

# Victoria Regina et Imperatrix – 200 years from her birth



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At 4.14am on May 24, 1819, at Kensington Palace on the outskirts of London, a little girl called Alexandrina Victoria was born, the daughter of Edward, Duke of Kent, and his wife Princess Victoria Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. Her father, Edward, was the fourth son of King George III and his wife Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, while her mother Victoria, after whom she was called, was the fourth daughter and seventh child of Franz Frederick Anton, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, and Countess Augusta of Reuss-Ebersdorf.

Queen Victoria's mother had already been married to Charles, Prince of Leiningen (1763–1814), and from 1814 onwards she served as regent of the Principality during the minority of her son from her first marriage, Carl; the regency ended with her second wedding in 1818 to Prince Edward of Great Britain. She was to give her name to one of the greatest eras in British history, and hers is now the second longest reign in British history.

The young Alexandrina Victoria was only the daughter of the fourth son of the British monarch; she was not born to reign. Her father was not Prince of Wales. However, fate favoured her.

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This was because while George III, her paternal grandfather, had some 56 grandchildren by the time she was born, not one of them was legitimate under the terms of the Royal Marriages Act of 1772, following the much-lamented death of the Regent’s sole heir Princess Charlotte, in childbirth that year. Destiny prepared her way to the throne, and with the death of her paternal uncle, King William IV, she automatically became Queen of Great Britain and Ireland and Head of the Church of England.

It is important to state from the outset that when the young daughter of the Duke of Kent was born, the British monarchy was definitely not at the highest point of its popularity. Whether dissolute, mad, bullying, eccentric or merely disagreeable, the first five Hanoverian monarchs had done little to endear themselves to their subjects.

It was Victoria’s role to attract once again the love of the British nations towards their



Coronation portrait of Queen Victoria.

monarchy; by 1848 – the ‘Year of the Revolutions’ – when she has already reigned for 11 years, many European monarchs had lost their throne. It was her duty to see to it that the monarchy’s popularity would rise again and steal the hearts of her British subjects. Gradually, she became so popular and her reign so long, that she became like an idol. After her death, historians would speak of the ‘Victoria era’ and refer to it with a sense of awe and appreciation.

Since Queen Victoria’s death, various movies have been filmed about her. *Victoria the Great* is a 1937 British historical film directed by Herbert Wilcox and starring Anna Neagle, Anton Walbrook and Walter Rilla; the movie was so successful that a sequel appeared the following year, *Sixty Glorious Years*. Other films followed. *Mrs Brown* (also theatrically released as *Her Majesty, Mrs Brown*) is a 1997 British drama film starring Judi Dench, Billy Connolly, Geoffrey Palmer, Antony Sher, and Gerard Butler in his film debut. It was written by Jeremy Brock and directed by John Madden. Metacritic, a review aggregator, assigned the film a weighted average score of 71 out of 100, based on 22 critics, indicating “generally favourable reviews”. It is still a popular movie today although more than 20 years have passed since it was produced. Monarchy lovers would definitely own a copy of this popular movie.

In 2009, the popular movie *The Young Victoria* was screened; it was a dramatisation of the turbulent first years of Queen Victoria’s rule, with continuous references to her enduring romance with Prince Albert. Emily Blunt and Rupert Friend featured as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The film is still very popular with monarch lovers.

The relationship between Queen Victoria and her handsome, young Indian attendant Abdul Karim was deemed so controversial

and scandalous by her family members that, upon the monarch’s death in 1901, they scrubbed his existence from royal history. Shrabani Basu, the journalist who uncovered this friendship between Queen Victoria and Abdul Karim after a 2003 visit to the Queen’s summer home, wrote about it in her book *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen’s Closest Confidant*. Basu explained how the Queen had expressed interest in the Indian territories ahead of her Golden Jubilee in 1887. It was most probably this book which inspired the film. After the filming, Brian Viner of *The Daily Mail* even stated that “Queen Victoria was born to be played by Judi Dench”; such was the success of the film that was screened in 2017.

Victoria is also the name of a popular eight-episode 2016 British television drama series starring Jenna Coleman as Queen Victoria. In Valletta, the square in front of the National Library was originally called *Piazza Regina* after Queen Victoria. Its official name is now Republic Square and it is connected to Republic Street, the main street of the city. It was after a statue of Queen Victoria was erected in the middle of the square that it was nicknamed *Piazza Regina* and it is by the latter name rather than by the former that it is now referred to by one and all.

The statue of the Queen was erected instead of that of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena’s statue in 1891, which it replaced, giving the square its present name. The statue was originally paid for by public subscription to commemorate Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee. The statue depicts the elderly monarch with a lace shawl, as she had ordered “eight dozen pairs long and eight dozen pairs short mitts, besides a scarf” of Malta lace. The statue was restored in 2011 by the M. Demajo Group; the entity sponsored the conservation-restoration of the monument but the project was coordinated by heritage NGO Din l-Art Hejwa.



Archbishop Pietro Pace (1831–1914), who instigated the petition to Queen Victoria for the area of Rabat, Gozo, and adjacent areas to be renamed Victoria in her honour.

The ‘Victoria Lines’, originally known as the ‘North West Front’ and sometimes unofficially known as the Great Wall of Malta, are a line of fortifications that spans 12 kilometres along the width of Malta, dividing the north of the island from the south. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 highlighted the importance of the Maltese islands and the British, who were the colonisers of the Maltese islands, called the Great Wall of Malta the ‘Victoria Lines’ after Queen Victoria, who was also to become Empress of India. In 1998 the government submitted the Victoria Lines to Unesco for consideration as a World Heritage Site. The Victoria Lines owe their origin to a combination of international events and the military realities of the time.

On the island of Gozo, Victoria is the name of the island’s main town. It was Queen Victoria who gave permission for the ancient town of Rabat in Gozo to be named after her. This took place through a document dated June 10, 1887; a fountain in Cathedral Square within the old Castello or

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Poster of the 2016 television drama series *Victoria*, starring Jenna Coleman as the young Queen Victoria.



Poster of the 2009 movie *The Young Victoria*, dramatising the turbulent first years of Queen Victoria’s rule, featuring Emily Blunt in the title role.

Citadel commemorates the event, although there are hardly any other monuments to commemorate the historical elevation of Rabat to its present urban status.

People in the 21st century may ask what legacy Queen Victoria left behind her, and this would be reasonable considering the fact that she reigned for 64 years and gave her name to the Victorian era. Victorian wallpaper, Victorian Christmas, Victorian furniture, Victorian plumbing and Victorian font are only a few among the many other items that have been called after the queen-empress. Hundreds of places in the Commonwealth and all around the globe carry her illustrious name.

As to British history, she is considered by historians as the queen who “redefined Britain’s monarchy”. She did, in fact, restore a sense of aura and respect to Britain’s most ancient institution, a respect that had almost faded entirely due to the controversial lifestyle that her uncles had adopted. In many ways, Queen Elizabeth II’s British monarchy offers continuity with Queen Victoria’s and reflects it in many ways – longevity and both royal and political stability, together with a healthy economy are some of the common traits of both Queen Victoria’s and that of her great-great-granddaughter Queen Elizabeth.

With the British Empire a reality of the past, the Commonwealth, consolidated during the reign of the present queen, can be

considered one of the legacies that go back to Queen Victoria’s glorious reign. It would not be right not to mention the special dedication that Victoria had for the poor and the needy of her kingdom in an age characterised by the Industrial Revolution; her life and legacy continue to attract the attention of thousands if not millions of people, as the late TV series about her has revealed and is still revealing.

One does not have to be a monarchist, nor an Anglophile or pro-British in his sympathies to realise that it is high time a statue of Queen Victoria is erected in a square of Gozo’s ancient town of Rabat to commemorate the fact that it was she who – at the instigation of Bishop Pietro Pace and his friend and companion Sir Adrian Dingli, both of Rabat (Gozo) – bestowed the status of a city of Gozo’s old town and gave her the new name of Victoria. While Rabat remains the most popular name for Gozo’s main town, it will be known for posterity as Victoria after the great British queen and empress whose name became an icon to be remembered for ever.

A statue of the queen-empress in the roundabout next to *Dar il-Gvernatur* as one arrives in Victoria from Mgarr would be the ideal way to commemorate such an important anniversary and give Gozo’s ancient town a long-deserved monument that has been lacking since Rabat became a city in 1887.



The fountain in Cathedral Square at the Citadel commemorating the naming of Victoria on June 10, 1887.



Queen Victoria with her controversial Indian attendant Abdul Karim.



An 1896 royal family group photo showing (from left) Queen Alexandra with young Anastasia, Tzar Nicholas II, Queen Victoria and the future King Edward VII.