



*The Daimler as purchased in South Australia.  
Photo: Laura Breen.*

## THE QUEEN'S ROYAL DAIMLER

The waiting group shifted its feet impatiently, cameras clutched at the ready and eager eyes fixed on the road where the Queen's black and royal blue Daimler would soon appear. Arriving to great celebration, the vehicle was manoeuvred with extreme care into its parking bay, eliciting murmurs of admiration from the assembled gathering. Radiating dignity, this stately DE 36hp landaulette looked more than adequate for the purpose of conveying Queen Elizabeth II during her 1954 Royal Tour of Australia. Although smaller in number than the crowds who flocked to see their newly crowned Queen on that occasion almost 60 years ago, this group of conservators and curators of 2009 was no less appreciative of her Daimler's now somewhat diminished glamour. After long and distinguished service, this historically significant vehicle was recently purchased by the National Museum of Australia for \$90,000.

Research into this car's varied history was fuelled by a mass of archival material conveying the fervent excitement, pomp and ceremony of welcoming the first reigning monarch to step onto Australian soil. As part of a strategic tour of the Commonwealth between November 1953 and May 1954, the visit strengthened Australia's relationship with Britain although, ironically, it was to be one of the last displays of mass public celebrations of the monarchy. Joyously proclaimed by Prime Minister Robert Menzies as prompting 'the most profound and passionate feelings of loyalty and devotion',<sup>1</sup> the 1954 Royal Tour was the culmination of an era in which popular education instilled veneration for the

pageantry of inherited European institutions. Travelling some 27,000 miles by car, train, aircraft and boat, and visiting all states and territories (excepting the Northern Territory), the Queen was introduced to a vast quantity of people, products and places. The tour was judged an extraordinary success. Today it can be viewed as a cultural milestone that evokes strong memories for many Australians who grew up in a period of extensive social and cultural change.

Their excitement was not unfounded; anticipation of a royal arrival had been building for over five years. This vehicle is one of two intact survivors of a fleet of six Daimler DE 36hp models originally commissioned by Prime Minister Ben Chifley in 1948 for the proposed 1949 Royal Tour of Australia by King George VI. By sourcing these very British cars, it seems the Australian government sought to preserve ties with British industry and culture. A classic choice, the Daimler Motor Company in Coventry had enjoyed many years of royal patronage and undertook highly regarded bespoke coach-built commissions for ceremonial purposes. This imposing four-ton landaulette vehicle was fabricated by coachbuilders Hooper and Company on a purpose-built Daimler chassis powered by a straight eight engine. Almost six metres long, it had luxurious interior fittings such as an electrically operated sun roof and windows, cream Bedford cord and blue leather upholstery, a walnut dash, roller-sprung silk window blinds, engraved glass light fittings and ashtrays, and thick fitted carpets. The folding landau section would allow the occupants to be easily seen, yet give some protection from the heat and dust of an Australian summer.

To the shock and disappointment of many, however, the tour was cancelled at the very last minute owing to the King's poor health. Extensive plans had already been made – the fleet was completed, crated and waiting to be dispatched to Sydney. Under these circumstances, the Australian government was required to fulfil its financial obligation to the Daimler Motor Company. Jack Beasley, the Australian High Commissioner in London, was able to sell two Daimlers to the Maharajah of Mysore in India, but the high tax payable on luxury cars did not make these large and ostentatious vehicles attractive purchases in post-war Britain. The cars were modified to suit ceremonial requirements; at almost two metres in height, they were described as 'too great to enable them to go under many of England's low bridges'.<sup>2</sup> Still lacking buyers, the remaining four Daimlers were shipped to Australia in 1949, where they became part of the government car pool and were used sparingly by the Governor-General, Sir William McKell. After another postponement of the Royal Tour in 1952, the four cars were recalled for duty for the attractive young Queen two years later.

Fully refurbished, this Daimler landaulette was one in a fleet of 55 British and Australian-manufactured vehicles operating throughout New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and South Australia for the 1954 Royal Tour. According to the Queen's itinerary, detachments of the main fleet were transported around the country by air and rail to supplement sub-fleet vehicles in Tasmania, Queensland and Western Australia, bringing the total to 115 vehicles. Administered with military precision by the Royal Visit Car Company, the management of the convoy was no mean feat. The Company registered an astounding 500,000 miles covered by motor car over the duration of the tour, with barely a delay or incident. In a pre-television age, this logistical efficiency was instrumental in allowing an estimated 75 per cent of Australia's population to lay eyes on the Queen at least once during the tour's two-month duration.



During the visit to New South Wales, a Daimler landaulette was used to transport the Queen to Newcastle City Hall.

Image credit: *The Royal Visit to New South Wales, official record; the visit of her Majesty, the Queen and His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh, 1954*, edited and published by Oswald Ziegler, Sydney, 1954, p. 53.

Families travelled many miles from their homes in the hope of catching a glimpse of the royal couple. The abiding memory for those Australians who did not get the opportunity to press the Queen's gloved hand or attend a royal ball or garden party, was of her waving hand and smiling face as she glided by during the Royal Progress, a stately drive enacted through upwards of 80 towns and urban centres across Australia. Many photographs of the day capture the smartly dressed crowds clustered at a respectful distance, flanked by hordes of expectant children and hovering policemen. Even the media entourage who recorded the Queen's every move crouched in neat unobtrusive rows as she cruised past at 6 mph. This Daimler landaulette, generally used to transport the Queen from airports towards town centres and to evening engagements, acquired an iconic character of its own and became synonymous with the 1954 Royal Tour as captured by the many lenses of the media and public.

As the excitement of the tour began to fade, the Australian government again faced the issue of disposing of the four Daimler vehicles. By now six years old and increasingly unfashionable, they were replaced in the Commonwealth government car pool by newer Humber vehicles. A few months later this Daimler landaulette was sold to the Governor of South Australia, Sir Robert George, who enthused that the car was 'a splendid acquisition ... which we shall be proud to use in our duties to the state'.<sup>3</sup> It indeed graced various vice-regal occasions, including the opening of Parliament in 1957 and the Governor's farewell tour of Adelaide in 1960. However, by the early 1960s the car had again become surplus to requirements. Described as 'on its last ... wheels',<sup>4</sup> it required extensive maintenance and the Governor's motor garage staff expressed doubts as to the future availability of parts due to the decline in the market for bespoke coach-built vehicles. Sold on, it passed through two further South Australian owners in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before being purchased by the Museum from a private collector.

This Daimler landaulette is an iconic reminder of the 1954 Royal Tour and reminds us of a period when royalty was far more accessible to the public. Not only visually impressive, it has strong relevance to broad areas of Australian history, and will be used to address several key historical themes relating to the monarchy in Australia, royal transport, and innovation in the motor industry. A long-term conservation and restoration plan based on the vehicle's significance is currently being developed by the Museum's curatorial and conservation teams. Although much of its glitter has worn off, the car retains almost all of its original fittings and impressive bodywork, and as such is the perfect vehicle for Museum conservators to showcase their skills in returning it to its former glory.

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1. Brett, J., 1992, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*, Macmillan Australia, Chippendale, p. 147.
2. 'Daimler cars may be shipped to Australia', *Canberra Times*, 3 February 1949, p. 1
3. CSO 162/1954, *State Records of South Australia*.
4. CSO 162/1954, *State Records of South Australia*.