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LEA FELICITAS DÖDING

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The Betrothal Gifts of Mary of Teck

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Front cover:

Front cover: Queen Mary (1867-1953) when Victoria Mary, Duchess of York, 1895.

Oil on canvas by Edward Hughes, 188x139.7cm. RCIN 405365.

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The Betrothal Gifts of Mary of Teck

LEA FELICITAS DÖDING

Among the British Queens, Mary of Teck (1867–1953, r. 1910–1936) is particularly renowned for her collection of resplendent jewels. Yet while her wedding gifts and other important jewels are relatively well documented, little is known of two especially significant pieces: her betrothal gifts from her first engagement in 1891 to Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence and Avondale, and her second engagement in 1893 to his brother, Prince George, Duke of York and future King George V. In this article, I will identify contenders for both the first and the second gift – a ruby engagement ring and a cabochon engagement bracelet, respectively – based on a consultation of archival sources, press reports, pictorial evidence, and eyewitness accounts, and the contextualisation of said pieces within the jewellery etiquette of the 1890s. Backed by a close study of ephemera, I outline the history and significance of the engagement bracelet to demonstrate why such a piece may have been chosen over a ring for her second engagement, and trace the impact that reports of it had on Belle Époque jewellery culture.



Fig. 1

A diamond and turquoise ring inscribed 'Dec 3rd 1891', the date of the engagement of Princess May to Prince Albert Victor.

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The First Engagement

On 3 December 1891, Mary of Teck – or Princess May, as she was affectionately called by the contemporaries – was engaged to Prince Albert Victor, informally known as Eddy. 'Eddy proposed to me during the evening', the Princess noted in her diary: 'Of course I said yes. We are both very happy.'¹ This event must be referred to as her first engagement, for in a tragic turn of events, the young Prince would die of pneumonia only six weeks thereafter, and the couple was never to wed.

To this day, the nature and whereabouts of the ring that sealed the engagement remain unknown to the public. Even the Princess's personal diaries do not mention a ring, and accessible inventories of her jewellery, detailing gifts she received as a girl, were only updated until the mid-1880s.² There are, however, contenders for this significant piece.

The first of these is kept in the *Royal Collection Trust*: a diamond and turquoise ring engraved with the date of the couple's engagement [Fig. 1]. According to the record, 'it is not known whether this ring was presented at the same time, or in remembrance of her

acceptance'.³ As a stone associated with the forget-me-not flower and its meaning in floriography – 'true love' – the turquoise would have been an appropriate choice for either purpose; it also had a history of romance at court, having featured in the gifts given by Queen Victoria to her bridesmaids (Munn 1993: 63). The diamond, on the other hand, was associated with eternity on account of its extreme hardness. Historically, it had therefore represented 'the fidelity promised with the marriage vows', although by the late nineteenth century it had primarily become a sign of wealth and featured almost necessarily even in coloured gemstone engagement rings (Scarisbrick 2007: 302, 329).

But since, as we will see, the evidence points towards a different ring, the turquoise and diamond ring may indeed have been a souvenir – rather than the seal – of the engagement. As such, it may not even have been given by the prospective groom: 'A betrothal souvenir is the correct thing at present, to be sent to the young fiancée by her girl friends and her female relatives-to-be, as soon as the engagement is announced', noted *Demorest's*

1 RA/QM/PRIV/QMD/1891: 3 December, p. 193. This and further records from the Royal Archives as cited in footnotes 2, 7, 40, 44, 45, and 70 were consulted and are quoted by the permission of His Majesty King Charles III.

2 See *Inventory of Diamonds and other Precious Stones belonging to HSH Princess May*, RA/QM/PRIV/CC58/156. The later inventories mentioned by Hugh Roberts in *The Queen's Diamonds* are not accessible to public researchers.

3 See Royal Collection Trust, [RCIN 65631](#) [accessed February 2025].



Fig. 2

A moonstone and diamond bracelet given to Princess May on her engagement to the Duke of Clarence by Queen Victoria. RCIN 65668. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

Family Magazine in 1891, the year of the couple's engagement.⁴ This custom was indeed abided by in the Princess's circles: a week after the engagement, Queen Victoria noted in her journal that she 'gave May a bracelet & Eddy a pin, in remembrance of their engagement.'⁵ This bracelet, featuring two moonstones in diamond surrounds, was also described as a 'betrothal souvenir' in

the press [Fig. 2].⁶ For our purposes, is notable that the Princess herself does not mention having received the bracelet, although she notes having met the Queen twice that day.⁷ Her diary entries of these years rarely linger on details such as jewellery, so that omission has little evidentiary value.

A second possible ring was described more than two years after the engagement. In June 1893, the *Ripon Observer* claimed that 'Princess May is superstitious about opals, of which the engagement ring given her by the Duke of Clarence was composed. Very curiously, these so-called unlucky stones appeared in almost every jewellery

4 [Anon.], 'Chat', *Demorest's Family Magazine*, Vol. 28 (1891), p. 175. *Demorest's* was an American publication but, as readers will be aware, there existed important jewellery trade relations between Britain, Germany, France and the US, leading to a close similarity in the styles and culture of jewellery towards the end of the nineteenth century, particularly in the higher market segment.

5 Victoria, Q. (1891). Friday 11th December 1891. Queen Victoria's Journals – Princess Beatrice's Copies (p. 193). Note: The Royal Collection Trust states that the bracelet was given on 3 December, which is the date of the engagement, but not the date the Queen notes in her journals.

6 'The Queen's betrothal souvenir gift is a bracelet with two hearts of moonstone set in diamonds and rubies'. [Anon.], 'The Royal Marriage', *Toronto Daily Mail*, 21 December 1891, p. 1. Note that the actual bracelet features moonstone hearts in diamond surrounds, but no rubies. *Royal Collection Trust*, [RCIN 65668](#).

7 See RA/QM/PRIV/QMD/1891: 11 December, p. 197.

present given by him to her.¹⁸ However, since this claim only appeared in conjunction with news of the Princess's 1893 wedding to Prince George, it may have been conceived to dramatically highlight the tragic ending of her first engagement – for, to the Victorians, the opal was famously a baleful omen. Since no evidence substantiates the claim of an opal ring, it is only of minor interest.

There is a third potential engagement ring, however, whose appearance is backed by a combination of eyewitness accounts and photographic evidence. In 1933, in an article published in *Cosmopolitan*, Hilda Grenier – introduced as a former dresser to the Princess, now Queen – mentioned 'the engagement ring that Eddie [sic], the Duke of Clarence, gave her ... a half hoop of rubies'.⁹ Grenier does not remain the only source to mention a ruby ring. For his 1959 biography of Queen Mary, James Pope-Hennessy interviewed a gentleman who had once been a room boy at White Lodge, the Teck family's residence, and who saw the Princess in July 1892, following Eddy's death:

This youth, today an aged gentleman, can vividly recall the return of the Duke and Duchess of Teck and their daughter to England that summer. He remembers Princess May as 'a tall, slim young lady' – 'very nice-looking, very polite', and dressed in half-mourning, with a ruby engagement ring upon her finger (Pope-Hennessy 1959: 243).

At the time, only sentiment could make a precious gemstone ring exempt from conventions that otherwise decreed material modesty; hence the Princess's half-mourning dress reinforces the notion that the ruby ring she wore was not any ring, but truly her engagement ring. Significant rings could be 'worn at all times, because of the sentiment supposed to be inseparable from them',¹⁰ and engagement rings did not have to be removed even in deep mourning.¹¹ The description of the ring concurs with press notices circulating after the 1891 engagement: a few weeks later, the *Ripon Observer* reported that the 'engagement ring given by Prince Eddie to Princess May is of diamonds and rubies',¹² and by 1892, even American newspapers had picked up – belatedly – on news of 'a circlet of rubies'.¹³

Pictorial evidence confirms the notion of a gem-set half-

hoop. A series of photographs of the newly engaged couple was produced by Hills & Saunders in December 1891. The Princess poses gloveless, her left hand in prominent view throughout, wearing a ring that fits the description of a half-hoop of diamonds and coloured stones that may be rubies [Fig. 3]. Throughout all photos, the Princess wears the ring on the third finger, i.e. the



Fig. 3
Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence and Avondale and Princess Mary of Teck in December 1891, following their engagement. Hills & Saunders.
RCIN 2913073. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026
Royal Collection Trust

8 [Anon.], 'Princess May's Superstition', *The Ripon Observer*, 22 June 1893, p. 2. The same was reported by the London correspondent of the *New York Town Topics* upon the day of the couple's wedding, likely having been gleaned from the former: [Anon.], [Since I last wrote to you...], *New York Town Topics*, 6 July 1893, p. 12.

9 Hilda Grenier, 'Behind Castle Walls', *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, June 1933, 32-35 and 114-19, p. 116.

10 [Anon.], 'Wearing Jewelry. Rules to Govern Women Who Would Study Good Form', *The Paterson Daily Press*, Evening Issue, 20 September 1895, p. 3.

11 For instance, an 1897 short story by Francesca Maria Steele describes a similar case: 'She wore deep mourning [...]. Her engagement-ring she had never removed.' Darley Dale [Francesca Maria Steele], 'The Land o' the Leal', *The Argosy*, 64 (1897), 757-62, p. 759.

12 [Anon.], 'The Royal Wedding', *The Ripon Observer*, 24 December 1891, p. 2.

13 [Anon.], 'New Styles in Jewelry', *The Carroll Herald*, 16 March 1892, n. p. (p. 7). This information also circulated in other American newspapers.



Fig. 4

A photograph of Princess May with what is presumably her ruby half-hoop engagement ring, circa December 1891. Hills & Saunders (attr.).

ring finger, of her left hand.¹⁴ For British brides of the 1890s, this was the conventional placement for an engagement ring.¹⁵

While the ring itself can only indistinctly be made out in those photographs of the session that are kept in the *Royal Collection Trust*, another portrait shows the Princess with her hand poised at her collar, showcasing what can be identified as a half-hoop ring of three coloured stones alternating with diamonds [Fig. 4]. Due to the deliberate placement of her hand, and the fact that she is wearing the same beaded dress as in the images produced by Hills & Saunders, now with the addition of a fur collar, it is likely that it was taken during the same session; Gilman & Soame (incorporating Hills & Saunders) are confident the photo is theirs.¹⁶ Furthermore, what appears to be this ring – now stacked

with others – can still be seen in several later photographs [Fig. 5 as well as a 1937 photograph by E. O. Hoppé¹⁷], corroborating Grenier's 1933 claim that the Queen 'still wears the engagement ring that Eddie, the Duke of Clarence, gave her.'¹⁸

Although the black-and-white photographs cannot confirm that the coloured stones are rubies, the choice of a ruby half-hoop would have been an apt one. For one thing, it found a precedent in the Princess's family history: her mother, Princess Mary Adelaide of Cambridge, had received a similar engagement ring in 1866 [Fig. 6]. In the engagement year, 1891, the half-hoop design was still just as current, and they were explicitly marketed as engagement rings by British jewellers.¹⁹ By the mid-1890s, it was reported of the diamond half-hoop that 'at least every third fiancée wears one as the pledge of affection, whilst a fair proportion of maidens, who have been wooed by lovers well dowered with the good things of this world, sport a ring formed of massive sapphires between diamonds.'²⁰ Of course, fine rubies were generally more valuable than sapphires. Like the sapphire, the ruby had also become a popular engagement stone from the

14 For further images of the session, see also Royal Collection Trust, [RCIN 2913037](#) and [RCIN 2913033](#), in which the left hand is in view yet the ring only faintly visible.

15 'You should wear the engagement ring on your third finger of [sic] left hand, only taking it off on the morning of your marriage, and then let it be the guard of your wedding ring.' [Anon.], 'Answers to Questions', *The Gentlewoman*, 9 October 1897, p. 453.

16 I thank Ellie Gilman of Gilman & Soame (incorporating Hills & Saunders) for her assistance in attributing this photograph. The physical whereabouts of this photograph remain unknown at this point, although its earliest digital appearance was in 2013, before the advent of generative AI [*Grand Ladies*, <https://www.gogmsite.net/the-belle-epoque-1890-1914/subalbum-queen-mary-may-of-1891-mary-of-teck-year-of-f.html>, retrieved 30 January 2025]. The author of the website could not be reached for an enquiry into the source of the image.]

17 Rights for this image could not be obtained, however it can be viewed in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, [NPG x199009](#).

18 Hilda Grenier, 'Behind Castle Walls', *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, June 1933, 32-35 and 114-19, p. 116.

19 See, for instance, an illustrated advertising for a 'Five-Stone Engagement-Ring' in 'White or Mixed Stones' by P. Graham & Co. in the *Illustrated London News*, 5 December 1891, p. 751.

20 [Anon.], 'On Engagement Rings', *Stockton and Thornaby Herald*, 9 February 1895, p. 2.



Fig. 5
Queen Mary by James Charles Dinham, 1897. On her left hand, she appears to be wearing the ruby engagement ring. NPG x136891. © National Portrait Gallery, London



Fig. 6
The Burmese ruby half hoop engagement ring of Princess Mary Adelaide, 1866. RCIN 65634. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 Royal Collection Trust

1880s onwards, being considered 'another gem affected in the affairs of love, and allowed nowadays to appear in an engagement ring. Its glowing color is emblematic of passionate affection, and diverse good fortunes are supposed to attend the wearer of a ruby.'²¹ The notion that 'Ruby is passion', as Edward Burne Jones wrote in 1883, was widespread (Gere and Rudoe 2010:157). The German *Bazar* suggested this made it 'especially suitable for young lovers ... In general, it is considered a symbol of the most ardent and passionate love'.²² British jewellers of the 1890s thus advertised 'really beautiful betrothal rings ... mounted with real diamonds, rubies, and pearls in the most charming combinations that taste can suggest.'²³

With certain reservations upheld by the current lack of primary documentation, we can therefore assume that Princess May received a ruby and diamond half-hoop ring for her first engagement in 1891, and that it corresponds to the ring first seen in the photographs by Hills & Saunders. The very existence of an engagement ring, however, seems to be the reason that the Princess did not receive another upon her second engagement.

The Second Engagement

In May 1893, Princess May was engaged a second time, now to her former fiancé's brother, Prince George. Upon this engagement, she received no ring as a seal of the engagement – but a bracelet. Once again, the Princess's diaries do not mention an engagement gift of any kind. However, during the summer of 1893, her bracelet was the subject of many a fashion column across British newspapers:

It will be news, I am sure, to not a few of my sentimental lady readers, that the Princess May received no betrothal ring from the Duke of York. Instead of this pledge customary in less exalted circles of society, a pretty bracelet of the now fashionable chrysoprase, a cloudy greenish gem, and supposed to bring good luck, was the engagement token between the young couple, who just now are so much talked about.²⁴

To understand the significance of an engagement bracelet, let us first consider its history. By all accounts, it appears to have been an American invention of the 1870s. While link bracelets with heart padlocks had been a quintessential design of early Victorian manufacture, the new engagement bracelet was marked by its designated purpose and initially also by the fact that it would be locked by the prospective groom. As early as 1872, it was reported:

21 [Anon.], 'Always in Demand. Engagement and Wedding Rings in Various Countries', *The Post Express*, 23 November 1889, p. 9.

22 Max Lortzing, 'Allerlei über Edelsteine', *Der Bazar*, 32 (1886), Beiblatt zur Moden-Nummer, p. 463.

23 H. Samuel, 'An Acceptable Engagement Ring' (Advert), *Manchester Evening News*, 19 June 1893, n. p. (p. 1).

24 [Anon.], 'World's Gossip', *The Lancaster Gazette*, 8 July 1893, p. 3.

A neat thing in gold has lately appeared ... an invention of a New England jeweller. It is an engagement bracelet, with the golden band securely locked upon the *fiance's* arm and the key to the bracelet to be worn as a charm from a gentleman's watch chain. The era of solitaires and clusters is said to be waning, and the bracelet is to become the pronounced emblem of impending matrimonial engagements.²⁵

This forecast would prove true, for throughout the next few decades, the engagement bracelet would become a veritable alternative to the ring, sufficing as the sole seal of the betrothal. By the early 1890s, the engagement bracelet had become common knowledge; the *Manufacturing Jeweler* noted:

When you see a nice girl wearing a chain bracelet from which hangs a jeweled heart you may know it 'means something', as the old women say. Some man surely has the little gold key that unlocks the clasp; some face not a woman's, is hidden inside the clasp locket, and the girl does not take the bracelet off at night.²⁶

As late as 1906, Tiffany & Co. still advertised their own '[g]old engagement bracelet, with permanent locking catch'.²⁷ By this time, however, the custom of giving an engagement bracelet was already in decline, for many now considered the ring such a necessity that when a bracelet was given, it would sometimes be given along with a ring – eventually rendering the bracelet obsolete.²⁸

Throughout the brief yet successful history of the engagement bracelet, many varieties came to the market. 'The engagement bracelet is no longer the padlock', *The Delineator* noted as early as 1885.²⁹ Instead it might feature, for instance, a combination

lock to be opened with a keyword.³⁰ Other bracelets could not be locked at all and were distinguished by a sentimental design.³¹ By the 1880s, no distinct look – or lock – was associated with the engagement bracelet. Indeed, one might assume that any bracelet might become an engagement bracelet, just as in the 1890s, almost any ring could become an engagement ring. And yet, all were initially united by one feature: they were American. Still in 1888, the engagement bracelet was described as an 'Americanism' by the British press.³²

It may seem perplexing that May and George would adopt an 'Americanism' to seal their very British union – but by the time of their engagement, the novelty had been sanctioned by Parisian fashion. In 1890, the *Gentlewoman* reported that Boucheron had launched its own model, the *Bracelet Protecteur*: an 'engagement bracelet or bangle ... studded with balls of gold, into which may be set as many diamonds as one desires', with a pendant charm of a hare, the age-old symbol of fertility and desire.³³

The princely couple may not even have been the first family members to adopt the idea, for it was reported that 'most people are aware that the Duke of Edinburgh has a bracelet permanently fastened to his left arm ... believed to be a betrothal bangle'.³⁴ While the Duke can be seen wearing a gold link bracelet on his left wrist as early as 1884 [Fig. 7], the article claiming it to be an engagement bracelet only appeared after Mary had popularised the notion. Engagement bracelets for men did exist, if rarely. However, given the notions of gendered ownership which marriage was still associated with (it was not even common for men in the English-speaking world to wear wedding rings), we should note that they differed in function from those for women: rather than seals of the betrothal, they

25 [Anon.], '[A Neat Thing...]', *The Fredericksburg Ledger*, 2 August 1872, n. p. (p. 1).

26 [Anon.], 'Novelties in Jewellery', *The Manufacturing Jeweler*, 10 (1892), 98–100, p. 100.

27 Adverts (text only) placed in *Vogue*, 11 October 1906, n. p., and *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1906, p. 1.

28 For instance: 'A great many girls insist at present on having an engagement bracelet as well as an engagement ring. ...Perhaps they consider the engagement would not be so binding without the orthodox ornament.' [Anon.], 'The Engagement Bracelet', *The Baltimore American*, 20 July 1902, p. 27. Still by the end of the decade, it was noted that an 'engagement bracelet instead of a ring is very often presented, and in many instances both are given'. Judic Chollet, 'Fashion's Forecast', *The Newburgh Telegram*, 6 February 1909, n. p. (p. 2).

29 [Anon.], 'Welcome Fetters', *The Delineator*, 25 (August 1885), p. 132.

30 'The engagement bracelet is a novelty to which lovers have taken a fancy. Attached to a round wire bracelet is a small barrel-shaped object, which is divided into four parts. On each part are four letters, sixteen in all. These parts can be turned and a suggestive word of four letters formed, which serves as the keyword for the opening of the bracelet.' [Anon.], 'New and Pretty Jewellery', *The Sunday Call*, Newark, 16 October 1887, p. 3. Another bracelet of this kind (using 'Love' as its keyword) described in: A Representative, 'Christmas in Jewel Land', *The Queen*, 94 (9 December 1893), 998–1000, p. 998.

31 For instance: 'The engagement bracelet is enjoying much favor just now, in the place of the usual ring, and they are seen in many quaint and pretty styles. One worn by a friend of mine is composed of dainty cubes of gold, on each of which is an appropriate quotation from Shakespeare. Another, quite intricate, consists of little Cupid's bows and arrows, hearts and lover's knots, each set with jewels, and all linked together by delicate little chains of gold.' [Anon.], 'Floating Facts and Fancies. Engagement Rings', *The Nashua Daily Telegraph*, 17 June 1884, n. p. (p. 2).

32 For instance: 'Speaking of Americanisms, it will not be inapposite to state that the latest invention of a New York jeweller is an engagement bracelet, with the young lady is informed by her betrothed when once put on cannot be taken off.' Nemo, 'Americanism', *Buchan Observer and East Aberdeenshire Advertiser*, 10 January 1888, p. 4.

33 Fanchon, 'Exclusive French Fashions', *The Gentlewoman*, 6 December 1890, p. 789.

34 [Anon.], 'Royalty and Bangles', *South Wales Echo*, 14 August 1893, p. 2.

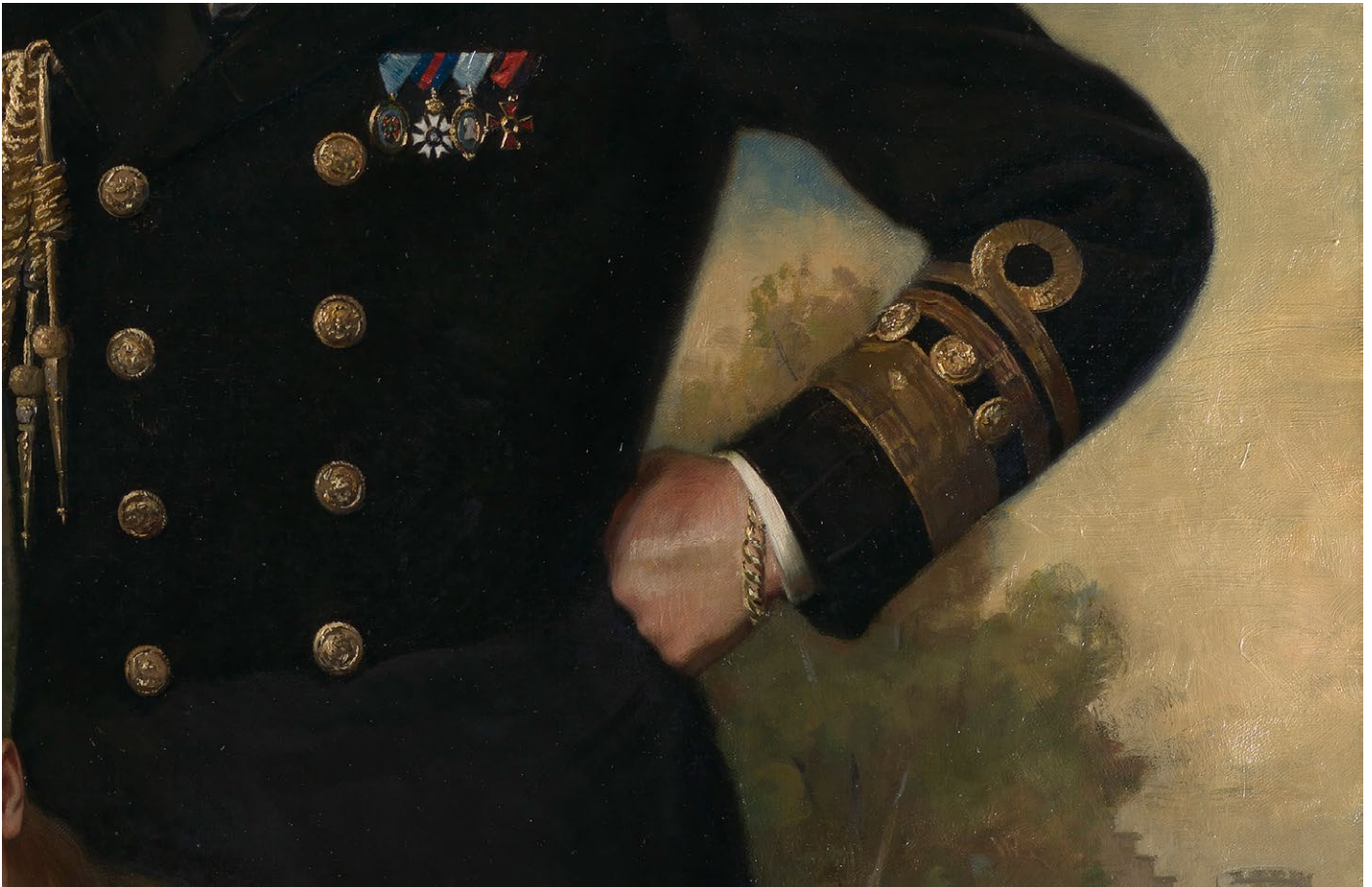


Fig. 7

Carl Rudolph, *Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, with his family*, 1884 (detail).
RCIN 404784. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

tended to be souvenirs of the day, tokens of love.³⁵

In any case: by the time the couple were engaged in 1893, the engagement bracelet was an ‘Americanism’ no more; and for their unique set of circumstances, the contemporaries considered the engagement bracelet a choice that appealed to a fine sense of taste and tact. ‘Princess May has, for obvious reasons, declined the conventional ring of betrothal’, reported the *Glasgow Evening Press*.³⁶ These ‘obvious reasons’ were likely that the couple did not want a second ring to enter into competition with the first, given the fact that the groom was the deceased fiancé’s brother. Unlike a ring, however, a bracelet

allowed them to evade any undue notions of rivalry.

It was also claimed in the press that to an engagement ring, the Princess ‘had a strong objection, as she has a superstitious dread of repeating in any way her previous betrothal experiences, and as she has ever since worn the beautiful ring given her by the Duke of Clarence, both she and Prince George were unwilling that it should not still retain its place.’³⁷ Indeed, as we have noted, we can see her wearing the ring long after her engagement to George [Fig. 5]. This fact concurs with Grenier’s 1933 claim that ‘[i]nstead of a ring, the King gave her a bracelet for a betrothal gift. He wanted her to wear the half hoop of rubies that Eddie gave her, and these two pieces – the ring and the bracelet – she always wears.’³⁸

Another reason may have been that the Princess was well-known to have a fondness for bracelets and bangles – terms which, at the time, were sometimes used interchangeably. ‘Princess May is specially fond of bangles’, reported the press: ‘She always prefers to have this article of jewellery to any other from those nearest and dearest to her. It was for this reason that the Duke of York gave her a bracelet as the betrothal gift.’³⁹ Indeed the inventory of gifts received by Princess May, which was maintained until the

35 In 1890, for instance, it was reported that the ‘handsome gold link bracelet which the Countess Pappenheim [Mary née Wister Wheeler] gave to her husband as a souvenir of their engagement day has never been taken off since it was put on by her fair hands, and the Count [Maximilian Albrecht, Count Pappenheim of Bavaria] says it never will’. [Anon., from the *Philadelphia Record*], ‘Pappenheim’s Engagement Bracelet’, *Lawrence Journal-Tribune*, 30 May 1890, n. p. (p. 1). When engagement bracelets became a fad among British men going to the Boer war, men purchased them themselves: one London jeweller was reported as saying that ‘men going to the front took a fancy to purchase bracelets and wear them as invisible betrothal tokens’. Frederick Stuart, ‘Hidden Gems A Men’s Fad’, *The Philadelphia Record*, 6 October 1901, n. p. (p. 1).

36 [Anon.], ‘An Engagement Bracelet’, *Glasgow Evening Post*, 23 June 1893, p. 2.

37 [Anon.], ‘Society, Art and the Drama’, *The Ripon Observer*, 13 July 1893, p. 7.

38 Hilda Grenier, ‘Behind Castle Walls’, p. 116.

39 [Anon.], ‘Society, Art and the Drama’, p. 7.



Fig. 8
The Duke of York engaged to Princess Victoria Mary of Teck, May 1893.
W & D Downey.
RCIN 2926125. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026
Royal Collection Trust

mid-1880s, lists more bracelets than any other item.⁴⁰ She is usually seen wearing many at once in photographs of the 1890s, and the *Royal Collection Trust* keeps several bracelets of the 1891-3 time period that were given to her on various occasions pertaining to her engagements.⁴¹

Her abundantly bejewelled wrists render the identification of the bracelet slightly difficult, however. Known news reports agree only that there was an engagement bracelet, and that it was set with chrysoprase. We must therefore consider pictorial evidence, and first of all the bracelets which Mary wears in the photograph taken to commemorate the engagement [Fig. 8]. Here, the Princess appears to be wearing her ruby and diamond half-hoop engagement ring on the ring finger of her left hand, now stacked with other rings. On her right wrist, she is seen wearing a curb link bracelet. It is the left that is of interest to us, however:

40 See *Inventory of Diamonds and other Precious Stones belonging to HSH Princess May*, RA/QM/PRIV/CC58/156.

41 See *Royal Collection Trust*, [RCIN 65679](#), [RCIN 65668](#), [RCIN 65681](#) and [RCIN 65665](#).

not only was it generally considered the proper placement for engagement bracelets,⁴² she was also reported to have worn hers on the left wrist to a significant garden party held at White Lodge on 26 June 1893, the event at which the couple received their wedding gifts (it was common to give them before the wedding).⁴³ From left to right, we can see:

No. 1. A bypass bangle which, with its open form, appears an implausible choice of engagement bracelet, given that both the engagement bracelet and ring draw their symbolism from the fact of being a closed circle.

No. 2. A slender bracelet or twisted bangle with a pendant charm, here slightly turned to the side, potentially an engagement bracelet of the padlock type. However, it might also correspond to earlier bracelets described in her inventory.⁴⁴

No. 3. A link bracelet with a large gemstone that appears to be held by claws; it faces away from the viewer at an angle.

Of these, bracelet no. 3 can most certainly and frequently be identified in relevant photographs taken between the engagement and wedding, all of which present the Princess's left wrist in prominent positions. In chronological order, these images are:

A series of photographs taken by Lafayette in the summer of 1893, prior to the wedding [figs. 9a-d]. This Lafayette session is significant, as it presents the Princess, for the first time, as a soon-to-be bride with the grand jewels belonging to her future position as a married woman. Bracelet no. 3 is clearly visible in all; here, we can recognise the central gemstone as a tall sugarloaf cabochon. However, a rigid charm bangle worn below the cabochon bracelet may be identical to bracelet no. 2. Notably, another image taken by Lafayette prior to the wedding shows her wearing what appears to be the ruby engagement ring given to her by Eddy [Fig. 9e].



Fig. 9a
Mary of Teck, c. June 1893. Lafayette. Photo postcard.
Collection of Hofer Antikschmuck, Berlin.

42 'An engagement bracelet is usually worn on the left arm.' [Anon.], 'Questions and Answers', *The Ladies' Home Journal*, August 1891, p. 28. Or: 'If an engagement bracelet is presented, it is worn on the left wrist'. [Anon.], *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries* (New York: Butterick, 1905), p. 6.

43 'Princess May wore a charming gown of fine cream French foulé ... On her left wrist she wore her engagement bracelet.' [Anon.], 'The Garden-Party at White Lodge', *West Surrey Times*, 1 July 1893, p. 5. That she wore the bracelet on this occasion was also reported by other sources; see, for instance [Anon.], 'The Royal Wedding', *The London Evening Standard*, 27 June 1893, p. 3.

44 For instance: '68 Gold Bracelet with small Gold Heart attached given by HRH The Duchess of Cambridge containing HRH Hair' (p. 14); '87. Gold bracelet with gold locket pendant' (p. 18). *Inventory of Diamonds and other Precious Stones belonging to HSH Princess May*, RA/QM/PRIV/CC58/156.



Fig. 9b
Mary of Teck, c. June 1893. Lafayette. Reproduction, loose page.
Collection of Hofer Antikschmuck, Berlin.

Fig. 9c
Mary of Teck, c. June 1893. Lafayette.
NPG Ax36401. © National Portrait Gallery, London



Fig. 9d
Mary of Teck, 1893. Lafayette.
NPG Ax26434. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Fig. 9e
Mary of Teck, 4 July 1893. Lafayette.
NPG Ax36400. © National Portrait Gallery, London



Fig. 10

Mary of Teck. Walery. Note: The record lists this image as having been taken in 1896, however, its close resemblance to the above Lafayette images as well as a diary entry by the Princess suggest it may have been taken on 25 May 1893.

NPG x197969. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Fig. 11a

The Duke and Duchess of York. W. & D. Downey. Reproduction in *The Illustrated London News*, 15 July 1893. Collection of Hofer Antikschmuck.

A photograph taken by court photographer Walery shows bracelet no. 3 and two unidentifiable bracelets [Fig. 10]. While the *National Portrait Gallery* record lists this portrait as having been taken circa 1896, it likely dates earlier; the Princess noted in her diary that she was photographed by Walery on 25 May 1893, three weeks after the engagement.⁴⁵ Indeed, her hairstyle is identical to that of the Lafayette session.

The official wedding portraits clearly show bracelet no. 3 [figs. 11a-b].

Bracelet no. 3 also reappears in later informal portraits of sentimental significance. The first is a family photograph from Mar Lodge, September 1893, which may also include bracelets no. 1 and 2 [Fig. 12]. A second photograph shows 'The Four Generations at White Lodge', the Teck family's residence, on 16 July 1894 on the occasion of the christening of their first son, the later King Edward VIII. Here, bracelet no. 3 is seen entangled with another curb link bracelet; we can discern a stone within a hexagonal frame [Fig. 13]. The curb link bracelet bears a charm; however, if it is identical with bracelet no. 2, then the rigid bangle from the Lafayette session is a different piece.

Considering the pictorial evidence, bracelet no. 3 is our most probable contender for the engagement bracelet. Indeed it seems to correspond to a bracelet depicted, now on the right wrist, in the 1895 portrait by Edward Hughes, commissioned by Mary herself as a surprise for her family [Fig. 14]. Given this sentimental context, it would be only appropriate for the engagement bracelet to be worn here alongside wedding gifts such as the double heart pearl brooch given to her by the groom.⁴⁶ What is curious, however, just as in the photographs, is the deep hue of the stone, which appears to be of a dark blueish-green tint, so highly polished as to reflect the pink roses in her lap. Might this cabochon stone, now, be a chrysoprase of saturated colour – the most remarked-upon feature of the bracelet? Several sources report that the bracelet featured this gemstone, yet all of them are newspaper reports; none of the accessible records kept at the Royal Archives feature descriptions that match either of the engagement gifts. Although chrysoprase is commonly apple-green, darker specimen also exist. Streeter noted in 1898 that it may be 'of many shades' and that another characteristic feature is its 'capability of high polish', also discernible in this cabochon.⁴⁷ The images alone, however, allow no conclusive identification of the stone. Nonetheless, reports of the bracelet featuring chrysoprase proved impactful enough to influence the jewellery industry. Let us therefore consider the plausibility of, and possible reasoning behind, the choice of a chrysoprase by weighing it very closely against the jewellery fashions of 1893.

The year before the engagement, the well-known London



Fig. 11b
The Duke and Duchess of York, 6 July 1893. Lafayette.
NPG Ax26483. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

⁴⁵ '... I was photographed by Waléry.' RA/QM/PRIV/QMD/1893: 25 May, p. 145.

⁴⁶ This, and the ribbon bow brooch given by the inhabitants of Kensington she also wears in the portrait, are depicted among the 'Royal Wedding Presents', *Illustrated London News*, Royal Wedding Number, 10 July 1893, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Streeter & Co. Ltd., *Gems* [Sales Catalogue], c. 1898, p. 53.



Fig. 12
Family group photograph at Mar Lodge,
September 1893.
RCIN 2300473. © Royal Collection
Enterprises Limited 2026
Royal Collection Trust



Fig. 13
The Four Generations, White Lodge, 1894. W. & D. Downey.
RCIN 2105941. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026
Royal Collection Trust

jeweller Edwin Streeter had still noted that 'in this country, the Chrysoprase is not a fashionable stone.' (Streeter 1892: 280) According to *Godey's Magazine*, this green stone was 'almost unknown to the present generation' – but, as of the autumn of 1892, reported to be quickly 'usurping the place of moonstones in public favor' in Paris.⁴⁸ By early 1893, the fad arrived in London. A few weeks before the engagement, it was said that the chrysoprase 'has been more fashionable than ever since the Prince of Wales gave one surrounded by diamonds and rubies in a bracelet to Lady Emily Cadogan on her marriage with Lord Lurgan' in February,⁴⁹ and indeed that it featured 'in several wedding presents lately given by the Prince of Wales'.⁵⁰ He would later repeatedly be credited with reviving the old fashion for the chrysoprase,⁵¹ and it may be he who had initially suggested to his son, Prince George, that the chrysoprase may be an appropriate stone to choose. By May 1893, chrysoprase was widely available at London jewellers, and the London correspondent of the *Manufacturing Jeweler* noted:

Chrysoprase here, chrysoprase there, chrysoprase everywhere. And yet not in such quantity as it ought to be, although the demand for this stone has called up an undreamed of supply. ... Curb and other inflexible bracelets are a speciality with some houses, many of the patterns being those which heretofore have been confined to rigid forms. A chrysoprase heart, surrounded by pearls or enamel, is a favorite.⁵²

The above having been noted a mere two days after the engagement, it is improbable that the availability of chrysoprase bracelets was already influenced by news of the couple's choice. However, in expected 'trickle-down' fashion, the stone's popularity increased greatly following the May 1893 engagement and abundant reports of a chrysoprase bracelet. Gentlemen were advised to take hints:

48 [Anon.], 'Hints on Home Dressmaking', *Godey's Magazine*, 125 (October 1892), 401-2, p. 402.

49 [Anon.], 'About the Chrysoprase', *Ripon Observer*, 6 April 1893, p. 7.

50 'It has been noted that in several wedding presents lately given by the Prince of Wales, chrysoprase has been the semi-precious gem used, either with pearls and diamonds, as in Lady Lurgan's case, or emeralds; and as it is a lovely opaque green of a shade possessed by no other stone, it has rapidly become fashionable.' [Anon.], 'The Society Papers', *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser*, 6 April 1893, p. 2. First appeared in *Vanity Fair*.

51 '[It] is the stone of the moment, by virtue of being the selection of the Prince of Wales'. Tillie May Forney, 'Fashionable Luncheon and Tea Toilets', *Table Talk*, 9 (January 1894), p. 30. Again, the article refers to the aforementioned bracelet. His role in reviving the fashion for the chrysoprase was also belatedly noted in other American sources a few years later, first with the *Jewelers' Circular* pointing out that 'The Prince of Wales is credited with launching this new fancy' ([Anon.], 'Fashions in Jewelry, Silverware, Bric-à-Brac, Etc.', 26 October 1898, p. 37), and again in *The Pacific Rural*, where it was claimed that he had 'introduced the old-fashioned Queen Anne jewel called the chrysoprase.' [Anon.], 'Fashion Notes', 21 January 1899, p. 41.

52 [Anon.], 'Matters in Great Britain', *The Manufacturing Jeweler*, 12 (1893), 662-4.

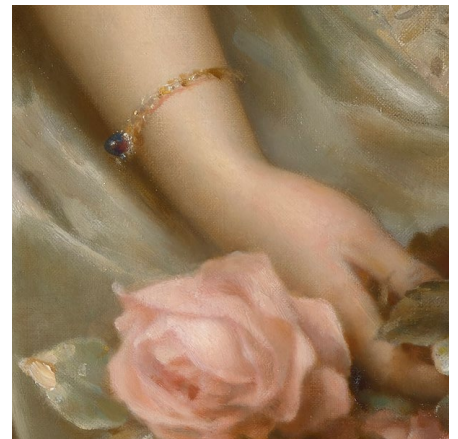
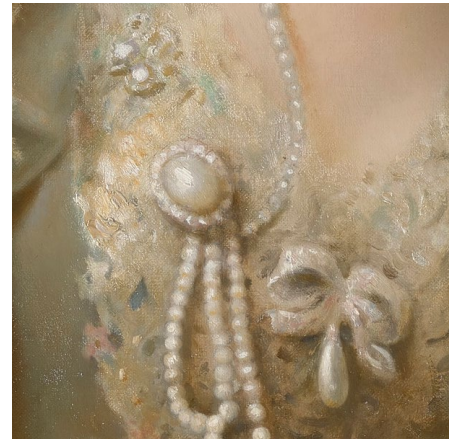


Fig. 14

Queen Mary (1867-1953) when Victoria Mary, Duchess of York, 1895. Oil on canvas by Edward Hughes, 188x139.7cm. RCIN 405365.

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Fig. 15

Design for a jewel published in *Le Bijou* in July 1893, the month of the couple's wedding. From *Le Bijou*, 20 (July 1893), pl. 13.

Digitized by Bibliothèque Forney, Paris.

No engagement ring for Princess May, dear friends. Nothing so commonplace. But a betrothal bracelet of bright chrysoprase, the milk-like stone of the moment, in lieu of the moonstone, deposed and dethroned. This is the gift of Prince George to his bride that is to be.⁵³

'Chrysoprase still more the rage than ever', reported the London correspondent of the *The Watchmaker, Jeweler and Silversmith* in July, describing one chrysoprase piece as 'a brooch a Princess might wear.'⁵⁴ The same month's issue of the Parisian design periodical *Le Bijou* featured a heart-shaped diamond brooch with a principal cabochon-cut stone whose milky green tint corresponds to the chrysoprase [Fig. 15]. In September, the

53 [Anon.], 'The Man About Town', *The Sporting Gazette*, 24 June 1893, p. 6.

54 'One of the prettiest little brooches in which Chrysoprase is combined with other stones is a cherub in moonstones and diamonds, rising from behind a Cupid's dart (also in diamonds); from end to end of the latter falls a festoon of collet-set diamonds supporting a Chrysoprase heart.' Our London Correspondent, 'Notes About Town', *The Watchmaker, Jeweler and Silversmith*, 1 July 1893, p. 5.

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Chrysoprase Frog and Diamond Horseshoe Brooch, £10 upwards.

Chrysoprase Heart and Diamond Initial Bracelet, £5; or with Curb Chain in place of Band, £6.

Chrysoprase Heart Bracelet, £2; or with Curb Chain in place of Band, £3.

Fox, £1 1s.
In Diamonds, £3 10s.

Horseman, £1 1s.
In Diamonds, £4 10s.

Pheasant, £1 1s.
In Diamonds, £5.

Fig. 16

'Lucky Chrysoprase Jewellery' by Streeter. Ad placed in *The Illustrated London News*, 21 October 1893, p. 521.

Collection of Hofer Antikschmuck, Berlin.

stone's continuing popularity was reported to be 'the result of the Duchess of York's betrothal bangle. Why did Prince George elect to send up the price of these stones at such a rate?'⁵⁵ To an exhibition to be held in October, Edwin Streeter lent a number of contemporary chrysoprase jewels; the record notes that the stone had been 'restored to fashion and adopted by the *élite* of English and foreign society.'⁵⁶ Within a few weeks, the fashion spread from London all the way to Montreal, so that in November, even the *Montreal Gazette* reported of an increased demand for the chrysoprase: 'Society women in London have made it quite the rage there which will surprise no one who has seen it, for it is, indeed, remarkably pretty, especially when mounted with diamonds and pearls.'⁵⁷

In conclusion, a taste for the chrysoprase was already beginning to take hold of London society in the spring of 1893, but increased swiftly after the engagement was made public. By the late 1890s, it was noted that '[a] few seasons ago it sprang suddenly into great favour and the demand was so great that an immense quantity of stained Agate was put upon the market and sold as true Chrysoprase.'⁵⁸ Notably, the chrysoprase usually featured in pieces intended as sentimental gifts.⁵⁹ Between autumn and Christmas 1893, Streeter & Co. offered 'Lucky Chrysoprase Jewellery' specifically for 'Wedding Presents and Bridesmaids' Jewels' [Fig. 16]. To a columnist of *The Queen*, who enquired about jewellery gifts for Christmas, Mr. Streeter explained that the stone was believed to possess talismanic properties, having been 'deemed a lucky stone in the days of King Solomon'.⁶⁰

This lore already circulated before the engagement; in April, the press reported that the chrysoprase was considered 'the antithesis of the opal; the latter being the fatal stone, and the former bringing nothing but good luck. The Queen, who is a great authority on gems and their significance, has taught the Prince [of Wales] her lore on the chrysoprase'.⁶¹ After the engagement, it was claimed that the stone had been 'specially chosen by Princess May as having supposed "lucky" properties'.⁶² For a young woman scarred by the tragic ending of her first engagement, this appears as a probable reason, for the chrysoprase was not yet considered a birthstone of May in 1893.

Of course, not only the chrysoprase, but the very notion of the

engagement bracelet was rendered more popular by association with Princess May, now Duchess of York. Already in the summer of 1893, it was noted that '[t]he engagement ring has had a long reign ... in its stead gentlemen are now giving their fiancés [sic] bracelets set with gems.' Notably, these were available in various designs.⁶³ Still in December, *The Queen* was adamant that '[s]ince the Duchess of York set the fashion a bracelet has become a favourite betrothal gift',⁶⁴ and as late as 1896, there was talk that the 'engagement ring may be regarded as doomed, since Princess May substituted an engagement bracelet for the conventional ring of betrothal'.⁶⁵

Soon, the association with Princess May had overshadowed the American origin of the engagement bracelet: even the American *Jewelers' Circular* considered that a 'gold banded affair with a permanently locking catch, is an English invention and is named the "engagement bracelet."'⁶⁶ Indeed, a great number of the popular heart padlock bracelets and bangles that were mass-produced in Britain around the turn of the century may have been conceived as engagement bracelets [Fig. 17].



No. 19,327.—Fine Gold Padlock "Engagement."
£4 0 0

Fig. 17

Padlock engagement bangle. 1899 Catalogue of the Goldsmiths & Silversmiths Company, Ltd., London, p. 12.
New York Public Library, digitized by Google.

55 [Anon.], 'Ladies' Tea Time Gossip', *Hampshire Independent*, 16 September 1893, p. 3. First appeared in *Vanity Fair*.

56 [Anon.], *Illustrated Guide to the Church Congress and Ecclesiastical Art Exhibition* (Birmingham 1893), p. 87.

57 [Anon.], 'The Latest Jewellery Craze', *The Montreal Gazette*, 25 November 1893, n. p.

58 Streeter & Co. Ltd., *Gems* [Sales Catalogues], c. 1898, p. 53, and c. 1899, p. 55.

59 See, for instance, 'An exquisite gold curb bracelet ... Two chrysoprase hearts encircled by pearls, and joined together by a true lover's knot in pearls' by Wilson & Gill, published in *The Sketch*, 23 August 1893, p. 221, or a Streeter & Co. Ltd. advert in *The Gentlewoman*, 11 November 1893, p. 48.

60 A Representative, 'Christmas in Jewel Land', *The Queen*, 94 (9 December 1893), 998-1000, p. 998.

61 [Anon.], 'The Society Papers', *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser*, 6 April 1893, p. 2. First published in *Vanity Fair*.

62 [Anon.], 'Society, Art and the Drama', *The Ripon Observer*, 13 July 1893, p. 7.

63 'This new fashion has been followed by the Duke of York, and the bracelet he has presented to the Princess is set with the popular pretty green chrysoprase. Among the novelties I have seen in these bijoux is one in which the initials of the engaged couple were picked out in diamonds and rubies, while in another the name of the donor was in tiny brilliants on a pale blue enamel ground. A true lover's knot is a favourite design for these bracelets.' Lorna, 'Our Ladies' Column', *The Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 29 June 1893, p. 4.

64 A Representative, 'Christmas in Jewel Land', *The Queen*, Vol. XCIV (9 December 1893), 998-1000, p. 998.

65 [Anon.], 'Is the Wedding Ring Going?', *The Free Lance*, 21 July 1896, n.p. (p.1). The same circulated in other newspapers from 1896 to 1897.

66 Elsie Bee, 'Fashions in Jewelry, Silverware and Art Goods', *The Jewelers' Circular*, 10 February 1897, p. 14.

Princess May reportedly did not remain the sole royal patron of the engagement bracelet, either. The 1896 betrothal gift of the future Italian King Victor Emmanuel III to Princess Elena of Montenegro was said to have been ‘a bracelet instead of the usual ring ... If you remember, the Duchess of York had an engagement bracelet instead of a ring, so that it appears to be the coming fashion.’⁶⁷ Much later, in 1908, a new type of engagement bracelet, now for the upper arm in neo-classical fashion, was ‘said to have been introduced by Princess Marie Bonaparte, who received from Prince George of Greece instead of the traditional ring a double band of gold made to fit about her arm close up to the shoulder.’⁶⁸

This notable increase in the popularity of both the engagement bracelet and the chrysoprase in the period immediately following the engagement, in conjunction with newspapers’ and her dresser’s reports, consolidate the notion of Princess May having received an engagement bracelet, possibly set with chrysoprase – while photographs taken on significant dates suggest that this description corresponds to a cabochon bracelet repeatedly photographed during the short period of her second engagement.

Perspectives

Having identified reasonable contenders for the betrothal gifts of Mary von Teck, we must inevitably ask: what happened to them?

A ring that is likely identical to her ruby half-hoop engagement ring occasionally appears in informal photographs as late as the 1930s, whereas pictorial evidence of the bracelet can only be traced until 1895. A former dresser, said to have been summoned to the court in 1905, claimed to have still seen her wear it sometime between this date and 1933, the date of the interview. However, she certainly cannot have worn the bracelet *always*, for official portraits taken after the wedding usually picture her wearing only important pieces such as the Cornwall Rose of York bangle or the Bombay diamond bangles.

Early reports of the bracelet being ‘permanently fastened to her arm’ thus appear unlikely.⁶⁹

From the time she was a married woman with access to the fine jewels of her trousseau, she had a responsibility of heeding the *bon ton* by matching her jewellery and wardrobe to the demands of any given occasion. Records detailing her gowns and jewellery worn for representative functions, kept from the time she became Queen consort in 1911, reveal that she meticulously matched her jewels to the colour of her gowns, as good taste dictated at this time.⁷⁰ Less representative pieces such as sentimental rings or the gold chain bracelets she was fond of wearing on private occasions find no mention in these records, nor would they have matched the state jewels in their splendour and formality. The bracelet with its heavy, distinctly Victorian design would also have been considered rather outdated at this time. This does not mean, however, that she ceased to wear either betrothal gift on informal occasions; merely that such occasions did not warrant documentation.

Pertaining to the physical whereabouts of the pieces, it is possible that she was buried with both. Given their sentimental value, it appears unlikely that either was converted or the stones re-set during her lifetime. Primary documentation of the pieces, however, might yet be uncovered: if further records of the ring or bracelet exist, there is a chance they may be contained in the illustrated inventories of her jewellery created from 1893.⁷¹ It is also possible that photographs of the pieces might be found among the former belongings of Thomas Copperwheat, who served as Master Gilder at Buckingham Palace and assisted Queen Mary in photographing many of her artworks, including jewellery.⁷²

While the whereabouts and primary documentation of the betrothal gifts of Mary of Teck remain considerable desiderata, their contemplation through secondary evidence allows us an insight into the late Victorian culture of jewellery – and the way in which a high-ranking couple might navigate an unconventional situation tactfully and elegantly, heeding etiquette without succumbing to aesthetic conservatism, and influencing the currents of fashion in doing so.

69 [Anon.], ‘Society, Art and the Drama’, *The Ripon Observer*, 13 July 1893, p. 7.

70 See *Gowns & Jewels worn by H.M. the Queen at principal functions in 1911-12-13*, RA/QM/PRIV/CC58/162, and *Gowns & Jewels worn by Her Majesty at important functions during 1913-14*, RA/QM/PRIV/CC58/163.

71 These records are inaccessible to public researchers but have been consulted by Hugh Roberts who, however, does not mention either piece in *The Queen’s Diamonds*.

72 Some of Copperwheat’s jewellery photographs and written records were recently sold at auction, but no photograph of the bracelet or ring are among the included material (Harper Field Auctions, 10 July 2024, lot 404). I thank Harper Field Auctions for letting me view the images.

67 [Anon.], ‘Femininities’, *Richmond Herald*, 17 October 1896, p. 8.

68 [Anon.], ‘Engagement Bracelets’, *The Newberry Observer*, 31 March 1908, p. 6. First published in the *New York Sun*. See also [Anon.], ‘Betrothal Bracelet a Delight’, *The Branford Opinion*, 30 October 1908, n. p. (p. 7).

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