

THE STIRLING HEADS

SCOTLAND'S OTHER CROWN JEWELS



The Stirling Heads are a remarkable collection of metre-wide oak medallions which date from the mid-16th century. They are hand-carved with depictions of kings, queens and other characters – including a jester. The heads originally decorated the ceiling of the King's Inner Hall and at least one other apartment in the royal palace at Stirling Castle. A new set has been created by Historic Scotland and are being used to recreate the lost ceiling of the King's Inner Hall, which came down in the 18th century. The surviving originals are all being put on public display for the first time in a specially-created gallery on the first floor of the palace.

About the heads

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

A total of 34, some a metre across, have survived the centuries since their creation sometime after 1530. 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 loan from National Museums Scotland.

Originals on 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 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 be kept at an optimum level to help safeguard this precious collection. The display area will be the centrepiece of a gallery exploring 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 decorated some 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 room would have been designed to overawe visitors with the majesty and power of the monarchy. The ceiling would have played a very important part in this.

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 shows a jester who is clutching one buttock while sticking out his tongue. It has been suggested that this was a warning to visitors – watch your tongue or you risk a kick from the king.

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? A total of 41, including all 34 surviving roundels, are being copied and two others – destroyed by a fire at Dunstaffnage Castle – are being recreated from sketches. Another one is being made from scratch, using a statue on the outside of the palace for inspiration.

Who carved the originals? The evidence 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. While some of them are masterly – showing a detailed knowledge of human anatomy and bone structure – others are less sophisticated.

When were they made? Scientists (using a tree ring dating technique called dendrochronology) found the trees were cut in Poland 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 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.

Origin of the Heads

King James V wanted to impress – and there was little that the rich and powerful of his day admired more than sumptuous displays of the most modern art. This was probably the motivation behind having ceilings in his palace lodgings decorated with carved wooden roundels. In the mid-16th century there was a vogue for using Classical references, such as medallions, in the decorative arts. But research for Historic Scotland shows that creating a ceiling in this way was very new.

Lost and found

After Stirling Castle fell from favour as a royal residence it eventually became an army garrison. The royal lodgings were not maintained as before. The heads remained lying around and some were lost. Others were saved as curiosities, some ending up in private homes across Scotland. It was only in the 1970s that all the remaining heads were all back in public hands. Many were put on display at the Smith Gallery in Stirling (www.smithartgallery.demon.co.uk) and three are owned by National Museums, Scotland (www.nms.ac.uk).

The Musical Head

The project to create a replica set of Stirling Heads brought a potentially remarkable musical discovery. Craftsman John Donaldson noticed a curious sequence of **O**s, **I**s and **II**s round the border of one of the medallions which experts now believe could be the oldest surviving ‘written’ Scottish instrumental music.

If this is the case the music could have been played on harps, viols, fiddles and lutes. However, evidence from Wales from later in the century, suggests that the composition may have part of the home-grown harp tradition. Barnaby Brown, a lecturer at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD) who specialises in early Scottish music, said: “This discovery is potentially of great significance to our understanding of medieval and Renaissance instrumental music. Sources from Wales suggest that the numerals on this Stirling Head could be a composition. If so, might it have been specially composed for King James V?”

In 2009 Historic Scotland teamed up with specialist musicians to recreate music from the head. The task was challenging as the markings would not be an exact musical score, but would have given guidance to players who then improvised in the same way as modern jazz and blues musicians. The experiment was highly successful with harpist Bill Taylor creating music based on the sequence.

Notes

- To hear the music on the head visit pibroch.wordpress.com/2009/08/30/stirling-head-20/.
- For more about medieval music see www.earlygaelicharp.info/, <http://triplepipe.net/measures.html> and www.pibroch.net/articles/bjb/2009-1.pdf.

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