



Buckingham Palace

Buckingham Palace is the headquarters of a working monarchy. Very often the last light to be turned off is that in the Queen's first-floor study, overlooking Constitution Hill, after a long evening spent sifting through the red boxes of state papers that follow her everywhere, even on holiday. On one such occasion, and it was a particularly heavy session with 'the boxes', the Queen is said to have remarked to the lady-in-waiting who had shared the night watch with her: 'You know, I do work awfully hard, but Mummy (a reference to Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother) has all the charm.'



Her Majesty was underestimating herself, because she is funny, wry and has a delightful sense of irony. She also has bags of common sense, and it was she who, in 1993, hit upon the idea of opening Buckingham Palace to the paying public, as a way of helping to meet the cost of restoring fire-ravaged Windsor Castle.

The great lyricist and friend of royalty Sir Noel Coward wrote wittily about the impoverished owners of 'The Stately Homes of England' having to dispose of 'rows and rows and rows of Gainsboroughs and Lawrences' to preserve their family seats for future generations. Her Majesty, of course, would never be so reduced, but the logic was inescapable.

An aerial view of Buckingham Palace. Behind the façade can be glimpsed Nash's elegant portico, which formed part of the original east front.

Facing page: the Palace viewed from the lake in St James's Park.

Why not let the glories of one palace pay for the restoration of another? It was a pragmatic way of dealing with an unexpected £40 million bill, and based on the belief that all those thousands of people who gathered, rain or shine, 365 days of the year, to peer through the splendidly ornate gilded gates and railings installed by command of George V were just itching to see inside. The Queen and her courtiers were right, and the palace has become one of the hottest tourist properties in town.

So what do the 400,000 or so paying visitors a year see? Certainly not 'rows and rows and rows of Gainsboroughs and Lawrences', nor, as Sir Noel's lyric continues, 'some sporting prints of Aunt Florence's, which are really rather rude', though there are some (not rude) cartoons in the loos. Neither do they get even the merest glimpse of the Queen's relatively simply furnished private apartments, where she has lived since she moved from Clarence House – her first home as a young married woman – after her accession to the throne on the premature death of her father, George VI, in 1952. Visitors see only the State Rooms, but an essential ingredient of their visit is its mystery, what they cannot see, and the strong feeling that they are, in fact, in somebody's home: a place where children have slid across polished floors; where a 19-year-old Princess in waiting practised ballet and tap routines to pass the time in the days leading to her July 1981 wedding; or where the Queen, said to be skilled at putting on a tiara while running down the stairs, might make a final adjustment in one of the long wall mirrors before making her entrance to greet guests at a State Banquet.

The senses are at once assailed by the grandeur of it all, maybe not so extravagant as Versailles, but still very remarkable indeed; by the deep pink, cream, blue, gold and white decoration, by the



Balcony scene. The Prince and Princess of Wales on the Palace balcony after their marriage at St Paul's Cathedral, on 29 July 1981.

crystal chandeliers, the exquisite workmanship of the furniture and porcelain – some of it the former property of dispossessed French aristocrats and bought by that most extravagant of collectors the Prince Regent, later George IV, in the aftermath of the French Revolution. But what tantalises many visitors is what lies behind the locked, highly polished wooden and gilt doors that lead to off-limits areas. The answer is: 52 royal and guest bedrooms, 188 staff bedrooms, 92 offices, 78 bathrooms and lavatories, a kitchen complex, staff dining rooms, a cinema, the court post office, a police station and a swimming pool once frequently used by Princess Diana and Princess Margaret.

Buckingham Palace is a very busy place, with constant comings and goings; incoming ambassadors to present their credentials, bishops to 'do homage' on appointment, judges, and hundreds of official callers whose business is concerned with that of the world's most famous monarchy. While Parliament is in session the Prime Minister arrives every Tuesday at 6.30 p.m. for his weekly audience with the Queen. Tony Blair is Her Majesty's tenth Prime Minister, and like his predecessors is listened to carefully and questioned adroitly by the woman who, because of the length of her reign and extent of her experience, is probably better informed on politics than any other in Britain. Then there are the 'getting to know you' receptions and lunches, two full-scale State Visits a year, and in summer three garden parties, attended by 27,000 guests.

All this, and the organisation and running of the Queen's official programme, let alone that of Prince Philip and other members of the Royal Family, means a lot of work. Almost 400 people are employed at Buckingham Palace, and if a visitor did manage to escape the vigilant eye of one of the attendants that discreetly patrol the State Rooms during the public opening and stray behind those imposing doors, he or she could face a roomful of surprised secretaries, busy behind their computers, or a footman cleaning silver.

The present palace is the culmination of several remodellings from previous houses. There was once a mulberry garden on the site, planted by James I to encourage the silk industry, but the royal gardeners were less than assiduous in their homework and planted black mulberries, rather than the white variety on which silkworms feed. The mulberry garden then degenerated into what amounted to an open-air brothel, which according to the diarist Samuel Pepys, was a draw for a 'rascally, whoring, roguing' class of person.

Buckingham House, bought by George III in 1762 as a family home. This picture dates from 1819 before George IV's rebuilding and the creation of Buckingham Palace.



George IV, as Prince Regent in 1814, by Sir Thomas Lawrence.



Diana meets World War II veterans outside Buckingham Palace during the celebration to mark the 50th anniversary of VJ Day.



The first building on the site was built in 1677 for Lord Arlington. It was transformed and enlarged in 1702–5, when the first Duke of Buckingham and Normanby built himself a redbrick country house at the interface of the Charles II's new canal and Mall. The Duke was delighted with his new house and wrote, 'The avenues ... are along St James's Park, through rows of goodly elms on one hand, and gay flourishing elms on the other.' Queen Anne, however, was not pleased, since it now appeared that the royal park was laid out for the house, rather than vice versa. The solution, which did not materialise until 1762, was for the monarch to buy Buckingham House. It was purchased by George III for £28,000 as a family home and known as the Queen's House. Fourteen of his children were born there.

The creation of Buckingham Palace as a symbol of national greatness, after the victories of the Napoleonic wars, was due to George IV, who, despite a dissolute private life, had the most exquisite taste when it came to buildings, pictures and furniture. He declared that Carlton House, on which he had spent a prodigious amount of money, was unsuitable for a King of England and that Buckingham House, his childhood home, must be rebuilt. The government reluctantly agreed that a sum that 'might not be less than £200,000' should be spent on its 'repair and improvement', while the King instructed John Nash to rebuild and enlarge the house in Bath stone. The bill eventually came to £700,000.



Buckingham Palace in 1846, before the removal of the Marble Arch.

Unfortunately, Nash's design is now largely invisible to the public. The east front, with its fine, two-storey portico, originally opened onto a deep forecourt (which can still be glimpsed through the present entrances) before which stood Marble Arch. The west front, which is unaltered, is a long, low composition in Bath stone with a bow window as its central motif. It faces the magnificent gardens and is reminiscent more of an elegant country house than a royal palace in the heart of the city.

This lavish scheme was still incomplete at the time of the King's death in 1830 and a year later Nash was sacked for exceeding his budgets. The work was entrusted to Edward Blore, a more business-like but far less inspired architect. In general, he kept to the lines of Nash's design but made it more solid and less picturesque. The new king, William IV, had little interest in the building. He never lived there, and according to contemporary reports 'never calculated on the use of Buckingham Palace for any purposes of State'. Indeed, when the Houses of Parliament were burnt down in October 1834, the King offered the palace as a new home for Parliament, as a gift from the Crown. The offer, however, was declined, and William died in 1837, before Blore's work was completed.

There are some great and priceless works of art in the palace, but visitors cannot help but get the impression of wall-to-wall Hanoverians. William IV stares unblinkingly down from his gilt frame, while opposite is his Queen Consort, Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen, the German princess he married to provide heirs for the Hanoverian line. Sadly, both their children died soon after birth, though previously William had fathered ten healthy illegitimate children with his mistress, the warm-hearted Mrs Jordan, an actress of some repute.

Unusually for a royal mistress, Mrs Jordan is commemorated. She and two of her children are represented in a sculpture, positioned in the lobby of the palace picture gallery. The group was commissioned by King William in 1834, 18 years after her death, as a romantic tribute to the woman with whom he was so happy. It was bequeathed to the Queen by the Earl of Munster, a descendant of the actress and the King, in 1975.



George V and Queen Mary, in 1914, by Solomon Joseph Solomon.



The Queen returns to Buckingham Palace after her Birthday Parade (Trooping the Colour) in June 1990.

King William's successor, the young Queen Victoria, took up residence in July 1837, when the palace was fresh from the builders. Nothing worked; it was too small, and the kitchens badly planned. She loved to dance, but none of the rooms was big enough for a court ball. Much more serious, after she married Prince Albert in 1840, was the absence of nurseries. The practical Victoria soon had these deficiencies put right and in 1851 built a new east range, designed by Blore, to close the forecourt and accommodate her large family. Marble Arch was then moved to its present site north of Hyde Park. The ballroom, built in 1853–5, was inaugurated in 1856 with a ball to celebrate the end of the Crimean War.

King George V and Queen Mary also put their stamp on the building, refacing the stucco façade in 1913 with an imposing design in Portland stone by Sir Aston Webb. The Queen took a keen interest in the improvement and restoration of the interior, banishing the traces of the Victorian era and reinstating much of Nash's original work. She left as a legacy to her succeeding custodians an informed and historically accurate approach.

During World War II the palace and its occupants became a symbol of defiance. It was bombed nine times, prompting Queen Elizabeth (now the Queen Mother) to make her most celebrated wartime response: 'I'm glad we've been bombed. It makes me feel I can look the East End in the face.'

The palace, of course, is still a great and mysterious symbol. That is why there is always a curious crowd outside, despite Her Majesty's decision seven years ago to lift part of the curtain.

The State Rooms of Buckingham Palace are open from early August to late September.

