‘Greatest day’ recalled

Memories sparked by jubilee

The recent royal jubilee celebrations have brought back memories of Wagga’s “greatest day” when Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh visited the city on February 13, 1954. But while planning had swung into action six months before, it was not the first time in the late 1940s to early 1950s that arrangements had been made for a royal visit to the city.

Indeed, three British royal tours—that never were made headlines in that period. Twice announcements were made of a visit to Australia by King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, and Princess Margaret, and one of a planned Australia-New Zealand visit by the then Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh.

In August 1948, Wagga’s mayor, alderman Len Barrand, told the city council it appeared the royal family would visit Wagga on April 9, 1949. Immediately steps were taken to began construction of buildings at Bolton Park, to paint the city council chambers and purchase flags and bunting.

Enormous meetings of council continued to confirm arrangements and, by October 1948 a route of the royal procession and order of proceedings for their welcome were outlined in council’s minutes.

Then, in November 1948 came news of the cancellation of the tour due to the illness of King George VI.

Through 1949 and early 1950, reports from time to time suggested the King, Queen and Princess Margaret would resume their visit as the King’s health improved until, in September 1950, Prime Minister Menzies announced there was “every hope” of their visit taking place early in 1952.

It was noted, however, that the 1952 tour would feature a less strenuous itinerary.

Government officials remained optimistic in 1951 that the King’s visit would go ahead, but on June 6, 1951, a metropolitan newspaper carried a cautious report that if the King’s doctors advised against his Australia-New Zealand tour, the governments might issue an invitation to Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh.

On November 27, 1951, The Daily Advertiser carried a front-page story hailing the visit by the Princess and Duke to Wagga on April 9, the following year.

Wagga City Council again swung into action, confirming the tour and setting aside a budget of £2650 (more than $5000) for decorations and entertainments.

Council also took steps for the gazetted of a public holiday in Wagga on April 9, 1952, to mark the visit.

Once again, this royal tour was not to be. Early in February 1952, while Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh were in Kenya on their tour to their Australian tour, King George VI died.

The new Queen Elizabeth II cancelled the tour and returned to Britain.

In Wagga, as Britain prepared for the coronation of its new queen, hopes were high that the city would be included in her planned 1954 visit to Australia.

And so, in February 1954, the decorations came out, the procession followed a planned route and thousands cheered as the long-awaited royal visitors finally came to Wagga.

Compiled by Nancy Blacklow