

A Private Function

On January 19th the BBC breathlessly announced the start of their '100 day countdown' to the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in Westminster Abbey. 100 days? I can only imagine the BBC are expecting a dearth of hard news in the weeks to come as this sounds seriously like overkill to me. But I may be in a minority; if you believe what you see in the press, wedding fever is breaking out across Britain as excitement builds towards this historic public/private event.

Ironically though, despite this enthusiasm, the British find actually attending weddings very difficult: we don't know how to behave; we stand around awkwardly, in ill-fitting and unflattering formal attire, unsure what to do with our hands, feeling slightly ridiculous. We don't know whether to hug or kiss our fellow guests and usually clumsily fail to do either. Sociologist Kate Fox believes this discomfort is a result of being put in the supremely un-British position of having to display our private feelings in public.

But we feel far more at ease with Royal Weddings, which can be watched from the safety and comfort of our living room sofas, avoiding all the unpleasantness of interacting with our fellow human beings. We get a better view on TV than the actual guests, can have a cup of tea whenever we want and don't have to fork out for a hat. Best of all though, we are free to say what we really think, a liberty we usually take full advantage of by making cutting remarks about how old so-and-so looks or revelling in a debate about who's wearing the most grotesque headgear.

Do the British behave any better on foreign soil? I've only been to one Japanese wedding, when an English friend got married in a traditional Shinto ceremony in Meiji Jingu shrine. It was interesting enough and I clearly remember the priest solemnly reading his ancient, incomprehensible prayer while lightly brushing the happy couple with Japonica leaves, as custom demands. At one stage he paused, and slicing through the profound silence came the piercing cry of a the groom's 3 year old nephew, mystified by the whole proceedings, 'Are we having a party?' He had to be taken out.

This kind of puncturing of the reverent with the irreverent is entirely typical and reflected in the cheeky expressions we employ to gently mock the seriousness of marriage. Instead of getting married, we often say we are 'getting hitched', 'spliced', 'tying the knot', or even 'doing the decent thing'. Of course when I say 'we', I mean, almost exclusively, men. And things don't improve after the ceremony as men refer to their wives in a similarly undignified way: the missus, her indoors, the trouble and strife, my better half (sarcastic) or even, she who must be obeyed! The list goes on...

And I picked up one more this week, which, in the interests of fairness, I'll admit I have the BBC's Learning English website to thank for: Bridezilla – a happy marriage of the English word and the Japanese monster - refers to the bride from hell, who makes everyone's life a misery by throwing panicky tantrums and making unreasonable demands.

Of course none of these terms will be heard in connection with the momentous events taking place in London at the end of April. At least, not in public.

Written by Philip Patrick
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