

■ SECOND IMPRESSION

QUEEN ELIZABETH II



God save the Queen

EVERYWHERE she goes, Queen Elizabeth II takes with her a Merchant Ivory-standard Britishness. Here is a 71-year-old grandmother who likes grilled haddock, stuffed cabbage and Bendicks Bittermints. She wears shapeless garments, outsize confections masquerading as hats and remembers the Blitz. She takes barley water and mint sauce with her whenever she goes abroad, just in case. Her calculated British ordinariness amounts almost to genius. Despite being the first monarch to circumnavigate the world, visit a leper colony, and accede to the throne while up a tree (in Kenya), she is no innovator.

Yet, never before could the British anthem *God Save the Queen* be sung with as much truth as for this monarch who has ruled with implacable determination for 45 years and now faces a country at odds with its very perception of what the Royal Family must be, if it must be there at all.

For Elizabeth Alexandra Mary, third in line to the throne at her birth, such republican sentiments must be the sign of a rapidly turning world too bewildering to rationalise. When her father, the Duke of York, became King in 1936, the 10-year-old Princess became heir presumptive. Despite the change in her public position, at that point her world was still the safe cocoon of a loving family, deferential retainers, adoring subjects and a Britain replete with glittering jewels in the imperial crown.

But soon after World War II, the changes began. At 19, Princess Elizabeth became a second subaltern in the Auxiliary Territorial Service and she completed a driving and vehicle maintenance course — surely a first for a future queen. Empire became an anachronism. It seemed hard to see much promise in the New Elizabethan Age that began with her accession to the throne in 1952, except perhaps for the public's right to know. The new queen began as she was unwittingly meant to go

on. With full television coverage. Her coronation was watched by 20 million people in Britain — at her insistence, against the wishes of the government.

Her decision may since have come back to haunt her. Next month she celebrates the golden anniversary of her wedding to her third cousin, Prince Philip of Greece, knowing — as do her subjects and much of the world — that her family is seen as a dysfunctional bunch of kooks.

But in all of this the Queen remains a British institution in the way Big Ben or Buckingham Palace is. Along with her 97-year-old mother, she symbolises continuity with a Britain that existed 40 years ago, if then. She stands for a safer world, to which everyone vainly wishes to return, albeit with a mobile phone and a modem. Like the guru of an eastern cult, she herself is the message.

She has somewhat confusingly changed at least some part of the message. The countrified horsy woman who pays 20 pounds a month to subscribe to a TV racing channel, approved the launch of a popular Internet site six months ago, opened her palace to the paying public and changed her guest list for garden parties to include ordinary people who never thought they'd be asked to tea by the Queen.

She pays income-tax, has scrapped the Royal Train, goes on unscripted walkabouts among the people and could evenly answer a woman teashop owner who told her that she looked like the Queen, "How very reassuring".

Britain may no longer be sure if it wants Elizabeth R, by the Grace of God, or the cherished touchy-feely ironic image of Diana, Queen of Hearts. But the dogs of republicanism don't seem to dare too much while the Queen is on her throne. For now, the Queen seems to be queen because, like Everest, she is there.

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