

# Scotland's royal palace

*Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh  
The Scottish Palace  
of The Queen*

The surviving interiors of Scotland's premier royal palace offer a vivid insight into the 17th-century life of the Court. Simon Thurley unravels the history of an outstanding building

Photographs by James Brittain

**O**f all The Queen's palaces, that of Holyroodhouse can claim, with Windsor, to be the most venerable. It has its origins in an Augustinian abbey founded in 1128 and is named after its most precious relic—a fragment of the true cross, a piece of the holy rood. Like their English counterparts, medieval Scottish kings often preferred to reside in the comfortable lodgings of a rich abbot rather than the austere towers of their own fortresses. More than Edinburgh Castle, Holyrood became a favoured residence of the Scottish kings, and by the reign of James V, the royal lodgings at the abbey overshadowed the monastic parts (*Fig 2*). Most impressive of the surviving remains from this early palace are the rooms of Mary Queen of Scots (*COUNTRY LIFE*, November 23, 1995).

Like most royal palaces, Holyroodhouse was horribly abused during the Civil War and Commonwealth, and, at the Restoration, it was very run down. The Scottish Privy Council had a scheme for smartening it up in 1661, but, in 1670, it was decided to almost completely rebuild it. What was constructed between 1671 and 1679 was no normal palace. At the time, it seemed very unlikely that Charles II would ever visit Edinburgh, let alone live there. The royal apartments were

*The Royal Collection*

← *Fig 1: The King's Bedchamber with its 1680s state bed. Hercules strangles serpents in the painting over the fireplace*



↑ Fig 2 above: The back of the palace with the remains of the abbey church projecting from it. → Fig 3 facing page: The cantilevered great stair to the royal apartments is boldly detailed with a heavy balustrade and thickly moulded edges to the tread of each step

actually intended to be used by the King's Commissioner, and the rest was to be given over as lodgings for various officers of State and for the meetings of the Privy Council.

Other than at Windsor, Charles II failed to complete any of his English palace schemes, largely for want of money. Why Holyroodhouse was seen as a priority, and why it was completed to a lavish standard, thus requires explanation. The answer is that the rebuilding of Holyroodhouse was actually paid for by the Scottish Privy Council, which, after the failure of a scheme for political union with England in 1669–70, wanted to emphasise Edinburgh's role as a royal capital and seat of government. This new palace was not about glorifying Charles II—it was about glorifying Scotland.

During most of Charles II's reign, John Maitland, 2nd Earl and 1st (and only) Duke of Lauderdale (1616–82) was Scottish Secretary, Royal Commissioner and, effectively, vice regent in Scotland. Like most men of his wealth and position, he was interested in architecture, and he spent much time redesigning and rebuilding his houses in Scotland and his property on the Thames at Ham. As the ultimate occupier of Holyroodhouse, Lauderdale supervised the building operations there closely. The architect was his kinsman William Bruce, King's Surveyor General; he worked closely with the royal master mason John Mylne on the design. However, in terms of the plan of the palace, the decisive influence was the King: surviving correspondence demonstrates that Charles directed Bruce to make alterations to his original scheme that brought it into line with the organisation of his English residences.

The new palace was arranged around a courtyard, with an entrance front that was

a highly accomplished blend of old and new. The north tower had contained the lodgings of Mary Queen of Scots and weighed heavy with national symbolism. Bruce retained this and built a matching wing to the south; between the two was a lower screen wall containing a swaggering entrance portal framed by coupled Doric columns and crowned by a cupola and vast coat of arms. This front, which still greets visitors at the bottom of the Royal Mile, is both ancient and modern, fashionable and venerable—successfully giving the Scottish Privy Council a royal focus for its capital. It is also resonant of its new neighbour, the Scottish parliament building, which, more than 300 years later, tried to achieve the same effect, although built on the site of a brewery rather than an ancient abbey.

## ‘The new palace was not about glorifying Charles II—it was about glorifying Scotland’

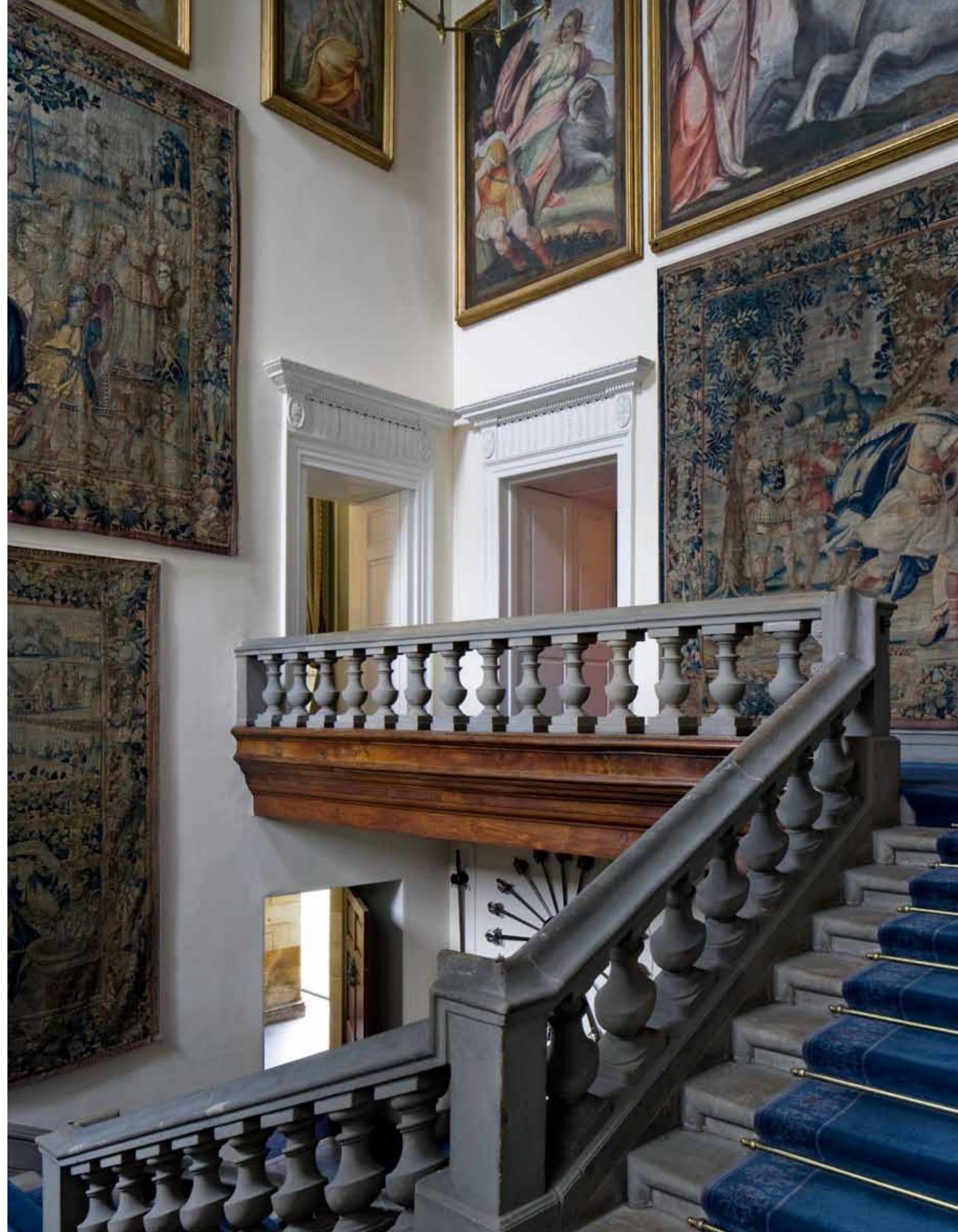
The plan of the royal courtyard is handsome. A magnificent state stair (Fig 3) in the south-west corner is its fulcrum. Straight on, at the stair top, the visitor enters the king's apartments, to the left are the queen's, and to the right an ante room that led to a grand new council chamber. The king's and queen's rooms were linked on the north side by a privy galley that ran the whole length of the inner courtyard. The courtyard itself, on which the state rooms look, was a refined essay in Classicism with superimposed orders. Its careful symmetry was much admired by Scottish

aristocrats, many of whom went on to regularise and Classicise their baronial seats.

The great stair is dizzying, topped with an incredibly deep moulded plaster ceiling (Fig 5) undertaken by English plasterers John Houlbert and George Dunsterfield. On the edges of the swirling central roundel, four figures hold items of the regalia of Scotland. The stair and roundel were never painted, but were surely intended to have been. Houlbert and Dunsterfield's ceilings transform the 17th-century state rooms at Holyroodhouse, making them far less austere than, say, the slightly later rooms at Hampton Court. Lauderdale employed them at his own house at Thirlestaine and, with the breathtaking ceilings at Sudbury Hall, Derbyshire, they are among the greatest of their age.

The Council Chamber at the head of the stairs is a room of great magnificence. Its prominent position was insisted upon by Charles II, who specified an ante room and office for the clerks. This was the standard layout that existed at Whitehall and his new palace at Winchester. Although the Council Chamber now has panelling (dating from 1910–11), it would have originally been hung with tapestry and furnished with a green-baize-covered table and turkey-work chairs. In some ways, this was the most important room in the palace—the only room with a continuous and hard-edged use.

Of the state rooms, Charles II's privy chamber (now called the Morning Drawing Room) is the finest and richest (Fig 6). This was intended to be the principal royal reception room and features a fine fireplace with slightly fatty wreaths and drops by the Dutch carver Jan van Santvoort. In the roundel is a painting by Jacob de Wet, whose work is in several other rooms and was perhaps meant





↑ **Fig 4: The great gallery is lined by the series of Scotland's kings—both real and legendary—painted by Jacob de Wet in 1684–86**

to be in more. This ceiling again features the Scottish regalia and daring swags and figures.

The west side contains the privy apartments facing onto the gardens. Their juxtaposition to the abbey church and other medieval buildings creates a unique setting. A classic series of royal apartments occupied the range: ante-room, bedchamber, closet, wardrobe, dressing room and waiting room for the royal body servants. The wing is ingeniously provided with a service stair and the private back stair that allowed the Royal Family and favoured guests to circumnavigate the sequence of state rooms.

The king's bedchamber (**Fig 1**) is of huge historical importance. It is the only surviving royal bedchamber of its age, and allows a glimpse of the sort of life that Charles II would have enjoyed in his many residences. Here, the most intense of the plaster ceilings was completed with an oval painted by de Wet. It shows Hercules admitted to Mount Olympus, a suitable subject for the bedroom of a king. The heavy carving round the fireplace, part of the original scheme, struggles to meet modern approval due to comparison with familiar carvings from the slightly later school of Grinling Gibbons. The

oak carvings, although splendid, feel ponderous when seen against the ceiling. The bed is not a royal one—it comes from the Duke of Hamilton's rooms—but, with the tapestries, gives a fine impression of the impact that textiles made in these royal rooms.

The closet next door also has some of the intense atmosphere of the 17th century; originally intended to be furnished as an office with desk and chairs, there is a coat of arms in the coving, perhaps intended to mark the position of the royal writing table.

Externally, the entrance front makes the strongest and most powerful advertisement

for the continuity of the Scottish monarchy. Internally, the great gallery (**Fig 4**) does the same job. Here, de Wet was commissioned to paint 110 kings of Scotland from Fergus I to Charles II. The depiction of lineage in palaces and aristocratic houses was not a new venture, but the ambition and scale of this commission is notable. The appearance of most of the kings was concocted by the artist, but he tried to include facial features of Stuart monarchs whose likenesses were known to give the pictures credibility. They are now set into the panelling, but were originally freestanding, framed canvases.

The unfortunate proportions of the gallery were dictated by the position of the existing



↑ **Fig 5: The great stair ceiling has angels with royal regalia. Its central roundel is blank**



↑ **Fig 6: The lion (left) and the unicorn (right) appear in the plasterwork of the state rooms**

walls, which make it wider than it ought to be in relation to its length. This was not improved by the rather flat plaster ceiling introduced in 1968, which would have been better omitted as it could never adequately compare to the originals that inspired it. Nevertheless, the room is the largest space in the palace and its width makes it an ideal location for big parties and investitures.

Although Charles II never came to the new palace, his brother, James, Duke of York, did. In the aftermath of the exclusion crisis—the movement to deny Catholic James the English throne—the Duke was sent to Scotland as first a member of the Privy Council, and then Commissioner to Parliament. This episode coincided with the fall of Lauderdale, the virtual dictator of Scotland. For three years after 1679, Holyroodhouse became a fully working palace where power and display, architecture and etiquette melded together in perhaps the way the Privy Council had originally intended.

The buildings were not properly finished

and the arrival of the Duke and Duchess explains why de Wet did not paint more rooms and why some of the panelling was never installed. James had a big impact on Edinburgh and formulated plans to make substantial changes to the palace. When he came to the throne in 1685, he ordered that the Council Chamber be converted into a Roman Catholic Chapel and that the abbey church be turned into a chapel for the Order of the Thistle (its splendid fittings were burnt out in a mob attack on the palace just a few years later). His abdication and flight, of course, put paid to any long-term plans.

James II's residence was the last time for 125 years that the palace was used by the British monarchy. After the Act of Union, there was no Scottish Parliament, no Privy Council and no Parliamentary Commissioner. The palace became an enormous grace-and-favour dormitory for the Scottish aristocracy. It was only in 1822, when George IV entertained here, that the modern history of Holyroodhouse as a royal residence started once again.