

Whole School Assembly – Friday 9th September 2022

We gather here this afternoon to be together as a community on the first day of national mourning following the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. We are all here from Year 3 to Upper Sixth, colleagues from Junior and Senior School. One of the things Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth valued was community and it felt fitting to gather you all together as a mark of respect for her. It was only a few months ago that we were all together as a very happy community celebrating her Platinum Jubilee. Today we give thanks for her reign, the longest of any British monarch and the longest serving monarch in all global history after Louis XIV of France. You may remember in years to come where you were when you heard of the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

Queen Elizabeth once said that grief is the price we pay for Love. These were the words she spoke after British families lost loved ones during the 9/11 terror attacks in New York. They are words that have stayed with me over the years, not just because they are so true, but also because they are characteristic of the Queen's ability to provide words of comfort and dignity at a time of tragedy and crisis. They were words which I remembered when we saw Her Late Majesty grieving herself last Spring after losing the man she had loved as her husband for 73 years. She sat mourning and alone, following the pandemic rules, at St George's Chapel in Windsor and people's hearts broke for her then as they break today.

Today we pay the price of the love we felt for her as a nation and the love that people all around the world felt for her. She was probably the most famous woman in the world, the most instantly recognisable, and one of the most admired. Her image, famously silhouetted on postage stamps, on coins and even by the 1960s pop artist Andy Warhol, is an image that we think of when we think of Britain. The Queen is as synonymous with Britain as cups of tea, London buses and red post boxes.

What many of us admired most about The Queen was her sense of service to this country and to her charity work for so many years. We may think that the life of a Royal is a gilded one – living in palaces, state banquets, crown jewels – but the truth is that I suspect nobody in this Hall would have wanted The Queen's job. Not all Royals have successfully lived in the public eye and certainly in my lifetime there have been several highly publicised royal crises and scandals.

But what is so astonishing about The Queen is that for 70 years she lived in the spotlight of the world's media and maintained a public image of someone discreet, diplomatic, and dignified. She must have had all sorts of opinions on all sorts of people, particularly of Prime Ministers, and yet we would never know what she really thought. It is that ability to hide her authentic self in the name of service to her country that is for me the most amazing thing about her, because it must have been so difficult. And yet, we always felt The Queen was human. We know she loved her Corgis (she also owned an elephant, a jaguar, two giant turtles and a pair of sloths), she loved horses and horse racing, she loved Scotland, she enjoyed her role as a mechanic in the army as a young woman, and she certainly seemed to love people. Monarchy can be a divisive issue – not everyone agrees we should have a Queen or a King – but somehow The Queen always managed to unite us, most recently during the pandemic when she told us that we would meet again.

Elizabeth was never meant to be queen because her father George VI was never meant to be King. His older brother Edward VIII abdicated from the throne in 1936 because he wanted to marry a woman who was divorced, Wallis Simpson, and that was not allowed at the time. His brother, Elizabeth's father, succeeded to the throne instead and was our head of state during WWII. He died young in 1952 and Elizabeth was suddenly thrust into the limelight for a role she never expected to

have so early. She was just 26 and she was rushed back from Kenya where she had been on tour with her husband, Philip.

To look at Elizabeth II's life is to look at history. Britain was a very different world when she came to the throne. It was rare for women to work outside the home in the 1950s. Britain still had an Empire. The European Union did not yet exist. No human had ever yet set foot on the moon. It really was a different era. Queen Elizabeth has met so many world leaders during her lifetime – she met 13 Presidents of the United States (it seems she was particularly popular with Barack Obama) and she has invited 15 Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom to form a government. Whatever you think of the monarchy, whether we should or should not keep it, you have to admire a 96-year-old woman who 48 hours before her death was still working, welcoming in her third female Prime Minister. For 48 hours, the Prime Minister and the Monarch shared a name.

Her work ethic was renowned. Before her Diamond Jubilee in 2012 she visited every region of Britain. She was the most travelled monarch in British history, frequently visiting countries around the world, including the family of nations that she held very dear which made up the Commonwealth.

You have to admire a woman who even in very advanced old age was patron of no fewer than 600 charities and who did things like this: ([Paddington clip](#)) and this ([London 2012](#)). Elizabeth II had the ability both to move us in moments of great sadness with her quiet and reserved dignity, but also to make us smile. During the pandemic, her words 'we shall meet again' gave people hope at a difficult time.

The Queen embodied a certain old-fashioned British quality known as 'stiff upper lip' or Keep Calm and Carry On. The ability to remain calm and impervious to turmoil around you, not to be seen publicly to yield to your emotions. Her discreet and dignified approach drew criticism after the death of Princess Diana at a tragically young age in a car accident in 1997. As the nation poured out its heart in an uncharacteristically emotional display of grief, the Queen was criticised for seeming distant and unfeeling by not commenting early enough on the tragedy. She was of course consumed by private grief for the loss of her daughter-in-law, but at the dawn of the 21st century, the public mood demanded that she not just grieve but be seen to grieve. Some thought her cold, I personally thought her stoic.

It is quite clear that far from being cold, the Queen was a loving wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. And at this sad time we remember her family.

What will happen in the days to come? A period of national mourning has been declared. The new King, Charles III, will address the nation and he will then travel around the four countries of the United Kingdom – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Flags will fly at half-mast around the country and there will be books of condolences in town halls for people to write messages of sympathy. At Junior and Senior School reception there is a condolence book in which you can write a message. The business of Government stops and world leaders will fly in for the funeral.

Millions of people are likely to flock to London to see the Queen 'lie in state' in Westminster Hall and the venue is likely to be open nearly 24 hours a day. This is when members of the public can come to pay their respects to her. The Queen's funeral is expected to take place 10 days after her death and a National Day of Mourning declared for this day. Shops, offices and schools are likely to close. The Queen is expected to be buried at St George's Chapel in Windsor after the full-state funeral at Westminster Abbey.

As you know the Queen has died at Balmoral Castle in Scotland, a place she very much loved. Her body will have to be moved first to St Giles in Edinburgh and then to Westminster Hall via Buckingham Palace to lie in state. The King's Coronation will not necessarily take place immediately. In the 1950s the Queen was not crowned Queen until over a year after her father's death.

There is one detail in particular which I think illustrates just how British social attitudes have changed since The Queen's accession to the throne. The reason she became Queen is because her uncle, as I explained, wanted to marry a divorcee and had to step down or abdicate, and the young Elizabeth was thrust into the line of succession. When King Charles married Camilla, his second wife, there was speculation for a very long time about whether she would be crowned Queen. She is his second wife and also previously divorced. One of The Queen's most recent acts was to confirm that Camilla would be crowned Queen Consort, just as Katherine Cambridge will be when William becomes King. That decision would have been impossible to imagine at the start of her reign. She has overseen a period of major societal change. Britain today is a multicultural community and people are permitted to love and marry whom they so choose.

The Queen embodied values that we may associate with yesterday, but she was, I believe, a modern monarch, able to capture the spirit of our country through the ages.

Today is a sad but historic day. When Queen Elizabeth acceded to the throne there were still people in the country in 1952 who remembered Queen Victoria. When you are old, you will be some of the people who remember Queen Elizabeth. If you have grandchildren perhaps you will tell them about your memories of her. I now ask you now as a community to bow your heads for a minute's silent reflection as we give thanks for the service of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Your thoughts are your own but perhaps this is a chance to remember some of the inspiration that the Queen brought to the world.

Remind them to walk silently up the stairs.