

# WORLD WAR II



The Estate Office, Sandringham, Norfolk PE35 6EN

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From: "The Royal Family at War" by Theo Aronson

## **Outbreak of War**

In the summer of 1939, the Royal Family were at Balmoral and here they received news that war was truly imminent. Air Raid Precautions in Britain went on to a war footing; volunteers dug trenches through the night; school children were evacuated to the country and gas-masks were issued.

King George VI left Balmoral in late August 1939, much earlier than usual, and hurried back to London to confront the worrying news and do all he could to avert war. Queen Elizabeth (now known as the Queen Mother) arrived back on 29 August. They had left the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret in Scotland.

By 3 September 1939, the country was at war and that evening the King broadcast to the Empire. He outlined the reasons Britain was obliged to go to war and called upon "my people at home and my people across the seas" to stand firm and united in the "dark days ahead".

A few days later, the King started a diary which he kept throughout the war years and in it he entered his thoughts about the outbreak of war and memories of World War I, when he had been a midshipman at HMS Collingwood in the North Sea.

## **Family Matters**

The Princesses moved from Balmoral Castle to Birkhall, a smaller house on the estate. They continued with lessons, homework and games. They also helped to hand round tea and cake to the women who gathered at Birkhall to sew as part of the war effort and they greeted the evacuee children from the Glasgow slums who were being accommodated on the Balmoral estate.

The first Christmas of the war was spent at Sandringham as usual. The King also made the traditional live broadcast. Queen Mary was not at Sandringham that Christmas, for the day after war was declared the King had insisted that she move to Gloucestershire to stay with her niece. The Norfolk Estate had been bombed in the First World War and the King was anxious for his mother's safety. Sandringham House was closed and visits to the Estate during the War were spent at Appleton House in the neighbouring village. However, Sandringham was considered safe enough for a Christmas visit by the family in 1939 as the war seemed to be static for the first few months.

## **Political Problems**

On 9 April 1940 Hitler invaded Denmark and Norway. Also that year, the Prime Minister (Chamberlain) resigned and the King was sorry to see him go although others felt that he lacked the dynamic leadership that was needed. Winston Churchill took his place and at first the King was wary of him as were many others who saw him as an unreliable political adventurer. However, they were all to be proven wrong and a great friendship developed between the two men. King George VI and Winston Churchill came to symbolize the spirit of Britain at war.

As the war progressed, more and more monarchs sought sanctuary in Britain including King Haakon VII of Norway and his son Crown Prince Olav and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands.

## **Royal Security**

As Britain faced the threat of invasion and the bombing raids began, the safety of the Royal Family had to be considered. The Queen's much quoted reply to suggestions that the family should flee was: "The children could not go without me, I could not possibly leave the King, and the King would never go". Instead, the Princesses were moved to Royal Lodge at Windsor and then to Windsor Castle itself.

Security at Buckingham Palace was surprisingly slack. The air-raid shelter used by the King and Queen was the same as that used by the rest of the household: the housemaids' basement sitting-room. The Coates Mission was established to protect the royal family and the King also had shooting ranges laid down in the gardens of the Palace and Windsor Castle. The Queen took instruction in firing a revolver.

## **The Coates Mission**

The Coates Mission was known as such because it was commanded by Major J S Coates, Coldstream Guards. He was instructed to guard the King and Queen and in an emergency, to escort the Royal Family to a place of safety - one of three large country houses: Madresfield Court in Worcester; Pitchford Hall in Shropshire; and Newby Hall, Yorkshire.

The Coldstream Company would move directly to the house selected and prepare its defence. The two troops of armoured cars would convey the King, Queen and Princesses to the house. The codeword for the invasion and the move was "Cromwell".

## **Bombing**

When the bombing of London started, the King and Queen moved from Buckingham Palace to Windsor Castle and travelled to London daily. An enclosed Humber passenger armoured car was provided for their use. It was so cramped and uncomfortable that this was discarded for an ordinary car until a new bullet-proof limousine was produced which was driven to

Sandringham in November 1940. The Royal Family always had gas masks and steel helmets with them.

The King and Queen spent much time visiting the bomb sites. The King arrived in naval uniform and the Queen in pastel-coloured clothes. Often they turned up completely unexpected. At these times they forged a very close bond with the people.

On 13 September 1940, the King and Queen themselves were bombed. An enemy bomber-pilot flew straight up the Mall and dropped six bombs on the Palace as the King was in his sitting-room. The Queen is remembered for saying: "I'm glad we've been bombed, it makes me feel I can look the East End in the face". Altogether, Buckingham Palace was bombed nine times during the war.

## **Sandringham**

When the Royal Family went to Sandringham, the Coates Mission took over their protection. Sandringham House was shut and the King and Queen occupied Appleton House on the estate; it had a large concrete bunker constructed for their safety but it seems that it was never used. The Mission was based in York Cottage.

The first occasion the Coates Mission went to Sandringham was from 8th - 23rd April 1941. The main danger was from airborne attack or a raid to capture the Sovereign. During the day a standing patrol kept watch from a nearby watertower. At night a platoon was dug in round the house and patrolled the area. Another platoon slept clothed and ready for action.

The King and Queen took a great interest in the welfare of the Company. The Royal Family regularly asked the officers to dine with them at Appleton House and at the end of their service they had drinks with the men in York Cottage. It was this occasion that the King referred to them as his "Private Army".

## **Queen Mary**

Queen Mary adjusted to living in the country at Badminton. During air raids she descended to the shelter with other members of the household, where she would sit immaculately dressed doing the crossword puzzle. Eventually, she refused to even use the shelter. She was worried, however, about being captured by the Nazis and so arrangements had been made to fly her to a secret destination if the Germans were to invade. She kept three suitcases permanently packed and a fourth suitcase for her jewels was to be packed at the last moment. Queen Mary was very strict about observing all wartime regulations concerning food, heating and clothing. She established a "wooding squad" which served to clear the grounds and strip down any ivy which the Queen Dowager disliked.

Sometimes she served tea in a canteen to a row of astonished soldiers and sailors. She also gave lifts to any servicemen she passed on the road. A number of her passengers told her that their friends at camp would never believe that they had been in the same car as Queen Mary and so she had a number of small metal medallions bearing her royal cipher and crown made and one of these was presented to anyone to whom she had given a lift.

## Rationing

The King and Queen also suffered hardships during the war and the Palace became rather uncomfortable. The rooms were large but very cold as the wartime restrictions on heat, water and food were strictly observed. When the bombing shattered the window panes the glass was replaced with wood and isinglass. Only one bulb was allowed in each bedroom and rooms had only a small electric heater. A black line was painted round the bathtub to show the amount of water allowed to be used. The most valuable possessions were taken away for safe-keeping. Maintenance work was kept to a minimum and buckets were placed beneath drips from leaking roofs.

Food was served from gold and silver dishes but was very simple and included typical wartime meals of dehydrated and reconstituted eggs, puddings and jams made of root vegetables, rissoles consisting mostly of mashed potato. However, the Royal Estates of Sandringham and Balmoral boasted plenty of game and it is claimed that something like eighty rabbits were sent to Windsor each week. At Sandringham the lawns had been given over to oats and rye, the golf course to potatoes and the flowerbeds to beetroot and parsnips

Conditions on the Royal train were much the same with a black line round the baths and rationed food. The Royal couple travelled for thousands of miles by train for official duties. They ate and slept on the train and each night it was connected up with the national telephone system. Photographs of the war years show the Queen wearing the same dresses time after time.

## The Princesses

During night time bomb raids, the Princesses put on their siren suits, picked up their gas masks and Iron Rations and carried their ready-packed suitcases and made their way along dark, damp passageways to their dungeon shelter. Each night at bedtime the Queen insisted that the Princesses filled in their diaries.

Like other children, the Princesses rolled bandages and knitted scarves and socks for the troops and as girl guides they continued their activities throughout the war and even camped out with their troop overnight.

In October 1940, during Children's Hour on the BBC, the 14 year old Princess Elizabeth made a five-minute broadcast to "the children of the Empire". At the end of the broadcast, the Princess said: "My sister is by my side, and we are both going to say goodnight to you. Come on, Margaret" and the 10 year old Margaret piped up: "Goodnight and good luck to you all."

During the war, Princess Elizabeth was maintaining and developing a close relationship with Prince Philip of Greece. He was five years older than her and they had first met during a royal visit to the Naval College at Dartmouth before the war. Over the war years, they wrote "cousinly" letters to each other and he was occasionally invited to stay at Windsor whilst on leave. However, Elizabeth's parents believed that she was too young for marriage yet.

## **Princess Elizabeth's War Effort**

In the spring of 1945, the King gave way to Princess Elizabeth's desire to be allowed to join one of the women's services. She attended the ATS training centre for drivers at Camberley. She registered as No 230873, Second Subaltern Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor. She was issued with the regulation khaki uniform and peaked cap.

Princess Elizabeth did not sleep at the depot but returned to Windsor each night for work on Constitutional Law and Politics. However, she did take her turn as duty officer, doing inspections and maintaining vehicles. She learnt how to strip and service an engine, change wheels, read a map and drive in convoy. She ate in the Officers' Mess each day where the diet consisted of horsemeat and soggy greens and pilchards in tomato sauce, although she did have a small jug of condensed milk which was a treat that nobody else enjoyed. The Princess passed her final test as her parents watched and then drove her company commander up from Aldershot through the thick of London's traffic to Buckingham Palace.

## **The End of the War**

When the war finally ended in May 1945, the King and Queen were plunged into a round of victory celebrations. They appeared on the royal balcony with their daughters and Winston Churchill in response to the cheers of the crowds and everyone sang "For he's a jolly good fellow".