

A right royal collection

Thousands of visitors flock to the Williams family's suburban home to pay homage to what has become a full-blown obsession

BY HAZEL FLYNN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEREMY PARK

It started with a mug. The packed rooms full of memorabilia that have drawn thousands of paying visitors to Janet Williams' home started with "an ordinary, common mug" that Janet's mother gave her five-year-old daughter in 1954, to mark the royal visit that year.

Fifty-six years and more than 10,000 pieces later, Janet's Royalty Rooms, in the Wollongong suburb of Woonona, hold the largest private collection of royal memorabilia in Australia and, Janet suspects, in the world. And yes, that first mug is proudly included.

The Williams family had emigrated from Britain three years before the young Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip came to visit. Royalty wasn't much discussed in the family. But all that changed one sticky February day.

Like hundreds of other children, Janet wore her white sports uniform and lined up along the road near where the Queen was to join the royal



My home is my castle: Janet Williams' royal collection includes both trivia and treasure



Holding court (left to right): Princess of Wales dolls; commemorative objects; Janet serves tea to some familiar majestic faces



train at Bulli. “We were given permission to run up the hill to the overpass bridge and wave our flags,” she recalls. It was a galvanising sight. “They talk about Diana, but the Queen herself was the most beautiful woman you could see. She had a lovely figure.”

Afterwards, Janet’s mother presented each of her three children with a commemorative mug bearing the Australian and British flags, and a picture from the visit. “She said, ‘This is your old flag, respect it. This is your new flag, obey it.’ That’s what started it.”

For years afterwards, Janet and her friends clipped magazines and filled scrapbooks. “There wasn’t a lot of other entertainment in those days,” she says. “I kept scrapbooks of the Queen and film stars up until I got married.”

Every now and then Janet was given some little royal keepsake or other, but the collecting bug was lying dormant. “When you’re a young wife you can’t afford much, and when you’re a mum it’s worse. Then my eldest daughter, Teena, started to collect Diana stuff in the early 1980s. When Teena moved out she left it all, and I thought, *I can’t throw this away.*”

Janet put all the bits and pieces together, and had a light-bulb moment.

Rule, Britannia

- “We get a lot of people crying in the Diana room,” says Janet Williams.
- “We had the Queen’s driver here. He sent me pictures and his pay envelopes afterwards.”
- Janet’s closest personal encounter with royalty was shaking hands with Prince Charles in 1988.
- The Queen Mother is her favourite: “I still think she was the best royal.”
- “It’s a collection, not a political statement,” says Janet. “We’ve only had one incident where someone said, ‘I can’t come in, I’m a republican.’ Philip, my husband, said, ‘I’m a Presbyterian, so what? Here’s a cup of tea!’”

“When I saw it all arranged in that cabinet, I loved it. There was no stopping me then. I could not get enough royalty stuff. I had to have it. Op shops, garage sales, antique shops – any filthy little dungeon, I’d hunt though it. If I hadn’t had something in a week I’d say, ‘Oh, I’ve got to get out and find something!’ I was addicted.”

As obsessed as she was, Janet could still see the funny side. So, fortunately, could her husband, Philip. (Would she, by the way, still have married Philip if his name had been different? “Oh yes,” she says, “I wasn’t into collecting then.”) Laughing together, they recall one holiday when they were heading up to Queensland. What should have

been a three-hour hop north to Raymond Terrace became an epic journey: "It took us ten hours," says Philip. "We stopped at every antique shop and garage sale on the way!"

With family and friends contributing, the collection grew and grew. Soon Philip was custom-making display cabinets to Janet's specifications. A friend took it upon herself to let TV's *A Current Affair* know about the collection, and a coach-tour organiser who saw the show called to see if they would sell tickets. "It had never occurred to me to do that kind of thing. But we had nothing to lose," says Janet. "I thought, *Oh well, if we go kerplunk, I've still got the collection.*"

Seven years later, the figurines, plates, teapots, tea caddies, thimbles, spoons, bells, magnets, pictures, cross-stitch, furniture, books, commemorative time-tables, signs, cups, brooches, medals, badges, coins, snow globes, toys, charm bracelets and more occupy the bottom storey of Janet and Philip's house (they live upstairs). In the enclosed area at the rear, an entire coachload of visitors at a time can make their way through a home-made morning tea. The economic downturn slowed the flow but,

in their busiest years, they have hosted up to 12,000 guests annually, without ever advertising.

Asked how much she has spent on the collection over the years, Janet will only say, "Too much!" The most valuable piece is probably the intact 1897 Shelley tea service, created to mark Queen Victoria's 60th year on the throne. "It was left by a friend of mine's mother when she died – still in the Anthony Hordern's box," she marvels.

There are other notable acquisitions, including two chairs used by guests at Charles' investiture as Prince of Wales. And then there is the toilet set up as a "Throne Room", the caricature eggcups of Andrew, Fergie, Charles and Diana (these get Janet's vote as her ugliest pieces), and the dummy of the queen in fluffy slippers reclining with a cuppa.

A sense of fun is important to her. "We don't want it to become too stuffy. Besides," she shrugs, "even the tacky and awful things, I still kind of like. You've got to have the ugly as well as the pretty, or it wouldn't be a collection." ■

To see our photo gallery of more of Janet's crown collectibles, pay a visit to readersdigest.com.au/royalcollection.

JUST A NOSE IN FRONT

I have long been teased about my large nose, and I sought some reassurance from a friend.

"Is it really that big?" I asked.

"No, your nose isn't big," he replied. "It's just that your face is too far back."



Tony Murray