

Buckingham Palace: A Historic Review

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Message Board Guide (Moderator)

It's amazing how something terrible can sometimes lead to such good things. I guess it's the saying that every cloud has a silver lining and that's the case with the fire at Windsor Castle.

One night in November 1992, a blaze swept through the castle, damaging more than 100 rooms. Initial estimates to repair the damage were put at between £40 and £60 million (about \$75 to \$113 million US). As the property is owned by the Royal Family, there was considerable debate about who would fund the repair work, with a decision eventually taken by the Queen that part of the money would come from opening up the State Rooms at her home in London, Buckingham Palace, to the public for a few weeks in the summer.

Thousands lined up in the summer of 1993 to visit the Palace and the tours became such a success that, even once the restoration work at Windsor was complete, the decision was made to continue with the summer opening for visitors. This summer, I decided it was finally time that we should join the millions who've already taken the tour around the Palace and see what it's all about it.

Buckingham Palace has been the official London residence of Britain's kings and queens since 1837, when Queen Victoria reigned. It evolved from a town house that was originally bought in 1761 by King George III. In the following years, it was remodelled and it was King George IV, a man known for his extravagance, who decided that it should be turned from a house into a palace.

As you'd expect, tickets are not cheap. A visit to the State Rooms in 2006 cost £14 (\$26) for adults, £12.50 (\$23) for those over the age of 60 or students, £8 (\$15) for under 17s, with those under the age of five admitted free. Family tickets (two adults and two children) were £36 (\$68). Of course, there's every chance that those prices could increase for the 2007 summer opening season.

The State Rooms are open daily from 9:45 am, with the last admission at 3:45 pm. Generally the palace is open from late July each year through until mid September but this year, the tours were extended to September 26. There's a timed ticket system, with admission every 15 minutes throughout the day, so if you plan to buy in advance -- and it's always a good idea, as you never know when dates might sell out -- you really do have to plan your day and think about what time you'd like to take the tour.

So what do you get for your money? The tour takes you through a selection of State Rooms, nearly 20 in total. Most of them are used throughout the year by the Queen to receive visiting dignitaries from around the world, be they members of other royal families, presidents or prime ministers. The rooms are also used to welcome members of the diplomatic service who work on Britain's behalf in embassies around the world, and for those fortunate enough to receive awards in either the Queen's Birthday Honours List or the New Year's Honours List. Suffice to say that without paying the money for the tour, most of us would never be lucky enough to see the inside of these rooms.

Without a doubt, the highlight of the tour is the magnificent Ballroom, an enormous room 14 meters high, 34 meters long and 18 meters wide -- that's 46 feet by 112 feet by 59 feet in non-British measurements! The room can accommodate more than 1,000 people and quite often does on various occasions, but it can also seat 160 guests at a long horseshoe-shaped table.

What strikes you almost as soon as you enter Buckingham Palace is that the whole building is beautifully understated, compared to some of the lavish palaces that Europe has to offer. Many of the State Rooms have a theme of gold and red, in keeping with most people's ideas of the colors that most represent royalty. That's the case in the Ballroom and in the neighboring State Dining Room, which offers stunning views over the Royal grounds.

Other highlights on the tour include the Blue Drawing Room, complete with the Table of the Grand Commander. It becomes apparent on your visit that one of the Kings, George IV, was a great collector of art and this is a good example. At first glance, the table doesn't look that special, that is, until you realize that it's made out of porcelain. Once you know that, you can't take your eyes off it, as you can't believe that anyone could do such intricate work on porcelain.

You get to see examples of royal history everywhere. The Music Room is where the Queen's three eldest children, along with Princes William and Harry, were baptised and the Throne Room is where the official wedding photos were taken when the Queen married the Duke of Edinburgh in 1947. Perhaps the most interesting snippet we learned was that the White Drawing Room comes complete with a disguised entrance through to the Queen's private apartments. The door is hidden in an ornate cupboard at one end of the room and we only spotted it because the door was open ajar at the time we visited!

The tour is self guided, using an audio tour, so you can linger for as long as you like in each of the rooms. Once you complete your tour of the

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palace, you exit out to the West Front of the palace and finally you're allowed to take photographs again. It's a shame that no photos are allowed inside, but it's not a surprise, it's the same in most palaces and historic homes we've visited.

Of course, there's the obligatory gift shop on the palace grounds, but as you exit, you walk through some of the grounds and you can just picture the more private side of life here. The walls are all over eight feet high here, with spikes on top of them, so it's completely secluded from watching eyes and we could just imagine the youngsters in the family running around in the gardens, enjoying the space.

If you're planning a trip to London during the summer months, it's well worth checking out the opening dates for Buckingham Palace at <http://www.royal.gov.uk/output/Page555.asp> to see if you'll be able to visit the State Rooms during your stay. They are something that anyone who's interested in royalty or history shouldn't miss on a trip to London.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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