

## How to marry a prince

AMANDA FOREMAN

SATURDAY, 27TH NOVEMBER 2010



The turbulent but often triumphant record of Britain's royal weddings is full of lessons for Kate and William

The popularity of the monarchy has been slowly improving since the Queen's 'annus horribilis' speech in 1992. But the vital spark needed to win over the country was missing. Not even the Queen Mother's 100th birthday could fully repair the damage caused by years of controversy and embarrassing revelations. It is only now, with the engagement of Prince William to Kate Middleton, that the monarchy has a real opportunity to remake itself for the 21st century.

But first, the handlers and planners for the royal event need to learn from history. Good intentions are not enough. Positively the worst royal wedding in 300 years was that of the Prince of Wales (later George IV) to Princess Caroline of Brunswick on 8 April 1795. His parents had pushed him into the marriage in the hope that becoming a husband and father would endear him, and the monarchy, to the people. The early 1790s were a bad time to be royal, as the execution of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette attested. All of aristocratic Europe was terrified that the French revolutionary spirit would lead to guillotines in every capital.

Yet despite careful planning, the 32-year-old prince still managed to turn the entire day into a disaster. He arrived late to the church and completely drunk. After stumbling up the altar steps, he refused to repeat the vows until his father stepped forward and ordered him to go through with the ceremony. There was a tense stand-off until the prince complied, but instead of speaking the words to his fiancée Princess Caroline, he said them to his mistress, Lady Jersey, who was in one of the front pews.

George and Caroline's marriage proved to be extremely damaging to the monarchy. Both royals were spoilt and selfish, and apparently oblivious to the shame attached to their antics. They provided the press with a constant supply of salacious stories. The nadir of their marriage was George's failed attempt to divorce Caroline in 1820. A royal divorce could only be obtained if the case was tried in the House of Lords, and there were riots during the trial, even a mutiny by some of the royal guards. It is impossible to know what would have happened if Caroline had not conveniently died a year later in 1821.

By contrast, the wedding of Queen Victoria's eldest son, Edward, to Princess Alexandra in 1863 was a model for how to revive the flagging fortunes of the institution. Victoria had been inconsolable since the death of Prince Albert in 1861, and the public had grown tired of her refusal to emerge from deep mourning. As it was, she insisted that the wedding take place in St George's Chapel, Windsor, away from the masses; and she wore deep black to the ceremony.

However, despite the inauspicious circumstances, the young couple were able to connect with the public. Princess Alexandra made a point of being charming and friendly to the huge crowds that turned out to cheer her carriage. During the heady days leading up to and after the wedding, she won the hearts of Londoners. As the Princess of Wales, her tireless charitable work made her the most popular royal for more than a century. Without realising it, she transformed the public's perception of the monarchy. Her patronage of hundreds of charities and educational institutions led to a boom in the benevolence industry. She even managed to please her critical mother-in-law, who ended up feeling quite guilty at the punishing pace required of the princess. 'To spare me the strain and fatigue of functions,' Victoria admitted, 'Alexandra opens bazaars, attends concerts, visits hospitals in my place... she not only never complains, but endeavours to prove that she has enjoyed what to another would be a tiresome duty.' It is estimated that Princess Alexandra raised over £50 million in her lifetime — in today's terms that is almost £4 billion.

Princess Diana famously imitated Queen Alexandra's devotion to charity — and there's every reason to believe Kate Middleton will follow in her footsteps. But philanthropy will not be enough to restore the monarchy. William and Kate must also heed the example of a more recent royal wedding — that of the Queen. She married Prince Philip in 1947, a year of exceptional hardship for the country. The make-do spirit fostered by the war was petering out. Many people were homeless, jobs were scarce, and almost everything was rationed, even the humble potato. That winter was also one of the coldest in living memory. Not surprisingly, the public in 1947 was both excited by the prospect of a royal wedding and wary of having ostentation thrust in its face.

Plenty of people advised the couple to marry on the quiet for fear of encouraging socialism. To the royal family's great credit, it got the balance just right. Some 2,500 guests crammed into Westminster Abbey, the famous Glass Coach was used to convey the bride, and the Household Cavalry wore its ceremonial uniform for the first time in six years. But the then Princess Elizabeth used the same number of coupons awarded to all brides-to-be to buy the material for her wedding dress. (Hundreds of women offered to share their ration cards, but it was illegal to pool resources.) She did not wear any of the crown jewels to the Abbey, but confined herself to a pearl necklace and a diamond-and-ruby Cartier brooch. Finally, rather than having a grand ball, the couple enjoyed an 'austerity' breakfast at the palace for 150 guests before leaving to start their married life at Broadlands, the country estate of the Mountbatten family.

If Prince William and Kate follow the example set by the 'good' royal weddings of the past they will be ensuring the future health of the monarchy. This means setting the right tone in difficult times, as well as demonstrating their commitment to public service. They will have to show that the monarchy is still a vibrant institution that has meaning for all generations, not just for the ones that remember rationing. Even more important, this will be the first royal wedding to take place in the multi-faith, multi-media Britain of today. William and Kate will need to make the wedding relevant to this distracted society that lives through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, reality TV, and live-streaming. Will they manage it? From the way they have conducted themselves for the past eight years, there is every reason to hope for success.