received an invitation from the Prince to spend a weekend at Fort Belvedere. Wallis and David began to realise their feelings for each other. In 1933 she began to visit Fort Belvedere informally and they had the opportunity to get to know each other better. In June, the Prince gave a party in honour of Wallis's 37th birthday and by the end of the year he knew he had found his "perfect woman".

Wallis's marriage deteriorated and Ernest began an affair with a woman who was to become his third wife. The Prince and Wallis became even closer and then early in 1936, King George V died making his eldest son King Edward VIII.





# King Edward VIII

## The New King

The new King, accompanied by the Duke of York, became the first King of England to fly. He had also been the first member of the royal family to speak on radio and the first to be photographed smoking. He flew from Sandringham to London in his private aeroplane to meet his Ministers and Privy Councillors assembled for the Accession Council. He took the oath and was pronounced King.

Problems were to follow, and in particular there were concerns about his linking with Wallis who was by now his constant companion. Wallis began divorce proceedings in 1936 just before she and the King embarked on a cruise in the Mediterranean. During the holiday the couple were photographed together in swimwear and even in nightclothes and the American and European press followed their every move.

The match was considered most unsuitable for the King but he continued heedlessly until eventually, increasing pressure prompted him to announce that he would marry Wallis as King or if not, abdicate. It was unacceptable for the King to marry a divorcee as he was “Defender of the Faith” and the Church did not recognise divorce. A morganatic marriage was suggested which would mean that Wallis would not become Queen and any children they had would have no right to the throne. However, when Baldwin the Prime Minister put the proposition to the rest of the British Empire, he worded it in such a way that their only answer could be against it.

## The Abdication

Wallis immediately left for France and from there made a statement saying that she would leave the King. However, this was too late as the King was already decided. He abdicated at the end of the year and his younger brother, Bertie came to the throne as King George VI.

Edward and Wallis were married in June and became the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. It was a civil ceremony followed by a religious blessing. No member of the Duke’s family attended and the day before the wedding the King sent a message that the Duchess would not be allowed to use the title Her Royal Highness. The couple honeymooned in Italy and Austria and then travelled to Hungary and Czechoslovakia before arriving in Paris where they rented a suite at the Hotel Meurice. Their honeymoon lasted three months.





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## The Second World War

When World War II broke out in 1939 the Duke was again keen for work. While the Duchess continued to shop for clothes and diamonds, the Duke crossed boundaries and was welcomed by the French troops.

When France fell to the German forces, the Duke and Duchess fled, first to Spain and then to Portugal, both neutral countries. They refused to return to England unless two conditions were met: first that the Duchess was to be recognized as Her Royal Highness, and secondly that the King and Queen should receive them. Neither request was granted.

The Duke was then appointed Governor of the Bahamas where he was concerned with provisions for the old and young and problems with housing. Wallis became President of the Red Cross and shortly afterwards, she ran a canteen for American servicemen.

In 1945, the Duke of Windsor resigned as Governor of the Bahamas and when the war ended the Windsors visited New York and were seen at nightclubs and high-society parties.

## Their Twilight Years

The Windsors were living in exile and spending their time wandering from home to home, spending money and lavishly partying. They were still not welcomed by the Royal Family and they were not invited to the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Philip Mountbatten in 1947.

In 1965, the Duke visited London to have a series of operations on his eyes. While he was recovering in hospital, Queen Elizabeth visited her uncle and at the same time, she met Wallis. A couple of years later, the Queen invited the Duke and Duchess to a ceremony to mark the centenary of Queen Mary's birth and for the first time, the Duke and Duchess were officially welcomed as a couple in England.

By November 1971, the Duke had been diagnosed as having inoperable throat cancer. In May 1972, the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince Charles visited the Duke after being informed that he was dying. By this stage, he was completely bedridden and eight days later he died.

In the years after the Duke's death, the Duchess became increasingly confused and suffered from arteriosclerosis. Her health deteriorated and she became troubled by gastric and liver problems. By 1978 she was totally bedridden and emaciated. She finally died in April 1986. The Queen, Prince Philip and the Queen Mother were among those who attended her short funeral service at St George's Chapel, Windsor and her body was then laid to rest beside that of her adoring husband David, at Frogmore.