2016

Menangle 'Little England' says Duchess of York

Ian C. Willis
University of Wollongong, iwillis@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
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Abstract
'This is like home, like England', proclaimed the Duchess of York in 1927 on her visit to Menangle. She and her husband the Duke of York visited Camden Park as part of their royal visit of Australia, which involved the opening of the provisional Parliament House in Canberra in May.[1] The Duke and Duchess of York had left England of their royal tour of dominions in January 1927 on board the Royal Navy battleship HMS Renown, travelled through New Zealand in February and arrived in Australia in March. The Royals departed from Australia in late May after visiting all states. The Duke and Duchess later came to the thrown as George VI and Queen Elizabeth on the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936.

Keywords
says, england', duchess, york, menangle, 'little

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
I. C. Willis 2016 Menangle 'Little England' says Duchess of York Camden History Notes

This creative work is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/lhpapers/2644
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February and arrived in Australia in March. The Royals departed from Australia in late May after visiting all states. The Duke and Duchess later came to the thrown as George VI and Queen Elizabeth on the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936.

At Menangle the Duke and Duchess were guests of Brigadier-General JW Macarthur Onslow and Mrs Enid Macarthur Onslow (of Gilbulla) for a weekend in April, in the absence of Sibella Macarthur Onslow who was in England at the time. The Royals travelled by railway from Sydney by steam train.

The royal entourage and the royal trains made quite an impact on a young Fred Seers, a local Campbelltown milk boy. He witnessed the royal trains pass through the Dumaresq railway gates where he was joined by a small group of enthusiastic flag waving Campbelltown locals. He recalls gatekeeper Bill Flanagan felt the occasion called for some degree of formality and dressed up in white shirt and tie.

Fred vividly remembers the three ‘shiny black’ 36 class steam locomotives that ‘sparkled’ as they roared through the locked gates in a fog of steam and smoke. The first of three steam engines painted in royal blue gave a blast on its high pitched whistle as it approached adorned with two crossed Union Jacks on the front. This was followed by another steam engine pulling four carriages, presumably with the Duke and Duchess on board, then the third steam engine.[2]
The Duke and Duchess had left Sydney early and arrived at Menangle Railway Station around 1.00pm and were met by a crowd of 200 people. Mr Bell the Menangle stationmaster and his staff had spruced up the platform with flags and bunting and rolled out a red carpet for the visitors. The Duchess was presented with a bouquet of carnations and heather by 'little Quinton Stanham'.

The Royals stayed with the Macarthers at Camden Park house, one of Australia’s finest Georgian Regency country homesteads designed by John Verge and built in 1835. Verge’s design was based on Palladian principles in a central two storey central block constructed stuccoed sandstock brick on sandstone foundations.

On Saturday afternoon the Duke went horse riding across Camden Park Estate, one of the earliest colonial grants in Australia allocated to John Macarthur in 1805. On ‘a whim’ the Duke and his riding companions decided to ride to the Camden Show, which was first held in 1886. The Duke created much excitement to the surprised show-goers by cantering onto the showground in front of the large crowd of around 7000 people and received a ‘tumultuous welcome’. The riding party included Miss Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow and her sister, Mrs Helen Stanham, who had recently arrived back from England for a few months, Brigadier-General JW and Brigadier-General GM, and their brother Arthur Macarthur Onslow.
On Sunday afternoon the royal couple motored in a 1926 Rolls Royce to Gilbulla for afternoon tea. Gilbulla, an example of a Federation Arts and Crafts mansion designed by Sydney architects Sulman and Power and built in 1899 by JW Macarthur Onslow. Gilbulla is a fine example of an Edwardian gentleman’s country residence for a family of power and distinction, while not out-doing the Georgian grandeur of Camden Park house itself. Gilbulla housekeeper Mima Mahoney served the Royals, who served the Royals afternoon tea, was the mother of local Campbelltown resident Basil Mahoney.

The royal entourage arrived ‘a few minutes before 5 o’clock’ at Menangle and boarded their train, which according to Fred Seers, had gone to Picton to fill up with water and coal, and turn around. Before leaving the Duke and Duchess inspect a guard of honour of Camden Boy Scouts and Girl Guides under the direction of their leaders, RD Stuckey and Miss Senior.
The Menangle visit of the Duke and Duchess of York was widely reported in the Australian press. The themes of the stories revolved around the Englishness of the Menangle countryside and the Royals taking a well-earned rest from their hectic tour.

The Brisbane Courier ran a story under the headline, ‘Like Home, Beauty of Camden Park, Royal Party’s Quiet Weekend’. [11] Readers were assured by the newspaper that the Royals had had a good time and stated:

“...The Duke and Duchess of York were both delighted with the loveliness of their week end at Camden Park... While the Duke went riding across country with the rain beating exhilaratingly in his face, and filled in a little spare time with a tennis racket on the soaked court at Gibulla, the Duchess went driving with Miss Onslow in a sulky turnout. Both were delightfully surprised with the sylvan beauty of the surrounding, the Duchess being enraptured by an unattended stroll through the grounds along the Nepean River, which flows through the whole length of Camden Park Estate on which are great coppices of gnarled old English trees.” [12]

The Melbourne Argus reported that the Duke and Duchess had a ‘restful weekend’ at the ‘beautiful country estate of the Macarthur Onslow family’. The Duchess ‘walked unattended in the old gardens under English oaks and elms’. [13]

The Launceston Examiner in Tasmania ran a story with the heading ‘A Happy Week End, Royals Guest in Country’ and assured its readers that the Duke and Duchess enjoyed the English style countryside of Camden Park, Menangle and the Nepean River. The Examiner went on that the Royals walked ‘beneath these spreading boughs’ of ‘gnarled old English trees, with ‘the rain pattering overhead, and the river providing an obligato to Nature’s music’. [14]

There were similar reports in the newspaper across the country. In Queensland the Warwick Daily News ran the headline ‘Royal Couple Spend Quiet Weekend’ while the Rockhampton Morning Bulletin ran the story under a banner headline ‘Royal Visitors Quiet Weekend’.

The Hobart Mercery ran a story under the heading ‘The Royal Tour Week-end in Country Free from Engagements, Delightful Time Spent’ and assured readers:
The Duke and Duchess were both delighted with the loveliness of their week-end at Camden-park and Menangle – a respite from official engagements that was so deliciously free that even the intermittent rain that fell did not disturb the enthusiasm of the Royal visitors.

In the west Perth’s West Australian reported that the Duke and Duchess ‘were delightfully surprised with the sylvan beauty of the surroundings’ in a story titled ‘The Royal Visitors. Week-End In Country. Respite from Engagements.’[15]

The Camden News placed an article about the royal visit on the front page in the middle its story that reported on the 1927 Camden Show. Perhaps illustrating centrality of the royal drop-in to whole show event. On the other hand down at Picton the Picton Post placed the report of the royal visit on page two at the end of a story about the Camden Show. The snub was just a reflection of the parochialism of both Camden and Picton and the long term rivalry between both communities. The accusation was that the Camden community thought that they were better than Picton. More to the point this snobbishness was more of reflection of the omnipotence of the Macarthurs of Camden Park in the whole district and the colonial history of New South Wales in general.[16]

The official records of the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York are located in the National Archives in Canberra.


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