

The King Is Dead, Long Live The Queen.

The first time I heard King George VI had died was at St,Patrick's School, the Headmistress, Miss Egan went to each class in turn to say she had some very sad news; in very gentle way she broke the news "The King had died". Miss Egan said we should say a prayer for him and The Royal Family, we should also especially remember Princess Elizabeth as she was now our Queen. I remember thinking in a child like way " they've soon sorted that out!"

I couldn't wait to get home to tell Mam, thinking, in a another child like way she wouldn't have already heard. I remember her saying he had been a good King who had been unflinching during the war, age 7, I didn't know what unflinching meant, and thought Mam must have heard the word on the wireless.

The following day, even as a child, I could sense a feeling of sadness in the air; everyone seemed to be talking in whispers. We started the day with prayers for The Royal Family, a lad from my class who had a sister in the 'girls school', a completely different buildings in those days, said some of the girls had been crying on the way to school, we less emotional boys were wondering if we would get a day off school. I can't remember if we got a day off for the funeral.

Wigan held its own funeral service on 15th February, the The Mayor of Wigan went in procession from The Town Hall to The Parish Church for a service at 3pm, a further service was held in the evening for those unable to attend because of work commitments. Prayers were also said throughout the town's other churches.

After the initial sadness the talk seemed to go to The Coronation and all the celebrations that would abound. We children thought the The Coronation would have been immediately after the funeral and couldn't believe it when it was announced it would be over a year, in the event it was it was 15 months, to a child a lifetime, 2 birthdays and a Christmas!

Tuesday, 2nd June, 1953 was a day well worth waiting for, the day, for many started with a visit to church as The Queen had asked for prayers. The months of preparation when everybody seemed to be involved in the planning, every shop, house and street was decorated in 'Red White and Blue', photographs of Her Majesty The Queen everywhere. All the children singing songs and ditties, one I remember, though there seems little sense in it, was -

🎵 Red White and Blue, The Queen's got the flu, The Duke's got the chickenpox and doesn't know what to do 🎵

All the children in Wigan received Coronation Mugs and specially minted coins and other items of memorabilia. For months street parties and been planned, trestle tables and forms borrowed from here there and everywhere. A Queen and Duke chosen for almost every street, I had harboured thoughts of being McCormack Street's 'Duke' in the event a soldier was to be my part. I was getting used to being overlooked for major roles having been disappointed at losing out on my ambition to be St Joseph in the previous year's nativity play! Finishing up as a 'tree', so a soldier doesn't seem so bad by comparison!

The day before Coronation Day there was a thunder storm in Wigan, it spoiled many of the decorations that had taken months to make; everyone hoping for the best for the ' Big Day '. Alas we were to be disappointed, rain was the order of the day. Schools, pubs, clubs anywhere with a large room available to hold indoor 'Street Parties'. The rain wasn't allowed to spoil the day, ,Wiganers, like the Queen of Tonga were not about to let rain interfere with the celebrations. To explain, it rained in London too on the day but The Queen of Tonga insisted on traveling in the

Coronation Parade with the hood down on her horse-drawn carriage. In an interview in Australia her way home Queen Salote said "Although I got a good soaking, I enjoyed every moment of it " Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh, I imagine impressed by Queen Salote's tenacity, paid a visit to Tonga in December of 'Coronation Year'

Back to events in Wigan, everyone was in high spirits, some more than others as the public houses joined in the jollities. A few families had televisions and those houses were packed to overflowing with neighbours and new 'best friends!' You could tell which were the lucky households with 'tellies' the curtains drawn so to be able to see the flickering screens better. Others listened to proceedings on the wireless. My Auntie Maggie got a relay from Central Wireless specially for the 'The Big Day'. Relays were basically a speaker with 2 wall sockets one for The Home Service the other The Light Programme. The limited choice was compensated by a crystal clear reception. The rental was 1/6 (8p) per week. We lesser mortals (those with no access to the little screen) had to wait till we went to ' The Pictures' to see Pathe News, the cinemas of Wigan and district were packed, everybody wanting to see the ceremony. I remember clearly something being said about a prayer being heard only in Westminster Abbey, whilst researching I consulted the archive of Pathe News, my memory served me well. The Communion Consecration Prayer could only be heard by the congregation. Isn't it strange the things that stick in the mind!

Everybody seemed overjoyed on the day, the privations of the war only 8 years before and previously the depression of the 1930s still clear in peoples' minds, people were determined to let their hair down and as the song goes " Let's be Hale and Hearty - Let's Have Jolly Good Party " The Queen has been an outstanding Sovereign, unflinching (I knew I would use that word one day) in her commitment to her people; she has certainly fulfilled the vow she made on her 21st Birthday.

"I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong"

I wonder if many people realise what a debt we owe to Mrs Simpson? Later the Duchess of Windsor, had Edward VIII married someone else and had children we would have been deprived of one of this country's greatest monarchs. "LONG MY SHE REIGN".

*Footnote- Queen Elizabeth's was the fourth and last British coronation of the 20th century. (Edward VIII was never crowned) It was estimated to have cost £1.57 million (c. £38,680,000 in 2018).