

The Telegraph

Royal wedding: the lessons and comforts that can be gleaned from previous marriages

The royal wedding is the perfect fairytale ending not just for the Prince and his princess-in-waiting but also for the monarchy and the British nation, says the historian Amanda Foreman



29 July 1981: The Princess and Prince of Wales kiss on their wedding day Photo: EPA

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When 18-year-old Princess Alexandra of Denmark married the future Edward VII in 1863 she was the first royal bride to have her wedding dress captured on film. The dress, an opulent creation of cascading silver lace and fresh-flower garlands made of orange-blossom and myrtle, became a sensation. Photographs of it appeared in magazines all over the world, inspiring thousands of women to copy the design.

A century and a half later it is not thousands or millions but billions of people who will see images of [Kate Middleton's wedding dress](http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/columns/hilary-alexander/TMG8466350/How-will-Kate-Middletons-dress-measure-up-to-history.html) (<http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/columns/hilary-alexander/TMG8466350/How-will-Kate-Middletons-dress-measure-up-to-history.html>). While some of them may simply be looking for inspiration for their own wedding day, for the majority the dress symbolises the uniqueness of the event. No matter how many imitations appear in the months to come, Kate's dress – “the” dress – will remain in a class by itself, an icon as instantly recognisable as Diana, Princess of Wales's became in 1981.

Just how rare it is to witness the marriage of a future king and queen can be seen by a little computation. Surprising as it may seem for a tradition that can be traced back more than 1,500 years, the number of [royal weddings](#)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/> of future monarchs remains in the tens. There were just two in the last century, three if you include the wedding of Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon to the then Duke of York.

The number of kings also remains small: [Prince William](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/prince-william/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/prince-william/>) will one day become the country's 62nd monarch (counting Egbert of Wessex as the first "ruler of Britain" in 829). [Kate Middleton](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/kate-middleton/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/kate-middleton/>) will belong to an even smaller group. There have been only 38 Queen Consorts since William the Conqueror crowned his wife, Matilda, queen in 1068. Perhaps even more startling, given the public's familiarity with the title, there have only been 10 Princesses of Wales.

Kate and William will enter the history books together from the moment they exchange their vows. Yet it is clear that neither is daunted by the prospect. During their post-engagement interview on ITV News they were asked what it was like to follow in the footsteps of some of the most famous figures in history. Their response to the question revealed why they are so popular across all generations.

[What Will and Kate will do next](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/8469794/Royal-wedding-what-Prince-William-and-Kate-Middleton-did-next.html) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/8469794/Royal-wedding-what-Prince-William-and-Kate-Middleton-did-next.html>)

[Will and Kate's romance in quotes](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/8469792/Royal-wedding-Prince-William-and-Kate-Middletons-romance-in-quotes.html) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/8469792/Royal-wedding-Prince-William-and-Kate-Middletons-romance-in-quotes.html>)

[A love match that was meant to be](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/8469789/Royal-wedding-a-love-match-that-was-meant-to-be.html) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/8469789/Royal-wedding-a-love-match-that-was-meant-to-be.html>)

[Royal wedding: the future for a modern princess like Kate Middleton](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/8470098/Royal-wedding-the-future-for-a-modern-princess-like-Kate-Middleton.html) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/royal-wedding/8470098/Royal-wedding-the-future-for-a-modern-princess-like-Kate-Middleton.html>)

Kate claimed that she embraced her royal forebears and found them "very inspirational". Prince William went even further, saying: "No one's trying to fill my mother's shoes — what she did was fantastic — but it's about making your own future and your own destiny, and Kate will do a very good job at that." No royal couple ever said such words, or probably even thought them before now.

This bold can-do attitude to life and marriage represents a complete break from the past. Prince William and Kate believe in the modern ideal of becoming your own person, regardless of the trappings of wealth or the demands of duty.

Their determination to combine the traditions of a royal wedding with their personal favourites, such as having chocolate-biscuit cake as well as the usual fruit cake, shows that they are comfortable in themselves and ready to assert their personalities. Because of this, they are going to shape the monarchy in ways that will bring fresh life and vigour to the institution.

What the institution will do to them is the great unknown. But there are lessons and comforts to be gleaned from the histories of previous incumbents. First and foremost, given the broken road that led to William and Kate's union, is that a rocky start has often resulted in singular compatibility. One of the most solid and powerful marriages in history of the

monarchy – that of William the Conqueror to Matilda of Flanders – began with a rejection and a furious response that shocked all of Europe.

Having learnt that Matilda did not think him sufficiently high-born to be her husband, William, then Duke of Normandy, waylaid her as she was going to church. He pulled Matilda off her horse by her braids, dragged her through the mud and then galloped off, leaving her bruised and filthy in the street. From this unpromising beginning emerged an extraordinary partnership that became famous after Matilda presented William with a warship for his invasion of England, paid for out of her own money.

The second lesson is that a royal marriage confers on both spouses an extraordinary power to effect social change and do good. The request by Prince William and Kate for people to make charitable donations rather than give wedding presents shows that they are already acutely sensitive to this power.

Long before Diana met Aids sufferers, Queen Charlotte, the wife of George III, decided that patronage and charity work should be as much a part of the monarchy as pomp and circumstance. In the 19th century Princess Alexandra led a small revolution in the care of the poor and vulnerable with her tireless championing of free hospitals and voluntary societies.

In 1887 she visited Joseph Merrick, better known as the Elephant Man, at London Hospital to show the world that disfigurement was not a social disgrace. Half a century later, during the Second World War, George VI and Queen Elizabeth took this lesson even further, demonstrating a commitment and unity with the ordinary people of London that almost single-handedly maintained the course of national morale.

Today, thanks to the internet, William and Kate have a platform and ability to reach out to people that is beyond the wildest imaginings of previous royal couples. Moreover, unlike the celebutant and media marriages that appear (and disappear) all the time, their desire to connect with the public comes from a sense of personal cause rather than a marketing plan to sell their own brand of perfume. Already the 20 charities lucky enough to be placed on the wedding list have experienced a dramatic and literal change in their fortunes, and much more is to come.

The real uniqueness of next week's royal wedding lies not in its rarity or even in its evocation of history, but in the communion of shared values and unity of intent that it symbolises between the royal couple and the nation.