

*This image: The White Tower and castle walls at the Tower of London
Right: Joint Chief Curator at Historic Royal Palaces, Tracy Borman*



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CURATING *the* CROWN

Joint Chief Curator at Historic Royal Palaces,
Tracy Borman shares the highlights of the job
and reveals her favourite haunts

WORDS JENNY ROWE

Author of biographies on Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and Thomas Cromwell, as well as the fictional *The King's Witch* trilogy, Tracy Borman is a historical force to be reckoned with. She is possibly one of the most well-read guides to the capital that we have ever presented in our pages, and even after decades of writing and rifling through books and sources, her curiosity remains unsated. Here, we pique yours with some of Tracy's favourite anecdotes and nuggets of advice for a trip from Tudor through to modern-day London.

What has been the highlight of your time as joint Chief Curator at Historic Royal Palaces?

There have been so many! It's a close-run thing, but meeting the Duchess of Cambridge when she came to open the Magic Garden at Hampton Court Palace was probably the most memorable and special, particularly as my daughter presented her with a bouquet. The Duchess was so lovely and I chatted to her for a long time – I took about a million photos and have dined out on it ever since!

What are you working on right now?

Just before lockdown, we were in the middle of installing a truly dazzling new exhibition at Hampton Court Palace, *Gold and Glory: Henry VIII and the French King*, to mark the 500th anniversary of their famous meeting known as the Field of Cloth of Gold. Although it masqueraded as an expression of peace between these two rival kings, it was really a battle of the bling as each tried to outdo the other in splendour and magnificence. The exhibition will bring together a host of treasures from 1520, with gold aplenty (of course), and is now scheduled to open in May 2021.

As Historic Royal Palaces is an independent charity, we really rely on the income from visitors to help us care for these incredible buildings, and to put on exhibitions and activities like this. 2020 hit us hard, so I really hope that readers will consider paying us a visit in the coming year!

What is the most unusual object you've curated at the Palaces?

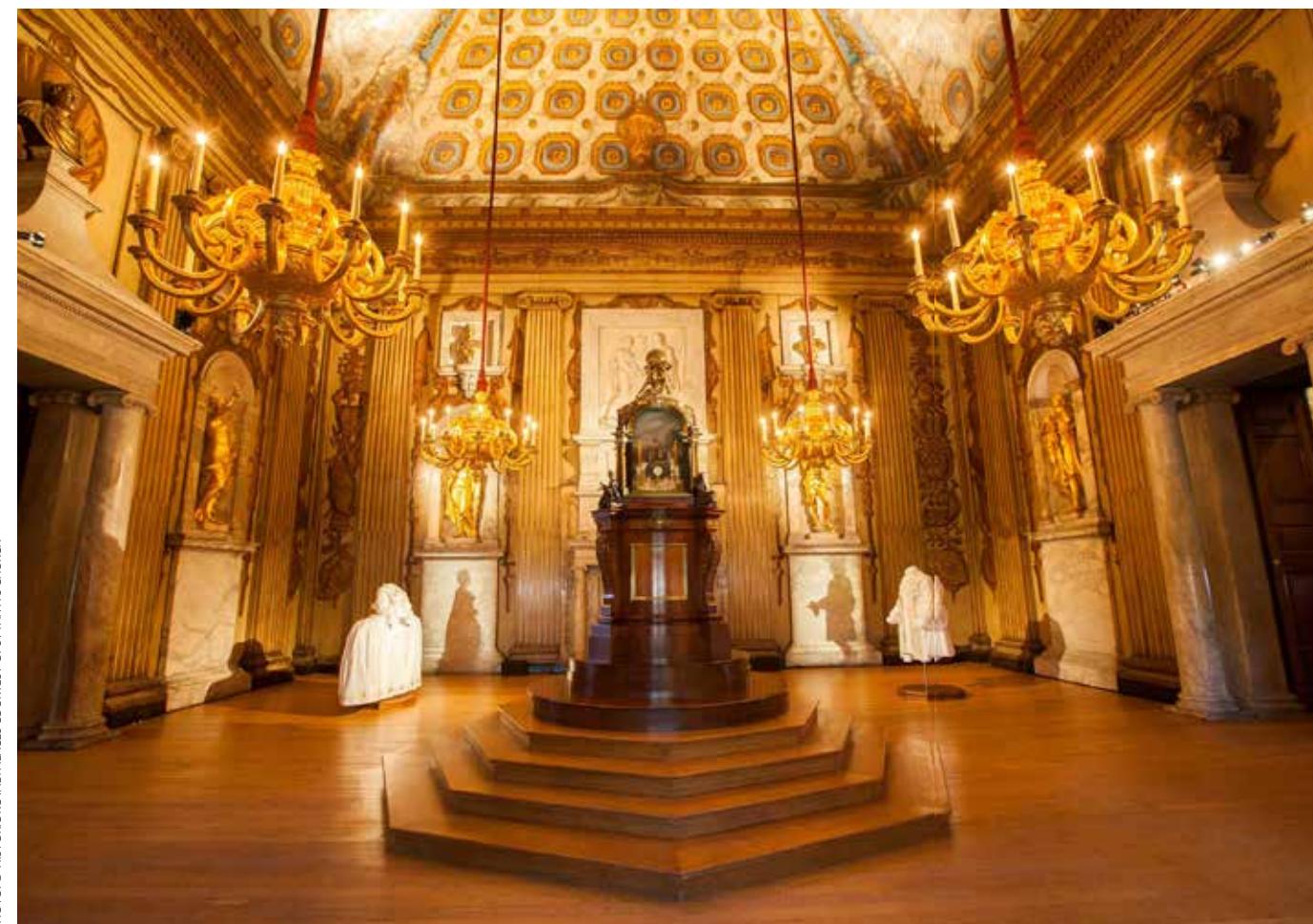
It has to be the Bacton Altar Cloth – otherwise known as the lost dress of Queen Elizabeth I. I first discovered it ▶



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Clockwise, from this image: Hillsborough Castle, Northern Ireland; portrait of Elizabeth I by an unknown artist, c.1600; portrait of Henry VIII after Hans Holbein the Younger, c.17th century; the Cupola Room in Kensington Palace; the Bacton Altar Cloth



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while researching my book, *Elizabeth's Women*, back in 2008. I was visiting a church in Bacton, a beautiful and remote village in Herefordshire, to see a monument to Blanche Parry, Elizabeth's favourite lady-in-waiting, when I saw this exquisite piece of embroidery in a glass case on the wall. The label just said 'Altar cloth, c.16th century'. I didn't think too much more about it until years later my colleague, dress curator Eleri Lynn, visited the church and her jaw hit the floor when she saw the embroidery. She knew at once it was something special and arranged for it to be loaned to Historic Royal Palaces so that it could be conserved.

As soon as they took it out of the case, they realised it was no altar cloth but a dress – and a very high status one at that. Painstaking investigation by Eleri has provided compelling evidence that it is the only surviving dress from Elizabeth's extensive wardrobe (which comprised 1,900 dresses by the time of her death) and that it was probably given to the church in memory of Blanche. It was the discovery of a lifetime and drew the crowds when we put it on display at Hampton Court Palace in 2019.

What is the most challenging part of your job?

Trying to be in six different places at once! I've managed to attend meetings at three of our palaces on the same day, but all six might be a tall order – especially as one of them is the beautiful Hillsborough Castle and Gardens in Northern Ireland. But since lockdown, we have all had to get very savvy with online meetings, so I don't do much palace-hopping these days. I must admit, I really miss it.

What is the strangest thing you've ever been asked?

Why Henry VIII built Hampton Court Palace on a flight path.

What is your favourite anecdote about The Tower of London?

Researching my book, *The Story of the Tower of London*, was a constant source of surprise, fascination and – at times – horror. So many pivotal events have taken place there in its 1,000-history that it felt like writing the history of Britain, not just the Tower.

Because of its key roles as a fortress and prison, I'm afraid not many of the stories have a happy ending. But one close to my heart does: I got married there five years ago, in the Chapel Royal of St Peter ad Vincula, originally built by Henry VIII and the final resting place of two of his wives, Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, as well as former favourites such as Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell. Not the most romantic place to get married, perhaps, but for a Tudor historian like myself it was a dream come true.

Tell us a grisly tale from the Tower of London archives.

The one that stands out is the execution of poor old Lady Margaret Pole. Imprisoned by Henry VIII because of her royal blood, she languished in the Tower of London for two and a half years before finally being sent to her death. This indomitable 67-year-old protested her innocence to the end and refused to lay her head on the block. It is said that it took the bungling executioner 17 blows of the axe to sever her head.



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Clockwise, from top left: The Chapel Royal of St Peter ad Vincula; the Great Hall at Hampton Court Palace; afternoon tea at Sketch

What was Tudor London like?

Although I spend most of my working life exploring or writing about London's royal palaces and their occupants, the vast majority of Tudor London's dwellings were a good deal less salubrious. Its streets were lined with tightly packed houses and were so narrow that they 'do not permit us to see the heavens', as Thomas More remarked.

Few streets were paved and drainage was poor, which meant that when it rained they would rapidly become a quagmire. In an attempt to remove the mud and filth from their shoes, people would spread rushes on the floors of their houses. But as one horrified visitor observed, it was not unusual for inhabitants to wade through twenty years' worth of 'unspeakable filth' in their homes, including 'spittle, vomit, dogs' urine and men's too, dregs of beer and cast-off bits of fish.' I think I'll stick with the palaces...

What is your favourite time of year in London?

Springtime. I love it when the days grow longer, enticing

you to get out of bed a little earlier and stay out later in the evening rather than rushing straight home. During lockdown, I became a cycling addict and regularly got up at the crack of dawn to do a couple of laps of Richmond Park or, when I was feeling particularly energetic, cycle up Box Hill just outside London.

Which is your favourite museum?

The National Portrait Gallery is very close to my heart. I always make a beeline for the Tudor gallery. Seeing Holbein's startlingly realistic portraits of Henry VIII and his courtiers is like stepping back in time. [The museum is closed until 2023 for refurbishment but its collections can be viewed online.]

What is the most underrated attraction in the city?

Kensington Palace. Obviously, it's well known as a royal residence, but much less so as a visitor attraction. It is the only palace in London to boast four centuries of continuous



royal occupation and there are so many fascinating stories to discover – from the scandalous court of Queen Anne to the antics of the Georgians, the birth of Queen Victoria and some very rebellious royal princesses. There's a wonderful programme of exhibitions, too, so do keep an eye on the Historic Royal Palaces website.

Which is your favourite London park?

Regent's Park, because when I first moved to London 23 years ago, I worked at the Royal College of Physicians and spent many happy lunchtimes strolling through this beautiful park with my workmates. Some of them became close friends and have remained so ever since.

Have you recently discovered any hidden gems?

The Church of St Bartholomew the Great, which lies in the heart of the city close to the Barbican, is nestled among modern high-rises and is the very definition of a hidden gem. The oldest parish church in London, it dates back to

the 12th century and survived the Great Fire of 1666 and the Blitz. I discovered it while filming a documentary about the fall of Anne Boleyn. The beautiful and atmospheric interior has featured in a number of popular films and TV series, including *Elizabeth: the Golden Age*, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Real Sherlock Holmes*.

If a tourist wants to experience London at its best and most British, what should they do?

Go for afternoon tea. In common with my historical heroine, Queen Elizabeth I, I have a very sweet tooth, so I'm something of a connoisseur of London's tea rooms. The Ritz is the most iconic, of course, but my favourite has to be Sketch. A bit pricey but worth it for the divine delicacies and funky decor. Oh, and the most extraordinary toilets in London. I'll say no more – you have to experience them for yourself to find out. **B**

For information on exhibitions and events at the Historic Royal Palaces, see www.hrp.org.uk

From left to right:
Inside the Church of St Bartholomew the Great; a statue of Queen Victoria stands in Kensington Palace Gardens