# The Queen's State Apartments Audio Tour

# Kensington Palace

## Overview

The intimate Queen’s State Apartments take you into the private world of joint monarchs Mary II and her husband William III.

## Stop 1 The Stone Hall

### Narrator:

Find the dark green panel and go through the doorway to the right. Walk down the corridor till you reach some stairs. Go up these into a room with views out to the gardens. From there go through the doorway to the left of the windows to the Queen’s Apartments.

## Stop 2 The Queen’s Staircase

### Narrator:

Find a place to stand at the bottom of the stairs, under the chandelier, while I give you a brief introduction to the Queen’s State Apartments. You’re looking at one of the oldest interiors in the Palace and the least altered. This staircase was built in 1691. It’s part of the original modifications made to an existing building – Nottingham House – to turn it into a royal palace for newly crowned joint monarchs William III and Mary II. They chose Kensington – then in peaceful countryside – to escape the smoke and bustle of London.

The apartments we’re about to explore were Mary’s official rooms. They were not intended to host grand entertainments, unlike the King’s State Apartments, so although the decoration was rich, there was a less formal atmosphere. This staircase was not used by visitors but by Mary and her ladies-in-waiting to easily access her private rooms on this floor as well as her garden – they would have gone out through the door between the windows with the garden view, which you can see here. Now climb the stairs and make your way into the Queen’s Gallery.

## Stop 3 The Queen’s Gallery

### Narrator:

This is the largest room in the Queen’s State Apartments, but it wasn’t used by Mary for grand court occasions. Instead, this was where she relaxed with her closest companions and her pets. The furniture and objects you see here today give you just a flavour of the interior she created for herself – walking in here over 300 years ago, you would be entering a riot of vibrant colour, sound, and smell.

Imagine the scene – originally set off by red velvet and colourful silk on the walls, every available surface, including the little shelves over the doors, was crammed with many more of the beautifully decorated ceramics you see today. These were evidence of Queen Mary’s passion for collecting treasures, especially from China and Japan. Some of the beautiful ceramics held flowers, including tulips, which were hugely fashionable and outrageously expensive. The bright colours and heady perfume of the various flowers contributed to the sensory overload.

[Sound Of Birds Tweeting And Rustling, Little Dogs Yapping And Running Up And Down]

The exotic atmosphere was further enhanced by the exquisite black lacquered cabinets from Japan – imagine many more pieces in this style here, including day beds and chairs. Hanging in the windows you might have found birdcages upholstered in red velvet and inhabited by twittering and chirping canaries, nightingales, cockatoos, and love birds.

Close to where the Queen would sit you’d find large cushions on which Mary’s beloved little pug dogs sprawled and yapped. Perhaps they longed to paw at the Persian carpets or to play with the loose threads of the embroideries that the Queen and her ladies sat sewing.

To find out more select the option on screen. And if you want to know how William and Mary came to be crowned as joint monarchs, ask a Palace Host.

## Stop 3a The Servant’s View

### Woman of the Bedchamber:

When Queen Mary returned to England from Holland I came with her, and if you ask me what I think of this room, I’ll give you two words in Dutch– ‘hard werken’ (hard work!). As First Woman of the Bedchamber to the Queen, it is my job to organise the maids in the cleaning of the Palace and – ach! – it is a nightmare in here! When you walk into the room, it rattles! So many pots! So easy to break one! Especially with Her Majesty’s ‘charming’ little dogs running round your feet – and doing their business too. Yet Queen Mary and her ladies pay it no mind – too busy with their needlework and card games and no thought for the likes of me and my duties.

I don’t know what the King makes of it, William – you can see him on the left of the flower painting – he’s a soldier through and through, from my home of Holland – but he indulges the Queen in her . . . excesses here. You can see her on the other side of the flower painting. Actually, though she’s happy for William to take the lead, she doesn’t need his permission to do anything – as she is joint and equal monarch with him. On account of she and William being invited to share the throne after her father, James II, was thrown off it. When Mary married William, she was half his age – so young. (SIGHS) As we all were, once. Ach! Time to clean up after those puppies – (WALKING OFF) now, to find a lucky maid for the task . . .

## Stop 3b Wood Carvings

### Narrator:

The elaborately carved mirrors over the fireplaces were made by the most skilled wood carver of his age, Grinling Gibbons. Historic Buildings Curator Lee Prosser can tell us more.

### Lee Prosser:

Most Grinling Gibbons that you see is made of lime wood and that helps to make a very sharp and clean carving, it’s very good for detail. So, when you normally see Grinling Gibbons carvings in stately homes and royal palaces, it’s just the naked wood, but here at Kensington our Gibbonses are gilt, so they’re covered with gold. We think that that’s to do with the fact that they weren’t just beautiful carvings meant to be seen but were meant to be a backdrop to china.

In a way it’s a frame for porcelain. You would have had porcelain all along the mantelpiece, probably rising to a very big piece in the middle and going down symmetrically to the smaller pieces, and then we know there were these little brackets or corbels which must have supported other pots. So, the whole thing would have been a wonderful kind of wedding cake of gold, mirrors, colourful porcelain. You just have to imagine it in your mind’s eye.

## Stop 3c Gardens

### Narrator:

Looking out from the windows in the early 1690s, Queen Mary would have seen her private garden just below. Mary loved gardens, gardening, and botany and both she and her husband William were greatly influenced by Dutch gardens which tried to find a perfect balance between art and nature. Kensington’s gardens included a grand formal parterre full of hedges and beds arranged in geometric shapes, a beautiful avenue of Elm trees and what’s described as the ‘Queen’s Little Flower Garden’.

The gardens have continually evolved over time and what you see today is quite different. Here’s Jude Evans from the palace gardens team to tell us more.

### Jude Evans:

Looking out of the window we can, first of all we can see the Wiggly Walk. This links the café and the front of the Palace to the upper gardens. It’s got a lovely winding path, lined in the early spring in snowdrops and cyclamen.

Beyond the Wiggly Walk we have the Sunken Garden, which is the jewel in our crown. It was built in 1908 and it’s quite a rarity and it’s of good historical interest, therefore. Around the Sunken Garden there’s an arched lime Cradle Walk. That’s made with lime trees, specifically large-leaved limes, because they give a lovely shade in the summer.

The gardens are planted to have hopefully something of seasonal interest all year round, so that whenever people come they can see something.

## Stop 3d Bust of a Man

### Narrator:

This disturbing marble sculpture by Jan van Nost the younger depicts a man of African descent. Although the jewelled headband and elaborate chain suggest high status, the collar around his neck indicates his enslavement.

The figure dates from about 1700 and may have been made for William III or his successor, Queen Anne for Kensington. Both financially invested in the trade in enslaved people, carried out by the Royal African Company and later the South Sea Company.

We don’t know who this man really was. One account describes him as a favourite servant of William III, but it is equally possible that the bust doesn’t depict a real person but a generalised representation of an enslaved man working in the royal court. From the late 1600s some wealthy households in England included Black people as ‘servants’, some of whom had been enslaved. They also displayed statues of Black people to flaunt their wealth and status. This sculpture would originally have been studded with precious stones. You might be able to see little holes where the stones once were.

The anonymity of these statues, and, perhaps, of this bust, reflects how enslavement strips people of their identity, seeking to reduce them to property.

## Stop 3e William III and Mary II portraits

### Narrator:

The portraits show the future William III and Mary II as Prince and Princess of Orange. They were painted by the Dutch artist Willem Wissing in 1685, the year that Mary’s father became James II of England and Ireland, and James VII of Scotland.

James II was Catholic, and his faith made him unpopular with the Protestant population and powerful people at court. Three years later he fled to France during the 1688 ‘revolution’ and was replaced by his Protestant daughter, Mary, and son-in-law, William.

A writer from the time describes William of Orange arriving in England accompanied by 200 Black attendants brought from South America. These were probably enslaved people who worked on Dutch plantations in places such as Suriname. Like his uncles, Charles II and James II, before him, William III had a personal financial investment in slavery.

William’s successor, Queen Anne, held shares in the South Sea Company, which were inherited by George I who became King on Anne’s death in 1714. The official royal role in the trade lasted from 1660 for about a century. Over the course of its trading lifetime, the South Sea Company was responsible for supplying about 42,000 enslaved people to Spanish colonies in South America.

## Stop 4 The Queen’s Closet

### Narrator:

This is the Queen’s Closet, a closet being a small room. This was where the Queen would be dressed by her ladies-in-waiting and was the perfect spot for private conversation. It was originally decorated with richly coloured silk wall hangings, probably from China.

But the queen you can see in the oval portrait in the centre of the room is not Mary. This is Anne, Mary’s younger sister, who became queen after her. When Mary died in 1694, her husband William III, continued to rule as King, until he too died here at Kensington Palace in 1702. The couple had no surviving children, so the crown passed to Anne. We can see Anne’s husband, Prince George of Denmark, in the other oval portrait here but Anne ruled alone as monarch. Despite Anne’s 17 pregnancies, none of her children survived beyond childhood and when she died, it marked an end to the rule of the Stuart dynasty and the arrival of the Hanoverian kings. As the first four of these were called George, this new era is known as the Georgian period. Find out more using the Timeline feature on the main menu.

## Stop 5 The Queen’s Dining Room

### Narrator:

This room is an intimate dining room. In contrast to previous monarchs, who tended to eat lavishly in public, surrounded by courtiers, William and Mary preferred the more domestic, plainer surroundings of this private room, where they could enjoy each other’s company. The table, made from yew and sycamore, and the walnut wood chairs date from the late 1600s and are good examples of the simple Dutch style of their reign.

Surviving household accounts show that meat dominated their diet. Perhaps as a relief from this, the monarchs also enjoyed simple suppers of fish and beer. Find out more by selecting the option on your screen.

## Stop 5a The Servant’s View

### Woman of the Bedchamber:

We must not disturb the King while he’s eating. Especially not as he’s dining with his wife’s younger sister, Princess Anne. They do not get on so well. Anne continually begs him and Queen Mary for money, which she continually spends so lavishly, most notably on her favourite, Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough. Perhaps that is why the King is now eating all the peas from the shared dish. Sweet little peas are new to this country and such a delicacy. Anne can’t take her eyes off them – she’s as greedy for the King’s peas as for his money!

## Stop 5b The Housekeeper

### Joanna Marschner:

I’m Joanna Marschner and I’m Senior Curator here at Kensington Palace.

When you go into the dining room perhaps the thing that you notice first of all is the really intriguing portrait which hangs over the chimney piece. This is of a lady called Katherine Elliot and it was painted in about 1687 or 88 by an artist called John Riley and it was probably commissioned by James II. Katherine Elliot was his nurse when he was a baby.

It was really rare in the 17th century for domestic servants to be the subject of portraits, but Riley seems to have been really comfortable working with subjects like this. And this is a truly affectionate portrait of a dignified old lady.

Both Mary II and her sister, Queen Anne, would have known Katherine Elliot when they were little girls and she was serving their mother and their stepmother. And it’s really touching to see that this portrait continues to be so treasured.

## Stop 6 The Queen’s Drawing Room

### Narrator:

This is the room where Queen Mary would greet visitors and host formal receptions. It’s connected to the start of the King’s State Apartments through the door to the right of the windows and it’s from there that visitors would approach. Having both King’s and Queen’s apartments accessed from a common ceremonial entrance reflected William and Mary’s status as joint monarchs. And this status was even incorporated into the interior design here. Look up to the carved wooden band, or cornice, running round the top of the walls and you might be able to make out the intertwined letters ‘W’ and ‘M’, standing for William and Mary.

The room was badly damaged during the Second World War, but most of the objects and artworks here survive from the time of William and Mary. Hanging on the wall is what looks like a clock, but is a barometer which measures atmospheric pressure and was used to predict changes in the weather. William took a keen interest in the latest technology of his time and commissioned Thomas Tompion, the most famous English clockmaker of the period, to make this piece.

The doorway opposite the windows leads into the Queen’s Bedroom –it can be a tight squeeze, but we can take a quick look in. This was a ceremonial bedroom, from where the Queen would appear to her assembled guests. Mary had a more private bedroom built next door and it’s there that she died suddenly from smallpox in 1694, aged just 32. Ask a Palace Host to tell you more about the stories here or select the option on your screen.

## Stop 6a The Original Palace

### Narrator:

This is the earliest known view of Kensington Palace, painted around 1696 by Francis Barlow, famous for his animal paintings. It shows the Palace, created for William III and Mary II, shortly after works to convert an existing building, Nottingham House, had been completed. The deer in the foreground are part of the royal herd, kept in a paddock so that William could hunt whenever he wished.

## Stop 6b The Bed

### Kate Orfeur:

My name is Kate Orfeur and I am a senior textile conservator.

It’s the oldest bed in the collection to survive. It’s a composite object, so that means that it’s constructed of many elements from different periods.

The counterpane is the earliest element of the bed, circa 1650, and it’s really beautiful. It’s gold silk and metal thread embroidery and it had also major conservation treatment. It was actually my first project when I started here. It took a thousand hours to conserve, so the loose metal thread embroidery was stitched down, the splits in the gold silk were repaired and the entire counterpane was protected with a dyed conservation net.

As well as the textiles being conserved, furniture conservators carried out repairs to several of the wooden elements of the bed, making it structurally stable.

## Stop 6c The Servant’s View

### Woman of the Bedchamber:

You see the beautiful desk? Its exquisite patterns are made from rosewood inlaid with wafer-thin slices of holly, ebony, and ivory. And as First Woman of the Bedchamber to the Queen, it’s my responsibility to keep it well stocked for Queen Mary with paper, ink, quill pens, sealing wax and other necessaries. For the life of the Queen is not all banquets and balls – there is much work to be done on matters of government, as well as private letters. Every morning she reads and writes from about six till eight, and then again for many hours in the evening until midnight, as well as going to Chapel every day. Ach! I would not swap my life for hers.

## Stop 7 Where next?

### Narrator:

We’ve reached the end of our tour of the Queen’s State Apartments.

Retrace your steps to the Queen’s Stairs. Go down these and turn right at the bottom. Then follow the signs back to the Stone Hall. From there you can choose a new tour.

## [End of Tour]