

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 329: Coronations: Chaos, Ceremony and Empire

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A whisper of mystery turns all eyes to the throne. Suddenly two or three run, others fall back. Some talk, direct, hurry, stand still, or disappear.

Then three or four of high rank appear from behind the throne. An interval is left. The crowd's scarce breathe. Something rustles.

And a being buried in satin feathers and diamonds rolls gracefully into his seat.

The room rises with a sort of feathered silk and thunder. Plumes wave, eyes sparkle, glasses are out, mouths smile.

And one man becomes the prime object of attraction to thousands. The way in which the king bowed was monarchic.

As he looked towards the piers and foreign ambassadors, he looked like some gorgeous bird of the east.

So that, Dominic, was a description by the painter Benjamin Robert Hayden of George IV, entering Westminster Abbey for his coronation.

With very much an emphasis on the rolling, because he was a very large gentleman, wasn't he? He was a man of size.

And I've read that from Roy Strong's book, *Coronation, the History of Kingship and the British Monarchy*.

And it actually has George IV on the cover. He's got a train.

I think he's wearing a kind of cloak modelled on Napoleon's, only designed to be even bigger and better.

And there are eight people carrying it.

His coronation was an absolutely splendid occasion, Tom.

It was simultaneously vulgar and shambolic, wasn't it?

And incredibly, incredibly expensive.

So all themes that we will be exploring over this, the final episode of our tour through coronations.

And in the second episode, we finished with the last of the stewards, Ann, dying.

And she is ceded by George I, who comes from Hanover.

And he's chosen basically for one reason or one reason, namely that he's not Catholic.

Exactly. He's a Protestant. So he doesn't really even speak English, which as we shall see...

Leads to complications.

Leads to complications of the coronation.

So in that very first episode, Tom, you did that brilliant bit of historical kind of detective work, uncovering the sort of Christian roots, the roots in the Old Testament, paganism, Anglo-Saxon kings, the Carolingians, Charlemagne.

And, you know, you made coronation seem deeply important and powerful.

Beating sacral heart of a kingdom.

Right. But when you get to the Hanoverians...

It all goes to its up.

Well, yeah, it's just...

There's just a series of... I mean, one of them is actually very good.

I think George II.

The others are ludicrous in all kinds of entertaining ways.

There's a sense in which they don't understand really what's going on, isn't there?

Yeah. Well, George I literally doesn't understand what's going on, because he's German and he doesn't really speak English.

So basically, he had become king on the 1st of August, 1714, because that's when Queen Anne had died.

And that has been preceded by all kinds of political jostling.

Are the Hanoverians going to come in?

Is it more important to have a very remote Protestant relative than to go to the Catholic stewarts and sort of Jacobites?

They basically decide, fine, we'll get to George over.

He pitches up in September and then he's crowned in October.

So because he doesn't speak any English,

they'll go back to doing it in Latin,

so that actually he will have some vague sense of what is going on.

And so this is the first time since Elizabeth, isn't it?

Since Elizabeth, exactly.

What's slightly shambolic is that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Tennyson, he's 78 and he's completely doddering in it.

So adding to the fun.

Everything goes wrong.

A bit like what we talked about, James, the first came down from Scotland.

Huge security because people are worried about ructions.

So there's huge security this time,

and actually the bishops of Bath and Wells and Durham, who you talked about, I think in the first or second episode, there's always been key figures.

They're not able to get to the king's canopy

where he's meant to be because there's too many soldiers around who sort of push them out of the way and stuff.

What would St. Dunstan say?

Well, St. Dunstan would not be impressed.

There's a point at which actually,

it's the last coronation at which the Archbishop of Canterbury asks the congregation sort of formulaically, do you accept this man as your new king?

And one of the people there is a woman called Catherine Sedley, who is the former mistress of James II, and she's renowned as a great wit.

And she says, when the Archbishop asks this question,

she apparently said in a very loud voice,

just that old fool think that anyone here will say no to his question when there are so many drawn swords.

So it's very much a sort of,
cross from the coronation, a kind of armed camp.
And actually, the drawn swords are completely understandable
because this is the year of the great coronation riots.
So in at least 20 towns across England,
largely in the south and the west.
So in other words, those parts of the country
that actually had been pretty royalist in the Civil War,
if you look at the map.
The coronation day sees tremendous riots
by sort of Tory mobs, it's fair to say.
If you can imagine a Tory mob.
High church mobs, Tom.
So I know we have a lot of vickers
and people of the cloth who listen to this podcast
drawn by your work on Christianity.
And we also have at least one listener to this podcast
who lambasts us on Twitter whenever he suspects us of wiggory
or of low church sentiments or any tolerance of dissent
or any of these kinds of things.
So they would have been out rioting.
They absolutely would have been out rioting
because there had recently been a huge hullabaloo,
one of the great political controversies in all British history
about a man called Henry Secheverell
who had given this sermon in which he dissenters
and low church people.
And he'd been impeached by the House of Commons.
And this has been the single biggest issue
in the general election of 1710.
Great days.
Great days.
Great days.
So the mobs pour onto the streets on coronation day.
In Bristol, they shout,
Secheverell and the Duke of Ormond and damn all foreigners.
Great slogans.
In Taunton, church and doctor Secheverell.
In Birmingham, Tom, I know you're an Aston Villa supporter,
they chant, kill the old rogue by which they mean George I,
kill them all, Secheverell forever.
In Tewkesbury, Secheverell forever, down with the round heads.
All this sort of stuff.
So there's a lot of trouble.

There's not enough troops to kind of suppress it.
So the mobs kind of rage, rampage, unchecked.
But that's a good coronation tradition.
Going back at least to the time of William the Conqueror.
Yes.
William the Conqueror, mob, I mean,
there are lots of soldiers who do a lot of damage, aren't there?
Yes.
I mean, every side could join.
Because presumably there are people who are very keen
on George I as well.
Wigs.
Yes.
You know, he's saving Britain from the maxims of French tyranny
and the principles of popish superstition.
I suppose.
So there's also the whole issue of the May Poles.
So the May Pole is regarded by this point as a sort of
a symbol of Jacobitism, of incipient Jacobitism.
That's a great shame, isn't it?
Because it should be a symbol of merry England.
Well, you see, this is the thing.
It's seen as a symbol of merry England.
And people say all the roundheads hated May Poles in the 1650s.
And the wigs, if they're not challenged,
they will eventually get rid of May Poles.
And George I is merely a Trojan horse for anti-May Polism.
For anti-farm.
Exactly.
Exactly.
So people are still shouting and rampaging about.
And in Bedford, they actually dress the May Pole in morning.
In black.
You know, I love Hanover in England.
Well, it's all those memories of the Civil War.
Yeah.
I mean, the fact that people are going and rioting,
shouting about high church forever.
The thing I liked about George I,
as someone who's recently become a Scottish landowner,
inherited this tiny little place outside Barrick on Tweed.
I'm glad you described it.
Because whenever you say you've become a Scottish landowner,
I imagine a lot of people unsubscribe in horror.

Owning Ben Nevis or something.

No, it's a little crofter's cottage on the banks of the Tweed.
And he was crowned as King of the Kingdoms of England,
Scotland, Ireland and France, the Dominion of Wales,
and the town of Barrick upon Tweed.

It's a separate entity.

It's a separate entity.

Very good.

Very good.

That's good.

So this rioting actually, it then flares up again in 1715,
a year later at the General Election,
which is won by the Whigs,
and they then passed the Riot Act.

So the phrase that's very common.

Ah, okay.

So read the Riot Act.

To read the Riot Act is that the troops would read it out,
or somebody who would magistrate or whatever
would read it out to people if they don't disperse.

Well, there you go.

The Whigs stopping innocent people from having fun.

Cracking down.

By rioting.

Right, exactly.

So that's George I's coronation.

The coronation itself is a slight,
it's not that exciting compared with the rioting.

George II's coronation, 17...

That's splendid, isn't it?

Because that's the Handle one.

That's the Zagot and the Priest one.

Exactly.

Exactly.

So George II's coronation, I think,
is actually a real high point of coronations.

It actually goes well.

Nothing goes chaotically wrong.

Doesn't his queen wear a spectacularly ornamented dress?

She does with jewels.

With jewels.

So many jewels that they have to lift her up by a pulley
when she kneels down.

Yeah.

So she's kind of weighed down by the weight of rubies or whatever.

Can I see that at the Kings, wouldn't it?

That would be very much the answer of the critics of...

She's also given, we know that her mistress of the robes had a handkerchief to wipe off any oil that might fall on her face.

So that suggests to me that at this point in the anointing they're slightly more concerned about its sartorial implications.

Yeah.

Than they are about the sacral quality.

Well, because it must be really difficult, because essentially as Protestants, who are also very, you know, the spirit of enlightenment is going on, it's all that kind of thing.

I mean, it must be very weird that these rituals are still carrying, still being done.

Also, there's a lot of German blood in this coronation, and they're very practical people, the Germans.

They are, aren't they?

Hence the provision of handkerchiefs.

Also, hence the provision at this point, putting aside seats in Westminster Abbey for people to sell wine and coffee during the ceremony.

And do you think kind of portable toilets?

There are toilets put aside, and toilets will become an issue later in this podcast, Tom, you'll be pleased to hear.

Amazing.

I'll tell you who's still around at this coronation, and gets a laugh from the crowd.

Sarah Churchill, the Duchess of Moorbra, so the former favourite of Queen Anne.

Queen Anne, yeah.

She's still around.

The procession goes on a very long time, and it's very boring, apparently.

So she took a drum from one of the drummers and fell up and sat on it.

And people said,

oh, that's the wife of the Duke of Moorbra,

and they all cheered and laughed,
and thought it was hilarious.
He would have enjoyed that, wouldn't he?
He would, yeah.
And there, Sarah Churchill,
an elegant duchessal posterior.
Exactly.
So we know that actually this was an impressive occasion,
because there was a Swiss traveller
called César de Sussure,
and he went to a lot of this
and reported on it, and he said,
how come?
Did he buy a ticket?
Are they selling tickets?
Well, they do sell tickets.
Oh, but not to the ceremony in the evening?
No, not to the ceremony.
He was very impressed by the banquet.
He said the chandeliers were very good.
So there's a hereditary champion.
We haven't talked about the king's champion.
The champion always comes in on horseback
during the banquet in full armour.
And this Swiss fellow was out,
thought this was absolutely brilliant.
Well, it would be, wouldn't it?
I'm amazed that Charles hasn't brought that back.
Yeah, that would be fantastic.
He loves a retro stump, doesn't he?
Charles is very keen on the music,
and this is the musical coronation
because Handel,
who'd been brought over under George I,
one of the first last bits of legislation,
was an act to naturalise Handel
as a British citizen.
So Handel is given the job of writing the music.
He has four weeks to do it,
and he writes Zaidok the Priest,
which is the champion's league anthem,
or the genesis thereof,
that we started our series with.
And everybody immediately thinks it's brilliant.

The only thing that goes wrong
is that they actually, at the coronation,
the choir sang Zaidok the Priest at the wrong point.
They'd got in a terrible muddle with it,
and they'd sung the wrong words at one point
and done some anthem and forgotten to do the end.
So they sing this at the wrong point,
but apart from that, it's brilliant.
Wasn't there a problem with the choir boys as well
that their voices kept breaking in the rehearsal?
They'd say,
Oh, no.
So they had to kind of hurling fresh choir boys in
to take their places.
But the sense I get is that it's a kind of cycle
of shambolic, expertly organised,
shambolic, expertly organised.
And so it goes on.
Well, I think we've got two shambolics in a row, actually.
George III is an idea.
An absolute idea.
Well, George IV is pretty bad.
George III is an idea.
So they set up 1761.
They're learning from, what is it, about 30 years,
just over 30 years since George II's coronation.
They do the same.
They're going to have a big banquet in Westminster Hall.
They've got partitions.
They've got a sluice, and I quote,
for the reception of urinary discharges.
They've got, they sort out galleries and stuff in
Westminster Abbey.
However, everything else is rubbish and totally
shambolicly and disastrously organised.
So to start with, crowds are too big,
and there are too many people trying to get to
Westminster Abbey in carriages.
And there's a carriage jam outside Westminster Abbey.
So they can't, people can't get into the Abbey.
Everything is massively delayed.
They finally get into the Abbey,
and the person who is organising it,
who is, what's his name?

The Earl of Effingham, I think it is,
or something of Effingham.
He aptly named.
He's forgotten loads of the stuff.
He's forgotten the thrones, hasn't he?
He's forgotten, yeah.
There's no way for the king and queen to sit.
He's forgotten the sword of state,
so they have to borrow a sword,
a random sword from the Lord Mayor of London.
There's none of the canopy.
The canopy is a big deal for people in
18th century coronations.
They've forgotten the canopy,
so they have to sort of try and
cobble something together with a bit of cloth
and some sticks.
So this obviously looks awful.
It looks rubbish.
The crowds are so thick.
They're sort of pressing down.
There's not enough troops to hold back the crowds.
So the troops are having to beat back
the crowds with the flats of their swords
and the butts of their muskets.
So this is obviously not very,
you know, it's not the sort of spirit of jollity.
Sacral.
It's not very, it's not sacral at all.
I mean, if they've forgotten the thrones,
it's ludicrous behaviour.
All the spectators who write accounts.
So whereas the Swiss fellow said,
brilliant, 1727,
people now say they talk of always
confusion, irregularity and disorder.
There's a lawyer, isn't there?
William Hickey.
Oh, right, yes.
It's William Hickey there.
Who gives his account to the anointing.
It's very funny.
As many thousands were out of the possibility
of hearing a single syllable,

they took that opportunity to eat their meal.

When the general clattering of knives, forks, plates and glasses that ensued produced the most ridiculous effect and a universal bout of laughter.

That's right.

They've all brought in picnics.

I think this reflects very well on Hanoverian Britain.

And pies and stuff.

Well, it's either rioting or picnicking.

I mean, this is exactly how I think of the 18th century.

They keep having stocks.

Nobody knows what's meant to happen.

So at one point, the king's meant to take communion.

He doesn't know whether he should wear his crown or not.

But they obviously haven't been rehearsing enough.

No, they've done no rehearsal.

So here's where you've got a toilet issue.

They're set up a special toilet, which they call the retiring chamber for the queen to use behind the high altar in St Edford's Chapel.

When she gets there, she sneaks off to go to the loo.

When she gets there, she finds the Duke of Newcastle.

It's like a man who's using the ladders, you know, that kind of...

The Duke of Newcastle is self-identifying for a few minutes.

Right.

And he's sitting and seated on the closed stall, as they call it,

which must be a very unpalatable sight in the middle of a coronation.

Especially if he's eating a pie at the same time.

Right.

Sound of cutlery, meanwhile, and people laughing.

So...

Sounds great.

The whole thing takes six hours.

And by the time they get out, it's taken so long that it's all...

It's dark.

On the way back, the king complains to this bloke, Effingham,

and says,
This was a disaster.
This was my big day.
It was a disaster.
And Effingham says to him,
you know,
I grant you there has been some neglect.
But he says,
the good news is we've learned lessons,
and the next coronation will be really well organized.
That's what you want, isn't it?
And George III apparently found this highly amusing.
And you went around.
He went back and had bread and milk with his wife, didn't he?
Well, actually, the coronation banquet, Tom,
is, if that's a shamble,
the coronation banquet is possibly even worse.
So to start with,
they light this by these linen tapers.
And the linen tapers shower the guests with ash.
So everybody is covered in ash.
The organization, they've got...
The thing is organized by a bloke called
William Talbott, who's the Lord Steward.
And he is, I read,
was noted for his swaggering manners of rude demeanor.
And he's forgotten to put in enough tables.
So there's two groups,
the Barons of the Sink Ports
and the Aldermen of the City of London.
And there's no seats for them at all.
The Aldermen are given the table
of the Knights of the Bath,
and they're kicked out.
The Barons of the Sink Ports
have no table at all,
and they're told they just have to...
I hate they riot.
No, they're only silenced when this bloke,
William Talbott, challenges them to a duel.
Excellent.
So Miwa, he has trained his horse.
He's got a party trick.
He's trained his horse to walk backwards away from the king

as a sign of, you know, respect.
Like a sort of, like a Persian vizier,
you know, retreating from his sovereign.
But the horse gets it wrong
and keeps backing towards the king.
And whenever they put that dish...
So showing the king his arse
and presumably dumping.
Whenever the fish shoved the horse out,
they managed to get the horse out of the Westminster Hall.
The horse keeps forcing its way back in
and backing towards the king.
Exactly.
Great.
So it finally ends at 10 o'clock
and the banquet ends.
And actually what happens here
is not unique to 1761.
It happens to almost all of these banquets.
As soon as it ends,
the tradition is that the public
can then have whatever is left.
So there are people outside in the galleries
who are poised waiting for the last guest to leave.
It's like the Christmas sales.
Right.
But their faces pressed to the glass kind of.
Yeah.
And as soon as that happens,
it's all up for grabs and they pile in.
So they pile in and they take everything.
They'll take the tablecloths.
They take chairs.
They take plates.
And you know, this sort of mob
storming off with all this stuff.
And because it's regarded as traditional,
nobody wants to be the person who stops it.
So it continues.
Now, do you think we have time
for George IV before the break?
Yes, I think we absolutely do.
Just one note.
Yes.

Did you read this thing about
Bonnie Prince Charlie perhaps coming?
I didn't.
Surely he would not have been welcome.
Well, he apparently he attended the coronation
under the pseudonym of Mr. Brown.
Did he?
And he spoke to someone in the audience
and said he wouldn't want to be crowned
for anything.
It looked a terrible business.
Really?
It was reported in a newspaper.
Yeah, it's easy for him to say that
once he's lost that, isn't it?
Yeah, National Inquirer.
Yeah, I never wanted it anyway.
Yeah, so let's do George IV.
So his entry into the Abbey,
that's what I read at the start of this episode,
rolling in and looking like a gorgeous bird of the east.
I mean, he's all about the bling, isn't he?
Yeah, he is.
So I said George III was an idea,
but I don't think now I'm reconsidering that
because I think George IV is pretty bad.
So first of all, George IV,
his coronation actually is postponed
because of his marital difficulties.
So it was meant to be August 1820.
It gets put off by almost a year
because he wants to get rid of his wife,
Carolina Brunswick,
who he accused of never changing her underwear
in all the time he was married to her.
So I think it's fair to say
they both behaved pretty badly, didn't they?
George and Carolina Brunswick.
They just absolutely despised each other.
To George's credit, he's a great antiquarian.
So that's the kind of interesting thing.
I suppose it's a way of elbowing the Stuart's aside,
going back to the medieval coronation.
So there's kind of spirit of antiquarianism.

Absolutely.

And he's all about resurrecting medieval and Elizabethan looks, isn't he?

Yeah, he basically says everybody must dress as an Elizabethan.

So it's the first Ursatz coronation?

It is.

It's the first one.

Well, we've probably got about as far from the sacral now as we can ever get.

It's like he has a mind.

Let's do a fancy dress.

That's all.

So yes, but he insists that everybody else has to pay for their own fancy dress,

whereas he expects the country to pay for his.

To pay for his.

Because he's dressing as Napoleon.

Right.

Well, he's dressing, I mean, if you look at his garb, he's, yeah, he looks absolutely preposterous.

And actually you mentioned Napoleon.

So French war reparations actually foot a lot of the bill for this.

So I worked out the cost.

It was 238,000 pounds in terms of as a proportion of kind of GDP and whatnot in today's money,

that would be about 1.3 billion pounds.

Billion.

So this is the coronation to end all coronations.

It's the biggest blowout.

Now he's desperate to, that his wife is not allowed to take part.

The legislation to divorce her, kick her out,

has run into trouble because the Wigs have decided,

it's the Wigly Dory again,

the Wigs have decided to take her side because they despise

George and they despise the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool.

So Caroline does show up on the big day.

She shows up with her Chamberlain, Lord Hood.

She has written, Lord Hood has written and says, she's going to come.

Lord Howard, who's running the show, has written back and said,

So is this another Effingham?

He's a part of the family, exactly.

Part of the sort of Norfolk clan.

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The Duke of Norfolk is never allowed to preside over this because he's a Catholic.
So he always has to delegate it to some member of his extended family.
Well, she pitches up anyway.
She arrives on the big day at six o'clock in the morning at Westminster Hall.
There's a lot of people in the crowd who support her.
There are soldiers guarding Westminster Hall who don't let her in.
The commander of the guard says,
you can't come in without a ticket.
She says, I'm the Queen.
I don't need a ticket.
No good.
She's eventually turned away after trying various doors.
And then she and Lord Hood eventually go down to Westminster Abbey.
George IV has hired a lot of boxers to act as doorkeepers.
So one of these boxers says to her,
I'm not admitting, you know, you haven't got a ticket.
Love, you're not coming in.
And eventually surrounded by soldiers with bayonets,
she is turned away while the crowds shout, shame, shame.
And of course, Tom, as you will know,
so she's turned away from her husband's coronation.
She dies two weeks later.
So a very poignant scene.
I mean, actually, this would make a great film.
I was thinking this.
Yeah.
I mean, it's an amazing story.
The coronation of George III,
I was thinking we would make a great comedy.
Yeah.
This would make a great tragic comedy.
It would.
It would.
Actually, probably just a comedy.
It would make elements.
So George IV now arrives at his coronation.
She's gone.
He arrives and he's wearing this massive costume.
You know, as you said, it's very Napoleonic,
sort of huge, huge cloak and stuff.
And it's a very warm day and he's sweating.
I mean, he's a gentleman of size, isn't he?

Yeah.

What is he?

Like 60-inch waist or whatever it is.

Who's your fat friend?

He is soaked in sweat.

And he actually said to somebody afterwards,
I would not endure again the sufferings of that day
for another kingdom.

The actual content of the service,
unlike the Elizabethan or the Stuart period,
is pretty fixed at this point.

There's no controversy about the content.

And the arrangements go all right,
but the choir go out first because of some sort of,
I don't know, some communications breakdown.

So as the king processes out,
he has to go past all these empty benches
which are covered with the choir's litter.
So presumably the choir had been
themselves smuggling pies and sandwiches or whatever.

The procession to the banquets is a shambles
because a very strange thing.

It's the barons of the sink ports, again,
always causing trouble, Tom.

They're allowed this time and they've got seats.

They've got a canopy that they're meant to hold over George.

But George is very keen to be seen by the public.

So he, he tries to, he walks very fast.

So to get out from under the canopy.

So the poor wardens of the sink ports are scaring after him.

They start, they start walking fast too,
and they're described because they're trying
to outpace each other.

One of the spectators said,
it ended up with them making a somewhat unseemly jog.

Towards the banquet.

They get into the banquet.

Now they've learned their lesson from the linen tapers last time.

What they've put now is they've got massive wax candles
and chandeliers.

But because it's such a hot day, the candles melt.

So all the people sitting underneath, they're being hit by wax.

Wax is dripping on them.

There's more horse action in this one.

The Lord High Steward is the Marquis of Anglesey.
Now as the Lord High Steward,
he is required to ride into the banquet
and reveal the first dish on the table.
Unfortunately, he is the Marquis of Anglesey
who lost his leg at the Battle of Waterloo.
And he's wearing a prosthetic leg
and he can't get off his horse unaided.
So it's a shambles.
Pages have to come and like try to unscrew his leg
and get him off his horse.
And everybody starts laughing
and it ruins the atmosphere, I think it's best.
Cary on coronation.
Once again, the king leaves at eight o'clock.
He goes off.
The banquet continues a little while.
Once the guests are gone, the crowd pour in.
This time the rioting and stuff is much worse than ever.
So the soldiers fighting the crowd
over the remains of chicken legs,
smashed plates and all this kind of thing.
And it doesn't, all this isn't dispelled
until about three o'clock in the morning.
And the last anyone sees is some of sort of George IV's cronies.
They've drunk far too much having to be carried to their coaches.
So it doesn't show Britain at its best.
So Dominic, you asked me in the previous episode
which coronation would I most like to have seen.
I would definitely like to have seen that one.
I think that's my top coronation.
Well, it's a lot better than the,
so the next coronation with which we'll go in.
Oh, we don't want that one.
Come back and we'll do the most boring coronation of all time.
Most boring coronation of all time.
So there's a tempting offer for you.
That is a tempting offer.
All right, we'll see you after the break for that.
Then at the close of that solemn right,
they both put on their crowns
and take their sceptres in their hands
while neither of them frowns.
Then robed in purple and velvet,

they prepare to take their departure.
The queen goes first and the king follows after.
Then the king entered his beautiful coach.
The sides were made of glass,
especially made so that his subjects might see him pass.
And he seated himself by his queen, most lovely and gay.
Then the royal coach was driven by eight beautiful bays away.
And the people cried,
Long live King Edward and his beautiful queen,
declaring such a sight they had never seen
and which they would remember for many a day
because they had seen their king and queen on coronation day.
And that, Dominic is by very much friend of the show,
William McGonagall,
Scotland's greatest poet on the coronation of King Edward VII.
And in the first half,
we were listening to the pie consumption,
the toilets in Westminster Abbey,
horses arses, people falling over,
left, right and centre.
All tremendous carry on.
But from now on, coronations, they become more earnest, don't they?
They definitely become more earnest.
Deliberately so.
And after George III succeeded by his brother,
William IV,
who has absolutely no interest in or understanding
of coronations whatsoever to the degree
that he doesn't really want one at all.
He would have listened to your very first episode
in this series, Tom,
in bewilderment and horror
at the talk of the sacronage of coronations.
Because he's a bluff sailor.
He is a bluff sailor.
So he wouldn't have had any of that.
He was not a man for an abstract noun.
I think it's fair to say.
He didn't want a coronation.
He was told he had to have one.
His coronation happens in the run-up to the Great Reform Act.
So Britain is being convulsed by political controversy.
And he's having to deal with that.
There's sort of battle between the Whigs and the Tories

and popular unrest, demanding parliamentary reform,
all this stuff.

And he says, listen, if we're going to have a coronation,
I don't want any of the flummery.

So the coronation banquets, the king's champion on his horse,
all of these splendid traditions.

I despise them.

I don't want them.

And this is the point at which they're done away with.

So basically, the sort of spectacle
is limited to some sort of gun salutes
and a couple of small processions.

He wears an admiral's uniform.

Because as you said, he's a sailor with a robe over the top.

And the total cost is an eighth of George IV's coronation.

So, I mean, in some ways, it might as well not have happened.

But Dominic, could I just read what he said

about the moment where the crown was laid on his brow?

Go for it.

It was a great moment when I actually felt the crown
descending upon me and touching my temples.

I could not restrain a thrill, but not a joy of awe

of the responsibilities Almighty God
had been pleased to put upon me.

So actually, the sacrality does come through at the end.

So he sees the error of his ways.

Well, yes, I stand corrected.

So that said, it's a bit of an on event, isn't it,
his coronation?

And actually, even Queen Victoria, 1838, so seven years later,
her coronation is still rubbish.

So people often say, oh, coronations,
they're all in its oldest Victorian flurry.

But Queen Victoria's coronation wasn't really Victorian.

It was still Hanoverian.

Yeah.

And the Hanoverians did did better coronations
than the Victorians, actually, I would say.

Well, Victorians only did one.

Well, but you know, but you know, the Victorian angle
on this was that there was no anointing
of the Queen's breasts.

Yes.

I know you love this detail, Tom, which I find disturbing.

I just think it's, I mean, it's a kind of example of how the rituals evolve, isn't it?

Right.

Victorian prudery, I suppose.

So they've got the Victorian coronation.

Again, it's a lot cheaper than George IV.

It's probably what are we looking at?

It's about a quarter of the cost.

So it's more expensive than William IV.

But it's still pretty cut price.

It is the first coronation.

It's a mass tourism event because of railways.

So probably up to about half a million people come down to London and there's fireworks displays and there's things going on in the parks and there's hot air balloons.

I think that people in workhouses are given beer to toast it.

Are they?

Yeah.

Oh, that's nice.

Which is nice for them.

That's not very Victorian giving them beer, is it?

Victorian would be encouraging them to work a little bit harder for overnight or something.

Yes.

Sensibly they have a break for sandwiches halfway through the coronation.

I don't think the King will be doing that at his own coronation.

So the sandwiches are laid out on the altar, Tom.

Very unsacral behaviour.

Yeah.

Again, people say it wasn't very well rehearsed.

Witnesses say nobody knew what they were doing.

Disraeli, who was there as a young MP, said all those involved were always in doubt as to what came next and you saw the want of rehearsal.

And the Archbishop of Canterbury wedged the ring very painfully onto Victoria's finger.

Yes.

Made her young with pain.

But on the wrong finger.

Yeah.

The music was regarded, one newspaper said,
a strange medley of odd combinations.
Which doesn't sound very promising.
The aptly named Lord Roll.
Yes, he fell down the steps, didn't he?
He was 82.
He fell out down the steps.
He rolled right down in the words of Queen Victoria's diary.
That's Hanoverian.
That's the one touch there was.
Well, he is a Hanoverian if he's 82.
Rolling down steps and things.
But generally there's not enough chaos
and there's not enough vulgarity at Victoria's.
It's shambolic and under rehearsed
and a bit shabby.
Yeah.
And that's the reputation for kind of British
state occasions, isn't it?
That they have seen abroad as being not very good.
And the whole idea that state occasions
and royal occasions are what Britain does best
is something that presumably kicks in
due to the influence of the empire
and the need to kind of, you know,
parades and jubilees and things.
Although interestingly, I read something today
that some bloke who worked in Westminster Abbey
for sort of, you know, 80 years or something
was asked of the coronations of 1902, 1911,
1937 and 1953, which was the best.
And he said, oh, there's absolutely no doubt about it.
1953 was by far the best.
You know, far better organised, far more,
you know, as time went on.
Because it was on TV.
So the whole world would be watching it.
The whole world would be watching.
I mean, they couldn't have horses,
arses and people falling down steps for that.
No, they didn't do that.
Well, they sort of do go in fancy dress, don't they?
I mean, actually, nobody thinks
that the fancy dress they're wearing,

people think of it as...

What, people wear to coronations?

Yeah, but a lot of this is thanks to George IV,
ludicrous pantomime senses of costume, isn't it?

Yeah.

Anyway, 1902 is Edward VII, Edward the Caressa.

He has his mistresses, doesn't he, in a box?

He does indeed.

And he also, he's another very large man
with probably not a...

You know, he's not a great man for sort of...

for dieting, I think it's fair to say,

or not an abstemious man.

And he has an abdominal abscess just before the coronation,

which means it has to be postponed, I think,

pretty much two days before the big day.

So one consequence is they've got loads of things

planned for the people, and they decide

to go ahead and do them anyway.

So there's a coronation dinner for the poor of London, Tom.

They were going to serve 500,000 dinners to Londoners.

Is that the one that the maids went to?

I think it probably is.

That we talked about in Downton Abbey episode.

It must be.

They gave out...

Every single person was given a tin of round trees chocolate.

But, get this.

Round trees had two different kinds of chocolate.

Some for the poor people who were attending the dinner,

and some for the people who were stewards,

helping the poor people.

And the people who were stewards got better chocolate

than the diners, because round trees said

they would be of greater influence socially than the poor.

Well, at least they're being honest.

Well, I suppose so.

But the other consequence is that

a lot of the European bigwigs who were meant to be coming
to this coronation had to go home.

They couldn't stay around for two months,

waiting for people to clear up their abdominal abscesses.

So, as a result, it became much more British

and much more imperial than it would otherwise have been.

Oh, that's interesting.
Which is interesting.
So, is that what then kind of instituted the idea
that coronation should be an imperial occasion?
I think it probably would have been a bit imperial anyway,
but it's even more imperial, yes.
But, I mean, that's the key note.
Presumably, for George V,
I know nothing about George V's coronation.
Yeah.
But, I mean, it is for George VI,
and definitely for Elizabeth II.
Yeah.
I've read with the 7th and George V,
basically, I have the same coronation.
You know, Sikh troops,
Field Marshal Lord Roberts,
Lord Kitchener, you know.
But George V doesn't have his mistresses in a box.
No, he doesn't.
Moustaches.
And one nice thing, actually,
about Edward VII's coronation
is he has the Commanders of the Boers along
to watch a naval review.
And they'd only just signed the peace deal.
So, he has the Lewis Boater and these other characters.
So, they'd literally only signed the end of the war.
It was only a sort of two months earlier.
And he said,
oh, come to the coronation.
It'd be a great laugh.
You know, we can all be friends.
Did they have a good time?
I think they did, actually.
I think they did.
I mean, then they go and they think,
I don't think they think,
oh, we've been generally patronized
and treated very badly.
There's a sort of sense,
oh, well, this is fair play.
Well done.
You know, hurrah for everybody.

So, he dies in 1910, doesn't he?
George V, one of my favorite people
from all history, Tom.
I know, Dominic.
You know what you said when his father died?
I've lost my best friend and the best of fathers.
I never had a crossword with him in my life.
I love George V.
I'm assuming that his coronation is incredibly dull.
You're thinking about stamp collecting, I imagine.
Of course, and his creases and his trousers.
His wife, Mary, has the Koh-e-Nor diamond in her crown.
Mary, Queen Mary of Ek.
Is it tech?
Tech, tech, tech.
Queen Mary of Tech.
I thought you got mad then, Tom.
So, George V has this coronation.
He says, it was a terrible ordeal.
He writes in his diary.
It was grand, yet simple and most dignified
and went without a hitch.
I love what I love about George V.
It's not just that he's so boring.
It's also that he's such a family man.
He says, I nearly broke down
when did David came to do homage to me,
as it reminded me so much when I did the same thing
to my beloved papa.
So, David is the future Edward VIII.
Who is a very bad man.
He's a bounder.
He's a bounder.
He's a cat and a bounder.
So, George IV enjoys it.
He has a tremendous time.
He says he's a bit tired at the end.
And they must have had great coronation stamps.
Brilliant stamps.
So, he must have loved that,
so special edition stamps
that he could then get for free.
There's none of the banquet of vulgarity with him.
Do you know what he does

after the coronation for the rest of the day?
Does he go and shoot loads of birds?
No.
He goes and answers his telegrams.
Excellent.
I should have guessed.
Then he goes off to India
for the Delhi Durbar.
The Great Durbar, yes.
Which I suppose is a kind of coronation, isn't it?
It is.
Well, they have none of the crown jewels
that are allowed to leave the United Kingdom.
Fortunately, however,
India is full of jewels.
Right.
Yes.
Have a habit of finding their way into...
Indian crowns.
These are British crowns.
It's completely reasonable
for Indian crowns to come to Britain,
but obviously not by his versa.
Of course.
So, a special imperial crown
of India is made for him
and he goes off to Delhi with it.
So, Coronation Park in Delhi,
about 60,000 people turn up.
He and Mary of Tech seated on thrones
in their full gear.
He says in his diary,
I mean, it's the most amazing thing.
It's the most extraordinary ritual,
probably in British history,
that this incredibly boring man
who loves his stamps
and worries about shooting birds
and creasing his trousers
is sitting on a throne
while thousands of Indian dignitaries
are queuing up to pay homage to him.
Kind of princes.
And he says in his diary

what he writes is,
rather tired after wearing my crown
for three and a half hours,
it hurt my head as it is pretty heavy.
And that's all he has to say.
But the next day,
they go to the Red Fort
and he and Mary,
they go out deliberately,
modeled on the Mughal emperors.
And they're certainly modeled
on the Mughal emperors
to receive the salutes
of half a million people
who have come to see them.
And then he goes and shoots
something like 20,000 pheasants
or something.
I knew that killing animals
had to feature at some point.
He writes in his diary,
I think we went a bit too far today
or something like that.
So actually George,
the sixth coronation,
I think is quite boring.
I don't want to be disrespectful,
but he is quite boring.
So he's the one,
he's King's speech,
father of Queen Elizabeth II,
King during the Second World War.
And he shouldn't have got it
because this coronation
has been explicitly arranged
for his brother,
Dear David,
Edward VIII,
who has deserted his post, Tom,
to go off for the American Divorcee,
something that, you know,
we don't approve of
on the rest of his history.
He's gone off.

This is a very big empire
and dominions kind of coronation.
So the prime ministers
from all the dominions
are present for the first time
in their procession.
Once again,
you've got tons of contingents
of kind of Indian troops,
Canadians, Australians,
all of those kinds.
Tom, you're yawning even while...
Sorry, I thought of it
as a way for me to be bored.
It's the first radio coronation,
so he gives an address.
This is your Lionel Loog,
Jeffrey Rush in the film.
Yeah, of course, of course.
Don't stammer,
all this stuff.
The BBC do film
and will televised the procession.
I mean, nobody has a television,
so I don't know who's actually watching,
sort of 15 people in Surrey
or something.
You look, there's me.
Exactly, in the procession.
Have you seen it?
No, have you seen it?
No, of course not.
I couldn't be less interested in it.
Golly, Tom, you're really...
George VI coronation, I think,
of all the things we've done
across all the entire sweep
and span of our podcast,
is the single most boring thing
that I can think of.
You think of anything more boring?
Yes, yes.
We recorded an episode that we never put out
because it was so boring.

It was so boring that while we were doing it,
I booked a holiday.
Do you remember the episode?
Yes, I do.
That was worse than this.
Okay, but that hasn't gone out.
I'm assuming it is going out.
Anyway, listen, make it interesting for listeners.
Second World War is just storm clouds overhead.
Storm clouds are building.
Meanwhile, in Germany...
Herr Hitler.
Yeah, exactly.
There you go, done.
This was the second, 1953.
Filmed in 3D, Tom.
Did you know that?
Did you know it was filmed in 3D?
No, no, that is interesting.
I once did.
I was a talking head on a Channel 4 documentary
called The Coronation in 3D,
and what I was required to do
was to go down and they kept saying,
now, can you answer this question by explaining
why it's really appropriate that Elizabeth II
was filmed in 3D in 1953?
It's very hard to answer that.
But the most popular member of the procession
was the Queen of Tonga.
Famously, it rained on the Coronation Day in 1953.
It's a kind of miserable occasion
in post-war, where it's only just coming out
of the long period of post-war austerity.
So it's kind of greyness to London
and a greyness to the proceedings, I would say.
And it starts raining and in Tonga,
if you are somebody's guest,
it is regarded as impolite to imitate them in any way.
So all the characters put up their hoods.
That's if she didn't.
And she doesn't.
And so the crowd can see her.
The crowd can see her and they think...

It's not because she's quite large.
And because she's kind of quite jolly,
the cradles start waving and laughing
and everybody says,
oh, the Queen of Tonga, what a tremendous person.
And she is the great star.
She's the only person who goes to that
that I know anything about.
Well, Churchill went.
I didn't know that Churchill went.
Of course, I mean, I assume he went.
But I don't know anything he did there.
He just, you know, wiped away tears
at the spectacle of a radiant young Queen.
Exactly.
Nehru went to that coronation.
That's nice.
Nehru went.
But you're right.
It's actually a surprisingly dull occasion,
though it's really livened up by Everest.
So it's on the morning of the coronation
that the news reaches Britain.
There's Redmond Hillary and Tenzing Norgay.
They're brought by James Morris,
who will shortly become Jan Morris.
Exactly.
So broken in the times by James later, Jan Morris.
And we'll be doing an episode on that.
We will be doing an episode about the conquest of Everest.
So in the newspapers in Britain,
there is this sort of enormous outpouring
of patriotic sentiment.
Oh, my gosh.
You know, I mean, Redmond Hillary,
he's not actually British,
but he's treated in the newspapers as though he,
I mean, he's New Zealand, so he might as well be British.
And then everybody says,
oh, hurrah, hurrah, we're top nation once again
and all this sort of carry on.
The other thing is, of course, TV.
Let's say 25 million people watch it on TV.
And yet there are only about

two to three million televisions in Britain.

So people are literally cramming into their neighbour's houses to watch.

And it's the single biggest, most important moment in the massive take up of television in 1950s Britain.

You know, because people are desperate to see this sort of, this extraordinary spectacle through the miracle of television, Tom.

Yes.

And of course, still then, a largely Christian country differential towards authority.

Yeah, that's true.

Absolutely true.

Yeah.

Not much of a Republican movement then.

I mean, literally, you could probably fit it in a phone box.

There are lots of people who are maybe indifferent to the monarchy or even people who think, well, I don't really like them, but there's no organised Republican movement worthy of the name.

So quite different circumstances to today's coronation.

I think the Republican movement, you could still pretty much fit in a phone box.

It's about a quarter of the population.

No, but that's not the same as Republican movement, though, is it?

No, I've seen people who regard the whole thing with contempt and, you know, flummery and mumbo jumbo and why we're paying for this nonsense.

Maybe about a quarter of the population.

I think it's just, you know, we've been in the first episode looking at how these rituals have long sustained a kind of deep meaning and even over the course of the past few hundred years,

where that meaning has been misunderstood
or, you know,
misinterpreted or occluded or whatever.
It's still been there
and it was obviously incredibly important for the Queen.
You know, she devoutly believed
that it had been a sacramental moment.

Yes.

A bit like Elizabeth I.

You know, she's been married to her nation,
all that kind of thing.

Yeah.

I think that what's interesting about
the operational orb it's called, isn't it,
the chalice's coronation,
is that probably most people will view it
as either with indifference,
they won't bother with it at all.

Or they'll watch it as a spectacle.

Yeah.

Or they will be radically infuriated
by the whole spectacle.

Yeah.

Or they will be very excited
by the very sacral quality
of this coronation.

Tom, the group that I've
at least persuaded by
is the people who, like you,
are convinced of the sacrality
of the occasion.

I think there's an awful lot of people,
probably a majority, who enjoy a spectacle.

I completely agree.

And I think it's always been that way.

But the fact remains that it is
a sacral occasion.

Without that sacral occasion,
there's no point in having it.

And people may ignore it,
they may despise it,
they may not even be aware of it.
But it remains a religious service.

Yeah.

And that is, I think,
a challenge in a country that is
increasingly, you know,
not Christian,
not interested in religion at all.
Because I think for the first time,
it means that we have rituals
surrounding the enthronement
of our head of state
that probably mean very little
to the vast majority of people
who are watching it, I would say.
So I think that is something new.
I would wander deep down
how much those rituals meant
to lots of the people in those crowds.
No, I agree.
I agree.
But they might not understand the theology,
they might not understand the scriptural references,
they might not understand
the precise significance of the ritual.
But they would be aware that it was significant.
Yeah.
If you asked people,
I mean, even at kind of George III or whatever,
they'd say,
does it matter that you have one?
So the example of that is
William IV.
Who's told he has to have one even if he doesn't want one.
He's basically told he has to have one
because he picks up a crown,
doesn't he, or something,
and puts it on his head and says,
I had a coronation.
Yeah.
And gets told in no uncertain terms there,
you have to have it.
But now I think people,
lots of people would just be simply
bewildered by what's going on.
I think you've spent too much time in there.
The Metropolitan didn't pass this time.

You know, when I,
when I tread the streets of middle England,
I see people sobbing with joy at the thought of the coronation.
Dusting down their bunting.
Exactly.
Dusting down their bunting.
Our next-door neighbor has bunting, actually.
A note of hope.
Yeah.
Could I end the series by quoting a tweet
by Francis Young, who was...
I know you like Francis Young.
You came on our podcast to talk about the occult.
He did.
Magic in Merlin's realm.
And he was very keen on all the occult significance
of pavements in Westminster Abbey and things.
And he tweeted,
the king seems to be going hard
on the sacrilization of monarchy.
Oil consecrated in Jerusalem.
The Cosmati pavement uncovered.
So that's the one in Westminster Abbey.
Relics of the True Cross.
So they were given to him to Charles by the Pope.
The St. Augustine Gospels.
So they've come from, I think, Corpus Christi College,
the oldest gospels in Britain.
More privacy for the anointing.
This is wild.
So that's...
I think he's wrong.
I'll tell you what I think is wild.
Toilets being set up in chapels,
sandwiches laid out on the altar,
horses coming in backwards,
such ever all forever.
I'm absolutely torn between excitement
at the Cosmati pavement being uncovered
and disappointment that there isn't going to be a horse
backing up to the king and showing him his arse.
If there's no high church riot in Taunton,
I should be very disappointed.
Well, you can organise one.

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 329: Coronations: Chaos, Ceremony and Empire

I could. I could indeed.
The great riot of Chipping Norton.
Get on with it.
So on that bombshell,
Tom, the coronation has actually turned out to be
much more interesting than I thought.
It's like the Olympics, isn't it?
I mean, I compared them to the Olympics right at the beginning.
And I remember when we finished doing the two episodes
we did in the Olympics, we ended by saying,
well, that was a lot more interesting than I thought it would be.
It's good to end rest of this history episodes that way,
rather than end the other way.
It's a lot worse than I thought it was going to be.
Yeah.
So thanks very much for listening.
We hope that you have a good coronation,
whether you are going to watch it,
or whether you're just bunking off
or doing whatever you're doing.
Have fun.
God bless the king.
God save the king.
May the king live forever.
Or, you know, on the revolution,
if that's how you feel,
we're open to all political persuasions here.
So have a good time.
Yes, of course we are.
Goodbye.
Thank you.