

King George VI Oak Tree

The King George VI oak tree at Victoria Park was planted in celebration of the coronation of King George VI and his wife, Queen Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon. The oak tree, an English symbol of royalty, strength and survival, was planted on May 12, 1937, as part of London's coronation parade and ceremony.



Figure 1. King George VI Tree. *Source:* Robin Armistead.

Earlier Coronation Celebrations

London has a tradition of coronation celebrations in the city and in particular, London has planted an oak tree for a coronation before:

- ***Coronation of George IV, 1820:*** London was still un-named and only described as a potential site for a city, but in York (Toronto), it was marked on some maps as “Georgiana-on-the-Thames” in celebration of George IV’s coronation.
- ***Coronation of William IV, 1830:*** London was only 4 years old, but Col. Thomas Talbot decided to create William St. in celebration.
- ***Coronation of Victoria, 1837:*** News of Victoria’s unexpected coronation did not reach London for a few weeks after her coronation but a holiday was proclaimed. Candles were lit in house and store windows and a bonfire was held at the Court house.
- ***Coronation of Edward VII, 1902:*** Numerous commemorative activities took place during the Coronation of Edward VII. A ceremony was held at St. Paul’s Cathedral, during which Mayor and Alderman Clarence T. Campbell spoke.



Following the ceremony, a procession led by Rev. Canon Dann and Rev. Dr. Bethune led Londoners to Victoria Park for the planting of an oak tree. The tree was planted and Mayor Campbell gave a patriotic speech before placing dirt in the ground. The other aldermen put dirt in the ground afterwards and everyone sang the anthem.

- **Coronation of George V, 1911:** It rained on the morning of George V's coronation on June 22, 1911, but in the afternoon, Londoners came out for many celebrations. Flags were flown at every house and the Union Jack was flown at various downtown stores. Churches held special services and the Ontario Association of Foresters put on a duplicate ceremony to England's ceremony in Queen's Park. George Rufus Keys played the King and Miss Mae Perrin played the Queen.¹

1937 Coronation of King George VI

On May 12, 1937, Londoners in Ontario joined England's Londoners in celebrating the coronation of the new king and queen, George VI and Elizabeth. Although Londoners had enjoyed beautiful sunny weather throughout the week, it rained heavily throughout the entire day on May 12. Despite this, hundreds of Londoners marched in a parade and an estimated 8000 individuals came to Queens Park and Victoria Park to celebrate.

In the morning, a service was held at St. Paul's Cathedral. It is likely that a procession similar to the ceremony in 1902 thus followed, with the reverends of the church leading the way and Mayor Thomas Kingsmill giving a speech. The procession proceeded to Victoria Park where a royal salute was conducted and the King George VI Oak Tree was planted by the Coronation Planting Committee. A plaque was placed in front of the tree. It is likely that the Planting Committee planted other oak trees in Victoria Park and/or around the city.

Afterwards, thousands of Londoners took part in afternoon and evening celebrations. A parade left Covent Garden Market at 1:00 pm and was led by a colour guard of army and navy veterans. Following the guard were members from military branches 227 and 229, the No. 1 Citadel Band of the Salvation Army, civic officials in motors, children in costume and a number of floats. The Irish Benevolent Society float featured Tom O'Brien of Brescia Hall, leading a group of horses and a horse-drawn wagon. The Amputations Association Army and Navy Veterans' float from branch 227 followed, with the "Britannia Float," a blue, red, and white decorated float by the St. George Society Womens' Auxiliary behind. The parade also featured the Ex-Servicemen's Wives, Mothers and Guardians' Association, 50 decorated bicycles, and a float by St. John Ambulance, who also provided ambulance services during the celebration. Dr. S. J. T. Bean was the chief parade marshal and London Boy Scouts acted as "parade runners."

The parade marched from Covent Garden, along Talbot Street, from Dundas Street to Waterloo, down King to Rectory, then to York and finally ended at Queens' Park.



Figure 2. Colour Guard leading the parade. *Source:* The London Free Press.



Figure 3. The "Britannia float" by the St. George Society Womens' Auxiliary. *Source:* The London Free Press.

At Queens' Park, grand stands were set up for Londoners to sit in and greet the marching parade. When the parade turned into Queens' Park, it finally stopped raining. Unfortunately, many costumes and floats were destroyed by the rain. The crowd cheered for the parade then listened to George VI's announcement over the public address system. After his speech, the crowds sang "God Save the King," and watched a live performance by 110 tap dancers from Central Collegiate. Directed by Doris Plewes, the tap dancers were girls from the school's physical culture training classes and performed to the music of pianist Fuchsia Whitehead. Prizes were then given out to the best floats and costumes. Finally, a number of sports events were held by the London Olympic Club. Participating in these events were John Loaring, Canadian Olympic track champion, Terry Ferris, an international track athlete at the time, and Poppy Nevin, a multi-sport star and competitor in the British Empire Games.²

Other commemorative activities took place around the city, including the establishment of the Coronation Coppice, which was placed in a garden of raspberries, redbuds and geraniums at Western University and a coronation cookbook, which was published by the Womens' Auxiliary of Victoria Hospital and titled *The Coronation Cookbook with tested recipes*.



Figure 4. Coronation Coppice in the Snow. *Source:* Western University Flickr account.

Two years after King George's coronation, the King and the Queen visited Canada on a Royal Tour, stopping in London for a parade and ceremony at Queens Park and Victoria Park.

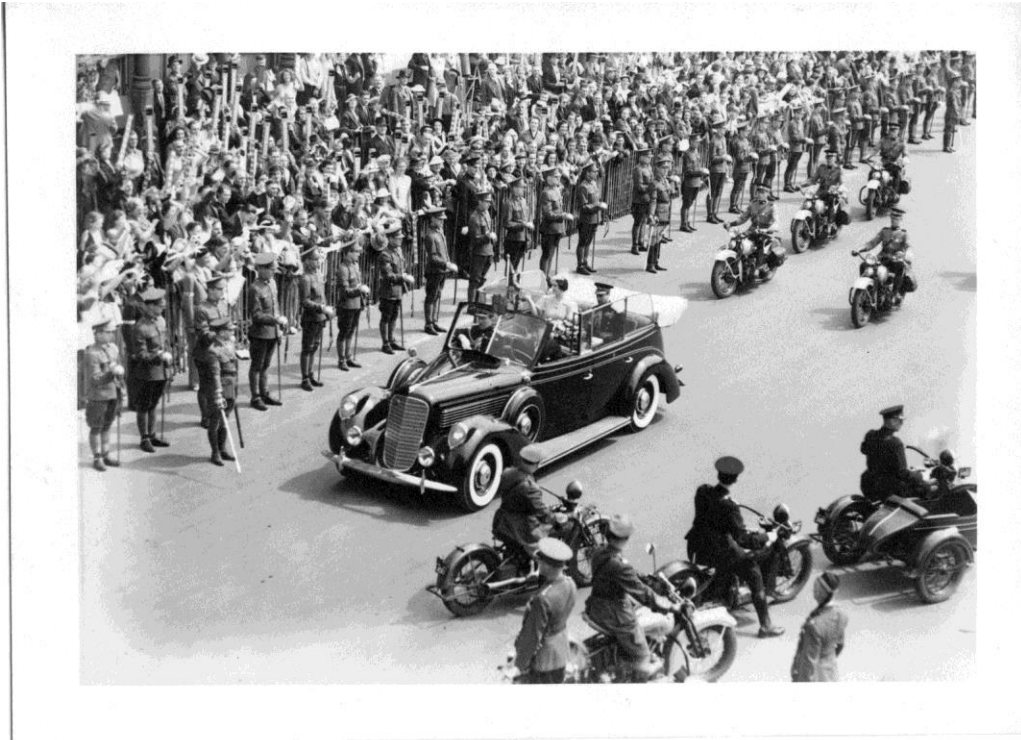


Figure 5. Royal Visit, 1939 – King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in limousine. *Source:* London Public Library Image Gallery.

Symbolism of the Oak Tree

It is interesting that two of the coronation ceremonies held in London included the planting of an oak tree in Victoria Park. It is likely that an oak tree was planted because the English oak tree is a national emblem of the United Kingdom. Oak trees are native to the area and are some of the most common trees, especially in southern and central England. The tree has also had a symbolic connection with royalty in England. Many ancient English kings wore crowns of oak leaves. Additionally, it is an English national symbol of strength and survival. In the seventeenth century, couples were married under old oak trees and in 1987, the oak tree decorated the pound coin.³



Contact Information

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Notes

¹ "Previous Coronations Celebrated Royally by London the Lesser," *London Free Press*, Coronation Edition, May 12, 1937, 8.

² "King George VI Crowned," *London Free Press*, May 12, 1937, 1; The Canadian Press, "Canada United in Celebration," *London Free Press*, May 12, 1937, 1; "London Honours Her King," *London Free Press*, May 12, 1937, 6; "Great Parade Part of This City's Homage to King and Queen," *London Free Press*, May 13, 1937, 14; "Parades Among Features of Coronation Day Celebration Here," *London Free Press*, May 13, 1937, 16; "Drenched but Game, Hundreds in Parade Continue in March," *London Evening Free Press*, May 13, 1937, 1; Daniel J. Brock, *Fragments from the Forks: London Ontario's Legacy*, edited by Catherine B. McEwen (London: London & Middlesex Historical Society, 2011), 237.

³ "Oak, English (*Quercus robur*)," *Woodland Trust*, <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/native-trees/english-oak/>; Simon Schama, "The tree that shaped Britain," *BBC News*, May 7, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/8668587.stm.