

Background

FURNISHING THE PALACE

When James V planned his new palace at Stirling he wanted it furnished with the very best that money could buy.

That was to include the latest must-have gear for Europe's social elite – the four poster bed.

He got two while in France, made in flat pack style so they could be taken apart, put in plush leather cases and carried round his various residences – and a couple more were made later.

This was a king determined to show he had style, which was important for impressing Scottish nobles and proving to fellow princes that he was to be taken seriously as a thoroughly modern monarch.

Dr Sally Rush, a lecturer from Glasgow University's Department of History of Art, was commissioned to research the furniture and fittings of the palace in the mid-16th century.

Her findings have played a hugely important role in deciding how it will be redecorated and refurnished in Historic Scotland's project to transform the royal lodgings into an important new visitor attraction.

What Dr Rush has found provides a remarkable insight into court life, and how a young king tried to mark his mark.

"After his father was killed at Flodden it seems that very little was bought for the royal household, so James V spent more than 20 years living with his dad's old furnishings
"But if you go through the royal accounts you find there is a period of incredible change.

"If you had gone into a royal residence in 1536, then again in 1538 you would see a big shift in magnificence."

This was precisely the time when James, born in 1512, was strutting his stuff in Europe and being exposed to the fashions and luxuries of France – a rich and powerful kingdom at the forefront of the Renaissance.

In 1536 he spent time touring the chateaux before arriving in Paris to wed the daughter of King Francis I.

Determined to make an impression he processed to Notre Dame on the arm of Francis I wearing a coat stitched with 49,500 pearls and real gold buttons.

As well as the princess Madeleine, James also landed a substantial dowry giving him the chance to do a fair bit of shopping.

"A report to Henry VIII from the English ambassador in Paris said he was running up and down the streets with his servants buying all sorts of trinkets and trifles," says Dr Rush.

Then there were all the wedding gifts – perhaps including a cloth of gold and cloth of silver bed.

Beds were important and made big social statements.

This will be clear from the replica four-poster that Historic Scotland is having made for the queen's bedchamber at Stirling.

It will be draped with violet-brown silk velvet and have violet silk damask curtains trimmed with silver and gold.

"Furniture was about bestowing dignity on a room, so the rich took it very seriously indeed and the bed was especially important.

"It was an opportunity to show off your wealth through the finery and richness of the fabrics you could afford.

"In fact, when nobles or royalty were receiving a particularly important visitor, they would often do so standing in front of their bed."

The marriage to Madeleine was short-lived – she was a sickly young woman who died soon after reaching Scotland in 1537 – but the influence of France continued. James then wed a new bride the healthy, wealthy widow Mary de Guise, promising her a palace as fine as anything in her homeland.

Dr Rush's research shows that Stirling had gorgeous tapestries and wall hangings, exotic Turkish carpets, cupboards to display the royal silverware and velvet covered chairs.

And it wasn't just a case of buying goods and shipping them home.

James also hired craftsmen and upholsterers to come back to Scotland and work for him and their influence would probably have been strongly reflected in the look of the palace.

A major challenge Dr Rush encountered was that while the royal records show what items the household had, how much they cost and where some of them came from they are very short on detail about what they looked like.

"Very little furniture survives from the time and what there is has often been changed or mended so has to be treated very cautiously," she says.

By a stroke of good fortune an ornately carved 16th century cabinet, which belonged to the de Guise household, survives at a museum in France.

It is just the sort of thing that Mary might have brought with her, so Historic Scotland has commissioned something similar for the queen's bedchamber.

Dr Rush has also spent time studying contemporary art for clues about the fashions of the period.

"A lot of paintings of the day had quite a photographic quality and recorded people's clothes and rooms in great detail.

"There is one, a miniature or book illustration, of Anne of Brittany, the wife of Louis XII of France, for example, which shows a table, cupboard and bed very clearly.

"Then there are others like Holbein's portrait of Thomas More demonstrates just how fabulous the quality of the hand woven materials were.

"This was a time when everyone was very much judged by their appearance, right down to the colour of the dyes because particular ones, like reds and purples, were rare and very expensive.

"On significant occasions James and Mary wore red and purple to show that they were of the highest rank."

Unlike today there was probably little sense of matching colour schemes, the emphasis was on abundance.

That's not to say that there weren't aesthetic sensibilities.

"Everything had its effect, and we have to remember, there was no electric light so people would be thinking about how rooms and clothes would look by the light of a fire and a few candles.

"Good quality beeswax candles were expensive even for a king.

"Clothes with gold or silver threaded through them would shimmer as you moved around, and the silver displayed on the cupboards would reflect the flames. It could have been rather lovely to see."

Many were doubtless impressed by the king's magnificence – but others took a dim

view.

Bishop Leslie observed: "... there were many new skills and devices, as well as palaces, clothes, ways of eating and behaving, first used in Scotland at this time, after the French fashion.

"While this seemed very pleasing and beautiful, it was also excessive and decadent and beyond the means of the realm of Scotland to continue or sustain ..."

Astute political observer or po-faced curmudgeon?

Whichever is the case, James V had little opportunity to enjoy his worldly goods, as he died in 1542 aged just 30 – it is not even known whether the palace was complete at this time or if work continued in future years.

But his wife lived on, later became regent of Scotland and ruling the country until her death in 1560, after which her teenage daughter Mary Queen of Scots returned from France.

The absence of the king means that Historic Scotland is leaving the chambers that would have been his fully decorated but relatively unfurnished.

However, those that belonged to his widow will be resplendent with all the fineries that the mid-16th century could afford.