

Queen Charlotte's Birthday Ball in Scotland (1764 – 1818)

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Figure 1 Left: Queen Charlotte, when Princess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz c.1760, Watercolour on ivory, RCIN 420189. This portrait may be the one sent from Mecklenburg to George III. Colonel David Graeme, who sent the portrait, wrote to Lord Bute: 'The Picture is like her. I cannot say flattered, and the nose badly done'. **Right:** George Noble, "View of the Court of St. James's with the Ceremony of Introducing a Lady to Her Majesty", 1781(?), RCIN 750504.

The racial identity of Queen Charlotte (Sophia Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, 1744–1818) and her portrayal in Netflix's *Bridgerton* series have renewed interest in the Georgian social season, particularly in the Debutante Ball held on Charlotte's official birthday, January 18. Queen Charlotte's Ball, depicted as the series' opening event, mirrored its role in the British social calendar between 1762 and 1818 as a key fashion event setting seasonal trends. From 1809, it also funded Queen Charlotte's and Chelsea Hospital. The tradition outlived Queen Charlotte, continuing to be part of the Royal calendar until 1959.

Marking royal birthdays began in England in the late 16th century and was adopted in Scotland after the Glorious Revolution. These celebrations became an important marker of political loyalty throughout the 18th century due to the Jacobite threat. The concept of an "official" royal birthday started in 1748 by George II wishing to align with warmer weather for *Trooping the Colour*,

or *the Sovereign's Birthday Parade*. Queen Charlotte's celebration was set for January 18, distinct from her natural birthday on May 19, which fell close to George III's birthday on 4 June.

The first official Queen's birthday in 1762 was celebrated at St James's Palace as well as in Dublin and Edinburgh. Dublin's programme included a theatrical play "for the ladies" and a ball at the castle hosted by the Lord Lieutenant. Attendees were noted for wearing dresses manufactured in Ireland. In Scotland, the occasion was marked with a Grand Ball at the Palace of Holyroodhouse, attended by Colonel Graham, Secretary to the Queen, and over 600 ladies and gentlemen. However, the following year no significant celebrations were described, although an Aberdeen newspaper reminded the reason for celebrating in January and noted the events in London. This situation changed in 1764 when the Queen's Birthday Assembly opened the dance assemblies' season in the Scottish capital.



Mantua of bright yellow silk worn at a ball at Holyrood in 1760 by Helen Robertson of Ladykirk: National Museum of Scotland, A.1992.170 A

Marking royal family birthdays with special assembly nights had started after 1746, following the Jacobite Rising of 1745/1746, and changes in the Edinburgh Assembly management. The National Records of Scotland preserve financial accounts from that period, detailing the operations of these assemblies. Interestingly, musicians' fees reflected attendance tiers: fewer than 100 attendees, 100–150, or more than 150 attendees. These numbers indicate the capacity of the Old Assembly Rooms, located between 1764 and the 1780s in Old Town's Bell's Wynd Close, to be around 200 people. On royal birthdays, musicians paid the highest fees, which meant high attendance.

The opening of the George Street Assembly Rooms in 1787 marked a significant expansion of Edinburgh's social scene. With a modern capacity of capacity of 1,370, it hosted the Queen's Birthday Assembly as its second event after the most elite gathering, the Caledonian Hunt Society Ball. A newspaper description of this second opening night mentioned dresses of different coloured satins and a plethora of decorated turban caps and Spanish hats. Some details about dancing arrangements in the new spacious ballroom were also given. Dancing lasted from 9 pm to 3 am. Lady Alva (Jean

Stirling, 1719 - 1797) served as the Lady Directress. Four sets danced at one time, of 24 sets in total, with approximately 1,000 people present. According to the George Assembly Rooms Rules, published shortly afterward, the size of a set was 12 couples (two more than in the Old Assembly Rooms) which indicates that only about 50% of those present participated in the dancing.

By the 1790s, the Queen's Birthday Assembly had become an important fashionable event in Edinburgh. Newspapers prior to the date were filled with fashion reviews from London and advertisements from local seamstresses and tailors. In 1803, the Assembly was attended by the Count of Artois, future Charles X of France, who lived at Holyrood Palace (1796 – 1803) while hiding from his debtors. Ticket sales data between 1813 - 1818 showed 1,000 - 1,500 guests, surpassing regular events with only 200 - 500 guests.

The political situation at the time influenced the Queen's Assembly in Edinburgh. The 1801 celebration was themed around the Union as the Irish Parliament had been dissolved following the unsuccessful Irish Rebellion of 1798. Dresses featured an interlocking pattern of rose, thistle and shamrock and the first dance was to the tune called *The Union*, newly arranged by Nathaniel Gow and based on *God Save the King*. Scottish dance music publications rarely included dance figures. The audience were thought able to compose their own sequences to 'lead the dance'.

In 1811 the celebration was initially cancelled by the government due to George III's failing health, then postponed for a month until 18 February. Conditions in Edinburgh were further worsened by the riots on

Hogmanay led by the Keellie gang, targeting wealthy residents and causing one police officer's death. By late January, 68 youths, all under 20, had been arrested. Many received severe sentences including death. Assemblies did not return to normal until after the Fasten's Eve Assembly held on the 26th of February.

After 1803, Nathaniel Gow, then the leader of the George Street Assembly Rooms Band, started to publish music played at Queen Birthday's Assemblies. In 1803 the publication contained *Lady Mackenzie of Coul's Strathspey*, *Delvine House*, a Reel, *Mr Don's Strathspey*, *John Barley Corn wishes Niel Gow a Joy of Piece* (by a Gentleman), and *Mrs McLeod of Geanie's Strathspey* (by a Gentleman). In 1804 the programme included *Niel Gow's Recovery* (a Strathspey by Niel Gow), *Lady Montgomerie's Reel* (by the Earl of Eglington), *The Irish Wedding* (a Favourite Dance, Irish), *The Argyle Bowling Green* (an Old Reel), *Major Molle's Favourite* (as danced at Alexandria in 1802; NB possibly introduced as 'Egyptian Dance' in the publication title). Over time, the assemblies began incorporating more diverse musical styles, blending traditional Scottish music with wider European tunes. In 1810, the program included *Marquis de la Romana's Waltz*, *The Opera Hat*, and *Princess Dolgourouki*, demonstrating a shift towards more cosmopolitan styles. Wherea, tunes such as *The Waterloo Strathspey* and *The Waterloo Reel* (1816) composed to celebrate recent military victories, highlighted the connection between music, politics, social life and ballrooms.

The Queen's Birthday Assembly also played a role in introducing new dance forms to Edinburgh society. Nathaniel Gow's Queen's Assembly 1816 collection included a French country dance, *The Batteuse*. The

1817 event, overseen by the Countess of Buchan, marked the public 'debut' of quadrilles and waltzes in Scotland. While these dance forms had previously been confined to private balls and dance classes, their inclusion in the most popular Assembly signalled a growing acceptance of continental dance styles in Scottish society. The quadrilles and waltzes were



accompanied by a full orchestra with French horns, flute, flageolet, bassoon, hautboy and double bass, which were considered necessary to play French music properly. French dances were preceded by tunes in Scottish style, *Gudewifes o' Peebles*, published in Gows' *Part fourth of the complete repository of original Scots slow strathspeys and dances (the dances arranged as medleys)* (Edin: Purdie, 1817), and selections from Captain S. Fraser's *Airs and Melodies Peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland and the Isles* (Edin, 1816).

Between 1764 and 1818, the Queen's Birthday Assembly became a cornerstone of Edinburgh's social dance calendar, setting the tone for the season and reflecting evolving tastes in dresses, dance and music. Blending Scottish traditions with European influences, it showcased late Georgian Edinburgh's more cosmopolitan identity.