

ROYAL ESTATE
Sandringham

The life and times of King George V



Educational Resource

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.

Childhood

The two brothers, Prince Albert Victor and Prince George Frederick, entered the Royal Navy together as cadets in 1877. They spent two years together on board the Britannia and both obtained a first-class in seamanship. They then undertook a three years' tour round the world made in the Bacchante. After this, Prince Albert Victor left the Navy and concentrated on preparing for his role as heir to the throne, while Prince George continued with a career at sea.

Prince George was known for his sense of humour and mischief often making apple-pie beds and arranging pillows over the doors to fall on whoever entered the room. As second in line to the throne, he had less responsibility than his older brother and grew up a simple, natural boy, nick-named the "Right-Royal Pickle" because of his fun-loving nature.

Hobbies

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 collection was kept at Buckingham Palace and when in London, if time allowed, the King would devote an hour a day to his stamps. 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 in life.

The Duke of Clarence

Meanwhile, Prince Albert Victor (known as "Prince Eddy") had become rather a problem to his father. Instead of taking an interest in serious matters of the State he seemed to only be concerned about clothes and more frivolous things. In addition, he became involved in a number of notorious incidents in London Society. 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.

That Christmas, the family was as usual at Sandringham and a special birthday dinner was arranged for Prince Eddy. Unfortunately, the dinner had to be held without him as he had been struck down by an attack of influenza which then developed into pneumonia. 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 from public life for a while to reflect upon himself and prepare for his time as King.





King George V

Princess May

It also became noticeable that Prince George was spending more 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, the couple announced their engagement and the public welcomed the news. In fact, Queen Victoria had been the one who was much responsible for pushing the two together. She believed that May would be a great asset to the Royal Family and indeed, she was proved to be right.

Princess May had been born at Kensington Palace in 1867 and was a great-granddaughter of King George III. 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.

Sandringham

York Cottage had originally been built by the Prince of Wales for his bachelor guests and had previously been known as Bachelors' Cottage. Its name was changed when Prince George, now Duke of York, and his bride moved in. It was a comfortable two-storeyed house built of stone and brick. There were no formal gardens but in front of the house was a picturesque lake. The house was not ostentatious and was a comfortable home rather than a palace.

As time went on and the family grew, 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.

Prince George was particularly fond of Sandringham: "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 all the 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, particularly around the Sandringham Estate.

Queen Mary had studied art and furniture and was also very knowledgeable about household management, so she had a great influence on the decoration and running of her houses. She was particularly fond of her collection of fans and Dresden china and favoured dainty, elegant furniture and soft light colours. It is her taste that is reflected in many of the present interiors of Sandringham House.





King George V

George as King

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

King George V was more humble than his grandmother Queen Victoria or his father King Edward VII. 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 not interested in pleasure-seeking and ostentatious display but took his responsibilities seriously as he knew of the dangers that were threatening Britain.

The King was known for his punctuality and the importance he placed on the 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 and perch on the King’s finger and then hop off to potter around the breakfast table and poke her beak into jam, butter, or boiled eggs or whatever else she took a fancy to!

The First World War

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. Britain was entering the war not for conquest but for liberty.

War with Germany placed the King in a particularly difficult situation as 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 renounced German names, German titles and hereditary German dignities and honours. The King later adopted the name of “Windsor” which emphasised the fact that the British Monarchy was the most British and most ancient institution in the realm.

During the War, the King and Queen devoted their time to strengthening the Empire, comforting the wounded, encouraging the workers and standing by the fighting men. The King set a good example by getting rid of all unnecessary display from the royal palaces and giving many of his personal horses for ambulance work. He encouraged his footmen to enlist, cut down on extravagant food and grew vegetables in front of Buckingham Palace. His eldest two sons, Prince Albert and the Prince of Wales, still little more than boys, joined the Services.

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.





King George V

Ill Health

On the night of November 22nd 1928, a bulletin was issued to the public to inform them of the King's ill-health. The King was said to be suffering from a cold and slight fever. By the following day his condition had deteriorated and he 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.

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 the traditional celebrations at Sandringham, and it was here at Christmas 1932 that he made his first Christmas broadcast: "from my home and from my heart" which was heard throughout the Empire.

Jubilee

The King celebrated his Jubilee in 1935 and there was 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.

The Death of the King

Early in the New Year, the young Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret 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 died at Sandringham on 20 January 1936 at 11.55pm. The death of King George V was believed to have had a greater 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 from the house and carried to the Church. 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 VIII and his brothers, tramping along the muddy road for two and a half miles. 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 train arrived at King's Cross station and the procession journeyed to Westminster Hall.

On January 28th, the coffin was prepared for its last journey to St George's chapel, Windsor.

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

The End of an Era

The King's reign witnessed many major developments and historical events including the opening of the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1924 and Sir Alan Cobham's successful flight over the Himalayas in 1925.

The motorcar was beginning to be mass produced which meant that cars could be marketed at a cheaper price and therefore be accessible to more people and radio broadcasting became an accepted method of communication.

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.

For further information about educational groups or resources at Sandringham please email education@sandringhamestate.co.uk