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# The Coronation oath: 'This is no empty display. It is the foundation stone of our system of government'

The Queen's Coronation saw her take an oath which is crucial to our system of Government.



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The Queen taking the Coronation Oath.

### *Queen Victoria taking the Coronation Oath.*



BY COUNTRY LIFE PUBLISHED 5 MAY 2023

The exact wording of the coronation oath sworn by King Charles III on Saturday 6 May, 2023 was released on the morning of the coronation itself. The oath is centuries old, but not fixed in time: the oath sworn by King Charles is different to that of his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, just as hers was different to that of her father in 1937.

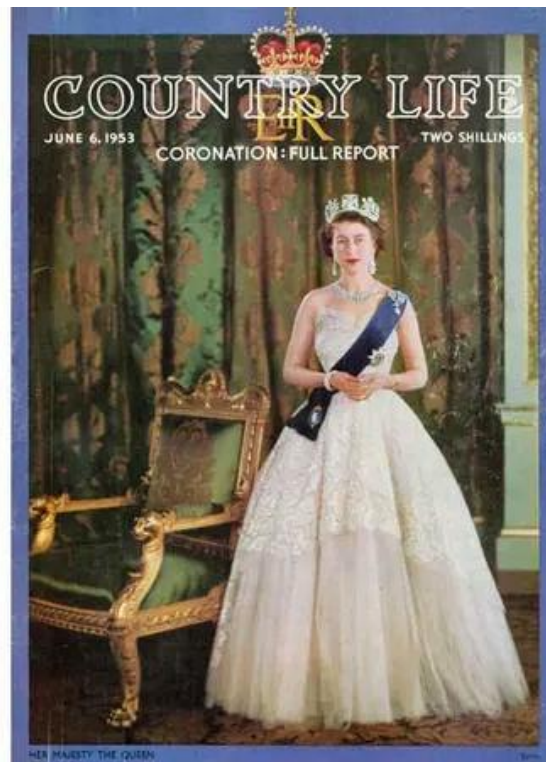
That said, much will be the same as it has been for centuries: in 2013, *Country Life* delved into the history and meaning of the oath.

The Coronation Oath, or *promissio regis*, along with the anointing of the monarch with holy oil, make up the central acts in the ritual Coronation. In the case of the kings of England, the earliest account of this oath comes in the description of the Coronation of the Saxon king Edgar in Bath in 973. There, the Oath followed the entry of the king into the church and immediately after his prostration before the high altar. The anointing, based directly on that by the prophets of the kings of Israel in the Old Testament, was, indeed, conditional upon the Oath.

It consisted of what is known as the *tria precepta*, three pledges given by the king to God: first ‘that the Church of God and all Christian people preserve peace at all times’; secondly ‘that he forbid rapacity and all iniquities to all degrees’; and, thirdly, ‘that in all judgments

he enjoin equity and mercy'. This was a written document delivered by the king and placed on the altar.

This act was to set the English Coronation apart. It is there in all the various liturgical forms or what are known as recensions of the ceremony. Although 973 is the earliest account of it, evidence would suggest that this perhaps occurred as far back as the 8th century. It was to evolve over 1,000 years in quite a complex way. With the Norman Conquest in 1066, it was gradually to assume even greater importance as it defined the role and duties of the king and, as such, was studied and pondered upon at length by the great magnates of the realm.



*Country Life's June 6, 1953 Coronation celebration front cover.*

*(Image credit: Country Life)*

By the 14th century, in what scholars call the fourth recension, much water had passed under the bridge in terms of the relationship of the monarchy both to the Church and to the barons. All of this was reflected in the checks and balances imposed on royal power in the Oath. By that century, too, Parliament was emerging fast, and the contents of such an oath incorporated already what was the ancestor of constitutional monarchy.

The turning point in that story was the Coronation of Edward II, a wayward and perverse monarch, who was forced to swear that he would observe the just laws, 'les quells la commonaute de vostre roialme aura eslu'. That spelt out to him that the governance of the realm was a joint enterprise, one that involved Parliament and not just the Lords — the *communitas regni* in their own right.

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The Reformation was to precipitate further changes to the Oath as a consequence of Henry VIII declaring himself Supreme Head of the Church of England. Drafts exist of this section of the Oath to make it accord with the break with Rome, but we have no evidence that it was ever used by his successors. Indeed, none of the oaths taken by the three Tudors who succeeded him survive, but they must at least in this point have been radically different from their medieval predecessors.

With the arrival of the Stuarts in 1603, the Coronation Oath was to dramatically return to the centre of the stage. James I, who fervently believed and enunciated the Divine Right of Kings, had no difficulty in taking the oath but gave it his own gloss. In it, he wrote, the king 'makes not his Crowne stoupe by this meanes to any power in the Pope, or in the Church, or in the People.' The inclusion of the last named spelt out that the King and Parliament were on a collision course.

For James, the king was the people's overlord by birth 'not by any right in the Coronation, commeth his crowne' and so 'it is like vnlawful... to displace him'. Indeed, it was rumoured that his successor, Charles I, wished to dispense with the Coronation all together so that he could 'remain more absolute, avoiding the obligation to swear to the laws and without the discontent of his subjects'.

In this way, the Coronation Oath touched the heart of the constitutional conflict of the 17th century. In the king's eyes, the oath was taken to God. For the republican opposition, it was one taken to the people, an oath that, once broken by the monarch, dissolved any obligation between the parties. In this light, the execution of the king was the outcome.



Although the Restoration of 1660 would seem to signal a return to early-Stuart mystical kingship, in the long run, that didn't occur. Thanks to the rise to power of Parliament, new vigour was infused into the idea that the king was subject to the law and owed duties to his subjects. That clash was to reach crisis point in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688. As so often occurs in English history, what was, in reality, a revolutionary position was to be dressed up in the pageantry of the medieval past. James II, who was ousted from the throne in favour of his daughter and son-in-law, Mary II and William III, was said to have 'abdicated' and, as the throne was vacant, it was offered to the couple by Parliament.



*Coronation of William III and Mary II Stuart by the Archbishop of Canterbury, 1689. .  
(Photo by: Sepia Times/ Universal Images Group via Getty Images)*

In January 1689, Parliament passed the Declaration of Rights, which framed what was, in essence, the principles of a constitutional monarchy of a kind that is still with us today. The Coronation Oath lay at the heart of this. The ruler was to be bound to observe the ancient laws of the realm, known as the laws of St Edward, and also those that Parliament would make in the future. The latter was a radical reinterpretation of part of the Latin text of the oath, which refers to *quas vulgus elegerit*.

In the Coronation Oath that was actually used in 1689, any reference to ancient custom in the form of the Laws of St Edward vanishes in favour of the philosopher John Locke's position that the ultimate guarantee of protection against a sovereign lay in the principles of nature and reason which, both being outside the confines of history, were eternal.

What is so striking about this concept, the fruits of a view of the universe that was no longer mystical and hermetic but mechanistic, were to be enshrined in what remained a

medieval ritual. In this way, the oath remains the foundation, even in 2013, of the post-1688 state.

Add to that the displacement in the oath of Holy Church by the phrase ‘the Protestant Reformed Religion Established by Law’. To reinforce that no monarch would ever again be Catholic, there was a separate Declaration, which was incorporated into the Coronation service. It was violently anti-Catholic and was first used at the Coronation of Queen Anne in 1702.

George IV had it removed from the Coronation service and, for him, and his successors, it became the first act that an incoming monarch made in his first Parliament. Catholic Emancipation arrived in 1829, so that by 1902, Edward VII was horrified by it and wanted it changed for his successor. Indeed, George V refused to take it and it was recast in gentler mould and, in that form, was taken by both George VI and the present Queen. But when it comes to any new reign, such a statement would be way out of kilter with a multi-faith society.

Complex although this may seem, the Coronation Oath still remains at the core of the country's constitution and belies anyone who regards the splendours of Coronation as nothing more than empty display. It is, in fact, the foundation stone of our system of government.

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*The Coronation Chair, known as St Edward's Chair or King Edward's Chair, was commissioned in 1296, and has been used in the coronation of all British monarchs since then.*

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*Royal enthusiast Margaret Tyler — who is approaching her 80th birthday — looks at a picture of a young Queen Elizabeth II during her coronation. (Credit Image: © Elizabeth Dalziel/ZUMA Press Wire)*

*(Image credit: Alamy Stock Photo)*

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*King Charles III.*

*(Image credit: Getty Images)*

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*Sir John Major and Charles III are amused at a 1994 Prince's Trust event.*

*(Image credit: Shutterstock Shutterstock)*

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Ahead of the curve, diligent and gifted with an empathy that allows him to connect with all people, Charles III



*The then Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall are amused on a tour of New Zealand.*

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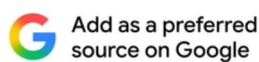
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