



The Queen and Her Cousins with Alexander Armstrong



PRESS PACK

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TX Thursday 15 April at 9pm on ITV

In this brand-new documentary marking The Queen's 95th birthday, Alexander Armstrong meets the royal cousins who share details about their most famous relative and reveal what it's like to be part of this extraordinary family.

Sharing private letters, personal photos and rare memorabilia, they recount treasured memories for the first time and Alexander learns more about royal life in modern Britain. And, as he takes viewers on a road trip through the country and the dynasties, Alexander reveals he may have uncovered a new cousin who can take their place in the royal family tree.

Alexander starts off in Kent where he meets one of The Queen's third cousins, Princess Olga Romanoff. Princess Olga lives at Provender House and runs part of the imposing family home as a holiday let with her daughter.

She says: *"I always said I would never ever do other people's dirty washing, ever. But luckily, now that this is up and running it should bring in some income towards the £50,000 a year to keep the place."*

The programme explains how in 1918 Princess Olga's grandmother was rescued by her cousin King George V and brought to England from Crimea after other members of their family were executed by communist revolutionaries.

Princess Olga shows Alexander around the house and shows him a signed photograph from Queen Mary. She says: *"She had kind of upmarket kleptomania because she would go stay in somebody's house and she'd be sitting on one of a dozen Sheraton chairs and she'd say 'Oo, I do like this chair,' And you'd be obliged to give her all twelve."*

Princess Olga adds that she is glad not to be an imperial princess. She says: *"You don't want to scrub up every day. You want to be smelling of horse and you don't want to have to be tarted up."*

She adds: *"The Queen used to take Charles and Anne to have tea with my grandmother and they apparently had beautiful manners and I had terrible manners."*

Princess Olga agrees to go on a road trip with Alexander to track down more of her relatives, starting in Devon where they meet Lord Ivar Mountbatten.

Lord Ivar Mountbatten lives with his husband at Bridewell Park. When the couple married in 2018 they became the first openly gay couple in royal history. They talk to Alexander about how they met and show him around the extensive estate which is run as a wedding venue. The



couple do most of the maintenance themselves and take Alexander with them as they get thigh-deep in mud trying to clear a woodland area.

Over dinner the pair talk to Alexander about their decision to get married and how James felt joining the royal family. Plus Ivar tells Alexander that behind closed doors the family is the same as any other.

He says: *"We all have our ups and downs, everybody has their own internal arguments, it's the same anywhere. But you will always remember that The Queen is The Queen. You will say Your Majesty to begin with and then always Ma'am."*

After leaving Bridewell Park, Alexander and Princess Olga hit the road again and head to Norfolk to meet the Queen Mother's great niece.

On their way, Princess Olga gives Alexander her opinion on members of the royal family talking about their problems on television.

She says: *"The Queen has always got on with it. A bit of mystique and all that is a very good thing."*

In Norfolk Alexander meets Victoria Pryor, the Queen Mother's great niece and The Queen's goddaughter. Victoria's mother was The Queen's best friend and bridesmaid and Victoria shows Alexander a snapshot of the two of them together in Scotland in more recent years.

She says: *"It just looks like two slightly elderly ladies in their kilts. The Queen would have loved to have been just a country lady with her animals."*

Victoria shows Alexander letters she has been sent by The Queen and tells him about the Christmas presents she has sent her.

Finally Alexander meets Kathy Cormack from Surrey whose family have long believed they are descendants of King Ethelred. The pair head to Oxford to meet a researcher who is going to find out the truth and let Kathy know if she really is related to royalty.

Produced by Daisybeck Studios for ITV.



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What appealed to you about this project?

Well, I loved the premise initially because I thought at the very least I would meet some fascinating people, learn a lot and hear some extraordinary stories from the inside track. And that was certainly the case. But the three cousins I met each represented a different royal connection and so what I ended up getting was a sort of triangulation on this strange 'thing' that is royalty. Best of all they were all incredibly down to earth: they all live in the real world – quite a rarefied corner of it in some cases – but they were all extremely likeable. And out of this rather blurred abstract notion, quite a sharp picture emerged of what it means to be royal. I mean, talking to Ivar Mountbatten about what it feels like to be standing on the balcony at Buckingham Palace - that must be a very strange thing to do, to take a bow for no other reason than that you have inherited a status. By the end, it became very clear to me that the monarchy and its many roles and titles all have to be held by exceptionally strong people. Because it's exhausting. You seemingly have to live the lives of two different people. The role you play and then the person themselves behind that role: the friend, mother, wife or daughter. It's hard to imagine quite how taxing that job must be.

Which cousin or visit made the biggest impression on you?

They were all very different. It was fantastic meeting Ivar and James. They live in the most beautiful house and are quite the nicest people you'll ever meet - enormously welcoming and open. But also, their story is so interesting. The first openly gay couple in the near royal family. They were just an enchanting pair.

Lovely Victoria Pryor in Norfolk was utterly delightful and relatable and she was able to provide a particular insight into the Bowes-Lyon side of the royal family. The Duke of York wasn't going to be king – he only became George VI through a quirk of fate – so he could marry who he wanted and adored. And he married Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, or the Queen Mother as she became. I think we owe a lot to the input of her family, the Bowes-Lyons, because it brought a blast of fresh air into the royal line.

Princess Olga Romanov was unarguably the grandest in her way, she couldn't have been nicer and was an absolute hoot – wonderfully indiscreet and swears like a trooper. She is someone you very much want to spend time with. She is struggling to heat that incredible old house, desperate for her B&B guests to keep coming so she can keep a roof on the place, but some of that Russian grandeur is very much still there and it made her fascinating.

You uncovered some lovely stories. What struck you the most about the Queen, from meeting members of her family?

How incredibly normal and fun she was, behind closed doors. When she'd taken off the mantle of being queen, there's a colossal sense of fun and warmth. It particularly showed in the



friendship she had with her cousin Margaret Rhodes. I had a lump in my throat reading her letters. There's a lovely photograph of the pair of them standing together in their kilts. She's so completely relaxed. It's quite lovely. But then also, it struck me that even with Margaret Rhodes, one of her oldest friends and her cousin, even when it was just the pair of them meeting on the Windsor estate together, Margaret would curtsy to the Queen and would call her 'Your Majesty' when they started speaking, before then reverting to a more informal name. But to have to carry that structural burden of being an emblematic head of state and church, even with dearest friends – it's very much, head of state first, friend second; the formality takes precedence, and it has to – that really stretched my understanding of who and what the Queen is.

Having discovered a royal link of your own previously, did you find the historical element to the programme interesting and meeting the ancestry researcher?

It was fascinating, but when you think about it, it starts to become apparent that actually most of us - without knowing it - are related to the royal family. Statistically, it is impossible that we aren't. If you work out how many offspring there were from each generation over the years, the royal line becomes so fantastically widespread. I rather like the idea of that!

What are your own thoughts and feelings about the Queen as she approaches her 95th birthday, particularly since having met her in person previously?

The Queen has been a presence in all our lives at a very personal level. She wouldn't have been aware of it, but she has sort of presided over so many occasions when we've all got together as families; happy occasions, sad occasions, momentous occasions when she's spoken to us as a nation, or even just as part of our family Christmases. She has always been there. It becomes an emotional attachment.

Through a single lifetime, to have coincided with so much change: medical change, technological change, sociological change - so much has happened during her reign and she's never missed a beat. She somehow managed to be a part of all those changing eras. To be 95 and to remain relevant is an astonishing achievement. I think the interest and the love she has shown to her country and its many communities is what gives her that extraordinary megawattage of soft power. And the status she enjoys is not actually something she's inherited, it's defined entirely and only by the affection that we hold her in; that we project onto her. That is the essence of an effective monarch – and we have been SO lucky to have lived under one of history's very best.

Please credit: 'The Queen and Her Cousins with Alexander Armstrong is on Thursday 15 April at 9pm on ITV' (TBC).

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