

**The Day Bondi Went Royal:
Queen Elizabeth's 1954 visit to Bondi Beach**



**ROYAL COMMAND
SURF CARNIVAL**
Bondi's Big Day



Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh.

Queen Elizabeth II made her first visit to Australia in 1954, the year after her coronation. Waverley residents and local surf clubs enthusiastically took up the idea of staging a Royal Command Surf Carnival on Bondi Beach to coincide with the Queen's visit.

The finals of the Surf Carnival were organised to be in progress while the Royal couple was here. Coverage of this most English queen, at this most Australian of events, caught the imagination of the world's media. Her visit lasted only 71 minutes but is still fondly remembered as the day that Bondi had its closest brush with royalty.

Tickets to the Royal Command Surf Carnival event sold out well in advance. At 2.35pm led by the Police Pipe Band, the young Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip drove slowly onto the beach under a huge sign 'Welcome to Bondi'. An honour guard of lifesavers awaited their arrival.

All stands in the Bondi Carnival area, on Bondi Beach, were packed hours before the Queen arrived. Crowd numbers were estimated at more than 40,000 on the beach, with a further 60,000 crammed at other vantage points around Bondi.

Shaded by a large white parasol, the Queen braved very non-English temperatures of 80 deg. F, but according to contemporary reports 'looked happy and refreshed' in a buttercup yellow frock and a matching small feathered hat. She wore white accessories and a three-strand pearl necklace.

Events put on for the Royal couple included junior and senior surf races, a mock pillow fight on a greasy pole, running races and displays of surf rescue. Occasional heavy dumpers made conditions tricky and delighted the crowd. The Queen pointed excitedly as boats battled the surf, with, on one occasion, seven surfboats being overturned together, including all the competitors in one race.

The Royal couple also inspected a march past of lifesavers from surf lifesaving clubs across NSW. Other surf club members, in white shorts and white singlets and shirts, provided local security on the day.

A member of the Bondi Surf Bathers Life Saving Club remarked, on meeting the Queen, that 'for one so tiny, her handshake is quite strong and is possibly one of the greatest shocks one receives on being presented.'

The London paper, *The Times*, reported the visit:

'The highlight of yesterday's festivities was the surf carnival on Bondi Beach, of world fame, in which the Queen and her husband, sitting amid a vast concourse of people in summer clothes, were so interested that they stayed for 40 minutes beyond their appointed time...The first surprise about Bondi... is that its wide expanse of white sand encroaches on a built-up urban area with a look of south London about it...' (8 February, 1954)

By a strange coincidence the Royal visit, on 6 February 1954, occurred on the 16th anniversary of Black Sunday, infamous as the most dangerous day ever on Bondi Beach, when 250 bathers were rescued from heavy seas and five died.

Following the Royal Visit enthusiasm for the monarch was running high throughout Australia, including in our local area. The Queen may have been gone, but she was not forgotten.

At the Waverley Council meeting of 9 February 1954 the following proposal was put:

'In view of the distinct honour paid this Municipality by the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, together with HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, on Saturday 6th February, 1954, appreciation should be made under the Seal of the Council to the appropriate authorities to name this pleasure resort 'Royal Bondi Beach'.'

The proposal was not successful, but there are still royal reminders at Bondi – the road formerly known as Marine Drive was renamed in the Queen's honour and is now known as Queen Elizabeth Drive.

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