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Concerning her realm, she is singularly well informed on all matters, although she has in the past confessed that ‘the British Constitution has always been puzzling and always will be.’ But it is perhaps a knowledge of the country’s people rather than its political workings that has equipped her so well for her long reign. No doubt such expertise has been acquired over a lifetime of ‘away days’, as she and Prince Philip call their visits to cities and small villages throughout the UK, as well as meeting the thousands of guests who attend the regular garden parties hosted at Buckingham Palace.

‘She spends so much time meeting people that she has an understanding of what other people’s lives are like in Britain. I think she understands what the normal human condition is,’ said Charles Powell, who witnessed the Queen in action when working as private secretary to both Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Others who have met her remark on her ability to speak to anyone on any level, whatever their background.

Strike a Pose

The Queen knows that being photographed by professionals and amateurs alike is part of the job description, and after so many years’ practice she knows exactly how to make the best of any photo opportunity. She dresses to stand out from the crowd, choosing bright, distinctive colours: ‘If I wore beige, nobody would know who I am.’



The Queen is careful to use a transparent umbrella in the rain so she can still be seen and she has a number of different ones, all edged with a band of colour selected to match her outfit. She is also very aware of camera angles and how to avoid potential embarrassment. When opening a British Council exhibition of Lucian Freud nudes in Norway she told an aide that she had been very careful to make sure ‘I was not photographed between a pair of those great thighs.’



On that same trip a curator asked the Queen, ‘Haven’t you been painted by Lucian Freud, Ma’am?’ The Queen smiled and replied, ‘Yes, but not like that.’



When Freud painted her portrait in 2001 he was said to have had ‘a whale of a time with the Queen’, according to his friend Clarissa Eden. It took several sittings and staff became used to the sight of Her Majesty mid-morning, racing down a corridor in full regal regalia, complete with ballgown and tiara, late for her appointment with the artist.

People like seeing the Queen. The excitement of catching a glimpse of royalty brings out the crowds wherever she goes – even in staunch republics. Think of the rapturous greeting that awaits her whenever she visits the US and the interest that is focused on her every movement or wardrobe detail. State visits have always been a feature of the Queen’s life. Just five months after her coronation she embarked on a mammoth six-month tour of the Commonwealth with Prince Philip, during which they covered some 43,000 miles. Over the course of her reign, the Queen has made over 261 official overseas visits to 116 different countries, which makes her far and away the most travelled head of state to date.

It’s strange to think of a time when royal walkabouts were not an essential element of any royal visit. In fact, the first royal walkabout took place in 1970 during an official tour of Australia and New Zealand – hence the reason for the name. Then as now, they were seen as a relatively informal way for the Queen and Prince Philip to meet ordinary members of the public alongside the usual list of officials and dignitaries. The idea immediately caught on and walkabouts are now an expected part of any official visit. As the Queen herself quipped, ‘I have to be seen to be believed.’

Walkabouts

Princess Anne was less keen on the idea at first and did not have fond memories of her first experience: ‘At nineteen years old suddenly being dropped in the middle of the street, suddenly being told to pick someone and talk to them. Fun? No, I don’t think so. A challenge.’



On a tour of Canada, visiting Saskatchewan, the Canadian minister Alvin Hamilton was concerned that the Queen had been on her feet all day and had not even requested a ‘health break’. Her private secretary breezily replied that the Minister for Northern Affairs and National Resources need not worry, ‘Her Majesty is trained for eight hours.’ It’s impossible not to wonder about the training sessions.



During one such state visit the Queen had to gently point out to an escort commander protectively blocking the crowd’s view of the royal carriage: ‘Actually, Captain, I think it’s me they’ve come to see.’