

Going ashore: (British Isles Shore Excursions)

Visiting Holyroodhouse Palace

by

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Scottish monarchs have lived at Holyroodhouse for centuries. Moreover, it continues to be a royal residence. Thus, while the Queen does not live there all year long, Holyrood, like Windsor Castle in England, has the atmosphere of a living, functioning house, not the sterility of a museum. While there is a great amount of history associated with Holyroodhouse, it is not just about the past.

Holyroodhouse Palace, as it is properly called, lies at one end of the Royal Mile in Scotland's capital Edinburgh. It is not the most architecturally impressive palace in the world but it certainly compares favorably to the new Scottish parliament building that stands nearby. In addition, the grounds of the castle are wonderfully cared for, especially the gardens, and so contribute greatly to the pleasure of a visit.

A brief history

According to legend, the inspiration for Holyroodhouse came when King David I of Scotland was hunting. He fell off his horse and was confronted by a majestic stag. Between the antlers of the stag, he saw a cross. The stag then disappeared. Interpreting this

vision as a miracle, the King ordered that an abbey be built on the site. His mother had brought a piece of the True Cross back from the Holy Land and the king presented this to the new abbey. As a result, the abbey was called Holyrood, which means Holy Cross.

When the abbey was founded, a guest house was built on the abbey grounds for use by the king. Over the centuries, Scotland's monarchs came to spend quite a lot of time at the abbey, which, because it was surrounded by parkland, was more attractive than Edinburgh Castle. By the reign of King James IV in the early 16th century, the royal lodgings had eclipsed the abbey. Therefore, James decided to turn the lodgings into a palace.

Mary Queen of Scots, perhaps the monarch most closely associated with Holyroodhouse, came to live there in 1561. She had been married at an early age to the heir to the French throne and had spent most of her life in the grand palaces of France. Now a widow, she reportedly was not impressed by the relatively austere and smaller palace where she was taking up residence. It was, however, to be the scene of some of the most dramatic episodes in Mary's life.

Scotland had changed greatly while Mary

was in France. The "Old Religion" had largely been replaced by Protestantism. Consequently, Mary, who remained a Catholic, was distrusted by many of her Protestant nobles and subjects. In an effort towards reaching harmony, Mary had several unsuccessful audiences with religious reformer John Knox at Holyroodhouse.

Mary also married the Protestant Lord Darnley at Holyrood. Darnley soon proved himself a drunkard and a wastrel, alienating Mary. Meanwhile, Mary's Italian private secretary David Rizzo, had become close to the queen. Disliking this Catholic influence, a group of Protestant lords persuaded Darnley to join in a conspiracy to murder Rizzo. This they did in gruesome fashion in Mary's presence at Holyroodhouse.

Not long after Rizzo's death, Darnley was murdered. He is buried in the Holyrood church, at least most of him is - - a mob broke into his tomb in 1688 and stole his head.

Mary then married Lord Bothwell, who had befriended her and who is also believed to have instigated Darnley's murder. The marriage was performed according to Protestant rites in the Great Gallery at Holyroodhouse. This marriage also angered a number of factions leading to civil war, Mary's abdication, her escape to England and eventual beheading after being implicated in plots to assassinate Queen Elizabeth I.

Mary's son, King James VI spent a considerable amount of time at Holyroodhouse. However, this all but ended when he became King James I of England as well as king of Scotland.

James' son, Charles I of England, was crowned at Holyrood but the ceremony was so anglicized that it angered his Scottish subjects, one of the many events that eventually led to Charles' beheading.

After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Charles II, Mary's great grandson, undertook an extensive renovation of the palace. The architect William Bruce is largely

responsible for the Baroque palace that we see today. He blended the older existing portions of the building with new construction creating a harmonious whole. His patron, however, never lived there.

Holyroodhouse received little royal attention for the next century and a half. In fact, its more illustrious residents during this time were members of deposed royal families. Bonnie Prince Charlie made a public display of living at Holyroodhouse during his attempt to gain the British throne for his father. His thinking was that he should be seen acting as a royal so that people would regard him as the true heir to the throne.

After the Comte d'Artois unsuccessful attempt to reverse the French Revolution, the British government allowed him to take up residence at Holyrood. This was very convenient for the Comte who did not have any money to pay his soldiers. Dating back to the days when the palace was an abbey and provided sanctuary, the law was that debt collectors could not seek to collect debts from people living on the grounds of Holyrood. The Comte eventually left to become King Charles X of France. He returned when he was deposed.

The writings of Sir Walter Scott drew the attention of the public and the monarchy back to Scotland at the beginning of the 19th century. George IV was the first reigning monarch to visit Holyrood since Charles I during a very successful visit to Scotland in 1822. He ordered that no further changes be made to Mary Queen of Scots' apartments.

George's niece, Queen Victoria, was even more taken with Scotland and visited it frequently. She carried out an extensive renovation program on Holyrood and cemented its place as a modern royal residence.

After World War I, King George V carried out another round of improvements to modernize the palace. It was during his reign, in 1920, that Holyroodhouse became the official royal residence in Scotland.

Visiting Holyroodhouse today

Holyroodhouse remains the official residence of the monarch in Scotland. However, the royal family only lives there a small part of the year. The Queen is in residence during Holyrood week, which is in late June and/or early July. Prince Charles is in residence for a week each year while he carries out his duties as Earl of Rothesay. Of course, the royals also come there for special occasions such as when a foreign head of state is making a state visit.

Each year, Holyrood week begins with the Ceremony of the Keys in which the Queen is given the key to the city and promptly gives it back for safekeeping. The Queen holds investitures and audiences. Honors are awarded, dignitaries met and dinners held including one for the members of the Order of the Thistle, Scotland's highest order of knights. Holyroodhouse also acts as a base for attending other ceremonies and engagements.

A highpoint of the week is the Garden Party on the grounds of the palace. Some 8,000 people attend the party each year. Music is provided by the Royal Scottish Pipers Society and the Royal Company of Archers act as the Queen's bodyguard.

When the royal family is not in residence, portions of Holyroodhouse are open to the public. There are audio guides for self-guided browsing. In addition, there is an evening tour with one of the palace's wardens.

The state apartments are open to view. These are the rooms that are used by the royal family for ceremonies and entertaining. They include the Throne Room and the Great Gallery. In addition to their historic interest, these rooms house portions of the Queen's incomparable art collection. The Great Gallery, for instance, has a series of paintings by Jacob de Wit of Stuart

monarchs that rather fancifully traces the line back to the 4th century B.C.

A number of the rooms at Holyrood have been restored to look as they did in Mary Queen of Scots' day. These include Mary's bed chamber as well as the Outer Chamber where Rizzo was murdered. There are also display cases showing artifacts from that time.

Not much is left of the abbey. At one time, it was a quite substantial community centered around a cathedral like church. The Reformation did away with the religious community and in 1768 the roof of the church collapsed. It was decided that it was too expensive to repair and so it was left as a ruin. Its hauntingly melancholy atmosphere remains and is said to have been the inspiration for Felix Mendelssohn's Scottish symphony. During the summer months, the wardens give tours of the ruins.

Visitors can also explore the palace gardens. There has been a garden at Holyrood since the time when it was an abbey. Of course, it changed quite a bit over the centuries. Lions, tigers and a camel lived there in the 16th century menagerie. Mary Queen of Scots practiced archery in the gardens. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert found the gardens in an overgrown state and carried out a major program to bring it back to life. Further improvements have been made during the current monarch's reign.

Today, the gardens cover ten acres. They are beautifully manicured with lively flower beds, tall trees and broad lawns. Behind them is the brooding presence of Arthur's Seat and the parkland surrounding it. The overall impression is that you are in the country, not within the precincts of a major city.

Shore excursions to Holyroodhouse are usually offered during port calls in Edinburgh. (Queensferry is the actual port for most ships). Inasmuch as the palace is in the city, it is relatively straight forward to visit independently.