



“...ALL I CAN SAY IS THAT SINCE IT IS TO BE I SHALL MAKE IT THE STUDY OF MY LIFE TO MAKE HIM HAPPY.”

— MRS FITZHERBERT, WRITING TO LADY ANNE BARNARD, NOVEMBER 1785. MARITAL PROBLEMS IN THE BRITISH ROYAL FAMILY ARE NOTHING NEW. LESLIE CARROLL LOOKS AT THE NOT-SO-SECRET MARRIAGE OF THE FUTURE KING GEORGE IV AND MRS FITZHERBERT, AND ASKS: HOW DO YOU SOLVE...

A problem like Maria?

ON JULY 27, 1784, the day after Maria Fitzherbert’s 28th birthday, *The Morning Herald* proclaimed: “A new Constellation has lately made an appearance in the fashionable hemisphere that engages the attention of those whose hearts are susceptible to the power of beauty. The widow of the late Mr Fitzherbert has in her train half our young nobility. As the Lady has not, as yet, discovered a partiality for any of her admirers, they are all animated with hopes of success.”

King George IV in Coronation robes © Royal Pavilion, Libraries and Museums, Brighton and Hove



Mrs Fitzherbert is often depicted as the patient, saintly and long-suffering romantic victim of the Prince of Wales. But she was a woman of spirit and spunk who liked an off-colour joke, spoke frankly and (although her income had derived from her marriage settlements) was remarkably self-reliant. Like her royal admirer, she was vain, proud and not without a sizeable ego.

She was born Mary Anne Smythe at Tong, in Shropshire, to an affluent Catholic royalist family and was educated at an English convent school in France. By the time she met the Prince of Wales, she was a 24-year-old childless widow (twice over) with a very comfortable £1,800 a year to live on.

After attending the opera one March evening in 1784, the Prince became transfixed by her appearance as she waited for her carriage. From that moment her fate would change dramatically.

Described by his friend Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, as “inclined to be too fat and looks much like a woman in men’s cloaths [sic],” the Prince was six years younger than Maria. Throughout his life he exhibited a penchant for older women, especially those who combined sexuality with a certain maternal quality.

Maria was not a classic beauty, mocking her own aquiline “Roman Catholic” nose. Her chin was considered too “determined”, her cheeks too broad and she had ill-fitting false teeth. But she made up for it with her hazel eyes, silky blonde hair and flawless complexion.

By March 10, 1784, rumours abounded that



Mrs Maria Fitzherbert, 1791, engraving after Richard Cosway © The British Museum, London. From *The Prince of Pleasure* by J B Priestley



The Rose Satin Drawing Room, Carlton House
© Regency England by Reay Tannahill.
Folio Society 1964

the Prince of Wales was making “fierce love to the widow Fitzherbert”. He sent her gifts of jewellery and commissioned Gainsborough to paint her portrait, but Maria made it quite clear to the heir apparent that she had no interest in becoming his mistress. So he proposed marriage.

Maria countered with every pragmatic reply. For one thing, she was a devout Catholic with no intentions of renouncing her faith. And, should she marry him, it would be in defiance of the Royal Marriages Act (which prohibits a royal under the age of 25 from marrying without the monarch’s permission), the 1701 Act of Settlement and, to some degree, the 1707 Act of Union which even in the 21st century still bars any Catholic, or anyone married to a Catholic, from inheriting the British throne. Were Maria to marry George, it would cost him his crown; even a secret marriage would be in breach of those statutes.

The prince was uninterested in anything approaching a rational argument for rejection. Maria thought it was one of his practical jokes when, late in the evening of July 8, 1784, four men from his household showed up at her

doorstep, informing her that George had stabbed himself. To preserve her honour from malicious gossip, she insisted that their mutual friend Georgiana accompany her to Carlton House as a chaperone. They found the Prince in a bloodstained shirt tearing at his bandages, foaming at the mouth and banging his head against the wall. The only thing that could “induce him to live” was Maria’s consent to marry him. So she relented, signing a hastily written promissory note; the Duchess pulled a ring from her own finger as the Prince had none of his own to bestow upon his bullied bride.

Back at Devonshire House, Georgiana wrote up a deposition stating that Maria was aware that a written promise extracted under such threats was invalid, thus protecting themselves against the illegality of the bedside agreement. Maria packed her trunks as soon as she arrived home, and the following day she went abroad in the hope that the whole messy business with the Prince would blow over.

Throwing tantrums like a spoiled brat, the 22-year-old heir to the English throne

wept uncontrollably, tore at his hair, banged his head against hard objects and vowed to relinquish his rights to the crown, sell his plate and jewels and elope to America with Maria. From Brighton, the Prince wrote to his “wife” regularly – and copiously – but Maria remained resolute: marriage was out of the question. However, in October 1785, after receiving more suicide threats from the manipulative George, Maria wrote to tell him that she might consent to marry him. To her friend Lady Anne Lindsay, Maria

wrote: “I have told him I will be his. I know I injure him and perhaps destroy forever my own tranquillity... Could I banish from my idea the fatal consequences that may attend such a connexion I then might be happy in attaching myself for life to the man that has gone thro’ so much for my sake & to whom I feel myself very sincerely attach’d to, but alas whenever I look upon it in a favourable light, that Idea vanishes... All I can say is that since it is to be I shall make it the Study of my life to make him happy.”



Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, by Sir Joshua Reynolds
© The Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement. From
Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire by Amanda Foreman

Maria insisted on certain terms before she would tie the knot: she would always be known as Mrs Fitzherbert, would maintain a separate address and establishment, have the place of honour at George's table and an annual allowance of £10,000. Furthermore, she would not spend a single night under the prince's roof until their marriage was made public.

It was not easy to find a clergyman willing to risk the wrath of Heaven and Earth to perform a blatantly illegal wedding ceremony. Finally, a young curate, the Rev John Burt, was located – in the Fleet prison, where he was incarcerated for debts. Most historians believe that Burt struck a hard bargain: he would marry the prince to Mrs Fitzherbert for £500, payment of all his debts, the appointment as one of the prince's chaplains and a future bishopric.

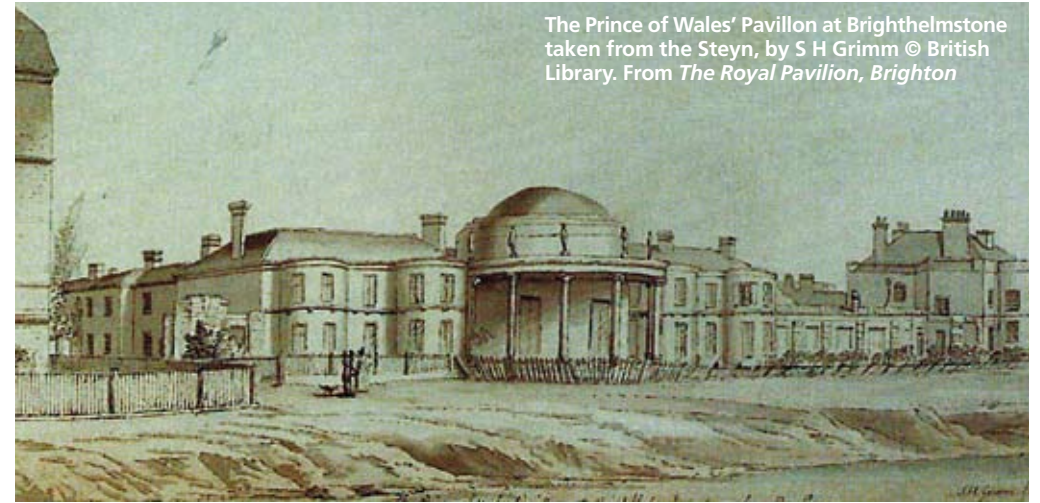
The ceremony was performed on December 15, 1785, a frosty autumn afternoon behind the curtained windows and locked doors of Maria's parlour in Park Street. The 29-year-old bride wore a simple suit of travelling clothes. After the groom and the two witnesses signed the marriage certificate, George gave it to Maria to keep. It is now in the Royal Archives.

The Prince Regent and Maria Fitzherbert, the prince's 'wife'. From *Regency Recollections Captain Gronow's Guide to Life in London and Paris* edited by Christopher Summerville



Although the few people who knew the truth were sworn to secrecy, caricatures of the Prince and Mrs Fitzherbert appeared in every shop window. The *Daily Universal Register* bawdily punned: "The Prince's musical talents are of the first rate... He is attached to, and peculiarly happy in humming old pieces. His Highness has lately set 'The Dainty Widow' much higher in order to suit his pipe." A clandestine royal marriage, true or not, was the talk of the town. Maria herself later referred to her union as "the One Truth – which all the world knows".

Those who glimpsed Mrs Fitzherbert with the Prince in Brighton the following July were certain that she was visibly pregnant. Many believe that Maria had at least one child, and possibly two, by the Prince; and she never denied having any offspring. Considering that their relationship lasted several years and contraception was in its infancy, so to speak, it is certainly possible that she became pregnant by him and carried to term. Her first child may have been born in the early autumn of 1786. A baby boy given the name of his foster father, James Ord, was taken first to Bilbao, Spain, and then to Norfolk, Virginia, raised by prominent Catholic families and afforded the best education available. James Ord's paternity was never clearly established, but if it became known that the heir apparent had fathered



The Prince of Wales' Pavillon at Brighthelmstone taken from the Steyn, by S H Grimm © British Library. From *The Royal Pavilion, Brighton*

a Catholic son, it would have irrevocably destroyed George's chances of becoming king.

A girl named Maryanne Smythe (a version of Maria's birth name) was born in about 1800, although she did not enter Mrs Fitzherbert's household until 1817. Maryanne was passed off as Maria's niece, the daughter of her younger brother John — although official records reflect that John and his wife had no children. The page that spans the years 1799 to 1801 is missing from the baptismal register of St John the Baptist Church, in Brighton, where Maria worshipped, so we will never know if it contained anything incriminating. It was purportedly removed by the Prince in 1811 when he became Regent. On the death of George – by then King George IV – in 1830, Lord Stourton, a distant cousin of Maria's, one of her executors and her eventual biographer, asked her to sign a declaration written on the back of her marriage certificate that read: "I, Mary Fitzherbert, testify that my Union with George P. of Wales was without issue." Stourton later said: "She smilingly objected on the score of delicacy." Surely she would have signed the endorsement without hesitation if she had never borne George any children?

On June 23, 1794, Maria was informed by letter that her relationship with the Prince was over. George told his next youngest brother, Frederick, Duke of York that he and Maria were "parted, but parted amicably", conveying his intention to marry their first cousin, Princess Caroline of Brunswick. According to King George III it was the

only way out of a hole: his heir's debts of £600,000 would be paid the day he wed. So the Prince married Caroline on April 8, 1795.

In 1796, three days after Caroline gave birth to their daughter, Charlotte, on January 10, the Prince of Wales wrote his last will and testament, bequeathing all his "worldly property . . . to my Maria Fitzherbert, my wife, the wife of my heart and soul". Although by the laws of this country she "could not avail herself publicly of that name, still such she is in the eyes of Heaven, was, is, and ever will be such in mine . . .".

However, this outpouring of self-pity did not lead to a reunion. The Prince finally sought a reconciliation with his "second self" during the summer of 1798. By then he had separated from Caroline for good and was bored with his mistress, Lady Jersey. Another year passed before Maria advised the Prince that a rapprochement would be possible only after the Pope deemed their marriage legitimate, a reunion that potentially jeopardised Princess Charlotte's chances of succession. If George was considered lawfully married to Maria, then his marriage to Caroline would have been bigamous and Charlotte a bastard.

On February 5, 1811, the Prince was sworn in as Regent and hosted an inaugural fête for himself on June 19 at Carlton House.

Although he had sent Maria a gown, she refused to attend because she would not be seated at his table, where the 200 highest-ranking guests would be placed, according to the strictest Court etiquette. George's



Bandelures, James Gillray, 1791 © Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton

insult was keenly felt. For decades Maria had received the honours as the Prince's consort and wife at his own table, and at that of every other host and hostess who had invited the Prince to attend their events. That contretemps spelled the end of their romance. Maria demanded – and received – a formal separation. George agreed to provide her with an income of £6,000 a year, paid from a mortgage on the Brighton Pavilion.

The Regent became King at the age of 57 upon the death of his father on January 29, 1820. During the first few years of his reign as George IV he turned violently against Maria as he did, Prince Hal-like, with several of his former associates. Whenever he mentioned her name it was “with feelings of disgust and horror”, claiming that their union “was an artificial marriage... just to satisfy her; that it was no marriage – for there could be none without a licence or some written document.” Of course there were documents, which were in fact in Maria's possession; and from time to

time after their final break Maria's demands for her annuity payments were accompanied by veiled threats to go public with her papers if she did not receive the funds.

In June 1830, when the King was dying, he eagerly seized her “get well soon” letter and, after reading it, placed it under his pillow. On June 26 at 3.15am, Maria Fitzherbert – who had no idea just how ill he was and was deeply hurt that he had never replied to her final letter – became a widow for the third time.

One day in March 1837 Maria collapsed; she died at her home in Brighton on Easter Monday, March 27, at the age of 80. On April 6 she was buried in St John the Baptist Church. The ring finger of her stone effigy is carved with three wedding bands. ❧

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Maria Fitzherbert, shown as “The Royal Toast, Fat, Fair, and Forty”. Anonymous. 1786 © The Royal Pavilion, Libraries and Museums, Brighton and Hove

