

## **Guide to the Coronation Service**

Westminster Abbey has witnessed 39 coronation ceremonies of reigning monarchs, with 40 crowned. The only joint coronation was that of William III and Mary II in 1689. Edward V, the boy king (one of the “Princes in the Tower”) and Edward VIII, who abdicated, were never crowned.

Once a new monarch succeeds to the throne the work of planning his or her coronation begins almost immediately. Coronations are State occasions, so although they take place in Westminster Abbey they are not organised by the Dean and Chapter but by the Earl Marshal, one of the great Officers of State, and by the Archbishop’s office.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has the duty of preparing the order of service and to him alone belongs the right of officiating at it and of crowning the Sovereign and the Queen Consort if any (though for various reasons others have very occasionally taken his place). Many other officials of Church and State traditionally participate in the ceremony.

The Dean of Westminster, as successor to the medieval abbots of Westminster, has the right to instruct the Sovereign in all matters relating to the ceremony and to assist the Archbishop at the anointing. During the investiture the Archbishop receives from the Dean various items of Regalia, culminating in the Crown of St Edward.

At various times in the past the historic fabric of the Abbey has been badly damaged by these preparations. The raised Theatre area in the Abbey lantern has to be constructed, and, since the coronation of William IV until that of Elizabeth II, an Annexe at the west door for the marshalling of processions was specially built, plus a large number of galleries to accommodate the congregation. Prior to 1831 the monarch had processed to the Abbey from Westminster Hall and a lavish banquet was held there after the ceremony (the last one was held in 1821). The traditional procession from the Tower of London on the eve of the service had been discontinued by James II. In 1953 the Abbey was closed for five months while the building was made ready to receive 8,251 guests. For the 2023 coronation of Charles III no extra seating was constructed and no annexe was required as the number of guests was much smaller.

The essential elements of the coronation service used in modern times can be traced back to the crowning of King Edgar at Bath in A.D. 973. He became the first King of All England. As at modern coronations there was a procession, an oath or promise, anointing and investiture followed by the Mass. That tenth-century liturgy, drawn up by St Dunstan, underwent various adaptations in the early middle ages. William the Conqueror chose to be crowned in the Abbey on Christmas Day 1066, as he claimed to be the lawful successor of the Saxon king Edward the Confessor and it was appropriate that he should receive the crown of England near Edward’s grave in the church. His immediate successors were also crowned in the Abbey and therefore laid the foundation of the right of Westminster Abbey to be the coronation church of the kings and queens of England.

Around 1382, probably in preparation for the crowning of Anne of Bohemia (Richard II's consort), a new fine copy of the order of service was made. This illuminated manuscript, known as the *Liber Regalis*, is one of the great treasures of the Abbey. It provided the order of service for all subsequent coronations up to, and including, that of Elizabeth I. For the coronation of James I in 1603 the liturgy was translated into English. Nevertheless, with occasional adaptations to suit the political and religious circumstances of the time, the *Liber Regalis* remained the basis for all later coronation liturgies. Monarchs have always been crowned in the context of the Eucharist or Holy Communion, the coronation ceremonies being interpolated at various points in the Eucharistic liturgy. Only for the coronation of the Roman Catholic James II in 1685 was the Communion service omitted.

In the past, on the night before the coronation, the Regalia was brought from the Tower of London to the Abbey and kept overnight in the Jerusalem Chamber, guarded by Yeoman Warders. The next morning the clergy of the Abbey processed with the Regalia through the cloisters and into the church. The oil was consecrated at that time. The Imperial State Crown is taken to the altar in St Edward's Chapel. Items for use in the main procession were taken to the regalia table in the annexe. For the 2023 ceremony the oil was consecrated prior to the ceremony, there was no regalia procession except during the service, and regalia was kept in the Norman Undercroft in the cloisters prior to the service.

At eighteenth and nineteenth century coronations public spectacle sometimes overshadowed religious significance. At George III's coronation some of the congregation began to eat a meal during the sermon. George IV's coronation was a great theatrical spectacle and the king spent vast sums of money on it. He flatly refused to allow his estranged wife Caroline into the Abbey although she went round to every door demanding admission. In contrast his successor, William IV, had to be persuaded to have a coronation at all and spent so little money that it became known as 'the penny coronation'. With Queen Victoria's coronation in 1838, however, came a renewed appreciation of the true significance of the ceremony.

## **The Service**

The service can be divided into five main sections and a description of these follows, based largely on the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. No hymns were sung by the congregation during the ceremony until "All people that on earth do dwell" was included in the 1953 service.

1. In the first part of the service the Sovereign processes from the west end of the Abbey through the nave and choir to the Theatre. During this, verses from Psalm 122 have traditionally been sung since the coronation of Charles I: 'I was glad when they said unto me: We will go into the house of the Lord'. Several musical settings of these words have been used over the centuries, but Sir Hubert Parry's version has been sung since its first performance at the coronation of Edward VII in 1902. Parry incorporated into it the cries of Vivat Rex! and Vivat Regina! (Long live the King/Queen!) with which the Scholars of Westminster School traditionally acclaim the Sovereign. The Archbishop of Canterbury presents the Sovereign to the people and they respond with 'God save the Queen/King!'. The Sovereign takes an oath, swearing to govern

faithfully with justice and mercy, to uphold the Gospel, and to maintain the doctrine and worship of the Church of England. In 1953, for the first time, this part of the ceremony ended with the presentation of a Bible, ‘To keep your Majesty ever mindful of the Law and Gospel of God as the rule for the whole life and government of Christian princes’.

2. The Communion service proceeds. After the Creed the choir sings *Veni, Creator Spiritus*, the ancient hymn invoking the Holy Spirit, the Sovereign’s crimson robe is removed and the monarch is seated in the Coronation Chair (placed facing the altar). Four Knights of the Garter traditionally held a canopy over the Chair and, concealed from view, the Archbishop anoints the Sovereign with holy oil on the hands, the breast and the head. In 2023 an embroidered screen surrounded the monarch instead. This is the most solemn part of the coronation service, for by anointing the monarch is set apart or consecrated for the duties of a Sovereign. Meanwhile the choir sings the anthem *Zadok the Priest*, the words of which (from the first Book of Kings) have been sung at every coronation since King Edgar’s in A.D. 973. Since the coronation of George II in 1727 the setting by Handel has always been used.
3. The Sovereign is dressed in robes of cloth of gold and returns to the Coronation Chair to be invested with the Regalia. Some items, such as the Orb, are presented symbolically and then returned to the altar, but the Sovereign retains the Sceptre (symbolising kingly power) in one hand and the Rod with the Dove (symbolising justice and mercy) in the other. Finally, the Archbishop receives St Edward’s Crown from the Dean of Westminster and places it on the Sovereign’s head. Trumpet fanfares are sounded and the congregation acclaim the Sovereign ‘with loud and repeated shouts’.
4. The newly-crowned Sovereign leaves the Coronation Chair and moves to the Throne in the main part of the Theatre between the sacarium and the quire. The Throne was newly made for each coronation (until that of Charles III when refurbished chairs were used from previous coronations). Now visible to all and supported by the Archbishop and the great Officers of State, the Sovereign is placed in the Throne and at that moment takes possession of the kingdom. The Sovereign now receives the homage of the people, performed first by the Lords Spiritual (the bishops) and then the Lords Temporal. The Homage was much curtailed in 2023. Anthems are sung during this and at the end there are further fanfares and acclamations. If there is a queen consort her anointing and crowning follows. The male consort of a Queen Regnant is not crowned.
5. The Eucharist resumes at the Offertory. The Sovereign receives Holy Communion, *Gloria in Excelsis* is sung and the Archbishop gives the Blessing. While the choir sings a *Te Deum* the Sovereign withdraws to St Edward’s Chapel behind the Altar and there puts on a robe of purple velvet and exchanges St Edward’s Crown for the lighter Imperial State Crown. Finally, carrying the Sceptre and the Orb the Sovereign processes through the Abbey to the west end.

**Selected reading list:**

*Coronation* by Sir Roy Strong, 2005

*The Stone of Destiny - artefact and icon* edited by R.Welander, D.J.Breeze and T.O.Clancy, 2003

*Liber Regalis*, printed for the Roxburghe Club, 1870

*Coronations - medieval and early modern monarchic ritual* by J.M.Bak, 1990

*A history of the English coronation* by P.E.Schramm, 1937

*English Coronation Records* by L.G.Wickham Legg, 1901

*The History of the coronation* by L.E.Tanner, 1952

*The coronation of Elizabeth Wydeville [Woodville], queen consort of Edward IV, a contemporary account*, printed by George Smith, 1935

*The coronation of Richard III - the extant documents* edited by A.F.Sutton & P.W.Hammond, 1983

*The coronation order of King James I* edited by J.Wickham Legg, 1902

*The manner of the coronation of King Charles I* edited by C.Wordsworth, 1892

*The entertainment of...Charles II in his passage through...London..and a brief narrative of his...coronation* by John Ogilby, 1662.

*The coronation of...King James II* by Francis Sandford, with engravings, 1687

*A faithful account of the..coronation of George the Third* edited by Richard Thomson, 1820.

*History of the coronation of King George the Fourth* by R.Huish, 1821

*The coronation of...King George the Fourth* by Sir George Nayler, 1839

*The coronation of Edward the Seventh* by J.E.C.Bodley, 1908

*Coronation June 2 1953* by Conrad Frost, 1978

*The Queen's coronation - the inside story* by James Wilkinson, 2011

*When the Queen was crowned* by Brian Barker, 1976