



Marble marvel: Queen Victoria's statue is the centrepiece of the spruced up palace grounds, laid out in the 18th century

NOT since the Windsor fire of 1992, has there been a royal makeover on this scale. Indeed, the last time a palace went through a facelift of this magnitude, it was courtesy of a German bomb.

In the case of Kensington Palace, however, this £12million transformation has not been prompted by any misfortune but by years of careful planning. Admittedly, there has been one unexpected, 11th-hour alteration to the designs. But no one is complaining about the decision of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to set up home here — because their presence in the private wing of the palace is only going to draw even more visitors through the doors on the public side.

A few days ago, the Queen came to Kensington to re-open what used to be the seat of royal power until the monarchy moved to Buckingham Palace. Before she cut the ribbon, she toured the rooms where Queen Victoria grew up and inspected the new displays which feature everything from Prince Albert's tongue-

HOW I SEE IT



by Robert Hardman

scraper to a new range of Diana, Princess of Wales, wallpaper and a very creepy children's birthday party (of which more later).

'We've set out to awaken a sleeping beauty,' announced Charles Mackay, the chairman of Historic Royal Palaces, the independent charity which runs the place. He might equally have called it a sleeping giant. Because, after years in the heritage doldrums, KP is finally exploiting its true potential as one of the capital's major tourist attractions.

First opened to tourists in Victorian times, Kensington Palace has long been a collection of flats for royal relatives — the Duke of Windsor used to call it 'the Aunt Heap' — alongside public state apartments. Now it has not merely been given a new lick of paint. Whole sections have been unveiled for the first time.

More spectacularly, the grounds have been opened out and, from this morning, the public can wander into a royal palace without a ticket, to buy a cup of tea or a postcard. Once inside, they will be steered towards one of the grandest ticket offices in the land, a covered courtyard decked out like a multi-storey four-poster bed.

And from there, they have the run of four exhibitions spanning four centuries, even if some of it may leave traditionalists harrumphing. After all, this is surely the first royal residence in history with talking Whoopie cushions — when sat upon, they burble historic court gossip into unsuspecting visitors' ears.

Observing the profusion of entries from Queen Victoria's diaries reproduced in facsimile on the palace walls, Prince Philip remarked: 'Who's been doing all this graffiti?'

The exterior is perhaps the most impressive aspect of the entire refurbishment. To millions, Kensington Palace is the red-brick block behind the hefty ironwork where all those floral tributes were piled up in 1997 to honour the late Diana, Princess of Wales. Viewed through those elegant bars, the palace had the feel of a gilded prison remote, aloof and with no obvious way in or out.

Now, the iron curtain has gone. Only the original 'Golden Gates' remain, while unobtrusive chest-height railings stretch around a new meadow. All the hedges and trees which were planted to seal off the outside world have been stripped away.

THE palace now has a completely uncluttered view of Kensington Gardens, its Round Pond and Hyde Park beyond. Looking the other way, the public now has a completely uncluttered view of the grounds landscaped by Charles Bridgeman in the early 18th century and the palace itself. Sitting there in pride of place, spruced up and good as new, is the statue of Queen Victoria sculpted by her daughter, Princess Louise.

From today, when the whole thing re-opens, the public can simply walk straight up to the new front door, a covered portico known as the Diamond Jubilee Loggia, or approach via a hornbeam-lined zig-zag called the Wiggle Way. Inside, visitors are greeted by what looks like a glowing tornado. Made of more than two miles of electroluminescent wire, it is a light sculpture called Luminous Lace and apparently replicates a royal lace pattern.

Here is a clue that this is not just another roped-off, 'do not touch' stuffy heritage trail.

We tend to picture Queen Victoria at her beloved Balmoral or being wheeled around her Solent retreat at Osborne House, where she died. But it was Kensington Palace which had arguably the greatest influence on the Queen Empress since she was born here, raised here, became Queen here and fell in love here.

'We want people to come away realising she was not just a grumpy old lady but a woman of strong opinions who liked to have fun,' says curator Deirdre Murphy, leading the way into the Red Saloon at the start of the Victoria Revealed exhibition. Here in a glass case is the tiny dress which (a tiny) Victoria was wearing in 1837 when she was told that her uncle, William IV, was dead and that she had become Queen.

Nearly 100 members of the Privy Council

crammed into this room to proclaim her as Sovereign. The historical records show she was dressed in black, while Sir David Wilkie's famous painting of the moment has her in virginal white. And yet, the actual dress is a bronze shade.

Deirdre explains that, over time, the chemical composition of the dye has gone from black to brown. It also turns out that the Red Saloon was never red either. It was pink. No wonder foreigners love this quaint British history stuff.

Next door, what used to be known as the Teck Saloon has been rebranded the 'Love Room' and tells the tale of the Victoria and Albert romance. Instead of cramming it with memorabilia, the curators have gone for a 'less is more' approach, steering visitors to Queen Victoria's wedding dress, a replica of Prince Albert's wedding outfit (he married in the uniform of a Field Marshal) and some jewellery he designed for her.

The floor is printed with extracts from their love letters ('Look! More graffiti!' as their great, great grandson, Prince Philip, observed).

ANOTHER room is devoted to childhood — that of Victoria and also of her children. A doll-sized pair of slippers turn out to be her very first pair of shoes. Some of her earliest sketchbooks show a passion — and a talent — for drawing. Deprived of childhood friends by her mother, the Duchess of Kent, she was devoted to a collection of dolls which she named after leading Court figures and her theatrical heroes of the day.

The young Victoria was an avid, if lonely, theatre-goer. Elsewhere, we find baby clothes and fancy dress costumes worn by her children. An entry from her diary reminds us that this mother of nine was not always maternal: 'I don't dislike babies, though I think very young ones rather disgusting.'

Other displays show Victoria and Albert in their prime. Visitors are encouraged to open drawers full of replica memorabilia and documents.

Suddenly, all is gloom as I enter a room shrouded in black. On public display for the first time is the book that Victoria was reading to her husband at the moment he died. Her copy of Peveril of the Peak by Sir Walter Scott has for ever after been open on page 80. She even had her handkerchiefs embroidered with black tears.

Most intriguing, perhaps, is the display of curios from across Victoria's life — her 'Transylvanian suite' of jewellery, her multi-coloured bonnet (very racy in those days), a brooch made from a milk tooth and Prince Albert's 'dressing case', a little wooden chest of bottles, brushes and a silver spatula for scraping the royal tongue.

When today's Queen came to see all this, she was particularly captivated by a screen showing footage of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession through London in 1897. Her own, of course, is just weeks away.

Downstairs, there is a smaller exhibition dedicated to the most celebrated resident of modern times.

It has always been a challenge for royal curators to set the right tone when remembering Diana, Princess of Wales. Market research shows that around a quarter of visitors to Kensington Palace are drawn by its associations with her. Too much Diana and the staff are accused of exploitation, too little and they are charged with neglect.

The result is an exhibition of some of the late Princess's dresses in what used to be Princess Margaret's garden room.

The most striking, perhaps, is the Emanuel black silk taffeta gown which the Princess wore to her first official engagement with the Prince of Wales in 1981. It came famously close to what we would, today, call a wardrobe malfunction.

The curators had to go to a Chilean textile museum to borrow this exhibit. None of these dresses, in fact, remains in royal hands. They are all on loan.

Equally striking is the passageway leading to this display. The walls are covered in wallpaper featuring cartoonish sketches of the Princess by the artist Julie Verhoeven.

The original idea had been to maintain a permanent tribute to Diana in here but that plan has had to change because her elder son will now be converting Princess Margaret's old home back in to a royal residence.

At present, it is still office and event space. Soon, it will be home to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. And it would be rather strange to expect Prince William to share the marital

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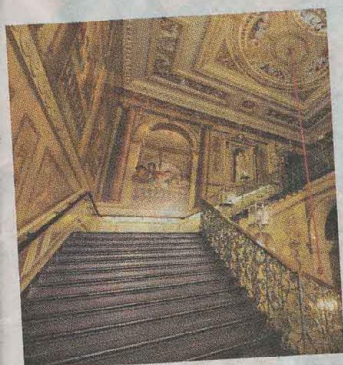


Palace of varieties: The modern Luminous Lace piece and (right) the restored formal gardens

Pictures: DAVID CRUMP

Nice pad, but I bet Kate changes the wallpaper

As Kensington Palace opens to the public after a £12m makeover – including walls covered with pictures of Diana – ROBERT HARDMAN takes an exclusive tour of Kate and Wills' new home



Splendour: The King's Grand Staircase



Memories: The Diana wallpaper

home with a public exhibition devoted to his late mother.

It might be equally disconcerting for his young wife to have a corridor plastered with wallpaper images of her missing mother-in-law. So, Diana will soon become part of a new royal exhibition in another part of the building and the Cambridges will be free to redecorate.

But the new Kensington Palace has no shortage of the weird and downright macabre. The state apartments, home

to the late Stuarts and early Georgians, have been reinterpreted by a team of theatrical designers. So a flock of replica birds hang down from the ceiling of the Queen's Gallery, where Mary II kept her songbirds. Sit down on 'whispering cushions' and recorded voices start hissing Court gossip in your ear.

One room is devoted to the tragic story of Queen Anne's 18 pregnancies. Only one child, Prince William, Duke of Gloucester, survived beyond the age of

four. Shortly after turning 11, he himself died of 'overheating', supposedly brought on by too much dancing at his own birthday party. This sorry tale is represented by 13 empty chairs laid out for a children's birthday party in honour of all these unfortunate siblings. The management call it a 'poignant re-interpretation'. Others might find it mawkish and faintly peculiar.

But the Historic Royal Palaces team believe Kensington Palace has to appeal to all ages and tastes if it is

to boost its annual visitor numbers from the usual 300,000 to upwards of 400,000. 'Some parts will appeal to more traditional visitors but we also need to target a younger audience,' explains the senior curator and historian, Lucy Worsley.

Unlike HRP's larger attractions, notably the Tower of London and Hampton Court, this royal palace cannot rely on a solid turnover of coach-party traffic. And it receives no Government subsidy. The

£12 million refurbishment has been paid for with cash reserves, Lottery funding and support from charitable trusts like the Clive Duffield, Gosling and Rothermere foundations.

As of today, however, it is down to the paying public to keep it all going, through sales of tickets, royal mugs, Penny Black cushions, tea and cakes. But I have no doubt it is going to be a hit. The 'Aunt Heap' is back. And the last time it looked this good was when the Georgians ruled the roost.