

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
KING GEORGE V



The Estate Office, Sandringham, Norfolk PE35 6EN
www.sandringhamestate.co.uk

KING GEORGE V

Prince George was born in 1865 as the second son of Prince Albert Edward (later King Edward VII) and Princess Alexandra. From an early age George was inseparable from his elder brother, the Duke of Clarence.

The two brothers, Albert Victor the Duke of Clarence and George Frederick the Duke of York, entered the Royal Navy together as cadets in 1877. Prince Albert Edward, their father and future King, had decided to send his sons to the Navy so that they would not only be disciplined but also have the opportunity of broadening their minds by extensive travel. They spent two years together on board the Britannia and both obtained a first-class in seamanship. The Prince of Wales then organised a three years' tour round the world made in the Bacchante. After this, Prince Albert Victor concentrated on duties on land preparing him for his role as heir to the throne, while Prince George continued with the Navy.

Prince George trained hard as a naval officer and became one of the most efficient linguists in the Navy. By the time he was ten he spoke French and German fluently.

At a young age, he was already becoming known for his sense of humour and mischief. As second in line to the throne, he grew up a simple, natural boy known familiarly as the "Right-Royal Pickle" because of his fun-loving character. Once at a family luncheon at Windsor Castle, in his childhood, he incurred the displeasure of Queen Victoria and as a punishment was sent under the table until he would behave himself properly. After a while he was heard to say: "Grandmama, I'm quite good now." "Very well, then" said Grandmama, "you may come out." Out he came, completely naked and unashamed, having removed all his clothes whilst under the table! On this occasion, Queen Victoria was distinctly amused.

As he grew a little older he made apple-pie beds, arranged pillows and bedding over the doors to fall on whoever entered and teased his masters and tutors to distraction.

The Prince also had a favourite hobby that he continued throughout his life: stamp collecting. His collection contains some of the rarest stamps available and is one of the most famous in the world. The stamp collection included original sketches sent by Sir Rowland Hill to the Government, the design for the famous Mulready envelope and numerous letters and documents illustrating the battle with the authorities before adhesive stamps were chosen. He had every issued stamp of the British Empire. They were kept on boards, not in albums and the collection was kept at Buckingham Palace. When in London, the King gave an hour a day to his stamps if he could spare the time. He really did like stamps, but no one else in his family took much interest in them. In 1896, he was elected President of the Philatelic Society.

He was also devoted to fishing, tennis, cricket, sailing, rowing and shooting. Like his father, he loved the open-air and the healthy, physical things of life.

Prince George had a great love of books and his mind was filled with stories of adventure and romance. He loved to play with his brother and re-enact the Wars of the Roses. The elder brother was expected to become Sovereign and therefore Duke of Lancaster and so he adopted the red rose as his badge, while Prince George wore the white. Years later when his brother

died and Prince George was placed in direct line to the throne he needed to assume another title rather than just that of Prince George of Wales and so he chose that of the Duke of York in memory of his childhood games with his brother and all through his life the white rose of King Edward IV remained his favourite badge.

Charles Kingsley was a frequent visitor at Sandringham and became a good friend of Prince George whom he described as being "full of spirits and life".

Meanwhile, Prince Albert Victor (known as "Prince Eddy") had become a problem to his father due to being seemingly interested only in clothes and being involved in a number of notorious incidents. Princess "May" of Teck was chosen as a suitable fiancée for him and it was hoped that her more stable influence would be good for him.

Around this time, there had been a national epidemic of typhoid (which Prince George had been a victim of although he made a good recovery) and this was then followed by an epidemic of influenza. That Christmas, there was a family party at Sandringham and a special birthday dinner was arranged for the Duke of Clarence with his own family, the Duke and Duchess of Teck and Princess May. Unfortunately, the dinner had to be held without Prince Eddy as he had been struck down by an attack of influenza which then developed into pneumonia and despite much care and nursing the Prince died on January 14th at Sandringham.

This had an important effect on the life of Prince George. Not only had he lost a much loved brother but his death had meant that Prince George was to become heir to the throne and from then on his education became tailored to the needs of a future king. He was deeply religious and since childhood, at the request of his mother, had read a daily portion of the Bible. He withdrew himself for a time from public life and reflected upon himself and his preparation for his time as King.

It also became noticeable that he was increasingly spending time with Princess May who had previously been betrothed to his late brother and it seemed that they had been drawn together in their mutual grief. In 1893, followed the announcement of his engagement to Princess May and the public welcomed the news. In fact, Queen Victoria had been the one who was much responsible for pushing the two together as she was determined that May should become a member of the royal family as she considered her to be a great asset, and indeed, she was proved to be right.

Princess May had been born at Kensington Palace in 1867 and was in fact the great-granddaughter of King George III. She was very close to the children of the Prince and Princess of Wales and she and her brothers were their constant playmates. Her parents were rather colourful characters and their lavish entertaining had caused them to incur a number of debts and consequently they spent some time in Florence in exile. Princess May accompanied them to Italy and it was there that she studied the arts. On their return, she settled at the White Lodge, Richmond Park. She was known as being good, well-educated and very caring. She was fond of riding and driving, sketching and playing musical instruments.

The wedding took place on July 6th 1893 after only a brief engagement and then the Royal couple honeymooned at York Cottage at Sandringham which was to become their main home.

York Cottage had originally been built by the Prince of Wales for his bachelor guests and had previously been known as Bachelors' Cottage but its name was changed when the Duke of

York and his bride moved in. It was a comfortable two-storeyed house built of stone and brick and the grounds had been enclosed and a lodge of red brick and thatch added before the bride's arrival. There were no formal gardens but in front of the house was a picturesque lake. The house did not remotely resemble a palace and its air was that of comfort not ostentation.

As public work grew and children came, the cottage began to seem a little small and consequently the cottage was enlarged twice each time by a different architect. In it, the future King George VI and all the Duke's children except King Edward VIII were born and it was not until the death of Queen Alexandra in 1925 that King George and Queen Mary moved into the Big House.

Sandringham was the place which Prince George was most fond of: "*Dear old Sandringham, the place I love better than anywhere else in the world*". Sandringham was the real home of his mother and father where they could live away from the public eye and expected formalities. The house was, and still is, unpretentious and very much a family home rather than a formal residence.

Like Queen Alexandra, Queen Mary was content to devote herself to home, husband and family but she was also very interested in the life of the poor and was involved with plans to secure them healthy surroundings and improved conditions.

Queen Mary was also influential in the decoration of her homes. She had studied art and furniture and strongly believed in balance, harmony and order. The Queen was also very knowledgeable of household management and budgeting probably as a result of the financial difficulties that she had experienced as a child. She was also particularly fond of her collection of lace and fans and of Dresden china. She favoured dainty, elegant furniture and soft light colours. It is her taste that is reflected in many of the present interiors of Sandringham House.

Prince George succeeded to the throne as King George V on the death of his father in 1910 and he was the ruling sovereign through the First World War. He was received enthusiastically during the Coronation and London was full of decorations and celebrations.

When establishing the new King's Court there were marked changes. The new Court quickly became known as a centre of public service rather than ostentatious display. The King was not interested in pleasure-seeking but took his responsibilities seriously as he knew of the dangers that were threatening Britain.

King George V was more humble than his grandmother Queen Victoria or his father King Edward VII and he set the style of monarchy that has been followed ever since most notably by his grand-daughter the present Queen Elizabeth II. The monarchy more of a symbolic office with less political or constitutional functions and more of a representative role. He was always immaculately dressed and acted with duty, dignity, honesty and hard work. He believed "in God, in the invincibility of the Royal Navy, and the essential rightness of whatever was British".

The King was known for his punctuality and the importance he placed on family. He was happiest being a country squire, particularly at Sandringham and greatly enjoyed shooting. He was also fond of a pet parrot called Charlotte who travelled with him almost everywhere. At Sandringham, she would come in to breakfast, perched on the King's finger off which she would hop to range over the breakfast table poking into jam, butter, or boiled eggs as the fancy took her!

In June 1912 the people of England expressed their affection for the Queen Mother (Queen Alexandra) by initiating "Alexandra Day" to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of her landing in England by offering ten million artificial wild roses for sale in London for the benefit of the hospitals. The roses were made by crippled girls. This was to become an annual event and the girls selling the roses were dressed in white with red-edged ribbons, flowered straw hats and a red-edged white sash (the Danish colours) with the name "Alexandra" on it. The price of a rose was a penny so even the poor could afford it but some of those who were better off may have given a five pound note instead.

1912 also marked the beginning of serious labour trouble including the great coal strike and even when this was over the unrest continued. The King and Queen visited some of the leading centres of industry and came in touch with the actual conditions of the workers' lives. The King revealed himself as a strong advocate of labour conciliation.

Three new forces came into play in Britain: death duties were introduced which broke up the old semi-feudal system of rural life; women were in revolt and Mrs Pankhurst was leading the Suffragette movement to gain women the right to vote; thirdly there was the growth of the Labour Party. The King was not threatened by these new developments as many people were because he had seen similar movements in other parts of the Empire during his travels and knew that these methods could work without any real danger to the Crown or national well-being. His time abroad had given him a greater understanding of such new ideas and he was therefore well placed to deal with them.

Between 1910 when the King came to the throne and the outbreak of war in 1914, there was a steady consolidation of the Empire. Improved communication meant that the Dominions seemed much closer and there were constant visits from overseas statesmen.

War broke out in the summer of 1914. It had been imminent for some months but the general public had never believed that it would really happen. However, despite attempts at a peaceful settlement war became inevitable. Austria attacked Serbia and then Germany declared war on Russia. Britain and France became directly involved when Germany threatened the neutrality of Belgium. England was entering the war not for conquest but for liberty.

War with Germany and Austria-Hungary placed the King in a particularly difficult situation as the German Emperor was the eldest son of the King's Aunt and the royal and imperial families of Great Britain and Germany were closely linked. When the King found it was impossible to keep the peace he swept his family considerations to one side and before the war was over, he and all those who remained with him, renounced German names, German titles and hereditary German dignities and honours. The King was later to adopt the title of "Windsor" which was seen by some as a violent break with tradition but the King insisted and it was done. This underlined and emphasised the fact that the British Monarchy was the most British, and most ancient, institution in the realm.

King George did not assume the place of military leader of his nation as was the case with the Kaiser, but instead left his ministers and military and naval leaders unhampered although he kept in close touch with their every move. He and the Queen devoted their time to strengthening the Empire, comforting the wounded, encouraging the workers and standing by the fighting men. He set a fine example in his personal life by getting rid of all display from the royal palaces and giving many of his horses for ambulance work, encouraging his footmen to

enlist, cutting down on extravagant food and growing plots of vegetables in front of Buckingham Palace. Two of the King's sons, Prince Albert and the Prince of Wales, still little more than boys, joined the Services.

The Queen visited hospitals and supervised the details of provisions. She also took active steps to see that women should not lose their jobs unnecessarily by others offering voluntary work and formed a committee to raise funds to find employment for women who had been thrown out of work by the war.

At last, peace was officially declared in 1918 and there was public rejoicing and nationwide celebrations. However, unemployment was growing and demobilised soldiers and sailors were finding it difficult to get work.

In 1921, the Prince of Wales visited India to inaugurate the new Chamber of Princes and the new Constitutions. This was to be a potentially difficult visit as an anti-British movement had been spreading among some sections of the Indian peoples. However, the Prince was determined to go ahead with the aim of learning about India and trying to understand its people. The trip turned out to be a great success and he helped to spread good will, understanding and increased fellowship among the nations.

Also in 1921 the announcement was made of the engagement of Princess Mary to Viscount Lascelles and the marriage took place the following year. Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon was one of the bridesmaids at the wedding and it was she who caught the attention of Prince Albert, the Duke of York, the King's second son. She came from an ancient and powerful Scottish family of Strathmore who owned Glamis Castle. Glamis was according to tradition, the home of Macbeth and the scene of Malcolm II's death. During 1922 the Duke and Lady Elizabeth were frequently seen together and early in 1923 the Duke proposed to her for a third time and was finally accepted. The couple were married in April of that year and were later to become King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, now known as our Queen Mother.

Royal Garden Parties had been introduced by King Edward but it was left to King George and Queen Mary to develop them after the War into the immense function that they are today. It was believed that the Garden Parties led to an increased interest in gardening which was one of the great passions of the Queen. It was under her direction that the gardens at Buckingham Palace became some of the most notable in the world and many of the beautiful private gardens throughout the country then opened to the public. She was one of the first to allow the public access to the Sandringham Gardens which were noted for their lovely vista of water and rocks and flowering trees.

1923 marked a big advance in the popularisation of broadcasting. The King had already shown his interest in the development of modern science. Whilst visiting the wireless section of the British Industries Fair at the White City the King said that he could never "cut" London on his own set, nor could he get Germany or Paris at Buckingham Palace, but at Sandringham he could get other countries quite easily.

The King's main love was shooting and he had learnt to shoot well from a very young age. His great skill as a shot was seen to best advantage in India and elsewhere in big game shooting. He also loved grouse and pheasant shooting. In pheasant shooting at Sandringham the King's average of successes was over 80% of all the cartridges fired. He was in his time one of the

twelve best shots in Britain. He usually shot wearing a red tie! The King was also an active patron of football and frequently attended important matches.

The King's reign witnessed many major developments and historical events from the opening of the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1924 to Sir Alan Cobham's successful flight over the Himalayas in 1925. The motorcar was beginning to be mass produced which meant that the cars could be marketed at a cheaper price and therefore be accessible to more people. Sadly, also in 1925, his mother, Queen Alexandra passed away at Sandringham.

The King himself spent several months at Sandringham in 1929 to recuperate after a fairly lengthy illness. The first bulletin issued to the public to inform them of the King's ill-health was on the night of November 22nd 1928. The King's condition was not considered to be serious but he was said to be suffering from a cold and slight fever. The Queen was to fulfil his Majesty's engagements for a few days. However, by the following day there seemed to be more cause for alarm. King George had spent a restless night and was diagnosed as having "some congestion of one lung" which was to develop into pleurisy. By early December there had been a decline in the strength of his heart. However, even from his sick bed the King enquired daily about the welfare of the miner and his family whom the King himself had adopted and installed in a cottage on the Sandringham Estate.

Towards the end of August the following year, after a period of convalescence in Bognor and a brief spell back in London, the King left for Sandringham to complete his recuperation. The fresh Norfolk air was believed to be a welcome tonic for the King and during his time here he began to regain his strength. That Christmas, he was joined by the rest of the Royal Family for celebrations at Sandringham, and it was here at Christmas 1933 that he delivered his first Christmas broadcast: "from my home and from my heart" which was heard throughout the Empire.

The King celebrated his Jubilee in 1935 with much public rejoicing which proved his immense popularity. The modest King was genuinely surprised at the warmth of the public celebrations and said: "I had no idea they felt like that about me, I'm beginning to think they must really like me for myself". His special broadcast that Christmas was to be his last. On Christmas Day, 1935, millions all over the Empire had heard the voice of the King broadcasting his Christmas message to "my dear people" but his voice was quavering and his heart was starting to fail.

Early in the New Year, the young Princesses were playing outside at Sandringham in the snow when Queen Mary went out to talk to them and to explain that their grandfather was very ill. After lunch, she took the nine and a half year old Elizabeth in to say goodbye to him. The King took to his bed on Friday, January 17 as he was not feeling well and members of the Royal Family were constantly at the bedside. He passed away on January 20th at 11.55 pm. The little Princesses had been sent back to Windsor a few days before their grandfather died, but Princess Elizabeth was taken to see the coffin when it arrived at the Houses of Parliament.

It was not until more than fifty years later that it became public knowledge that the King's life had been terminated by his principal medical adviser, Lord Dawson of Penn, who injected morphia and cocaine into the King's jugular vein. This was, he said, aimed to give him the dignity and serenity that he deserved at the end of his life and also to allow the death to be announced by the BBC in enough time for the press comments to be made by The Times rather than by "the less appropriate evening journals".

The death of King George V at Sandringham on January 20, 1936, was believed to be more dramatic in its effect upon world affairs and the British Empire in particular than any other event since the outbreak of war in 1914.

At Sandringham, the coffin containing the body of the dead King was taken one afternoon from the house and carried to the Church of St Mary Magdalene. There the coffin was placed in the chancel, covered by the Royal Standard. Estate servants watched through the night.

On Thursday morning there was a simple service in the church and then the coffin was placed on a gun-carriage and taken to Wolferton station. Behind the coffin walked King Edward and his brothers, tramping along the muddy road for two and a half miles. There was also Richard Howlett who had been King George's valet and friend. Then came Jock, the dead King's grey pony, who was led by the groom and finally, in closed carriages, came the Queen, the Princess Royal and the Royal Duchesses. Also in one of the carriages was Charlotte, the king's parrot, who had been his constant companion at work and in leisure since his sailor days. The cage was carried by a servant.

The train arrived at King's Cross station and the procession journeyed to Westminster Hall where a lying-in-state had been arranged. On the coffin was a wreath of red and white flowers from the Queen.

When the service was over, Queen Mary and her family departed and then members of the House of Commons filed slowly past the coffin to pay their last respects to King George. They were the first of hundreds of thousands. There was a constant guard of twelve watchers over the coffin. The Imperial Crown, the Orb, and the Sceptre were also in evidence. Later, Queen Mary sent white and pink flowers to be laid on the coffin.

On January 28th, the coffin was prepared for its last journey to St George's chapel, Windsor. King Edward VIII took up his position behind the coffin and immediately behind him were his three brothers. Then came the five kings - the King of Norway, the King of Denmark, the King of Romania, the King of Bulgaria and the King of the Belgians. Also the President of the French Republic, M Lebrun and then a score of Royal representatives from all over the world.

The congesting crowds delayed the procession through the streets of London and the funeral train was 22 minutes late leaving Paddington station.

King George V had been at the head of the greatest confederation of self-governing states that the world had ever known. Through broadcasting, his voice had been familiar to all his subjects, and because he was never surrounded by armed forces, except for ceremonial purposes, or shadowed by guards, he was in every sense a King of the people.