

The Gold State Coach

As we enter this stable block we come face to face with life size models of the horses which are pulling the most stunning carriage in the Royal Mews – the Gold State Coach.

Almost every surface of the coach is covered in gold leaf and it's displayed here, as though moving towards us with life-sized models of 4 horses and 2 postilion riders. although it needs 8 horses to pull it. The four Red Morocco sets of harness used to pull the carriage were originally made in 1792. These are adorned with gilt-brass mounts, and were refurbished in 1834 and again in 1901. Each weighs about 50 kilograms, or 110 pounds. The riders wear grey wigs with black riding hats. Their short scarlet tunics have wide gold stripes around the sleeves, the tunic fronts adorned with gold braid and rows of gold buttons. Under this are white breeches and long black boots. They hold the reins of their grey horses in white gloved hands.

The whole carriage is over 7 metres long, 2.5 metres wide and nearly 4 metres high. It weighs almost 4 tonnes and even with eight horses, only ever goes at walking speed. The rear wheels, covered like the rest of the coach in gold leaf, are nearly 2 metres in diameter, much bigger than the front wheels. All four have decorated rims and elaborately carved spokes.

The carriage was commissioned in 1760 for a young George III who had just succeeded to the throne. It was to be used for his wedding and coronation the following year. However, the project was so ambitious and so complex that it was two whole years before the King first rode in it – at the State Opening of Parliament in 1762.

The framework of the body consists of eight golden palm-trees which branch out at the top to support the roof. At the corners, each tree is topped by a plumed helmet, with a shield and crossed sword and spear beneath. In the centre of the domed roof stand three cherubs, representing the guardian spirits of England, Scotland and Ireland.

They support the royal crown, and hold the sceptre, the sword of state and the ensign of Knighthood.

The upper half of the carriage has windows around three sides; three smaller windows at each side and a large one in front, allowing us to view the plush red interior. In between the palm trees on the lower half of the body, the exterior panels are painted by Florentine artist Battista Cipriani with scenes from mythology – one showing Neptune rendering tribute to a Britannia who sits in a floating shell.

At each corner of the coach, halfway up, a golden lion's head holds a ring in its mouth, from which hangs a maroon leather strap. This is fastened at its other end to a long, thick brace of Moroccan leather which holds the carriage body suspended above its wheels.

At front and back, huge golden figures kneel between the wheels. Naked and muscular, they have long wavy locks and legs which are scaled like fish tails. These are Tritons, or sea-gods, symbolizing Britain's naval power. The two at the front, twist their torsos outwards, leaning over the smaller front wheels – their fish-tail legs entwined between them. With their outside arm, they hold a conch shell to their lips like a trumpet, cheeks bulging as they blow. Over their inside shoulders, a thick golden rope is looped around the carriage framework, as though they are pulling it along.

At the back, the Tritons face to the rear, their sinuous tail-legs entwined. These figures have wings, and hold tridents over their inside shoulder – though they look out over the wheels as though protecting the carriage.

The Gold State Coach has been used for every Coronation since George IV in 1821, though not everyone has found it comfortable. William IV compared the ride to a ship tossing in rough seas, and George VI described his Coronation procession as ‘one of the most uncomfortable rides I have ever had in my life’.

During the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2002, the Gold State Coach travelled to Windsor to take part in the spectacular equestrian pageant ‘All the Queen's Horses’. On 4 June it was used to convey The Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh to a special service of

thanksgiving held at St Paul's Cathedral. Such is the carriage's size, that on the few very special occasions it is brought out, an entire window frame has to be removed, and the section of the wall opened up; an operation that takes at least two days.