

A Railroad History of the Royal Visit, 1939

Seventy-five years ago (1939), King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were enjoying a thirty-day tour of the New World. Theirs was the first visit to North America by a reigning British monarch.

The royal couple and their entourage had arrived in Quebec City on May 17 aboard the Canadian Pacific ocean liner S.S. Empress of Australia. Two twelve-car trains transported the important visitors, their staff, security detail, and the press. Each train included six cars from Canadian National Railway and six from the Canadian Pacific.

Their westbound journey was via the Canadian Pacific. CPR #2850 hauled the royal train the entire 3,300 miles, setting a world record for longest continuous run by a single steam locomotive. Later, all 66 locomotives of this class became known as "Royal Hudsons".

On their westward trek, the Queen laid the cornerstone for the Supreme Court building at Ottawa (May 20), and the King dedicated the National War Memorial. In Toronto the royal couple inaugurated the Queen Elizabeth Way (May 22). They reached Vancouver BC on May 29.

Canadian National hosted the royal train on its eastbound return trip, which included a five-day visit to the United States.

At 9:35 p.m., the Royal Train crossed the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls and entered the USA on tracks of the New York Central behind a J-class Hudson. Two hours later, it departed Buffalo via the Pennsylvania Railroad en route to Washington DC.

King George VI and Queen Elizabeth traveled via the Pennsylvania Railroad to meet with U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in Washington DC. It was the first time a British monarch had set foot in the United States.

The royal couple had just come from a three-week tour of Canada, where their every move was well-publicized and where they were enthusiastically greeted by millions of admiring subjects. In contrast, their journey through the United States was regarded as a private diplomatic mission, and most of the travel took place at night.

Railroads took the same precautions as they did for a POTUS (President of the United States) train. Tenders were emptied and re-filled with high-grade coal. Facing-point

turnouts along the route were spiked closed. All trains on adjacent tracks were inspected. Opposing trains were restricted to 30 miles per hour. Trains traveling in the same direction could not overtake the royal train.

The twelve-car royal train was painted royal blue with gold window stripes and lacquered roofs. A baggage car carried a steam-driven electrical generator as well as a gasoline engine backup. Another baggage car housed a telephone switchboard. Railroad crews were cautioned not to uncouple any cars without direct supervision by the train's mechanical supervisor, lest they disrupt the communication lines. The King and Queen rode in a Canadian Pacific business car at the end of the train. Other cars housed kitchen and dining facilities, wardrobe rooms, a barber shop, facilities for the royal physician, a post office, and an office suite for the King.

A twelve-car pilot train carried the security team, maintenance crews, and members of the press. This train was scheduled to run 15-20 minutes ahead of the royal train.

On the evening of Wednesday, June 7, the pilot train and the royal train departed Buffalo NY at 10:56 and 11:15 p.m. respectively. Things started to go wrong around 6:00 a.m., when a car on the pilot train developed a hotbox near Williamsport PA. While the bad-order car was being switched out, the royal train was allowed to proceed – much to the dismay of the press corps, which was supposed to cover the King's arrival in Washington!

According to the advance itinerary, the royal train passed through York PA at 8:23 a.m. on the morning of Thursday, June 8, 1939. By this time, the pilot train was over an hour behind schedule.

At Baltimore, PRR president Martin Withington Clement disembarked from the royal train and took personal charge of the situation. The tuxedo-clad railroad executive helped to couple up a GG1 and check its air lines. Racing down Pennsy's Northeast Corridor at 80 mph, the pilot train managed to catch up with and overtake the royal train, in time for the press to cover Their Majesties' 11:00 a.m. arrival in Washington.

Seventy-five years ago this month, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth made the first-ever visit by a British monarch to the United States. On June 8, their royal train arrived in Washington DC via the Pennsylvania Railroad. Following a reception at the British Embassy, the royal couple were guests of honor at a state dinner in the White House.

On June 9, the king and queen sailed down the Potomac in the presidential yacht to visit Mount Vernon. They also laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington VA.

The king and queen were scheduled to visit the New York World's Fair on Saturday, June 10, 1939. Their royal train departed Washington Union Station at 11:30 p.m. on June 9 behind PRR #4838. King George rode in the GG-1's cab as far as Philadelphia. This showed extraordinary fascination with railroading on his part, since that portion of the journey took place between midnight and 3:00 a.m.

A K4s Pacific took over the royal train at Jamesburg NJ, and pulled it to Red Bank NJ over tracks of the New York & Long Branch Railroad. Reaching Red Bank around 6:00 a.m., the royal train was parked in the freight yard until shortly before 8:00 a.m., when it pulled into the station for the party's official arrival. After a public reception, the King and Queen were taken by automobile to Fort Hancock, where they boarded a Navy destroyer which took them across Lower Bay to The Battery on Manhattan Island.

In the event of fog on the bay, the backup plan was to continue by train from Red Bank to Penn Station in New York City.

Upon arrival in Manhattan, the royal couple were taken via motorcade to the World's Fair. At the end of the day, they were driven to FDR's home at Hyde Park.

Meanwhile, the empty royal train and its accompanying pilot train were moved and prepared for the final leg of the king's American tour. K4s Pacifics hauled the trains to Rahway NJ, and GG1s pulled them to Penn Station, where they were restocked (presumably in Sunnyside Yard?). The New Haven then took the trains to New Rochelle NY, then back to New York City to hand them over to the New York Central at Mott Haven. The Central's T-motors moved the trains to Harmon, where Hudsons took over for the trip to Poughkeepsie. Both trains were parked there until it was time to pick up the King and Queen at Hyde Park on the evening of Sunday, June 11.

"They are such a charming and united family and living so like English people when they come to their country house."

On the weekend of Saturday-Sunday, June 10-11, the royal couple were guests of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt at their private estate in Hyde Park NY. In contrast to the official state dinner in Washington DC three days earlier, their time at Hyde Park was cozy and informal.

The President of the United States treated the King and Queen of England to a picnic on the front porch of Top Cottage, where (to the horror of FDR's mother) he served them hot dogs.

Two twelve-car trains transported the royal couple, their official party, and journalists during their month-long tour through North America. During the visit to Hyde Park, both trains were parked at Poughkeepsie NY, and most of their passengers spent the night aboard them.

At 9:15 p.m. on the evening of June 11, the royal train departed Poughkeepsie behind a J3-class Hudson and pulled into Hyde Park station approximately fifteen minutes later. After fond farewells, the King and Queen were underway by 10:00 p.m. Like most of their rail travel in the United States, this portion took place at night.

An hour and twenty minutes later, the trains paused at Rensselaer NY, where Delaware & Hudson Pacifics took over. New York Central engineers accompanied D&H crews as pilots for the next six miles over NYC's Troy and Greenbush Branch. At one minute past midnight, the royal train entered D&H right-of-way at Troy NY. It reached the Canadian border at Rouses Point NY around 5:30 a.m. It crossed into Canada on the D&H-owned Napierville Junction Railway, and was handed over to the Canadian Pacific at Delson QC.

The royal train and its accompanying pilot train traveled over four U.S. railroads (New York Central, Pennsylvania, New Haven, and Delaware & Hudson) during their six-day American visit. Pennsylvania Railroad was the primary contractor and ticket issuer. The U.S. State Department guaranteed PRR a minimum of 200 first-class fares for handling the two trains, although there were usually fewer than 150 persons aboard.

After returning to Canada, the royal couple concluded their North American tour with visits to New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. On June 15, after a farewell luncheon at Halifax NS, they boarded RMS Empress of Britain for their return to the United Kingdom.