

THE PRINCESS BRIDES

When the young Victoria defied tradition by choosing to wear white on her wedding day, she created a new fashion – and ever since then, Royal bridal gowns have been reinterpreted a myriad times over, heralding hope as well as heritage, and defining the identity of those enigmatic women who may come to wear the Crown

BY CATRIONA GRAY

Princess Elizabeth photographed by Bert Hardy on her wedding day in November 1947

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Left: the official portrait for the engagement of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in 2010



Left: the recently engaged Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip in July 1947. Right: the Duke of York and Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon on the occasion of their engagement in 1923



Meghan Markle and Prince Harry photographed by Alexi Lubomirski for their engagement last December. Left: the newly engaged Princess Margaret and Antony Armstrong-Jones in February 1960

There's something about a Royal wedding that captures the imagination – the pomp, the ceremony, and of course, the wonderful gowns. When Meghan Markle begins the journey to St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle on 19 May, she will be embarking upon her greatest performance yet: that of the Royal consort. As an actress, Markle is used to the spotlight, but her forthcoming marriage will mean acclimatising herself to a far greater degree of scrutiny than anything she has experienced before. And perhaps she will make no greater statement of intent in how she navigates her new position than in her choice of bridal attire.

Already Markle seems to be negotiating the pressures of Royal dressing with ease, favouring classic, elegant choices. Her engagement photographs show her firstly in a Ralph & Russo dress, the sheer black tulle embroidered with swirling fronds of burnished gold thread, and secondly in a simple white crewneck from Victoria Beckham's latest ready-to-wear collection. It is no coincidence that these are both British labels, so it seems to be a subtle signal that Markle is likely to continue the time-honoured Royal tradition of picking a UK designer to create her wedding dress – given Ralph & Russo's exquisite couture and Beckham's celebrity following, these two brands are strong contenders.

As it happens, our archetypal vision of a wedding gown was invented by one of Prince Harry's ancestors. Before Queen Victoria's marriage in 1840, it had been common practice for Royalty to wear coloured robes for their nuptials, and white was not particularly associated with marriage. However, Queen Victoria broke with convention and chose a spectacular creation made from ivory Spitalfields silk, the bodice, skirts and the voluminous ruffled sleeves trimmed with Honiton lace from Devon. She deliberately donned a garland of orange blossom instead of a coronet, along with a gauzy veil that floated about her, setting aside her regalia in favour of a costume that was beautiful, youthful and very feminine. Pictures of her dress were circulated around the world and were so admired that this became the template for bridalwear within Victoria's lifetime – and remains the dominant style in Western culture to this day.

It is something of a paradox that the woman who popularised white weddings is best known for dressing in black – Victoria famously wore widow's weeds for 40 years after her husband's death, instigating the cult of mourning that pervaded the latter part of the 19th century. And yet, long before white was associated with marriage, mediaeval queens wore it as the shade of deepest mourning, and it still has that significance in many Eastern cultures, symbolising purity and rebirth. It is used for christening robes (a miniature version of Queen Victoria's bridal garb has been worn by every successive generation of Royal children at their baptisms) but it is also the colour of shrouds.

The Gothic tropes that pervade the popular literature of the time play upon this duality to chilling effect – Rochester's mad wife in *Jane Eyre*, ripping a veil in half, the night before the protagonist's wedding; the jilted Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, still clinging to her decaying bridal finery; the unnerving, wraith-like figure in Wilkie Collin's seminal sensation novel, *The Woman in White*... That each of these examples caught the public imagination so effectively illustrates the resonance and power behind the colour white, which signifies such mixed meanings.

There are striking similarities between Queen Victoria's wedding dress and that of her daughter-in-law Alexandra, a Danish princess who married Victoria's eldest son Edward in 1863. 'Alexandra was immensely popular – she was the Diana of her day,' says Elly Summers, who has curated a new exhibition on the clothes of four Royal women (Queen Alexandra, Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret) at the Fashion Museum in Bath. 'People took note of what she wore and copied it. The reason that Royal wardrobes are so scrutinised is because they represent a highly coded way of dressing, where every choice is significant. Royals are often unable to speak freely, so they express themselves through what they wear.'

Alexandra was establishing herself as a leader of fashion and a personality in her own right, as evinced by her wedding dress, which was far more voluminous than Queen Victoria's: a veritable meringue of ruched silk and elaborately worked lace. As for the orange blossom, Alexandra was absolutely swathed in it. She wore a heavy headdress of white imitation flowers and green foliage, with trailing sprays of blooms decking her layered skirts. Although the costume is a centrepiece of the Bath exhibition, it is not quite the same garment that swept across the flagstones of St George's Chapel – it was simplified following the wedding so that the Princess could wear it as part of her trousseau.

When the time came for our current monarch to marry, the then Princess Elizabeth chose the British couturier Norman Hartnell to make her dress. By 1947, Hartnell had spent almost a decade designing clothes for the two Princesses and their mother, and his name had become synonymous with Royal couture. Despite post-war rationing, Hartnell declared that he intended to create 'the most beautiful dress I had so far made'. Taking inspiration from Botticelli's *Primavera*, his design was almost entirely covered with floral motifs to symbolise the regeneration and growth that was tentatively emerging in the wake of two devastating world wars. As heir to the throne, this bride was particularly significant – she heralded a new Elizabethan age of modernity and promise, a sign of spring flowering after a long winter. 'I marked in circles the rich white roses of York to be carried out in padded satin, and centred by raised strands of pearls threaded on silver wire and raised up in relief,' said Hartnell. 'Wherever there was space or weakness of design I drew more wheat, more leaves, more blossom of orange, syringa or jasmine.'

Ten thousand seed pearls had to be transported from

Right: Queen Victoria before her wedding to Prince Albert in 1840. Below: Princess Elizabeth on her wedding day



Above: Princess Margaret and Antony Armstrong-Jones at Buckingham Palace in May 1960. Right: Queen Alexandra in March 1863



The Princess of Wales at St Paul's Cathedral in July 1981. Above left: Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon en route to Westminster Abbey in April 1923



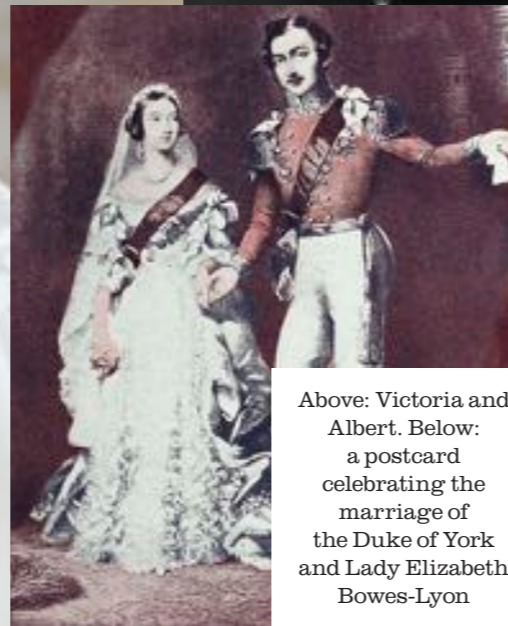


On the balcony of Buckingham Palace, from left: Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip in November 1947. Princess Margaret and Antony Armstrong-Jones in May 1960. The Prince and Princess of Wales in July 1981. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in April 2011

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The Duchess of Cambridge arriving at Westminster Abbey for her wedding in April 2011. Right: Princess Margaret on the way to her wedding. Bottom left: guests at Princess Margaret's nuptials, including Princess Anne, carrying a confetti basket



Above: Victoria and Albert. Below: a postcard celebrating the marriage of the Duke of York and Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon



Carole Middleton and the Duchess of Cornwall en route to Buckingham Palace after the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's ceremony

America for embellishments, and were briefly held up at customs, while anti-Japanese sentiments in the wake of the war sparked concerns about the origins of the ivory silk used in the gown. The British public felt extremely invested in the marriage of their future Queen, and there were even reports of people sending in their own clothing coupons to aid with the making of the dress, amid rumours that the Princess would be subject to the same restrictions as everyone else. However, Hartnell's creation was spectacular, managing to be both pretty and supremely regal. Viewers of *The Crown* will recall that the hugely popular television series chose the Royal wedding for its opening scene, the moment that propelled the Princess into the spotlight for the first time, her youth and loveliness accentuated by her breathtaking costume, which cost £30,000 to replicate for the 2016 episode.

When Princess Margaret married the photographer Antony Armstrong-Jones almost 13 years later, Hartnell was also her couturier of choice. At 29, she was an older bride than her sister, with sophisticated tastes and a glamorous social circle. She was a long-standing client of Christian Dior, who described her as 'a real fairy-tale princess, delicate, graceful, exquisite'. Her silk organza gown was markedly different to her sister's, notable for its simplicity and lack of adornment, which not only suited her petite frame, but also reflected the changing era. It was 1960 and Margaret was the first British Royal in 400 years to marry a commoner. The decade to follow was to be remembered for breaking down class barriers and fostering a new liberal atmosphere, and Princess Margaret's marriage exemplified that, and her wedding too captured the zeitgeist – or perhaps defined it.

However, it is Princess Diana who best exemplifies the romantic ideal of a virginal bride in a fairy-tale gown. The image of her stepping out of a horse-drawn carriage in July 1981, borne up to St Paul's in a cloud of chiffon and taffeta, captured the imagination of the entire nation. The designers David and Elizabeth Emanuel recalled how she was keen to make a statement with the dress, and kept the details of the design a secret, wanting it to be a surprise. She succeeded – her 25-foot train remains the longest in Royal history, while the voluminous puffed sleeves, corseted waist and huge skirt set the tone for bridalwear for the rest of the decade, a New Romantic gown worn by one of the era's most famous figures. 'Just two days after the wedding there were headlines about copies of the dress being available to buy,' says Eleri Lynn, who curated an exhibition on Diana's style at Kensington Palace last year. 'The fact that Diana chose to work with young, upcoming names rather than with the more established, traditional designers perhaps gave an insight into how she viewed her role – that she intended to take a contemporary approach.'

And yet, for all her freshness and hope, Diana became one of the Royal family's most tragic figures with her untimely death in 1997. The extraordinary period of national mourning that followed saw her elevated into an almost saintly figure, the white flowers of her memorial garden at Kensington Palace now a perennial reminder of the young bride. Westminster Abbey, where Diana's funeral took place, was also the location chosen by Prince William for his own marriage, 30 years after his parents' nuptials, and that occasion prompted a fresh wave of remembrance for the former princess. In a 2017 documentary entitled *Diana, Our Mother: Her Life and Legacy*, Prince William said: 'When it came to the wedding, I did really feel that she was there.'

Like Princess Diana, the Duchess of Cambridge engaged an emerging designer to make her bridal attire – Sarah Burton, who had recently been appointed creative director of Alexander McQueen in the turbulent months following its founder's demise. Unlike Diana's fabulous confection of a dress, the Duchess opted for a more streamlined style that evoked elements of an earlier era; at the time, Karl Lagerfeld remarked that 'it almost reminds me of... the Royal weddings in the Fifties'. Certainly the unusual V-shaped neckline bore a remarkable resemblance to that of Princess Margaret's gown, while the silhouette, with its padded hips and narrow corseted waist, was a nod both to Her Majesty's 1947 wedding garb and to that iconic dress of Queen Victoria's that started it all.

As the first of a new generation of female Windsors, the Duchess of Cambridge has a style that is a study in how to balance tradition with modernity, of recognising Royal protocol while portraying a more youthful, approachable side to the monarchy that sees her photographed in everything from couture gowns to high-street brands. Her wedding day symbolised the multifaceted nature of the modern Royals, for in fact Sarah Burton designed two different gowns for the Duchess to wear. The first famously graced the Abbey, but the Duchess changed into a simpler number for the reception, which she paired with a white angora shrug, her formal hairstyle replaced by loose waves. This delineation between public and private suggests that although the Duchess of Cambridge is one of the most photographed women in the world, for the most part what we see is a carefully curated image, an exemplar of self-fashioning. And although the last few years have seen an upsurge in fitted white wedding dresses with long lace sleeves, just like the Duchess' ceremonial gown, you get a sense that no matter how much we study the Royals, their true selves will always remain an enigma.

As Meghan Markle prepares to join the ranks of Royal brides, it remains to be seen if she will choose Alexander McQueen like the Duchess of Cambridge, follow Pippa Middleton's lead and pick Giles Deacon, or forge her own relationship with a new designer. But whatever she decides, it's likely that before May is out, her choice will have subtly influenced the prevailing style of wedding dresses, and a fresh wave of brides will take their cues, once more, from the trends set by the Royal family. □

'Royal Women: Alexandra, Mary, Elizabeth and Margaret' is at the Fashion Museum (www.fashionmuseum.co.uk) in Bath until 28 April 2019.

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