

# “Camilla IS AN incredibly good sort”



In a rare and intimate interview at his country retreat in Scotland, His Royal Highness Prince Charles talks exclusively to The Weekly’s Juliet Rieden about his family, his passionate plans for the planet, what he really thinks of Australians and his nerves at delivering the Jubilee speech to his mum, the Queen.

**T**HE LAST TIME The Weekly interviewed Prince Charles was in 1974 when the 25-year-old was still looking for a wife and forging his path as heir to Britain’s throne. In that interview, the young, athletic and slightly shy Prince was incredibly open and thoughtful, with a feisty protective edge when challenged.

He talked about the importance of a lasting marriage, revealed “family life means more to me than anything else”, that he loved playing polo, painting and watching *Monty Python*, preferred classical to pop music, struggled with the media’s portrayal of his family, felt that “young people should run their own show” and

that, as Prince of Wales, he wanted to use his influence to affect change and try to “lead from the front”.

Talking to the Prince of Wales today, close to 40 years later, it’s fascinating to note how much of what he said back then still holds true, even though he tells me with a hearty chuckle, “I dread to think what I said in those days”.

In fact, many of those ideals he is now feverishly implementing and while his first marriage to Diana may not have lasted as he had hoped, his second marriage to Camilla Parker Bowles, now the Duchess of Cornwall, is arguably one of the greatest royal love stories of our times.

We are meeting in what the Prince calls “the gazebo” in the gardens at Birkhall ▶

Prince Charles in the garden of his Scottish retreat, Birkhall house, which once belonged to his grandmother, The Queen Mother.

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house, His Royal Highness' private retreat on the Balmoral estate in Scotland, some 13 kilometres from the castle where his mother, the Queen, so loves to spend her holidays and Charles spent most of his childhood summers. It's a stunning part of the world and even though the mercury is hitting a challenging 4°C, the air is what they call "invigorating" in these parts and hopping across the clipped lawns is a remarkably friendly red squirrel.

Charles is a fervent campaigner for the cute rodents that are in danger of being wiped out by a virus carried by their immigrant grey American cousins, and he once quipped he'd like to have them as house pets and guests at his breakfast table. Today, almost on cue, the russet-coated squirrel gambols up the back steps and hops through the open door into the house ... just moments before the Prince himself appears to greet me.

The house is homely and comfortable, very different from the majestic, more austere Castle over the hill and, as with all his residences, the Prince's personal touch is everywhere, especially in the garden, which combines flourishes of formality with an abundance of nature and organic building materials.

His Royal Highness guides me onto the stepping stone path through the flower beds of grape hyacinth, daffodils and tall blue hyacinth, to a garden room that is very special to him.

He built the gazebo, which is more of a summer house, as a memorial to his late grandmother, the Queen Mother, whose home Birkhall used to be. It's octagonal in shape, with interior mustard yellow and blue painted walls, and comfortable rattan furniture with cushions from his trips to South Africa and stained glass works by students at his art school. On one table sits a fine bust of the Queen Mother.

Later in the week, I visit Prince Charles' magical gardens at Highgrove, his other country residence, this one down south in Gloucestershire, and again the Queen Mother is honoured with her portrait carved in an artisan wooden relief surrounded by sunrays.

"My grandmother was an enormous influence in my life and I learnt a lot from her," the Prince tells me.

We have met before at official events in the UK and when His Royal Highness toured Australia last year with his wife, but this is the first time I've had the chance to spend quality one-on-one time with the Prince and, at first, I'm struck by his warmth and his self-deprecating sense of humour and, later, by his passion and deep-seated need to hand on a legacy that his sons and grandchildren can be proud of.

At 64, Prince Charles is at the age when most men are looking towards retirement. Instead, his biggest job – that of King – is yet to come and you can't help feeling he's still got a lot of unfinished business in his current role.

There's a powerful sense of duty at the heart of everything that Prince Charles does, probably inherited from his mother, but for the long-time heir it seems also to be mixed with an imperative to make a difference in things he has long believed

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society is getting wrong. He has been criticised over the decades for his opinions and personal projects in the areas of organic farming, sustainability, town planning and an integrative approach to healthcare, so it seems ironic that having been dubbed "old-fashioned" and "reactionary" throughout his entire youth and middle-age, now in his mid-60s the Prince's ideas are finally in vogue and even – to some – visionary.

The British press has been especially vicious in its attacks, suggesting the Prince should stick to royal duties, meeting the people and shaking hands, and leave the social, political and environmental issues to the elected politicians.

Yet the Prince sees it differently and, finally, he's receiving well-earned praise for his brave and bold initiatives, which include Poundbury, building an entire

town in Dorset along his principles of community and sustainable town planning, bringing hope and employment to a depressed area in Scotland by refurbishing a stately home and opening it to the public, and setting up the hugely successful Prince's Trust to help disadvantaged young people who need a financial leg up to form their own businesses. And among so many other imaginative and intelligent projects, there's The Prince's Charitable Foundation, the largest multi-cause charitable enterprise in the UK.

"One of the things that has motivated me for so long is everybody else's children and grandchildren. I mean yours as well as mine and everybody's, because it's what I think is required of somebody like me, to try and think ahead, look at the long term," he tells me.

"So much of the way we've devised our approach to life has become terribly short term. So we've created the throwaway society. But I've always thought it's crazy to go on doing that because we can't just exploit the world around us without thinking about the long-term consequences and that's why I've been trying to warn people of the negative side-effects of this approach to life which totally ignores nature."

Charles is a famed lover of the outdoors, be it walking among his wildflower pastures at Highgrove or in the snow-capped Cairngorms around Birkhall, which inspired him to write a children's book, *The Old Man Of Lochnagar*, for his brother, Prince Edward, in 1980, set on the snowy clifftop I can see on my visit to Birkhall.

While he admits he's not great in the heat, he does remember a charmed time spent as a 17-year-old in the wild Australian bush. He was a pupil at Timbertop's outback school in the foothills of the Great Dividing Range, an idea hatched by his father, Prince Philip, to expand his son's horizons and education.

"It's horrifying. It's nearly 50 years ago, but I remember it well," says the Prince, laughing. "It was the first time that I'd gone anywhere really away from home so to travel 11,000 miles and then find myself in that area of bush country was quite an undertaking.

"And, of course, you can imagine, when you arrive, you're a bit of an oddity for ▶



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The Duke and Duchess of Cornwall, on their wedding day in 2005. "She's got the most wonderful sense of humour," says Charles.

everybody else. But I had a marvellous character in fellow pupil, Stuart Macgregor, who was a year older than me and has been a friend of mine ever since. He and I shared this bit we were living in and it provided an extraordinary degree of freedom and once you've got over, you know, the initial hump and people had got used to me, it got better and better.

"We did long expeditions and we had all these runs through the bush. I remember it being unbelievably hot, but I didn't really mind because I actually rather loved the physical exercise and the combination of the physical and the reflective and the intellectual.

"There were leeches and snakes, and those enormous bull ants and funnel web spiders I've never forgotten. And then waking up in your tent and you're frozen stiff in the frost. I never imagined that would happen in that part of the world – or all these strange creepy crawlies wanting to do you mischief. But it was jolly good for the character and, in many ways, I loved it and I learnt a lot from it. And I certainly discovered what good value the Australians are."

That early trip kicked off a unique connection between Prince Charles and Australia and he has since visited regularly. It also launched his training in the peculiarly royal art of meeting people, something he has become incredibly good at and swears he still enjoys.

"As I say, I'd never gone far from home in those days and I remember there were crowds of people who would gather in airports when I arrived and I had never really had much of that in my life, so I was slightly hesitant about it. Then, of course, finally, I took the plunge and went over and talked to people, and that suddenly unlocked a completely different feeling and I was then able to communicate and talk to people so much more. So, in that sense, I learnt an enormous amount in Australia and discovered just how direct and friendly, straightforward and so often blunt Australians are, but with such an incredibly good sense of humour – that's the wonderful thing, I think. I do enjoy that."

When he brought his wife, the Duchess of Cornwall, to Australia last year, they both felt that nervousness again. "Before you go, you wonder what is the reaction

going to be – it's always the same. But it was wonderful that they took to her and saw her for what she is – an incredibly good sort," he says, with a broad smile.

"She loved it and has such incredibly happy memories of her experience and, obviously, I was thrilled, as you can imagine, for Australians to discover just how special she is ... because she's got the most wonderful sense of humour and has some very good jokes."

When I ask him about the spontaneous dancing at the end of the tour in Christchurch, New Zealand, the Prince dissolves into more chuckling. "They had this stage, I don't know how it happened, but you know, how can you not join in. And, anyway, it's quite fun hamming these things up."

In his 1974 interview, the 26-year-old Prince declared, "If I hear rhythmic music, I just want to get up and dance." Does he

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still feel the beat? "Perhaps, it's slightly less becoming once you get to my age," he quips. "I think given half a chance though, the old one-two and the two-step can come in handy! I'm glad to say that both my sons have inherited it, I think. They're very good. They do make me laugh when they get going."

Key to the daily role of a royal – especially the heir to the throne – is being able to meet people usually fleetingly and still leave a lasting positive and meaningful impression. Prince Charles is a master at it. I ask him if there's such a thing as a royal training camp, but he explains it's a lot more organic than that.

"I think if you find yourself in this sort of life then inevitably you watch others who are older, your parents or your grandparents," he explains. "I learnt a lot from my grandmother, from my parents

and also, funnily enough, from Lord Mountbatten. You know, the late Lord Mountbatten, whom I adored, was a sort of surrogate grandfather because I didn't have a grandfather.

"I was taught to always look people absolutely in the eye; eye contact, I think, is so central. But I'm always interested in people's lives and the other thing is to listen to people. The difficulty is when you have such a short moment. When you meet people in the crowd, you long to go on talking to them, but you can't because you have to keep moving on."

Is he passing this wisdom on to Princes William and Harry? The Prince rolls his eyes and smiles. "Well, I don't know. I hope so. How do you know? You can try, but no, I've always believed I just do what I do and I hope that they might notice something. I mean, funnily enough, I don't see what they're up to when I'm not there, but sometimes I hear back from others that they're surprisingly similar in some ways [to me]. So maybe some things rub off ... which they wouldn't want me to know."

Prince Charles' own connection with the people – and his mother – hit a high point last year when he delivered a moving, witty and emotional eulogy to the Queen, in front of thousands of revellers outside Buckingham Palace, at the Diamond Jubilee concert that concluded the year's celebrations. His opening words, "Your Majesty ... Mummy", were met with rapturous cheers and he went on to pay tribute to his mother "for inspiring us with your selfless duty and service, and for making us proud to be British".

Although used to public speaking, this was something of a landmark in the Prince's life, a very public moment for him to take the lead and express both his own and the nation's thanks for 60 years of service. "I'm thrilled if [you think] it went well," he tells me, "because for about six months I was unbelievably anxious about how I was going to sum up all these things in a short space of time. It was a bit alarming.

"For about six months, I noted down reflections and thoughts. I'm a great believer in noting things that come to you from almost a subconscious source. It actually works for me by capturing those passing moments of perhaps inspiration. ▶

And it frequently happens when I'm walking. You get into the rhythm and, funnily enough, you compose the things in your mind that way, but unless you stop and write them down, you've had it. So I used bits of notes and thoughts, and moments I had and that's how, eventually, I collected them all together and put it down as it came out."

In many ways, that speech also represented a shift in emphasis in the House of Windsor, with the 87-year-old Queen Elizabeth II starting to pass the mantle of office to her son.

As with all things regal, the changes will be slow and subtle, but already, Prince Charles and his wife, the Duchess of Cornwall, are taking on more and more of the Queen's duties, with Prince William also stepping up into a more public role. In May this year, the Prince attended the State Opening of Parliament alongside his mother for the first time in 16 years and this time there was another debut – Camilla was on his arm looking every inch the future Queen Consort in a tiara lent to her by the Queen and formerly owned by the Queen Mother. And in November this year, Prince Charles will be taking his mother's place at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Sri Lanka, another first.

On a personal level, the Prince is also moving into new territory with the birth a few months ago of his very first grandchild, Prince George of Cambridge. He told crowds on an official visit to Yorkshire, in England's north, on the day of the birth that he hoped to be called "Grandpa". The Duchess of Cornwall, who was with him that day, was also clearly delighted at the news. "It's very exciting and wonderful for the grandfather," she said, pointing at her beaming husband. "He's brilliant with children, so he'll have a wonderful time."

While few believe the Queen will ever abdicate, Prince Charles is certainly starting to ease her public burden. In the next decade or two, it's highly likely he will take on the job he's been preparing for his whole life.

And whatever you think of the Prince's views and initiatives, few can question his passion and resolve. The reign of Charles is sure to be an interesting and, I suspect, meaningful one. ■

## Prince Charles' VISION OF THE FUTURE

### ● WHY WE MUST USE WOOL

"When I heard the ultimate horror of all, that they'd created a new sheep called Easycare, which you don't have to shear, I thought, 'Enough!'. I got people together from the fashion world and the wool producers, and said how can we turn this situation around, so that not only are farmers given a better chance, but also we remind people of all the wonderful benefits of wool as a natural, totally eco-efficient, sustainable material. We've managed to get all the wool producers around the world to join in and, hopefully, it's given a new boost to the value of wool. It may be a little bit more expensive, but my goodness, it's longer lasting and safer, and you need the sheep to graze the land."

### ● THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO HEALTHCARE

"I can't bear people suffering unnecessarily. It just seems to me that patient choice is absolutely crucial in all this. I know lots of people who find they aren't benefitted in every case by just the conventional, orthodox drug and finally discover that actually an approach – whether it's herbal medicine or acupuncture or various other forms of complementary medicine – actually does benefit them. There's a lot that can be done on the preventative side. There's an enormous amount we can do by looking at the whole person. That's all I've been trying to say. We are actually made up of mind, body and spirit."

### ● SUSTAINABLE HOUSING WORKS

"I think people in a local community should be properly consulted and provided with an adequate, alternative vision. I want to show that you can blend the best of the ancient with the best of the modern. With sustainable eco-efficient housing, it doesn't have to look like a spaceship from Mars. You could create a genuine community from different socio-economic groups, actually mix affordable housing for those on the lowest income with people buying their houses who have a much higher

income. I was told this was impossible and that I was ridiculous. But we need to just to look again at the way we build and create community."

### ● PROTECTING THE PLANET

"Human beings are part of nature. So the whole of the conventional paradigm, the model, has been to battle against nature in every way. In agriculture, it's portrayed as a constant battle to subdue nature with one chemical after another. What I'm trying to say is there is another way of looking at this if we're going to hand over to our children and grandchildren a planet that isn't totally degraded and compromised. You can't push nature beyond a certain limit. We have to look after it."

### ● PLANS FOR AUSTRALIA

"It's taken me 40 years to finally achieve what I wanted, which was to have a small foundation in Australia. I've already set up lots of charities in the UK to respond to needs as I've seen them over the years. I want to see if we could link up with other groups, organisations and charities in Australia that were interested in looking at some the things that I've been trying to do ... like my foundation for building in the community to work in different states, or my Prince's Trust for young people's development." Starting next year, the Prince – through his charity, The Prince's Foundation for Building Community – is developing the "Prince's Australian Terrace" in Melbourne. The development will be an update to the popular Australian terrace, combining 21st century Australian lifestyle demands with the technology of today.

