

Background

STIRLING HEADS – Scotland’s Other Crown Jewels

The Stirling Heads are a remarkable reminder of the moment when Scotland stood poised on the brink of leaving the medieval centuries and entering the modern age. Each of these large oak medallions – or roundels – was hand carved by skilled craftsmen who created vivid images of all sorts of figures from imps and classical heroes to kings, queens and courtiers.

A total of 34, some as much as a metre across, have survived the centuries since their creation some time after 1530.

It is believed that many of them originally decorated the ceiling of the King’s Inner Hall – at the very heart of the royal palace.

There is nothing quite like them anywhere else in the world.

One of the most important parts of the palace project is to put the 31 Stirling Heads in the care of Historic Scotland on display in their own gallery, along with three on permanent loan from National Museums Scotland.

It will be the first time for many years that this exceptional part of Scotland’s artistic heritage has been on show for all to enjoy.

Another exciting part of the palace project is the carving of a complete replica set of heads in order to recreate the ceiling of the King’s Inner Hall as it might have looked in the 16th century.

The new display

A special display area is being created for the original Stirling Heads on the upper floor of the royal palace.

It is here that hundreds of thousands of visitors a year will be able to admire some of Scotland’s most unusual and special works of art.

In fact the modern visitor will come face to face with the heads at a distance of just a few centimetres – far closer than any of the select few who would have been admitted to the King’s Inner Hall five centuries ago.

They will be on show in glass cases specially designed to show them off to their best effect – while keeping them in a humidity and temperature-controlled environment to ensure their conservation.

Lighting will also be kept at an optimum level to help safeguard this precious collection.

The display area will be the centrepiece of a special gallery, which will explore the background to life and the arts in mid-16th century Scotland.

Key questions

How many were there? We do not know how many roundels there originally were. It is likely that some were lost and destroyed after being removed from the ceiling in 1777. In addition to the 34 surviving, two were destroyed in a fire at Dunstaffnage Castle. Fortunately there are drawings of both. Six of the heads are also known to be composites in which missing parts of the borders have been replaced, possibly using sections from other now-lost heads.

Where were they in the palace? The heads were used to decorate the ceilings of the most important rooms in the palace – particularly the King's Inner Hall. This was a throne room where certain people were admitted into the presence of their monarch.

What were they for? The whole room would have been designed to overawe visitors with the majesty of the king and power of the monarchy. The ceiling would have played a very important part in this.

How will the replicas be used? We are using the replicas to recreate the ceiling of the King's Inner Hall as it might have looked in the mid-16th century. Expert study has come up with suggestions for how they might have been displayed. While this is certainly not an exact science, it gets us as close as the evidence allows to the ceiling's original appearance.

What is shown on the heads? There are a variety of images, some of which may be careful portraits of real people, or representations of past kings and queens of Scotland to emphasise the power and lineage of the monarchy.

Will the gallery be themed? The gallery display will be divided into two themes. The first is *Renaissance Putti (imps), Kings, Queens and Courtiers* and the second is *The Ancient World, Mythology, Court Theatre and Pageantry, Costume*.

Do the carvings have meanings? We are not sure, but one roundel shows a jester who is clutching one buttock while sticking out his tongue at the people below. It has been suggested that this was the first one seen by visitors and was a warning – watch your tongue or you risk a kick.

What inspired the images? At this time there was a fascination with Roman coins. These tended to have a portrait on one side and a Classical god on the other. This idea may be reflected in the heads.

How many replicas are being made? All 34 surviving roundels are being copied and two others – destroyed by a fire at Dunstaffnage Castle – are being recreated from sketches. In order to complete the King's Inner Hall ceiling another one is being made from scratch, based on styles and images in keeping with the originals.

Who carved the originals? The evidence is limited but points to them being the work of a Frenchman and two Scots. More than one set of hands was clearly at work, even on individual heads, because while some of them are masterly – showing a detailed knowledge of human anatomy and bone structure – others are much less sophisticated.

When were they made? Scientists (using a tree ring dating technique called dendrochronology) have found the trees were cut in the mid-16th century, somewhere between 1530 and 1544. It is assumed they were cut as part of the 1538 construction project.

Were they in plain wood? Careful analysis detected microscopic fragments of paint on the originals – fitting in with the Renaissance love of strong colours. As a result the new versions carved for Historic Scotland will be brightly painted.

How large are the heads? The largest of the roundels is a metre in diameter. They are deeply carved from oak and are up to 7.6 cm thick, weighing in at around 40kg.

- Many of the heads were previously on display at the Smith Gallery in Stirling.

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