



HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES

COMMUNITY ACCESS SCHEME

BANQUETING HOUSE RESOURCE GUIDE

SPACE TO STIR AND BE STIRRED

TOWER OF LONDON - HAMPTON COURT PALACE - BANQUETING HOUSE
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INTRODUCTION

The Community Access Scheme (CAS) offers free entry and support for community groups local to Historic Royal Palaces' sites to visit and explore our palaces. We want local community members to feel a sense of ownership and belonging at our sites, especially those who would not normally visit the palace or see it as a place of interest for them.

This resource is designed to support group leaders to access and engage with the stories of Banqueting House, a magnificent survivor of the lost royal Palace of Whitehall.

HISTORY OF THE BANQUETING HOUSE

The Palace

The great Palace of Whitehall began as the medieval London home of the Archbishops of York, and was known as York Place. The once mighty Cardinal Wolsey, also Archbishop of York, fell foul of King Henry VIII, and his London home was taken from him.

Henry set about enlarging York Place, and transforming it into a magnificent royal palace, fit for himself and his Queen, Anne Boleyn. He called it Whitehall, and it became the principal setting for the passions, intrigues and ceremonies of the Tudor, and afterwards, the Stuart monarchies. In 1698, disaster struck – the palace burnt down.



View of Whitehall, with the Banqueting House and the Holbein Gate © Historic Royal Palaces, Image by Google

Early Banqueting Houses

The Banqueting House we see today had two predecessors. Elizabeth I was wooed by her noble suitors in the first building, meant to be temporary, which was made of bricks, timber and canvas, with a ceiling beautifully painted with vines and fruit, all symbols of the hoped-for fecundity of a marriage, which never materialised.

Despite its flimsy construction, this old banqueting house was much in demand from Elizabeth's successor as a venue for masques. James I and his wife Anne of Denmark loved this form of extravagant performance. Eventually James commissioned a more substantial hall from architect Robert Stickells. However, the King was disappointed with the building. Although very ornate, a forest of columns supporting a gallery blocked much of the audiences' view. In 1619, this second banqueting house burnt down in a fire.

Did you know?

The idea of banqueting is ancient. In the 16th century, a banquet was very different from our modern perception and stems from the medieval 'ceremony of the void'. After dinner, guests would stand and drink sweet wine and spices while the table was cleared, or 'voided'. During the 16th century, guests would no longer stand in the great chamber whilst the table was cleared and the room prepared for entertainment but would retire to the parlour or banqueting room.

As the idea of banqueting developed, it could take place at any time during the day and have much more in common with the later practice of taking tea.

Key Figures



King James I of England and VI of Scotland, 1621
© National Portrait Gallery, London

James VI and I

r.1603–1625

James I was the first Stuart king of England. He was a religious reformer, a keen patron of architecture and the arts as well as an early anti-smoking campaigner.

James commissioned a new banqueting house from architect Robert Stickells, but James was hugely disappointed with the finished building. It was used for the first masque in 1608, but in 1619 it burnt down in a fire.

The calamity gave James the chance to commission a building that properly suited his needs: the Banqueting House that we have today. He turned to brilliant designer and friend of Queen Anne of Denmark, Inigo Jones.

When the Banqueting House was completed in 1622, it is noted that the Undercroft was covered in seashells and James made use of it as his personal drinking den where he would invite his court favourites.



Inigo Jones holding the plan for the Banqueting House © Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd 2026
| Royal Collection Trust

Inigo Jones

(1573–1652)

James I's new Surveyor of the Kings Works, Inigo Jones, was chosen to build the third, and final, Banqueting House. Son of a London carpenter, Jones was a skilled costume and scenery designer, as well as a gifted architect. Together with the playwright Ben Jonson, he had created many wonderful masques for Queen Anne of Denmark.

Inigo Jones knew of the King's disappointment with his previous building, so he drew up plans for a completely different classical building. Jones had travelled widely in France and Italy, where he made copious notes and drawings of the architecture of ancient Rome and the Renaissance. Inspired by the classical forms he encountered on his travels, he adapted elements of the buildings he had witnessed, and reinterpreted them in a new and unique way, to suit his royal patrons.

His spectacular Banqueting House building was completed in 1622, to the King's great delight and the astonishment of all who surveyed it.



Portrait of Ben Jonson inside a copy of his collected literary works, 1640 © Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

Ben Jonson

(1572–1637)

Jonson was an English playwright, poet, actor, and literary critic. He popularised the comedy of humours and is generally regarded as the second most important English playwright during the reign of James I after William Shakespeare. At the beginning of the reign of James I, Jonson joined other poets and playwrights in welcoming the new king.

Jonson pursued a prestigious career, writing masques for James' court. *The Satyr* (1603) and *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) are two of about two dozen masques, which Jonson wrote for James or for Queen Anne.

On many of these projects he collaborated, not always peacefully, with designer Inigo Jones. Jones designed the scenery for Jonson's masque *Oberon, the Faery Prince* performed at Whitehall Palace on 1 January 1611 in which Prince Henry, eldest son of James I, appeared in the title role.



Pocahontas wearing elaborate clothing including a lace ruff and a feather fan © Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

Pocahontas

(1596–1617)

Pocahontas was a Native American woman notable for her association with the colonial settlement at Jamestown, Virginia. Pocahontas was captured and held for ransom by the English during Anglo-Indian hostilities in 1613. During her captivity, she converted to Christianity and took the name Rebecca. In April 1614, at the age of 17, she married tobacco planter John Rolfe, and in January 1615, she bore their son, Thomas Rolfe.

In 1616, the Rolfes travelled to London. Pocahontas was presented to English society as an example of the “civilized savage” in hopes of stimulating investment in the Jamestown settlement. She became something of a celebrity, was elegantly fêted. On Twelfth Night 1617 at the Banqueting House, Whitehall, Pocahontas attended Jonson's masque *The Vision of Delight* and was received by royalty. Writer John Chamberlain observed ‘The Virginian woman Pocahontas, with her father's Counsellor hath been with the King, and graciously used’. It was also noted that when Pocahontas met King James, he was so unprepossessing that Pocahontas did not realise whom she had met until it was explained to her afterward.



Rubens, painted by Venetian artist Giuseppe Nogari © Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

Peter Paul Rubens

(1577–1640)

Rubens was an influential Flemish artist. He specialised in paintings of mythological and allegorical subject. He was later knighted by Charles I. James I began discussions with Rubens about a decorative scheme for the Banqueting House, but it was his son, Charles I who finally commissioned the paintings.

Rubens presented Charles with working sketches but painted the finished canvases in Antwerp. They were installed in 1636, and Rubens was paid (rather belatedly) £3000 and given a gold chain for his services. The paintings glorify the achievements of his father, and depict James as a divine figure, the implication being that his Stuart heirs were too.



'Rubens' ceiling, Banqueting House © Historic Royal Palaces

The crowning glory of the Banqueting House is its magnificent nine ceiling paintings by Peter Paul Rubens, one of Europe's most influential and important artists.

These vast oil-on-canvas paintings are unique, in that they remain in the very ceiling for which they were first painted, most of Rubens's paintings are in art galleries around the world.

The three largest paintings depict James uniting the thrones of Scotland and England, ruling his land wisely, like Solomon, and ascending into the heavens, transported by classical gods and goddesses.

Key Themes and Stories

The Masque

The masque began as an improvised performance at court in the 16th century during which courtiers and even royals would disguise themselves for play acting, fun and dancing.

Masques were staged at Whitehall and Hampton Court Palaces for the Stuarts, with singing, acting, music, dialogue, amazing costume and above all, special effects and moving scenery. By the early 1600s, under masque-loving monarchs James I and his queen Anne of Denmark, it became an elaborate performance.

The Stuart Masques were mostly created by the partnership of playwright Ben Jonson and set and costume designer Inigo Jones. These temperamental artists quarrelled over whose contribution was more important, and after 1632, Jones worked with less argumentative (and less talented) poets.

The masques were a heady combination of opera, theatre, ballet and ball. They were always allegorical, featuring gods and goddesses from mythology and British history. Their purpose was to demonstrate the wisdom, and God-given right to rule, of the Stuart monarchs. There was always



Portrait miniature of an unknown woman in a colourful Masque Costume © V&A

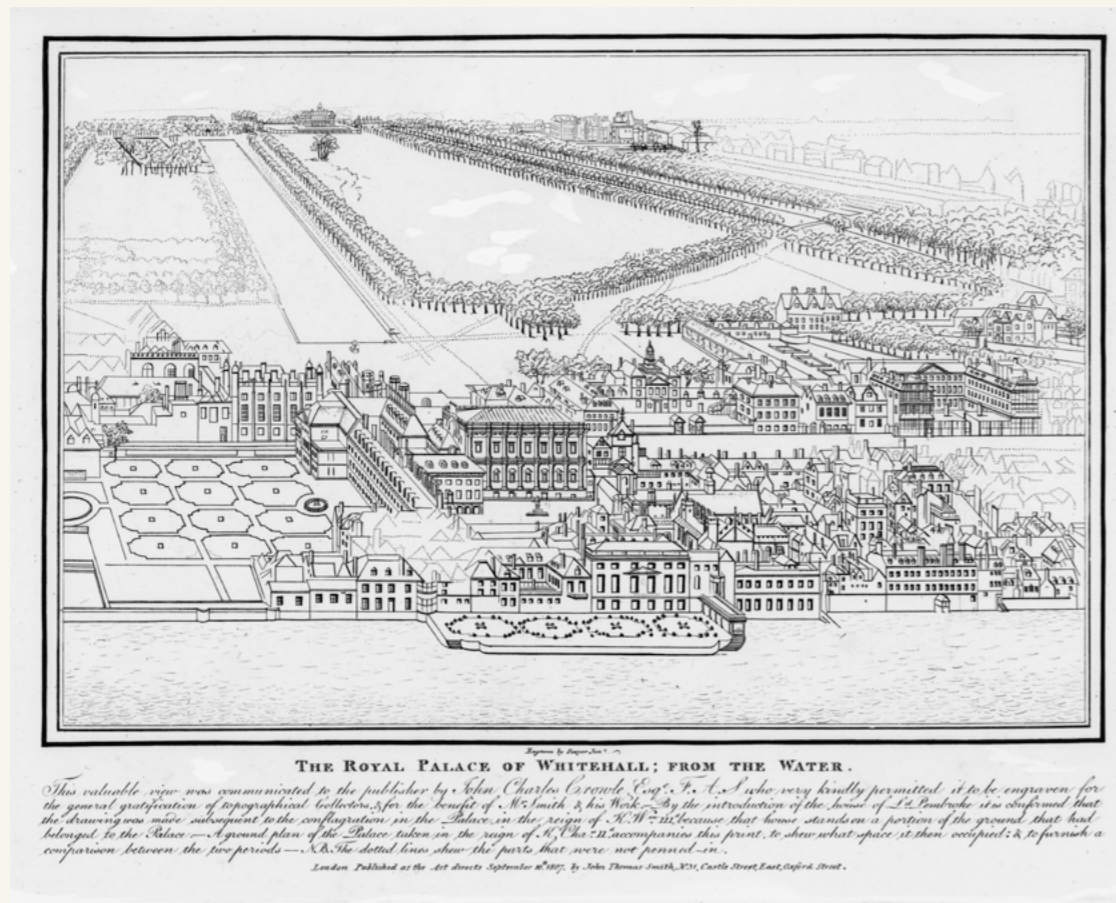
an 'anti-masque', featuring wild and outlandish dancers, who symbolised the chaos of a kingdom before the Stuarts. This was followed by the masque proper portraying the idealistic world of peace and harmony under divine kingship. At the end of the masque, the King would dance, and then the courtiers. Masques were performed for, rather than by, the court, although sometimes the queen and her ladies danced.

A masque was also a place to see and be seen. They were incredibly expensive to produce; some of the most lavish were staged by affluent lawyers. But despite the cost, they weren't always the most comfortable of shows to attend, for either actors or audiences. The crowded room was stifling hot, and smoke from the hundreds of torches must have been oppressive. Sometimes there was a long delay before the performance began.

The installation of Peter Paul Rubens' ceiling paintings in 1636 marked the end of the building as a venue for masques, with their requirement for brilliant, and highly damaging, illumination. 'Seventy dozen torches and 60 flambeaux' alone were ordered for a single performance of *'The Triumph of Peace'* in February 1634.

But more importantly, the world was changing, and Civil War was looming.

The royal coffers were all but empty, and the nation was in a state of unrest. The world of the masque, with its fantasy, extravagance and illusion was coming to an end. By 1640, it was dead.



© Historic Royal Palaces

Whitehall Palace Fire of 1698

Whitehall Palace began life as York Place, the Westminster house of Cardinal Wolsey. Henry VIII appropriated this desirable residence in 1530 on Wolsey's fall from grace, and made it his own, turning it into the most magnificent palace in Britain. At the time of its fiery destruction in 1698, Whitehall Palace was the largest palace in Europe; the centre of English royal power for 168 years.

On the afternoon of 4 January 1698 a Dutch maidservant was drying linen sheets on a charcoal brazier in a bed chamber at Whitehall Palace. It only took a second for the sheets to ignite, then to set fire to the bed hangings, and then the whole lodging was ablaze.

Whitehall Palace was still a largely timber structure, and flames travelled rapidly quickly from building to building. Before long, flames were rising from the whole of the southern part of the palace. As soon as the alarm had been raised, palace staff were mobilised to fight the flames. Pumps and buckets were used to pour water on the burning palace, with little effect.

Massive explosions rocked the evening air as officials detonated gunpowder to create firebreaks, but this made things worse as chunks of burning timber fell on other buildings and set them alight. All was chaos.

As news of the fire spread, so did the realisation that palace riches were vulnerable. Servants who were desperately trying to remove the fabulous tapestries and works of art from the staterooms were shoved aside by looters who had climbed over the palace walls. Palace inhabitants tried desperately to save their belongings, blocking the way of firefighters.

The fire raged for 15 hours and was extinguished only by the middle of the following day. But a breeze re-ignited the flames in a different part of the palace, near to the Banqueting House. On William III's express orders, huge efforts were made to save it. The building's southern window was bricked up to prevent the flames from reaching the interior.

After the second day, when there was little left to burn, the fire died down, leaving the royal apartments of Europe's finest palace as little more than a pile of rubble.



A 'touchpiece' – a coin worn on a ribbon around the neck to show a patient had been 'healed' by a monarch © Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

Royal healing ceremony

Since the Middle Ages, English monarchs had claimed to have the power to heal, or at least prevent, 'the King's Evil'. It's not clear exactly what this nasty skin disorder was, possibly leprosy, or scrofula, which causes large growths on face and neck. It became known as 'the Kings Evil', alluding to the belief that sufferers would be cured by the touch of the monarch.

James I decided to use his fabulous new Banqueting House to stage this mystical ritual of monarchy, which was continued by Charles I. Revived by his son Charles II in 1661, the ritual became wildly popular.

Queen Anne (1702-14) however was the last monarch to perform the ceremony as George I thought it 'too Catholic'.



Queen Elizabeth II after distributing Royal Maundy at the 1973 Maundy service © Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

The Royal Maundy

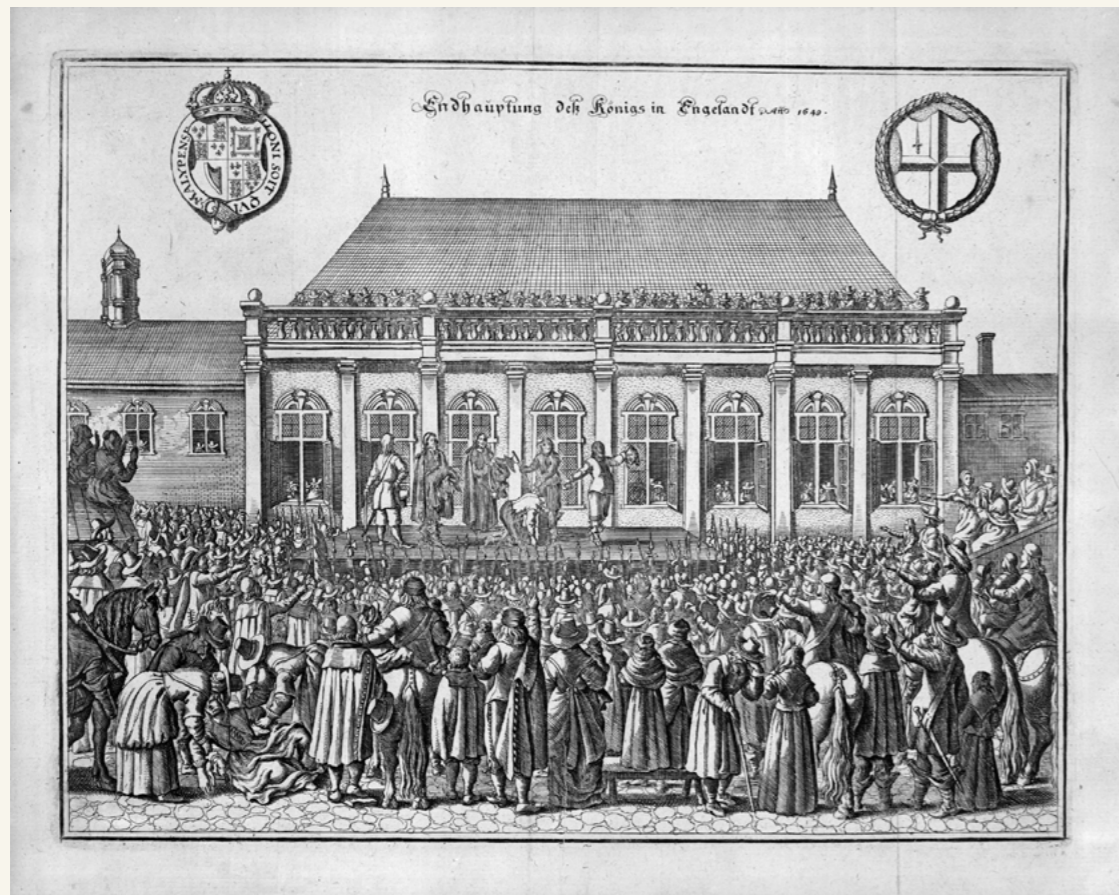
Distributing money to the poor on the Thursday before Easter is a long-standing Christian royal tradition. Monarchs from Charles II to Queen Victoria frequently used the Banqueting House for this special ceremony, which evoked the way Jesus took the role of the lowliest servant and washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper.

As well as distributing cash, food and clothing, the monarch was also expected to wash the feet of the paupers who approached them. However, this wasn't really an unpleasant task, as a royal official ensured that the chosen paupers' feet were very well scrubbed in advance!

The Banqueting House was last used for Royal Maundy in 1890, when Queen Victoria distributed alms.

Modern monarchs have continued the Maundy tradition. However, they usually distribute money from different cathedrals, rather than the Banqueting House.

The ritual of foot washing was abandoned in the 18th century. However, to this day, the Lord High Almoner still traditionally carries a towel over his right shoulder during the Maundy service today.



© Historic Royal Palaces

Execution site

The Banqueting House was also used for a much darker purpose. It was the execution site for Charles I. Charles only became heir when his brother Henry died in 1612. Charles had many admirable personal qualities, but he was painfully shy and insecure. He also lacked the charisma and vision essential for leadership. His stubborn refusal to compromise over power sharing finally ignited civil war.

Charles clung to his 'Divine Right of Kings' principle, ignoring any other opinion or attitude and he demanded to rule alone, without hindrance. This caused huge problems as members of Parliament tried in vain to curtail his power. Eventually Charles dissolved Parliament in 1629 and ruled alone for the next 11 years.

His rule became increasingly difficult; he was nearly bankrupt and didn't control his own army. Charles recalled Parliament, only to dismiss it again, then recalled it. Mistrust and hatred built up between the Royalists and Parliamentarians. The country began to divide itself between the two sides until war was inevitable. By August 1642 Charles felt strong enough to declare war.

Seven years of fighting between Charles' supporters and Oliver Cromwell's Parliamentarians claimed the lives of thousands, and ultimately, of the King himself. Charles was convicted of treason.

Just 13 years after Rubens' canvas were installed Charles I viewed the ceiling for the last time, as a condemned man. The irony of the divine right of kings cannot have been lost on him as he walked to his death under the magnificent canvases: commissioned as a tribute to his father.

The King was executed on a specially built scaffold outside the Banqueting House on 30 January 1649. His death is commemorated in a special service held there every year on the anniversary.

Did you know?

Banqueting House is all that remains of the once great Whitehall Palace after the devastating fire of 1698.

Timeline

- 1240 ○ York Place was built (soon to become Whitehall Palace)
- 1530 ● Henry VIII took York Place from Cardinal Wolsey and created Whitehall Palace which the Banqueting House was part of
- 1581 ● Elizabeth I built the first temporary wooden structure of the Banqueting House
- 1603 ● James I became King. He decided to rebuild the temporary Structure of the Banqueting House that Elizabeth had commissioned with a stone structure. Even though it was designed in the classical style, James did not like it because columns obstructed too much light from the windows. It lasted 10 years before it burnt down. The king was not disappointed.
- 1621 ● New Banqueting House was finished. This was designed by architect Inigo Jones.
- 1636 ● Peter Paul Rubens installed the artwork on the ceilings, commissioned by Charles I.
- 1642 ● Charles I left London, due to increased tensions between the crown and Parliament. It was in this year that the Civil War began in England.
- 1649 ● 30 January, Charles I returned to Banqueting House in Whitehall Palace, the site of his execution.
- 1660 ● After the protectorate of Oliver Cromwell came to an end, Charles II was invited to become King. He continued to have state events and entertain ambassadors in the Banqueting House.
- 1689 ● After the Glorious revolution in 1688, Mary II and William III were invited to become King and Queen in the Banqueting House. This is where the Declaration of Rights were signed.
- 1698 ● Fire at Whitehall Palace destroyed the entirety of the building, the Banqueting House was the only part left intact.
- 1890 ● Queen Victoria donated Banqueting House for use as a military museum until 1960s.



HOW TO VISIT WITH YOUR GROUP

Unlike our other sites, Banqueting House is not open to the public for the majority of the year. During its summer open period, Community Access Scheme (CAS) groups will be able to visit in groups of up to 20 people. Pre-booking by CAS group leaders is essential for these visits, due to high demand. We'll do our best to accommodate your visit request, but slots will be allocated on a first come first served basis.

This also means that, unfortunately, CAS cards are not eligible for use at Banqueting House. CAS cards are eligible for use for free, non-bookable entry at the Tower of London, Hampton Court Palace, and Kensington Palace

During Banqueting House's closure periods, the HRP Community Partnerships team organises events at Banqueting House exclusively for our CAS partners. Please keep an eye on the CAS newsletter, where events like this will be publicised.

You can find dates for Banqueting House's open periods here:

[Opening and closing times | Banqueting House | Historic Royal Palaces](#)

In 2026, this is the 1st August – 20th September.

Getting Tickets

Tickets to Banqueting House during the open period must be pre-booked with the Communities team. When booking is available, CAS group leaders will receive an email with the specific link and instructions on how to book these tickets. Tickets are digital QR codes and will be emailed to group leaders ahead of their visits.

The Offer

There are two main rooms within the Banqueting House, The Undercroft and the Main Hall. The Undercroft is the vaulted ground floor hall originally used as an intimate drinking den for James VI and I and his friends. The Main Hall is the opulent hall on the first floor, complete with the magnificent Rubens ceiling.

Due to the acoustics in the Undercroft space, we advise you do not lead group discussions in here. During your visit, we encourage you to speak to the Front of House staff to find out more information about Banqueting House.

We recommend groups allocate at least 45 minutes to an hour for their visit to Banqueting House – although they are of course welcome to remain longer! Please note that there are no eating or drinking facilities on site.

Accessibility

There is step free access to both spaces in the Banqueting House, with the Main Hall accessible via a large passenger lift. There is an accessible toilet with baby changing facilities available.

For more information on Accessibility at Banqueting House, please visit our website here: [Accessibility | Banqueting House | Historic Royal Palaces](#)

FURTHER INFORMATION

There is a wealth of information available about Banqueting House and Whitehall Palace.

- 🌀 For more information about Banqueting House stories and figures, visit: [Banqueting House | Historic Royal Palaces](#)
- 🌀 Book: *Whitehall Palace, The Official Illustrated History*, Simon Thurley, 2008, Historic Royal Palaces

CONTACT

If you have any further questions about planning a visit to the Banqueting House, please contact Florence Unwin, Community Partnerships Assistant Producer.

Email: communities@hrp.org.uk

Website: [Communities | Historic Royal Palaces](#)

