

A Tour of The Gardens of Holyroodhouse

Every year in July HRH The Queen hosts a spectacular garden party at the **Palace of Holyroodhouse**. It's an event that carries on whatever the weather, and no doubt many a royal jam tart has ended up a little damp – but did you know that you can visit the Palace's gardens on a day of your choice (hopefully a dry one) throughout most of the year?

What's more, between May and September a guided garden history tour is available– one that takes you behind the ropes to see some very special parts of the royal estate.


The Holyroodhouse Garden Tour focuses on the ways in which the gardens have evolved over time. From King James V to Mary, Queen of Scots, Queen Victoria and her consort Prince Albert, and now Prince Charles himself, many members of 'The Firm' have taken a great interest in the gardens' layout and development – but the history of the gardens begins many years earlier, with the foundation of Holyrood Abbey in 1128.


The Abbey was founded by King David I, who is said to have been out hunting in the park when he saw a stag with a crucifix between its antlers.

Holyrood means 'Holy Cross', so that's what King David called his church. Although it was ruined by Henry VIII (who got rather cross when Mary, Queen of Scots didn't marry his son Edward), large parts of the Abbey can still be seen in the garden; in the 12th century, however, it was much, much larger. Augustinian friars and a community of hundreds of people lived here.


Kings and queens were baptised, married, crowned and buried in the Abbey. Foundation stones (unearthed during excavations in

the early 1900s) marking the full extent of the original building can be seen in today's lawn.


The Abbey ruins so inspired Mendelssohn that after seeing  them he went home and composed his *Scottish Symphony*. Zara Phillips and Mike Tindall posed for their wedding photos here, and HRH Queen Elizabeth met the Pope on the very spot where the altar once stood.

It is perhaps not surprising, given the nature of the times, that when King James IV wanted to build a palace, he wanted to  build it on holy ground.

Holyrood was the obvious place; it was also rather more attractive than that draughty old castle up the hill. His daughter Mary (yes that one) was a outdoorsy type who spent much of her time hunting specially imported wild boars and hawking in the palace grounds. She loved sport, was one of the first women golfers, and even did a bit of open air theatre on the tennis courts.


In 1633, when King Charles I was crowned in the Abbey,  sundials were madly popular; the new monarch commissioned one in memory of his grandmother, and you can still see John Mylne's **Queen Mary Sundial** in the garden today, although sadly its current position means that it doesn't actually get any sun...

It used to be in the King's Privy Garden, but things have changed a bit since 1633 and that particular bit of the royal realm is now a coach park. (Image: The British Sundial Society)

Gardens, perhaps especially British ones, are generally home  to lots of flowers, and those at Holyroodhouse are no exception. Every July HRH The Queen comes to stay, and for Royal Week every room in the palace bursts with blooms.


Seven greenhouses toil away to produce all this floral


abundance, but the garden offers plenty of beautiful shrubs and trees for all seasons.

A particular feature is the **Jubilee Border**, which the palace gardeners gifted to the Queen in 1977. It was originally planted with silver and white flowers to mark the Silver Jubilee (25 years); in 2002 these were replaced with yellow roses, potentillas, coreopsis and verbascum to mark the Golden Jubilee. Now the border is stocked with plants with a royal association, such as the Queen Elizabeth rose (image: David  Austin Roses). Although the planting is designed so that the border is at its very best in July, it is still of interest throughout the summer, and is said to be one of the Queen's personal favourites.

The royal Garden Party is one of the palace's major events – eight thousand invitations are issued, and that's a *lot* of cucumber sandwiches – but it's certainly not the only thing that happens here. **The Royal Company of Archers** has provided bodyguard services to the monarch in Scotland since the reign of King George IV, and its members often practice in the gardens in summer.

In 2006 Tony Robinson came along with his *Time Team* and dug up a mound in the lawn to find out what it was (it turned out to be a kitchen midden, the 17th century version of a compost heap).

 Other excavations have unearthed the final resting place of the poor animals of the royal menagerie (which, in line with the fashions of the time, included lions, tigers and apes – James VI even had a camel) underneath one of the courtyards, and a plague pit in front of Croft-an-Righ, the former house of the head gardener. You can read the fascinating memories of people who have lived in or near the house [here](#).

HRH Prince Charles is of course especially interested in  horticulture, and apparently enjoys taking his breakfast

sitting on a well concealed bench near the palace. For many years Holyroodhouse was the only royal residence not to have a mulberry tree, King James I & VI having dished them out around the country in an ill-conceived plan to kick start a silk industry.

In 2009 Prince Charles put the Palace out of its misery and planted a mulberry tree in the grounds, and whilst no silk has so far been forthcoming, the tree has this year produced its very own mulberries.

☒ Meanwhile, next door...**Holyrood Park**, one of the best open public areas in the city, hosts its own entertainment. Dogs and children romp, games are played, yoga is yoga-ed, and this year there's even been a Corgi Convention.

From the royal garden you would think that there was no ☒ barrier at all preventing an incursion by the Great Unwashed, but unsurprisingly this is not the case. Queen Victoria liked an unobstructed view of the park, and Salisbury Crags behind it, from the royal apartments.

This is not suburbia; no picket fences nor – whisper it low – *leylandii* for her. Prince Albert wanted to keep her happy, so he ordered a wall to be built in the style of the original 18th-century ha-ha, or hidden ditch. There is in fact a ten foot drop protecting the Royal Household from the outside world – but you can only see the wall from Holyrood Park. Just remind your partner of Albert's noble work the next time he or she refuses to countenance your proposals for a charming water feature...

For full details of opening hours, admission prices, dates and times of tours and all other visitor information, see www.royalcollection.org.uk/visit/palace-of-holyroodhouse/plan-your-visit'

With thanks to Sophie Lawrenson, Royal Collections Press Officer, and to Catriona for an interesting and informative

tour.



Image: The Pink Whisk