

ROYAL  ESTATE  
Sandringham

# The life and times of King George VI



## Educational Resource

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# King George VI

Prince Albert Frederick Arthur George, later King George VI, was born on 14 December 1895 at York Cottage, Sandringham and baptised in St Mary Magdalene's Church Sandringham.

## The Early Years

Prince Albert (known as "Bertie" to his family and friends) was the second son of Prince George of York (later King George V) and Princess Mary. He was named Albert after his great Grandfather, the Prince Consort, whose death day was unfortunately the same date as the new Prince's birthday.

Bertie is said to have been bullied and over disciplined as a child. He was left-handed but forced to use his right and he suffered from knock knees, like his father and grandfather, and was forced to wear agonizing splints to try to correct the problem. He also endured life-long gastric problems and developed a stammer which was one of the banes of his existence. Bertie was the middle child in the family and was shy and prone to bursting into tears. He was rather afraid of his great Grandmother (Queen Victoria) and also of his Father but enjoyed spending time at Sandringham where "Grandpapa and Grannie", later King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, lived.

## Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon

Bertie seldom met children his own age, but one Christmas, Lady Leicester gave a children's party and Bertie was allowed to go. It was there that he met a pretty little girl called Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon. She gave him the glace cherry decorating her slice of iced cake.

The Honourable Elizabeth Angela Marguerite Bowes-Lyon was born on 4 August 1900 in London. She was descended from King Robert II of Scotland and spent an idyllic childhood within a large and loving family and among beautiful surroundings. She was to become an important part of Bertie's life and, indeed, of the lives of all of the British people.

## Naval College

Bertie and his elder brother "David" (later Edward VIII) were sent to naval college as their Father had been. They experienced problems with bullying and found it hard to fit in. Bertie was a slow pupil who usually came bottom of the class but by the time he started senior college he was learning to adjust and was making more friends.





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## The First World War

When war broke out, Bertie went down with appendicitis and was operated upon. He convalesced at Sandringham but his gastric problems continued and he was declared unfit for sea. After some time spent in the War Room, he managed to return to the ship where he carried on despite frequent attacks of illness. Eventually he was diagnosed as having a duodenal ulcer and after another operation he transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service. He learned to fly and was to become Squadron Leader. At the end of the year Bertie went to Trinity College, Cambridge. He studied political economy, civics and history and was remembered for being fined 6/8d for smoking in the street while wearing academic dress! Bertie was growing up away from the spotlight.

In 1910 Bertie's Grandfather, Edward VII, died upon which Bertie's Father became King George V and in 1920 Bertie became Duke of York.

## A Love to Last a Lifetime

On the evening of the first RAF summer ball in 1920 Bertie and Elizabeth met again. Elizabeth was dancing with Bertie's equerry, James Stuart. When the music stopped, Bertie called James over to ask about the beautiful lady and then he asked her to dance himself. From then on, he spent as much time as possible with her and by the autumn he was invited to stay at Glamis (Elizabeth's family home in Scotland). Bertie proposed twice but was turned down and it became known that Elizabeth was afraid of the public life that would lay ahead of her if she married into the Royal Family. However, they shared a common love of the countryside, of Scotland and of history and both families hoped that they would marry. On Sunday, January 14th while on a visit to St Paul's Waldenbury, Elizabeth's family home in England, Bertie and Elizabeth were excused church and went for a walk. When they came back they were engaged. That afternoon, a telegram for the King and Queen arrived at Sandringham in code. It read "All right. Bertie."

The King and Queen were delighted about the engagement and Elizabeth was always to be a favourite of King George V. The King hated people being unpunctual and one evening Elizabeth arrived two minutes late for dinner. As she apologized the King graciously excused her by saying "You are not late, my dear, I think we must have sat down two minutes too early"! He later added that "If she weren't late, she would be perfect, and how horrible that would be."





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## The Wedding

On 26 April 1923, Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon left her family's London home in a State Landau to be married at Westminster Abbey. London was packed. Elizabeth looked beautiful in a simple white and silver dress with satin slippers. She carried a wreath of white roses and heather and as she walked with her Father, the Earl of Strathmore, from the West Door she paused and placed the wreath on the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in memory of her brother in particular who had died in the First World War. Afterwards was a wonderful reception with 123 guests and an eight-course meal. The tables were decorated with pink and white tulips and lilac and the wedding cake was nine feet high with gold charms hidden in it. Their honeymoon was spent at Polesden Lacey, Surrey, then Glamis (where Elizabeth unfortunately developed whooping cough - "Not a very romantic disease" she complained) and lastly Frogmore in Windsor Park.

In June Bertie and Elizabeth moved into their new home, White Lodge, Richmond Park. The couple were blissfully happy together but were soon inundated with requests for their presence at openings and other formal engagements. The demand for them was such that Princess Mary (Bertie's Sister) offered them the use of her London home, Chesterfield House.

## The Death of Queen Alexandra

In December 1925, Queen Alexandra was at Sandringham when she suffered a heart attack. Bertie raced to Norfolk to say goodbye to his beloved Grandmother, but sadly fog held up the train and he was too late. Just before she died, she had been told that Bertie and Elizabeth were expecting a child and this gave her great happiness. The baby was to be a daughter, born on 21 April 1926 and named Elizabeth Alexandra Mary.

## The King and his Sons

Bertie and Elizabeth had by now moved into 145 Piccadilly, in London and were becoming more and more popular with the public. They were seen as a perfect family with an exemplary lifestyle while David, and Bertie's other brothers, were more frivolous and high-spirited. Britain was suffering economically and the quiet and responsible attitude of the Duke of York was welcomed by those who were getting fed up with Society life and fashionable clubs.

The relationship between David and his father was also growing more and more strained. David was independent and rebellious. King George V was having increasing health problems. In November 1928 he became severely ill with septicaemia as the result of a chill and nearly died. His popularity was at its peak. He was operated on in December and went to Bognor to convalesce. When the King recovered, it was announced that the Duke and Duchess of York were expecting a second child due in August 1930. She was born by caesarean and named Margaret Rose, known to the family as "Bud" because, as Lilibet said "she isn't old enough to be a rose yet".





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## The 1930's

Britain was experiencing financial problems and unemployment was rising. A successor for the King needed to be properly trained and preferably married. David was neither. In June 1931, David met Wallis Simpson. She was an American, already married and thirty-eight years old and with an ambitious, ruthless personality. Meanwhile Bertie and Elizabeth spent the first half of the 1930s engrossed in family life. They were given Royal Lodge at Windsor as a country retreat with a garden where the children could play. It was in a poor condition and they set about redecorating and gardening, a hobby which became a great passion of theirs.

In May 1935, the country celebrated King George's Silver Jubilee. Shortly afterwards the King began to lose his strength again. On Christmas Day he broadcast his last Christmas message from Sandringham. After Christmas, the King became confined to his room at Sandringham and at five minutes to midnight on 20 January 1936, King George V died there.

## The New King

Shortly after David had taken the throne as King Edward VIII, people began to grow concerned about his weekends at Fort Belvedere with Wallis Simpson. There began to be a delay in the returning of important papers and it was said that notes were being left around the Fort in places where people may read them. Wallis began divorce proceedings against her Husband and then in August she embarked on a Mediterranean cruise with the King. Reporters followed their journey and the King was photographed in shorts and no shirt. Later, the King was to announce his decision to either marry Wallis or abdicate. The Government and the Overseas Territories would not accept the marriage and so the King decided to abdicate in order to marry Wallis.

## The Abdication

The abdication papers were signed on December 10th. When Bertie arrived back at 145 Piccadilly there was a large cheering crowd outside his house. Elizabeth was unfortunately in bed with influenza and Bertie was worn out and anxious; succeeding the throne was a daunting task. On December 11, Bertie became King George VI, taking his fourth name in memory of his Father.

## King George VI

Despite initial concern, King George VI began to show signs of being a good King. Queen Elizabeth was an invaluable support. They were both deeply religious and both determined to do a good job. Reluctantly, the family moved to Buckingham Palace.

They decided to keep the Coronation date the same as that arranged for King Edward VIII and so they had only 5 months to prepare. Queen Mary decided to attend although no Queen Dowager had before attended the crowning of her Husband's successor. Her presence was an added attraction and some said that it was a public sign of her condemnation of her eldest Son's abdication. It was also the first Coronation to be broadcast by radio.



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## The Second World War

In June 1939, the King and Queen, at the invitation of the President, undertook a very successful visit to the United States which bolstered relationships with the USA. This followed a State visit to France in 1938 to cement the Entente Cordial.

In late Summer 1939 the Royal Family left for 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. The King and Queen returned to London while the Princesses remained in Scotland. Queen Mary was at Sandringham which the King believed was unsafe (the Norfolk Estate had been bombed in the First World War) and so she moved to her Niece's home Badmington, in Gloucestershire and Sandringham House was closed. Further visits to the Estate by the Royal Family during the War were spent at Appleton House in the neighbouring village.

The Princesses stayed at Balmoral and then, after Christmas at Sandringham in 1939, moved to Windsor where they remained for most of the War. The King became obsessed with rationing and had lines painted around the baths to indicate the limit of water level; bread served in the Palaces was the same as that supplied to the canteens and expense on drink and clothing was cut dramatically. King George and Queen Elizabeth took up firing practice in their spare time. Both were determined and spirited and declared that they would not leave their people whatever the risks. They did not even have their own air raid shelter at Buckingham Palace but used the basement like everyone else. A special protection force was set up to guard against attack on their Majesties. This was known as the Coates Mission. On the 13 September, a German bomber flew over the Palace and dropped six bombs. Four men were wounded and much damage was done but the King and Queen were unhurt. The King and Queen continued to visit the sites of other bomb attacks and the Queen joked: "Now I can look the East End in the face."

The War finally ended in May 1945. The Palace was floodlit and The King and Queen appeared on the balcony with their daughters and with Prime Minister, Winston Churchill to tumultuous cheers. Later the Princesses slipped out for a while to join the jubilant crowds.





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## The Second World War

After the War, there was a feeling that wealth should be distributed more evenly and that class distinction should fade. The King had always been keen to break down barriers between the classes. As Duke of York, he had organized a scheme for annual summer camps at which two hundred boys from the public schools came together with a like number from industrial firms.

Whenever the King and Queen had a free hour or so to relax, they tried to spend it in their gardens. The King was still reeling from the strain of the War. Their gardens had deteriorated during the War because of expenses and shortage of labour. Flower beds had been ploughed up for crops and after the War gardening fashions changed with a new emphasis on informality and privacy. This was best illustrated at Sandringham.

In 1947, the King and Queen with their daughters toured South Africa for almost 3 months. Princess Elizabeth went reluctantly as she was in love with Prince Philip of Greece and they wished to marry. On their return the engagement was announced and the King conferred titles on Philip, including Duke of Edinburgh. The couple were married on 20 November 1947 in Westminster Abbey.

On 26 April 1948, the King and Queen celebrated their Silver Wedding Anniversary and that evening they were endlessly called out to the balcony of Buckingham Palace to wave to the crowds.

To the joy of the King and Queen, Princess Elizabeth gave birth to a boy, Charles Philip Arthur George, on 14 November of 1948.

## Illness

The King again struggled with illness in January 1948 when he began to suffer from cramp in the legs. He was diagnosed as having arteriosclerosis and was told that there was a danger of gangrene setting in. He felt irritated and annoyed at having to rest and postpone his engagements. He was a stubborn worker and a bad patient. He was operated upon to relieve the thrombosis. The King was becoming increasingly tired.

In August 1951, the Royal Family journeyed to Balmoral. At Balmoral the King began shooting and when out in the cold and wet he developed a chill and sore throat. The Queen insisted on specialists from London going up to see him. It was confirmed that the King was suffering from a malignant growth and doctors decided to remove his left lung. He was not told that he had cancer although Queen Elizabeth knew. The King was operated on successfully in September 1951 and began to recover although doctors had found that the other lung was affected.

The Royal radiologist said that he believed it unlikely that the King would live more than eighteenth months as the operation was six months too late.





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## Illness cont

The King celebrated his 56th birthday at Buckingham Palace and pre-recorded his Christmas message one sentence at a time - it took him two days. He was having trouble with his throat but doctors had assured him that his operation had been successful. On 21st December, the King and Queen left for Sandringham. The King intended to do as much shooting as possible. He went out with an electrically heated waistcoat and boots and found that he had not lost his skill. Shooting had always been one of the King's great passions and he had begun at Sandringham at the age of twelve. He began by using a single barrel muzzle loader which had been used by his father and grandfather when they started shooting. This is now in the gun lobby at Sandringham House.

The Royal Family gathered and celebrated Christmas 1951 at Sandringham as usual.

A decision had been made that Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh, would undertake a tour to Australasia as the King was clearly unable to go. They left for an initial stop in Kenya in the January of 1952 and the King and Queen went to Heathrow airport to wave them off. It was the King's first public appearance since his operation and, as it turned out, his last public appearance. They then returned to Sandringham.

## Death of The King

On 5 February, the King went out shooting as usual. That evening he seemed well and in good spirits. After dinner, he went to the kennels to see his golden retriever whose paw had been cut by a thorn and the King wanted to check that the wound was clean. He went to bed early leaving Queen Elizabeth by the fireside.

King George VI died in his sleep at Sandringham on 6 February 1952. It was a shock to everyone. When the news reached Kenya, Prince Philip broke the news to the new Queen and they flew home immediately.

The King's coffin, made on the estate, left Sandringham to go to the Church, where he lay in state, surrounded by a guard of estate workers. As the coffin passed through the garden gate from the House to the Church a cock pheasant crowed loudly. It was a fitting farewell. His funeral took place on 15 February in Westminster Abbey. He was then taken to Windsor to be interred in St George's Chapel.

King George VI was remembered as having a great force of character and a strong sense of duty as well as being a gentle man with unlimited love for his wife and daughters. He was conventional, but dignified, with a deep religious faith and, although at first a reluctant king, he became "a model and a guide to constitutional sovereigns throughout the World" as Winston Churchill said.







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## The Queen Mother

With the King's death, the Dowager Queen Elizabeth became the "Queen Mother" and her Daughter "Lilibet" became Queen Elizabeth II. The Queen Mother sent a message to the British people when her Husband died saying: "My only wish is now that I may be allowed to continue the work we sought to do together". She helped her Daughter settle into her new role and helped with preparations for the Coronation.

Eventually, the Queen Mother moved from Buckingham Palace to Clarence House which she made her own. She also used Royal Lodge at Windsor. At Balmoral she lived at a house called Birkhall on the Balmoral Estate. In living in these various official residences, she was able to stay close to her family, but maintain her independence.

Not long after the King's death the Queen Mother bought a home of her own, The Castle of Mey in Caithness, Scotland, the only home she ever owned, and which she had restored. She loved to escape to Mey and spend time there with friends and family. It was quiet and remote which suited her well. The Castle is now a tourist destination.

She remained very close to both her daughters and their families. She also established herself as a great hostess. Her lunch parties were legendary. The Queen Mother became a well-known figure in her own right. She travelled widely, sometimes representing The Queen, and fulfilled her wish to continue the work begun by her Husband and herself.

She was always gracious, enthusiastic and friendly, appearing interested in whoever and whatever was claiming her attention. The Queen Mother always was a much-loved public figure blessed with dignity and compassion.

She died at Royal Lodge on 30 March 2002. She was 101. Tragically, her younger Daughter Margaret had died just a few weeks before on 9 February. The Queen Mother was interred next to King George VI in the King George VI Memorial Chapel in St George's Chapel, Windsor. Princess Margaret's ashes were also interred there.

In 2023, the bodies of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh were interred alongside those of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

For further information about educational groups or resources at Sandringham please email [education@sandringhamestate.co.uk](mailto:education@sandringhamestate.co.uk)