

Stirling Castle Palace Project

Kirsty Owen, Historic Scotland



An aerial view of Stirling Castle looking north-east.

The immense project to return the royal apartments of Stirling Castle's Renaissance royal palace to how they might have looked in the 1540s is nearly complete. Indeed, on the weekend of 4 June the great oak doors will be heaved open and visitors from all round the world will flood in. They will walk through opulent rooms, decorated in the most fashionable mid-16th century styles. Gorgeous tapestries, and other hand-woven textiles, will hang from the walls. Some apartments will be splendidly furnished with oak furniture, engraved and painted with ornate designs.

All of this is a long way away from what the palace was like when it came into our hands after the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders marched out of the castle in the 1960s. It had been their regimental training depot for many decades, and a military base for centuries before. When this chapter in the castle's story ended, a new one began with the gradual return of its principal buildings to their original magnificence. Historic Scotland first

set about transforming the Great Hall and the Chapel Royal, also developing exhibitions, displays, a café and shops. The final, and biggest, challenge was the palace block. Its exterior walls were decorated with wonderful stone statues, including one of the ill-fated James V who commissioned the palace in 1538, but its interiors had lost almost all their original features barring the fireplaces.

I recently had the pleasure of doing a talk for the Lorn Archaeological and Historical Society, and discussed the work needed to return a bare and empty building to something, we hope, would feel familiar to Mary of Guise and her daughter – Mary Queen of Scots. After all, this was their main residence for some years after 1543. The refurbishment is the largest project of its kind ever undertaken by Historic Scotland and has involved an investment of £12 million. What our visitors will see is only the tip of the iceberg. An extraordinary amount of archaeological and historical research was needed before we could even begin the basic jobs of plastering the walls, laying the floors and creating new ceilings. Even more expertise, from the UK and throughout Europe, was employed to help us decide on the decorative scheme and furnishings.

With little in the way of surviving building records, the project was dependent on top-quality research. The archaeology is a prime example. Between 2003-05 Gordon Ewart and his team from Kirkdale Archaeology carried out an astonishingly thorough series of excavations, combined with a detailed standing building survey, which revealed much. In addition to this there was extensive specialist research by our own staff – including analysis of paint and plaster fragments. Perhaps one of the most interesting revelations was that despite being intended as an impressive expression of the latest Renaissance fashions and ideas, the palace was far from being entirely a new build. Earlier structures were cannibalised and incorporated, with a great deal of ingenuity going into creating an impression of evenness and regularity in a palace block which is a long way from rectilinear.

The archaeological research was an end in itself as well as being an invaluable source of information on how to achieve the maximum authenticity in the palace refurbishment. It resulted in an enormous online publication *Stirling Castle Palace, Archaeological and Historical Research*, which embraces everything from 15,000 archaeological context sheets through to academic papers. Every aspect of the work can be

examined, scrutinised and assessed both now, and in years to come, by anyone and everyone, from laymen to experts. It's a prime example of our ambition to make archaeology open and accessible to all.

Fortune has left us with some clues to the glories to the early palace décor – about 34 of them. These are the Stirling Heads, metre-wide, hand-carved oak medallions depicting kings, queens, courtiers, Roman emperors, Classical heroes, and others. There were once more (some of the survivors are composites and we have drawings of two destroyed by fire at Dunstaffnage) and they were used to decorate palace ceilings. We know



One of the recreated Stirling Heads is painted after being installed on the ceiling of the King's Presence Chamber. It depicts Hercules vanquishing a serpent.

that one of these was the King's Inner Hall, intended as the place where much royal business would be conducted, because there are records of them being removed in 1777 after becoming unsafe. The carvings (sometimes known as Scotland's *other* crown jewels due to their importance, rarity, beautiful workmanship) were then scattered across the UK. Research was carried out to determine who, and what, they represented. Some of the resulting identifications are pretty firm, for example there are several of Hercules, the archetypal virtuous man and one of the Nine Worthies, plus Julius Caesar and the emperor Titus. We also think that Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, is there. Just think

of the importance that foreign leaders attach to being pictured with the US President when they visit the White House and you will appreciate why. Rulers like being seen with the top member of their elite set.

We wanted to recreate the ceiling of the King's Inner Hall. As some of the survivors may have come from elsewhere in the palace it was unlikely to be exact. But by learning more about the heads we could come up with a version of that would make sense to a Renaissance Scottish courtier. Close examination also revealed paint fragments on the heads, confirming that they would once have been brightly coloured. The originals were too fragile to be put back up, so Historic Scotland engaged master Craftsman John Donaldson, to carve a replica set – including the Dunstaffnage pair. It took five years, and that was before they were put in place and painted. When the finished results were revealed to the media they drew gasps of amazement, confirming our hope that they will be among the big attractions.

The project has seen the creation of a gallery on the upper floor where the originals will be on display in purpose-built cabinets, which will allow the public to see them from just centimetres away. This area also has some lovely interactives so visitors can find out about Scotland in the Renaissance, plus an audio-visual presentation about the external statues. Here again, the research has contributed directly to the visitor experience. A major attempt has been made to understand the statues, who they represented and the messages they were intended to convey. Like the heads, everything about them would have been brimming with meaning. The AV uses special effects to take one of the weather worn statues back to what it might have looked like when freshly carved and, in line with the research, colourfully painted.

As I write the main contractors, who have been at work in the palace for nearly two years, are preparing to return the site to our control. This will allow us to carry out the final dressing. Chairs, cupboards, beds, benches, an altar and much more besides, will be moved inside. Some have been inspired by Guise or Scottish royal household inventories, while other items come from preserved items in museums, or depictions in period paintings. There will also be gorgeous hand-embroidered cloths of estate, bearing the heraldry of Mary of Guise. While there will be a few items in the king's three apartments, most will be concentrated in the matching set (an outer hall, inner hall and bedchamber) that were built for his queen. This is also the outcome of research. The Stewart court was peripatetic at this time, with most furniture following the monarch on his travels (or being packed away in his absence) and there is no evidence that he ever saw the palace complete. Dying in December 1542 at Falkland Palace,

aged just 30, James V left Mary of Guise as a widow abroad, in a fractured realm, with a daughter less than a week old.

The palace which visitors will see is testimony to the ambitions of a Renaissance king. But, rather more than that, it points to the strength of the French noblewoman who not only stamped her mark on Stirling, but on the whole kingdom. She rose to become regent and successfully ensured the transfer of power to her daughter, among the most famous Scots of all time. And thanks to the survival of the palace (the most complete example of its era in Britain) and to the research that has been carried out, we can now step back through the centuries and get a powerful insight into the world they would have known.

Address for correspondence: Kirsty Owen, Historic Scotland. Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH.



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