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A look back at the wedding of the century

In honor of the 45th anniversary of **Prince Charles and Princess Diana’s** fairy-tale “I do’s,” historians and those who were there share behind-the-scenes stories

BY JAIME HARKIN
US Weekly

In the early hours of July 29, 1981, roughly 600,000 people gathered on the streets of London to catch a glimpse of a dashing Prince Charles and his beautiful bride-to-be, Lady Diana Spencer, as they made their way to St. Paul’s Cathedral. Dressed in his Royal Navy commander’s uniform, Charles, then 32, arrived first in a horse-drawn carriage, escorted by the Household Cavalry. Soon after, 20-year-old Diana stepped out of the Glass Coach in a stunning silk taffeta gown — complete with a 25-foot train — to the sound of cheering crowds. It was a fairy tale come to life. “The dress, the setting, it was like something out of a movie,” Charles’ former butler Grant Harrold tells *Us*.

Inside the hallowed walls of St. Paul’s, 3,500 guests watched as Charles and Diana exchanged “I do’s.” Around the globe, some 750 million people tuned in via television. “Millions got up early or stayed awake late into the night to watch,” says royal historian Marlene Koenig. Now, 45 years later, the pomp and circumstance of the occasion remain unmatched. “Diana was a gorgeous young lady about to become a real-life princess,” says Harrold. “The whole world’s attention was captured. There’s been nothing like it since.”

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

According to Elizabeth Emanuel, who created Diana’s wedding dress alongside her then-husband, David, the princess was in high spirits on the morning of her nuptials. “The mood was very good, and everybody was together, and it was marvelous,” says the British designer, noting that Diana had been a pleasure to work with. “She was always fun to be around.”

There were, of course, some nerves. Diana had only met Charles 13 times during their courtship. (Her aristocratic relatives had been close to the royal family for years; Charles briefly dated Diana’s older sister Sarah before he was matched with the shy nursery school assistant.) “She was 20 when they wed, which is incredibly young to be thrown onto the world stage,” says Harrold. “It would’ve been an incredibly intimidating event for her.” Charles was used to the fanfare, but Harrold says the future king was also a bit on edge. “He’s such a perfectionist; he would have wanted it all to go right.”

After the ceremony, Charles and Diana appeared on the balcony at Buckingham Palace, where they shared an impromptu kiss. “We hadn’t really seen the royals show public displays of affection like that



Prince Charles, Prince of Wales and Diana, Princess of Wales, wearing a wedding dress designed by David and Elizabeth Emanuel and the Spencer family Tiara, leave St. Paul’s Cathedral following their wedding on July 29, 1981 in London, England.

before,” reveals Harrold. “They created an iconic tradition.” (Koenig says Charles got a quick “OK” from his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, before the gesture.)

A wedding breakfast followed inside the palace, where guests were served a first course of brill in lobster sauce and *Suprême de Volaille* *Princesse de Galles* — chicken breast stuffed with a fine lamb mousse — as the main course, named in honor of the new Princess of Wales. There were 27 cakes, including a five-tiered fruitcake. “It was a great occasion and a great day, and

everybody was exhausted at the end — their mouths were aching from smiling,” says former Palace press secretary Dickie Arbiter.

Even the queen let her guard down during the celebration. “As Diana and Charles were leaving, all the guests thundered out of the palace, and leading the charge was the queen,” reveals Arbiter. “To actually see the queen running was quite funny.”

UNHAPPY ENDING

For all the magic of their big day, Charles and Diana’s union did not stand the test of time.

While some experts believe Diana’s decision to omit the word “obey” from her vows was a sign of trouble to come, Koenig says its inclusion wasn’t necessarily royal tradition. Charles, then considered one of the world’s most eligible bachelors, was under pressure to settle down when he chose Diana. “His main duty was to father a male heir and find a suitable bride,” says Andy Webb, author of the 2025 book *Dianarama*. Diana fit the bill. “She [seemed] ideal,” Webb adds.

Arbiter says he had tea with Charles and Diana

three days before their wedding and insists they appeared to be “very much in love.” He tells *Us*, “They couldn’t keep their hands off each other, and it was ‘Darling this,’ and ‘Darling that.’ Charles in those days was not the most tactile of people, and yet here he was with his hands all over Diana, and quite unashamedly doing it in front of me, which I found surprising.”

However, it soon became clear that Charles and Diana were ill-matched. “Apart from a few dinners and phone calls, Charles and Diana never truly got to know

each other,” says Koenig. “They had nothing in common.” Diana sought the help of astrologer Penny Thornton, who worked with the late royal from 1986 until 1992. “Diana was not experienced in life, and she really adored Charles,” Thornton tells *Us*. “For her it was real, whereas for Charles, we all know now he remained in love with Camilla all that time.” (Charles, now 77, married Camilla, 79, in 2005; Diana famously told the BBC that “there were three of us in the marriage,” in a 1995 interview.)

Thornton says Diana told her that Charles had confessed the night before their nuptials that he wasn’t in love with her. “He wanted to come clean and say, ‘Look, I don’t love you, but we’re going to make a very good job of this,’” she says. “It was absolutely a job [for Charles].” Koenig says Diana “had her doubts” about going through with the wedding, but was reminded by her sisters that “her face was on the tea towels, so it was too late to bolt.”

The astrologer tells *Us* that she and Diana mostly talked about her future with Charles and her sense of powerlessness within the royal family. “Diana couldn’t approach anyone in the family,” Thornton shares. “She felt very isolated and hopeless.” Thornton says she was struck by Diana’s warmth. “I’d been advised to curtsy and call her ‘Your Royal Highness,’ and she said, ‘Oh, stop that nonsense! Just call me Diana.’ She was an absolute ray of sunshine,” Thornton adds, “and her charisma was very palpable.”

Charles and Diana — who went on to welcome sons Prince William and Prince Harry — split in 1992 and formally divorced in 1996. Diana tragically died at age 36 following a Paris car crash the next year. “Even though people have now accepted Charles’ [relationship with] Camilla, Charles’ marriage to Diana is one that people still look back on fondly,” says Harrold.

ROYAL BENCHMARK

After the wedding, Diana was catapulted to worldwide fame. “She became a superstar,” says Harrold, noting that Diana forever changed the face of the monarchy. “She put a real focus on her family as well as the crown.” Adds Koenig: “She loved her sons, and was determined that their royal lives would be a success, and she wanted to prepare them for their future.”

The storybook nuptials raised the stakes for future royal events. “It was the wedding of the century,” says Harrold, “and it set the standard of the picture-perfect royal wedding. It’s a historic day that people who lived it will never forget.”