

JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS 1809-1935

On 6th February last Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II completed the twenty-fifth year of a reign which began in 1952 when as a young woman of twenty-five she succeeded to the throne on the sudden death of her father, King George VI. This summer there will be celebrations all over the country rejoicing in the anniversary of the Queen's accession and on 7th June, the day appointed as the official Jubilee commemoration, Her Majesty will honour the City with her presence. She and other members of the Royal Family, as you well know, will attend a Service at St. Paul's and afterwards will lunch with the Lord Mayor and Corporation at Guildhall.

The original connotations of the word "jubilee" were religious. The Jewish religion kept a jubilee or more correctly a jubilee year every fiftieth year in accordance with Leviticus chapter 25.

And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.

A jubilee shall that fiftieth year be unto you: ye shall not sow, neither reap that which groweth of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of thy vine undressed

For it is the jubilee; it shall be holy unto you

In the Roman Catholic church a jubilee as a year of remission from the penal consequences of sin during which plenary indulgence might be obtained by a pilgrimage to Rome was first instituted by Pope Boniface VIII in 1300. Thereafter jubilees were granted first every 100 years, then at shorter intervals of 50, 33 or 25 years and now may be instituted at any time. Today such a jubilee year is commonly called a Holy Year.

The application of the word jubilee to the celebration of a secular event or activity is comparatively modern. At first it was used, doubtless with the religious connotation in mind, to denote a fiftieth anniversary but was later applied to other anniversaries, especially the twenty-fifth and the sixtieth.

The first occasion on which it was used in connection with the celebration of the reign of a British monarch appears to be the fiftieth anniversary of the accession of George III which fell upon the 25th October 1809. A letter

in The Times on 13th October of that year explained the use of the word in the Jewish religion and the Roman Catholic church and from that date onwards that august journal adopted the phrase "the Jubilee of the King". The more conservative City Corporation did not and its records refer to the occasion only as the fiftieth anniversary of the King's accession.

The members of the Corporation, however, were far from unanimous in their desire to celebrate this particular occasion. A large faction within the City, both in Common Council and among the Livery, had been bitterly opposed to the policies of George III and George III's ministers for much of the reign. The freedom of the press and the grievances of the American colonists were only two of the burning questions of the late 18th century on which the City and the Crown had been at variance and Lord Mayors William Beckford, Brass Crosby and John Wilkes all at one time or another earned the displeasure of the king. Moreover the events of the Jubilee year itself were unhappy. In the spring of 1809 charges had been brought against the Duke of York of a scandal involving the sale of commissions, and the City went so far as to confer the Honorary Freedom upon the instigator of these allegations, one Colonel Wardle. In the summer there occurred the disastrous failure of the Walcheren expedition and the consequent resignation of several of the King's ministers. A proposal to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the reign did not therefore meet with whole-hearted support.

On 15th September 1809 a meeting of Common Council was called as a consequence of a requisition which the Lord Mayor had received from over 60 members. At this meeting it was decided to celebrate the anniversary and a Special Committee was appointed consisting of all the Aldermen present and a Common Councilman from each of the City's wards.

The Special Committee reported back to the Council on the 26th September with proposals that the Corporation should attend divine service on the 25th October and that the King should be sent an address of congratulation. It was also suggested that Guildhall should be illuminated on the evening of the 25th and that members should dine together upon the occasion. The meeting was a stormy one. The committee's report was considered paragraph by paragraph and finally the Lord Mayor broke up the Court after "considerable Debates and much confusion arising thereon".

A draft of the address to the King was drawn up on 3rd October but it was reconsidered and altered on the 12th. Meanwhile on the 5th, the orders of 26th September relating to the illumination of the Guildhall and the

members dining together at the City's expense had been rescinded and the City decided instead to grant £1,000 for the relief of small debtors. The King himself after receiving the City's address contributed a further £2,000 to this cause. The Lord Mayor attended in state the thanksgiving service which was held at St. Paul's.

George III's sons, George IV and William IV, reigned for ten and seven years respectively and the question of a royal jubilee did not arise again until the fiftieth anniversary of the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837, the celebration of which was approached in a very different spirit from that of George III.

On 18th November 1837 at the commencement of the mayoralty of Sir Reginald Hanson it was resolved to commemorate the Jubilee and that the Committee for carrying this into execution should be a Committee of the Whole Court. The Committee recommended and it was agreed that a loyal and dutiful Address be presented to Her Majesty, that £5,000 should be contributed towards the cost of the Imperial Institute, and that a Reception and Ball should be held in Guildhall to which the Queen, members of the Royal Family, and such Foreign Sovereigns as might be in England at the time should be invited to be present. In the event the Queen, who proposed to visit the Mansion House on 14th May, did not feel able to visit the City again on her Jubilee but the Prince and Princess of Wales and all the other British and Foreign Royalties to whom invitations were extended accepted the Corporation's hospitality.

The Queen's visit to the Mansion House on the 14th May was a splendid occasion. Her Majesty was accompanied by no fewer than ten members of her immediate family and by the Crown Prince of Denmark and the Mansion House was lavishly decorated within and without. The occasion is recorded pictorially in one of the four tapestry panels executed by the Windsor Tapestry Works which now hang in the saloon. Four days after the Queen's visit it was announced that a baronetcy had been conferred upon the Lord Mayor and knighthoods upon the two Sheriffs.

At the Jubilee Service at Westminster Abbey on 21st June, which was attended by numerous British and Foreign royalties, the City Deputation included the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, the Sheriffs and nearly one hundred Aldermen and members of the Common Council who proceeded to the Abbey in state.

Expenditure for the City's own Reception and Ball, which were fixed for the 28th June 1887, was limited to £6,000. When we consider the effects of ninety years of inflation it will be realised that this sum permitted the Committee to organise the event in a gratifyingly lavish style and it did in fact keep within its permitted budget with a final expenditure of £5,597.11s.2d.

The number of invitations issued was 5,392 and the actual number of persons present 4,646. The Committee was pleased with the result of its endeavours. "Notwithstanding the difficulties inseparable from the assembling of such a large number, and the peculiar circumstances attending the Reception (the chief of these being an unprecedented gathering of Royal personages), the marked success of the evening was apparent throughout".

The royal guests included the King of Denmark, the King and Queen of the Belgians, the King of Saxony and the King of the Hellenes, as well as a bevy of Crown Princes and Princesses, Grand Dukes and Duchesses and Princes and Princesses from most of the European courts. From further afield came the Queen of Hawaii, Princes of Japan, Siam and Persia, and Maharajahs and other dignitaries of the Indian States. Among the delights offered to the guests were dancing, glee singing (in the New Council Chamber), a "museum of antiquities" and six refreshment and supper rooms.

Ten years later the 60th anniversary of the Queen's accession was commemorated as the Diamond Jubilee. A loyal Address was again presented and the Corporation resolved to contribute £1,000 during the current year and £500 per annum for the next eight years to the Prince of Wales' Hospital Fund. The celebrations were divided between two functions: the Queen's Procession through the City on 22nd June and a Reception and Ball at Guildhall on 5th July.

Deputations were appointed to await the Queen at Temple Bar, St. Paul's and the Mansion House on the day of the Procession. At Temple Bar the customary ceremony of tendering the Sword was carried out and the Lord Mayor, George F. Faudel-Phillips, then took his place in the procession, riding bare-headed and carrying the Sword before Her Majesty in front of the Queen's own personal Escort. The procession halted at St. Paul's where the Corporation has been assigned a space within the Churchyard for the erection of a large block of seats. An admonitory notice had been sent out with all admission tickets to these seats:

"It will greatly contribute to an uninterrupted view of the Royal Procession by all the occupants of the Corporation Seats if Ladies will, as an act of grace, kindly appear on this occasion in Bonnets or Hats with limited trimmings".

At the Mansion House the procession halted once more. The Queen was presented with a bouquet by the Lady Mayoress and after expressing her thanks graciously dispensed with the further attendance of the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs.

£5,000 had been voted for the provision of the seats in St. Paul's Churchyard and for the decoration and illumination of the Mansion House, London Bridge and other Corporation buildings. An intention to illuminate the dome of St. Paul's by gas or electricity was abandoned in view of the fire risks but "very satisfactory results", the Committee reported, were achieved by means of searchlights from surrounding buildings.

The Queen was not present at the Reception and Ball on 5 July. The function was on a slightly more modest scale than in 1887. The glittering array of foreign royalties who had been in London for the Golden Jubilee were not present in 1897 and the British Royal Family was represented at the Reception only by the Duke of Cambridge. Ambassadors and Ministers, Members of the House of Lords and the House of Commons, and representatives of other municipalities, public bodies and trade and commerce made up a gathering of 3,800 persons. Four bands played in the Great Hall, the Library, the Art Gallery and the Crush Room, while a programme of concerts in the Council Chamber ranged musically from "Sweet and Low" to "The Jewel Song" from Faust and from "I'll sing thee songs of Araby" to "Rule Britannia".

Both the Jubilees of 1887 and 1897 were commemorated further by the striking of a fine Corporation medal.

There remains but one further Jubilee to be recounted, that of Victoria's grandson and our present Queen's grandfather, George V, and this time it was a Silver Jubilee commemorating twenty-five years of his reign. Many of us will have some personal recollection of the celebrations of 1935.

In the City the programme followed a familiar pattern. The loyal address was dispensed with at the request of the King who had recently been ill but once again the Corporation made a munificent gift to charity contributing

£25,000 to the King George Jubilee Trust. As in 1897 the celebrations were divided between two functions. On 6th May, the actual anniversary of his accession, the King with Queen Mary attended a Service at St. Paul's with all the attendant ceremonies of a state visit by the Sovereign to the City. The City streets were decorated and special provision was made for school children to view the Procession. Floodlighting of many buildings in the City continued for a month and for a week the Monument remained open until midnight and was a popular point from which the floodlighting could be viewed.

On 22nd May a Reception and Ball were held at the Guildhall and unlike Queen Victoria, King George and Queen Mary accepted the Corporation's invitation to be present, as did the Prince of Wales and other members of the Royal Family. The number of guests, about 1750, was much smaller than on either of the Victorian occasions. Their majesties arrived at 10 p.m. An especially large Reception Room was constructed for the occasion, the walls of which were covered with ivory sateen, with blue brocade panels and gilt mouldings. From here the King and Queen were conducted via the Porch and the Library Corridor to the Dais in Guildhall where a royal canopy had been erected which was covered in scarlet velvet embroidered with gold, lined with white satin and lit by hidden lamps.

Their Majesties spent an hour at Guildhall, progressing through the various parts of the building, receiving a presentation of an antique Tompion clock, and watching the dancing in the Great Hall.

Expenditure on the Royal Procession, the floodlighting and the Reception and Ball came to £13,855.17s.1d. If the large donation to the Jubilee Trust is taken into account, the Corporation celebrated the Silver Jubilee of King George V to the tune of nearly £39,000. Comparable expenditure in modern financial values is unthinkable today, even apart from the present financial crisis, and would certainly not be in accord with the Queen's own wishes. In 1977 the Queen's progress through the City will combine the traditional ceremonies at Temple Bar and St. Paul's with the informality of a modern royal "walkabout" through Cheapside. But there can be no doubt that, whatever the changes, Her Majesty's Jubilee will be celebrated in the City with as much affectionate loyalty and enthusiasm as were the Silver Jubilee of her grandfather and the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of her great great grandmother.

B.R.M.
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