at the archives
Wayne Doubleday

February 12, 1954, will long be regarded as one of, if not the most, important day in Wagga's history. The Daily Advertiser's front page of February 14, 1954, (a special Sunday souvenir edition) carried the headline "Wagga's Greatest Day," and devoted the entire front page to the visit of Queen Elizabeth II and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh.

The editorial for that day read, "Yesterday the Queen of Australia rode in triumph through the streets of Wagga. "For 145 thrill-packed minutes, the centre of the Riverina became the heart of the mighty British Commonwealth."

Estimates vary to the exact number of people who crammed Wagga's streets to catch a glimpse of the royal couple, but most range from between 80,000 to in excess of 100,000.

This sounds even more significant when one considers that the population of Wagga at the time was only 38,500 and that the temperature reached a maximum of 92 degrees fahrenheit on the day (the hottest of the entire 10-day royal tour).

After arriving at Forest Hill from Canberra, the royal progress, comprising 18 cars, made the slow trip into Wagga.

The first official duty was the visit to the council chambers, where the Queen and Duke were introduced to the mayor, Mr W.F. Donne and his wife, local parliamentarians (including the Member for Wagga, Mr Eddie Graham), church and civic leaders.

The royal couple also spoke to several ex-servicemen, three of whom were Victoria Cross winners from the Riverina.

On the journey throughout the streets of Wagga, the crowds were so great that the royal car was forced to travel at less than two miles per hour.

A highlight of the day included an exhibition of boomerang throwing at the showground conducted by Mr Joe Timbery, his wife and two children, Joe, 7, and Jeannette, 12.

When the display began, "...The Queen turned to the Duke and excitedly cried 'Oh, Phillip, look.' This was the first time the Queen and the Duke had seen boomerangs thrown."

At the conclusion of the display, the Duke exclaimed, "Good heavens! The only thing you could kill doing that would be yourself!"

The royal couple then spoke with the Timbery family (from La Perouse in Sydney), who in turn presented the Queen and Duke with boomerangs, and two specially embossed "baby" boomerangs—one each for Prince Charles and Princess Anne.

More excitement followed shortly for the Queen while watching the exhibition of tree felling and wood chopping, when she was almost struck in the face by a six-inch woodchip.

Her Majesty saw the chip coming and shielded herself with her umbrella, but did not move away until the display had finished.

The Duke had requested that the lead axeman, Mr Ron Greenstreet from Canowindra, demonstrate a standing chop on a 14-inch log. However, the royal couple found they were a little too close to the action, standing only 12 feet away.

Mr Greenstreet did not know that a woodchip had nearly hit the Queen until later told of the incident. Greenstreet replied "Gee, I'm sorry ...I was flat out trying to show the Queen and the Duke how fast we can chop. I didn't think of where my chips might fly!"


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