

The Day When the Queen Came

John Meredith looks back on an historic occasion



Maundy Thursday, 19 April 1984. was to be a memorable day in the life of the Minster: it was the day when the Queen came to distribute the Maundy Pence. We had just three months to make all the arrangements.

As to the layout of the service, that was no problem as it is fixed and almost the same each year. All the Minster staff had to do was choose the hymns and decide who was to read the first lesson and say the prayers. The main headache was the layout of the seating, who was to receive the Maundy Money and how many guests we could accommodate. As you may guess, everyone wanted to be in the Minster on that day. Thankfully we had very little to do with the selection of the recipients: that was done through the recommendation of the clergy and representatives around the county. Not all recipients had to be members of the Church of England, but must have at some point in their lives carried out Christian charitable work of some kind. Certain rules are laid down. They have to be over 65 years of age and receiving a pension. The number of recipients relates to the Monarch's age, as does the amount of pence given. When the Queen came to Southwell she was 58, so there were fifty-eight men and fifty-eight women.

The giving of the Maundy Money dates back to medieval days when the Monarch first washed the feet of elderly men and women, following the custom of Christ at the Last Supper, when he washed the feet of the apostles as an act of humility. The money was given afterwards, followed by a banquet and the ceremonial giving of the Monarch's best gown. All this was stopped many years ago, and today the recipients only receive money, contained in two leather purses: in one the Maundy coins, in the other a five-pound note and a fifty pence piece, in lieu of the banquet and gown.

Maundy Thursday, 1984, dawned bright and fair, the weather mild. Fellow vergers Patrick Frost and I were on duty at 5.30 a.m. ready for the police to arrive and search the Minster, which they did from top to bottom. Once the search was completed the building was sealed until we opened the doors for the arrival of the congregation. The only people allowed in, besides the staff, were those with passes or those known to the policeman on the door. For the vergers there was not a lot to do now, as everything was ready and in its place, except to get on with the early morning services

of Communion and Matins, and make tea for the policemen. At 8.00 a.m. BBC radio came to interview the Bishop and me. I did my interview in the nave, and as it was a live broadcast the interviewer suggested we walk up and down the centre aisle; this made it more comfortable and I could answer his questions with ease. The main things he wanted to know about were the drawing of the seating plan (which I had been in charge of), how many chairs were in the Minster and how long it had taken to set them out, plus my thoughts on the service, and was I going to enjoy taking part in such a royal occasion, which I thought was strange, considering it was possibly one of the greatest days in my life.

Around 9.30 a.m. the doors were flung open and the invited guests started to arrive and take their places, the starting time of the service being 10.45 a.m. Apparently the time varies a little each year, governed by the time the railway can get the Royal Train to the nearest station, in our case Newark.

The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh arrived at the west gate at 10.35 a.m. where they were met by the Bishop and the Lord Lieutenant, and presented to several of the civic representatives. At 10.40 a.m., with the west doors open, we had our first glimpse of Her Majesty as she and the Duke stepped over the threshold and entered the nave. The Bishop then presented her to the Provost, who in turn presented the two Archdeacons and the two Residentiary Canons. Then everyone made their way to their respective positions in the procession and the service began with the singing of the first hymn. It seemed strange to be walking down the centre of the nave with the Queen immediately behind me. You read so much about her in the press and see her on TV, but never in my wildest dreams did I think that one day I would be that close, or allowed to sit within a few feet of her through a service.

Before the procession set off the Queen and Duke were handed nosegays of sweet herbs, which were also carried by members of the Royal Almonry party. Today just symbolic, in years gone by they were used to ward off the smells of the elderly recipients.

The first distribution of the Maundy gifts took place on the south side of the Minster, after the reading of the first lesson, whilst the choir sang two anthems. Before the second anthem was completed the Queen had returned to her seat in the sanctuary. Then it was my turn to urge the Duke to read the second lesson at the nave lectern, which in those days stood on the south side. During the rehearsal the day before, I had been instructed to move at a certain point during the anthem, but before then the Duke kept looking across at me, no doubt wondering if I'd forgotten all about him. He seemed quite relieved when I walked towards him and bowed.

At the end of the lesson the second distribution took place on the north side of the Minster. In order not to clash with this ceremony I had been instructed to return the Duke to his seat via the south nave and quire aisles. Turning round on the lectern stand, he looked a bit lost and said to me, 'Which way do we go?' To which I

replied, 'Just follow me, sir.' But as I turned in towards the centre of the quire near St Oswald's chapel, I was confronted with the Queen distributing the Maundy gifts to the recipients on the apron in front of the High Altar, so I stopped, the Duke standing behind me, until the procession had made its way to the crossing. I then returned the Duke to his seat. At the reception afterwards, when I was presented to him, I apologised to him for stopping. 'Don't worry about that,' he said. 'It was just like being on British Rail and shunted into the sidings.'

June and I were amongst a small group to be presented to the Royal party at the Residence, and had been told, once the processions had arrived at the west door, to make our way to the Residence via the south door and be ready for when the Queen and Duke arrived. I was just about to leave when the Bishop of Sherwood called me over – “The Provost wants you,” he said. I thought I must have done something wrong, but to my surprise he said, 'Will you please lead the Queen to the Residence?’ How could I refuse!

The way to the Residence was via the north side path, which had been protected by a barrier. Now I know what it's like to be on a Royal walkabout. The Minster churchyard was packed, and the Queen and Duke were only too willing to stop and talk to as many people as possible. Bunches of flowers were being handed over, and at one point the Queen had so many that she did not know what to do with them, so started handing them to other members of the group including the policewomen and detectives who were acting as the protection force. She even looked towards me, but realised I had my hands full carrying the silver verge.

In the Residence, after drinks and refreshments, we were all lined up in the sitting-room ready to be presented. Mrs Irvine, the Provost's wife, first brought along the Duke who stopped and spoke to everyone, at times cracking a few jokes. It was a nervous moment as the Queen approached, but after you've bowed and shaken her hand, she soon puts you at ease. She spent quite a time talking to me and showed great interest in the history of the Minster and the Maundy recipients, even mentioning Don Keefe, our then resident artist, who was one out of the total of one hundred and sixteen. What a fantastic memory she has.

It was all too quickly over and the Queen and Duke left for a reception at the Council House in Nottingham, where they were to meet ice skaters Jayne Torville and Christopher Dean, who had just won the Gold Medal at the World Championships.

A week or so later we had a reception in Trebeck Hall for all those who had taken part in the service. The Royal Almonry Secretary, Peter Wright, came up from London to thank everyone and presented us with a set of Maundy coins [10 pence] for services rendered. As well as the people in the processions, also included were the bell-ringers, stewards and those who had helped with the preparations. For everyone it had been a day to remember.

[A shortened extract from John Meredith's book, Verging on Work]