The royal family (so the theory used to go) ride into the 21st century atop a tidal wave of British tradition. They represent, for better or for worse, the nation’s love affair with the past. Every time we see the Queen wearing a centuries-old crown, walk through the Houses of Parliament to celebrate the even older deal struck between Commons and Crown, we reach for another digestive biscuit to dunk in our mug of English Breakfast tea.

In recent years the theory has been modified, to acknowledge the changes that have come to the British monarchy. The strength of our royals – so this theory now goes – is that they are prepared to change when necessary. Yes, even their head, a queen who has just celebrated her 90th birthday. She pays taxes, she sends a token tweet, she joins her grandson Harry to play a prank on occasion. She even took part in a James Bond movie.

There is, of course, much truth in both these theories. We love tradition, especially when it is softened by a little flexibility. But maybe the real secret to the long success of the British monarchy is its connection, not to the stodgy old ways of the stately home, but to the aggressive, thrusting, young nation that we used to be.

By this theory, the reason we’ve never had a lasting revolution [against the monarchy] is that we got there so early. We executed King Charles I at a time, 1649, when the major states of Europe hardly knew an alternative to monarchy. After that we were immunized against revolution, and the immunity has lasted until the present day.

**Magna Carta**

Looking back, of course, one sees a long chain of events that have shaped the British monarchy. We’ve celebrated one just recently – King John’s sealing of Magna Carta in 1215, requiring the king to rule only under law. And although in many ways the kings of England actually assumed more authority during the few centuries that followed, this is an idea that has never gone away. Even in the days of that earlier, authoritarian, Queen Elizabeth I, the bishop John Aylmer could write that England was governed by a ‘rule of mixture’ of prince, peers and people – assuaging fears of a female monarch with the assurance that she did not in any case rule autonomously.

The Stuart kings tried to assert their ‘divine right’ – and the end of that story is very well known. Except, of course, that the execution of Charles I was not the end. This was an age that could see little alternative to the hereditary principle: even Oliver Cromwell, while publicly refusing the role of king, tried to arrange that his own descendants should succeed him. Then in 1660, little more than a decade after his father’s death, Charles II was invited once more to take up Stuart rule.

All the same, a line had been crossed. In 1688 the country’s ruling class and ruling body could decide that the unpopular and Catholic James II and VII should be replaced by his daughter Mary; and when it was clear not only Mary but her sister Anne would die without a living child, it was parliament’s voice that invited Anne’s third cousin, the Elector of Hanover, to become George I, ignoring a chain of heirs closer in blood.
The 1689 Bill of Rights placed strict limits on the monarch’s power, which continued to dwindle under successive Hanoverian kings as parliamentary reforms saw their rights of patronage whittled away. But though the French Revolution may have scared, it could not really shake the British monarchy. And after all, Britons wouldn’t want to do anything our ancient French enemy had done – not in the days of Napoleon’s threat, certainly.

The model family

William IV and Victoria after him were horrified to learn they could not even choose their own prime minister. It was the great Victorian Walter Bagehot who wrote that Britain was “a secret republic”. But that was the secret of the royal family’s survival, perhaps. And it was Victoria’s husband, Albert, who carved out for the crown another, a moral, kind of authority as the nation’s first and model family – one which, in spite of any evidence to the contrary, they have retained almost until the present day.

But the royal family has embarked on several major changes even more recently. It was in 1917 that the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha changed its name to the less ‘Hunnish’ House of Windsor, the same summer that saw the Tsar of Russia swept from power (to be subsequently killed, with his family). Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey all lost their monarchies with the First World War – a side effect of their having been on the losing side, maybe.

But other monarchies went, too, in the first half of the 20th century – those of Italy, Yugoslavia, Portugal, followed later by Greece. King Farouk of Egypt declared that by the turn of the century there would be only five kings left in the world – “the king of hearts, clubs, diamonds and spades – and the King of England”. He was wrong about the monarch’s gender, and Europe still boasts a handful of other monarchies, notably in Scandinavia and the Low Countries. And in Spain, which first replaced and then recalled their monarchy. But his basic point holds good, and there is no easy single answer as to why.

The royal family in the 20th century has seen some real downturns in its popularity, many of them during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, however eager we may be to celebrate that reign today. But somehow, whether by good judgement or good luck, the monarchy retains as its trademark a blend of change and consistency that keeps it bobbing along, indomitably.

The Popularity Game

The dawn of the 20th century had brought a new readiness among the royals to be seen – though not necessarily heard – as often as required. Before the First World War, for example, royal weddings had long been private ceremonies. After the war all that changed, and such occasions became valuable crowd-pleasers – while, conversely, its detachment from party-political affairs allowed the monarchy to remain above the Westminster fray. It allowed it to provide, in the words of the Buckingham Palace website “a focus for national unity”. Not that the royals won’t change the tradition and trim the privilege, when necessary. To try to be whatever we want them to be.