

Today I thought I would talk about QUEEN VICTORIA. It's odd, given how rare it is for a woman to be the British monarch, that maybe the three greatest monarchs in British history were all women - Queen Elizabeth I (who reigned for 45 years, from 1558 to 1603, dying at the age of 69, and who I told you about on 22 April), Queen Victoria (who reigned for 63 years, from 1837 to 1901, dying at the age of 81), and Queen Elizabeth II (who so far has reigned for 68 years, making her the longest reigning king or queen in history, and is currently 94 years young). Unfortunately, for Queen Elizabeth II, she is the odd one out when it comes to these three queens - while she has presided over a sustained period of national decline, triggered primarily by Britain's involvement in WORLD WAR I, Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria's reigns saw them preside over probably the greatest years in British history - when Britain was at his most powerful, militarily, economically, and culturally. And if anyone were to campaign for office in the UK in the future under the slogan 'Make Britain Great Again' - it would be the way Great Britain was under Queen Victoria that they would be thinking of.



Queen Victoria became queen very young - she was only 18 when her uncle KING WILLIAM IV died. She became queen because she was the only grandchild of KING GEORGE III, who had been succeeded by two of his sons, KING GEORGE IV (who had no children with his wife), and then King William IV (who also had no children). Victoria was the only child of George III's youngest son, Edward, who died in 1820, when Victoria was less than one years old. Victoria was brought up very strictly by her mother and her mother's adviser, who tried to control every aspect of her life. By the time she became queen, Victoria was sick of this treatment and asked her Prime Minister LORD MELBOURNE what she could do to get her freedom. 'Get married' was his answer, which Victoria found very shocking. But she soon found someone she liked - PRINCE ALBERT, a German prince. As she was queen, and he was only a lowly German prince, she had to propose marriage to him. Luckily, he said yes, and they were married in 1840, when Victoria was 20 years old. They got to spend 21 mostly very happy years together, until Albert died in 1861. In that time, Victoria had NINE children, with her eldest son succeeding her as king - KING EDWARD VII - and her other children marrying into royal families all over Europe, which meant that when WORLD WAR I broke out, England's king at the time (KING GEORGE V) and Germany's emperor (KAISER WILHELM II), were both



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Victoria's grandchildren. One of the biggest 'what-ifs' in history concerns Victoria's eldest daughter, also called VICTORIA, who married PRINCE FREDERICK OF PRUSSIA in 1857, when she was 17 years old. Prince Frederick was a good guy, who was against war and wanted to give more power to the German people and take power away from the German army. He eventually got his chance to put his ideas into action in 1888, when his father EMPEROR WILHELM I died and he became EMPEROR FREDERICK III. But as ill-luck would have it, he died 88 days after becoming Emperor, and he was succeeded by his and his wife Victoria's son - Wilhelm II, who was as stupid as he was nasty, and would lead Germany into WORLD WAR I, with devastating results for the whole of Europe. If Frederick III would have had better health, he probably would have still died before 1914 (when he would have been 83) but he might have been able to make the German Emperor and army a lot less powerful before he died, with the result that Germany would never have dreamed of starting a huge European conflict like World War I.

The 21 years that Queen Victoria was married to Prince Albert saw a number of huge changes in British society, some of which were brought about by Prince Albert himself. He was a keen supporter of scientific advances, and helped set up the 1851 CRYSTAL PALACE EXHIBITION, which was designed to showcase all the inventions and achievements that the

world had to offer, with an emphasis on demonstrating just how much scientific progress Britain had made - with one inventor even showing off something that would eventually become the world's first fax machine (and you won't know what a fax machine is - ask your parents - but the idea of someone coming up with an idea for one in 1851 is mind boggling). The world flocked to the Exhibition to see all its wonders and what the future would hold



for them, and the Exhibition made so much money that the government could afford to purchase the land in Kensington that now houses the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, and - of course - the ROYAL ALBERT HALL, which is named after Prince Albert. Some of the inventions that were created during Victoria's reign were: photographs, postage stamps (with Victoria's head on them) and post boxes, the telephone, flushing toilets, safety matches, the London Tube (the first ever underground railway), typewriters, Easter eggs and Christmas cards, street lights, record players, and the Football Association (laying down the first ever set of rules for playing football). Virtually every aspect of the kind of life that someone like me - born in 1970 - had growing up originated in the Victorian age. A lot of these Victorian inventions are now disappearing in the computer age - but whether that is for better or worse is hard to judge at the moment.

So a lot was changing in Victoria's time and that created a lot of social pressures, with people who were badly off feeling a lot of anger towards people who had been born into rich

families. In Europe, that led to various attempts at revolution, notably in 1848 (with one young German revolutionary, KARL MARX, being ordered to leave Germany after the 1848 revolt was put down - he ended up in good old England, and spent the rest of his days in the British Library, writing about why all societies would eventually become COMMUNIST societies, based on the principle 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'). Victoria herself was the subject of lots of attempts to shoot her as she rode through the streets of London in a horse-drawn carriage; though she seemed to treat these attempts to kill her with amazing courage and good humour. One time when someone shot at her and got away, she took exactly the same route the following day, hoping the shooter would have another go, and would be caught -



and he did, and he was caught. But Britain avoided a lot of the problems that countries like France and Germany faced, by making various attempts (very inadequate by our standards, but they still tried) to improve the conditions of working people - for example, banning children from working and trying to get them to go to school instead - and widening the number of people who could vote, so working people could feel that they had some say in the society they lived in.

But there were times when people wondered whether Victoria would be the last British monarch, and would be replaced by a president or elected head of state. These moves to abolish the monarchy became particularly powerful after 1861, when Victoria was so devastated by the death of Prince Albert that she stopped going out in public, and insisted on wearing black all the time to show she was in mourning (something she continued to do for the 40 years she still had left to her after Albert died). But another attempt on her life, and pride in Britain's accomplishments in the Victorian age (including the spread of the British Empire, which Victoria encouraged as much as possible - despite the number of wars in far-off places like CRIMEA and AFGHANISTAN and the SUDAN that the British Army ended up fighting as a result), and pride at having a queen who became (at that time) the longest serving British monarch, helped to put those REPUBLICAN feelings to bed, and ensured that Britain would continue to have a king or a queen reigning over it throughout the 20th century and beyond. And by the time Victoria died, she was wildly popular among the British public, who recognised that with her death (just after the start of the 20th century), a golden age had passed and an uncertain future was ahead of it. Sadly, that future was to be pretty grim - and all the wealth and power accumulated by Britain in the Victorian age would be thrown away over the course of two world wars, so that by 1945, 44 years after Victoria's death, Britain would be effectively bankrupt as a nation. But it still thought of itself as being the power that it was in Victorian times, and like someone who has lost all their money and refuses to face up to that fact and insists on carrying on buying fine clothes and eating at great restaurants, Britain continues to this day - 75 years after the end of World War II - to try and find ways of living the high life that Britain became used to in the Victorian age.