



Colonel The Honourable SIR HENRY ABEL SMITH KCMG, KCVO, DSO

[1900 – 1993]



Sir Henry was Patron of the Club from 1958 to 1965.

Sir Henry was elected to Life Membership of the Club in 1961.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

Please do not reproduce them or distribute them outside of the Club membership.

Sir Henry Abel Smith, army officer and Governor, was born on 8 March 1900 at Westminster, London, third of four children of Francis Abel Smith, banker, and his wife Madeline St Maur (née Seymour). He was tutored privately at home and, though a member of one of England's oldest private-banking families, chose an army career.

Entering the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, he was commissioned in the Royal Horse Guards in 1919. In November 1928 Smith (his surname before his marriage) was appointed as an aide-de-camp to Honorary Major General the Earl of Athlone (Governor-General of South Africa).



Captain Henry Abel Smith and Lady May Cambridge

Romance blossomed between the 'dashing young cavalry captain' and Athlone's daughter, Lady May Helen Emma Cambridge (1906-1994)¹. Smith's and Lady May's engagement was officially announced in August 1931. Despite some opposition from Lady May's family, because of her royal lineage the King consented to the marriage, which took place on 24 October that year at St Mary's parish church, Balcombe, Sussex. Lady May became the first royal bride to omit the word 'obey' from the marriage service.

Abel Smith was promoted to Major in 1934. Following the outbreak of World War II in 1939, he served in Palestine and Iraq with the 1st Household Cavalry Regiment (HCR) - one of two mechanised reconnaissance units formed by merging the Royal Horse Guards and the Life Guards. In 1941 he was promoted to temporary Lieutenant Colonel (substantive in 1944) and appointed to command the 2nd HCR.²

From July 1944 the 2nd HCR took part in the invasion of Europe; its armoured and scout cars probed ahead of the advancing army, reporting enemy dispositions, skirmishing, and capturing strategically important bridges.

The unit won an enviable reputation and Abel Smith was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his leadership.

Lady May worked with the British Red Cross Society and the St John Ambulance Association during the war. Back in London and promoted to acting Colonel (1946), her husband served on the staff of the Household Cavalry at Whitehall and worked closely with King George VI to revive the ceremonial life of the peacetime capital. Abel Smith was largely responsible for implementing the King's wish for the cavalry to play an enhanced role in the parade of Trooping the Colour.

In 1950 he was appointed KCVO. That year he retired from the army to his estate in Berkshire, where he and his wife bred Arab horses and enjoyed outdoor activities, particularly riding, hunting, and shooting.

With Sir John Lavarack's term as Governor of Queensland due to end in 1957, Abel Smith's appointment was announced in November and he assumed office on 18 March 1958.³

¹ She was a niece of King George V and Queen Mary. She had been born Princess May of Teck on 23 January 1906 at "Claremont", Esher, Surrey. The eldest of three children and only daughter of the then Prince Alexander of Teck (Queen Mary's brother), army officer, and his wife Princess Alice, formerly princess of Albany (Queen Victoria's granddaughter). In 1917, in the midst of World War I, the family, in common with others, the family relinquished their German titles at the request of King George V. Created Earl of Athlone, Alexander assumed the surname Cambridge.

² Universally respected, if not always liked by those who did not match his standards, and known as "Aunty" because he was so fussy, he trained his men hard.

³ A newspaper article suggested that the selection of the husband of Queen Elizabeth II's cousin was 'a compliment' to Queensland, with the State's centenary to be celebrated in 1959.

Queenslanders took an immediate liking to the couple and their popularity grew quickly. Both were regarded as approachable, energetic, jovial, sporty, and charming, and as 'true party givers'. They travelled extensively throughout the State; invited the Australian Broadcasting Commission to Fernberg to film *At Home at Government House*; and hosted successful royal visits by Princess Alexandra in 1959, the Queen in 1963, and Lady May's mother in 1964.

Demonstrating the respect Abel Smith had gained, his five-year term was extended by three years. From May to September 1965 he served as administrator of the Commonwealth of Australia.

He was appointed a knight of the Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem (1958) and KCMG (1961).

The University of Queensland conferred an honorary LLD (1962) on him and named a lecture theatre after him.

In March 1966 thousands lined the streets of Brisbane to farewell him and his wife. The Lord Mayor, Alderman Clem Jones, declared that 'nobody had ever done a better job as Governor than Sir Henry; probably nobody in the future would exceed what he had done'.⁴

He was the last British Governor of Queensland.

The Abel Smiths returned to their estate in Berkshire, where they took an active part in country life and worked their Arab stud.

Sir Henry was Patron of the Club from 1958 to 1965 and was elected to Life Membership of the Club in 1961.

Suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Sir Henry spent his last years in a nursing home and died there on 24 January 1993. Lady May died on 29 May 1994 at Kensington, London, and was buried in the Royal Burial Ground, Frogmore, Windsor. The couple's son and two daughters survived them.

Sources included:

- Katie McConnel, 'Abel Smith, Sir Henry (1900–1993)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/abel-smith-sir-henry-27157/text34690>, published online 2017, accessed online 2 April 2019.
- Various web pages
 - <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/abel-smith-sir-henry-27157>
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Abel_Smith
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents

⁴ He was succeeded by His Excellency Sir Alan Mansfield KCMG, KCVO