

A Day to Remember! By Bjorn Watson BEM

Last Saturday I had the immense privilege of being invited to their Majesties' Coronation in Westminster Abbey.

Nikki, my daughter, dropped me at Swindon Station on Friday afternoon and I checked into my hotel in Lambeth which was walking distance from the Abbey. I had the tiniest room one could squeeze into and I practically had to go in sideways. But in fairness it had all the facilities including a shower and a loo and that was all I needed for my big adventure.

After a very special supper with my granddaughters who live and work in London I got an early bed and slept like a log. I set the alarm for 5am but I needn't have bothered as I was wide awake at 4.30 and after squeezing round the door into the shower and having had a pear for breakfast I set off for the Abbey at six o'clock. The deserted streets of Lambeth seemed to be populated only by policemen at that hour. There were police vans and cars everywhere but as I drew near to Lambeth Bridge the crowds started to appear and as I crested the bridge I met a long line of smart folk all queuing for the Abbey. It was a grey old morning but I could see all the way up the Thames past Westminster Bridge, Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament and with the Millennium Wheel in the background.

The first person I encountered in the queue was a delightful lady dressed immaculately with a large hat perched jauntily on her head like the jib on a sailing boat. I had the idea that if we had a gust wind she would be whisked into the waters of the Thames below! It turned out she was from Armagh in Northern Ireland not far from where my family used to live. She was the first of many friendly happy people I met. Indeed as the queue moved everyone was smiling and had a cheerful 'Good morning'. Our route into the Abbey was carefully cordoned off and we had to go through airport style security checks where we had to produce photo ID but we were not quite strip searched!

Once in the Abbey I found the nave filled with rows of extremely hard seats on either side of the central aisle and I bagged one almost on the front row. Then the seats began to fill with a truly diverse bunch of people. It was our new King's aim to reward the common folk who were mostly community volunteers and all around me, mixing with the great and the good, were other people sporting BEM medals on their chests. Next to me was a caretaker from Londonderry with a virtually incomprehensible Northern Irish accent. On the other side was a retired Gurkha

officer with interesting tales to tell of training African Union troops in that war torn continent. In front sat some Muslim clerics and opposite was a row of morning-suited worthies from The Establishment with their finely turned out wives.

On entering we were given an Order of Service - the like of which you have never seen. It was a 50 page booklet setting out precisely what was going to happen and when. This gave me something to look at because I had got in at well before 8.00am and things didn't start to hot up until around 10.00. The service proper kicked off at 11.00. What had much preoccupied me was how I would last for five and half hours without a pee as we had been warned that the facilities in the Abbey were extremely limited. In the event I carefully had had only a sip of water that morning and upto 9.30 there was no problem wandering off to the loo.

The proceeds started with swirling music which built up as the time of the service neared. Then came the processing clergy followed by the politicians past and present and I was within touching distance of them as they went by. We had an upright John Major, an ageing Tony Blair with Cherrie who had grown matronly with the years. We had a smiling Gordon Brown and David Cameron and his wife. Then of course there was a dishevelled Boris Johnson shambling along holding on to Carrie and Liz Truss smiling serenely with her husband. After that a blur of the present day lot, the only one of whom I could pick out was Jeremy Hunt. And I missed Kier Starmer fresh from his recent electoral successes. Then came ranks of foreign dignitaries followed most movingly by the Commonwealth heads of state from Antigua and Australia through to the United Kingdom. Each head of state was proceeded by his national flag culminating with Rishi Sunak bringing up the rear. After that came the procession of foreign kings and queens of whom I picked out King Carl-Gustav of Sweden and his Queen.

Finally a gaggle of Royals came solemnly in followed by a sad looking Prince Harry bringing up the rear. Now in the gallery just above us, a mighty fanfare that literally made the hair on the back of my head stand on end. Before I knew it the King was there in front of me looking tiny between the two burly clergy on either side of him. As the procession inched its way slowly past I could have reached out and touched the figures - the little pages in their scarlet and gold holding up the train - Prince George among them, each looking steadfastly ahead. Now came Camilla looking as tall and radiant as Charles was small and sombre. Then there was William in his Garter finery with Kate. I must confess to having tears in my eyes as the two little grandchildren went by - Charlotte holding Louis by the hand.

The coronation service started but we, the congregation in the nave, were shut off from the ceremony by the giant ornate golden rood screen between us and the action so we saw it all on huge TV screens suspended from the columns cunningly

disguised to look like stonework when switched off. So we watched the proceedings just like the rest of the millions of viewers on TV. But of course the millions didn't have the atmosphere of the Abbey, the soaring vaults and the echoing sound. Neither did they have the living breathing congregation to spur them on.

I remember being bowled over by incomparable Bryn Turvill singing the magnificent Kyrie eleison in Welsh and when it came to the part where they put screens up to shield the King in the most solemn and secret part of ceremony, the sound of Handel's famous 'Zadok the Priest' left me literally weak at the knees. As the ceremony progressed I couldn't help wondering what the multi faith leaders thought of the barbaric symbols of medieval power that they were required to offer up to the King. I must say that I thought that Archbishop Justin was the star of the show. He had stood at the door and smiling welcomed each high flying guest but he also went into the congregation and greeted people of different faiths. And now he lifts the great golden St Edward's crown with its 400 gemstones weighing nearly 2.5 kg or almost 5lbs and screws it firmly down on the King's head then stands back to see if it is aligned properly. I wonder if you like me thought - what if he had dropped it? And the crown of St Edward had come tumbling onto the floor! If I had thought about it I would have paid more attention to the regalia particularly the two sceptres - each a three foot long golden staff symbolising the power of Kingship. The older one had had the famous Cullinan diamond added in 1910. This remains the largest diamond ever discovered which made me wonder how much all this fabulous stuff was worth.

When it came the coronation oaths, the king swears to govern his people, to administer justice, to protect the church and the Protestant Succession but not, I noted, to protect Parliament which, given the state of our government in recent years, was a notable omission, I thought. The climactic conclusion of the service was a rousing GOD SAVE KING CHARLES. I have never sung the National Anthem more lustily.

Then suddenly the service was over and the clergy were progressing out of the church. The big wigs ended up standing around waiting in front of us and the tedium was enlivened by a bearded Muslim gentleman in front of me leaping up in strict contravention of all the regulations and putting his arm around round Rishi Sunak and saying "Can I have a selfie" to which Rishi duly obliged! Finally the King and Queen went slowly past. As they mounted the golden state coach for the procession back to the palace, the rest of us, led mostly by the great and the good, completely ignoring the strictures of the ushers piled for the entrance. I was lost in a scrum of top hatted gents and bejewelled ladies pushing for the door. I emerged into the London drizzle feeling the anti-climax of it all.

Unaccountably emotional, I couldn't stop the tears. At times a bit boring, I confess to nodding off sometimes. I had been up since 5 o'clock after all. But always spectacular, I couldn't help the feeling that this was the culmination of my long and lucky life and remembering my loved ones who had gone.

I wound my way disconsolately back through Westminster Palace Gardens and over Lambeth Bridge past the ranks of policemen through the dirty back streets to my hotel. As I picked up my bag the receptionist asked "Have been you to the actual coronation? How was it?" "Beyond amazing, I replied"!