

LOCAL

Royal wedding a celebration for Daughters of the British Empire

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Published 9:00 a.m. ET May 18, 2018 | Updated 8:26 p.m. ET May 19, 2018

Story Highlights

Daughters of the British Empire is an international nonprofit.

The organization has six chapters in New Jersey.

The wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle is not expected to commence until 7 a.m. Eastern Time on Saturday, but Virginia Bosler of Glen Rock will have her alarm set for 4 a.m.

There's nothing quite like watching a royal wedding live.

"It's important – the immediacy of it," Bosler said. "I did it when Kate and William got married, when Diana and Charles got married, when Andrew and Fergie got married. Sure, you can watch it on the 6 o'clock news but it's not the same. You want to watch every minute that is possibly televised."

Bosler will pair the viewing with tea and crumpets. At some point, she'll call her cousins in her native England to see if there is any royal news she should know about.

"I'll feel like I'm there even though I'm not," Bosler said.

A similar scene will play out in the Fort Lee home of London-born Angela Walsh, who will rise at 5 a.m. and watch in her nightgown, as well as the Washington township residence of Carol Handy, an Essex native who will be up at 6 a.m. and postpone her morning shower until the nuptials conclude.

Mollie Woolley, a Londoner who lives in Fort Lee, Janet Tinz, a Leonia resident born in Hertfordshire, and Hazel Rosen, a Bristol native now residing in North Haledon, will sleep in and catch the festivities a bit later.

The women of the Daughters of the British Empire, a century-old international nonprofit with six chapters in New Jersey alone, never miss a royal wedding, birth or jubilee.

“For English people, the royal family is something that we’ve grown up with and it’s not that we think they’re better than anybody else, it’s just part of the framework and history of the country,” Walsh said. “These same people are in place all your life... It’s like a member of your own family.”

The story continues below the gallery.

Nearly every monarchical milestone prompts a gathering of the 74-year-old North Jersey branch of the organization, named the “General Montgomery” chapter for a British World War II hero.

The group has thrown celebrations for Queen Elizabeth II’s jubilees, marked the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton with a bridal tea party at High SocieTea House in Wayne and recently held a baby shower for the birth of the couple’s third child.

On Saturday, nearly all 24 members will meet at Rosen’s home for a bridal brunch for Prince Harry and Markle. The menu includes quiches, scones with jam and clotted cream, stuffed French toast, homemade cakes and of course, tea served in bone china tea cups.

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Members are encouraged to wear a hat, a fascinator or flowers in their hair, said Bosler, the group’s regent, or administrator.

It’s an opportunity to compare notes on the ceremony, she said. And more importantly, it’s a perfect occasion for a fundraiser.

The Daughters of the British Empire was founded on the motto, “Not ourselves, but the cause” and that cause is supporting four U.S. retirement homes established by the organization for British expatriates.

The General Montgomery chapter collects funds for the Victoria Home in Ossining, New

ShopRite gift cards and anything else the women can think of.

Their charity also extends to the Mountain Lakes-based Sound Start Babies program for infants and toddlers with hearing loss, the North Porch Women and Infants' Center in Paterson and other philanthropic causes.

“We’re like sisters and our common goal is a very strong bond,” Rosen said. “It’s good to know that you’re doing something for other people and you’re enriching the lives of retired elderly people. I believe everybody has to give back.”

The camaraderie is nice too, said Handy, the group’s longest-serving member.

Handy joined the New York City chapter of Daughters of the British Empire in 1977, about a decade after she followed her sister to the U.S. for a temporary stay that turned permanent.

“When people say ‘home,’ you always think of England,” Handy said. “It’s good to talk about where you come from – we call it the ‘old country.’ We all have the same background and talk about our memories.”

Most of the group’s members hail from England or Scotland but membership is open to women who have ties to any of the British Commonwealth countries, either by birth or family.

“We share magazines, we share stories, we share each other’s recent travels home so it's like we never left,” said Bosler, the daughter of an English war bride and an American soldier. “You’re always British if you started off British.”

Many of the women have gone on to marry Americans, have American children and become grandparents to American grand- and great-grandchildren.

Rosen moved to the U.S. as a child and considers herself a product of both her birth country and her adopted one. Woolley, who left London for Detroit as an adult in 1958, said visits to England no longer feel like a homecoming. But there’s still a certain poignancy in seeing an American marry into the British royal family for the first time.

“It’s lovely,” Woolley said. “It’s a great unity between America and England.”

Handy said some of her friends in England are critical of Markle because she is American and a divorcee but the Daughters of the British Empire find Markle’s background and biracial identity refreshing.

“It’s good to have some outside blood coming in,” said Tinz, a prolific crafter in the group and with 30 years of involvement, it’s second-longest serving member.

The story continues below the gallery.

The marriage would have been unthinkable just decades ago, said Bosler. King Edward VIII abdicated in 1936 to marry the divorced American socialite Wallis Simpson. Princess Margaret, Queen Elizabeth’s sister, was forced to give up her fiancé in the late 1950s because he was divorced.

“We’re thrilled that someone like Harry, who’s very progressive and has a strong will, has asserted that he’s choosing the woman he loves and he’s allowed to do that,” Bosler said. “The monarchy has moved with the times.”

Prince Harry is sixth in line for the throne and will likely never be king, but he holds a special place in the heart of the British public, Walsh said. For years, they watched him wrestle with the death of his mother, Princess Diana, Bosler said. Now they get to celebrate his happiness.

“This wedding shows that there’s room and there’s life for love,” Bosler said.

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