

Empire Games, Sydney, 1938

The Empire Games competition

The tradition of an international sporting competition involving countries of the British Empire began with the Festival of Empire sports meeting, which took place in London as part of the events connected with the coronation of King George V in 1911. Later suggestions that an Empire-based, regular sporting competition to parallel the Olympic games be held did not bear fruit until 1930, when, following a Canadian initiative, the first Empire Games took place. These first Games, held in Hamilton, Canada, were judged a great success. With the formation of an Empire Games Federation in 1932, the Games began to take on a format that resembles the Commonwealth Games that we know today. Two more Empire Games were held before World War II – London in 1934, and Sydney in 1938.

The Sydney Empire Games

The 1938 Empire Games in Sydney were planned to form part of the 150th anniversary celebrations of the establishment of the city (which also heralded the foundation of British settlement in Australia). These celebrations were scheduled to take place over a three month period – between Australia Day, 26 January and Anzac Day, 25 April. The Empire Games were held during the week of 5–12 February 1938.

Competitors from 15 Empire countries participated in the seven sports (athletics, boxing, cycling, lawn bowls, rowing, swimming and wrestling) that made up the games. Most of the venues used were existing sporting or entertainment facilities. The Sydney Cricket Ground was the main stadium, while events were also held at the Sydney Sports Ground and the North Sydney Pool. A competitors' residential village was established within the grounds of the Sydney Show Ground.

Australia finished as the most successful of the competing nations. The outstanding competitor of the Games was Australian sprinter Decima Norman who won five gold medals.

Records holdings relating to the Sydney Empire Games

Organisation of the Sydney Empire Games rested with a non-Government body, the Australian British Empire Games Association, which received considerable support from the NSW State Government. The Commonwealth Government did not have a major role in organising the Games,

but the records held by the National Archives reveal that it actively supported Sydney's bid, that Federal Cabinet approved funds to be used for the outfitting of the Australian team, and that Prime Minister Joseph Lyons accepted an honorary role as President of the Games and was present at the opening ceremony.

Additional information relating to the Games can be found in other parts of the Archives' collection, and includes records relating to arrangements for celebrating the 150th anniversary of European settlement, the publicity photographs of competitors found in the Australian National Travel Association collection, and Customs arrival permits for some of the overseas competitors.

Sydney Empire Games records held by the National Archives

Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>British Empire Games</u>	1933–50	A461, D344/1/12
<u>150th Anniversary celebrations, Sydney</u>	1937–39	A601, 661/1/12
<u>Empire Games, 1938</u>	1937	CP4/2, Item 59
<u>Australian British Empire and Commonwealth Games Association – patronage of Prime Minister</u>	1961	A463, 1961/5995

Sydney

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Historical file – Sesqui-centenary celebrations of Australia</u>	1938	C3994, 229

Melbourne

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Collective travel permit for the members of a team from Ceylon Olympic and Empire Games Association</u>	1937	B13, 1937/19782
<u>Sport, Other, Swimming – Lynda Adams in high tower diving at British Empire Games in Sydney during Australia's 150th Anniversary Celebrations, 1938</u>	1938	M914, Sport – Other 5805

Adelaide

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Collective travel permit for the members of a team from Ceylon Olympic and Empire Games Association – British Empire Games</u>	1937	D596, 1937/8224

Other records of sporting events held by the Archives

- *Fact sheet 57 - 1956 Olympic Games, in Melbourne*