

## A LUXURIOUS REFUGE IN A VIOLENT WORLD

### THE EARLY YEARS OF STIRLING CASTLE'S ROYAL PALACE



STIRLING  
CASTLE

Stirling Castle was one of James V's favourite residences. It had everything the king needed. There was the Great Hall for national festivities and a Chapel Royal for important religious ceremonies. There were fine gardens and excellent hunting nearby. All this made it an ideal place to hold court and indulge the young king's love of display, pageantry and bloodsports.

James often spent Lent at Stirling, culminating in a great Easter feast. During his 20s, with the hope of a long and successful reign ahead, he started a major upgrade – creating a new palace that would impress Scots and foreign emissaries alike. James was aware of how challenging a task this was, having spent time in France where royalty and aristocracy had far greater resources and ready access to the best and most fashionable architecture, art and crafts. The project began in 1538, but he did not live long enough to see its completion.

#### Castle Fit for a King

Castles weren't all about defence – but they were about showing who was boss. High on its rock and dominating the plains for miles around, Stirling Castle really looked the part. The site had been in royal hands since at least 1110 and had undergone a series of expansions and improvements over the centuries. Gardens and royal lodgings are known to have existed in the days of James II (1437-60). Just as important was that many of the lands nearby were under royal control – giving direct access to the wealth and resources needed to run the court. Many local Crown properties were in the hands of James V's mother, but came to him when she died in 1541, further increasing his interests in the region. Estimates suggest that Margaret's lands in the Stirling area yielded £370 in money, plus valuable commodities like roughly 17 tonnes of barley, nine tonnes of wheat, 17 tonnes of malt, four tonnes of oats, 30 salmon and 90 capons.

James V's wife, Mary de Guise, kept poultry at Stirling, then there was venison from the royal park, a doocot for pigeon meat, herbs and fruit from the gardens and ponds for fresh fish. The town's merchants could be relied on for other

goods, such as wine. All this helped confirm Stirling's standing a perfect place for a king with a love of lavish entertainment and display.

While James had over 30 residences to choose from it appears that he spent around 70% of his time at just four of them - Stirling, Linlithgow, Holyrood and Falkland. This was in era when monarch's moved from one location to another throughout the year – often with huge baggage trains moving ahead of them and large numbers of nobles, officials, servants and their families in tow.

Stirling, and its palace, also need to be seen within the context of James' efforts to professionalise the government. Instead of simply drawing all his officials from the most powerful families in the land, he employed men from lesser backgrounds who would work hard because they needed his money and favour.

## **The Life of James V**

James was born at Linlithgow Palace in 1512, the son of King James IV and Margaret Tudor – sister to King Henry VIII of England. It was an auspicious start. His father, born in 1473, was a vigorous ruler who had extended royal power, built great warships, and undertaken ambitious building projects to modernise Linlithgow Palace, Stirling Castle and Edinburgh Castle. But disaster struck when he, along with much of Scotland's ruling elite, were wiped out at the Battle of Flodden in 1513. As was so often the case in Scottish history the country was left with an infant sovereign and a government run by uneasy and shifting alliances of nobles.

At the age of 15 James V shook himself free of the powerful Douglas family, who tried to direct his decisions, and began to assert his own will. As the head of a small and poor country he worked hard to increase his revenues and the political stature of Scotland. Marrying a rich wife, Madeleine daughter of King Francis I of France in 1537, was a help. She died soon after and he was free to wed a second rich bride, Mary, daughter of the Duke of Guise. At the same time he increased his authority by enhancing the Auld Alliance, and supporting the French against an English monarchy that had often been ambitious to completely swallow Scotland.

Mary and James had two sons, but both died, yet the king was young and seemingly had plenty of time to produce a male heir. In 1542 Mary fell pregnant again and hopes were high that the king, aged 30, would soon have a healthy prince at his side. That year the English and Scots were involved in raids and then outright war. There was fighting on either side of the border with the Scots victorious at Hadden Rigg, near Kelso, but the English winning at Solway Moss on 24 November. The battle might have ended up being regarded as a relatively minor episode had it not been for the events which came in its wake. James, who was not at Solway Moss, remained busy for the next few days but by 6 December had fallen sick and was confined to bed. Two days later, Mary de Guise gave birth to a girl, rather than the hoped-for boy. On the night of 14, December, the monarch died and once again there was an infant on the throne of Scotland.

## **Mary, Queen of Scots**

Scotland faced difficult times after the death of the king. Stirling Castle and its new palace soon became a refuge for his widow and their baby daughter. By the summer of 1543, just months after James V's death, James Stewart the earl of Arran had become regent and agreed that the infant Mary, Queen of Scots should marry Henry VIII's son, prince Edward. Many feared this would end Scotland's independence.

Arran seems to have installed himself at Stirling, even though it was officially the dower house of Mary de Guise, the king's widow. Worse still, there were fears that the English might guarantee a wedding by crossing the border to kidnap the future bride and achieve conquest by marriage. However, de Guise had powerful allies, and together they won the day. In July mother and baby made a triumphant

move from Linlithgow to Stirling attended by 2,500 cavalry, 1,000 infantry and with a baggage train a mile long. Such a spectacle was a clear statement that many Scots were unwilling to hand over the future of the country to Henry VIII of England. The young queen was to be kept safe in one of the country's strongest castles and a long way from the border.

### **Home to a child queen**

The palace was now the home of a child queen and her small entourage. Mary de Guise, her servants and supporters, kept a close eye on the little girl and her welfare. But they were not the only ones watching her every move. Arran, who now wanted the child married to his own son, feared that she might be spirited away to the Highlands and then to France. And after 1547 the new French king, Henry II, fancied the idea of wedding her to his own son, Francois. Parliament chose two lords, one favouring Arran and the other his rival Lennox, each with 24 men to monitor Mary.

In the meantime her mother, dowager queen and adept politician, was working hard to build up her own power base with Stirling as its core. Quite what it was like to be a small child surrounded by so much scheming is hard to imagine. A place of carefree happiness, or gilded cage?

Seen objectively the palace was a place of relative safety in a very dangerous world. Anyone within the castle walls would have been aware of an ongoing military build up with the arrival of artillery, the building of a blockhouse and the completing of the town walls. These were no mere precautions. English forces were gradually taking control in southern Scotland, and even the accession of the nine-year-old Edward to their throne in 1547, did not bring peace.

Then there was always the risk of a coup by one of Scotland's own armed factions. On top of this there were outbreaks of plague, even in Stirling itself. Raids and skirmishes took place. And in 1547 came the disastrous battle of Pinkie at which many Scots, including key members of the de Guise household, were killed or captured. Suddenly Stirling was no longer looking safe and young Mary was whisked away to Inchmahome Priory, on an island in the Lake of Mentieth. The French were asked for help and took control of the defence of key parts of Scotland. Help came at a price and in 1548 the Scots allowed their queen to be taken overseas and raised in France.

### **Mary de Guise and the Palace**

Mary de Guise, stayed behind after her daughter went to France, with the palace as her main residence. But 1548 was a dreadful year. English armies ravaged the country and held forts across the south, though they were unable to decisively beat the Scots and French. At one point de Guise was near Haddington, which was occupied by the English, when a shot fired from the town killed 16 gentlemen around her. She later fell sick, a suspected victim of the plague, and remained in isolation for several weeks while being nursed back to health.

Yet de Guise was becoming increasingly powerful in Scottish affairs and when the Earl of Huntly, held captive by the English since the battle of Pinkie, escaped and returned north he joined her for Christmas at Holyrood, and Hogmanay at Stirling. The fortunes of war ebbed and flowed, but the English were finally forced to abandon their campaign when rebellions broke out around Norwich. A peace treaty was finally signed in April 1550.

In 1554 Mary de Guise was declared regent and ruled Scotland on behalf of her daughter. At this point the palace of Stirling came very much into its own as a centre of government – just as James V intended. While Mary made increasing use of other royal residences, in keeping with the contemporary Scottish practice of having peripatetic government, Stirling remained her principal base.

This was a period which saw immense changes as Protestantism grew ever stronger in the face of a staunchly Catholic rulership. Mary de Guise died from dropsy in 1560. Her death was at Edinburgh Castle, rather than Stirling. Severely ill and increasingly beleaguered, the last weeks of her life were spent trying to hold her government together in the face of immense pressures. A substantial French force was holed up behind sophisticated defences in Leith, but they were gradually being worn down by Scots Protestants – the Lords of the Congregation – and their heavily armed English allies. The death of Mary de Guise brought the surrender of Leith and an end to the Auld Alliance with France, as the Reformation triumphed and Scotland made common cause with its traditional foe, England.

In August 1561 Mary Queen of Scots returned, arriving in Leith to take control of government. Her husband, King Francis II of France, had died in 1559. As a teenage Catholic widow brought up abroad she had many challenges to face. Mary's reign was troubled and in 1567 she was forced to abdicate in favour of her Protestant son. As an exile in England she was accused of continuous plotting and beheaded in 1587. Yet in 1603, following the death of Queen Elizabeth I, Mary's son succeeded to the English throne and united the crowns as King James VI and I.

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