

Background

A PALACE WITH A PURPOSE

The palace was to be a centre of government and power – splendid enough to impress even the rich and powerful French.

Indeed King James V promised his bride, Mary de Guise, that it would be as grand as anything she was familiar with in France.

The young king had done well at increasing royal revenues and was expanding his household in order to create a more effective administration.

The palace at Stirling Castle was to provide a suitable setting for his modernised regime.

Its design closely reflected the workings of contemporary government.

There were twin sequences of rooms, one for the king and the other for his queen.

These would be the places where great issues of politics, war, justice and finance were thrashed out and where rival factions would jockey for position.

Well born and ambitious men would try to win the favour of their majesties and gain access to the more private lodgings where only the favoured few were permitted.

The palace would be a place of colour and spectacle full of gossip, intrigue and opportunity.

Fortunes could be made within its walls, but it was also full of dangers.

Those who aspired to glittering prizes also ran the risk of a painful fall from grace.

Setting the stage

Royal life in the Renaissance had much to do with theatre, and the king's and queen's lodgings were the stage and set.

A huge amount was also going on behind the scenes to make the whole operation appear effortless.

With no modern devices, this was a labour-intensive affair.

There were kitchens, storerooms, stables and workshops plus a host of secular and ecclesiastical staff from priests and administrators to cooks, cobblers, soldiers, grooms, craftsmen, maids and many more.

When the king was absent the castle would tick over on a reduced staff.

But it would burst into life as rooms were prepared and food was stockpiled in advance of his arrival.

The operation would need to be seamless, so court life could roll on without a hitch.

And any public act by royalty was always accompanied by a degree of ceremony.

One well-recorded example of a royal arrival was in 1543 when the infant Mary, Queen of Scots was moved from Linlithgow to Stirling – which was now her mother's dower house.

They were said to have been accompanied by 2,500 cavalry, 1,000 infantry and a

baggage train that was a mile long.

At Stirling everything was focussed on the lodgings for the king and queen.

The outer halls were the most accessible and public with richer, finer, more closely controlled rooms towards the heart of the complex.

While the Renaissance planning of the palace at Stirling has survived better than anywhere else similar in Britain the queen's inner closets – very small rooms off the bedchamber where she would have slept and washed – are gone.

A viewing gallery also once ran from the king's to the queen's lodgings, and the king's own kitchen was probably in the west quarter.

While the palace project will bring the royal lodgings back to life, there will also be the chance to find out about some of the servants who made the court function.

Arrangements are currently being made to upgrade exhibits in the vaults about key characters in court life.

Among them are those who performed the all important task of helping kings and courtiers temporarily set aside their cares – the jesters and musicians.

Building on the past

Generations of Stuart monarchs had favoured Stirling as one of their most important residences.

James II and III had each played a part in enhancing the castle. James IV (1488-1513) commissioned an entire royal lodging in 1496 – now known as the King's Old Building.

He also added defensive works to the south and east and had the Great Hall constructed.

It's a mark of James V's ambition and affluence that he decided on creating a new palace block even though the existing royal lodgings were only 40 years old.

James also decided that the existing chapels were insufficient for his needs and built a new Chapel Royal (not the current one which was the work of James VI in 1594) – ensuring it was endowed with a suitable complement of priests.

Even though the king was doing much that was new, he was also emphasising continuity by building on foundations established by his forebears.

And while English kings had started to settle some government departments in permanent bases, Scotland stuck to an older model.

The entire state apparatus usually accompanied the king as he roved from one residence to the next.

This meant appropriate space and facilities had to be instantly available wherever they went.

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