

This Day in History... April 21, 1926

Happy 100th Birthday Queen Elizabeth II

On April 21, 1926, at 2:40 in the morning, a baby girl was born at 17 Bruton Street in London's upscale Mayfair neighborhood — and almost no one expected her to ever wear a crown. That child, Princess Elizabeth Alexandra Mary, would go on to become the longest-reigning monarch in British history.

She was born at the London home of her maternal grandparents, the Earl and Countess of Strathmore. Her father was Prince Albert, the Duke of York — the second son of King George V. Her mother was Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon. At the time of her birth, young Elizabeth stood third in the line of succession, behind her uncle Edward, Prince of Wales, and her father. No one was grooming her for the throne.

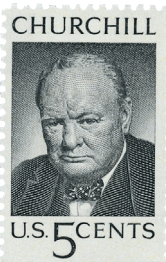
She was christened Elizabeth Alexandra Mary at Buckingham Palace on May 29, 1926. She was named after her mother, while her two middle names honored her paternal great-grandmother, Queen Alexandra, and her paternal grandmother, Queen Mary.

From the start, she had presence. Winston Churchill first encountered Elizabeth at Balmoral when she was just two years old. In a letter to his wife, he described her as having “an air of authority and reflectiveness astonishing in an infant.”

Her early years were spent at 145 Piccadilly, the London townhouse her parents took shortly after her birth, and at White Lodge in Richmond Park. When she turned six, her parents settled into Royal Lodge in Windsor Great Park as their country home. That same year, the people of Wales gave her a miniature thatched cottage on the grounds called Y Bwthyn Bach — Welsh for “the Little Cottage.”



Set of 4 Great Britain stamps was issued in memoriam of Elizabeth's life of service.



Churchill was the first of Elizabeth's 15 prime ministers — and reportedly her favorite. He called her a “character” at age two.

Everything changed in 1936.

Her grandfather, King George V, died, and his eldest son took the throne as King Edward VIII. However, before the year ended, Edward abdicated to marry American divorcée Wallis Simpson. Elizabeth's father became King George VI, making the 10-year-old Elizabeth next in line for the throne.

Her education shifted immediately. From age 12, she was tutored by Sir Henry Marten, a well-known history teacher and later provost of Eton. Her grandmother, Queen Mary, personally schooled her in the expectations and customs of royal life. She also studied French with Belgian and French governesses, a skill that proved useful throughout her reign. She learned to ride horses, became a strong swimmer, enrolled as a Girl Guide at 11, and later became a Sea Ranger. She even won the Children's Challenge Shield at London's Bath Club at age 13.

During World War II, Elizabeth didn't sit on the sidelines. At 18, she joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service — the women's branch of the British Army — and completed a driving and vehicle maintenance course, qualifying as a mechanic on April 14, 1945. During the Blitz, she and her sister Margaret were moved to Windsor Castle for safety, where they participated in air raid drills and lived under food rationing just like ordinary British families.

On her 21st birthday, while on a goodwill tour of South Africa, Elizabeth made a radio broadcast to the Commonwealth: “I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service.” It wasn't just a speech. It defined her entire reign.

She married Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten at Westminster Abbey on November 20, 1947 — the first major state occasion after the war. On the death of King George VI in 1952, she succeeded to the throne while in Kenya with her husband.

As queen, the records stacked up. She advised more than 170 prime ministers across her realms, made a landmark state visit to the Republic of Ireland in 2011, met five popes, and sat across from fourteen US presidents. Her reign of 70 years and 214 days was the longest of any British monarch and the longest of any queen regnant in history.

She died on September 8, 2022, at Balmoral Castle in Scotland at the age of 96. Her legacy extends well beyond records. In 2013, she received an honorary BAFTA award for her lifelong patronage of the British film and television industry. She also earned the International Federation for Equestrian Sports Lifetime Achievement Award for her dedication to horses and riding — a passion she held her entire life. She was the first head of state to open two Olympic Games in two different countries, presiding over both the 1976 Montreal Games and the 2012 London Games. And in a nod to her sharp sense of humor, she portrayed herself in a short film alongside Daniel Craig as James Bond for the London opening ceremony — earning her the title of “the most memorable Bond girl yet.”

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