

Buckingham Palace

Buckingham Palace is the working headquarters of the monarchy, where The Queen carries out her official and ceremonial duties as Head of State of the United Kingdom and Head of the Commonwealth. It is one of the few remaining working royal palaces in the world today. The Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh live in the private apartments on the north side of the Palace. Rooms on the upper floors of the north and east sides are occupied by other members of the Royal Family. Much of the ground floor and the south wing of the Palace are used by Household officials. The State Rooms used for court ceremonies and official entertaining occupy the main west block facing the gardens.

The Queen receives a large number of formal and informal visitors to the Palace, including the Prime Minister at weekly audiences. Investitures regularly take place in the Ballroom and more than 50,000 people visit the Palace each year as guests to banquets, lunches, dinners, receptions and the royal garden parties which are attended by some 30,000 guests.

The Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh are the Palace's longest residents. In 1993 The Queen gave approval for Buckingham Palace to open its doors to the paying public for the first time to raise funds for the restoration of Windsor Castle following the fire of November 1992. The 19 State Rooms are open to the public annually as part of the Buckingham Palace Summer Opening.

The Kings and Queens who shaped the Palace

James I (r.1603-1625)

The architectural history of the site can be traced back to the reign of James I who established a plantation of mulberries for the rearing of silkworms. By 1628 a substantial house already existed on the site and in 1698 it was let to John Sheffield (later the Duke of Buckingham) who demolished the property and rebuilt it as 'Buckingham House'. The house stood exactly on the site occupied by Buckingham Palace today.

George III (r.1760-1820)

Buckingham House remained the property of the Dukes of Buckingham until 1761, when George III acquired the whole site as a private residence to serve as a family home for him and Queen Charlotte. It came to be known as The Queen's House and underwent considerable remodelling and modernising between 1762 and 1776, at a cost of £73,000.

George IV (r.1820-1830)

The death of George III in 1820 was a turning point in the history of Buckingham House. George IV wanted the existing house to be transformed into his palace, rather than a new one being built elsewhere. The King put John Nash in charge of all the changes to the house and during the last five years of George IV's life, Nash enlarged Buckingham House into an imposing U-shaped building which was to become Buckingham Palace.

The Buckingham Palace created by Nash was widely regarded as a masterpiece. It came, however, at a considerable cost – by 1828 Nash had spent £496,169 on the changes to the building – and soon after the death of George IV, the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, dismissed Nash from his post for over-spending.

Queen Victoria (r.1837-1901) and Prince Albert

Queen Victoria was the first Sovereign to rule from Buckingham Palace, acceding to the throne on 20 June 1837, following the death of her uncle William IV. Within 48 hours of taking up residence at the Palace on 13 July, the Queen entertained a large dinner party in the State Dining Room. On 10 May 1838, as part of the celebrations leading up to her Coronation, she held the first state ball in the Palace's South Drawing Room.

The Queen's marriage to her first cousin Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in 1841 set the seal on the use of Buckingham Palace as a royal family home and as a place of entertainment as well as official business. Lavish costume balls were held throughout the 1840s, and the Queen also gave a series of concerts, with her favourite composer Felix Mendelssohn playing at the Palace on five occasions.

A new architect, Edward Blore, was appointed to finish the state apartments according to Nash's designs. In 1845, Queen Victoria complained to the Prime Minister, Robert Peel, about the lack of sufficient space in Buckingham Palace. Blore was instructed to prepare plans for a new wing, enclosing Nash's forecourt on its eastern side to create the now-iconic façade of the Palace. The Queen's wish for large rooms for musical performances and entertaining was granted in 1852 when architect James Pennethorne completed two new rooms, the Ball Room and the Ball Supper Room, linked by galleries to Nash's state apartments at their southern end.

Over the course of 20 years, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert transformed the Palace into the centre of an energetic, cosmopolitan court. But after her husband's death Queen Victoria was absent from Buckingham Palace for long periods, and by the end of her reign in 1901 it had begun to look neglected.

King Edward VII (r.1901-1910) and Queen Alexandra

When King Edward VII came to the throne, he swiftly set about the complete redecoration of the interior of the Palace in a white and gold finish. Improvements were made to the heating, ventilation and electric lighting, and by March 1902, court life was resumed. The King would preside at Evening Courts seated on the throne, and a new dais and canopy were set up in the Ballroom for this purpose. Throughout Edward VII's reign, the Palace was the undisputed focus of fashionable social life in London.

King George V (r.1910-1936) and Queen Mary

The reign of King George V saw considerable changes at Buckingham Palace. His consort Queen Mary had a strong knowledge of furniture and decoration and, advised by curators from the Victoria and Albert Museum, set about restoring more of a Regency character to the rooms.

King George VI (r.1936-1952) and Queen Elizabeth

Very few changes were made to Buckingham Palace during the reign of George VI, as the outbreak of the Second World War coincided with the first half of the King's reign. During Germany's night offensive on London, from early September to mid-November 1940, the King and Queen would leave the Palace each evening for Windsor and return the next

morning. The Palace suffered nine direct hits during the War – in September 1940 the north screen of the East Front was damaged after bombing raids, and the Victorian private chapel in the south-west pavilion on the garden front was destroyed. When the war in Europe ended on 8 May, 1945, the King and Queen, together with Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill and Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, appeared on the Buckingham Palace balcony before unprecedented crowds.

Did you know...?

- The Palace gets its name from an 18th-century Tory politician. John Sheffield, 3rd Earl of Mulgrave and Marquess of Normanby, was created Duke of Buckingham in 1703. He built Buckingham House for himself as a grand London home.
- Buckingham Palace measures 108m across the front, 120m deep (including the Quadrangle) and 24m high.
- The Palace's total floor area covers more than 77,000 square metres (just over 19 acres).
- The gardens cover 40 acres.
- There are 775 rooms in Buckingham Palace, including 19 State rooms, 52 Royal and guest bedrooms, 188 staff bedrooms, 92 offices and 78 bathrooms.
- The biggest room is the Ball Room which is 36.6m long, 18m wide and 13.5m high. It was opened in 1856 with a ball to celebrate the end of the Crimean War.
- The Palace has 1,514 doors and 760 windows which are cleaned every six weeks.
- Electricity was first installed in the Ball Room in 1883, and between 1883 and 1887 electricity was extended throughout the Palace. There are about 40,000 lights in the building.
- There are more than 350 clocks and watches in the Palace, one of the largest collections of working clocks anywhere. Two full-time horological conservators wind them up every week and keep them in good working order.
- Several of the State Rooms were used for the Royal Wedding reception for the marriage of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. These include the Picture Gallery, Centre Room, Green Drawing Room, White Drawing Room, Music Room, Bow Room, Ball Room, Ball Supper Room, Throne Room.
- Visiting heads of state occupy a suite of rooms at the Palace known as the Belgian suite, on the ground floor of the north-facing garden front. These rooms were first decorated for Prince Albert's uncle Léopold I, first King of the Belgians. King Edward VIII also lived in these rooms during his reign.
- More than 800 members of staff are based at the Palace. Their jobs range from housekeeping to horticulture, catering to correspondence. Some of the more unusual jobs include fendersmith, clockmaker and flagman.
- The balcony of Buckingham Palace is one of the most famous in the world. The first recorded Royal balcony appearance took place in 1851, when Queen Victoria stepped on to it during celebrations for the opening of the Great Exhibition. King George VI introduced the custom of the RAF fly-past at the end of Trooping the Colour, when the Royal Family appear on the balcony.
- A flag always flies above Buckingham Palace. When The Queen is in residence, the Royal Standard flies. When the Sovereign is not present, the Union Flag flies instead. A flag sergeant has the role of raising and lowering the right flag as The Queen arrives at or departs from the Palace.

- The oldest part of the Palace is the wine vaults located below the west wing, dating back to 1760.
- The newest part of the Palace is The Queen's Gallery. It was rebuilt to its current form ten years ago.
- More than 30,000 guests attend The Queen's Garden Parties at Buckingham Palace every year, around 8,000 at each occasion. At a typical garden party, around 27,000 cups of tea, 20,000 sandwiches and 20,000 slices of cake are consumed, served by around 400 staff.
- The only monarch to be born and die at Buckingham Palace was Edward VII (born 1841, died 1910). William IV was also born at Buckingham House. The Queen gave birth to Prince Charles and Prince Andrew at Buckingham Palace. Notice of Royal births and deaths are attached to the railings at Buckingham Palace for members of the public to read.
- Four Royal babies, The Prince of Wales, The Princess Royal, The Duke of York and Prince William, were christened by the Archbishop of Canterbury, in the Palace Music Room.

The Garden

- The garden covers 16 hectares (39 acres), the lake is 1.2 hectares (3 acres), and the famous Herbaceous Border is 156m long and 5m deep.
- The garden is home to 30 species of bird, 322 types of British wild flower, 150 mature trees and a quarter of the total British list of moths and butterflies.
- Buckingham Palace is the holder of the National Collection of mulberries. In the reign of James I (1603-25), a plantation of mulberries for the rearing of silkworms was established on the site under royal patronage. Unfortunately the wrong type of mulberry bush was chosen and the scheme came to nothing.
- Buckingham Palace has been recycling green waste on site since 1991 and also recycles waste from St James's Palace and Kensington Palace. Horse manure is collected daily from the stables at the Royal Mews, Buckingham Palace, and added to the garden's compost heap.
- The garden is the oldest helicopter pad in London. It was first used as such just before Her Majesty The Queen's Coronation in 1953.
- The Herbaceous Border was used to grow vegetables during the War.
- Every Monday morning when The Queen is in residence, the Gardens Manager sends Her Majesty a posy of the interesting plants in flower in the Palace garden.
- The garden includes a tennis court where King George VI and Fred Perry played in the 1930s.