



TO BE CHECKED AGAINST DELIVERY

CORONATION PREPARATIONS

Speech By The Minister of Works, The Rt. Hon. David Eccles, M.P.,
at Church House, Westminster, Tuesday February 17th 1953.

Thank you for coming here again. My business this morning is to give you Progress Report No.3 on the most important of the Coronation decorations which are my responsibility as Minister of Works.

You will agree, I am sure, that in the long history of State occasions the events of 2nd June, 1953, are going to make an impact in print and in pictures undreamed of before. The world's appetite for news, and this seems especially true of the Coronation story, grows with the means of satisfying it. And now the best estimate I can give you is that for every single spectator who has a seat or who stands on the pavements a thousand others will see the pictures or read about June 2nd in newspapers and magazines. For a hundred thousand who will watch with their own eyes a hundred million will watch through your eyes.

I make this point to bring clearly before you the scale of our joint responsibility: mine to contrive the finest setting to the Coronation which the tight limits of my budget will allow; and yours to tell the story with complete success.

Today I want to talk about decorations for the Mall, Whitehall, Parliament Square and outside the Abbey.

We thought you would be interested to see the working models of this part of the route. These models are made of odd bits of material - Balsa wood, twigs, wire-wool, pins and so on. They were carved and decorated by members of the Ministry's architectural staff. I owe a great deal to their skilful fingers. For without the models I could not test in true perspective the shapes, sizes and colours which my architects suggest for this or that position on the route.

Now let us suppose that we are following the Coronation Procession on 2nd June. What will the Queen see? Leaving Buckingham Palace by the south gate the first to greet Her Majesty will be holders of the Victoria Cross and George Cross and disabled ex-service men.

The Queen Victoria Memorial has always been a favourite position for cameras and press. We are building a larger platform here than has been erected before, but even so the limits of space will not permit all who would like to be there to get a place.

I think you know about the machinery for allocating places to the Press. I am bound to rely on your own Committee's advice and I can assure you we are doing our best by increasing the total number of positions to reduce disappointment. The steps and pavement round the Memorial will be reserved for boys and girls.

In ordinary summers the gardens round the Queen Victoria statue are famous for their geraniums - the variety is Gustav Emich. We shall use this geranium to make a great display in front of the stands which are going up on the semicircle of grass and flower-beds facing the Palace. Behind the flowers there will be the blue frontals of the stands and a pinkish-red under-side to the roof of the stands.

The Mall

Coming round the Victoria Monument the procession faces the thousand yards of London's royal highway. The Mall offers perhaps the best chance on the route to create that blend of majesty and gaiety which so truly represents our Queen. From the models you can get a first impression of what we are making of this opportunity. Of course the real thing will be much more entrancing, for you must bring into the picture the cheering crowds, the sparkle and movement of the uniforms, the music of the bands, and the golden coach itself. The models you are looking at this morning are like the table set for the banquet, but the guests, the footmen and the fare are still to come; and what life and colour they will bring.

The decoration of the Mall is governed by the triple avenue of plane trees. On June 2nd these will be bursting with leaf. We decided the greenery would be too much in evidence to rely for colour simply on a line of standards on either side of the carriage-way. What were we to add to the usual scheme of decoration? My chief architect Mr. Eric Bedford had a wonderful idea. He designed a most graceful and exciting arch to span the procession quite dwarfing the trees.

There will be four of these arches along the Mall, built of tubular steel, the construction work filled in here and there with fan-shaped designs in golden cane. The twin spans of the arch intersect at right angles 65 feet above the ground, and on top there face each other, poised in the manner of old-time dancers, two lions and two unicorns. These rampant creatures, designed by Mr. James Woodford R.A., are profiled in steel tube and filled in with wire mesh, gold for the lions and white for the unicorns. They add another 20 feet to the height of the arch.

A Princess's coronet is suspended on gold wires from the centre of each arch. The wires are threaded with polished aluminium spheres, which, if you are feeling romantic, you can compare with drops of dew on strands of gossamer.

The details of the arch are best studied on the large-scale model. You can see on this model how we are going to light up the Mall after dark. I am hoping crowds of many thousands will take pleasure in gazing at the floodlit lions and unicorns standing guard over the illuminated coronets twinkling and floating in the night air.

On both models, if you will align your eye with the level of the road, you will get the best idea of how the Mall decorations will look to the Coronation spectators.

The four arches are linked with Buckingham Palace at one end and with Admiralty Arch at the other by standards placed at intervals along the kerb and rising above the trees. Forty feet up in the air these standards are surmounted with a crown.

The standards are hung with four banners set at right angles to each other as the lions and unicorns are on top of the arches. In this way the maximum colour can be seen from all points of view. The banners carry the Royal monogram and like the arches will be lit from the bottom at night.

You will notice in front of the stands the sloping platforms and handrail which we are building in order substantially to increase the standing room at key points. And remember that those who stand in the Mall will get a magnificent view of the Procession both going to the Abbey and returning to Buckingham Palace.

Now we come to Admiralty Arch. This is one of the first Crown buildings which the Queen will see. We might have designed the decorations for all these Government offices as one single scheme. But by tradition, and I like tradition, these buildings are decorated to represent the Departments which occupy them.

Here we are then in the presence of the Royal Navy. On the model you will see the fowl anchor flag flying from the top of the arch. We have not yet received the views of the Admiralty on this idea. White Ensigns dominate the higher levels of the building. The Duke of Norfolk told me he thought these White Ensigns the most striking piece of decoration on the route in 1937. We have in mind as a centre-piece the Royal Cypher in red and gold flanked and tied to large anchors. Here we are experimenting with gold ropes, which are quite easy to make out of a cheap sort of rope treated and covered with gold paint.

The coach then passes under the arch and into Trafalgar Square. I confess that Trafalgar Square is a bit of a problem. It always attracts large crowds and on June 2nd those who get a good position there will see the procession three times. So we expect a very large number of spectators. In any case I cannot afford to allot much money to the decorations in the square itself and these will have to be simple.

You will see on the model several flower beds which it is proposed to fill with rhododendrons. There is a slight argument between my staff and myself about how many flowers will be left the morning after. I take the destructive view.

The buildings round the square should make a fine show. The High Commissioners will no doubt decorate Canada House and South Africa House with the flags of their countries. We shall do our best with the National Gallery. The floodlighting of the square at night is being carefully planned.

Facing Whitehall is the beautiful statue of King Charles I. The space round this statue, which is under the care of the Ministry of Works, has always been coveted as a vantage point by cameramen and reporters. A circular platform will be built to accommodate as many as possible. The statue itself must be protected with care and woe betide anyone who does it any damage.

The procession then turns out of the square and down Northumberland Avenue to the Embankment. This part of the route is the concern of the City of Westminster. My chief responsibility here is the Hotel Metropole now occupied by the Ministry of Defence. In decorating this building we shall work in with Sir Hugh Casson who is in charge of the City of Westminster's decorations.

The Air Ministry is now housed in the big new offices in Whitehall Gardens. R.A.F. flags will fly from the top of this building.

The London schoolchildren will have their places along the Embankment. The procession then turns down Bridge Street and into Parliament Square. As you know the area of Parliament Square and Broad Sanctuary has been designed to represent the Commonwealth and Empire. On the higher levels this is achieved by the grouping of Commonwealth flags and emblems on the Whitehall corner of the New Public Offices, now occupied by the Treasury and the Ministry of Housing.

Leading representatives of the Commonwealth countries will have the seats in the quadrilateral of stands in the middle of the Square. The decoration of these stands - which you can see in detail on the large model - is carefully planned to illustrate the eight self-governing countries of the Commonwealth. Their painted arms will be displayed on the blue covering of the underside of the stand roof. At the corners of the stand there will be massed flowers. Here I should tell you we are being given by most of the Commonwealth countries consignments of their own flowers and foliage, some of which, by arrangement with Sir Miles Thomas, B.O.A.C. has kindly agreed to fly in. Others are coming from Kew. Whether these flowers and plants will be suitable to put in Parliament Square we shall have to see when they arrive; but I hope so.

Members of both Houses of Parliament and their friends will occupy the stands in New Palace Yard. Other representatives of the United Kingdom will be allotted seats in the stands in St. Margaret's churchyard. These latter stands will be decorated with the arms of the county towns of England, Scotland and Wales. The stand on the new Colonial Office site, opposite the Annexe to the Abbey, will be occupied by representatives of the Colonies. There will also be a considerable number of camera and pressmen in this stand. Special positions are being constructed for them in the roof.

The Annexe

As the coach draws to a standstill at Westminster Abbey the Royal Standard will break from the pole over the pavilion which forms the entrance to the Annexe.

You have probably seen the Annexe rising from the ground. Many people tell me that it is a much larger building than they had expected. It is not a square foot too big. The Duke of Norfolk must have the space for the marshalling of the processions.

It sound economical and gay to suggest that the Annexe should be a canvas marquee. But those who say this cannot be familiar with the limitations of the site, the stringent requirements of security, and the very extensive and complicated arrangements that have to be made in the Annexe. A marquee could not meet any of these requirements.

I may add that many of the materials we are using in the Annexe will be saleable afterwards, but according to Parliamentary practice I cannot set off what I shall certainly recover against the expenditure on these items.

The Queen's Beasts

The Chief Architect and I went away one Friday undecided about the decoration of the Annexe. We were looking for something to give animation and a certain intrigue to this important structure. Believe it or not we both returned on Monday with the same idea - the Queen's Beasts.

You will not meet these animals in farmyards or in the Zoological Gardens, or indeed anywhere on the level of humdrum reality. But then on that plane there is no place for the Queen's golden coach. Her Majesty's glittering carriage does not belong to the same family as motor-cars and taxi-cabs; in the same way the dogs and cats we keep at home are very different animals from the Queen's beasts. These are dream creatures, aristocrats of an heroic species, real and formidable in the world of the imagination.

You will see that the sculptor, Mr. James Woodford, has captured the spirit of nobility and heraldry in his models. His beasts are not commonplace. Nor are they

absurd. They are all-of-a-piece with the golden coach, and they are appropriate on the top of the Mall arches and at the foot of the Annexe.

Inside the Abbey work goes ahead as planned, indeed better than planned. It is a queer sight to see railway lines running down the middle of the nave with wagons trundling to and fro carrying steel sections and lengths of timber. One cannot fail to be struck by the steady efficiency and quiet keenness of the men working in the Abbey; they look and act like a team determined to do a good job.

I do not propose to say anything about the decorations inside the Abbey. The brocades and the carpets are chosen but we are still considering a good many details.

Now let me go back to the route. The Queen, wearing the Crown, begins the return progress to Buckingham Palace by the south and east sides of Parliament Square and so enters Whitehall.

The street and pavements of Whitehall are the responsibility of the City of Westminster. We have put on our model Sir Hugh Casson's design for a feature at the south entrance to the street. This consists of two standards in the form of Venetian blinds and attached to them a modern version of the Royal Arms. Further up Whitehall you will see in the middle of the street groups of gay poles which Sir Hugh has decorated to represent the Household Cavalry. I like these poles very much.

At the Cenotaph we shall place specially designed containers filled with red flowers.

Whitehall is the home of Government Offices. We shall decorate these, limited by the money available, to represent the Departments which occupy them. We hope by a judicious use of colour to bring harmony into the whole street.

Following the Procession as it enters Whitehall the first building on the left is the Ministry of Housing, which will be decorated with the flags and emblems of the Commonwealth and Empire.

The next building is the Home Office. The Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, is also Minister for Welsh Affairs and the channel between H.M. Government in Northern Ireland and Whitehall. So on the Home Office there will be a display of the flags of Wales - the red dragon - and also of the flags of our friends in Ulster.

Just a word about flags. I was surprised to find how expensive these large flags are to buy, to fix in position and to keep an eye on. The flags used on the top levels in Whitehall are 18 ft. x 9 ft. They cost about £10 each. The poles and fixing the poles cost £15-£20 making £25-£30 in all. It is easy to forget what a tremendous strain the wind puts on flags of this size and what a job it is to anchor the poles securely and to see that none breaks loose.

I cannot mention all the buildings. You will get some idea how we are going to decorate them from the model and the sketches. You will see for instance that the scheme for the old Treasury building is red and white with golden medallions of St. George and the Dragon just to remind you that once upon a time the Chancellor counted his cash in sovereigns.

On Dover House, where in two years the Scottish Office will return, you find St. Andrew's Cross and the Scottish Lion.

Coming to the Horseguards, where two stands are to be built, the theme of plumes and the colours scarlet and gold are taken from the Household troops.

The Admiralty, dressed in navy blue and gold, with a hint of waves and anchors, should give much pleasure. We are thinking of placing some curly sea-horses, made of wicker, painted gold, riding on the wall.

On the other side of Whitehall the War Office is the most conspicuous building. There the Union Jack comes into its own and the general scheme is red, white and blue.

There will be plenty of green on the Ministry of Agriculture and I really must ask Mr. Bedford to introduce some fish and bacon and eggs.

The beautiful Banqueting Hall, now the United Services Museum, needs only a touch of white and gold to show off its fine architecture.

The display of R.A.F. flags on the new Whitehall Gardens building will be seen in Whitehall as well as on the Embankment.

There are a number of private buildings in Whitehall and their owners are kindly consenting to arrange their decorations to harmonise with the Government Offices.

FLOWERS

You will, I am sure, want to hear something about our very extensive plans for flowers. The only way to get a good effect is arrange the plants and flowers in large masses. There are many points on the route which lend themselves to this concentrated treatment. For instance, the Duke of York's steps, the screen at

Hyde Park Corner, the main entrance of the War Office, the Admiralty screen, the Treasury windows, the quadrilateral in Parliament Square and the entrance to the Annexe.

The greenhouses in the Royal Parks are bulging with plants which are being nursed to be in bloom for the Coronation. I am fortunate to have a team of first-rate gardeners under the leadership of Mr. Hepburn, The Superintendent of the Central Parks.

Among the flowers now being cultivated are, grouped under the main colours:

Red: Geranium, Verbena, Salvia, Phlox Drummondi, Azalea, Rhododendron

Blue: Larkspur, Delphinium, Petunia, Hydrangea, Lobelia

Yellow: Chrysanthemum, Calceolaria, Celosia

White: Marguerite, Gladiolus, Stock, Antirrhinum

Handwritten notes:
2/10/6
1/10/6
3/10/6

For the arrangement of the flowers I have the advantage of the advice of Mrs. Constance Spry. She is here and will answer any questions which stump me.

We are designing special containers and baskets as well as stands on which to group large displays. There is a great deal of skill in this business and I am full of admiration for the plans which Mr. Bedford and Mrs. Spry are getting out.

You may be interested to know that the Mayor of San Remo, Italy, has offered to send us a generous consignment of red roses, carnations and strelitzia, which will be a very welcome addition to our own supplies.

CONCLUSION

Not wishing to take up too much of your time I have narrowed my remarks to those parts of the route which you can see in the round on our working models. Even so there has had to be more selection and cutting than I would wish.

I hope you will get from the models and sketches some idea of the enthusiasm and imagination which go into our work. How can I sum it up? Well, when someone asked what was the special fascination of the Coronation he was told that all nice children pretend to believe in unicorns, golden coaches and Fairy Queens, and that the charm of the Coronation is that you do not have to pretend. That is true. I go further. There is no make believe at all about this drama of Church and State. It is a real and living part of the British Constitution, which we have some reason to think is the best in the world.

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