

VICTORIA AND ABDUL – TRUE OR FICTION?

Researched thoroughly by George Plohn



Left: From Historical Collection/REX/Shutterstock: Queen Victoria and Abdul Karim, 1890;

Right: Judi Dench as Queen Victoria and Ali Fazal as Abdul Karim in the movie *Victoria & Abdul*.

A group of Esplanade residents were bused recently to view the movie *Victoria & Abdul*. On the bus, on the way back, one of our residents raised the question whether this is a believable story, or just a fiction, because being raised in England she never heard about this.

With this in mind, I took upon myself to research what is the reality, if there is any truth about it or not.

And here below are my rather interesting and intriguing findings.

Yes, there was a relationship between Queen Victoria and her handsome, young Indian attendant Abdul Karim, which was then deemed so controversial and scandalous by her family members that, upon the monarch's death in 1901, they scrubbed his existence from the royal history. According to the daily *The Telegraph*, Victoria's son Edward immediately demanded that any letters between the two found on royal premises be burned. The family evicted Abdul immediately from the home the queen had given him, and sent him back to India. Victoria's daughter Beatrice erased all reference to Abdul in the Queen's journals—a painstaking endeavor given Victoria's decade-plus relationship with Abdul, whom she considered her closest confidante. The royal family's eradication of Abdul was so thorough that a full 100 years would pass before an eagle-eyed journalist noticed a strange clue left in Victoria's summer home—and her consequential investigation led to the discovery of Victoria's relationship with Abdul.

But why was the relationship so controversial—beyond the interclass curiosity of the Queen of England confiding in a servant—that it warranted full censure?

According to historians, Victoria's family and palace staff members exhibited prejudice of racial and social variety, which compounded with jealousy as Victoria became closer with Abdul and afforded him privileges including traveling with her through Europe, titles, honors, prime seats at operas and banquets, a private carriage and personal gifts. The queen entertained Abdul's family members, helped his father get a pension, and enlisted local press to write about him. Victoria also commissioned multiple portraits of Abdul—which would be the key to discovering the depth of their relationship.

Abdul was the only servant to ascend to the queen's inner circle since the death of her Scottish confidante John Brown, who helped fill a personal void in Victoria's life after her beloved husband, Albert, died. (Dench also starred as Victoria in the movie adaptation of *that* tongue-wagging palace relationship, *Mrs. Brown*—named for the nickname the queen's staffers gave her behind her back.) Though court members did not approve of Brown's relationship with the queen, they considered Abdul's friendship far worse.

According to historian Carolly Erickson in *Her Little Majesty*, "For a dark-skinned Indian to be put very nearly on a level with the queen's white servants was all but intolerable, for him to eat at the same table with them, to share in their daily lives was viewed as an outrage."

Did Victoria catch wind of the racist animosity swirling in her palace? She sure did. Her assistant private secretary Fritz Ponsonby ended one letter, which protested Abdul's favored standing, by outlining Victoria's assessment of the inter-palace resentment: "the Queen says it is 'race prejudice' and that we are jealous of the poor Munshi (means secretary)."

A valid question is: **How did they meet?**

According to Shrabani Basu, the journalist who uncovered this friendship after a 2003 visit to the Queen's summer home and wrote about it in her book "*Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant*", the Queen had expressed interest in the Indian territories ahead of her Golden Jubilee in 1887, and specifically requested Indian staff members help serve at a banquet for the invited heads of state. As such, Abdul, the son of a hospital assistant living in the north-Indian city of Agra (yes, THAT Agra), was one of two servants selected and presented to Victoria as "a gift from India" on the occasion of her 50th year on the throne. Abdul, who joined Queen Victoria four years after the death of her beloved Brown, quickly set to work for the nearly 80-year-old monarch. Victoria wrote that her first impression of the handsome Abdul was that he was "tall with a fine serious countenance."

Another valid question: **What did they bond over?**

At Victoria's summer home on the Isle of Wight, shortly after the Golden Jubilee, Abdul impressed the monarch by cooking her Indian-style chicken curry with dal and pilau. According to Victoria's biographer A.N. Wilson, the queen enjoyed the dish so much that she incorporated it into her regular meal rotation.

As she became more interested in the culture of India, she asked Abdul to teach her Urdu—then known as Hindustani. In order to better communicate with Abdul, she also insisted that he double down on English lessons until the two were able to communicate directly with each other. Though he was hired as a servant, Victoria quickly promoted him to “Munshi and Indian Clerk to the Queen Empress” at a monthly salary of 12 pounds. He was later promoted to a highly decorated secretary.

As for what the Queen saw in Abdul, beyond his provenance, Basu told *The Telegraph*, “He spoke to her as a human being and not as the Queen. Everyone else kept their distance from her, even her own children, and this young Indian came with an innocence about him; he told her about India, about his family and was there to listen when she complained about her own family.”

“I am so very fond of him,” Victoria wrote. “He is so good and gentle and understanding ... and is a real comfort to me.”

Another question: **How close were they?**

In letters to him over the years between his arrival in England and her death in 1901, the queen signed letters to him as ‘your loving mother’ and ‘your closest friend,’ Basu told the BBC in 2011. “On some occasions, she even signed off her letters with a flurry of kisses—a highly unusual thing to do at that time. It was unquestionably a passionate relationship—a relationship which I think operated on many different layers in addition to the mother-and-son ties between a young Indian man and a woman who at the time was over 60 years old.”

Though Victoria and Abdul did spend a night alone at Glassat Shiel—the remote cottage in Scotland the queen had shared with John Brown—Basu does not think that the two, separated by decades in age, had a physical relationship. “When Prince Albert died, Victoria famously said that he was her husband, close friend, father, and mother,” Basu wrote. “I think it’s likely that Abdul Karim fulfilled a similar role.”

Abdul’s descendants, having read the diary, similarly believe that the relationship was platonic and maternal at best.

In 2010, Abdul’s great-grandson Javed Mahmood told *The Telegraph*, that they shared “a mother and son relationship. She became an Indophile in part because of her affection for him. But the prejudice of her family percolated down to Victoria’s staff.”

Further question: **What kind of special privileges did he get?**

He was allowed to carry a sword and wear medals in court and bring family members from India to England. “Mr. Karim’s father even got away with being the first person to smoke a hookah [water-pipe] in Windsor Castle, despite the queen’s aversion to smoking,” Basu has said.

And this question too: **Did he, Abdul, ever marry?**

Abdul was married and Victoria treated his wife just as favorably. After Abdul expressed his desire to return to Agra to be with his wife, Victoria invited Abdul’s wife to join him in England. She gave the couple homes on all of the main royal estates in the U.K. and also land in India. The monarch, who had nine children of her own, even offered Abdul

conception advice, advising him, according to *The Telegraph* and his wife, "She should be careful at the particular time every month not to tire herself."

And then this question: **How did they say goodbye?**

Victoria requested that Abdul be among the principal mourners—a small group of her closest friends and family members—at her Windsor Castle funeral. And Victoria's son, Edward, who became the next monarch as Edward VII, complied with this request, incorporating Abdul in the funeral procession and allowing him to be the last person to view Victoria's body before her casket was closed.

According to *The Smithsonian* though, "Edward VII sent guards into the cottage Abdul shared with his wife, seizing all letters from the queen and burning them on the spot. They instructed Abdul to return to India immediately, without fanfare or farewell."

And now the last question: **How was this story discovered?**

While touring Victoria's Isle of Wight summer home in 2003, Shrabani Basu noticed several paintings and a bust of an Indian servant called Abdul Karim that stood out to her.

"He didn't look a servant," Basu told *The Telegraph* in 2017. "He was painted to look like a nobleman. He was holding a book, looking sideways. Something that about that expression struck me, and when I moved along, I saw another portrait of him looking rather gentle. It was very unusual."

Intrigued, Basu spent the following five years uncovering the story of Victoria and Abdul—a long investigation which involved the historian going to Windsor Castle and cannily asking to look at Victoria's Hindustani journals—the exercise workbooks Abdul used to teach Victoria Urdu.

"No one had seen them up to that point," explains Basu. "The blotting paper fell out of these journals which hadn't been opened for 100 years—presumably because all Queen Victoria's biographers had been western and couldn't follow Urdu."

According to *The Telegraph* she read through 13 volumes of the Queen writing about Hindustani lessons in Balmoral, visiting Abdul when he was ill, and visits to take tea with his wife—who she had granted permission to come from India to join him—and see their cat's new kittens. Her passion for India was obvious, from her wish to eat a mango and to her view of the Abduls as her equals. It showed a completely different side of the Queen's life that had been previously recorded.

Miraculously, a surviving member of Abdul's family contacted Basu and directed her to a relative who had held onto Abdul's existing diaries, which she incorporated into her book *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant*—the basis for the **Stephen Frears** drama starring **Judi Dench** and **Ali Fazal**.

One early journal entry, per *The Telegraph*:

"This is the journal of my life at the court of Queen Victoria from the Golden Jubilee of 1887 to the Diamond Jubilee of 1897," wrote Abdul. "I've been but a sojourner in a strange land and among strange people... While I record my life I cannot but call to mind the many honors which have fallen to my lot and all through the great goodness of

Her Majesty. I pray to the Almighty for the richest blessings to be showered down on our good Queen Empress.”

And a last thought of my own: IT IS QUITE A STORY! Now, I am sorry that I didn't go too to see it.