



### My experience as a choirboy for Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation by James Wilkinson

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this [five-question survey](#).

#### Glossary

**Coronation** – when a king or queen is crowned in a special religious service

**Anointing** – when the Archbishop uses a kind of oil which he dabs on the Queen's head, chest and hands while saying prayers

**Supreme Governor** – a title given to the monarch to explain their relationship with the Church of England

**Dormitory** – the room that the choir boys slept in

**Dean's Yard** – a courtyard next to Westminster Abbey and the Westminster Abbey Choir School where James was at school

A Coronation is a very rare event so it was most exciting to be part of one. The last Coronation was more than 60 years ago. I was a 12 year old choirboy at the time and sang at the service.

We first heard that there was to be a Coronation when we were waiting for a lesson to start. Apart from being excited about the service, we were also excited that there would be new stamps for us to collect with the Queen's head on them.

A Coronation is quite a long service during which there are special prayers and music. Apart from being crowned, there is another part of the service which is just as important as the crowning called the Anointing. This, and the crowning, mean that the Queen becomes a very special person. It tells everyone that she is the head of the country and the Supreme Governor of the church.

At a Coronation, it is important that as many people as possible can see it. Before the Queen's Coronation, the Abbey was closed for five months, so that extra seating could be built. Normally when the Abbey is full it holds just over 2,000 people but there were 8,000 people present at the Coronation. With the Abbey closed, it meant that us choirboys had no services to sing at. We had more time to do sports, go swimming and have extra lessons. On Sundays we used to go to another church for the normal Sunday morning service.

---

---

The first thing the workmen did after the Abbey was closed was to protect all the monuments and tombs by building wooden structures around them. This stopped them being damaged when they started to put up scaffolding on which they put extra seats, some high into the arches. There were new blue and gold carpets everywhere which made the Abbey look very colourful.

In front of the high altar was the Coronation Chair. This is a very old and rather grand looking chair in which the Queen sat for the crowning and the Anointing. It has been used for this purpose for 700 years. When it was first made it was painted gold but now it is so old that most of the gold has worn off. More than 100 years ago lots of people carved their names on it. Many of them were boys from Westminster School. If they did that today they would get into terrible trouble!

The workmen also built extra rooms onto the front of the Abbey where the lords and ladies could get ready for the service. They could get drinks and sandwiches and there were changing rooms for them to hang their coats. There was also a room where the Queen and her friends could have lunch after the service before they went home.

We choirboys started practising the new music several weeks before the service. As the day of the Coronation came closer, we had special rehearsals in the Abbey itself. I remember going into the Abbey for the first time after everything had been prepared. It looked magnificent. In particular, there were very bright lights because the service was to be televised. The colours were gorgeous.

The night before the Coronation, we did not sleep very well. We were very excited and had a pillow fight in the dormitory. It was great fun. I woke up the next day at 6 o'clock and sat on the windowsill watching what was going on in Dean's Yard. There were several big tents and lots of people in uniform with horses. At 8 o'clock we went over to the Abbey for a short rehearsal in our practice room. There were about 30 of us boys from the Abbey but extra boys and men from different parts of the country were also in the Coronation choir, making 400 in all.

In the Abbey we had seats near the organ loft where there was an orchestra. We had to be in our seats by half past eight although the service did not start until 11 o'clock but we were not bored because there was plenty to look at. Our seats were very tight. There was very little room. We had been given a picnic to take in with us for our lunch which we ate before the service started. We had sandwiches, an apple and some sweets.

At about five to eleven everyone thought The Queen had arrived so everyone stood up. But instead of The Queen four cleaners came in and started to sweep the carpet to make it clean and tidy. Everyone laughed and sat down again. Then a few minutes later the Queen really had arrived and as the procession started we sang our first song – an anthem called 'I was Glad'. It was very loud and sounded wonderful. The procession passed just below us. The Queen looked beautiful in her gown with its long train which was carried by six young ladies, all dressed in the same way.

The service lasted more than two hours. After she had been crowned everyone had to shout 'God Save The Queen, Long Live The Queen, May The Queen Live for Ever'. I remember I was a little disappointed at the way this was done. I thought there was going to be a big cheer like you get at a football match when someone scores a goal. But instead, everyone shouted the same thing. The Coronation is the only service in the Abbey where people are actually told to shout!

---

---

By the time the service had finished we were quite tired. We got back to school at about 3 o'clock and were given a tea of boiled eggs, bread and jam. Some hours after we had gone to sleep, we were woken up by the noise of a big firework display nearby.

For several days after the Coronation people were allowed to go into the Abbey to see what it looked like. They queued up beneath our classroom window. One afternoon we put a bag on the end of a piece of string and lowered it down to the queue. On the bag we had written 'sweets please'. This lasted for about half an hour and we got a lot of sweets. Then one of our teachers came in, caught us and stopped us doing it.



Image © James Wilkinson

---