

Q for Queens

I've seen our present Queen in person twice. The first time we were taken from school to see her car pass by in Oldham. I vaguely remember standing by the roadside and waving a small Union Jack as she passed by. I was disappointed as I expected her to be wearing her crown and a velvet robe.

The second time I was sitting in the doctor's surgery waiting for my ante-natal appointment when, in a flurry of activity, the surgery emptied. I followed everyone to the door, just in time to see the Royal car passing along the A6 with the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh inside.

When we were on holiday in North Wales in the early 1950s, it was rumoured that the Royal train was to pass along the coastal railway line very close to the chalet in which we were staying. My dad spruced us all up and we sat on the wall that bordered the railway line. For ages and ages. We were at the point of rebelling when we heard the sounds of a steam train approaching. We had our little flags poised to wave at the Queen but the train speeded past, all the blinds firmly closed and not a golden crown to be seen.

I watched the Coronation of Elizabeth II at my aunty Lilian's house on Downing Street. It was quite unusual to have a television in those days so it seemed as though all the neighbours as well as all our large family had squashed into the small living room to watch proceedings on the 9 inch screen.

We amused ourselves as children dressing up as Queens. We borrowed some net curtain, made a paper crown and stole our Mum's high heels to dress as Queen of the May. Our corner was an ideal spot to cadge pennies off the mill girls and the men going to and from Josh Heap's engineering works.

Sunday School socials often had Fancy dress competitions. My Mum's friend lent us a red velvet cloak, white dress with red hearts sewn on and gold crown so that I could enter as the Queen of Hearts. I carried a tray with jam tarts on it, trying hard not to drop them all over the floor. I managed to carry the tray successfully as I paraded around the room.

When I was about five I was chosen to be in the retinue of the Rose Queen. The tradition of having a Rose Queen to represent the chapel went back many years. The Rose Queen was in fact a late Victorian invention encouraged, and perhaps even created, by clergy and respectable churchgoers as a piece of safe and controlled pageantry. The Queen herself was an older girl, often in her late teens or early twenties. She had a long dress and a cloak with a train which was held aloft by her retinue, usually small girls aged between 5 and 8. A few older girls were also part of the retinue and probably on hand to keep the younger children in order. There were three or four boys also in attendance. One was to walk at the front carrying a silk cushion on which was the new queen's crown. At the crowning ceremony the retiring queen from the previous year would crown the newly appointed queen who 'reigned' for that coming year. If you were part of the Rose Queen retinue you walked behind the Queen at the Whit Walks procession and took part in fund-raising activities for chapel. The current Rose Queen had to entertain other Rose Queens from around the town at different times of the year.