

MARRIAGE AND WEDDINGS in the UK

THE WEDDING

Marriage is usually initiated by a **proposal** of marriage, simply called "a proposal". In a heterosexual relationship, the man traditionally proposes to the woman and the actual proposal often has a ritual quality, involving the presentation of a ring (an engagement ring) and the formalized asking of a question such as "Will you marry me?" The man may even go down on one knee before proposing. If the proposal is accepted, the couple become engaged.

In the United Kingdom, the engagement ring is worn, by the woman, on the third finger of the left hand (the ring finger).

In the UK the 29th of February (in a **leap year**) is said to be the one day (coming round only once every four years) when a woman can propose to her partner.

It is usual for a couple to be engaged for a while before they get married. An engagement is actually an agreement or promise to marry, and also refers to the time between proposal and marriage. During this period, a couple is said to be affianced, engaged to be married, or simply engaged.

A man who is engaged to be married is called his partner's fiancé; a woman similarly engaged is called her partner's fiancée.

Once a wedding date has been set the banns of marriage, commonly known simply as "the banns" (from an Old English word meaning "to summon") are announced. This is a notice, usually placed in the local parish church or registry office, which tells everyone that a marriage is going to take place between two people.

The purpose of banns is to enable anyone to raise any legal problems as to why the two people shouldn't get married, basically it is to prevent marriages that are legally invalid. Impediments vary between legal jurisdictions, but would normally include a pre-existing marriage (having been neither dissolved nor annulled), a vow of celibacy, lack of consent, or the couple's being related within the prohibited degrees of kinship.

In England, a marriage is only legally **valid** if the reading of the banns has taken place or a marriage licence has been obtained.

THE PEOPLE

In addition to the bride and groom, traditional weddings involve a lot more people. Typically, these positions are filled by close friends of the bride and groom; being asked to serve in these capacities is seen as a great honour.

For the couple:

Ringbearer - an attendant, often a young boy, who carries the wedding rings.

Ushers - helpers, usually men, who assist with the organization.

For the groom:-

Best man - a close male friend or relative of the groom, given a place of honour.

Groomsmen - one or more male attendants who support the groom.

For the bride:-

Maid of honour - a close female friend or relative of the bride, given a place of honour. If she is married, she is called the "matron of honour" instead.

Bridesmaids - one or more female attendants who support the bride.

Father of the Bride - One who symbolically "gives away" the bride. If her father is deceased or otherwise unavailable, another male relative, often an uncle or brother, will give the bride away.

Flower girl - a young girl who scatters flowers in front of the bridal party.

Junior Bridesmaids - young girl typically between the ages of 8 and 16 who is too old to be a flowergirl, but the bride wants to be a part of the wedding.

Wedding guests are generally sent invitations to which they are expected to reply (rsvp). The guests are generally invited to both the wedding and the wedding reception afterwards, although sometimes reception places are limited. Often certain people are invited due to perceived family obligations, as to not receive an invitation can be considered an insult.

THE WEDDING CEREMONY

A bride's wedding day is often touted as "the happiest day of her life", but in all honesty it's often a very stressful experience as there are lots of conventions surrounding the whole thing and you can get caught up in family rows, and trying to please everyone. Still it's a good test of a couple's fortitude.

When the guests arrive for a wedding the ushers' duty is to hand out the correct books, flowers and the order of service, they also ensure the guests are seated in the correct places. Traditionally, the side on which people sit depends on whether they are friends or family of the bride or of the groom. The front rows are generally reserved for close family or friends, with the very first seats reserved for the bridal party. However, in many ceremonies the bridal party will remain standing at the altar during the ceremony along with the bride and groom.

The groom and his best man wait inside the church for the arrival of the bride and her "entourage".

This entourage generally arrives in elegant cars or in horse-drawn coaches, specially hired for the occasion. The bride's entourage normally consists of the bride, the bride's father and all the various bridesmaids, maids of honour, sometimes flower girls and page boys attend her. The page boy's task is often to carry the wedding rings on a cushion.

The ushers and/or groomsmen escort the grandparents of the bride and groom to their seats.

The ushers and/or groomsmen escort the mother of the groom and mother of the bride to their seats.

The bridesmaids enter, escorted by the groomsmen.

The maid or matron of honour enters, either by herself or escorted by the best man.

The ringbearer or page boy enters.

The flower girl enters. (In some ceremonies, the ringbearer will accompany the flower girl.)

The bride then proceeds down the aisle, escorted by her father, to the accompaniment of music (usually the wedding march, often called "Here comes the bride"), and the ceremony starts.

During the ceremony the bride and groom make their marriage vows. Marriage vows are promises a couple makes to each other during a wedding ceremony. In Western culture, these promises have traditionally included the notions of affection ("love, comfort, keep"), faithfulness ("forsaking all others"), unconditionality ("for richer or for poorer", "in sickness and in health"), and permanence ("as long as we both shall live", "until death do us part").

Most wedding vows are taken from traditional religious ceremonies, but nowadays in the UK many couples choose touching love poems or lyrics from a love song revised as wedding vows and some couples even choose to write their own vows, rather than relying on standard ones spoken by the celebrant (registrar, priest or vicar).

After the vows have been spoken the couple exchange rings. The wedding ring is placed on the third finger of the left hand, also called the "ring" finger. The wedding ring is usually a plain gold ring. I was once told that the third finger was chosen because in the past people believed a vein ran from that finger, straight to the heart - modern anatomy books have put paid to that theory though.

After the wedding ceremony, the bride, groom, officiant, and two witnesses generally go off to a side room to sign the wedding register. Without this the marriage is not legal and a wedding certificate cannot be issued.

Afterward, guests file out to throw flower petals, confetti, birdseed, or rice (uncooked for obvious reasons) over the newly-married couple for good luck.

The bride stands with her back to all the guests and throws her bouquet over her head to them. Whoever catches the bouquet is the next person to get married. I don't know if this has ever been scientifically tested, but it can result in a very unseemly scramble, reminiscent of rugby scrums.

Finally, a photo session ensues of the couple leaving the church, and everyone has to stand around to form formal groups for the photo album. A lot of people video the whole thing, which can be good for a laugh on YouTube.

NICE DAY FOR A WHITE WEDDING

In the past Wednesday was considered the most auspicious day to get married, as shown in this old rhyme, which seems to favour the first half of the week.

Monday for **wealth**,
Tuesday for health,
Wednesday the best day of all.
Thursday for losses,
Friday for crosses,
Saturday for no luck at all.

Nowadays, most weddings take place on a Saturday, which might account for the rise in divorce rates.

THE CLOTHING

The Western custom of a bride wearing a white wedding dress, came to symbolize **purity** in the Victorian era (despite popular misconception and the hackneyed jokes of situation comedies, the white dress did not indicate virginity, this was symbolized by a face veil). In the past the **veil** was worn to confuse any evil spirits.

There's another rhyme that affects what the bride wears:-

"Something old,
Something new,
Something borrowed,
Something blue."

Often the bride will wear an heirloom, or maybe carry a family bible or prayer book, the dress of course is usually the something new, and they will borrow something from someone to wear. The something blue can be difficult, but a lot of brides get round this by wearing a blue garter under their dress.

Within the "white wedding" tradition, a white dress and veil would not have been considered appropriate in the second or third wedding of a widow or divorcee. Nowadays it really isn't an issue.

Before the white wedding dress became "traditional" an old poem (which seems to favour blue) sang the praises or woes of various colour choices.

"Married in white, you will have chosen all right.
Married in grey, you will go far away.
Married in black, you will wish yourself back.
Married in red, you'll wish yourself dead.
Married in blue, you will always be true.
Married in pearl, you'll live in a whirl.
Married in green, ashamed to be seen,
Married in yellow, ashamed of the fellow.
Married in brown, you'll live out of town.
Married in pink, your spirits will sink."

The average price of a traditional white wedding dress is around £826.

In the Middle Ages, bridesmaids used to wear the same **outfit** as the bride. This was to confuse any evil spirits who wished the bride harm. Nowadays they are more likely to be dressed in such a way as to scare any evil spirits away, after all no bride wants to be outshone on the big day.

THE RECEPTION

After the ceremony there is usually a reception at which the married couple, the couple's parents, the best man and the wedding entourage greet each of the guests. At such events it is traditional to eat and drink - a lot.

During the reception a number of speeches and/or toasts are given in honour of the couple.

Any dancing is commonly started by the bride and groom, usually termed the "Bridal Waltz", but dancing an actual waltz is comparatively rare - often the couple chooses their favourite piece of music or a song.

An arranged dance between the bride and her father is also traditional. Sometimes the groom will cut in halfway through the dance, symbolizing the bride leaving her father and joining her new husband.

At some point the married couple may become the object of a charivari, a good-natured hazing of the newly-married couple. While this is most familiar in the form of tying tin cans to the bumper of the couple's car, or spraying shaving cream on the windows, some of the **pranks** can be far more malicious. The worst one I've ever heard of is when the bride and groom returned from honeymoon to find their front door had been bricked over.

The final tradition is the newly married couple to set off for their honeymoon.

HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT

At the wedding reception an elaborate, **tiered**, wedding cake is often served. Traditionally this is a fruit cake. Often there are a couple of little figures on top of the cake, normally they are a representation of the bride and groom in formal wedding attire.

It is considered lucky for the couple to cut the cake together. It symbolises them working together during their marriage. A tier is usually stored, and eaten by the couple at their first wedding anniversary, or at the christening of their first child. The cake can be frozen and if the top tier of the cake is fruitcake, it can be stored for a long time, because it's so full of sugar (and often alcohol) that it's very well preserved.

People who were invited to the wedding, but were unable to attend are often sent a piece of cake in a small box, as a memento.

One superstition is that unmarried guests should place a piece of wedding cake under their pillow, as it will increase their prospects of finding a partner. Bridesmaids who do so will supposedly dream of their future husbands, which must make Johnny Depp a potential bigamist.

BRITISH WEDDING TRADITIONS

- The happy couple **toast** each other.
- The newlyweds have the first dance.
- The couple cup the cake together as the symbol of their first meal as husband and wife.
- The bride may throw her bouquet to the assembled group of all unmarried women in attendance, with folklore suggesting the person who catches it will be the next to wed. (A fairly recent equivalent has the groom throwing the bride's garter to the assembled unmarried men; the man who catches it is supposedly the next to wed.)
- On arriving back home it is traditional for the husband to carry his wife into their new home. This is called carrying the bride over the threshold.

THE COST OF GETTING MARRIED IN THE UK

In 2004 the average wedding in the UK cost £16,000, and prices have risen since then, by 2012 it stood at £18,500, and according to Brides Magazine in 2015, it is a whopping £24,716! Of course there is no need to get caught up in Competitive Wedding Syndrome, none of it is actually necessary. You can simply get married and live happily ever after.

Internet source: <https://www.learnenglish.de/culture/marriage.html>

EXERCISES:

I. What does the wedding ceremony look like in Poland? Who are the people at the ceremony? Where do people get married? Where are the wedding receptions held? What are the customs, traditions and superstitions?

II. Read the text and find similarities and differences between the Polish and the British wedding ceremonies.

III. Which British wedding custom do you especially like? Would you like to have it on your wedding day? Why (not)?

IV. Correct the wrong statements:

1. In the UK there is one day (coming round only once every two years) when a woman can propose to her partner.
2. A marriage is only legally valid if a marriage licence has been obtained.
3. Maid of honour can be called the "mother of honour" instead.
4. All wedding vows are taken from traditional religious ceremonies.
5. The third finger of the right hand is called the "ring" finger.
6. After the wedding ceremony, the bride and the groom go off to a side room to sign the wedding register.
7. The best day to get married is Saturday.
8. The whole wedding cake is supposed to be eaten during the wedding reception.
9. After the ceremony the groom throws the bride's bra to the assembled unmarried men; the man who catches it is supposedly the next to wed.
10. The cost of getting married in the UK is relatively low.

V. Explain the meaning of the highlighted words and phrases.

VI. What was the last wedding ceremony you went to? Describe it to your partner(s).

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