

# Princess Margaret Hosted in Mwanza

by Jarat Chopra

**1956** Princess Margaret visited East Africa on her "Blue Lagoon" tour in autumn 1956. After spending her twenty-sixth birthday at Balmoral, her five-week itinerary included the coast of Tanganyika as well as Mwanza and the Williamson diamond mine at Mwadui. Princess Margaret had been heartbroken the year before when she renounced her love for Group Captain Peter Townsend on account of the unacceptability of marrying a divorcé. Concerned about her wedding prospects, she reverted to her social life and official duties.

The *Sunday Express* suggested an unlikely scenario, a fairy tale with an enchanting, forlorn princess and John Thorburn Williamson, a handsome, mysterious 'diamond king' in Tanganyika: "Princess Margaret will visit the man often called the world's richest and most eligible bachelor."

On the eve of the grand event, Iqbal Chand Chopra released the front-page news that Williamson, his partner, would present Princess Margaret with a precious brooch. The centre-piece was a fine blue white stone cut from 16 to 5 carats, surrounded by 250 diamonds in the form of a dahlia designed by Cartier and later reshaped by Dennis Gardner. A few months earlier, on June 11, 1956, the biggest diamond ever found in East Africa had been unearthed. At 240.83 carats and of highest quality, it would be displayed on a billiards table along with a fabulous array of discoveries.

In the late afternoon warmth of Saturday, October 13, Chopra advanced on the Mwanza airfield as the royal De Havilland Heron coming from Tabora by "purple airway" (completely closed to all other flights) landed. He accordingly bowed and received Princess Margaret on behalf of Lake Province as its Member in the Legislative and Executive Councils. Joined by the Governor, Sir Edward Twining, who had flown from Dar es Salaam to accompany this leg of the trip, they proceeded to the formerly German "Fort" overlooking Lake Victoria for dinner with the Provincial Commissioner, Stanley Walden. One hundred outrigger canoes bore lights around the

bay below, the sound of drums and conch shells carrying faintly over the water.

The next morning, past African shields on poles with crowns and the monogram "M", the Princess attended Sunday service in the little St Nicholas church and then lunched with Chopra and his wife, Thelma, at Chopra House, "P.O. Box 1, Mwanza," on Capri Point (today the President's State House).

Thelma, the consummate hostess, relayed the details in a letter to her youngest sister, Marian, in London. "My Darling Baby," she wrote, "You, I



*Iqbal Chand Chopra welcoming Princess Margaret on behalf of Lake Province at Mwanza airport on Saturday, October 13, 1956. Governor Twining is standing behind her. Twining had just flown in from Dar es Salaam to connect with the Princess on this leg of the trip. (Photo credit: The Topical Press Agency)*

know, will be glad to hear that the lunch with Princess Margaret went off most successfully. She arrived here at about ten minutes to 1 PM and stayed until nearly 3 PM. It was just ourselves," their younger son Gerald and his wife Marcelle, H E the Governor and Lady May Twining, the Princess with two ladies in waiting

(Lady Elizabeth Cavendish and Lady Iris Peake) and two gentlemen in waiting (Col Martin Gilliatt and Major the Hon Francis Legh), and the Provincial Commissioner. Two detectives remained on the premises throughout.

When the motorcade turned off dusty Lake Road, "Iqbal and I went down the steps to greet her and I, of course, curtseyed." On the back of a photograph capturing the moment she compared her own diminutive stature: "I am curtseying, and you can't see it very well, but I am much taller than H.R.H.," who was hardly more than five foot, "and here we are about the same height." Thelma guided the entourage up the broad ox-blood stairway to a spacious white residence



with a privileged view of Bismarck Rock. “Lady T, Gerald and Marcelle were presented at the top of the steps. There were crowds of people outside the house, lining the road and sitting on the walls etc. also many press men and women with cameras from all over the world.”

Inside, vases of carnations, gladioli and chrysanthemums stood in each room. The favourite tidbit of correspondents was that Mrs Chopra had flown samples of her curtaining material to the florist in Nairobi, so the flowers to be airlifted back would match her furnishings.

The staff, too, had been suitably prepared under the firm and unforgiving hand of Maganga, son of a chief and the major-domo of the household, who dominated by fear of his regal heritage. He ensured white gloves, additional to the daily uniform of red fez caps, white *kanzus* (tunic) and gold-embroidered, red waistcoats.

cutlery, it did look nice. The flowers I got from the garden—double red and pink Hibiscus, white Bougainvillea, Maidenhair fern and a little blue flower (to make the red, white and blue) which was before her” in three arrangements. She was seated in the middle facing Thelma, with Iqbal to her right, the Twinings at opposite ends, and the rest placed in between.

Indigenous tilapia was the delicacy served: “For lunch I had

- Grapefruit & Maraschino Cocktail*
- Grilled Lake Fish and Tartar Sauce*
- Cold Turkey, Duck, Chicken & Ham Salads*
- Mashed Potatoes*
- Strawberry Ice Pudding*
- Orange Soufflé*
- Coffee*
- Wines of the best*

Everyone praised the food and said it was splendid.”

The dining party retired to the lounge where “the Princess had coffee and chatted a lot to Gerald. She was most delightful, natural and charming. She wore a sapphire blue dress, with large black spots, no hat, black bag, and black shoes. She has beautiful blue eyes and lovely skin and pretty hair and is



*Thelma Florence Chopra greeting Princess Margaret on her arrival at the Chopra's house for lunch on Sunday, October 14, 1956. Iqbal Chopra is standing to the right and Governor Twinning is to the left. Thelma Chopra wrote on the back of this photograph that she is curtsying and therefore looks the same height, but the Princess is in fact even smaller than she is. (Photo credit: The Topical Press Agency)*

“The Princess sat down in the Lounge, smoked a cigarette and had something to drink and chatted with me,” recounted Thelma. “Then we went into lunch. The table set against the lake looked simply wonderful and I wish a coloured snap could have been taken. The linen tablecloth is really super and with the cut glass and silver

most dainty. Iqbal had of course met her at several functions in Dar es Salaam and so she talked to him like an old friend. After she went away, the press people arrived. Some of them asked most impertinent questions...”

The focus of international attention, “Mwanza has been in fête for the days she was here. There



were many functions and the town was ablaze at nights with coloured lighting and decorations. The Governor and Lady Twining were with her nearly all the time. Otherwise, they were here and delightful and nice guests to have stay in the house. We are all very tired and I am so glad the strain is over and I can sit back and breathe again. The Governor was most pleased with everything and said it was a most luxurious house and the best food in Tanganyika. In fact there was a lunch laid on at the airport before they left, but he said in the morning that if I would have sandwiches made for them he would rather eat sandwiches made in this house than any lunch."

Thelma concluded, "Ever your loving Cissy. In great haste, as I know you would be anxious to hear." An enclosed cutting from *The Tanganyika Standard* reported that "The Princess commented to Mrs Chopra on the beautiful setting of the house" and quoted Mr Chopra as saying "she had discussed Tanganyika politics extremely sensibly—'far more sensibly than many older people.'"

On the Monday, 40,000 paid homage to *mtukufu* (Great One) in a myriad of marches and dances at the foremost *baraza* (tribal gathering) in memory before she journeyed 100 miles south-east to the diamond mine at Mwandui. Unfortunately, Williamson was unable to welcome her and show her what had been built and consecrate it with the gift of the publicized brooch. He was

in Montreal being diagnosed with throat cancer. Nevertheless, from her next stop at Arusha, she conveyed to him how much she had enjoyed herself.

The following year in June of 1957, Williamson met the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Alan Lennox-Boyd, who recalled the "tragic occasion": "It was in the Dorchester Hotel in London and he was extremely ill. He had great difficulty in speaking, and in fact our conversation consisted of my talking to him and his writing questions and answers to me...We did have quite a long discussion, me talking and he writing, on the mine and the future. We talked also about the royal visit of Princess Margaret... which he was so proud of to have happened and regretted to have missed. And so, we said 'good-bye' in this sad way."

In July, Williamson issued a statement from his Karen home, curbing speculation about his physical condition and indicating he had personally chosen a replacement for the centrepiece of the brooch, since the original had been found to have a flaw. The finished product was sent to London as Williamson's health failed. He agreed with Chopra to ask Lennox-Boyd to make the formal presentation to Princess Margaret, which was done on November 19, 1957, to commemorate the Tanganyika tour. The *Times* published a picture of Williamson's last diamond creation, two months before he died of his cancer.

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