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Queen Elizabeth II

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longest-serving monarch

Understand Queen Elizabeth II's
impact on the modern world

See the intricacies of the
UK's political structure

Stewart Ross

Award-winning British author



Queen Elizabeth II

by Stewart Ross

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Queen Elizabeth II For Dummies®

Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, www.wiley.com

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Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2022932770

ISBN: 978-1-119-85034-2 (pbk); ISBN: 978-1-119-85035-9 (ebk); ISBN: 978-1-119-85036-6 (ebk)

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
About This Book	1
Foolish Assumptions	3
Icons Used in This Book	3
Beyond the Book	4
Where to Go from Here	4
PART 1: THE ROAD TO THE THRONE	5
CHAPTER 1: Queen Elizabeth II: A Global Icon	7
Carrying the Weight of History	9
Heading up a monarchy 1,500 years in the making.....	9
Ruling the jig-saw kingdom	11
Being one of the precious few queens.....	13
Following in the Footsteps of Grandpa and Daddy	16
George V	17
George VI	17
Wearing Many Different Hats	18
Ruling in theory	18
Running the family firm	19
And Being a Mum, Too	20
The Secrets of Elizabeth’s Success	21
She’s been queen for a long time	21
Her style has evolved and adapted.....	21
She uses more carrot than stick	22
She’s nothing if not discreet.....	23
CHAPTER 2: Triumph of Compromise: Constitutional Monarchy	25
From Tribal Leader to King of England.....	27
Settling down with the Anglo-Saxons.....	27
Uniting through adversity	29
Ruling by Divine Right?	32
Losing my religion: Henry VIII’s church reforms	33
Entering the first Elizabethan Age.....	35
Finding Mary (Queen of Scots).....	35
Becoming a republic	36
Establishing a Constitutional Monarchy.....	37
Choosing absolutism or republicanism?	38
Bringing about revolution	38

	Appointing a newcomer	40
	Learning with George: what monarchs shouldn't do	41
	American Republic, French Republic – Britain next?	42
CHAPTER 3:	Victoria: The Queen Who Defined an Era	43
	The Monarchs Who Came Before Victoria	44
	The Young Queen	45
	Along Comes Albert.	46
	How Albert helped the British monarchy.	47
	The royal network	48
	From Monarch to Empress	49
	Victoria Gives Way to Parliament	50
	Britain's New Empire.	51
	Death, despair, and republicanism.	52
	Celebrating Victoria's Jubilees	53
	Golden Jubilee, 1887	53
	Diamond Jubilee, 1897	54
	After Victoria.	54
	Edward VII: A playboy king.	55
	George V: A dull king for a difficult time.	55
CHAPTER 4:	The Birth of a Princess	57
	Bertie: The Stammering Second Son	58
	Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon: A Suitable Match	58
	Princess Lilibet is Born	60
	Baby Betty steals the limelight	62
	Grandma knows best	62
	A sister is born	63
	Educating a princess	64
CHAPTER 5:	Edward VIII: The King Who Abdicated	65
	Edward Prince of Wales	66
	A Populist Prince	67
	Edward's other education	67
	A trial run	68
	Enter Wallis Simpson	68
	Accession and Abdication	69
	Act I: October 1936	71
	Act II: November 1936	72
	Act III: December 1936	73
CHAPTER 6:	Preparing for the Throne	75
	Bertie Steps up to the Plate	75
	Peeking out from behind the glass curtain	77
	Building up to war	78
	Choosing a premier.	80

The Royals at War	82
Royalty on rations	83
Working towards victory	84
Sharing hardship	84
The princesses at war	85
Countdown to the Crown	87
Reaching out to the Commonwealth	88
Courting Philip of Greece	89
Living the family life	90
PART 2: THE YOUNG QUEEN	93
CHAPTER 7: Coronation: ‘I Present Unto You Queen Elizabeth’	95
An Occasion of Pomp and Ceremony	96
Glamour in Westminster Abbey	96
The glory of the Crown Jewels	99
Mixing family and politicians on the guest list	99
A Day to Remember	100
CHAPTER 8: The Queen Goes to Work	101
Working Daily as a Dutiful and Diligent Monarch	102
Dressing the part	103
Heading to work	104
Ploughing through the paperwork	105
Relaxing with some downtime	106
Acting as a Political Figure	107
Understanding the relationship between the Crown and Parliament	107
Meeting with the prime minister	108
Hosting heads of state	109
Carrying On with a Continuous Round of Visits and Ceremonial Duties	110
Touring her realm: visiting, opening, and launching	111
Running ‘The Firm’: the Windsor family business	111
CHAPTER 9: Back-up: The Royal Household	113
At Home With the Windsors	114
Crown properties	114
The Duchy of Cornwall	115
Private Properties	116
Are You Being Served? Meeting the Royal Household	116
The five key departments of the household	117
The power behind the throne: the Private Secretary’s Office	119
Working for the Royal Family	120

CHAPTER 10: The Globe-trotting Monarch	121
Taking Those All-important First Steps	122
Travelling Around the World 42 Times (Without a Passport)	124
Touring the Commonwealth of Nations	125
Understanding the Commonwealth's role	126
Drawing the crowds and spreading joy	127
Bowling them over: Elizabeth and the Aussies	127
The Saviour of the Commonwealth?	128
Acting As a Royal Ambassador	128
Forging special relationships: Elizabeth and America's presidents	130
Boosting trade	131
Passing the baton to other royals	132
Using Planes, Trains and Automobiles	132
Royal coaches	132
Royal cars	133
The royal train	134
The royal yacht	134
Royal flight	135
 CHAPTER 11: The Queen Mother	137
Creating a New Role for the Former Empress	137
Sharing the Queen's Duties	139
Flying the royal flag	139
Remaining the Queen's mother (not just the Queen Mother) ..	140
Flipping the Coin: The Other Side of the Queen Mother	141
Sharing Royal Duties Around the Family	142
Out and about with Charles and Anne	142
Remaining a working family	143
 PART 3: THE NEED TO ADAPT	145
 CHAPTER 12: Times They Are a-Changing	147
Witnessing Britain's Waning Influence in the World	147
No longer ruling an empire	148
No longer ruling the waves	149
No longer ruling the Middle East	149
No longer ruling Africa	150
Joining the European Economic Community	151
Surviving Gossip, Constitutional Complications, and Political Scandal	153
Philip's solo world tour	153
The princess and the politician	155
Political shenanigans	156
Saying farewell to Winston	158

Ruling Through the Swinging Sixties	159
Satire and the establishment	159
Elvis and four boys from Liverpool	160
Changing social attitudes	162
Being Stuck in a Time Warp?	162
Malcolm Muggeridge	162
John Grigg	163
John Osbourne	163
Reactions from the monarchists	163
CHAPTER 13: Margaret: Elizabeth’s Troubled Sister	165
Looking at the Early Life of the Lively One	166
Becoming the All-singing, All-dancing Playgirl	166
Falling in Love	168
Introducing Group Captain Peter Townsend	168
Calling it off	170
. . . And (Eventually) Getting Married	171
Being the odd one out	172
Finally . . . a marriage	173
Heading Downhill: Sex, Drink, and Cigarettes	174
Divorce and depression	174
(Just about) Remaining a dutiful royal	175
Margaret’s final years	176
CHAPTER 14: The Royal Response to Criticism	177
The Raising of Charles and Anne	178
Prince Charles at school and beyond	178
Princess Anne grabs the headlines	179
Heading Towards the 1960s	181
Welcoming Two New Boys to the Family	182
Prince Andrew	182
Prince Edward	183
Living With Unsavory Rumours	184
Living with the Labour Party	185
Opening Up to the World (A Little)	186
The <i>Royal Family</i> documentary	187
The Investiture of Charles	187
The continued need for a little mystery	188
CHAPTER 15: Celebrating 25 Years: The Silver Jubilee	189
Britain’s Difficult Decade: The 1970s	189
Dealing with trouble and strife	192
Finding reasons to be cheerful	193
Keeping Calm and Carrying On	194

Planning Elizabeth's Jubilee	196
Entering Jubilee Year	197
Celebrating in June 1977	199
PART 4: STORMY WATERS	201
CHAPTER 16: The Tragedy of Charles and Diana	203
Stepping Out With Charles	204
Charles's first girlfriends	204
Charles's number one: Camilla Shand	206
Introducing Lady Diana	207
The early life of Lady Diana	207
Charles and Diana get engaged	209
The Marriage of Charles and Diana	210
Building up to the big day	210
Worrying moments of the wedding	211
Going Steady: The First Few Years of Marriage	212
Heading off on honeymoon	212
Protecting Diana from the press	213
The birth of Prince William	213
The Birth of Prince Harry	214
Fulfilling Royal Duties Together	215
Troubling times beneath the surface	215
Diana's affairs	217
The whispers get louder	218
Heading Towards the End of The Marriage	218
Remembering Diana's Final Year	220
CHAPTER 17: The Queen's Wealth and the Cost of the Monarchy	221
Understanding Royal Finances Over the Centuries	222
Introducing the Civil List	222
Mixing family and state funding	224
Reforming the System	225
Introducing the Sovereign Grant	226
The growing grant	227
Giving the family some extras	227
Totalling Up the Windsors' Wealth	228
Paying tax (on a voluntary basis)	228
Bowling to pressure	229
Estimating Royal Value For Money	230

CHAPTER 18: One Country, Two Women: The Age of Margaret Thatcher	233
Comparing Elizabeth and Margaret	234
The pragmatic Queen and her principled prime minister.	234
The mother and the schoolmarm working together ... for a while	235
Navigating Difficulties and Dangers	236
The assassination of Louis Mountbatten.	237
Rhodesia becomes Zimbabwe.	238
South African apartheid	240
The invasion of Grenada	241
Prince Andrew goes to war: The Falklands	242
Coalminers divide the nation ... and its rulers	243
More Bombings, a Wedding and a 60th Birthday.	244
CHAPTER 19: Defender of the Faith	247
Understanding the Long Relationship Between Crown and Church.	248
Stirring things up: The radical Tudors	248
Calming things down: The Anglican compromise.	249
Figuring out Elizabeth's Faith	251
Delivering the Christmas message	252
Talking religion.	253
Checking out Royal Chapels and Churches	253
Balmoral	254
Buckingham Palace	254
Sandringham	254
Windsor Castle	255
CHAPTER 20: Annus Horribilis	257
Staying Married is Hard to Do	258
What is a royal marriage?	258
The Windsor's complicated history of marriage	259
Following the Family's Progress	261
Charles: The tortured one	262
Anne: The gamechanger.	262
Andrew: 'Randy Andy'	263
Edward: The lost boy.	265
Watching a Royal Game Show	265
Smouldering Tension: Fire in Windsor Castle	267

PART 5: STEADYING THE SHIP	269
CHAPTER 21: ‘Long to Reign Over Us’: No Sign of Flagging	271
Negotiating the 1990s.....	272
Dwindling public deference.....	273
Surviving the songs and satire.....	274
The Death of Diana.....	275
Sunday, 31 August.....	275
Monday 1 September.....	276
Tuesday 2 September.....	276
Wednesday 3 September.....	276
Thursday 4 September.....	277
Friday 5 September.....	277
Saturday 6 September.....	278
The aftermath of Diana’s death.....	279
Ancient Monarchy meets New Labour.....	279
Celebrations and Bereavements.....	281
Elizabeth and Philip’s Golden Wedding.....	281
The death and funeral of Princess Margaret.....	282
The passing of the Queen Mother.....	282
A Queen’s Work is Never Done.....	283
Reacting to 9/11.....	283
Heading over to Eire.....	284
Going online.....	285
CHAPTER 22: The Queen’s Animal Friends	287
Horsing Around: The Princess and Her Ponies.....	288
Following royal equine tradition.....	288
Learning to ride.....	289
Being in the saddle.....	289
Breeding Equine Success.....	290
Backing the winners.....	292
Attending Royal Ascot.....	292
Her Majesty’s notable racehorse winners.....	294
Keeping Pets and Receiving Presents.....	294
The corgis.....	294
The dorgis.....	295
Exotic animals as gifts.....	295
Supporting Bloodsports.....	296
CHAPTER 23: The Golden and Diamond Jubilees	297
Celebrating 50 Years on the Throne: The Golden Jubilee.....	297
Making careful preparations.....	298
Dining with five prime ministers.....	299

Proving popular at party time	299
Lighting up the Empire State Building	300
Jaunting 40,000-miles around the world	300
Following In the Footsteps of Victoria: The Diamond Jubilee	300
Becoming re-dedicated to a life of service.	301
Falling (a little) flat	301
Planning for the Platinum Jubilee	302
Holding unprecedented popularity	303
Unique celebrations for a unique queen.	303
CHAPTER 24: Succession Secured	305
Entering a Brave New World	305
Becoming a Happier Family	307
Charles	307
Anne	308
Edward	308
Opening the London Olympics	309
Making Ripples on the Royal Pond	309
Andrew's murky goings-on.	310
Weathering recession and austerity.	311
Going Green: Environmental Efforts.	312
Exploring the Difficult Lives of William and Harry	313
The princes at their mother's funeral.	314
The steady one: William's education and service	315
The wild one: Harry, soldier and playboy.	316
Introducing Catherine Middleton	316
A new marriage for a new age.	317
Catherine's non-royal upbringing	318
Changing the Rules of Succession.	319
Updating the Monarchy In The New Century	319
Relaxing into the role	320
Welcoming George, Charlotte, and Louis to the family	320
CHAPTER 25: Home Alone	321
Living Without Philip	322
The Land Rover funeral	322
Tributes and complaints.	323
And Elizabeth?	323
Facing Britain's Current Big Issues	324
Austerity	325
Scottish independence.	325
Brexit.	326
BLM and culture wars.	328
COVID-19.	329

Going It Alone: Harry and Meghan	330
Marrying a TV star	330
Heading into American exile	332
Preparing For The Crown: King Charles III.	332
What Will History Make of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II?	334
Her reign was not without difficulties	334
She did her duty.	335
PART 6: THE PART OF TENS.	337
CHAPTER 26: Ten Prime Ministers Elizabeth has Worked With	339
Winston Churchill (1952–1955)	340
Harold Macmillan (1957–1963)	340
Harold Wilson (1964–1970, 1974–1976).	341
James Callaghan (1976–1979)	342
Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990)	342
John Major (1990–1997)	343
Tony Blair (1997–2007)	344
Gordon Brown (2007–2010).	345
David Cameron (2010–2016)	345
Boris Johnson (2019 to the time of writing).	345
CHAPTER 27: Ten Tricky Moments for Elizabeth.	347
Rumours of Prince Philip’s Infidelity (1948 onwards).	347
The Affair Between Princess Margaret and Peter Townsend (1952–1955)	348
Lord Altrincham Criticizes the ‘Priggish School Girl’ (1957)	350
The Unwise Appointment of Lord Home as Prime Minister (1963)	351
Dismissal Crisis: The Governor-General Sacks Australia’s Prime Minister (1975)	352
Michael Fagan Sneaks Into the Queen’s Bedroom (1982).	353
A New Biography Reveals Criticism of Prince Charles’s Upbringing (1994)	353
The Palace is Slow to Capture the Public Mood on Princess Diana’s death (1997)	354
Prince Charles Says he is ‘Impatient’ to Succeed to the Throne (2012).	355
President Trump Pats the Queen on the Back (2019)	355
CHAPTER 28: Ten Royal Portrayals	357
Jeanette Charles in <i>Austin Powers in Goldmember</i> (2002).	357
Helen Mirren in <i>The Queen</i> (2006)	358
Barbara Flynn in <i>The Queen</i> docu-drama (2009)	359
Freya Wilson in <i>The King’s Speech</i> (2010).	360

Emma Thompson in <i>Walking the Dogs</i> (2012)	360
Sarah Gadon in <i>A Royal Night Out</i> (2015)	361
Penelope Wilton in <i>The BFG</i> (2016)	361
Claire Foy in <i>The Crown</i> (2016–2017).	362
Olivia Coleman in <i>The Crown</i> (2019–2020).	363
Imelda Staunton in <i>The Crown</i> (2022).	364
CHAPTER 29: Ten Grandchildren and Great-Grandchildren	365
Prince William, Duke of Cambridge	366
Prince George of Cambridge	367
Princess Charlotte	368
Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex.	368
Princess Beatrice	370
Princess Eugenie of York	370
James Mountbatten-Windsor, Viscount Severn	371
Lady Louise Mountbatten-Windsor	371
Peter Phillips	372
Zara Tindall.	372
INDEX	373

Introduction

The subject of this book is one of the most memorable figures in recent world history, one of the very few who have become a legend in their own lifetime. This is all the more remarkable because Queen Elizabeth II did not seek power and influence, nor did she force her way onto the world stage through ambition or vanity. She inherited a job she had not asked for, and – because she sees it as her duty – she performs it with exemplary diligence, and has done so for over seventy years.

Whether or not you approve of the institution of hereditary monarchy is beside the point. Elizabeth did not have any say in the matter – she was dealt a hand and told to get on with it. So she did. It took her close to the very heart of things, meeting Winston Churchill, Jack Kennedy, Nelson Mandela . . . being there when the Berlin Wall went up and when it came down . . . witnessing the tragedies of her sister Margaret and Princess Diana. As you will discover, the story of Elizabeth’s life is the story of the modern world.

About This Book

To help you make sense of Elizabeth’s life, especially if you come from outside the UK, I have included a fair slice of British history and stuff about Britain’s byzantine unwritten constitution. I have also done my best to be objective in coverage and judgements, though I hope not to the point of blandness. I want you to enjoy using this book as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

Throughout the book, I’ve used UK English – the Queen’s English! Among other things, you may spot more uses of the letter “u” in words than you’re used to, and “s” and “z” popping up in unusual places (if you’re from the US). I feel it is important to write about Elizabeth in her own nation’s version of our language.

When there are so many books, websites, blogs, podcasts, and so on, dealing with Queen Elizabeth II, what does *Queen Elizabeth II For Dummies* offer that's unique, making it stand out from the crowd? Here's an insight into my approach:

- » **A neutral read.** Unlike many authors approaching Elizabeth II, I have no axe to grind, no political point to prove. I don't believe she's a saint or a sinner, just an ordinary yet extraordinary human being. I give you the whole picture, warts and all.
- » **A non-chronological read.** What makes this book so useful, like all *For Dummies* titles, is the way it is organized for reference *and* for a pleasant read. You can dip in, check out a fact or a topic, and dip out again; or you can relax and read through a whole chapter or two.
- » **An easy-to-understand read.** To help the user, *Queen Elizabeth II For Dummies* uses handy icons, regular explanations of complex issues (I highlight these explanations with the use of *italic text*), sidebars about interesting-but-not-essential subjects, and the helpful use of bullet points.
- » **A humorous read.** Life is nothing without a smile – wherever possible, I've tried to handle the subject with wit and precision, pointing out the oddities and quirks that festoon the British monarchy.

Several places in the book have links to web addresses. If you're reading a digital version on a device connected to the internet, you can click the web address to access the site directly, like this: www.dummies.com. Alternatively, you can type the address into your browser.

To make the content of *Queen Elizabeth II For Dummies* more accessible, I have divided it into six parts:

- » **Part 1: The Road to the Throne** places Elizabeth's early life in the context of the evolution of Britain's constitutional monarchy.
- » **Part 2: The Young Queen** covers Elizabeth's coronation, her early years on the throne, and the daily life of a working royal.
- » **Part 3: The Need to Adapt** looks at how Elizabeth slowly – and at times reluctantly – adapted the centuries-old institution of monarchy to the rapidly changing post-war world.
- » **Part 4: Stormy Waters** deals with the series of painful events that beset Elizabeth in the lead up to her *Annus Horribilis* of 1992.
- » **Part 5: Steadying the Ship** brings the bitter-sweet story of Elizabeth's reign to the present day, taking in joyful jubilees, painful losses, and hopes for the future.

» **Part 6: The Part of Tens** includes ten prime ministers Elizabeth has worked with, ten tricky situations she had to navigate, ten actors who have portrayed her on screen, and snapshots of ten of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Finally, if I may, a short blast on my own trumpet. I have been teaching and writing about history at all levels, from primary school to university, for half a century. This book is a distillation of years of practice in clarifying the complex – and I hope it works like that for you.

Foolish Assumptions

As I sat writing this book, I conjured up a picture of you, the reader, in my mind. How did I imagine you?

- » You have an enquiring mind about the British Royal Family.
- » You're interested in politics, current affairs, history – and probably a bit of gossip, too!
- » English (though not necessarily British English) is probably your first language. If it's not, then you're definitely fluent. This is not a book for the English-language beginner – unless you have bags of patience and a large dictionary.
- » You may well have watched the TV series *The Crown* or the film *The Queen*, and want to know more about what was going on and how much of it is true.

Recognize yourself? I hope so, because this book is for you.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, icons in the margins highlight certain types of valuable information that call out for your attention. Here are the icons you'll encounter, with a brief description of each.



TIP

Helpful insights and tips. I use these to draw your attention to a strange or uncertain point that I think will interest you, and personal insights from me.



REMEMBER

This is the key information within the book. If you take away nothing else from these pages but the stuff flagged by these icons, you'll have Queen Elizabeth II and her reign pretty well covered. To siphon off the most important information in each chapter, just skim through to these icons.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Non-essential stuff that is interesting but not vital to getting to grips with the Queen. I use these icons to indicate background material on British politics, history, tradition, or constitutional convention.



WARNING

Watch out! I use this icon to point out where fiction, especially in *The Crown*, drifts wide of fact for the sake of a good story, or to explain incidents that you may have heard about but are unsure how true they are. Myth is fun, but it can lead to serious or hurtful misunderstanding.

Beyond the Book

Queen Elizabeth is almost 100 years old, and the British history that created the monarchy she inherited is more than 1,500 years old. That's an awful lot of information, and I couldn't possibly shoehorn all I wanted into this book. Happily, beside the abundance of information and guidance within these pages, you can get access to even more help and information online. To check out this book's online Cheat Sheet, just go to www.dummies.com and search for "Queen Elizabeth II For Dummies Cheat Sheet".

Where to Go from Here

Though the structure of this book is roughly chronological, that doesn't mean it's designed to be read from start to finish like a story book. You can start anywhere you want, depending on what you're looking for or what you're interested in.

Let's take a few examples of where you might want to start, if you don't fancy rolling up your sleeves up and getting stuck into Chapter 1:

- » If you'd like to know a bit more about the relationship of Prince Charles with Princess Diana, dip into Chapter 16.
- » There's plenty on Prince Harry, his marriage to Meghan and their decision to opt out of royal duties in Chapters 24, 25 and 29.
- » What about Elizabeth's wealth? Try Chapter 17.
- » Find out about Elizabeth's religious faith in Chapter 19, or her love of horses, dogs and other animals in Chapter 22.

The detailed Table of Contents is also a good place to begin. And if you can't find what you want there, don't forget the index. Wherever you start, welcome to the extraordinary world of Queen Elizabeth II!

1

The Road to the Throne

IN THIS PART . . .

Queen Elizabeth II may not be as instantly recognizable as Lady Diana or Prince Harry, but without her no one would have even heard of Di or Harry. The nonagenarian monarch is the rock on whom rests every other current member of Britain's famous (and sometimes infamous) Royal Family.

That said, Queen Elizabeth does not stand alone. She is the latest in a line of kings and queens that stretches back into Britain's dim and distant past. From her ancestors she has inherited the glittering trappings of power, as well as customs, traditions and – most problematic of all – attitudes. The responsibilities these bring are enormous.

The Queen was not born into her current role. She was raised as a princess, but not as the future monarch. Only when her headstrong uncle chose love over the crown did her future suddenly change. Her father became king and she heir to his throne.

From that moment onward, it was only a matter of time.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Carrying the weight of history on her shoulders
- » Following in her family's footsteps
- » Being a multi-tasking Queen and mother
- » Understanding the secrets of Elizabeth's success

Chapter 1

Queen Elizabeth II: A Global Icon

Great Britain is the only country in the world without a name on its postage stamps. This is not just because Britain invented adhesive postage stamps with a 'we were here first' attitude when it comes to mail; it's also because Brits reckon an image is all that's needed for others to recognize where UK mail has come from.

The image is not a map, nor a man-made feature, nor an animal. It is a portrait of the *Head of State*, meaning Britain's reigning monarch. For almost three-quarters of a century, longer than any other person to hold the office, Great Britain's stamps have been adorned by the profile of Queen Elizabeth II.



REMEMBER

Since the time of Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547 – see the nearby sidebar to find out what 'r.' means), England's monarchs have been called 'Your Majesty'. The title had previously been used only for God. The weight of history grows heavier if we give the Queen her full title: 'Elizabeth II, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of her other realms and territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith.' That's quite a mouthful!

REIGNS AND LIVES

Dates prefaced by an 'r.' are the years of a monarch's reign. Dates given without an 'r.' are the years of a person's life or an event. A single date preceded by a 'b.' is the year a person was born.



TIP

The inheritance is as daunting as the job title. As we get to grips with what makes Elizabeth tick, bear in mind that she sees herself as a sort of athlete in a relay race. The royal baton was handed to her by her father (see Chapters 5 and 6); her job is to hand it on intact to her heir. That, above all, is what drives her.



REMEMBER

Throughout this book, you'll encounter Elizabeth's extended family, heirs, and line of succession. Check out Figure 1-1 for a diagram explaining who's who in the modern Royal Family (and flick back to this page as you're reading through the book – I honestly don't expect you to memorize this sort of thing!).

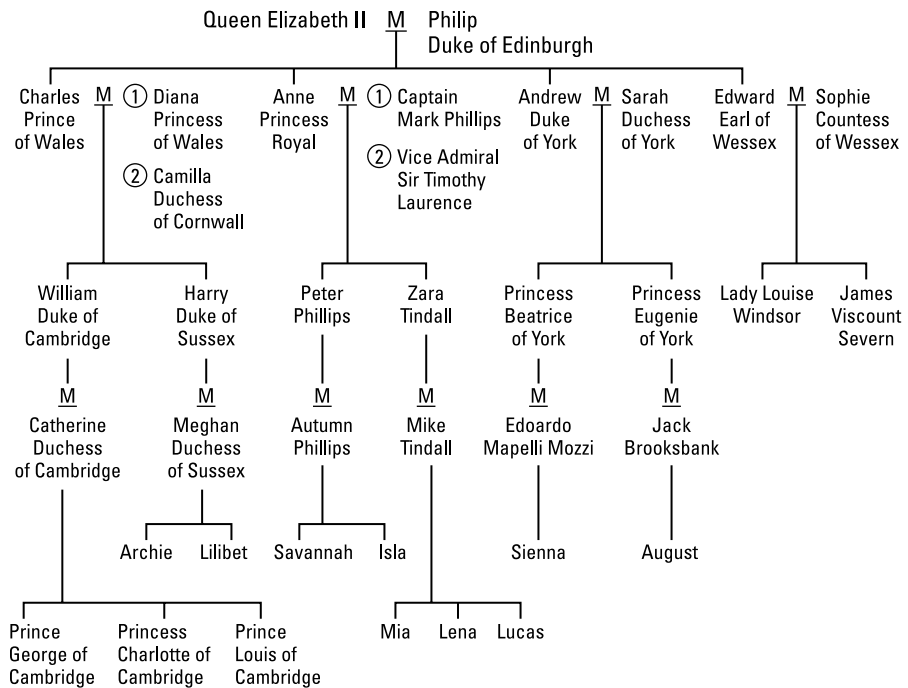


FIGURE 1-1: Queen Elizabeth II's family tree.

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This chapter looks more closely at the Queen's historic inheritance and the range of work involved in trying to maintain it. It concludes with a few suggestions as to why, showing stoic toughness and blessed with not a little luck, in most people's opinion by the time of her Platinum Jubilee (2022), she had made a fair fist of it.

Carrying the Weight of History

Queen Elizabeth's paternal grandmother, Queen Mary, sometime Empress of India, was an impressive figure. She demanded that Elizabeth curtsy whenever they met, and instructed her awestruck grandchild that kings and queens never smiled in public.

Though no academic, Queen Mary was a keen historian. Her specialization was genealogy, specifically the genealogy of her family. Born in 1867, she clearly remembered Queen Victoria (r. 1837–1901) and proudly recalled how King George III (r. 1760–1820) was her great-grandfather (find out more about these monarchs in Chapter 3). From this austere figure of her impressionable childhood years, Elizabeth was left in no doubt as to the weighty significance of her royal heritage.



Perhaps appropriately, in 1913, Britain's latest armour-plated battlecruiser was named after Queen Mary. It lasted less well than its namesake, exploding and sinking during the Battle of Jutland, 1916, in World War I.

You can read more about Queen Mary in Chapter 4.

Heading up a monarchy 1,500 years in the making

Elizabeth was born in 1926. Though Britain had been severely shaken by the bloodletting and vast expenditure of World War I (1914–1918), during the years of the Princess' childhood it was still a major world power. Its industry and commerce were formidable. The sprawling British empire – the largest the world had ever seen – remained more or less intact. If self-governing Dominions (see Chapter 10) were included, it stretched from New Zealand via India and large swathes of Africa to northern Canada.

That a country less than half the size of Texas should achieve so much was a source of national pride. This was reflected in the history taught to the young Elizabeth by family members and tutors (see Chapter 4 for more on her early life). She learned that, though there had been setbacks, British history was generally a

story of progress. And a number of worthy monarchs had sometimes been part of that progress.

Here are a few of the more important ones she may have been told about:

- » **Alfred the Great (r. 871–899):** The doughty King of Wessex (an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in southwest England) who resisted and then overcame an invasion by barbaric Vikings.
- » **William the Conqueror (r. 1066–1087):** The Duke of Normandy in northern France who seized the English throne, thereby paving the way for his country to become a major European power.
- » **Henry V (r. 1413–1422):** A warrior king whose victory over the French at the Battle of Agincourt (1415) inspired William Shakespeare's memorable patriotic verses.
- » **Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547):** A ruthless patriot who freed England from papal (Catholic) interference and put himself at the head of the Church of England.
- » **Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603):** A potential role model for Elizabeth II (though she denied it!) who demonstrated how a queen could reign as competently as any king.
- » **Charles II (r. 1660–1685):** A highly intelligent king with an innate political sense who guided the monarchy through a tricky post-republican era.
- » **Victoria (r. 1837–1901):** Elizabeth's great-great-grandmother whose reign laid the foundations of Britain's modern constitutional monarchy.

As well as these stand-out characters, the young Elizabeth would probably have found out about a whole host of others. A good many were pretty average. She can't have imagined enjoying a tea party with the ineffective Henry VI (r. 1422–1461) or the oddly named Harthacnut (r. 940–942). Nor with George I, who spoke scarcely any English. And poor Edward V (r. 1485) wasn't on the throne long enough to take tea with anyone. (Not that the Brits knew what tea was back then.)

Did the Princess thrill at the martial exploits of the warrior king Edward III (r. 1327–1377)? Was she fascinated by the idea that monarchs, like her doting but grumpy grandfather George V (r. 1910–1936), were placed on the throne by God, as propounded by James I of England (r. 1603–1625; aka King James VI of Scotland)? Maybe some of the tales she heard gave her nightmares. According to Shakespeare, the source of all the best stories of medieval skullduggery, Richard II (r. 1377–1399) was slain with an axe, John (r. 1199–1216) was poisoned by a monk, and Richard III (r. 1483–1485) had two little princes murdered in the Tower of London.



TIP

The sovereigns I've mentioned are by no means a complete list and the details offered are scanty. Don't worry, we'll meet them again in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3. They are here simply to illustrate the enormous weight of history that bore down on Elizabeth's shoulders the moment she knew she was destined to wear the Crown. Whatever she thought of the long line of kings and queens who came before her, she was their heir and could never, ever forget it.

She owed it to them, and to history, not to mess things up.

Ruling the jig-saw kingdom

Non-Brits frequently refer to Elizabeth II as Queen of England. Though this is not wrong, it is incomplete. The reason why becomes apparent when scrolling down the list of countries that springs up automatically when completing an online form. After searching in vain for 'England' or even 'Britain', down among the 'U's one finds 'United Kingdom' between 'United Arab Emirates' and 'United States'. In the British Isles, Elizabeth is Queen of the United Kingdom, a jig-saw realm.



REMEMBER

Even Brits get confused by this one! The 'British Isles' is a geographical name for a group of 6,000+ islands off northwest Europe. The two largest are Britain (made up of the countries of England, Scotland and Wales) and Ireland. The 'United Kingdom' is the European bit of Elizabeth II's realm. It comprises England, Scotland and Wales, plus the province of Northern Ireland.

Like many countries, the United Kingdom started small and expanded over time. Between the years 43 and 410, England and Wales (but not Scotland or Ireland) were part of the Roman Empire. After the Romans left, the British Isles split up into a number of tribal units.

By the sixth century AD, some tribal chiefs were calling themselves kings, and may even have taken the title *Bretwalda* ('Britain ruler'). The title didn't mean much because England, let alone all Britain, was nowhere near a single kingdom, but it certainly made them sound more impressive.

The United Kingdom's jig-saw came together in four steps of unity:

- » In the ninth century AD, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex fought back against Viking invaders from Scandinavia. Bit by bit, they added Viking and Anglo-Saxon territories to their realm until, by the time of King Athelstan (r. 895–939), all England lay within a single kingdom. Athelstan is Elizabeth II's thirtieth great-granduncle.

- » The *Normans* (meaning ‘Northmen’ from Normandy in modern-day France) conquered England in 1066 and then Ireland in the late twelfth century. With two of its four constituent parts in place, the United Kingdom was now half-way there. The English and Irish parliaments were amalgamated in 1801.
- » Wales was conquered by Edward I (r. 1277–1307) in the thirteenth century. To placate the Welsh, who had – and still have – their own ancient language, King Edward ‘gave’ them his infant son to be ‘Prince of Wales’. The title has been given to the heir apparent ever since (see the nearby sidebar). It currently belongs to Prince Charles, Elizabeth’s eldest son. With the addition of Wales, the United Kingdom was three-quarters complete.
- » Scotland took a long time to pull together its scattered and mountainous territories into a single kingdom, and finished the process only with the acquisition of the Orkney and Shetland Isles in 1472. The 1503 marriage of James IV (supposedly a distant ancestor of mine, r. 1488–1513) to a sister of England’s Henry VIII, laid the foundations for the union of the two crowns. This came about when Scotland’s James VI succeeded Queen Elizabeth to become James I of England. Full political union of England and Scotland followed in 1707.

But, of course, this is no more than a snapshot of the complex history of the United Kingdom! (See Chapter 2 for more details on the backstory of the British monarchy.)



WARNING

Readers with Irish ancestry may already know that the union outlined above did not last. In 1921, Southern Ireland (also known as Eire or the Republic of Ireland) left the UK after years of tension and bloodshed. As a result, Elizabeth is Queen of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. During her reign, more Irish troubles and a Scottish independence movement further threatened the unity of her realm (see Chapters 15 and 21).

WHAT’S AN HEIR APPARENT?

The person in line to succeed a monarch on their death or abdication is their *heir*. The *heir apparent*, traditionally a first-born son, is someone whose right to succeed cannot be taken away by the birth of someone else. An *heir presumptive*, often a first-born female or a cousin of the monarch, is an heir whose right to succeed is lost on the birth of a more eligible child.

Being one of the precious few queens



REMEMBER

Britain has had dozens of queens, but Elizabeth II is only the eighth to reign in her own right. The others acquired their status through marriage. For example, Elizabeth II's mother, born Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, became Queen Elizabeth when her husband inherited the throne as George VI in 1936. You can read more about the Queen's mum (unsurprisingly known later in life as, 'The Queen Mum', in Chapter 11).



TIP

The first monarch of a particular name is not given a number until a second person of that name takes the throne. Therefore, the first Queen Elizabeth (mentioned earlier in this chapter) was not Queen Elizabeth I until 1952, when the second Elizabeth came into her royal inheritance. Note that Miss Bowes-Lyon morphed into plain 'Queen Elizabeth', not Queen Elizabeth II. She was the King's *consort* (partner). Britain gives numbers only to monarchs who have reigned and not to their partners.

There are, therefore, two categories of queen:

- » *Queens consort*, who are married partners of kings.
- » *Queens regnant*, who are monarchs ruling by birthright.

Let's look more closely at these two queenly types.

Queens consort

All of Britain's monarchs were expected to marry, whether or not they liked the idea. It was basically in the job description. Some, such as Edward II (r. 1307–1327), did not and drew down the wrath of conservatives for openly favouring male friends. Others made multiple marriages. The best-known example is Henry VIII, whose rhyming 'divorced-beheaded-died-divorced-beheaded-survived' summary of the fate of his six wives is one of the few bits of monarchical history popular with school kids.



TIP

Royal marriage had a triple purpose:

- » **Providing a legitimate heir.** This gave the monarch pride in their dynastic prowess (because the ruling family's position had been secured) and removed the grim prospect of a disputed succession. British history is strewn with conflict between rivals for the Crown. The prime example is the so-called Wars of the Roses (1461–1487), when descendants of Edward III – the Lancastrians (using the symbol of a red rose) and the Yorkists (using the symbol of a white rose) – fought each other almost to extinction.

It is unlikely that the House of Windsor (Windsor is the Queen's family name) would have resorted to armed struggle if Queen Elizabeth, her son Prince Charles, or grandson Prince William had failed to produce an heir. Nevertheless, all three clearly took pride in their ability to fulfil their royal heir-making role.

- » **Facilitating and cementing political alliances.** Royal marriages were usually political arrangements. A good example is the marriage of Henry VIII's sister Margaret to Scotland's King James VI. The union initially failed to stop the two nations from going to war with each other, but it did eventually lead to the union of the two crowns in 1603. (See Chapter 2 for more about the tricky history of these two nations.)
- » **Providing a church-sanctioned outlet for royal sexual desires.** This was the least successful aspect of royal marriages. Adherence to a single partner is not something for which British monarchs (and their families) are renowned. Until relatively recently, royal mistresses were a lively feature of the court. The ten-year, four-child relationship between mistress Arabella Churchill and the future James II (r. 1685–1688) was the launch pad for one of Britain's most famous non-royal families (both Winston and his illustrious military ancestor John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough).

Numerous queens consort made their understandable disappointment at their husband's philandering abundantly clear, usually to no effect. Others simply accepted it as par for the course and hoped their loyalty would be rewarded in heaven. Some, showing an altogether more modern outlook, determined to make the most of their consort role. For example:

- » **Eleanor of Aquitaine**, a duchess in her own right whose lands added substantially to the empire of Henry II (r. 1154–1189), refused to play second fiddle to her ambitious, notoriously unfaithful husband, and even encouraged her sons to rebel against him.
- » **Queen Margaret of Anjou**, rather than her feeble husband Henry VI (r. 1422–1461), was the fulcrum of royal power during his troubled reign.
- » **Queen Henrietta Maria**, consort of Charles I (r. 1625–1649), wielded political and even military power during England's Civil War (1642–1645).

Readers might be shocked by the treatment of many queens consort, especially as their taking a lover was treated very differently from their husband's. While George I made no secret of his two mistresses – known behind his back as 'The Maypole' and 'The Elephant' – he divorced his wife and locked her up in a castle for the last 30 years of her life because of her alleged affair with a German count.