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'Our royals explain why we are weirdly romantic'

By **MATTHEW WILSON**

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IT was the wedding of the year by a country mile and — amidst a sea of Brexit uncertainty — the sort of occasion that arguably shows Britain at its best.

The wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in May last year was both a media feeding frenzy and something of a public relations coup for UK Plc.

By marrying a divorced American actress of mixed race and uncertain religion, the second son of the Prince of Wales was widely seen as signalling a fundamental modernisation of the British monarchy. But was he?

One man with an intriguing answer to this question is the constitutional historian Professor David Starkey, who is returning to the Kenton Theatre at 7.30pm on Friday, April 12, to give a talk titled "A Monarchy of Misfits?"

"As the Queen recognises with the way in which she's so quickly integrated Meghan and promoted her, promoted Harry, within the institution she most values, the Commonwealth, Meghan is a very good news story," he says.

"The oddity of her outsider status combined with this poise, this elegance, this ability to speak well in public, the fact that dear Harry desperately needed a good woman to take charge of him — it all works astonishingly well."

Set against the long sweep of history, however, there is an argument to be made that Meghan is not quite as groundbreaking a figure as she at first appears.

"The whole point of my lecture is to argue that although Meghan looks very extraordinary in terms of the 20th century monarchy and its immediate predecessors, there are lots of people just as odd as she is in the Middle Ages."

In the publicity material for his talk, Starkey notes that Meghan's marriage to Harry can be seen as a return to the 14th century.

"I point out that the Black Prince, one of the most famous figures in English history, the eldest son of Edward III, marries a woman who is twice divorced, widowed, with children, and who had eloped with her first husband at the age of 12. How's that for starters?"

"One of the other sons of Edward III married the au pair. That was John of Gaunt, from whom the Queen directly descends. And another one of them marries a part-Moorish Spanish princess who it is claimed was a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad."

None of which is intended to detract from the royal family's prestige. At one point, alluding to the political turmoil over Brexit, Starkey says: "The monarchy is about the only bit of our constitution that's still looking reasonably respectable — it's extraordinary."

For Starkey, who made a series on the subject for Channel 4 that eventually ran to 17 episodes, the story of the British monarchy is one that is distinguished by several very different chapters.

"The idea of these marriages that I was talking about with Edward III, the thing they all have in common is they're marriages for love."

"Again, with Edward IV, Henry VIII, these are love marriages. And you then get a very, very sharp change when you get the foreign royal houses coming in, when you get the Stuarts, who feel they have to marry into a very high level of European royalty, which creates the most terrible problems because all their wives are Catholic when



Historical perspective: Professor David Starkey is giving a lecture at the Kenton Theatre on Friday, April 12

they're supposed to be Protestant.

"And then again, more particularly with the House of Hanover, from whom the Queen descends, where you have the most restrictive marriage rules. And partly because they have to marry Protestants — that's the English rule after the fall of the House of Stuart in 1688-9 — but also because of German rules, they've got to marry German princesses of the right status. And the problem with that is that when any one royal prince wants to marry it turns out there are only about two and a half women in Europe that he can marry — and they're both unbelievably unattractive."

"I mean, for much of the 18th century, English royal princes opt out of marriage — they just have long-term love affairs with actresses instead."

"And again, the story has a very sharp turn in it in 1917 when you really reinvent the monarch, when you invent the House of Windsor — and the House of Windsor is

designed to replace a German dynasty. Remember, the royal family in the 18th and 19th centuries keep on becoming foreign again because they marry back home with each generation.

"So, you know, Queen Victoria's first language is German. And [her eldest son] Edward VII's first language is German. Victoria and Albert converse and write to each other in German."

"But with 1917 you turn a German dynasty into an English family. You call it the House of Windsor and then you also adopt English marriage customs."

"So George V and Queen Mary said our children can now marry English men and English women — and it's at that point that you invent our notion of a royal marriage — that it's supposed to be a love affair, that it's supposed to be a grand public spectacle, that you use the Abbey or St Paul's."

"Before then, for centuries, princes and princesses had got

married privately. The whole way we think of a royal marriage in so many ways is a very modern, very recent invention.

"The thing people love about the lecture is when I explain that we English are very peculiar because we think love and marriage have got something to do with each other. Tell that to a Frenchman and he laughs his head off."

Like so much else in our national life, according to Starkey, this cultural thread leads back to Henry VIII and his six wives.

"That extraordinary cycle of marriages, in which the idea of love plays an absolutely central part — it's magical, it's captivating stuff. With each one of them, with the exception of Anne of Cleves, Henry is deeply in love."

"The love may turn to something else very quickly, but there is no doubt whatever, we know — we have it from his own lips — that this is the reason for what he does."

"It's a unique pattern. Other monarchs, of course, fall in love — but they fall in love with mistresses. The peculiarity about Henry is that he insists on marrying his mistresses."

And Starkey thinks this quirk of Henry's has fed through into our cultural practices today?

"Very much so. We are a weirdly romantic people."

So Henry wasn't just desperately trying to father a son and heir?

"No! It's love. If you look at the literary origins of all this stuff, clearly the idea of courtly love is French. It begins in France. But in France it's never associated with marriage. It's the English, from Chaucer onwards, who start to put the idea of love and marriage together. It's a very Anglo-Saxon idea."

● "A Monarchy of Misfits?" has a running time of 90 minutes with no interval, the last 30 minutes of which will take the form of an audience Q&A. Tickets are £18 for adults and £16 concessions. To book, call (01491) 575698 or visit www.kentontheatre.co.uk

Elvis star is coming home for Christmas

ONE of the world's leading Elvis tribute artists will be back on home turf in Henley this December — for three nights running.

Ben Portsmouth hails from Waltham St Lawrence but played only his second ever gig in the former Queen's Head pub on the corner of Duke Street and Greys Road.

Tonight (Friday) he and his band are in concert at the Wycombe Swan — and on Saturday, April 13, they play the 2,000-seater Indigo at the O2.

The year ahead will see Ben performing in such far-flung locations as Ireland, Malta and Brazil.

But come December his Henley fans will have three chances to see him on their doorstep when he plays two nights at the Kenton Theatre in New Street — followed by a special gospel-themed "Elvis by Candle Light" concert at St Mary's Church in Hart Street.

A Kenton spokesman said: "Internationally renowned as one of the best Elvis tributes in the world today, Ben will bring his unique style and charisma to the Kenton and show audiences why he is regarded as the best in the business

"He looks like Elvis, sings like Elvis and has an on-stage charisma that has audiences believing at times that they are watching the King himself."

"Born in Reading but with a voice that could easily come from Memphis,



Showman: Ben Portsmouth

Ben is in high demand around the world.

"We only have two shows, meaning we can't quite get an American Trilogy, but two out of three ain't bad."

The shows at the New Street theatre take place at 8pm on Friday, December 6, and Saturday, December 7.

Tickets are £36 and are limited to two per person.

For more information and to book, visit www.kentontheatre.co.uk

"Elvis by Candle Light" takes place on Sunday, December 8. Doors open at 6.30pm for a 7.30pm start, with seating allocated on a first come first served basis.

Ben and his Taking Care of Elvis band will play a 75-minute gospel music set.

Tickets are priced £22.50, with £1 per head being donated to a Henley charity.

For more information and to book, visit www.takingcareofelvis.co.uk

Ceilidh specialists rev up for spring

FOLK dance band Nedron's Jig have two of their trademark ceilidhs lined up at Norden Farm in Maidenhead in April.

The first of these is a family ceilidh next Sunday (April 7). This starts at 4pm in the Long Barn.

Featuring easy to learn dance steps and lots of laughter, tickets are priced £11 for adults and £9 for under-16s.

Then on Saturday, April 27, at 7.30pm the band will be hosting a spring ceilidh.

A Norden Farm spokesman said: "You'll be in safe hands with the expert calling and playing from Nedron's Jig. A social evening of dance is in store. No experience necessary!"

Tickets are £15 with concessions £13. To book, visit www.norden.farm

Meanwhile, over at Nettlebed village hall, folk



Experienced: Nedron's Jig

music fans are in for a treat on Monday (April 1) when the High Street venue hosts a double-header show.

Banter, a trio who were among the highlights of last year's festival season, will open the evening. Fairport Convention founder Ashley Hutchings will then perform a set called "The Beginnings of Fairport Convention" with Becky Mills.

Tickets for the 8pm concert are £15 in advance via 01628 636620 or www.nettlebedfolkclub.co.uk

Have you got what it techs for musical?

TECHNICAL crew members are being sought for the Henley Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society's next production.

Lighting, sound and stage management are among the technical skills needed for *Half a Sixpence*, which is being staged at the Kenton Theatre from Wednesday, May 1, to Saturday, May 4.

The show is a musical comedy based on the 1905 novel *Kipps* by HG Wells, with music and lyrics by

David Heneker and book by Beverley Cross. First staged in 1963, it was originally written as a vehicle for pop star Tommy Steele.

Tickets for the show are £18 for adults with concessions £17 and children £12, available from the Kenton box office.

Anyone able to lend their skills to the production is asked to email director Julie Huntington on hunting311@aol.com for more information.



Love's young dream: Harry and Meghan's was the wedding of the year

Picture: Mark Jones