

Holiday majesty

The Chapel Royal, Hampton Court Palace, Surrey

Reflected in the splendid fittings and architecture of the Chapel Royal is a history of the palace it has served for nearly 500 years, as John Goodall explains

Photographs by Will Pryce

WITHIN the vast and magnificent complex of Hampton Court Palace, there is only one space that continues to be administered by the royal household. The Chapel Royal, which forms one side of Chapel Court (Fig 1), has a small, dedicated staff appointed by The Queen. This comprises the Chaplain—technically a Deputy Priest in Ordinary installed by the Dean of the Chapel Royal—a Director of Music and a Clerk of the Chapel. With the help of a choir on Sundays and feasts, they maintain the daily celebration of Divine Service in a building that has been shaped for the devotion of our kings and queens (Fig 2).

The founder of the modern palace, Cardinal Wolsey, built the shell of the chapel in about 1525. He connected it to the existing residential buildings with a cloister and aligned the chapel in the overall plan with the great hall. The new interior was about 100ft long and laid out on a T-shaped plan. This distinctive design undoubtedly looks back to the example of Oxford collegiate planning as inspired by

Merton chapel (begun 1289) and formalised by New College (founded 1379). Yet, whereas the bar of the T—the ante-chapel—was used in Oxford colleges for university debate, at Hampton Court, this space was apparently split in two by a floor to create a raised balcony overlooking the interior.

Little can be said with confidence about the interior Wolsey created beyond the fact that its scale reflects the grandeur of his intended liturgy. The blocked east window was revealed in 1981 and takes the unusual form of a pair of windows connected by smaller, central light. Drawings for its stained glass, attributed to the Nuremberg engraver Erhard Schön, survive. They show the kneeling figures of Henry VIII, Catherine of Aragon and Princess Mary with a group of patronal saints. The central light was filled with a Crucifixion. That this glass was completed and installed is suggested by documented repairs to the glass in 1531.

Yet whether Wolsey ever really completed the chapel must remain an open question. Before his fall from

Fig 1 below: Chapel Court with its Tudor garden designed by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan.

Fig 2 facing page: The chapel with its marquetry reredos. Visible to either side is the outline of the Tudor east window. The reredos follows in a tradition of 17th-century Chapel Royal designs. These were copied in several London churches and Trinity College, Oxford

power and death in 1530, Henry VIII had commandeered the palace from the Cardinal. The King had a large chapel staff that formed part of his itinerant royal household. Confusingly, this staff, as well as the various buildings they served, was called the Chapel Royal (today, the Chapels Royal). To accommodate this, changes to the building were initiated in 1535 that are hard to imagine if Wolsey's interior had been fully realised. These included the installation of new stalls for the clergy, a new floor of Chertsey tiles and an organ.

“It is a mark of the continued importance of the chapel that The Queen delivered her 2010 Christmas message from it”

The ante-chapel balcony was divided into two to create a pair of elevated ‘holy day closets’ for the King and Queen. Since at least the 13th century, English kings—and their nobility—had begun to practise their devotions from ‘closets’ or ‘parcloses’. These could take the form of fabric tents or small rooms with a squint through which it was possible to witness the consecration of the bread and wine, the central episode of the Mass. These devotional spaces were arguably the first private interiors—as we understand the word—in English domestic architecture.

In most Tudor palaces, the king and queen possessed a chapel and closet within their own apartment at which they performed their daily devotions. However, Court etiquette demanded that on ‘holidays’—in other words, every Sunday and on major feasts—they processed formally to their household chapel. This appearance ➤





offered the opportunity for courtiers to press petitions on the monarch.

It took the king and queen from their respective apartments to their 'holy day' closets, privileged spaces where they might keep company and receive visitors. At Hampton Court, the holiday closets were large rooms that overlooked the chapel through a projecting pair of bay windows. There also survive the remains of the original Tudor closet ceilings (Fig 4).

6 A Parliamentary tract triumphantly announced that "the Altar was taken down... and Popish pictures... demolished"

Completing the transformation of the interior was a new vault (Fig 3). This appears to be suspended beneath Wolsey's roof. Building accounts reveal that the vault was made at Sonning, Berkshire, by a team of carpenters under the direction of one Edmund More of Kingston. From September 1535, its constituent parts were brought down the river and installed. Once completed, the whole vault, and the royal closets with their 'great bay wyndowes', were coloured by 'John Hethe and Harry Blankston of London, gylders and painters' for the staggering sum of £457.

The vault pattern is directly lifted from a much smaller stone vault completed in 1534 over the chapel of Bishop West at Ely Cathedral. The vault of Bishop West's chapel can be confidently attributed through its technical affinities to a mason familiar with recent royal work at Westminster. It is only a small jump beyond the available evidence to attribute both designs to John Moulton, the documented senior mason at Hampton Court.

Few changes are documented to the Tudor interior prior to the Civil War. In 1566–7, a richly painted and gilded timber canopy with a rail was installed over the high altar for Elizabeth I and, in 1619–21, the chapel and roof underwent structural repair. Then, on September 29, 1645, the interior was devastated. As a Parliamentary tract triumphantly announced, 'the Altar was taken down, and the table brought into



Fig 3 preceding pages: The painted wooden vault added to the chapel by Henry VIII in 1535 has pendants carved with angel musicians. It specifically relates to the West Chantry vault at Ely Cathedral. Fig 4 above: A detail of the surviving Tudor ceiling to the Holiday Closet. Fig 5 right: The closets were reconfigured in 1690 with three balcony compartments supported on pillars. The central aisle is the result of 19th-century changes to the interior

the body of the Church, the Rails pulled down, and the steps levelled; and the Popish pictures, and superstitious Images that were in the Glasse Windows were also demolished.

In addition, a fine organ by John Burward and Edward Norgate, that had been installed by Charles I in 1637–8, was removed. An inventory of 1659 lists the chapel contents as a pulpit set on a table and 12 forms or benches.

This austere interior was again transformed in 1662, however, following the Restoration. Tapestries were hung beneath the windows and an altar on a platform with rails was installed. New desks were created for the choir and the royal closets were repaired and refurnished. Further important changes followed during the wider transformation of the palace by William and Mary.

They were keen to express their Protestantism through the furnishing and liturgy of the chapel. In March 1690, they reconfigured the Tudor closets with three balcony compartments (Fig 5). Curiously, someone in this

period evidently entertained the idea of erecting the great marble altarpiece from James II's Catholic chapel at Whitehall at Hampton Court. The whole furnishing was shipped down the river, only to be returned to Westminster Abbey after 1706.

William III died before the restoration of the chapel was complete, but Queen Anne continued his work. On January 31, 1711, a commission was issued to Sir Christopher Wren and the Office of Works to refit the chapel 'with all convenient speed according to the design you prepared, and which Her Majesty has been pleased to approve of'. The whole project cost well over £4,000 (approximately double the original estimate) and involved the refurnishing of the interior with joinery by the Master Joiner Sir Charles Hopson and the carver Grinling Gibbons, both of whom were otherwise active in the palace.

The present marble pavement—which had been stored for several years in the antechapel—was laid and the



interior furnished with box pews and the present altar reredos. This closely resembles the reredos designed by Wren in 1676 for the Tudor chapel at Whitehall Palace Chapel. At the same time, the panels of the vault were painted white and the whole structure was sprung on supports decorated with cherubs.

The chapel interior was also lit with new windows of clear glass. The form of the windows is recorded by the surviving *trompe l'oeil* paintings, part of a cycle executed by Thomas Highmore, Sergeant-Painter to the King, and his successor, James Thornhill.

Queen Anne was the last monarch to make substantial changes to the chapel. As the 18th century progressed, the palace fell out of royal favour and, from the 1740s, a number of grace-and-favour apartments became established within it. The residents of these now became the congregation of the chapel and its order of seating came rigidly to reflect the precedence they observed. Various changes to the pews were made in the 19th century and, in the 1880s, the chapel came to accommodate a font.

Over the same period, the architectural quality of the building was increasingly appreciated. As a consequence, in 1845, the roof was repainted on the advice of A. W. N. Pugin. Then, in 1894, the interior was refurnished with Gothic windows. Nevertheless, the chapel remained closed to the public except during Divine Service until 1918.

Over the 20th century, the chapel has undergone extensive repairs and improvements. Rot and beetle attack necessitated the restoration of the vault in 1927–9 and the whole structure was repainted in 1973, following paint research by Jan Keevil. To accommodate the choir, the stalls were also reconfigured in 1973 and a new organ console was installed in 1993. The fabric of the chapel is now the responsibility of Historic Royal Palaces (HRP), which manages Hampton Court.

Since 2007, Andrew Harris of Martin Ashley Architects has undertaken repairs to the royal closet on HRP's behalf. It is a mark of the continued importance of the chapel that the Queen delivered her Christmas message from it in 2010, continuing its public role into the 21st century.

For further details of services at the Chapel Royal, visit www.chapelroyal.org