

the X files

The private archives of Edward VIII's advisor Sir Walter Monckton promised shocking revelations concerning the Queen Mother's role in the Abdication. But when they were finally opened last month the crucial papers were missing. *Ian Lloyd* investigates.



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News that restricted documents from Walter Monckton's private archives were to be released was trumpeted across *The Sunday Telegraph* on 26 February, under the headline 'Letters to Reveal Queen Mother's Role in Abdication Crisis'. The fact that this broadsheet is edited by Dominic Lawson, who happens to be married to Monckton's granddaughter Rosa Monckton (friend and holiday companion of the late Diana, Princess of Wales), gave credibility to the scoop.

Few readers had probably heard of Sir Walter Monckton. He was a typically discreet, urbane courtier who in the words of one historian 'was the go-between who lived in a world of intrigue'. While factions grew up supporting either the King and Mrs Simpson or his brother Bertie – the future King George VI – Monckton managed to stay loyal to both men, and acted as a crucial link between them for the next 20 years.

The Monckton papers were scheduled for release on Wednesday, 1 March, and would be

Two days before Christmas 1936, Walter Monckton, King's Counsel and advisor to Edward VIII, wrote to thank Captain T Dugdale, MP for expressing his concerns over the King's abdication less than two weeks before in order to marry an American divorcee, Wallis Simpson.

'I am tremendously keen, for his sake,' wrote Monckton, 'and for the sake of the whole show, that the controversy should be allowed to die without any further splutterings and that there should be no more rumblings in the old volcano.'

Not even in his wildest dreams could Monckton have foreseen that 'the old volcano' could rumble on into the 21st century, and that the merest hint of a new slant on the Abdication crisis could cause splutterings from the BBC, Channel 4, a posse of photographers and at least 20 journalists, not to mention sparking interest across the Atlantic.

made available for research at 9 am that day in Oxford's Bodleian Library. At 8.30 am a crowd of journalists were joined by surprised librarians, who admitted: 'We haven't had this level of interest in years.'

A hastily arranged photocall failed to whet appetites, since the documents themselves were off-limits and could only be snapped if held by a trusted historian at a distance of several yards.

Restless journalists were shepherded across Broad Street to the promised royal revelations in Room 132 of the New Bodleian building. For a second it looked as though they'd been beaten to it, since a plaque on the wall pointed out to them in

Latin that the King's mother Queen Mary ('*Maria Regina*') had been there 18 months after the Abdication. Fortunately there was no carved message to say '*Regina takenum juicy documentum*', so everyone was praying the archive was intact.

But the 11 promised box files had been reduced to 10, with box 24 mysteriously still restricted ➤

ABOVE A portrait of the Windsors taken in 1937 by Cecil Beaton, who later observed: 'The Duke relies entirely upon her.'

RIGHT: On 2 March *The Times* reveals the contents of the Monckton archives but says the 'Crown Jewels' are missing.

FACING PAGE: King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and their two daughters pictured in 1939.



until 2037. Whilst journalists bored through the piles of paper like a drove of deathwatch beetles, hell-bent on finding anything signed 'Elizabeth R', they were rapidly becoming disillusioned. True, there was a telegram ending with 'much love from Elizabeth and Bertie' telling the exiled King: 'We are thinking of you... on this your wedding day,' though what they were thinking is anyone's guess.

A promised exchange of telegrams both dated 28 August 1939 between the Duke of Windsor and Adolf Hitler was just an exchange of pleasantries. Edward hinted to the Führer it would be nice if he didn't attack Britain, and Adolf replied that really the ball wasn't in his court, but firmly with the British.



'Journalists bored through piles of papers hell-bent on finding anything signed "Elizabeth R"'

An early draft of Edward's Abdication speech shows for the first time just how bad it would have been if Monckton and Winston Churchill hadn't knocked the King's words into shape. 'You know me well enough,' wrote the King, 'to understand that I never could have contemplated a marriage of convenience. It has taken me a long time to find the woman I want to make my wife. Without her I would have been a very lonely man...'

Surprisingly, there is also a note from Mrs Simpson to Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin dated 7 December, three days before the King abdicated, saying that she was 'prepared to withdraw from the situation'. For some reason this message was not passed on, and after Baldwin's death in 1948 when it was shown to palace staff it took everyone by surprise, although they knew that by that moment in time Edward was too besotted to have changed his mind.

What the archive really brings to life is the sheer amount of hard work involved for one of the key players in this constitutional crisis. These days it would be abdication by e-mail, but in 1936 it involved countless notes, some in

pencil, scribbled and crossed out on notepaper from Downing Street, Buckingham Palace and newspaper barons headed by Lord Beaverbrook of *The Daily Express*.

The notes also show how much an overworked and conscientious courtier was constantly hampered by trivial requests from the Royal Family as well as ordinary correspondents. The new King's brother, the Duke of Kent, wrote several notes asking how he could promote himself to get better coverage in the Press. His wife, Princess Marina, was similarly concerned with how she was depicted by the newspapers.

The most amusing set of documents refers to the Madame Tussaud's depiction of Mrs Simpson.

The furious new Duchess of Windsor wrote to Monckton: 'Is there any way you can have that appalling wax figure of me removed? It really is too indecent and so awful.'

The normally svelte Duchess was depicted dressed in a frumpy evening gown, her vivacious personality toned down so far that she looked retarded. It's also tempting to wonder whether the museum had deliberately displayed the waxen Wallis near to Marie Antoinette and Joan of Arc, both of whom met sticky ends.

And so, as it became clear that there were no shock revelations to be found amongst the papers, all the broadsheets carried detailed features suggesting an establishment cover up in March 2000 to rival the one in 1936. 'Crown Jewels are kept from view,' wrote *The Times*. 'Mystery of Box 24: Where is the Queen Mother's letter?' screamed *The Independent*, while the *Daily Mail* asked why the Queen Mother's 'vitriolic royal outburst' remained 'locked away'.

The Bodleian did its best to fend off criticism, pointing out that most of the letters written by the Queen Mother were offered to the Royal Archives as long ago as 1974, when the Monckton trustees donated the papers to Oxford University.

Finally, on 3 March, the historian Philip Ziegler released extracts of the Queen Mother's note which he had seen in the Monckton archive only a decade before whilst researching his official

biography of Edward VIII. The letter, dated 14 August 1940, was written to Monckton after the then Queen had heard of attempts by Edward and Wallis to recapture items from their home in occupied France and have them sent to them in the Bahamas. Clearly angered at such frippery during the height of war, Queen Elizabeth wrote: 'For sheer vulgarity it is hard to beat, and though it made us laugh, one's mind went automatically from pink sheets to our poor people spending nights in little tin shelters, and then going to work in the morning.'

The missing letter will hardly damage the monarchy, and neither will it damage the reputation of its most-loved member in the run up to her 100th birthday. The Press excitement fanned and eventually extinguished during a single week does, however, show a continued interest in the royal romance that forced a king to renounce his throne to marry the woman he loved. ■



TOP: Monckton remained a close friend of the Windsors, who he invited to a dinner party at his London home in 1956.

ABOVE: The *Daily Mail* questions why the Queen's letters were withheld.