

A History



of Royal

Britain



in 100



Objects

Gill Knappett



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Introduction

The visual timeline of *A History of Royal Britain in 100 Objects* begins with Alfred the Great in the 9th century, journeying through to the 21st century and the reign of Elizabeth II. But how do you tell in just 100 objects this story that began over 1,150 years ago? What best represents the kings and queens who have ruled? And what constitutes an object?

Suffice to say, selecting the 100 was not an easy decision. Crowns, statues and coins are items that may spring immediately to mind, and they certainly have their place within these pages. But so too do golden coaches, castles, paintings, flags, letters, jewellery ... and much more besides; even the occasional photograph becomes the object itself in the desire to tell the intriguing royal tale.



James VI of Scotland/James I of England; an early 17th-century oil painting, attributed to John de Critz (c.1552–1642).

The history of royal Britain dates back even further than King Alfred, to the time when the Romans left these islands and warrior-chieftains ruled small kingdoms. England and Wales were forged from a fusion of Celtic/Roman Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the 5th and 6th centuries; around the same time, the kingdom of Scotland was emerging from a tribal contest between Picts, Scots, Britons and Angles.

Strengthening the tangled branches of the historic royal family tree are those who ruled as kings and queens in Scotland or as princes in Wales, each having their part to play. In 1284 the Principality was annexed to the English Crown; from 1603 the royal line of Scotland merged with that of England, since which time one monarch has reigned; in 1707 came the Act of Union which created the kingdom of Great Britain; the Act of Union in 1800 added the Kingdom of Ireland to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. It became customary for monarchs to be 'numbered' following the English system: Queen Elizabeth II, for example, is properly Queen Elizabeth I in Scotland.

The role of the sovereign has changed dramatically through the ages. But while the power of the Crown may have diminished over time, its symbolic majesty was extended in the 19th and 20th centuries through the British Empire and Commonwealth nations.

From the Anglo-Saxon Alfred the Great to the Normans and Plantagenets, through to the Tudors, the Stuarts and the House of Orange, the House of Hanover, the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha and onwards to the House of Windsor and Elizabeth II, there have been 57 men and women who have served as monarch. Among their numbers are those who were much loved and those who were similarly loathed; there have been heroes and villains, martyrs and murderers, the exulted and the exiled, the wise

and the foolish. For better or worse, each character has left their mark on their kingdom and their subjects.

Monarchs over the years have received varying levels of supports from their consorts, who often came to the role through diplomatic marriages. Some such unions were hugely successful, others disastrous, but there are also plenty of kings and queens who married for love, while a few did not marry at all. Many consorts left an important legacy, in some instances equally as strong as that of the person they married. Among the consorts remembered in their own right within the 100 objects in this book are: Margaret of Wessex, wife of Malcolm III of Scotland; Eleanor of Castile, queen to Edward I; Catherine of Aragon, the first of Henry VIII's six wives; and Queen Victoria's beloved Prince Albert. Part of royal history's legacy, too, is that of the English Commonwealth under Parliamentary rule, which warrants mention within these pages.



George III, who reigned for just under 60 years. This oil on canvas of the king in his coronation robes is by Allan Ramsay (1713–84) and hangs in the Green Drawing Room at Buckingham Palace.

Some rulers in the long line of succession were mere babies when they become monarch, others were in the late years of their lives. Some occupied the throne for no more

than a few months, others spent decades as sovereign. Six have reigned for over 50 years: Henry III, Edward III and James VI of Scotland/James I of England, George III, Queen Victoria and Elizabeth II – though William I of Scotland came close at 49 years. One king, George III, reigned for 59 years and 3 months but it is two queens who have lived to celebrate their Diamond Jubilees: Victoria and Elizabeth II. And Elizabeth II is the first to reach the milestone of a Platinum Jubilee – a remarkable 70-year reign.



The Duke and Duchess of Windsor in France in 1937. Formerly Edward VIII, the king gave up the throne to marry Mrs Wallis Simpson.

Some monarchs spoke little English; several chose not to spend much time in their kingdom, while others – including

James VI of Scotland/ James I of England – could hardly wait to arrive in London. There were those, such as Richard III, who seized the Crown, and those, like Henry VII, who won it on the battlefield. Charles I lost not only the Crown but also his head; the boy-king Edward V never held the Crown; Edward VIII rejected it in favour of the woman he loved; George VI wore it reluctantly but magnificently.

The power, function and duties of the monarchy have altered over the centuries, evolving with the times. So too have the rules regarding succession. Military leadership, once a vital part of kingship, made it relevant for the Crown to pass through the male line – from father to son, brother to brother, or, as in Scotland in the early Middle Ages, to the king's most respected kinsman. Today's order of succession is based on where each person is in line to the throne, regulated not only by that descent but also parliamentary statute. The grounds for succession were determined by the Bill of Rights (1689) and the Act of Settlement (1701). Until the 21st century, sons were always first in line to inherit the throne; only if a sovereign had no living son, or no grandchild through a son, would they be succeeded by a daughter. However, the 2013 Succession to the Crown Act changed all that; females born after 28 October 2011 cannot now be displaced in the line of succession by a male. The first generation this has applied to is that of the children of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Their first-born was a son anyway: Prince George, who is third in line to the throne. But their second child, Princess Charlotte,

would in previous times have been bumped in favour of the their third child, Prince Louis; as it stands, Charlotte is fourth in line and her younger brother fifth.

The 2013 Act also ended disqualification from the line of succession for those who marry a Roman Catholic, although a Roman Catholic remains excluded from ascending the throne. The Church has, of course, been a hot topic in British royal history for centuries, its nations almost ripped apart at times by the battleground of religious – and indeed political – division.

The monarchy has survived such divisions, along with centuries of war and bloodshed: war-torn medieval kingdoms and the Scottish Wars of Independence; relentless claims to empires in France which culminated in the Hundred Years' War; the Wars of the Roses; the 17th-century English Civil War; the horrors of the First and Second World Wars in the 20th century.

As well as wars, sovereigns have experienced many other life-changing events: great plagues and great fires, revolutions and reformations, economic and constitutional transformation. Some monarchs gave their names to the eras through which they lived, including Elizabeth I and Victoria, who saw the nation grow through exploration, investigation, innovation and achievement. All this, and more, has left its mark on the history of the nation and its people.

As the world changes, so too must the monarchy. Ancestry alone does not ensure its survival, but its proven

ability to move with the times contributes to its continuity – a role that involves hard work, earning respect and retaining ancient traditions that still stir the heart, the soul and the imagination.

The modern-day monarchy is ever-more under the spotlight of media intrusion. Elizabeth II has reigned in an age that continues to move swiftly through political shifts, cultural changes and technological advances. Through triumphs and disasters she has remained steadfast, her devotion to duty admired not only in the United Kingdom but also throughout the Commonwealth and wider world. Even in her nineties, Her Majesty carries out a busy, demanding role, supported increasingly by the senior members of the immediate Royal Family, in particular the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, the Princess Royal, and the Earl and Countess of Wessex.

The Queen's heir apparent, Prince Charles, will be next to take the throne, his concern for the planet and its people, his compassion and sense of duty an encouragement and reassurance for the future. He will be followed, in due course, by his son, Prince William. So while they are not yet kings, towards the end of this book we give acknowledgement to their roles yet to come, both of them strong threads in the fabric of our nation and the continuity of the British monarchy.



Looking to the future: Elizabeth II with the Prince of Wales, the Duchess of Cornwall, and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge at the Eden Project in Cornwall for the G7 summit, June 2021.

Statue of a Great Monarch

Alfred (reigned 871–99)

In the city of Winchester in Hampshire towers a fine statue of Alfred the Great. Alfred of Wessex – son of Ethelwulf, King of Wessex (reigned 839–856) and grandson of Egbert, King of Wessex (reigned 802–839) – was the most outstanding of all Anglo-Saxon monarchs and is the only ruler to have held the title 'Great'.

The kingdom of Wessex rose to power in the early 9th century; while the Vikings ravaged East Anglia and invaded Northumbria and Mercia, Wessex held out. Resistance to the Norsemen's onslaughts helped unite the kingdoms of Wales under Rhodri Mawr of Gwynedd (reigned 844–78) and Scotland under Kenneth MacAlpin (reigned 843–59).

Alfred learned the art of diplomacy and skill on the battlefield from his older brothers, Ethelbald, Ethelbert and Ethelred I, who all preceded him as King of Wessex. He came to the throne facing Viking invasion and in early 878, following a surprise attack, was forced to hide out in the marshlands near Athelney in Somerset. It was here that the legend of Alfred burning the cakes arose. Offered shelter from the enemy by a local woman, who thought he was a soldier, she put him in charge of minding the cakes that were cooking over the fire while she went about her other

chores. But Alfred became distracted – some versions of the story say while restringing his bow, some that he was planning his battle strategy, and others that he simply fell asleep. Whatever the reality, the cakes burned and the king was scolded by the woman.

Later that year, Alfred defeated the Danes at the Battle of Edington in Wiltshire. As a result, the king demanded that the Danish leader, Guthrum, be baptised in the Christian faith. The subsequent Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum set out the boundaries of their territories and the peaceful relations between their people, seen as the foundation of Danelaw. Alfred went on to recapture London from the Danes and reorganised the defence of his kingdom. When the Vikings struck again in 890, Wessex was ready and by 897 the Danes were defeated.

Alfred had made Winchester his royal capital. It is fitting, therefore, that his statue – commissioned to mark the 1,000th anniversary of his death in 1899 – is a landmark in the city, situated on The Broadway, close to the site where the medieval East Gate once stood. The 5-metre (17-foot) bronze, which stands on two granite bases with the simple engraving 'Ælfred', was the work of sculptor Sir Hamo Thornycroft RA (1850–1925). It was unveiled in 1901, two years later than intended but on a day of great celebration that was made a public holiday.

King Alfred stands proud, his shield an emblem of defence, his sword raised with the blade pointing down in

recognition of his greatness on the battlefield but also representing a cross in his role as a Christian.

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