# The King's State Apartments Audio Tour

# Kensington Palace

## Overview

The King's State Apartments offer the grand experience of visiting the glittering court of George II and Queen Caroline in the 1730s.

## Stop 1 The Stone Hall

### Narrator:

Find the orange panel and go through the doorway to its right. You’ll enter the King’s Stairs, the first stop on your tour.

## Stop 2 The King’s Stairs

### Narrator:

You are about to explore the Kings State Apartments of George II. We’re going to imagine coming here to the royal court in the 1730s.

Let’s climb the stairs now – and hope you’re looking dazzling enough for the royal court. You can pause along the landing at the top and find out more about the King’s Stairs.

## Stop 3 Staircase Landing

### Narrator:

Find a safe place to stand on the landing out of the way. This is where courtiers would enter - imagine them walking up the stairs in fine silks and jewels. You have to dress to impress the King's guards, the imposing men in red uniforms painted on the staircase, if you want to meet the King!

The walls are decorated by royal artist William Kent who has created the illusion that courtiers and servants have assembled to watch our arrival – giving you a good sense of the Georgian court – a place to see and be seen.

Find out more about the painted characters and the staircase by selecting the option on your screen.

When you're ready turn left into the Presence Chamber

## Stop 3a Stairs and Handrail

### Lee Prosser:

I’m Lee Prosser and I’m the Curator of Historic Buildings at Kensington Palace.

So, the staircase itself is a solid staircase, very grand, and the treads are made of huge pieces of black marble, probably from Belgium, might be even from Ireland, we don’t know. But the most beautiful part of the staircase, I think, is the ironwork balustrade which is very carefully wrought with lots of twists and curls and what we call repoussé work, which is where a piece of iron has been beaten into a shape.

And all of this was done by the most prestigious ironworker of his age, a man called Jean Tijou, who was a Huguenot refugee, French, and who had come here and worked for King William and went on to create many gates and staircases in places like St Paul’s Cathedral, for example.

This was his first commission in England, so it really made his name in a way.

## Stop 4 The Presence Chamber

### Narrator:

Aha – the throne! If you were here 300 years ago, you’d be meeting the King! Or would you?

Actually, at most gatherings of the court, you would not find the King sitting here. He would be much further along the sequence of grand rooms and it would be your hope to pass between the guards at each door, getting closer and closer to the royal presence. Even so, you were still expected to bow to the empty throne on your way. If you’d like to do that now, pause your tour. If there is a Palace Host in the room, ask them to show you the correct way.

Another reason, however, why you might not find the King on this throne, is because the Queen might be on it instead. These apartments were for the use of the reigning monarch, whoever that was.

In the 1730s the monarch was George II – you can see a terracotta or fired clay portrait bust of him in the room together with a bust of his wife, Queen Caroline. They inherited Kensington Palace in 1727 on the death of George I, for whom artist William Kent had created the interior scheme for these apartments, inspired by ancient Greek and Roman designs. As these busts suggest, George II and Queen Caroline were also influenced by ancient styles – here the sculptor John Michael Rysbrack has depicted the couple as a Roman emperor and his wife. George was a man-of-action, but in contrast the highly intelligent Caroline was passionate about scholarship and the arts and took the lead in making changes to the presentation of the Palace, including its furnishings and paintings.

Find out more by selecting the option on screen. Or for more information about the Kings and Queens, explore the timeline feature on the main menu. Ask a palace host to tell you more about what it was like to visit the Georgian court.

## Stop 4a The Ceiling

### Charles Farris:

My name’s Charles Farris and I’m the Public Historian for the History of the Monarchy in the curators’ team at Historic Royal Palaces.

Here in the Presence Chamber, which is one of the great reception rooms of the monarchs at Kensington Palace, we see this rather wonderful ceiling designed by William Kent between 1723 and 4. Now Kent was inspired by many people, including the great Inigo Jones. Both him and Inigo Jones had travelled widely in Italy and were inspired by the Ancient World.

We have a combination of what we call grotesques, which is this very elaborate and intricate style which was actually inspired by some ancient Roman designs which were rediscovered in the grottoes or the caves under Rome and which is from where we get the word ‘grotesque’. And this combines lots of imagery, including these sort of mythical creatures and architectural features and unfurling floriate designs, to create a very distinctive style. And it would have been distinctive at this time as well because it had been unpopular for many years.

Now Apollo is the subject of this central roundel right in the middle of the room. There’s a lot of symbolism going on here as well. The god Apollo is pulling the sun across the sky, we know it’s at the dawn because just in front of him is the little figure of Phosphorus, or the Morning Star, which is the planet Venus, and this shows that this is the morning, this is the dawning of a new age and George I is alluding to the dawning of a new, distinctive and impressive dynasty.

## Stop 5 The Privy Chamber

### Narrator:

So far, so good in your visit to court. You’ve made it through to one of several rooms along the sequence of state apartments used for lavish entertaining, particularly by Queen Caroline. When her husband King George II was away for long periods, Caroline ruled Britain as his stand-in or regent and took over these apartments as her own. You won’t find much furniture in any of these rooms, as they needed to accommodate large numbers of people standing.

It was Caroline who had portraits of earlier kings and queens hung here – similar to the ones you see today. This was not just for decoration but was a piece of propaganda. Her husband George II, and his father, George I, were from Hanover in Germany and she herself was German. It was important to emphasize her husband’s right to the throne, by showing his family connections to the previous dynasty of English monarchs, the Stuarts.

For example, Princess Anne, later Queen Anne, shown in the portrait to the left of the fireplace had been George II’s cousin. And Anne’s grandfather was King Charles I, in the portrait between the windows, on the left. The whole room was therefore a statement about George and Caroline’s right to rule.

To find out about more about this room, select the option on screen.

## Stop 5a Busts of Great Thinkers

### Narrator:

Around the walls are a number of marble busts on tall pedestals. Queen Caroline commissioned them from Italian sculptor Giovanni Guelfi to celebrate some of the great British scientists, philosophers, and theologians of recent times. In the corner opposite the windows next to the door frame is the bust of Sir Isaac Newton, who, amongst many other achievements, most famously discovered the laws of gravity.

Senior Curator Joanna Marschner can tell us more about it.

### Joanna Marschner:

Caroline had actually met and really admired the work of Sir Isaac Newton. So Sir Isaac Newton was coaxed from Cambridge University to join the gatherings at St James’s and in fact agreed to conduct experiments there, which of course massively intrigued and impressed the other guests. The experiments that he showed off were about how vacuums were created and how rainbows were created by refraction. You can just imagine how spectacular that would have been in rooms such as this one and indeed at St James’s.

And Caroline continued to encourage the lively academic debate in the court after she became Queen Consort, which wasn’t until 1727.

## Stop 6 The Cupola Room

### Narrator:

Well done – you’ve obviously impressed the guards! You’ve not quite reached the King, but you’ve made it through to the most splendid room in the whole palace. Imagine yourself surrounded by dozens of other glamorously dressed courtiers and hopeful visitors. You’re bathed in a golden glow from the candlelight in the chandeliers as it reflects off the gilded statues. And you’re serenaded by musicians playing the latest tunes by court composers such as George Frideric Handel. There’s dancing, gambling and certainly drinking.

The magnificent decoration is like a theatrical backdrop for the drama of court life. This was artist William Kent’s first work for the Georgian kings and he brought to it all of his ten years’ experience studying in Italy. Here, he has evoked an ancient Roman hall.

But it’s not all glitz – the crowded room is stuffy and hot and the smells of hair powder, slowly melting wax make-up and bodily odours are overpowering. Toilet arrangements are also surprisingly basic, even in a royal palace – why not ask a Palace Host to discover more! Or select the option on screen to find out more about this room.

## Stop 6a Temple of the Four Grand Monarchies’ Clock

### Narrator:

This unusual object is an ingenious mix of clock, music box and artwork. It’s the work of many different artists and craftsmen and is designed as a temple from the ancient classical world. The dark bronze figures which sit at the four corners were created by Louis Roubiliac and represent the four ancient kingdoms of Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

The musical clock mechanism itself was made by Charles Clay and John Pyke. It originally played music by fashionable composers of the time – Handel, Corelli and Geminiani.

Here’s what it once sounded like.

(Music: Recording Of Clock)

## Stop 6b Artistic Tricks

### Charles Farris:

So, we’re here in the Cupola Room, which is the grand saloon or entertaining space, built for George I in 1721. And it really is one of the most exuberant and intriguing rooms in Kensington Palace. It was in fact the first royal commission of William Kent for George I. We see a lot of what we call trompe l’oeil, which is a French phrase which means ‘trick of the eye’ in which painted flat surfaces are made to look three dimensional, both as architectural designs and features. There’s a lot of Roman imagery as well, which is harking back to the Ancient World, of which William Kent was such a great fan. And the whole room is in fact evocative of an ancient Roman hall.

## Stop 7 The King’s Drawing Room

### Narrator:

Congratulations! You’ve reached your goal as a visitor to the royal court. Because this is the room where the King will make his appearance. You and the many other courtiers will need to form a circle, ready for the King and hoping to be introduced to him by a high court official. He’ll come through the door into this room, from this official state bedchamber, which sadly no longer survives.

To discover more here, select the option on screen. Or why not enter into the spirit of a court entertainment and sit down at the tables to try your hand at a Georgian game of chance. When you’re ready, go through the open doorway to the right of the card tables.

## Stop 7a Venus and Cupid

### Tracy Borman:

My name’s Tracy Borman and I’m the Joint-Chief Curator here at Historic Royal Palaces. Here in this room you will notice quite a striking painting of Venus and Cupid by Vasari. It actually has hung here for quite some time, dating back to the reign of King George II who was very fond of it. And there’s a lovely story of a time when George returned to his native Hanover and his wife, Caroline, who’d never liked this painting decided to get rid of it during his absence. Well, it was pretty much the first thing George noticed when he returned because he was a stickler for detail, and he flew into an absolute rage, ranting against the Queen for altering things in his absence. And in fact, it would take him several days to calm down, and even then he kept criticising the Queen for ‘forever stuffing her face with chocolate’. And he had nothing good to say about her for several weeks afterwards.

## Stop 7b The Gardens

### Narrator:

From the windows here, you get a good view looking east across Kensington Gardens, which, together with Hyde Park beyond, once formed the original palace gardens. As this is the most important room in the Palace, it is placed centrally along the East Front and the palace gardens were originally designed to be focused on this position.

Immediately in front of the palace lies our modern interpretation of the gardens created for George II and Queen Caroline, which incorporate the much later statue of Queen Victoria.

It was Caroline who did much to transform the wider landscape around the Palace. She established the central path to the Palace and the large pond. Beyond that, Caroline oversaw the creation of Kensington’s great boating lake, the Serpentine.

## Stop 8 Queen Caroline’s Closet

### Narrator:

Above the fireplace, you can see a portrait of Queen Caroline– she took a keen interest in the arts and made an important rediscovery of a portfolio of portrait drawings by Hans Holbein the Younger, artist to Henry VIII and his court in the early 1500s. She created in this room a ‘Gallery of the English’ which included the rediscovered drawings as well as small paintings, miniatures, and embroideries. This collection has since been dispersed among other royal homes.

This was a private display, for this room was the link between the public, ceremonial rooms we’ve explored so far, and the King’s private gallery. Only the elite courtiers and most distinguished visitors would be allowed through here. Luckily, we are too. As you leave, you’ll pass through the top of a servants’ staircase, before entering the King’s Gallery.

## Stop 9 The King’s Gallery

### Narrator:

As you enter, move to the left, towards the large painting of a man on horseback. We’ve now moved from the public space of the ceremonial rooms to the King’s Gallery – a place to display paintings and sculptures. This magnificent painting is a copy of Van Dyck’s portrait of Charles I with his riding master, Monsieur de St. Antoine. It was Charles who established what’s now known as the Royal Collection, which comprises works of art and furniture owned by the Crown. Like many monarchs, George II added to this collection, including pieces specifically intended for this room.

Now, let’s turn around and take in the view. This room was part of the monarch’s private realm and is in fact the largest and – at almost 30 metres – the longest room in the Palace. It’s here that the King or Queen could take some gentle exercise and relax with their closest friends and advisers – a place for private discussion of court matters, government business and, of course, all the latest gossip.

If you find a Palace Host, ask them to fill you in on the latest court scandal. Otherwise, why not explore the option on screen.

## Stop 9a Wind Dial

### Narrator:

This unusual feature is a wind dial. It is attached by chains and pulleys to a weathervane on the roof of the Palace. Its mechanism - designed by the famous clockmaker, Thomas Tompion - still works today, over 300 years later! Depending on today’s weather, you may see it in action.

It was installed for joint monarchs William III and Mary II who created the Palace in 1689. William was a soldier King and knowing which way the wind was blowing helped William plot the movements of his own fleet - or that of his enemy. William, who had been the Dutch Prince of Orange before becoming King of England, also had plans for imperial expansion which can be seen on the face of the wind dial.

Notice how much larger Britain is made to look, compared to Continental Europe. At the four corners, demeaning racial stereotypes are used to represent Europe, Asia, America and Africa, the four then known continents of the world, where the Dutch and the English had established commercial and colonial interests.

It was also here in the Gallery where William, recovering after a riding accident caught the chill which led to his death in 1702.

## Stop 9b Gardens

### Narrator:

From the windows, you’re looking across the south gardens of the Palace. In the foreground you can see the Gold Gates, forever now associated with the outpouring of grief and sympathy after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, whose home this was.

What is much less visible now are the original grand formal gardens which once unfolded down to the former village of Kensington. These were created for William III and Mary II, the first monarchs to live here. They brought from their previous homes in Holland the Dutch fashion for flower beds cut in complex patterns.

New, extended gardens were created in the 1730s for Queen Caroline by designers Charles Bridgeman and William Kent, with expansive lawns and avenues of trees.

## Stop 9c Ceiling

### Joanna Marschner:

When you come into the King’s Gallery one of the first things that strikes you is that this room has the most spectacular ceiling. It’s composed, in fact, of seven large canvases, painted with scenes from the story of Ulysses by Homer.

The scenes depicted on the ceiling show the trials and the triumphs of a classical warrior hero who was a great sailor as he undertakes perilous voyages to protect the honour of his family and his dynasty. And this becomes the perfect subject to choose for this room in which members of the government would meet with the King to discuss the commerce and business and politics of this nation, both at home, but also in that great wider world. Great Britain of course is an island nation and it prided itself on the prowess of its navy.

## Stop 9d Esther before Ahasuerus, by Tintoretto

### Meredith Crosbie:

My name is Meredith Crosbie, I’m an Explainer here at Kensington Palace. This painting is by Jacopo Tintoretto, one of the Renaissance Old Masters from Venice. It was painted around 1546, then later purchased by the art loving King Charles I.

It depicts the biblical story of Esther, as told in the Book of Esther from the Old Testament. Now, Esther was the second wife of Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, the King of Persia. She’s Jewish but has to hide that part of her identity. Xerxes had been influenced by his evil adviser to massacre the Jewish people held captive in his kingdom. Esther decides to come before the King to plead on behalf of her people. Now, it’s forbidden to approach the King without his permission and she’s so afraid of his infamous temper that she faints. God moves the King to pity and he listens to her, reverses his decree and punishes his evil adviser instead.

In the painting Tintoretto has frozen the story at the high point of drama. It looks like a snapshot from an opera or a play with Esther swooning under the spotlight. There’s a swirl of dramatic emotion around her and the tension is heightened by Tintoretto’s bold, loose brushstrokes. His technique was quite experimental for the time; he painted quickly and often at night by candlelight, which gives his paintings a ghostly flickering quality.

## Stop 10 Where Next?

### Narrator:

Your visit to the Georgian court is over and it’s time to find your carriage or your Sedan chair for the journey home. But first, look for the exit door at the end of the gallery on the right and make your way down the stairs. Turn left at the bottom and head back to the Stone Hall. From there, use your audio guide to explore the other Palace tours if you’ve not already done so.

## [End of Tour]