

Going ashore: (British Isles Shore Excursions)

Visiting Stirling Castle, Scotland

by

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How do you make a centuries old monument come to life? The usual path is to do a bit of patching and repair and let visitors walk the grounds and the monument's empty halls. One might add some graphic panels or a few displays and in hope that their imagines will be inspired to fill in the blanks. However, at Stirling Castle, they have taken a much more ambitious approach to the delight of more than 300,000 visitors each year.

The origins of Stirling Castle are obscured by the mists of time. Some say that the rocky crag overlooking the city of Stirling has been inhabited since Prehistoric times. Others claim that the Romans fortified it. It has even been associated with the legendary court of King Arthur. However, the first record of the castle is from 1110 when King Alexander I dedicated a chapel there.

Stirling Castle is in a strategic location overlooking a crossing of the River Forth. As a result, quite a few important battles were fought nearby. For example, within sight of the castle, William Wallace defeated the English at the

Battle of Stirling Bridge and Robert the Bruce did the same at the Battle of Bannockburn during the 60 year long Scottish Wars of Independence in the 14th century. The castle was besieged and changed hands several times during that struggle.

Nearly all of the buildings that you see at Stirling Castle today date from the Renaissance. Stirling had become a royal residence and by the time of King James IV, a full Renaissance court was flourishing at Stirling. James wanted to bring his residence in line with other European courts and so made a number of improvements to the castle.

This ambition was shared by his son James V who made even more changes to the castle. After James' death following the Battle of Solway Moss, his infant daughter Mary Queen of Scots was crowned at Stirling and lived there until as an adolescent she went to France and married the heir to the French throne.

Her son, King James VI, was the last reigning monarch to make major changes to the castle. However, after the union of the Scottish and English thrones, James, now also James I,

lost interest in Stirling.

During the Civil War, his grandson, Charles II lived at the castle for a time. But he was the last reigning monarch to do so until Queen Victoria came to visit in the 19th century.

Still, the castle continued to have military significance. It was successfully besieged by the English Parliamentary forces under General Monck in 1651. During the Jacobite Rising of 1745, Bonnie Prince Charlie made an unsuccessful attempt to take the castle.

In the years that followed, Stirling became first a prison and later a military base. In the 1890s, it became the headquarters of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

Stirling Castle is about 25 miles from Glasgow, a 30 minute drive through the countryside. Unlike the wild bare terrain of the Scottish Highlands, the area surrounding Stirling is a lush area of rolling hills and fields punctuated with stands of tall trees. It seems more like Ireland than the stereotypical image of the Scottish countryside.

The castle itself sits majestically atop its crag, dominating the skyline. While history teaches that it is an illusion, the castle just looks impregnable with its nearly vertical cliffs. In any case, it is indisputably impressive to behold.

The view is equally magnificent from the battlements of the castle. Hills and valleys stretch out for miles. In the distance, you can see the Memorial to William Wallace (a.k.a. "Braveheart").

Stirling Castle's major attractions are situated around the Inner Close. On the western side of this quadrangle is the King's Old Building built in the 1490s as a residence for King James IV. It is now the regimental museum of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and contains artifacts and displays documenting the regiment's history, which included action in the Boer War, the First World War and World War II.

To the north is the Chapel Royal. It was built in 1501 by King James VI in order to have a

suitably grand place for the baptism of his eldest son and heir Prince Henry. The chapel was completed within a year in time for the ceremony. However, Henry died when he was 18, never becoming king.

On the east side of the Close is the Great Hall, built by James IV in 1497 as the largest banqueting hall in Scotland. It was here that Mary Queen of Scots held a lavish celebration after the baptism of her only child, the future James VI. James likewise held a celebration here after the aforementioned baptism of Prince Henry.

The most impressive feature of the Great Hall is its hammerbeam ceiling. The original was removed during the period that the castle was a military base. What we see now is a recreation that took some 35 years to complete and which is modeled after the Great Hall in Edinburgh Castle.

Finally, on the south side of the Close is the Royal Palace.

The highpoint of a visit to Stirling is exploring the Royal Palace. This section of the castle was built by King James V in connection with his marriage to Mary of Guise, his second wife. Mary had also been married before, to a French duke. Her father too had been a French duke and she was used to the splendors of the French court and its nobility. James wanted a palace that was on a par with what she had known in France.

It should also be borne in mind that this marriage was important as a matter of state. France and Scotland had long been allies and James wanted to continue this relationship. He was also aware that the English King Henry VIII had wooed Mary in hopes of disrupting the Auld Alliance. Thus, James wanted to impress upon people that he was a monarch of the first order and worthy of his new bride.

Therefore, the Royal Palace was constructed and decorated in keeping with the highest standards of the time.

While the Royal Palace is one of the best preserved Renaissance buildings in Great Britain, essentially nothing was left of its artifacts and décor after centuries of being used for other purposes. Consequently, a decade long program was undertaken; first to study what the Royal Palace would have looked like in the days of James and Mary of Guise and then to restore the palace. 12 million pounds were allocated for the project.

The result is quite spectacular. Six large rooms have been restored. They are divided into the King's Apartments and the Queens Apartments. Each has an outer chamber, an inner hall and a bed chamber. These were used by the king and queen for audiences, dancing, entertainment and taking meals. Which of the rooms a courtier was allowed access showed his or her place in the court hierarchy.

The restoration of the rooms involved an army of artists and craftsmen who painstakingly re-created the décor of the rooms. Surprisingly, the rooms are brightly colored and lively. One gets the impression from rooms and furnishings that have survived from those times that people chose to live with dull and muted colors. However, those examples have faded with the passing of the centuries. Renaissance people actually preferred bright colors.

One of the most difficult projects facing the restoration team was replacing the Stirling heads. James had had the ceiling of his presence chamber decorated with portraits of some of the notable people of the time. These circular disks were made of carved wooden and were brightly painted. In 1777, after the palace had ceased to be a royal residence, the portraits were taken down and became dispersed. Out of the 56 that are believed to exist, only 33 are known to have survived.

The surviving portraits were too delicate to re-attach to the ceiling of the King's Inner Hall. Instead, the restoration team carved and then painted replicas of the portraits. For the portraits that have been lost, the restorers relied

on a book written in 1817 by the wife of the deputy governor of the castle, which had illustrations of the heads. The replicas are now on the ceiling of the Inner Hall. The surviving originals are in a gallery on an upper floor of the palace.

Another important project was the recreation of the tapestries that had adorned the palace. Tapestries were an important part of the décor in a Renaissance palace and James was known to have had two sets of tapestries which featured a unicorn. Thus, if the palace were to present an authentic Renaissance experience, it was important to have tapestries.

James' tapestries had long since disappeared. So for a model, the restorers turned to a series of unicorn tapestries at The Cloisters, which is part of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. A workshop was set up in the castle and another at West Deans College in West Sussex to weave new tapestries using Renaissance techniques. The project began in 2001 and is expected to be completed in 2013. However, those tapestries that have already been completed are on display in the Queen's Inner Hall.

To further enliven the experience of visiting the Royal Palace, the castle has a group of guides who roam the restored rooms. Dressed in period garb, the guides adopt the characters of various members of the court during the time of James IV and/or Mary of Guise. At designated times, they share their stories with the visitors, telling something about the history of the palace and about the rooms. Remaining in character, they also answer visitor's questions. These performances are not only entertaining but they make the visit more personal. As a result, you learn more about the subject matter than you would just reading a plaque.

A visit to Stirling Castle is a very worthwhile for several reasons. First, it is scenic and picturesque. Second, it is a place of historic importance. Third, it has been

restored in a scholarly way to produce an authentic experience. Finally, thanks to Historic Scotland who operate the castle, it is an entertaining learning experience.

Stirling Castle is typically offered as a shore excursion during port calls in Glasgow (the actual port is Greenock).