

A Crowning Experience



Richard Barr's childhood memories of the Queen's Coronation

That year three things happened. First Banger fell off a cliff, then we had a rain swept holiday at Mundesley and lastly (in importance to my six year old mind) the Queen was put to bed and given a new hat.

It is all a little confusing. The year was 1953, the year of the coronation, yet in 2012 we are celebrating the Queen's diamond jubilee on the 59th anniversary. Yes I know her accession to the throne was in 1952, but that was in February. Either someone is being practical, because February is not a good month for street parties, or Theresa May was in charge of the dates and got the year wrong.

Whatever the year, our village (Bacton on Sea) and numerous others around the county is gearing itself up for a day of celebration this month, to include displays and exhibitions, prize competitions, a fifties tea party, free celebration mugs for the children, a dance to music of the time and a free hog roast for everyone in the village.

If past experience is anything to go by, it will be so memorable that in 2071 the next but three generations of writers in Places&Faces® will be looking back nostalgically on the outpouring of patriotic fervour that took place on June 4 2012 - just as we are now doing for June 2 1953.

That day it rained - the kind of rain that was called rain then, not drought as it is termed these days. Not many had televisions, and with some excitement we, the children, were loaded into the car to drive into the

Fens to the home of a wealthy farmer who did indeed have one of these wonderful boxes. We splashed through puddles and the ancient windscreen wipers struggled to clear the rain. Eventually we went down a long tree lined drive and reached the impressive farm house.

There, in an otherwise spacious and elegant drawing room was the television. I don't remember it as being big then. As I was very small the television screen must have been tiny.

We gathered round, the children on the floor, the adults seated upright, as we watched the ghostly images of a black and white queen in a black and white carriage being driven for the ceremony. Black and white was an exaggeration. It was mostly shades of grey. It seemed interminable and, were it not for a steady supply of cakes from the farmer's wife, I am sure that my brother and I would have rebelled or started fighting.

The celebrations then in Wisbech (where I spent my childhood) were similar to what will happen this month, with houses festooned with flags, street parties and of course mugs for the children. I remember that everyone was encouraged to decorate their front door, and my father grumpily hanging up some red white and blue balloons. Needless to say we did not win a prize.

A few weeks after the coronation our family spent a week in a caravan perched on the top of a cliff at Mundesley. The caravan belonged to a local doctor who had lent it to us. It rained incessantly and there were howling gales. The caravan rocked alarmingly in the wind.

It was not long after the war, and the army were still hard at work clearing land mines from the sea below the cliff. They had sea-going tanks, and every now and then there would be a huge plume of water as another mine was detonated. For a six year old, this was much more fun than a sunny beach. But the parents needed respite and as a treat we saw the coronation all over again at the same cinema in Cromer as is still going strong - though it has now been converted into several screens.

I remember snatches from the film - the huge carriage that took the Queen to and from the ceremony, the thronging crowds and pomp and ceremony. There were so many people with crowns on their heads that it was difficult to work out who was the Queen. But most of all I was struck by the fact that the Queen was put to bed during the ceremony and had to try out a new hat.

Looking again at the film of the coronation on You Tube for the first time in 59 years, my childhood memory was not far wrong. In the middle of the ceremony something closely resembling the curtains of a four-poster bed was brought in and held over the Queen while she put on a robe made out of gold cloth.

The 'hat' was her Crown, but I wasn't to know about such things then.

The coronation over (again) we returned to our windblown cliff top to continue to watch the army at work, while my father caught small fish which we ate for tea and Banger fell off the cliff.

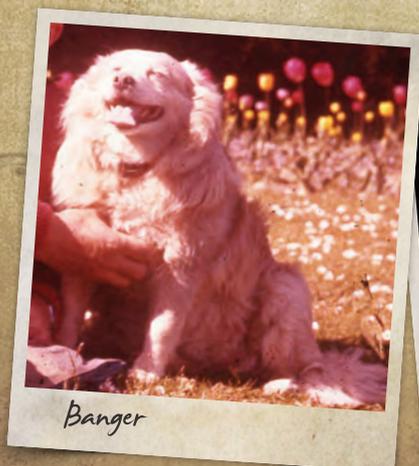
Banger was a fluffy mongrel who distinguished herself by adopting a family of kittens whose mother had been run over. One of them became our childhood cat. Banger and the cat (Mitty) were lifelong friends and lived to become teenagers (in human years). They both died within a short time of each other.

Banger was special in other ways too. She insisted on travelling in the boot of the car, and whenever the boot was open she would sit in it expectantly waiting to be taken for a trip.

Banger celebrated the coronation by tumbling down the Mundesley cliff, startling the soldiers below. On arrival at the bottom she dusted herself off, and started to run up the steps cut in the rock to do it again. This was not altogether surprising, as she would always come with us to the local playground. She sat on the roundabouts and would bark until someone made it go round.

She also loved going down the slide. She queued up with the children to climb the steps, then would slither down, as often as not on her bottom. She evidently viewed the Mundesley cliffs as a super slide, but she was banned from doing it again, though I don't think she was confined to the boot of the car.

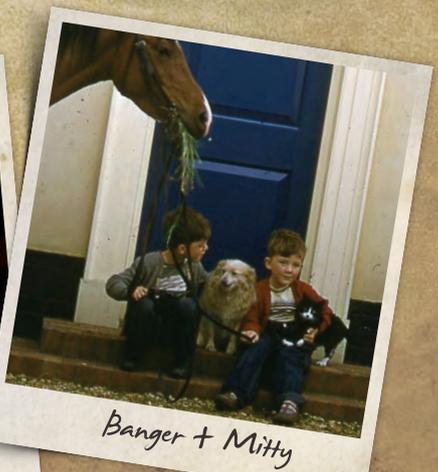
And so like Banger's roundabout, history will repeat itself in the next half century and the childhood memories of others will be dredged from the recesses of the memories of today's children. I wonder whose jubilee will be celebrated - and how.



Banger



Coronation mug



Banger + Mitty