



THE REAL QUEEN CHARLOTTE

INSIDE THE REAL
BRIDGERTON COURT

UNOFFICIAL

CATHERINE CURZON

THE REAL
QUEEN
CHARLOTTE

To Helen, for all those worlds.

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CATHERINE CURZON



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Now for the usual suspects... A gin-soaked *rococo* 'n' roll to Rob and Kathy, who have been the very, very best.

Pippa, Nelly, and the Rakish Colonial – keep watching the skies!

The Royal Family

In a few generations there will be no joke in saying
*Their Highnesses the Mob.*¹

In their first twenty-two years of marriage, George III and Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz became parents to fifteen children. Their names are below, with the names of their spouses – legal or otherwise – in italics. Rumoured marriages are not included.

George IV (12 August 1762–26 June 1830)

Maria Fitzherbert (m.1785; not legally recognised)

Princess Caroline of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel (m.1795; separated)

Prince Frederick, Duke of York and Albany (16 August 1763–5 January 1827)

Princess Frederica of Prussia (m.1791; separated)

William IV (21 August 1765–20 June 1837)

Princess Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen (m.1818)

Charlotte, Princess Royal (29 September 1766–6 October 1828)

King Frederick of Württemberg (m.1797)

Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and Strathearn (2 November 1767–23 January 1820)

Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld (m.1818)

The Royal Family

Princess Augusta Sophia (8 November 1768–22 September 1840)

Princess Elizabeth (22 May 1770–10 January 1840)

Frederick, Landgrave of Hesse-Homburg (m.1818)

Ernest Augustus, King of Hanover (5 June 1771–18 November 1851)

Princess Frederica of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (m.1815)

Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex (27 January 1773–21 April 1843)

Lady Augusta Murray (m.1793; annulled)

Lady Cecilia Buggin (m.1831)

Prince Adolphus, Duke of Cambridge (24 February 1774–8 July 1850)

Princess Augusta of Hesse-Kassel (m.1818)

Princess Mary, Duchess of Gloucester and Edinburgh (25 April 1776–30 April 1857)

Prince William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh (m.1816)

Princess Sophia (3 November 1777–27 May 1848)

Prince Octavius (23 February 1779–3 May 1783)

Prince Alfred (22 September 1780–20 August 1782)

Princess Amelia (7 August 1783–2 November 1810)

Introduction

[Charlotte] is not tall, nor a beauty; pale, and very thin; but looks sensible, and is genteel. Her hair is darkish and fine; her forehead low, her nose very well, except the nostrils spreading too wide; her mouth has the same fault, but her teeth are good. She talks a good deal and French tolerably; possesses herself, is frank, but with great respect to the King.¹

Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz was not born to greatness. She was quiet, unassuming, and raised in a little corner of Europe from which it seemed unlikely that any queen would emerge. Yet when it came to royal marriages, a mostly forgotten little corner might turn out to be just what was needed.

When George II died in 1760, his son and heir, Frederick, was already dead. The crown passed to Fred's 22-year-old son, the timid, unassuming George III. He would reign for nearly sixty years. At his side through thick and thin was Queen Charlotte, the girl from Mecklenburg-Strelitz.

What made Charlotte so remarkable was the very fact that she wasn't remarkable at all. Unpolitical, unambitious, and aspiring only to a happy home, she was a gift to the politicians who hoped to keep the young George III in check. At first, Charlotte got her wish. Though she had never met her groom before the wedding

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day, their marriage was loving, faithful, and mundane in its domesticity. There was not a trace of the tumultuous roller-coaster of infidelity, divorce, and murder that had tainted the marriage of George I, nor of the politically ambitious queen and procession of mistresses who had held sway at the court of George II. George III was at pains to prove to his subjects that he was not so different to them. He strove to demonstrate his Englishness, downplayed his German ancestry, and shared his bride's love of home and hearth. It should have been a match made in heaven, but fate had other things in store.

Queen Charlotte and King George III were married for nearly sixty years. Their union was blighted by the king's ill health and, as his wife became more keeper than companion, she mourned for the man she had known and loved. That unassuming, optimistic girl was dragged into a life that she had little anticipated, where she fled in terror from her husband's rages, locked the bedroom door against him at night, and sought solace in her unhappy, cosseted daughters. As the royal family erupted into all-out war between the queen and the eldest son who would be Regent, what had once been a happy home became a battleground.

Yet Queen Charlotte was more than the stand-by-your-man wife at the side of an ailing husband or the gossip-hungry matriarch of the *Bridgerton* court. She lived through tumultuous times, and her journey from that little corner of Europe to queen of one of the grandest courts in the world is as fascinating now as it ever was. Poised, devoted, difficult, and with a temper that would send her children scattering, this is the story of the real Queen Charlotte.

‘Think of the Crown of England and a handsome young King dropping from the clouds into Strelitz! The crowds, the multitudes, the millions, that are to stare at her; the swarms to kiss her hand, the pomp of the Coronation. She need be but seventeen to bear it!’

Horace Walpole, 4th Earl of Orford, to Horace Mann, 17 August 1761

‘The King I think remarkably well; the Queen as usual, sometimes *sweet* & sometimes *sour*.’

Princess Amelia to the Prince of Wales, October 1806

Act One

Princess

No lack of Daughters, nor of Sons by-and-by; eight years hence came the little Charlotte, subsequently Mother of England, much to her and our astonishment.¹

Mother of England

The childhoods of royal daughters do not always make for a happy story. In the Hanoverian family tree alone, one can find children ripped from the arms of their mothers, never to be reunited, sons thrashed for stepping out of line, and daughters locked away, cosseted in perpetual girlhood. For Sophie Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, however, things were rather different.

If Great Britain was a superpower, Mecklenburg was anything but. Just 120 miles long and 30 wide, it petered out into the Baltic Sea in the north and its borders were crowded by Brandenburg, Luneburg, and Holstein. Mecklenburg had once been a powerful home to the Vandals, but as their dominance decreased, they were pushed further and further back until it was their only stronghold. Here they reinforced their kingdom until they fell beneath the forces of Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony. Duke Henry brought Christianity to the conquered people of Mecklenburg, and hot on his heels followed an influx of new arrivals from Germany and the Low Countries. Once the stronghold of warlords, Mecklenburg was changing beyond recognition.

The Real Queen Charlotte: Inside the Real Bridgerton Court

Over centuries, the German territories were reshaped and carved up, used as bargaining chips and dowries in a never-ending European powerplay. In 1701, the Treaty of Hamburg established the Duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, a far from important state of the immensely powerful Holy Roman Empire. Mecklenburg was simply one of dozens of duchies that the Empire hoovered up to secure its power, but it proved extraordinarily good at producing queens.²

Sophie Charlotte's father, Duke Charles Louis Frederick of Mecklenburg, was born in Strelitz in 1708. He was the younger son of Adolphus Frederick II, the reigning Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, and the half-brother of *another* Adolphus Frederick, who eventually succeeded their father to rule over the duchy in 1708. Just three months old when his father died, young Charles Louis inherited the commandries of Mirow and Nemerow. A commandery was the smallest territory anyone could administer and even in Mecklenburg, where large was relative, it paled in comparison to the lands controlled by Adolphus Frederick III. Charles didn't mind, though. It was all a matter of birthright, after all.

The infant Charles Louis was taken by his bereaved mother to the family estate at Mirow, where he was raised. Mirow was a rather sorry place, by far the lesser of the Mecklenburg territories, just as the Strelitz branch of the House was lesser to the others, and Charles Louis' education was rather wanting too. Still, he lived the life of a noble young gentleman, eventually leaving Mirow for Pomerania and a programme of study at the University of Greifswald. The 18-year-old Charles Louis also undertook the requisite Grand Tour of Europe, a coming-of-age rite of passage for highborn young men. With little calling him home, he entered the military in the service of the Holy Roman Empire, serving to little fanfare before he finally returned to Mirow.

Upon his return to his childhood home, Charles Louis was ready to settle down. He took as his wife Princess Elisabeth Albertine of

Princess

Saxe-Hildburghausen, and though theirs was a marriage of minor dynastic importance for two minor dynastic families, it was one founded on love. Their union seemed to signal a new beginning in Mirow and soon the little court was beginning to flourish. Though far from wealthy, the young couple's presence ignited a spark that revitalised all of the land. Yet as his territories prospered and Charles Louis threw himself into their improvement, his health began to fail. He already suffered from recurrent bouts of pulmonary illness and, as the years passed, they grew ever more serious.

Elisabeth Albertine was the daughter of Ernest Frederick I, Duke of Saxe-Hildburghausen, and Countess Sophia Albertine of Erbach-Erbach. Like Charles Louis in Mirow, their life was hardly illustrious. Ernest Frederick was a soldier who had dreamed of recreating the splendid Bourbon court on his home turf, but instead he managed to wring the treasury dry. With his lands on the brink of revolt, Ernest Frederick tried to raise funds by selling his wife's dowry, the county of Cuylenburg. Saxe-Meiningen purchased the county, not realising that Sophia Albertine hadn't consented to the sale, which she was legally required to do. Once the truth got out, Saxe-Meiningen and Saxe-Hildburghausen entered into a ruinous territorial war that devastated the land. It wasn't until Ernest Frederick's death that the financial situation in Saxe-Hildburghausen came under control. His widow, it turned out, was more of a ruler than he had ever been.

It was from this unsettled court that Elisabeth Albertine came to Mirow. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the example of her mother, when Elisabeth Albertine was called upon to prove her mettle many years after her marriage,³ she proved herself more than capable. She and Charles Louis eventually had ten children, four of whom died in infancy. Of the six who survived to adulthood, Sophie Charlotte was the longest-lived.

The Seat of Every Social Virtue

Sophie Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz was born on 19 May 1744 at the Unteres Schloss in Mirow. She was the eighth child and fifth daughter – though three died in infancy – of the Duke and Duchess, who had passed nine years of happily married life. There was nothing to suggest that this latest arrival might become a queen, and nothing to suggest that anyone as lofty as the King of Great Britain might ever even know that she existed.

When it came to raising their children, Charles Louis and Elisabeth Albertine didn't stand on ceremony. The couple personally oversaw their education and under the watchful eye of Reverend Gottlob Burchard Gentmer, a Lutheran minister, Sophie Charlotte and her older sister, Christiane, were subject to a regime with two things at its heart: faith and family.

Gentmer was particularly passionate about the sciences and the little siblings soon shared their tutor's excitement about everything from mineralogy to botany, which was Sophie Charlotte's particular passion throughout her life. Though Gentmer couldn't teach the girls English because he didn't speak it himself, Sophie Charlotte did study French, the language of the courts of Europe, and she proved herself to be a placid and industrious student who was keen to learn. The girls and their brothers studied European literature, history, geography, and a great many classes of arts and sciences. Though botany was always one of Sophie Charlotte's keenest interests, Gentmer also shared with her his enthusiasm for mineralogy. During his research, he had assembled an impressive collection of fossils, which was considered to be one of the best in Europe, and Sophie Charlotte was fascinated by it. In the years to come, Sophie Charlotte's interest in mineralogy never waned and, when queen, she became the patron of Jean André Deluc, the Swiss geologist and meteorologist.⁴

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Perhaps we can best see the difference in the fate that awaited the brothers and sisters when we consider that, whilst her brother was appointed rector of the University of Greifswald at the age of just 15 and delivered a self-composed Latin oration on the occasion, Sophie Charlotte was being trained in household management. Not for her the lofty ivory towers of higher education. Instead, she was already well on the way to becoming the very picture of a philanthropic gentlewoman. She excelled in botany, needlework, and music and undertook regular trips to the poor of the duchy, dispensing charity and taking a very real interest in the wellbeing of those who had less than she.

So, whilst Sophie Charlotte's brothers were being prepared to serve the duchy, the girls were being prepared to serve as-yet-unknown husbands. Their progress was monitored by their governess, Mademoiselle Seltzer, a noblewoman from the neighbouring Duchy of Württemberg⁵ who had been childhood friends with Elisabeth Albertine. Mademoiselle Seltzer was virtually a member of the family and she oversaw the more feminine aspects of the girls' education that Gentmer could not, though she too spoke no English. Yet nobody suspected an ability to converse in English would be high on Sophie Charlotte's future agenda.

Effectively, Sophie Charlotte's early life resembled that of the landed but not quite monied gentry, rather than the mindbogglingly wealthy. The family revenues were a far from high-rolling £15,000 per year, less than half the annual allowance that one of her sons alone would later receive, but life in Mecklenburg was happy. The mornings were spent in lessons or bent over needlework and embroidery, skills Sophie Charlotte later shared with her own daughters. At the end of the morning, the two sisters would be taken for a walk or perhaps a drive before lunch. Then there was music, dancing, and household management to master. Years later, these would prove to be useful skills indeed.

The Real Queen Charlotte: Inside the Real Bridgerton Court

It might all sound a little too good to be true, but Charlotte never forgot the unambitious, domesticated court of her youth. When Thomas Nugent, already famed for his extensive multi-volume account of his Grand Tour, visited Mirow, he painted a picture of a land where all was calm, a world away from the politicking court of England:

They have no ambition here, but that of serving their prince and country; they idle not away their time, but act with the utmost diligence in their respective departments, they behave with a just dignity and decorum, avoiding the extremes of meanness and pride; they are content with their parental fortunes, which set them above the inordinate desire of riches; they are open and sincere, which renders them lovers of truth; they have no occasion to cringe to a prince whose aversion is flattery; they have the highest ideas of honour, and consequently are true to their engagements; they have an inviolable regard for all civil duties; they have a love for their prince on account of his virtues, and esteem him for his capacity: to conclude, it may be truly said that, instead of encouraging the ridicule of virtue, this court is a pattern of morality and religion, a school of probity and honour, a seminary of politeness, and in fine, the seat of every social virtue.

This, my dear friend, is no exaggeration, but a fair portrait. The court of Strelitz, indeed, is not very numerous, but it is one of the most regular and most agreeable of any in the whole empire. No private family is governed with more order; and perhaps no prince is served by abler officers, and with greater diligence and affection.⁶

But this happy idyll wasn't destined to last. The Duke, who had always been a martyr to ill health, died in 1752 at the age of just 44. His death left his family heartbroken and the newly widowed Elisabeth Albertine came to rely ever more on the friendship of Mademoiselle Seltzer. Perhaps this was the genesis of the female circle that Sophie Charlotte herself later established, when she drew her daughters into a secretive cabal to which few men were admitted.

The Most Regular and Most Agreeable

Just months after the death of Sophie Charlotte's father, his reigning half-brother, Adolphus Frederick III, followed him to the grave. Because Adolphus Frederick left no male heir, the reigning dukedom descended to the next eligible member of the family: Adolphus Frederick IV, Sophie Charlotte's brother.

The new Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz was just 14 years old, so Elisabeth Albertine became her son's Regent. She packed up her whole household and the family moved from Mirow to the livelier world of Neustrelitz, which had been the capital of Mecklenburg-Strelitz since 1736.⁷ For Elisabeth Albertine, however, a change of address didn't mean that other things had to change as well. The domestic and educational system that had worked so happily in Mirow continued in Neustrelitz, where the little group was joined by Frederike Elisabeth von Grabow, known to her charges as Madame de Grabow.

If Mademoiselle Seltzer was the perfect governess for the girls in their youth, as they grew older Madame de Grabow proved to be an ideal partner in the enterprise. The two women were already friends and Madame de Grabow enjoyed an excellent reputation as a poet, earning the admiring nickname, 'the German Sappho'. She was the daughter of the Mecklenburg minister at Vienna and a good marriage had left her a very rich widow. She