# Victoria: A Royal Childhood Audio Tour

# Kensington Palace

## Overview

This exhibition takes you behind the scenes to discover the extraordinary story of Queen Victoria’s childhood here in the early 1800s.

## Stop 1 The Stone Hall

### Narrator:

Find the single light green panel and go through the doorway to its right. Climb the stairs on the right and go through the narrow doorway at the top, into the Jewel Room, the first stop on your tour.

## Stop 2 The Jewel Room

### Narrator:

The dazzling display of jewellery in this room reflects the outward, public story of the queen in the framed portrait on the wall – Victoria. The glittering diamond and precious gemstone jewellery you see here was worn by Queen Victoria and her granddaughter and reflects the formal splendour of the royal court in the 1800s. But the story that we’ll be exploring on the rest of this floor peeks behind this glamorous public image. It reveals the private and personal journey of the young girl who grew up in these rooms – a princess who played with dolls, made up stories and had tantrums, but who would one day become a queen whose realm covered a quarter of the globe.

To find out more about the jewellery here, select the option on your screen. When you’re ready to move on, go through the door to the right of the windows and pass through the lift lobby.

## Stop 2a Princess Louise’s Diamond Necklace Tiara

### Narrator:

This piece was a wedding gift to Queen Victoria’s granddaughter, Princess Louise, from her parents, Bertie and Alexandra, the Prince and Princess of Wales.

The design was inspired by a traditional Russian headdress called a Kokoshnik and reflects the close family ties between the British and Russian royal families in this period. It is cleverly constructed to allow it to be worn on the head or as a necklace.

## Stop 2b Queen Victoria’s Emerald Tiara

### Narrator:

On the 25th of April 1845 a 25-year-old Queen Victoria described this tiara in her diary as ‘a lovely Diadem of diamonds and emeralds, designed by my beloved Albert, who has such wonderful taste.’

Her husband Prince Albert designed and commissioned many pieces of jewellery for his wife. The emeralds, traditionally associated with royalty, were also a symbol of lovers’ vows.

## Stop 2c The Fife Diamond Tiara

### Narrator:

In 1889 Victoria’s granddaughter, Princess Louise, married the 6th Duke of Fife. He gave her this tiara as a wedding gift. Designed in Paris by Oscar Massin, the pear-shaped diamonds are ‘swing-set’ – intended to catch the light as the wearer moves.

## Stop 3 Young Victoria

### Narrator:

Queen Victoria was born here at Kensington Palace in 1819 and spent her childhood in these rooms. Take a look at the large model of the Palace. You can see the rooms where she lived and in them the key characters of our story.

On the side of the model nearest the windows, is, on the left, the room we’re standing in now – and in it Princess Victoria herself. Her father, the Duke of Kent, died when she was a baby leaving her a distant fifth in line to the throne. But by the age of 11 she had become the immediate heir.

In the next room in the model, you see Victoria on the right, with her much older half-sister and closest childhood companion, Feodora, from her mother’s first marriage.

[Yappy Dog Bark] And that’s Dash, Victoria’s adored little dog.

Moving round to the right, you see Victoria with her governess, Baroness Lehzen, who was strict but kind and well respected by the young princess.

And in the next model scene we meet Victoria’s German mother, Victoire, Duchess of Kent. Together with her private secretary and adviser John Conroy, seen here, they raised the Princess under strict rules.

We’ll discover more through the following rooms – but, first, if you want to find out more about the Duchess, select the option on screen.

## Stop 3a Victoria’s Mother, the Duchess of Kent

### Duchess:

Well, here I am, on the left of course, Princess Victoire of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld in Germany. Twice married and twice widowed. Created a British Duchess when I married my second husband, the Duke of Kent, fourth son of King George III.

And by my side here, dear, sweet Alexandrina Victoria, my little mouse, Vickelchen. God has been good in letting me have such an angel, although He took her father away so soon. Leaving me, you see, with his enormous debts. But also with sole responsibility for this adorable child, who, one day, might be Queen of England.

## Stop 4 The Princess at Play

### Narrator:

These displays explore Victoria’s early childhood at Kensington. Take a look at the large case just by the entrance. Here you’ll see Victoria’s dolls house and some of the many little dolls she made with her governess. She spent hours sewing costumes for each one and giving each a name and an elaborate story. She was a happy and imaginative child but had few friends her own age at the Palace.

You’ll see other toys elsewhere in the room. As you explore, imagine a spoilt, strong-willed child with a fiery temper. Greater discipline arrived at the age of five in the form of a German governess, Louise Lehzen. And feel free to play with the replica toys in the toybox in the centre of the room – they’re inspired by Victoria’s own. Ask a Palace Host if you want to find out more or select the option on screen.

## Stop 4a Dash the Dog

### Dash:

Rrrrrrufffff! I don’t know how the painter made this picture, because I don’t sit still for very long – only for my mistress, Victoria, because she likes to dress me up – red trousers and a blue jacket’s a favourite – but it’s a real effort not to run around in excited little circles, I can tell you. Perhaps that’s why she calls me Dash. And she also calls me ‘a most amusing, playful, attached and sweet little dog’. Oh, and you could say I’m a doubly royal dog, because I’m a King Charles Spaniel – ha ha!

## Stop 4b Regency Style

### Sebastian Edwards:

Hello, I’m Sebastian Edwards, Head of Collections at Historic Royal Palaces.

This is the apartment where Queen Victoria was brought up. It’s decorated now in what we call the Regency style, which is named after her uncle, the Prince Regent, who became George IV the year after she was born. He extravagantly furnished his homes, like Buckingham Palace and Brighton Pavilion in this style.

Some of the period features you could look out for in these rooms are the classical Greek key borders on the wall, door surrounds with their reeded decoration picked out in gold leaf, the colza oil lamps – colza oil was another name for rapeseed oil – and the fitted carpets with their bold designs and simple colours. And also there were lots of bold stripes everywhere, as you’ll see.

The new decoration of these rooms is inspired by descriptions we found in the archives as well as a few scraps of evidence discovered, such as pieces of wallpaper and layers of paint. We’ve decorated them as brightly as they would have been when the Duke and Duchess of Kent lived here in 1819.

## Stop 5 Educating Victoria

### Narrator:

Victoria’s education as a future queen began in these rooms when she was just three years old. In the table case in the centre of the room you can see Victoria’s little folding desk – she practised her handwriting on this. The bookcase display holds the kind of books Victoria was expected to study, including – unusually for a girl at the time – Latin, science, and maths.

Hanging on the wall by the windows is a list of rules which Princess Victoria was expected to follow. They were devised by the close adviser to Victoria’s mother, John Conroy. Under the rules, known as the Kensington System, Victoria’s every move was controlled – she had to sleep in her mother’s room and could not walk down the stairs on her own. The system was intended to protect the young princess, but many people suspected Conroy designed it to keep Victoria under his control when she became Queen.

## Stop 6 A Royal Performance

### Narrator:

Find a place to stand out of the way. Victoria loved music and theatre, which fuelled her vivid imagination.

The little theatre display is an artistic recreation of a performance given here for Victoria’s sixteenth birthday in 1835. Famous Italian singers of the day performed the princess’s favourite opera, Bellini’s ‘I Puritani’. Afterwards Victoria wrote:

### Victoria:

It was the most delightful concert I ever heard. No one could be more enchanted than I was. I shall never forget it.

### Narrator:

Do take a seat to enjoy the performance yourself or feel free to try on the costumes in the dressing up box – something which Princess Victoria loved to do.

## Stop 7 Family Feuds

### Narrator:

King William IV came to the throne in 1830 – you can see him to the right of the fireplace – and Victoria was finally acknowledged as the official heir.

As Victoria grew into her teens the atmosphere inside Kensington Palace became increasingly tense. Behind the conflict was the rather self-important looking man over the fireplace, Sir John Conroy. As close adviser to the Duchess, he schemed to gain power. He insisted that Parliament appoint the Duchess as regent – or caretaker ruler – if King William IV died before Victoria turned eighteen. Until she was officially an adult, Victoria could not rule alone.

Now take a look at the little bed – it’s Princess Victoria’s travelling bed, which she slept in on her tours of England and Wales. The tours were known as the Royal Progresses and were organised by Conroy and the Duchess. They hoped to promote Victoria to the British public as the future queen and to ‘sell’ the Duchess as a potential regent.

To find out more, select the option on screen.

## Stop 7a Travel Bed

### Sebastian Edwards:

Princess Victoria’s travelling bed is a new discovery and a rare survivor from her childhood. Victoria wrote in her first journal entry in 1832 about ‘my own little bed, which always travels with me’, which followed her around in a cart, or later in her life, on the Royal Train. And you can see a map of where she went with it above the bed today.

The bed’s shown partly dismantled. You can see the heavy mahogany frame is not very portable and would have needed some burly servants to carry it in pieces. When it was in use it would have had muslin or chintz covers and draperies, like a tent, and be much cosier than it looks now.

## Stop 7b Sir John Conroy

### Conroy:

About time! You finally get to hear my side of the story. Sir John Conroy, retired officer of the British Army, advisor to the late Duke of Kent and now private secretary to his widow, the Duchess. And no more than that, despite the wicked rumours.

Rumours spread by that man next to me. Yes, that stubborn fool, King William IV, who mocks me as ‘King John’.

Why? Because he fears that when he dies, the Duchess will rule as regent for her young daughter, and I will rule the Duchess. (LAUGHS) Well, he’s not wrong about that, actually! But look at it this way – that girl Victoria is a silly, weak child unready for the burdens of the throne. She needs a – my – firm hand to guide her.

## Stop 7c Exercise Clubs

### Narrator:

Find the case to the left of the windows. Here’s curator Claudia Acott-Williams to tell us more.

### Claudia Acott-Williams:

So, this rather odd set of objects that we can see are a pair of exercise clubs. And so what the user would do is they would swing the clubs in a kind of repetitive sequence of movements to improve arm and back strength, and also to improve posture and blood circulation.

In 1835 Victoria was struck down by a very severe episode of typhoid fever, so she was very severely ill while she was on holiday in Ramsgate in Kent.

What we know now is that during this illness Victoria was also under very intense emotional strain. Tensions within the household between her, her mother and John Conroy had really reached a boiling point and we also know that she was being treated for melancholy which was, you know, basically feeling incredibly low.

So it wasn’t just physical strain that she was under, but really psychological strain as well. And it was during this moment of weakness that John Conroy chose to attempt to force the Princess to sign a document which would have handed over management of her household to him and would have ensured him a position in the household once she became Queen. And despite being really seriously unwell, with Lehzen’s support, she manages to resist his attempts.

But the clubs form a really, really important part of this recovery and she uses them to regain both her physical and her mental strength.

The fact that she decides to keep these, I think sort of imbues them with a kind of symbolic importance and perhaps we can read from them that they were her own weapons in a battle against John Conroy.

## Stop 8 The Birthday Ball

### Narrator:

This is the room where Victoria first danced with the man she would eventually marry, her cousin Albert. You can see the couple dancing in the centre of the room on top of a candelabra. When Victoria turned seventeen, her mother held a lavish ball here, with fireworks in the gardens and distinguished musicians and singers providing the entertainment.

But the ball was not simply a birthday celebration – it was also a chance for potential suitors to meet the princess. Her German family was keen to promote their candidate, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha – there’s a rather handsome bust of him against the wall, on the left – and this visit was their first meeting.

The cousins hit it off immediately, but Albert was not really a party animal. According to Victoria’s diary entry for her birthday.

### Victoria:

He stayed a short while in the ballroom and, having only danced twice, turned as pale as ashes and retired early.

Find out more by selecting the option on screen. When you’re ready, make your way to the next room through the door to the left of the windows.

## Stop 8a Cousin Albert

### Albert:

Aha, you have found me, loitering by the wall between the windows. I love music, but dancing is not really my strong point. I prefer to fence, to ride, to study, especially the sciences which promise so much. But no matter, it is my cousin Victoria who is very much the centre of my attention. Such an animated girl with such stamina for these entertainments – but with a head full of sense and ideas. Apparently, she likes me in return. She said:

### Victoria:

Albert is extremely handsome; his hair is about the same colour as mine; his eyes are large and blue, and he has a beautiful nose . . .

### Albert:

So kind–

### Victoria:

And a very sweet mouth with fine teeth.

### Albert:

Oh, there’s more–

### Victoria:

But the charm of his countenance is his expression, which is most delightful.

### Albert:

Ja, a little embarrassing now–

### Victoria:

Full of goodness and sweetness, and very clever and intelligent.

### Albert:

And . . . she’s done. As I say, a very perceptive young lady.

## Stop 9 A Baby in the Palace

### Narrator:

Find a place to stand to the side, out of the way. In this room, we’ve jumped out of the main story and back to Victoria’s birth. For a very good reason – research has allowed us to identify this as the room where Victoria was born, on 24 May 1819.

We also know what the room looked like and have recreated the Regency style, including the white and green curtains. The furniture is similar to what we know was here in 1819. This room had been a dining room and was hastily converted in preparation for the birth. It was the perfect location – near to the kitchens for supplies of hot water and close to the room where officials would need to gather to confirm the birth.

The Duke and heavily pregnant Duchess had raced to Kensington from Germany, where they had been living, to ensure their child would be born on English soil. They brought with them Germany’s first female, gynaecologist, Charlotte von Siebold, who assisted with the birth – and coincidentally, three months later with that of Victoria’s future husband Albert.

The Duchess pronounced her baby:

### Duchess:

A pretty little princess, as plump as a partridge.

### Narrator:

To find out more select the option on screen. When you’re ready to leave, carry on through into the final room of the tour.

## Stop 9a Victoria’s Uncles

### Narrator:

These engraved portraits by the window are of Victoria’s six living uncles at the time of her birth – all sons of George III. A crisis arose in 1817 after the death of Princes Charlotte – the granddaughter of George III, and second in line to the throne. None of George III’s ageing sons had surviving legitimate children – though plenty of illegitimate ones. Those brothers who were still single quickly got married to European princesses and the race was on to produce an official heir to the throne. Of all the children to survive to adulthood, Princess Victoria was the eldest. By 1830, her path to the throne was clear. To find out more, ask a Palace Host.

## Stop 10 Becoming Queen

### Narrator:

At 11.30 on the morning of 20 June 1837, 97 members of the Privy Council, a group of official advisers to the monarch, assembled in this room, in a scene recreated on the table. They were here to hold their first meeting with Victoria, who only hours earlier had awoken to the news that she was now Queen.

The scene is also shown in the large painting on the left-hand side of the fireplace.

The painter has altered the scene for dramatic effect – Victoria was wearing black to mourn the dead King, but here is shown in white to symbolise her youth, femininity and purity – and to make her stand out in a crowd of old men. And her little dog Dash, originally in the picture, where you see his cushion by her feet, has been painted out – perhaps because he made the scene less solemn. But the painter has captured the significance of the occasion. Having turned eighteen just weeks earlier, Victoria was now not only Queen, but could rule on her own, without a regent.

She immediately moved her mother’s bed out of her bedroom and dismissed the hated Conroy. Within weeks she had moved to Buckingham Palace. Finally, she was free.

To discover more select the option on screen.

## Stop 10a Victoria’s Coronation

### Victoria:

Ah, my coronation. I’m in Westminster Abbey on 28 June 1838 – a year after leaving Kensington Palace. I seem a little small and lost amongst all those people, don’t I? But I didn’t feel that way – I was quite calm. Even when the Archbishop of Canterbury jammed the monarch’s ring onto the wrong finger, which was really rather painful!

I shall ever remember that day as the proudest of my life. I really cannot say how proud I feel to be Queen of such a nation.

But I’ll let you into a secret – the moment I got back to Buckingham Palace, I gave my little dog Dash a bath, still in my coronation dress! I may have just been crowned Queen, but part of me will always be the little girl who grew up at Kensington Palace.

## Stop 10b Rewriting the Rules

### Narrator:

Take a look at the painting of Victoria’s mother, the Duchess of Kent, to the right-hand side of the exit, as curator Claudia Acott-Williams explains more about what happened when Victoria became Queen.

### Claudia Acott-Williams:

So, she spends her last night at Kensington on 12th July 1837 and the following day she moves to Buckingham Palace, which is still completely unfinished, entirely unsuitable for habitation. But I think Kensington by this point has come to kind of define this sense of confinement and control that she’s been rallying against for so long. So, Buckingham Palace symbolises this sort of new power, new freedom that she has from her mother and from Conroy.

Their departure from Kensington is so hasty that years later their belongings are still sort of languishing in the rooms, and that’s why many of the objects that we have here today have not really left Kensington since Victoria lived here.

## Stop 11 Where next?

### Narrator:

Just before I tell you where to go next, take a final look around this room. After Victoria was crowned Queen, she proposed to her cousin Prince Albert – as was the protocol for a monarch. They were married in 1840.

Queen Victoria never stayed in Kensington Palace again. But despite her difficult upbringing here, she remained fond of it and opened it to the public towards the end of her reign in 1899.

Now, make your way back down the stairs to the right and turn right at the bottom into the Stone Hall. From there you can choose another tour. As you descend the stairs, imagine a 16-year-old Victoria doing the same, on her way to greet Albert for the very first time.

## [End of Tour]