

Historic Scotland podcast: Episode 3 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah:

Hello, and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name is Sarah MacGillivray. I'm an actor and writer with a passion for people, place and story.

Each episode, we will be travelling across Scotland to a different site, unearthing their surprising tales. Today, we're at Stirling Castle.

High above the King's Inner Hall, a remarkable collection of carved faces has watched over centuries of Scottish history. These are the Stirling Heads. They're a series of beautifully crafted oak medallions, each depicting a king, a queen, a noble or mythical figure.

But these aren't just decorations. Who are the people behind these spaces? What secrets do they hold? And how have they survived the passage of time?

To find out, I'm chatting to Ross, one of the guiding managers at Stirling Castle.

Chapter 2

01:06

Ross:

The very first record we have of there being a castle at Stirling, early 1100s, the reign of King Alexander I.

Sarah:

We're also chatting to a conservator, Ailsa, and a collections manager, Michelle.

Michelle:

So it's really important that we maintain a stable environment, which is relative humidity and temperature need to be kept in a very tight range.

Ailsa:

We did actually find evidence that they were painted and some pigment analysis was done as well at the time.

Sarah:

And we're talking to carver John Donaldson.

John:

So my lack of training paid off big time with Stirling because the carvers in Stirling, the Scottish carvers certainly, were not artists stroke sculptors.

Chapter 3

01:52

Sarah intro:

Stirling Castle is more than just stone and mortar. Every inch of this fortress tells a story. And there's no better person to give you a quick overview of that than Ross. He's been here himself for over a quarter of a century. And he's quite the storyteller.

Sarah:

Could you tell us, I don't know where to start. Where would you start with the history of this castle? The importance of it for Scotland.

Ross:

We certainly go back a long, long way in history. The very first record we have of there being a castle at Stirling is early 1100s, the reign of King Alexander I. So he's king 1107-1124. And sometime during his reign, he dedicated a chapel in Stirling Castle to his late mother, Queen Margaret. Now, the record of that dedication is the very first time that Stirling Castle is ever mentioned in historical record.

So that's where our history begins. But, if Alexander I is dedicating a chapel here in the castle at that time, it means there must have been some here before that. We just don't know what it was, how long it had been here, who commissioned it, etc.

So the official history begins – Alexander I reign, 1100s. And the castle is here for a very specific purpose – it controls Stirling Bridge.

Stirling Bridge across the River Forth, really from time immemorial down to the 18th century, it's the main link between the north and south of Scotland. If you're travelling between the north and south, you come to Stirling, you cross the Forth out of the bridge, so consequently the Crown built a castle here, to guard that crossing, and inevitably what that's meant is that whenever there's been conflict in Scotland, armies funnel down the Forth Valley. This is often where they meet, that's why you get so many battles here.

Wallace at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, 1297, Bruce at the Battle of Bannockburn, 1314, the Battle of Sauchieburn, 1488. James III is killed, overthrown by his son, the future James IV, etc. So strategically, Stirling is hugely important.

And, of course, the castle had two main uses. We've touched on the military aspects. And it was always a fortress commanding the crossing over the Forth.

But aside from that, it had another main use. It was a home. This is one of the most important royal residences in Scotland. All of our kings and queens lived here, at least from the 1100s down until 1603, in the reign of King James VI.

Really, the architecture of the castle today reflects those uses. On the outer parts, it is very much a fortress. Gun batteries, fortifications, etc. But then when you progress higher up the castle rock, up to the summit, you begin to see the architectural styles change. And we're faced with a very elegant, a very fine royal residence.

As I was saying earlier, some of the finest royal buildings that you will find anywhere in Scotland. So fortress and home, Stirling Castle's two primary uses throughout its history.

Sarah:

You can feel that actually, yeah, very much so. More so maybe than other places. You really get, it'd be a really nice place to actually live and call your home.

Ross:

It is quite homely.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Ross:

It is quite homely. And we're blessed here at Stirling in that the four principal royal buildings have survived from the 16th century. So you very much see the stage upon which your 16th century monarchs performed.

And with the refurbishing work that Historic Scotland has undertaken in recent decades, we're seeing them at their best. The Great Hall has been refurbished. The Chapel's refurbished. The Palace is refurbished.

So you can really walk in the footsteps of our great Stuart monarchs – James IV, James V, Mary Queen of Scots, James VI.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Ross:

It's a very elegant place.

Sarah:

Yeah, absolutely. Who are your most notable residents? The ones you've just spoken about, I suppose.

Ross:

Well, you can't really go past the first on that list. King James IV. Gentle King James IV, as he was described.

Quirman, that rick redoubt at Roy, that potent prince.

Gentle King James III.

I pray to Christ, his soul for to convoy, ain greater prince was never heard until it aired.

As he was described by Sir David Lyndsay in James V's reign.

Sarah:

That was gorgeous. I'm going to give you applause. That was amazing.

Ross:

You're fine. James IV is probably the king who does more than any other monarch to give Stirling Castle its present appearance.

He's a Stirling boy. He's born in the castle, 1473. And throughout his reign, and he's king from 1488 to 1513, he spends fortunes redeveloping this place.

So when you come here today and you see the forework, you see the King's Old Building, you see the Great Hall, these are all the work of James IV. The kitchen range is James IV. He also was prominent in the development of the Chapel Royal in the castle, the old Chapel of St Michael. So in James IV's time, the castle would have been something quite special.

But each monarch as they come along, they also add to the lustre of the castle's history.

Sarah:

Can you tell us a bit about the castle during the time of James V?

Ross:

He's a huge figure in our history too. Because he was crowned here in this castle.

Sarah:

Oh was he?

Ross:

As a wee boy.

Sarah:

Where would he have been crowned?

Ross:

It would have been across the Inner Close, just in front of the Chapel Royal that we have today. You can actually still see on the ground cobblestones marking out the foundation of where a building once stood.

Sarah:

Oh, really?

Ross:

And those cobblestones almost certainly mark out the foundation of the old chapel of St Michael.

Sarah:

Right.

Ross:

And it was in that chapel on the 21st of September 1513, that James V was crowned King of Scots. It was just days after his father, James IV, had been killed fighting at the Battle of Flodden in the north of England, 9 September 1513. So it's often termed the morning coronation.

But it would still have been quite an elegant affair because we know, for example, or it's believed, that Robert Carver's great mass *Dum Sacrum Mysterium* was sung at that coronation. So it gives a sense as to the Renaissance splendour of courtly life at Stirling Castle. So from the beginning of James V's reign, he's immersed in that Renaissance splendour. So this, where we stand at this present moment in time, in front of the current Chapel Royal, this is where the old chapel would have been where James V is crowned.

Sarah:

And are these cobbles marking where the structure would have stood?

Ross:

These straight lines highlight where that chapel once stood. And you can see it's on a true east-west alignment, as were all medieval chapels. And, of course, it wasn't just James V that was crowned here.

This is also where Mary Queen of Scots was crowned as a nine-month-old child, 1543. And it's where James VI was baptised in 1566. So this is a special place.

But yeah, this is the site of King James V's coronation. And, of course, during his minority, he was only less than two years old when he was crowned here.

The Renaissance splendour that was enjoyed here at the castle during his father's reign diminished.

However, by the late 1520s into the 1530s, by the time that James V as an adult monarch reigning in his own right, he was not long in returning Stirling Castle to Renaissance splendour.

He presided over a glittering court, perhaps even equal, of his father's. James IV's court was something quite special. And he also contributed to the architecture of the castle. So James V is a big, big player here.

We know, for instance, that he was a great patron of poets. I mentioned earlier, Sir David Lyndsay of the Mount. He flourished during James V's reign.

James V, really interested in music. Lots of musicians here at the castle. The Drummond family, for example. They have a Scottish name, but they're Italian in origin.

Sarah:

Oh, really?

Ross:

Yeah, but they flourish here at the court under James V. James V himself was interested in music.

Sarah:

Right.

Ross:

He could sight-read music. He played the lute. He also liked to sing. However, it was noted that his voice wasn't the best. It was said that he was rocky and harsh. So perhaps he couldn't carry a tune.

Sarah:

Do you think they told him or they just had to pretend he had a really voice?

Ross:

Perhaps diplomacy came to the fore.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Ross:

But he's certainly interested in music. And for our purposes today, we see the architectural contribution that James V made to the castle with the commissioning of a wonderful palace.

Now, the palace at Stirling is built in 1538 to 1542, but it's part of a wider building programme that James V initiated across Scotland.

He was aided ably in that endeavour by his Master of Work, Sir James Hamilton of Finnart.

And to a certain extent, the king's building programme was influenced by the sojourn that he took to France between September of 1536 and May of 1537.

And he's across there looking for the hand of a French bride. He's been promised one many years before under the terms of the Treaty of Rouen. So he's arrived in France, the first France, looking for a bride. And he gets one. He marries the King of France's daughter Madeleine de Valois. So they marry at Notre Dame in Paris.

Sarah:

Wow.

Ross:

Yep. Special place. 1st of January 1537. And of course, when James V is over in France, he's visiting in France as the first French royal palaces – Fontainebleau, Blois, Amboise. And he's blown away by what he sees. There's nothing like that in Scotland.

So when the king does get back to his own realm, he decides that he also is going to try to recreate that French Renaissance style in his realm.

Sarah:

I love that. So he was so inspired by all that French splendour and architecture, he was like, I want to recreate that at home.

Ross:

Very much so. I suppose part of the drive that he has to emphasise Scotland is not a backward land of the north-western periphery of Europe. We're part of the European mainstream. So he initiates really quite impressive building works. Holyrood Palace, Palace of Holyrood House in Edinburgh.

Sarah:

So he was responsible for constructing that?

Ross:

He was responsible for construction work there. He's building at Linlithgow Palace. He's building at Falkland Palace up in Fife.

But perhaps the best attempt that James V made at recreating that French Renaissance style here in Scotland is the palace that he builds at Stirling Castle.

Now, of course, James V's pockets are not quite as deep as the pockets of the King of France. France is the first. So everything he's building is on a smaller scale, but it's still grand. It's still hugely, hugely impressive.

And to see the palace that we have here in Stirling Castle today back in the 16th century, it must have blown people away.

Sarah:

Absolutely.

Ross:

It is a stunning building.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Ross:

Adorned as it is, with sumptuous statuary. We know that French stonemasons worked on it. People such as Moyse Martin, Nicolas Roy.

So it probably accounts to the fact that a lot of the statuary and carving we see in the palace facades are said to be similar to the type of statuary and carving that we would find, for example, on the Louis XII wing at the French royal palace in Blois.

And of course, once the palace was built, this is where the king and queen live when they're based in Stirling Castle. And there were three rooms for the king and three for the queen. Each had an outer hall, an inner hall, and a bedchamber. And on the upper level of the palace, you had accommodation for different courtiers. It was the very first time in the castle's history that the king and queen had accommodation within the same building. Previously, there was a king's house where the king lived, and there was a queen's house where the queen lived.

And for most of James V's time here at the castle, he, of course, lived in the King's House, that his father James IV had built circa 1497 right up on the summit of the rock. Still stands today and now houses the regimental museum of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders but after he was stripped of France, James V decided he must have something better, hence the construction of this palace and within it, as we say, there are rooms both for the king and the queen and the interior is sumptuous.

Sarah:

Yes! Shall we go in?

Ross:

I think we should.

Sarah:

Yeah? Would you show us around? It would be wonderful.

Ross:

Certainly. The palace itself, the king has three rooms. An outer hall, which essentially is the waiting room. If you're coming to the castle to seek an audience with the king of Scots, you're given admittance to the outer hall, and that's where you wait. And then wait some more until the king is ready to receive you. And then you would proceed from the outer hall to the inner hall, where we are now.

And this is where the king would have welcomed you to the court. This is where the king met foreign ambassadors. This is the room in which the king would discuss politics with his nobility. This is the room in which the king would dine publicly with courtiers.

And, of course, as he's undertaking all these activities in this space, he does so beneath an astonishingly beautiful ceiling depicting the Stirling Heads. The heads themselves were commissioned by James V, circa 1540.

They are part of the decorative scheme of the palace. And, of course, they shouldn't be viewed in isolation. We've already mentioned the sumptuous statuary on the exterior. It's all part of the same programme to really embellish what was originally referred to as the King's House. This was also the King's House before they started to term it the Palace.

We know the names of some of the carvers. There's a Robert Robertson, said to be involved with it, Scotsman. There's a John Drummond of Milnab. He's associated with the carving of the heads. There may even have been a Frenchman, a man called André Mansioun.

And once the Stirling Heads were carved and decorated, they're placed upon the ceiling of the King's Inner Hall, and there they were to remain from the 1540s until 1777. And they are beautiful pieces of Renaissance art.

And with these heads, King James V intended that they would convey certain images regarding his kingship. For example, the king is attempting to celebrate his dynasty and emphasise his right to rule. Thus we have heads that may depict his parents. For example, up here above us in the King's Inner Hall, we have a female figure clutching a greyhound. This may be his mother, Margaret Tudor.

And next there's a figure with a shift on and the long hair – his father, King James IV. And beyond Margaret Tudor, there's another figure which is perhaps King James I of Scotland. So dynasty is being celebrated.

We also have heads that reflect the glittering Renaissance court, a fashionable court over which James V would have presided. For example, we can see so many figures with elaborate headdresses. There's a figure here with his hand upon his breast. Perhaps it's a poet.

My own personal favourite is in the corner, looking down upon us and giggling. The king's jester. So very much we're seeing the fashion and vibrancy of James V's court.

We're also getting images about how well-connected King James V was and how he is a player in European power politics. For example, across here, there's a figure with a lion around his shoulders. It's believed that this head may depict his uncle, Henry VIII, King of England.

And beyond him, this austere-looking figure, is perhaps King Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor.

Now these are major European figures with whom James V had dealings. For example, in 1532, Charles V bestowed upon King James V membership of the prestigious Order of the Golden Fleece. Perhaps the most prestigious chivalric order in Europe.

It was at a time when Charles V was trying to entice James V into his orbit and encourage him to take a bride of his choosing.

Henry VIII of England, too. He bestowed great honour upon his nephew, James V. In 1535, he made him a member of the English Order of Chivalry, the Order of the Garter. Again, it's at a time when Henry VIII is trying to encourage Scotland to pursue similar policies to that which obtained in England.

So these heads, as I say, emphasise James V's links to the most important figures in Europe.

And then we go back in time, back to classical Rome, a great theme of the Renaissance. From above us we can see figures that are clearly Roman emperors. For example, the man with the toga and the beard. It's thought that this may be Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome. And next to him the figure with a starburst behind itself, Julius Caesar.

So why would James V wish to commission images of Marcus Aurelius or Julius Caesar?

Because the King of Scots wishes to be associated with the wisdom and good governance of classical Rome.

Sarah:

Wow.

Ross:

Again, royal image-making.

And then there are figures from mythology. If we come across to the corner, there are one, two, three figures which may all depict Hercules. Of course, Hercules is said to be half human, half divine, and he has to undergo his 12 labours to attain full divinity.

And here we see Hercules, for example, wrestling with a lion. So Hercules is associated with the qualities of strength and courage. These are qualities that James V himself would wish to be associated with.

So the Stirling Heads, their decoration, the figures that they represent, they're all there to present a very specific manifesto for King James V. This is who I am, this is how I will govern, this is what my court stands for.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Chapter 4

19:54

Sarah:

Now, you might be wondering, if these wooden carvings were part of a ceiling, how did they survive nearly 500 years?

The truth is, they almost didn't.

Fast-forward to 1777, and the roof of the King's Presence Chamber was in serious trouble. To prevent total collapse, the Stirling Heads were removed and scattered, some ending up in private collections, others lost to time. For centuries, they were seen as curiosities rather than important historical artefacts.

It wasn't until the 20th and 21st centuries that they were properly studied, restored and given the recognition they deserved.

Today, the ceiling still stands, but not made up of original heads.

John Donaldson is a carver. Born near Stirling, his journey has been shaped by both chance and passion.

John's work has spanned churches, stately homes and commemorative pieces, but his most renowned project came when he was chosen to carve these replica Stirling Heads.

Historic Scotland entrusted John, a local artist, to lead the project. Over the course of five years, he painstakingly recreated the magnificent 16th-century oak medallions, ensuring their legacy would live on for generations.

Chapter 5

21:28

Sarah:

So did you carve all the heads, John?

John:

Yeah, yeah.

Sarah:

That's incredible. What a massive amount of work.

John:

Well, I was, and looking back on it, actually, quite recently looking back on it, it was scary. You know, I think, my goodness. But then, I'm an old man now. And at the time, I was in my 60s, late 50s, early 60s, and still vigorous and vigorous enough to say, "I can do this".

And so, it was a task that I took on with some trepidation, but at the same time confident that I could do it.

It was incredibly fortunate for the point of view that, as I've already described to you, my introduction to carving was not through formal training. I'm not what's called a bench-trained carver. There's a huge plus there. There's also a huge minus.

Carving in the early days, and I'm talking about 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th century, where carvers gradually moved from being your common or garden carrier and hewer and so on, into a world where they were given titles of sculptor and artist, and paid accordingly.

Gradually, the workshops tuned into this, and over the centuries... The change from 14th-century work to 19th-century work changed dramatically because of the way that they were trained.

Sarah:

Okay.

John:

And they came to the work. So my lack of training paid off big time with Stirling because the carvers in Stirling, the Scottish carvers certainly, the French carvers probably not so. The Scottish carvers were not artists stroke sculptors stroke carvers. They were carvers and trained and worked well in decorative carving. But their understanding, knowledge of experience of carving human figure and so on, animal form, was demonstrably missing, whereas the French guys had that background.

So right away, when you look at the heads, you can see quite a disparity in the artistic style of some heads to others. The obvious comparison is between, say, the jester and a couple of the Roman emperors, who look like guys you wouldn't have liked to meet on the way back from the fish and chip shop, whereas the jester is an absolutely brilliant portrayal. That's the way that that guy looked and I could talk for a while about jesters and their role in the court and so on and so forth, but interestingly by comparison the head that's designated James V, the king, the top man, the big cheese, he was the guy that would be paying for all this, so it's intriguing to consider that the head which depicts the jester is better, in inverted commas, than the head that depicts James V. So if you were the guy that was paying all the dosh, you'd be thinking, "Hmm, who made that decision. Bring him to me. He might have an accident on the way."

You know, it's one of these mysteries... There's a lot of mystery about the heads but it's one of these wee mysteries that's intriguing as to how this all evolved. There's bits on the head

that show that there are three hands working – there's an untrained hand next to a very competent hand, working on the same head. There's all sorts of disparity and sometimes what you think is a mistake, why would they make a mistake like that?

As you discover, as you work your way through the job, you discover, hmm, maybe it's not a mistake – maybe it's some sort of wee game that's being played here.

Chapter 6

26:15

John:

So here we are walking into the Presence Chamber. So those and such as those that we get to this stage, important people coming to meet the king who would be warming his bum at the fire across here. And as they walk in here, they look up and they see this array of roundels.

Now, bear in mind that not everybody was literate at that time. I'm not suggesting these people were illiterate. Far from it. At the same time, visual imagery was incredibly important.

So when they looked up and saw these heads, they would start to get an understanding of the Scottish court.

Sarah:

Okay.

John:

What was going on.

Sarah:

Right.

John:

Who knew what, who knew about mathematics, astrology, the dynasties of powerful people that ran the country and other countries and so on. People in way back history, antique characters like Aristotle and Hercules and all this sort of stuff, you know.

So that's what they would read – a story on the ceiling as they approached the great guy, James V.

Sarah:

Wow. That's amazing. So it's like education.

John:

Well, they would very... if they had the capacity, I'm sure they did... they would very quickly recognise that the Scottish court was up to the mark. They knew what was going on all over the, certainly all over the continent, all over Europe.

And although Scotland's way out in the westerly extent, regions if you call it that, they recognised that Scotland was well aware of what was going on in the world. So it gave a certain stature to the king. They knew they were meeting a guy who was on the ball.

So up here we've got all sorts of characters, but bear in mind that this is like doing a jigsaw with a lot of the pieces missing and the lid of the box has disappeared.

So when Historic Scotland had the task of working out some sort of coherent plan for the Heads, they had to bear that in mind that they didn't have a complete group and the group that they did have were in some sense or another affected or reflected by the ravages of the age, and no more so than the composite heads.

Now the composite heads are a very interesting, intriguing group. What happened in the early 19th century was that, through people like Jane Ferrier, there was a movement to gather the heads together. They were recognised as being extremely important and they gathered the heads together just in time because there was a strong probability that they would have been skipped. If they had skips... They would probably land up in fires, carted down the street and landed up in bakers' ovens. So the story goes, you know.

And the reason for that was that the heads, the original heads, were constructed from three boards of oak with another board on top to give it extra depth to allow for the relief of the carving.

So these three boards would give you two glue joints and, inevitably, that glue, which was all that was holding them together, that glue would eventually disappear, be eaten by insects, whatever.

And the consequences eventually were that the heads parted, or bits of the heads parted company, fell off.

Sarah:

Okay.

John:

So towards the end of the 18th century, it was decided to take the whole lot down.

Sarah:

Right, because they were too dangerous and it hit someone on the head.

John:

It did hit a poor English soldier. I mean, how sad. They were garrisoned here.

Sarah:

Oh, really? And then they were like, "oh, we better do something about that".

John:

Aye, aye. So health and safety was alive and well at that time.

Sarah:

Was he okay? Do we know? Was he okay?

John:

Well, inevitably the Scots in the town would have immediately elaborated – just the whole garrison were killed when the heads fell off the ceiling. So, yes, it's difficult to say just how that happened. But the heads were taken down, the ceiling was destroyed.

Sarah:

And they were going to be skipped and they were going to be...

John:

They just despaired. There were folk who somehow recognised that they had worth and who grabbed them. So various characters, snaffled heads.

Sarah:

Yeah, took them home.

John:

Aye, and others grabbed bits because there was just an assortment of bits because they were falling to bits.

Sarah:

So these bits were all scattered across the country.

John:

Yes, yes, aye. So the consequence of that was that when they were gathered together, eventually, when they were pulled together, they had enough information on a good couple of dozen.

But then they had others where there was only a centre section. The centre section is the bit that has the portrayal of the centre figure. It has not only the centre board, but a board added

that gives greater depth to the carving. So that's what remained in many of them with associated borders. But on some, the outer boards had disappeared. Some, the centre boards had disappeared. So you can imagine somebody looking at a pile of stuff and going, looks like Auntie Jessie.

Well, hop, hah, and, you know, took it away.

Sarah:

Get that middle section.

John:

Aye, and took the middle section away. Lost forever.

Sarah:

Wow.

John:

It might be that on somebody's mantelpiece in the Raploch, you know, there's Auntie Jessie still there. We don't know.

Sarah:

So there might still be bits out there now?

John:

Might well be. Each talk that I've given, I've tried to declare to the assembled group the possibility is that there's stuff still out there. We don't know that.

Sarah:

Oh, wow. Must check the attic.

John:

Exactly. So the consequences were that some centrepieces which were worth saving, obviously, were made up into complete roundels by taking the bits of other heads that had disintegrated.

The centres had disappeared and the outside borders were remaining. So they stuck them on to make a complete head.

And when I first started to look at these composite heads, I thought the heads generally are pretty bizarre, but these are wonky, big time. How did this happen?

And nobody, and this is a really strange thing as well, it's one of these mysteries in the way things happen, nobody had ever gone, "they're so daft, it shouldn't be like that," you know?

Sarah:

Really? So you were the first person who went, this doesn't make sense.

John:

It doesn't make sense.

And that follows on from two HMSO publications where a group of more than interested, certainly experienced and, well, certificated folk, had looked at the heads and never passed comment on this.

So when I was set the task of returning the heads to what they were like in 1542 when they came off the bench, what was I going to do with the composite heads?

Well, the obvious thing was that to make them as they were in 1542. I would salvage anything that made sense and then rebuild the borders as they used to be.

And in the main, that worked pretty well. But what it meant was that when we took the heads apart, and we didn't literally take them apart, because obviously they're important pieces of historic material, so we couldn't do that. But on paper, I drew the thing up and I took them apart, and what we landed up with was a certainty that we had enough full heads to

complete the ceiling. But there were extras left over. And the extras left over said there were other heads that no longer exist.

Sarah:

Right.

John:

So we land up with the potential for 46.

Sarah:

Wow.

John:

At least 46. Now, ancient comments from the 1780s or thereabouts said that there were 56 heads. I think there could have been more.

There could have been others in other places because of the way that the heads are presented, their directional gaze, the subject matter, even going back to quality.

Poorer heads perhaps would be allocated dark corners somewhere else in the suite, in the apartments, rather than being on the ceiling for a particular purpose, so there's all sorts of possibilities there. But one major fact that came out of this focus was that there were more heads than we thought and that the heads that we had might not have been the heads that were on the ceiling. Some of the heads that are up there might have been elsewhere. However, Historic Scotland had the task of coming up with a coherent plan and I think they've done that wonderfully well. And they tell a story. The people that are up there – kings, queens, folk from antiquity, and even my daughters, which is a great thrill for us.

Sarah:

Could you tell us about that?

John:

Well, two of the heads were lost at Dunstaffnage in the 40s. They were burnt and lost. And the only reference we have to them is Jane Ferrier's drawings.

So one of them was a lady, and Jane Ferrier's drawings are not that accurate.

Sarah:

Okay.

John:

It's another wee mystery. She had some talent as an artist. But when you look at the drawings and look at the actual carvings, you quite often say, well, why are they out of proportion? Or what are the bits that are not drawn terribly well? Or whatever. You know, let's just say that some of them are inaccurate.

So the two heads at Dunstaffnage, one of which was female, one male... The female head was accurate from the point of view that the pose, the position of the hands, the clothing, and so on, all told a story which had, in a sense, evidence in history. But the facial character was a very Victorian face, you know.

So I asked if I had permission to do my own thing, if you like. And this hasn't happened all the way through the job. I was rigidly sticking to and disciplined myself to do an exact copy of what was there. Mistakes and everything. Inadequacies, whatever. I was doing that because that's the way they were. But in this sense, there was no existing head. So I had a wee bit of freedom. So in this one, I did my younger daughter, Mhairi.

And eventually, when the historians had got to grips with who these characters were, that hen, it was decided, which is that hen up there.

Sarah:

That one there?

John:

Yep. Two hen. With a purple. And a wee flower. The historian decided that was Marie de Guise, James I's wife.

So, so Mhairi became a prime mover and shaker in this whole business because that head features on all the merchandise. So, Mhairi is the profile of Marie de Guise.

By coincidence, the same name.

Mhairi in Gaelic. Mary. Marie in French. So, Mhairi is Marie de Guise.

She's got her sister across there. Two in – that one up there. That's her sister.

Sarah:

With the green headdress.

John:

Yes. And that happened because we were one head or one space short. We didn't have a head for that space. So again, I said, how much freedom have we got? And the Historic Scotland people were brilliant. We have freedom. Let's anchor it in the images that are around.

So we searched out one of the stone sculptures from outside, chose the torso and the decoration on the torso, and then I had the freedom to do Fiona's head, and then we took one of the sections of border that was left over from the pile of rubbish in the early 19th century that hadn't been used elsewhere, and I made up a complete border.

So that border is made up from, see the green foliage all the way around, with the four red intersections? That border is a border that's been made up from an element from a head that was missing. That's one of the extra heads, if you like. So that's Fiona. At the time they were very acceptant of this notion and when I produced it – "What do you think?" "That's excellent! We'll call that 'the carver's daughter'." So there's my two girls.

Sarah:

Oh, that's incredible, isn't it?

John:

Oh, absolutely.

Chapter 7

40:51

Sarah:

I loved chatting with John. You can really tell he's full of knowledge and insight and fun.

And what a beautiful thing, too, that the story of him and his family is also represented in the artwork shown on display here.

Now, heading out of the room and around the corner, you'll come to a small set of stairs. Up those stairs in a gallery where some of the remaining original Stirling Heads are displayed is where we're meeting our next guests.

Michelle:

So my name is Michelle Atherton. I'm the Regional Collections Manager. I'm responsible for managing the collection objects at all our properties and care across the central region, including Stirling Castle.

A major part of my job is managing risk to the collections. So I do a lot of work with collections care, preventive conservation. I also would commission remedial conservation, if it's necessary.

And some examples of projects that I would be working on in my role are installing new display cases or supporting on filming requests. That sort of thing.

Ailsa:

Hi, I'm Ailsa Murray, I'm one of the Paintings Conservators. I'm based in Edinburgh, but actually I cover the central region and Edinburgh region as well.

We work on quite a range of painted, decorated artefacts and also structural elements to properties as well. So easel paintings on canvas in the collections. We support the collections department.

And so we're actually doing hands-on conservation treatment as well too and documentation.

Michelle:

Probably the most important aspect of their care now is environmental control. So it's really important that we maintain a stable environment, which is relative humidity and temperature need to be kept in a very tight range. And we achieve that through using bespoke display cases that you see here.

So underneath the case, we have what's called a miniClima, or a constant humidity device, and that uses a small tank of water to either add more moisture into the air of the case if it gets too dry or it can also draw moisture out, so we can maintain a really steady environment which prevents fluctuations, which is where you get issues with condition changes. And then we monitor that through these little radio-looking things, which is a wireless monitoring system so I can log in anywhere and see what's happening in any of the cases.

So we can keep a really tight eye on what's happening with the environment.

We also do regular condition checking and we clean them when necessary, but it's not that often that we have to do that.

The replica heads downstairs actually also have a regular programme of maintenance and every year we go up on a scaffold and inspect them individually and it's mostly just an opportunity to dust them because the replica heads are in excellent condition but we're looking for things like cracking, flaking paint, mould, or even evidence of pests like woodworm.

Sarah:

Now in this gallery you can get up close and personal with a replica head, left in various stages of completion to show you exactly how one of these magnificent works of art is constructed.

Ailsa:

So you have the painted... it was identified as a lead white that was used on the original heads, but you'd have a sort of a white preparation layer first of all, prior to adding on the decoration and the coloured layers.

So this was the different sort of stages of the design application process.

There was no like varnish layer or anything identified when we did take some small tiny samples, even though there was minimal... We were able to take some very tiny samples that show the sort of cross-section of the different paint applications. And it's possible to usually identify if there's varnish layers as well present there. But there wasn't anything like that.

They may have been lost a lot because they have actually been stripped, say as well, and probably something a bit harsher than what you would use now was used at that time.

Well, on a couple of the heads we did actually... we used various technical examination techniques as well, like infrared light and ultraviolet light and particularly on the back of one of the heads we found a drawing, just in a charcoal black, carbon black-based material, but it wasn't particularly of a head – it was more decorative, arabesque...

Sarah:

Doodle...

Ailsa:

Yeah, but it was just interesting to find you know, and we also found sometimes there's some markings... tool markings, as well... date markings.

Sarah:

So someone's put their sort of tool marking. A sort of "I was here on this date"...

Ailsa:

Yes, but not like consistently. You know, across it all. So talking a bit more about the investigation...

Michelle:

Yeah the pigments, I think...

Ailsa:

Yeah, the pigments, because they were identified... particular pigments, like on the clothing as well as the hats so like red and yellow ochres. Red lead and lead white – they're bound in an oil-based medium and then on the hats, they also found indigo and carbon black mixed together, so indicating that there also was a bit of variation, a bit of tonality in the hats. They are not completely painted flat or given an indication of modelling, which was interesting too.

Vermilion was a pigment, and vermilion and red lead, that was actually found within the mouth areas and in the flesh tones as well too, mixed with lead white again. So these were all pigments that were available during the 1540s sort of era.

And then there was also some repainting that happened, that was discovered on at least one of the heads, a separate layer on top that, from what the constituents that were found within the material identified being applied later than 18th century.

Sarah:

So they've done the role of this?

Ailsa:

So there has been various... and that would be considered a non-original layer. Analysis was very minimal because of that very minimal amount of what was originally surviving anyway. It was definitely enough to be able to say that these heads were richly decorated originally.

Sarah:

Would they have been painted back in the day?

Ailsa:

I know that's an interesting question because when we carried out initial documentation, when we were initially looking at the heads, we did find evidence of original paint, but as you're saying, quite minimal really.

So you have to look quite closely into these particular grooves around the face and the folds. And we did actually find evidence that they were painted and some pigment analysis was done as well at the time. So there's a record of some different pigments that actually were positively identified. But it was quite a step, I think, to go ahead, to actually do a full painting of the actual replicas.

Michelle:

They look really bright from the floor, but when we're up on the scaffold cleaning them and inspecting them, it is really jarring, especially you see like the whites of their eyes.

Sarah:

Really?

Michelle:

You get really close to them. So yeah, that's always a fun thing. We do it every year.

Ailsa:

It's mostly more of a light, actual clean and just observation.

Michelle:

If there's anything that we're concerned about, we'll take a photo of it. And then the next year when we go up, we'll kind of compare it and monitor, see if there's been any change. Because the replica heads and the original heads have seams from the various kind of pieces put together. So those are areas where it might be more vulnerable to change.

So I think there's a few heads that we're keeping an eye on, but so far nothing major we're concerned about.

But we do kind of keep an eye on any kind of cracking or potential issues in the future. We try to get on it as soon as it starts to become apparent.

Ailsa:

There was some conservation treatment just done at the point of the full documentation and that was really focused on making the head sites stable enough to be handled and to be able to be displayed at a bit more of an actual angle as well too. So there were particular support backings that were constructed at the time that they were coming into the display here as well.

But more of the other intervention was just securing splits and cracks and some reversal of previous repairs and things as well that may have caused... more for aesthetic reasons but these have all been recorded. It's quite interesting the different types of repairs that have been used over the years as well – different patches and butterfly buttons as well too that would help to stabilise the joins. Often these are visible on the back more than the front so they can be just as interesting.

Michelle:

I guess another important aspect of their care is their documentation. And so each of the heads, and also the replica heads, are recorded in our museum object database.

And we retain information like their measurements, what materials they were made with, any conservation treatments they've had in the past and what their current condition is like.

We also have an ongoing project called the Collections Inventory Project, where a team will travel around to all our properties and ensure that all of our data for the objects is accurate and up to date.

So, they, last year, they just came to Stirling Castle and part of that work was taking new photographs where it was necessary.

So, all of our data is up to a high standard and we can count on it. And a lot of that information is available on the Collections website. So you can browse through the Stirling Heads online. You can look at the images and some of the heads also have 3D models on

Sketchfab which have been scanned which are quite fun to play with actually if you go online.

Sarah:

So you can play about with it?

Michelle:

Yeah, yeah. You can look at them at any angle and kind of zoom in on details and it was really fun.

Chapter 8

52:38

Sarah:

It's quite funny in some ways to have two sets of heads: the originals and the replicas. And the replicas they're made so fantastically.

I just had to ask whether there's a possible future where these replicas are treated in the same ways as the originals.

Michelle:

Yeah, that could happen. I mean, we certainly treat them as museum objects in their own right, just in the way we document them and care for them. And they are excellent examples of craftsmanship. So, yeah, I can absolutely see that being a possibility.

If they're taken off of their display in the ceiling, maybe someday they'll end up in display cases as well and they are already used for research purposes.

Yeah, they don't require a whole lot of special care or anything because they're in very good condition. So effectively, we're just trying to keep them in the condition that they're at and keep our eye out for anything that might crop up.

But having the replicas is really helpful because I guess it can help us with conservation as well, because we can track the condition of both the replicas and the originals, and it can kind of help us predict any future conservation challenges we might have. And yeah, there's lots that can be learned between comparing the two sets.

Chapter 9

53:52

Sarah:

I'm learning that history is something of a circle. The past informing the present, informing the past. Informing the present, informing the past, you see?

Stirling Castle is a stage where history has played out for centuries, where kings were crowned, battles were fought, and stories were carved into stone and oak.

Standing among the Stirling Heads, it's easy to imagine the court of James V, the splendour, the ambition, the desire to leave a legacy.

And in a way, that legacy endures, not just in the original carvings, but in the hands of artists like John Donaldson, who have ensured that their story continues.

Next time, we're off to Huntly Castle.

From gory stories of a corpse on trial, to the castle's new status as something of a nature spot, we're looking at the thrilling and sometimes bizarre tales associated with one very powerful family and the place they called home.

See you then.