

Factsheet

The King's Apartments at Kensington

When William III and Mary II extended Nottingham House in 1689, four new blocks, or pavilions, were added to the main house to provide additional accommodation for the King and Queen. The King's Apartments were in the south-east pavilion and the Queen's in the north-west. Despite later alterations, the basic layout of separate suites for the King and Queen survive.

The King's Grand Staircase

- The King's Grand Staircase was the original approach to the King's Apartments. It was built by Sir Christopher Wren in 1689 in a similar style to the Queen's Staircase and was made of oak and had plain panelled walls.
- When a new Grand Chamber (no longer surviving) was built at the foot of the stairs in 1692-3 the staircase was remodelled in marble, in a grander style. It was decorated by William Kent for George I in the Venetian manner.
- Extensive alterations to the staircase were carried out for George I in the early 18th century. The panelling (with the exception of the dado) was removed, the windows were altered, a grand arcaded entrance was built at the foot of the stairs and above this, both the top landing and the balustrade were extended. Finally, the ceiling and walls were painted in a novel, continental manner by William Kent in 1725-7, for which he received £500.
- The ceiling is designed to give the impression of a dome with balustraded openings, from which onlookers gaze down upon the staircase.
- The lower part of the walls is decorated simply with trophies, masks and sea horses picked out in gold against a stone-coloured background.

- The upper part is treated more elaborately in the manner of Italian 16th-century illusionist painting. On the north wall (facing the landing) and part of the east, Kent painted an arcaded gallery crowded with members of George I's court. Among the group are the Yeoman of the Guard and the King's two Turkish Grooms of the Chamber, Mahomet and Mustapha.
- The figures on the east wall include Peter 'the wild boy', who was found in the woods near Hanover walking on all fours and climbing trees like a monkey; he was presented to the King who brought him to England and exhibited him as a curiosity.

The Presence Chamber

- The Presence Chamber was originally part of the south-west pavilion added to Nottingham House by Wren in 1689 and was used for formal receptions.
- The room was altered for George I and the doors were inserted at this time. The extraordinary ceiling was decorated by William Kent in the 'grotesque' style derived from Italian 16th-century painting in the antique manner. The centre depicts Apollo driving his chariot through the sky.
- The walls are hung with a set of rare 17th-century Italian embroideries depicting scenes from the New Testament: *The Adoration of the Magi*, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and *Penance (or Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee)*.
- The overmantel, decorated with a composition of drapery, birds, fruit, flowers and cherubs' heads, was carved by Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721). This came originally from the King's Gallery and was moved to the King's Drawing Room in 1721 and then to here in 1724.
- A giltwood chair of state, similar to that in the room today, would have originally sat underneath a grand damask canopy.

The Privy Chamber

- This room served as an audience chamber of a more intimate character than the Presence Chamber and to which fewer people were admitted.
- It is hung with three tapestries, part of a set, representing the seasons of the year and illustrating the months of February, July and August and November. The tapestries were made at Mortlake outside London.
- A series of 18th-century busts below the tapestries represent distinguished early scientists and philosophers.
- The magnificent ceiling was painted by Kent who received £300 for his work in 1723. It is painted in imitation of a series of ceiling paintings in ancient Rome and shows Mars, the god of war, attended by Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and the arts; they are surrounded by the arts and sciences.

The Cupola Room

- The Cupola, or Cube, Room was the principal state room of the palace and the most lavishly decorated. It was here that Kent began work in 1722. His intention was to conjure up an image of Roman grandeur and the architectural setting, the painting and the statuary were all devised to this end.
- The dominant architectural elements of the room are the giant Ionic pilasters and the massive grey marble doorways supported by Ionic columns. Kent made extensive use of trompe l'oeil and much of the architectural decoration is painted, including the fluting of the pilasters and the carving of the mouldings of the bases.
- The commission for the ceiling was the subject of a fierce argument between George I's Serjeant (principal) Painter, Sir James Thornhill and the new royal protégé, William Kent. The commission was given to Kent in 1722 who promised to complete it for a total of £350.
- The design is painted with octagonal coffers in blue and gold, diminishing in size towards the top of the ceiling to give an optical

illusion of height. In the centre is a large octagonal panel enclosing the Star of the Order of the Garter, Britain's premier order of knighthood.

- The clock in the centre of the room was acquired by Augusta, Princess of Wales, the mother of George III. It was begun by Charles Clay and completed in 1743 by John Pyke. It once contained a musical box that played tunes by Handel, Corelli and Geminiani. The original plinth of the clock has been reproduced after an engraving by Hubert-Francois Gravelot of c1743.

The King's Drawing Room

- The Drawing Room was the focal point of court life where, on public days, the king would meet members of the court, dressed in their finery. The assembly became known as a 'Drawing Room' and these public days at court were frequently held on Thursdays and Sundays when the Royal Family also dined in public.
- William Kent was responsible for the original furnishing and decoration of the room of which only the chimneypiece and ceiling survive. The chimneypiece, carved in 1724 by James Richards, the King's Master Carver, was removed to St James's Palace in 1822-4 but restored to its original position in 1974.
- Kent's ceiling painting shows Jupiter appearing to his lover, Semele who he inadvertently destroyed with his divine power. The central panel is surrounded by a deep oval frame in a simulated architectural setting. Kent received a payment of £500 in May 1723 for the work.
- Four carved, gilt chandeliers made by Gumley and Moore originally lighted the room. They were suspended from the orbs in the corners of the ceiling, outside the oval frame. The drawing-room furniture was also probably supplied by Gumley and Moore and included one armchair (for the king), 24 footstools, two mirrors, two tables and four carved, gilt stands.

Queen Victoria's Bedroom

- Queen Victoria's Bedroom was originally the King's State Bedchamber and its ceiling was decorated by Kent in grotesque painting' in 1723 (this no longer survives). The room was converted for the Duchess of Kent and Princess Victoria in 1834-6. In 1923-3, it was rearranged by Queen Mary to show how it might have appeared in Princess Victoria's time.
- It was here that Princess Victoria was awoken in the early hours of 20 June 1837 with the news of the death of her uncle, King William IV and of her accession to the throne.
- 30 years later, in 1867, the Duke and Duchess of Teck were allocated these apartments and their first child, Victoria Mary (the future Queen Mary, wife of George V) was born in this room.
- Queen Victoria and her consort, Prince Albert delighted in giving each other paintings for their birthdays or at Christmas. The Bedchamber is hung with paintings which depict their children or members of their family.
- The bed belonged to Queen Victoria and was brought from Buckingham Palace by Queen Mary in 1932-3. The chaise-longue at its foot was the Duchess of Kent's favourite sofa.
- The room also houses busts of Queen Victoria's eldest children, the Princess Royal and the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII). They are by Mary Thornycroft and dated 1846.

Ante Room

- This room was originally part of the King's Great Closet and the door in the west wall led to the King's back-stairs.

The Duchess of Kent's Dressing Room

- The Duchess of Kent's Dressing Room was originally part of William III's private apartments and there was formerly a wall across the centre of the room dividing it into the Great Closet and the Little Closet.

- The wallpaper and curtains reproduce those which existed when the room was occupied by the Duchess of Kent and Princess Victoria.
- The furniture, pictures and objects in this room which is furnished as a sitting-room, date almost entirely from the 1840s and 1850s.
- The pictures in the room include a portrait of the Duchess of Kent with the young Princess Victoria, who is shown holding a miniature of her father. It was painted at Kensington Palace in May 1821 by Sir William Beechey, probably for the princess's uncle, Prince Leopold.

The King's Gallery

- The King's Gallery was built for William III in 1695 and was originally furnished with green velvet hangings and white damask curtains.
- The room is 96 feet long and was intended as a gallery for the finest pictures in the Royal Collection.
- The wind-dial above the chimney dates from 1694. The points of the compass encircle a map of north-west Europe, and the pointer (connected to the wind vane on the palace roof) indicates the direction of the prevailing wind on this compass. Paintings representing four continents are depicted in each corner. Australia was missed out as it was not discovered until later in the 18th Century.
- In November 1700 the *London Gazette* reported that the King had returned from Hampton Court to celebrate his birthday at Kensington where there were 'Entertainments for the Ladies, and other Persons of Quality in the Great Gallery'.
- It was here in the gallery, on 3 March 1702, that William was taken ill, a few days after a riding accident at Hampton Court. The *Post Boy* recorded: '[On] Wednesday last...he took several Turns in the Gallery at Kensington, but at length finding himself feeble and weary, he sat down, and fell a-sleep, which tis thought occasion'd him to take cold, for when he awak'd he had a Shivering Fit, which

turn'd to a Fever'. The King died five days later on 8 March 1702, aged 51.

- In 1725 George I commissioned William Kent to design and decorate a new gallery.
- In January 1725 Kent and an assistant began work on the ceiling. The paintings, executed on canvas, depict scenes from the story of Ulysses. The seven mythological scenes were painted by Kent himself but all the surrounding decorative work was done by his Spanish assistant, Francisco de Valentia, whose name is inscribed on the back of one of the canvases.
- In 1835 the gallery was partitioned into three rooms for the Duchess of Kent and Princess Victoria. The young Princess described the new rooms in her *Journal*: 'the old gallery...is portioned into three large, lofty, fine, cheerful rooms. One only of these is ready furnished; it is my sitting room and is *very* prettily furnished indeed...The next is my study, and the last is an ante-room'. Traces of the patterned red wallpaper used in the Princess's sitting-room were discovered when the King's Gallery was restored in 1993-4.