A painting of Queen Victoria in 1838, wearing a white lace dress and a tiara, standing in a room with a red curtain and a chandelier.

How do you solve a problem like Victoria?

Thomas Sully's
painting of Queen
Victoria in 1838,
the year after she
ascended the throne

Dr Kate Williams, author of a new book on Victoria and presenter of the Timewatch programme *Young Victoria*, charts the challenges that the young Queen had to overcome to gain the throne

“A woman on the throne of England – how ridiculous!”

THESE WORDS were uttered by Prince George of Cambridge, after he'd been pushed far from the succession by his plump little cousin, Princess Victoria. And many at the time agreed with his assessment. Even worse, as the Queen herself put it, “I was the first person ever to bear the name Victoria”. Astonishingly to us for whom the word ‘Victorian’ seems so categorically English, it was then regarded as an absurd, invented name. Still worse, it had a French origin, and France had been until only a few years back the country's great enemy. It might be compared to ‘Kylia’, if Australia had recently been at war with Britain.

The little Princess was further hampered by other matters: an unprepossessing appearance, shyness, a wilful temper, and, most of all, a greedy mother who wished to use her daughter as a tool to power. But Victoria was also spirited, vibrant and determined, and, from a young age, determined to be Queen.

“A pretty little Princess, as plump as a partridge,” declared the Duke of Kent on the day his daughter was born, 24 May 1819. The arrival of Princess Victoria thrilled her father, but made little noise in the country. Kent was only fourth in line to the throne, after his brothers the Prince Regent, the Duke of York, and the Duke of Clarence. To the rest of the royal family, Victoria was merely the daughter of a minor brother, nothing more than a pawn to be eventually traded in marriage.

Victoria was born in the midst of a succession crisis. By the time George III's six daughters and seven sons were nudging their fifties, in 1817, they had managed one legitimate heir, Princess Charlotte, the daughter of the Prince Regent (their illegitimate children would finally total 56). The English looked to Princess Charlotte as the hope for their country, in contrast to her debauched, spendthrift uncles and spinster aunts. When she became pregnant by her popular husband, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, the people were delighted. But after nearly 50 hours of labour, she produced a stillborn baby boy. Within hours, she had fallen into a fatal fever and died. The country was grief-stricken, and the politicians began panicking over the lack of an heir.

In the hope that Parliament would pay off their huge debts, the dukes

embarked on a race to marry and produce children. The Duke of Kent sent away his mistress of 20 years and set about courting Prince Leopold's sister, Victoire, Dowager Princess of Leiningen. Victoire was initially reluctant to relinquish her “agreeable independent position”, as she put it, to marry Kent, an indebted Duke 20 years her senior, but Leopold pressed her into agreeing. Despite her doubts and his debts, the two were happy, and Victoire soon fell pregnant. “My brothers are not so strong as I am,” the elated Duke postured. “I have led a regular life, I shall outlive them all; the crown will come to me and my children.”

The Prince Regent was infuriated by his brother's success in producing a child and took his revenge by wrecking the christening. He allowed only a handful of guests and refused to allow the child to bear the names associated with queens such as Charlotte, Augusta or Elizabeth. Instead, on the actual day, the Archbishop of Canterbury stood with the child over the font, waiting for the Prince Regent to inform him of her name. Finally, the Regent spat, “Give her the mother's name”. Her first name was Alexandrina, after the Tsar (even the Regent dared not anger the Russian ruler by refusing it), but she quickly became known by her middle name – Victoria.

Impoverished and desperate

By December, Kent had accepted his debts were insurmountable and moved his family to a cheaper house in Sidmouth, on the Devon coast. It was a bitter winter, and in early January, after returning from one of his outdoor walks soaked to the bone, the Duke took to his bed with a chill. Within days, he was severely ill: delirious, and unable to breathe. He died on 23 January, holding his wife's hand. “She kills all her husbands,” sniped the wife of the Russian ambassador about the Duchess. Victoria was just eight months old.

The 33-year-old Duchess was impoverished and desperate. Her brother Leopold persuaded the begrudging Prince Regent to allow her rooms in Kensington Palace and she took with her John Conroy, a handsome Irishman who had been equerry to the Duke. In the chaos after the Duke's death, he had inveigled himself into the Duchess's absolute confidence and became the de-facto ruler of her household.

Dr Kate Williams's first book, *England's Mistress*, on Emma Hamilton was BBC Book of the Week and short-listed for the Marsh Prize for Biography. Her Timewatch documentary on *Young Victoria* will be broadcast on BBC Two in October. Her book on Princess Victoria, *Becoming Queen*, was published in September this year by Hutchinson

On the podcast



Dr Kate Williams discusses the obstacles that Victoria had to overcome before ascending the throne on this month's podcast

► www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast.asp



Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent, c1830-40



A portrait of Irish officer Sir John Conroy, c1830



Thomas Woolnoth's engraving of Princess Victoria, when she was nine years old

On 29 January 1820, the day that the Duchess arrived at the palace, the poor mad King George finally died. The Prince Regent finally became King George IV. After the Dukes of York and Clarence, baby Victoria was next in line to the throne.

Kensington Palace was then cold, gloomy and shabby – and the life Victoria led there was little better. The Duchess and John Conroy were absolutely united: in a quest to make Victoria their slave. Both were convinced that Victoria would become queen and their dearest hope was that she would ascend as a minor, so the Duchess could be Regent and gather power and riches for herself and her dear friend. If, however, she succeeded after the age of 18, they wished to ensure that she would give up all power to them. And so they instigated the 'Kensington System'.

The Kensington System was a cruel regime of bullying – and most of all, surveillance. Victoria was not allowed to be alone for a second. She slept in her mother's room every night, and a nurse or governess stood guard over her until her mother retired to bed. Her every cough, every word and even choice of dress was faithfully reported to John Conroy. She was kept away from her father's family, and isolated from all children, apart from Conroy's.

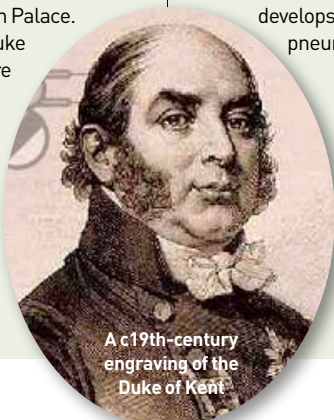
The Duchess was also terrified of reports that the Duke of Cumberland, who would have been the next brother in line to the throne, wished to kill the little girl. Certainly, Cumberland spread rumours that Victoria was too sickly to rule and tried to find ways of pushing her out of the succession – and it is not impossible that he might have wanted her dead. Whatever his intentions, Victoria's food was tasted before every meal, and

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Timeline Victoria: a young life

24 May 1819

A Princess is born to the Duke and Duchess of Kent at Kensington Palace. She is, the Duke admits, "more of a pocket Hercules than a pocket Venus".



A c19th-century engraving of the Duke of Kent

23 January 1820

The Duke of Kent dies at Sidmouth, after a chill develops into pneumonia.

29 January 1820

King George III dies and the Prince Regent becomes King George IV. **Victoria is now third in line to the throne.** On the same day, she and her mother arrive to live in Kensington Palace.

Stephan Poyntz Denning's portrait of the future Queen Victoria, aged four



26 June 1830

Death of George IV. His brother becomes King William IV. **Eleven-year-old Victoria is now heir to the throne.**



George IV, 1762-1830

she was not allowed to walk downstairs without holding somebody's hand.

Victoria felt her confined situation keenly. "I led a very unhappy childhood", she lamented. She declared that her only "happy time" had been driving out with her half-sister Feodora and her governess, for "then I could speak or look as I liked".

As Victoria grew up, the Duchess redoubled her attempts to control her, and to show herself off as the power behind the throne. For time proved her right: Kent's elder brothers did remain childless. The Duke of Clarence and his much younger wife had a girl, Charlotte, in 1819, but she lived only a few hours. In late December 1820, they had another girl, Elizabeth, to the despair of the Duchess of Kent. But by the following March, Elizabeth had died. To the Duchess's delight, there were no more children.

Just after Victoria turned 11, King George died and the 65-year-old Duke of Clarence ascended the throne as King William IV. Victoria was now heir, and the Duchess decided to parade her to the country as the future Queen – with herself and Conroy by the Princess's side. On 1 August 1832, she, the 13-year-old Victoria, and the Conroys set off on the first of their journeys: a three-month tour to Wales, via the Midlands and Cheshire.

Victoria hated the tour. She detested being surrounded by Conroys, the early starts, and the endless dinners and receptions with dull adults. On 24 September 1832, she confessed to her 'Good Behaviour Book' that she had been "VERY VERY VERY HORRIBLY NAUGHTY!!!!", underlining each word four times. Yet despite her complaints and the King's fury at the Duchess's presumption, the tours continued: to the south coast and the Isle of Wight, and the Midlands and the North, as well

Meanwhile, the politicians voiced their opinion that Victoria was just too ridiculous a name for a ruler

as including sporadic visits to seaside resorts and aristocratic houses throughout the year.

Meanwhile, the politicians voiced their opinion that Victoria was just too ridiculous a name for a ruler. Indeed, the King tried to force the Duchess to agree to change it to Elizabeth or Charlotte. Initially, she agreed. Finally, however, she refused, wishing that her daughter would bear her name. It is odd to think now that if she had relented, the Victorian age would never have existed. Instead, we would talk about 'Elizabethan morality' – which hardly has the same ring.



ABOVE: An 1819 engraving satirising the race to produce an heir to the throne. The Duke and Duchess of Kent, parents of the future Queen Victoria, are the third couple from the left

Runners and riders: What happened to the royals in the race for the crown

George IV becomes king after a long period as regent while his father, George III, is mentally ill. He spent his adult life attempting to divorce his wife, but when she died in 1820, he was too content with his mistress to find another wife. Dies childless.

The heirs to the throne of George IV:

- 1. Princess Charlotte.** Only child of the Prince Regent. Dies in childbirth in 1817 at the age of 21. Her death sparks a succession crisis.
- 2. The second brother.** Frederick, Duke of York. Dies childless in 1827, at the age of 63.
- 3. The third brother.** The Duke of Clarence. Becomes King William IV on 26 June 1830. At 65, he is the oldest person ever to ascend the throne.
- 4. Princess Elizabeth.** Daughter of the Duke of Clarence. Dies in infancy in early 1821. Even though the Duchess of Clarence was only 27, there were no more children.
- 5. The fourth brother.** The Duke of Kent, father of Victoria. Dies unexpectedly of pneumonia at Sidmouth in January 1820.
- 6. Princess Victoria.** Born at Kensington on 20 May 1819. Although she is fifth in line to the throne, few pay attention to her birth. They expect Kent's elder brothers to produce children.
- 7. The fifth brother.** The Duke of Cumberland. Hates Victoria and hopes that she might die – for then he would inherit the throne from his brother.
- 8. The sixth brother.** The Duke of Cambridge. Thanks to Victoria, he has little chance of ascending the throne.

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1 August 1832

Victoria's tour around Britain is a three-month trip that takes in Wales, Cheshire, the Midlands and Oxford.

A portrait of Victoria, aged nine. Two years later she would be heir to the throne

October and November 1835

Victoria falls ill with typhoid at Ramsgate. She resists the Duchess's attempt to try to force her to appoint John Conroy as her secretary and adviser.

June 1837

The Duchess and Conroy again attempt to force Victoria to appoint Sir John as her secretary. Again she refuses.



24 May 1837

Victoria turns 18. The whole country celebrates – except the Duchess and John Conroy.

A profile of Princess Victoria, aged 18, before her accession to the throne



Sir George Hayter's painting of Victoria taking the coronation oath on 28 June 1838. Her reign was to last for an unprecedented 63 years



The Duchess of Kent, whose influence waned following Victoria's coronation

hated the Duchess and the last thing he wanted was for her to be Regent. Every day, he struggled on – willing himself not to die.

“Today is my 18th birthday! How old!” mused the Princess on 24 May 1837. It was a giant gala day for the country. Kensington was festooned with banners and there was an official reception at the palace and a large ball in the evening. For the Duchess, however, it was a day of despair. Victoria was 18 – and the King was still alive.

The Duchess and Conroy redoubled their efforts to force Victoria to agree to appoint Conroy as her private secretary or treasurer, or to a regency until she was 21. They told her that the country only esteemed her because of her mother; they begged and threatened – and

They told Victoria that the country only esteemed her because of her mother

For all the Duchess and Conroy's grand schemes for exerting absolute control over Victoria on her succession, time wasn't on their side. Soon the Princess was 16 and, with King William showing every sign of holding onto health for another two years, the pair began to panic – and decided to embark on a new strategy. They told all those with influence that Victoria was so immature that she would require the Duchess to rule for her until at least the age of 21. At the same time, they plotted to force Victoria to give them positions of power when she ascended the throne.

In the autumn of 1835, when Victoria fell ill with typhoid at Ramsgate, they saw an opportunity to act. While the Princess was weeping with fever in bed, the Duchess loomed over her and repeatedly attempted to force her to sign a document agreeing to appoint Conroy as her private secretary – in effect, the controller of her affairs and money. But Victoria, as she later wrote, “resisted in spite of my illness, and their harshness”. She was determined to defy her mother's drive for power.

The King, too, was resolute. Although very unwell, he was determined not to give up on life until Victoria turned 18. He

Conroy declared she should be locked up and denied food. Victoria stayed strong and, luckily for her, she did not have long to wait.

In the early hours of 20 June 1837, the King finally died. At six o' clock in the morning, in Kensington Palace, Victoria stood in her nightwear as the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Chancellor knelt to her and told her that she was Queen. Her first act was to ask for an hour alone. Then she moved her bed from her mother's room.

She was Queen – without ‘mamma’ – of the greatest country in Europe, and she had succeeded against great odds.

Our vision of Victoria might be of an elderly matron, dressed in dour black, unsmiling and pronouncing, “we are not amused”. But she was a vibrant young woman who succeeded to the throne despite the expectations of many that she would never become Queen, and the intent ambition of her mother. “I shall ever remember this day as the proudest of my life”, wrote Victoria on 28 June 1838, her coronation day. She had deserved her triumph – and all the pride. **II**

JOURNEYS

BOOKS

Becoming Queen by Kate Williams (*Hutchinson, September 2008*);
Queen Victoria: A Personal History by Christopher Hibbert (*HarperCollins, 1997*)
Victoria R.I by Elizabeth Longford (*Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964*);

PLACES TO VISIT

Kensington Palace was Victoria's childhood home. Once she became Queen, she left the palace and let it fall into disrepair. Yet it has now been restored to its former glories. Victoria was crowned at **Westminster Abbey**, and spent some of her happiest days at **Osborne House** in the Isle of Wight, where she shared a family home with Prince Albert. After her husband's death, Victoria retreated to **Balmoral Castle** in Aberdeenshire.

20 June 1837

Death of William IV. **Victoria ascends the throne.** Her first act is to ask for an hour alone.

28 June 1838

Victoria is crowned queen. “I shall ever remember this day as the proudest of my life”, she declares.



Queen Victoria's imperial state crown

Victoria receives the news of her accession in Frederick Shuckard's 1880 painting

