

With her choice of a white gown, Queen Victoria began a new and enduring fashion



Portrait of Queen Victoria in her wedding dress by Franz Xaver Winterhalter. Original painting owned by the Royal Collection.

Wedding Dresses

Through the years

A look back at our favourite royal wedding dresses of all time

Words by Rachel Avery

For any bride, selecting a wedding dress is a very carefully considered decision – probably the biggest decision of your life after accepting the proposal! It's going to be worn on the biggest and best day of your life and it's essentially a reflection of who you are: your style and personality. For royal brides, the pressure is even greater as this fashion statement is there for the entire world to see and scrutinise. We take a tour of history to highlight some of our favourite bridal gowns that famous royals have worn.

QUEEN VICTORIA AND PRINCE ALBERT OF SAXE-COBURG AND GOTHA

10 February 1840

At a time where royal brides tended to wear silver or gold dresses, Victoria actually chose to have her gown made in white to best show off the delicate Honiton lace detailing – so it's quite possible that she actually started the white wedding dress trend that's still popular to this day. It is rumoured that she forbade anyone else to wear white to the wedding; another trend that has stood the test of time. It has also been said that in a savvy mood she destroyed the pattern for her dress afterwards so that no one could copy the design! ▶

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An extravagant ostrich feather trim for The Duchess of York's wedding dress



Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon's dress reflected the flapper style of the 1920s



Princess Elizabeth's classic wedding dress was designed by Norman Hartnell

PRINCESS VICTORIA MARY OF TECK (QUEEN MARY) AND PRINCE GEORGE, DUKE OF YORK (KING GEORGE V)

6 July 1893

The obsession with royal wedding dresses was in full swing by this time and women's magazines published special editions detailing exactly what the bride wore. Mary's beautiful wedding dress was designed by Arthur Silver in silk brocade and lace. Embroidered with the traditional British emblems of rose, shamrock and thistle, it was considered quite an extravagant gown because it was also trimmed with ostrich feathers and orange blossom. The entire trousseau was manufactured in Britain and as her 'something borrowed', Lady Mary had panels of Honiton lace from her mother's wedding gown woven into the material of the dress.

DUKE OF YORK (KING GEORGE VI) AND LADY ELIZABETH BOWES-LYON (THE QUEEN MOTHER)

26 April 1923

Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon's wedding dress will always be remembered as something a little different. London-based fashion designer, Madame Handley-Seymour, created her sumptuous wedding gown and pearls featured heavily in the outfit as they were woven into the dress itself and the bride also wore a precious pearl necklace. The dropped-waist dress was very much in keeping with 1920s style and she paired it with a show-stopping veil for ultimate decadence.

PRINCESS ELIZABETH (QUEEN ELIZABETH II) AND PHILIP MOUNTBATTEN, DUKE OF EDINBURGH (PRINCE PHILLIP)

20 November 1947

Overall, Elizabeth went for a rather traditional shape and style, but the decision wasn't easy – British designer, Sir Norman Hartnell, submitted three different wedding dress designs for Elizabeth to choose from. Eventually, this particular satin style was selected and the garment was adorned with crystals and 10,000 pearls. It was an epic task and a staggering 350 people were involved in the making. It's also said that Elizabeth refused to have a dress fitting prior to her wedding day as she believed that it would be bad luck to try on the dress until the morning of the wedding.

British designer, Sir Norman Hartnell, submitted three different wedding dress designs for [Princess] Elizabeth to choose from

CHARLES, PRINCE OF WALES AND LADY DIANA SPENCER (PRINCESS DIANA)

29 July 1981

Lady Diana's dress made the careers of designers Elizabeth and David Emanuel. When news broke that it would be them designing the dress of the decade, they were forced to get a heavy-duty safe for their studio to keep the designs secret thus ensuring the press didn't find out before the big day. The record for the longest royal train in history was 20 feet, so of course David Emanuel suggested 25 feet for Diana's. The billowing full skirt and mammoth silk taffeta train certainly got the attention that they hoped for, and it's probably the most iconic royal wedding dress of all-time. Diana's dazzling tiara became a traditional wedding piece for the Spencer family: both her sisters wore it on their wedding days too.

PRINCE WILLIAM AND CATHERINE MIDDLETON (DUCHESS OF CAMBRIDGE)

29 April 2011

Royal wedding fever hit a major high in 2011 and the lead up to the nuptials saw a lot of speculation and interest about what the royal bride, Kate Middleton, would be wearing. On the day, Kate stepped out in an elegant bridal design created by Sarah Burton for Alexander McQueen. It's been said that Kate wanted to 'combine tradition and modernity' with her chic dress choice. Not only did the dress wow the crowds, it managed to put sleeves back on the bridal map. So many brides flocked to their nearest bridal boutique to find a replica design and this signature style is still very popular today. The sleeves were made of chantilly lace and they had traditional roses and shamrocks delicately placed throughout: it's also said that a small blue ribbon was sewn inside the dress for good luck. ▶



Diana's 25-foot-long silk taffeta train unfurls outside Westminster Abbey



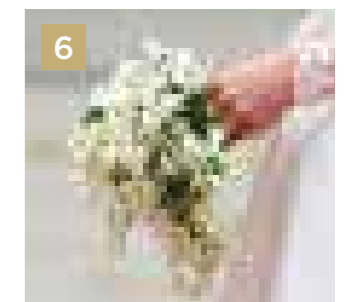
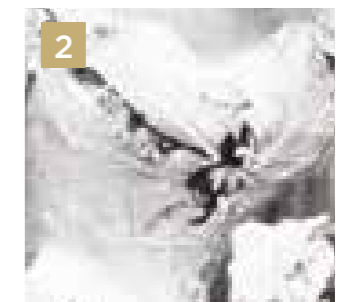
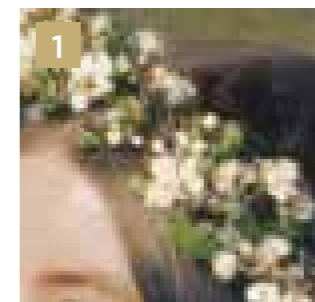
The sleeves were made from chantilly lace and they had traditional roses and shamrocks delicately placed throughout

Catherine's wedding gown was an elegant fusion of tradition and modernity

Floral details

The flowers chosen for bridal bouquets are brimming with symbolism passed down from Queen Victoria to the most recent of royal brides

- 1 Queen Victoria set a new bridal trend with a simple wreath of fresh orange blossom, the symbol of chastity
- 2 Princess Mary's large cascading bouquet included traditional orange blossom, echoed in her dress
- 3 Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon had a myrtle leaf wreath for her veil, with white York roses and white heather
- 4 The Queen kept to family tradition with scented myrtle and beautiful white orchids in her bouquet
- 5 Princess Diana's wedding bouquet was a tumbling cascade of white blooms including fragrant gardenias
- 6 Catherine Middleton's bouquet was placed on the Unknown Warrior's Grave in Westminster Abbey, a tradition started by the Queen Mother



Looking ahead...

We say yes to 'The Dress'

Wedding dress speculation is at fever pitch so we ask two British designers for their style take on 'The Dress'...



Image © Caroline Castigliano



Image © Caroline Castigliano

“Meghan will want to give a nod to tradition, but still show off her personal sense of style.”

Caroline Castigliano

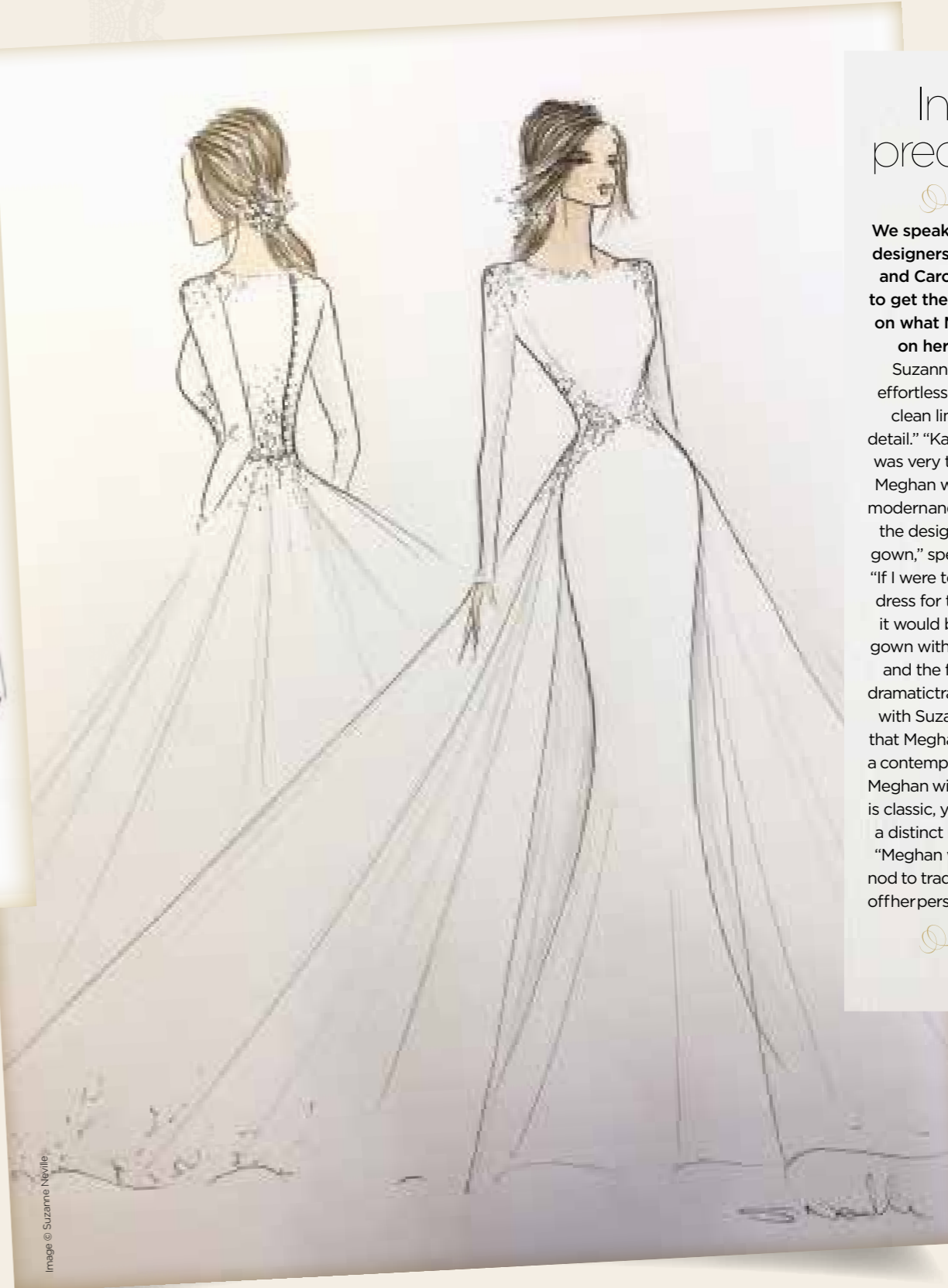


Image © Suzanne Neville

Set to say their vows in Windsor in May, there is a lot of build-up around what Meghan might wear. It's usual protocol that a royal bride will select a British dress designer to pledge their allegiance to Great British industry – and brands such as McQueen, Temperley, Stewart Parvin and Elie Saab are all in the running to be the lucky designer. However, as we've witnessed from the couple's engagement photos, Meghan is not one

for following the rules and with strong links to America and Canada, it's speculated that her dress could come from elsewhere. Perhaps Canadian designer Erdem or American fashion house Badgley Mischka will get the privilege of designing for royalty. Either way, we predict something less traditional than the royal brides that have gone before her, but something classy, demure and suitably fit for royalty. **FM**

Insider predictions

We speak to leading bridal designers, Suzanne Neville and Caroline Castigliano, to get their expert opinions on what Meghan will wear on her wedding day.

Suzanne envisages “an effortlessly chic gown with clean lines and minimal detail.” “Kate’s wedding dress was very traditional – I think Meghan will be a little more modern and experimental with the design of her wedding gown,” speculates Suzanne. “If I were to design Meghan’s dress for the royal wedding it would be a long-sleeved gown with a fitted silhouette and the focus would be a dramatic train.” Caroline agrees with Suzanne and predicts that Meghan’s dress will have a contemporary edge: “I think Meghan will wear a gown that is classic, yet very stylish with a distinct modern twist.” As “Meghan will want to give a nod to tradition, but still show off her personal sense of style.”

FAR LEFT Caroline Castigliano's modern take on a classic style

LEFT Effortless chic and clean lines from Suzanne Neville