



HD FED:ROYALS POOL COPY - WINMALEE GUIDE HALL

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ROYALS WINMALEE, NSW, SYDNEY, April 17 - Six months to the day, the very scorched earth under their feet was ablaze.

Thirty six minutes; 200 homes gone.

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Sometimes being a Royal, sitting fancy free on the line to the throne, isn't all glorious, upbeat and celebratory.

It's confronting.

Here was a chance for Prince William and his wife Kate to hear the horror stories, to understand the devastation of Australian bushfires at their grim worst, to recognise the resilience of a Blue Mountains community brought low but rising fast, together.

And a chance to offer some compassion and a kind hand on the shoulder.

Massed along Singles Ridge Road as its snakes down through the charred bushland of Yellow Rock, residents waved hand-painted signs of welcome, reclined in their deck chairs and turned a few sausages on the barbecue preparing for an early lunch.

This was an Easter holiday one day early for the hardened, resolute and immensely passionate people of the lower Blue Mountains; a people who have overcome much, and continue to smile.

The visit last spring of Crown Prince Frederik and Crown Princess Mary of Denmark was indeed a poignant occasion for the neighbourhood, a time of healing, a time for encouragement. This, however, was momentous; a celebration rather than the post-bushfires **group** hug, and a reminder that when it comes to royalty, it's the ties to Commonwealth that seem to stretch the longest.

Inside the quaint Winmalee Guides Hall, surrounded by blackened trees, a phalanx of uniforms greeted Will and Kate. Rural Fire Service volunteers, fire brigade officers. Heroes and heroines.

The pair - Prince William with an open-neck shirt that freed his chest hair, a jacket and ash blue **chinos**, Kate with a floral blue and white dress and killer platform heels - walked from table to table posing the questions that mattered and listening with intent.

"I want to shake as many hands as I can. Everyone," Prince William told the volunteers.

"What's your story?" he repeated with every new introduction.

He talked cricket: "I'm a terrible bowler".

He talked fire-fighting techniques: "What was most effective for the crews?".

He talked rebuilding: "It must be wonderful being a part of a community that works together."

He singled out a 16-year-old who worked the communication lines when the bushfire came to town - while his house was burning. Not that he told the Prince that.

"Wow what a baptism of fire you have had," Prince William said.

Ten metres away, the Duchess was engrossed in the sheer dimensions of the disaster, and marvelled that no lives were lost.

"To not have any loss of life is incredible," she said, always engaged, always talking with her hands.

Murray and Fiona Hillan were waiting for the couple, armed with her tale of woe. And resilience.

While they worked in Sydney, their Winmalee home was incinerated. Walking down a darkened Singles Ridge Road at 10pm that night, the family was unsure what they would find.

"We walked down the street in the dark and we couldn't orient to anything because it had all changed when we got to our house we saw this little glow. That was it," Mr Hillan said.

"At midnight we had to go and **buy** some clothes because all we had was what we were standing up in."

Mrs Hillan paused to compose herself. She wasn't undone by the realities of their circumstances, as troubled as they were. She was overcome that the Royals cared, that they "showed compassion"; that they listened and "engaged".

"It is wonderful. I nearly said it almost makes it worthwhile, but it doesn't really. It doesn't replace everything that we've lost but it certainly helps the healing process," she said.

"The support we've had, all the way along has been amazing. This is the cherry on the top."

Clad in her oversized blue fire jacket, Julie Willis nudged her way around the crowd of fire colleagues to tell her story.

While her timber home was beset with flames, the community fire service volunteer could get near the property to do what she was trained to do. She spent the next day putting out spot fires in a neighbouring suburb, selflessly doing her part, while in the back of her mind, she knew her abode was probably no more.

She was right. Twenty foot flames destroyed the Yellow Rock home in seconds.

Despite the heartache, today was a day to be proud. Proud of her community, which had rallied from the lows to showcase what humanity can do, when it works together, when it cares.

It meant so much more that a future King and Queen cared as well.

"It's lovely that they've taken time out to see the devastation that was caused here.

"This a wonderful community which is working together. We will come back from this stronger."

After a short lunch of sausages in **bread**, finger-cut sandwiches and iced tea, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge walked out to greet the screaming masses, iPhones at the ready.

In front of a bevy of girl guides, the pair helped plant a tree before being serenaded by a rollicking, dance-move version of Guides song Bravo.

No doubt the pair planted something Royal in the hearts of the impressionable mob; something they'll never forget.

It's not every day you get to dance with a Duchess.

ends (POOL COPY/DAILY TELEGRAPH)

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