King and County: The *Kent Messenger* and the abdication of Edward VIII

**Tim Luckhurst reports on how a forgotten parcel has revealed the ways in which self-censorship by journalists over the 1936 abdication crisis worked at an influential local newspaper**

Attempting a first draft of history in the immediate aftermath of the abdication crisis of 1936, the American historian M.M. Knappen asked: “Is it the duty of publishers to tell the public all the truth or only that portion of it which the bulk of the public wants to know?”(1938: 248) Having shown that British newspapers had concealed from their readers King Edward VIII’s relationship with Mrs Wallis Simpson, Knappen concluded that Britain’s press had failed in its duty to liberalism and democracy. His assessment has since been vindicated thoroughly. Writing sixteen years after the abdication, Young observed that “The voluntary discretion of the English papers concealed from the public a situation which the people of the United States were watching with excitement, France with amusement, and Canada with some anger and some alarm.” (Young 1952: 234) In his twenty first century history of the British press Temple notes that no story “illustrated the strength of press self-censorship more than the British press’s response to the Abdication Crisis of 1936” (2008: 141). Now, a forgotten parcel has revealed how that self-censorship worked at an influential local newspaper and the extent to which those responsible considered it their duty to defend what Knappen termed the ‘mystery, pedestal variety’ of monarchy and the public’s ‘superstitious reverence’ for it.

**Discovery**

In autumn 2012, Geraldine Allinson, Chairman of the Kent Messenger Group, showed me around the building at Larkfield near Maidstone in which her family’s newspapers were published until 2012. In the abandoned executive suite we found a package. A label, handwritten in black ink, revealed the contents: “Copies of newspapers dealing with the abdication of Edward VIII and succession of George VI December, 1936.” Inside were American, British and French titles from the autumn and winter of 1936, several bearing handwritten notes. The collection includes the county edition of the *Kent Messenger* for Saturday 12 December bearing the banner headline THE KING: HOW KENT RECEIVED THE NEWS.Accompanying it were examples of coverage from other British newspapers including the Cadbury family owned London evening newspaper *The Star;* its competitor Associated Newspapers’  *Evening News;*  the *News Review –* “Britain’s First Weekly Newsmagazine”– and a copies of American titles including *Time Magazine* and an edition of New York’s *Literary Digest.*

**Keeping the Secret**

For months before British newspapers made their readers aware of it, foreign titles had reported the King’s affair. American titles were determined to follow the adventures of Wallis Simpson, a woman many considered an all-American success. They paid particular attention to her second divorce at Ipswich Assizes on 27 October 1936 where she was awarded a decree nisi on the grounds of adultery by her English husband, Ernest Simpson. The coverage often relied on conjecture; foreign correspondents in London were accustomed to relying on reports in British newspapers, but that source of information was closed and official sources were obstructive. However, despite these difficulties, commuters taking trains home from Manhattan could read titles such as *Liberty* magazine which printed 2.5 million copies of an edition detailing the affair and advertised it on billboards proclaiming “THE YANKEE AT KING EDWARD’S COURT” (Time, 1936a). In Portland, Oregon students launched a “Simpson for Queen” campaign with the slogan “God Save the King” (Time, 1936b)

Meanwhile, official efforts ensured that little of this reporting reached the British public. Imported titles that covered the affair were intercepted at ports or censored with scissors by distributors who feared they might be sued (Griffiths 2006: 253). Public figures who discussed the King and Mrs Simpson found their comments unreported. So, in November 1936 Willie Gallagher MP (Communist, West Fife), told lobby reporters “I see no reason why the King shouldn’t marry Mrs Simpson if he wishes. Naturally the charmed circle in this country would be upset, but we Communists certainly shouldn’t worry about it. Good luck to him, and good luck to her.” (Time, 1936c) Not a syllable of this appeared in British newspapers. Editors and proprietors colluded with government to manage the crisis. Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the market-leading *Daily Express,* responded to the King’s request for help ‘to protect Wallis from sensational publicity at least in my own country’ by working to persuade other newspapers to ignore the story (Griffiths, 2012: 21) In subsequent discussions with Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, Beaverbrook argued that the King should be allowed to marry the woman he loved (Taylor 1972). Baldwin believed the electorate would be appalled by a marriage between their King and a divorcee. White (1937: 96) records that the Prime Minister told his King: “I might be a remnant of the old Victorians, but my worst enemy would not say to me that I did not know what the reaction of the English people would be to any particular course of action, and…so far as they went I was certain that that would be impossible”

Editors, including Geoffrey Dawson of *The Times* and C.P. Scott of *The Manchester Guardian* visited Downing Street during the crisis and spoke to members of the Royal court. Cecil King of the *Daily Mirror* would complain that “The people behind the *Mail*, the *Express* and *The Times* were all actively involved.” (King 1969: 107) But none of these newspapermen felt obliged to inform their readers. The foreign press had been discussing the relationship between Edward and Mrs Simpson for ten months before the British public read about it. The first hint that a serious crisis was developing only appeared in the British press following a speech on 1 December in which the Bishop of Bradford, the Right Reverend A.W.F. Blunt, spoke of the King’s ‘need of Divine grace.’ Led by the *Yorkshire Post* regional papers in Leeds; Bradford; Manchester; Nottingham; Darlington and Birmingham reported his comments (Times, 1936).

**The press divided**

The dam was breaking and it collapsed following a meeting between the King and the Prime Minister at Buckingham Palace on Thursday 3 December. The King had intimated that he wished to marry and the Cabinet had advised him against it. Now he confirmed that he intended to go ahead. In its edition of Thursday 3 December, *The Times* quoted with approval the *Yorkshire Post’s* explanation that the real explanation of Dr. Blunt’s words lay in “certain statements which have appeared in reputable United States journals, and even in some Dominion newspapers and which cannot be treated with indifference.” In an article headlined KING AND MONARCHY; it described a “grave constitutional issue to be raised by a conflict between the King’s intentions and the advice of his ministers.” At the *Kent Messenger,* the Editor-Proprietor highlighted the column with slashes of ink from his fountain pen. At the end he wrote “see next page.” There, on page 16 of *The Times,* he marked with additional slashes a column replicating comments about Dr Blunt’s speech from the *Yorkshire Post*, *Yorkshire Observer* and *Birmingham Post*.

On Friday 4 December Stanley Baldwin made a statement in the House of Commons. He explained that the King sought a Bill of Exclusion that would allow him to marry Wallis Simpson without her becoming Queen and exclude any children of the marriage from succession to the throne. Baldwin said the Cabinet had denied his request (Hansard, 1936). The Prime Minister’s statement made newspaper silence impossible. Now the British press divided into two distinct camps which had started to emerge during the private machinations between editors, proprietors and ministers. One group supported Baldwin’s insistence that the King could not marry Mrs Simpson and remain King. This group shared the Prime Minister’s view that the crisis must be resolved in cabinet without debate in parliament or press. It defended the institution of monarchy over the rights of the monarch himself. It consisted mainly of elite titles including *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Manchester Guardian* whichfeared debate would embroil the King in political controversy, divide the country and damage British prestige. Siebert writes (1937: 124) that they believed: “[A]ll discussion of possible solutions should be avoided in the public prints until after a final settlement had been made.”

The second group, known as the King’s Party, sympathised with Edward’s wish to marry. It included the *News Chronicle, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Express, Evening News, Evening Star* and *Evening Standard.*  Precise positions varied. The News Chronicle supported a morganatic marriage. The *Daily Mirror* demanded democratic debate. On 5 December it told the Prime Minister: “The Nation Insists on Knowing the King’s Full Demands and Conditions. The Country Will Give You a Verdict.”

**Forewarned and forearmed**

One week elapsed between first reports of the relationship in British newspapers and the King’s abdication on 10 December. Many Britons were flabbergasted. Henry Roy Pratt Boorman, the *Kent Messenger’s* Editor-Proprietor was not. Among the items in his collection of foreign newspapers was a copy of *Paris Soir’s* edition of Wednesday 28 October (1936) carrying a front page story that: “La presse et la radio des Etats Unis annoncent le marriage d’Eduard VIII avec une Américaine” (Press and radio in the United States announce Edward VIII’s marriage to an American).

American and French newspapers in Pratt Boorman’s bundle suggest that he had taken care to obtain uncensored accounts of the affair. Handwritten underlining in his copies of the *Literary Digest* and *Time* indicate that he read detailed coverage for weeks before he informed his own readers. This conduct is revealing. It provides a case study of the British establishment’s concerns about Edward’s relationship with Mrs Simpson and the future of the monarchy.

Most intriguing in the bundle are two galley proofs, made by hand-stamping the composed decks of type onto sheets of newsprint. In the hot-metal era, these were prepared so editors could correct copy and assess its merit before allocating it to a page. The proofs preserve pre-publication versions of reports that would explain the abdication crisis to the people of Kent. Their existence emphasises the issue’s sensitivity and that Pratt Boorman was involved in every aspect of his newspaper’s coverage.

Striking in the *Kent Messenger* proofs is a story explaining the newspaper’s silence regarding the crisis throughout weeks when it was openly discussed abroad. Headlined “Friendship with Beautiful Mrs. Simpson” it explains “Along with other newspapers, the *Kent Messenger* has been bound by that reticence with which the affairs of the Royal family are treated by the British press, but, now that the matter has become a national issue, this no longer holds.” Other newspapers would protest their innocence more vigorously. The arch-conservative *Morning Pos*t told its readers that it was “no part of the function of the Press to publish gossip possibly injurious to such an institution as the Monarchy.” Some British editors resented so profoundly coverage of the affair in America that they sought to identify a story that had been suppressed in the U.S. which they might print. *Time* observed that “Although the infirmities of President Roosevelt have been freely chronicled and pictures have been published in the U.S. which show him hobbling about (TIME, Dec. 17, 1934), the London *Daily Telegraph*  salved its conscience for omitting the Mrs Simpson story by declaring: ‘Actual view of the President’s disability never fails to surprise the public. Neither the reporters nor the photographers have prepared them for it.’”(Time 1936d)

Ignorance was not quite complete. Siebert (1937) notes that, for those in the know, there were early hints in the British press that a crisis was looming. But this was Delphic stuff which left all but the social and political elite mystified.

**Informing Kent**

Pratt Boorman was part of this elite and his access to coverage in the foreign titles ensured he was earlier informed than almost all of his readers. It is plain that he shared some of the Prime Minister’s moral concerns. An article in *Liberty* entitled, “Queenly Enigma: What Will Mrs Simpson and King Edward Do? Asks Wondering World” appears to have captured his interest. It begins: “Nobody mentioned the King. For that matter, no British newspaper mentioned that Mrs Simpson was his friend. But minutes before the Baltimore belle slipped out of Ipswich Assizes with her second divorce in her pocket, a million conversations were being launched around the world with the phrase: Now that she’s free…?” In Pratt Boorman’s edition the words, “second divorce in her pocket” are heavily underlined.

Such disapproval is confirmed in the galley proofs. In a story explaining that some people in Kent may have heard about the scandal from relatives and friends in America and Canada, the *Kent Messenger* notes in bold text that **“To most people, especially those belonging to the middle classes, it came as a shock. They were almost unanimous in their condemnation of the proposal that the King should marry Mrs Simpson.”** Then, reverting to plain type, it explains that “Their principal objection was that Mrs Simpson had been married twice before.”

Pratt Boorman’s copies of *Time* are similarly annotated. In the edition of 5 October pencil marks highlight four paragraphs in the magazine’s coverage of the British Empire (1936e). They illustrate vividly the extent to which British journalists could plunder American titles for juicy details. One pencil mark draws highlights a report that the King ordered bagpipers at Balmoral Castle to entertain his guests, among them Mrs Simpson, with a rendition of *St. Louis Blues* containing the lyric “St Louis woman with her diamond rings pulls that man around by her apron strings.” Another appears beside the revelation that, on an official visit to Greece, “Mrs Simpson was seen riding through the streets of Athens seated at the King’s right hand in his official car amid the plaudits of the Greeks.” A further mark adorns *Time’s* cheekily suggestive report that “Edward VIII differs from his father in that the hoisting of his personal standard over a place of residence is no proof that he is there, as it always was in the case of George V.”

But if the Editor-Proprietor relished details of the King’s affair he sided with Baldwin when informing his readers. An enticing story: “Intimate Inside Story of the Crisis,” published on the Kent Messenger’s front page of Saturday 12 December hints at salaciousness. It is in fact studiously conservative. “The past week has been a severe one for our Nation,” it intones “for none more than the young King and Mr. Baldwin. Both have devoted their lives to our Nation, to both we owe our deepest thanks.” Lest there be any doubt that the newspaper supports the Prime Minister it explains “Mr Baldwin has aged considerably during the last few months. On him has fallen a difficult task. His has been the duty to maintain British constitutional rights.”

The newspaper’s editorial stance was that the integrity of the monarchy was essential to the health of democracy. It is captured on the front page in a quote from the King’s speech renouncing his throne: “Best for Stability of Throne and Empire and Happiness of My People.” The message: that Edward’s abdication and the installation as King of his brother, the Duke of York, is the settled will of a sombre and united nation. Comments on the same page reveal that this is not entirely true. Councillor H.A Tye, Mayor of Gillingham, said: “The abdication is a calamity for this country. I fail to see how his private affairs concern the population. There are many who have sat in judgment upon him who would also have to consider ‘abdication’ if their private affairs were matters of public interest and control.” Mr Cyril Richards, President of Sevenoaks Rotary Club, said: “It is a catastrophe at a time when the country can ill afford it.”

The *Kent Messenger* claimed to have spoken to “people chosen at random in many parts of the county.” Its trawl produced a surprising number of Councillors and several Presidents of Chambers of Commerce, but the abdication producedcontroversyeven among these members of the provincial elite and their newspaper sought to calm passions. It explained that the coronation date set for Edward VIII would almost certainly be used to crown his successor. It introduced readers to the new Royal Family with a front page picture of “The new King and Queen and Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret Rose.” It summarised the events of the past week as if the crisis had emerged fully formed on 3 December 1936 and explained the legal and parliamentary process whereby one king would be replaced by another. A double page spread across pages 6 and 7 depicted Edward VIII’s visits to Kent on the left hand page beneath the headline “I have determined to renounce the throne.” On the facing page the headline is “The New King’s Visits to Kent” and the space is filled with images of the Duke and Duchess of York at locations such as Chatham Royal Dockyard and studio images of the pretty princesses.

There is no room for doubt: though shocked the county must rally to the cause. Nation and empire expect Kent to remain calm and carry on. The *Messenger* assists this process by providing a full summary of local court cases and social events. Though news of the abdication monopolises the front page and the picture spreads inside, the life of the county dominates the edition. Advertising reminds readers that they can look forward to “the most prosperous Christmas for years.” It is time to buy presents and festive comestibles.

If a governing class consists not merely of those elected to high office, but of people who define the agenda and advance plans for action in the public sphere, then the Proprietor-Editor of the *Kent Messenger* in 1936 plainly regarded himself as a member of that class. The *Kent Messenger’s* treatment of the abdication crisis is informed by considerations of duty. It privileges the defence of monarchy over concerns for Edward VIII’s happiness. It presents the replacement of one King with another as a virtuous *fait accompli* around which the people of Kent must unite without demur. It accepts the view that marriage between the monarch and a divorcee is unacceptable and it endeavours to limit any public opposition to the abdication on the grounds that it would provoke division and instability. Above all it seeks to prevent Edward VIII securing the time his sympathisers wanted, time in which to enlist support for a compromise in which he might retain the throne and marry Mrs Simpson without her becoming Queen.

**Conclusion**

Pugh (1999:217) notes that the ingredients for a crisis in liberal democracy existed in Britain during the years before the abdication. Economic conditions had given rise to extremist movements of right and left. Fascism in Italy and National Socialism in Germany were destabilising Europe. Edward VIII’s affair reached British attention just as the Spanish Civil War that had erupted in July 1936 threatened to provoke a wider confrontation between totalitarianism and constitutional democracy. Fear of instability and war abounded. The Conservative Baldwin led a National government, and, in dealing with the crisis, had support from the Parliamentary Labour Party. Labour’s Clement Attlee the leader of His Majesty’s Loyal Opposition, was a dedicated monarchist and his priorities during the crisis were indistinguishable from Baldwin’s. He was determined that the monarchy must endure unscathed and certain that Edward VIII would discredit it (Brookshire 1995: 16). Attlee and Labour made sure that no party-political split emerged to intensify division in the country.In the newspaper industry, intense competition between national popular titles such as the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror* put provincial titles under economic pressure and discouraged editorial risk-taking.

The *Kent Messenger’s* treatment of the abdication can only be understood in this context. Henry-Roy Pratt Boorman adopted the position shared by all major parties in the House of Commons. He took an editorial stance in opposition to the mass-circulation popular titles that were seeking market dominance. He took care to do so with all the authority a popular and trusted local newspaper could muster. Within months of the abdication, similar consensus over the merits of appeasing Hitler’s Germany would emerge between government, national newspapers and the BBC.

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