

The Great Gallery

This breath-taking room designed for balls and receptions is still used today for banquets and investitures, where people are honoured for their service to the nation. A red carpet stretches in front of you down the more than 44 metre length. The walls are a sea green and the ceiling white. Half way down the left hand wall, nine tall windows have gold curtains and look down over the Quadrangle below.

Overhead the ceiling is restrained in comparison with what's gone before. A simple repeating pattern of leaves creates giant circles and rectangles down the centre, and there are five silver-plated chandeliers. A gilded freeze runs round the room at the top of the walls.

On the right are two fireplaces, one almost opposite the entrance, the other at the far end of the room opposite the windows. They have a fluted, gilded pilaster on either side and a cast iron fire basket. Against the walls is a collection of large chests, carved wooden arm-chairs and tables.

But perhaps the most arresting thing about the Great Gallery is the number of portraits on the walls. They hang on the left before you reach the windows, between each one, then across the bottom wall and back up the right hand side, as well as between the windows overlooking the garden. Single full-length pictures alternate with a vertical line of three head and shoulder portraits, one above the other. There are 96 of them – and here Jacob de Wet really comes into his own.

In 1684, Charles the Second commissioned de Wet to paint his ancestors. Such a set of paintings would demonstrate his right to the throne of Scotland as the latest in a long line of Stuart rulers – some real, some legendary. But no one knew what they looked like. So De Wet decided to make them look as much like the King as possible, giving them all his piercing gaze and rather prominent nose. To complete the commission on time, de Wet painted one portrait a

week for two years. Some of these ancestors were real, like Robert the Bruce and David the First, and some legendary, like Fergus the First and Dornadilla. Mary Queen of Scots, the only woman, is about halfway down the wall opposite the windows. After the 1745 Uprising, Government troops ripped some of the paintings with their swords, and it's said that it's possible to make out one of the soldier's boot prints on Mary's portrait.

Nowadays, royal dinners, investitures, and receptions take place in the Great Gallery throughout the year, sometimes with as many as 400 people attending. It was at one of these investitures that the actor Sir Sean Connery received his knighthood. The chef, Gordon Ramsay and the television presenter Lorraine Kelly both came here to receive the OBE, and the statistician, Professor John Curtice was knighted here.