

The real Prince Charles, heir to the British throne

By Tom Bower, the Daily Mail, 18 March 2018

"Nobody knows what utter hell it is to be Prince of Wales," Charles said in November 2004. His idea of hell, it must be said, is unlikely to be shared by most of his future subjects.

Take, for example, accounts of what it is like to have Prince Charles come to stay for the weekend.

Before a visit to one friend in North-East England, he sent his staff ahead a day early with a truck carrying furniture to replace the perfectly appropriate fittings in the guest rooms, according to The Daily Mail.

And not just the odd chest of drawers: the truck contained nothing less than Charles and Camilla's complete bedrooms, including the Prince's orthopaedic bed, along with his own linen. His staff had also made sure to pack a small radio, Charles's own lavatory seat, rolls of Kleenex Premium Comfort lavatory paper, Laphroaig whisky and bottled water (for both bedrooms), plus two landscapes of the Scottish Highlands.

The next delivery to arrive was his food — organic, of course. His hosts decided, despite their enjoyment of his company, not to invite him again.

Their experience was less distressing, however, than that of the family asked to host Charles for a long weekend on the Welsh borders.

Over the preceding months, they'd invited many friends for the four meals at which he'd preside; they'd also hired staff and ordered in masses of food and flowers.

But on the Friday afternoon of Charles's expected arrival, there was a call from St James's Palace to offer regrets. Under pressure of business, the Prince could not arrive until Saturday morning.

The following day, the same official telephoned to offer regrets for Saturday lunch, but gave the assurance that Charles would arrive for dinner. Then, that afternoon, the whole visit was cancelled due to "unforeseen circumstances".

The considerable waste and disappointment were not mitigated when Charles later revealed to his stricken hostess the reason for his cancellation. He had felt unable to abandon the beauty of his sunlit garden at Highgrove, he said.

His travelling staff include a butler, two valets, chef, private secretary, typist and bodyguards. Photo / Getty Images

For about six months of every year, the heir to the throne enjoyed a unique lifestyle in beautiful places, either in seclusion or with friends.

Although his travelling staff (a butler, two valets, chef, private secretary, typist and bodyguards) could anticipate most of his movements between his six homes, the only definite confirmation of his final destination, especially to his hosts, would be the arrival of a truck carrying suitcases, furniture and food.

There then followed endless telephone calls with his staff as he changed his mind about his future plans and projects.

For four months every year he lived in Scotland, where he expected people to visit him from London, usually at their own expense.

Sometimes, he travelled abroad. After the death of the Queen Mother in March 2002, for instance, he flew to Greece to stay for three days on his own in a monastery on Mount Athos. Unfortunately, someone took a photograph that showed the Prince stepping off a boat with a butler and a remarkable amount of luggage in tow — certainly far more than anyone could need for a few days' meditation.

The image didn't exactly chime with the theme of the imminent Jubilee celebrations: to emphasise the monarchy's relevance in modern Britain. Charles's staff could see this, even if he couldn't.

Julia Cleverdon, an executive on one of his charities, stuck the photo on her office wall and wrote, with risky irony: "We're off to Mt Athos with 43 pieces of luggage."

The Prince's other free weeks were likely to be divided between well-off friends. At Chatsworth, the 175-room home of his beloved Debo Mitford, the Duchess of Devonshire, Charles and Camilla would be assigned a whole wing for up to three weeks.

During the shooting season, the Prince opted for the company of Gerald Grosvenor, the Duke of Westminster, at either Eaton Hall, near Chester, or at the Duke's shooting lodge in the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire.

In between, he stayed at Garrowby, the home of the Earl and Countess of Halifax in Yorkshire, and with Chips and Sarah Keswick in Invermark, Scotland.

Even his personal policeman was roped in to cater to his comfort. If the Prince had to attend a function, the policeman would arrive with a flask containing a pre-mixed Martini. This would then be handed over to the host's butler along with a special glass that Charles insisted on using. And if he was expected to sit for a meal, the host would be informed in advance that an aide would be delivering a bag containing the Prince's food. This was in complete contrast with the Queen, who always ate what everyone else was having.

None of this petulant behaviour would be on show, however, when Charles emerged in public.

On those occasions, he'd show what appeared to be genuine interest in people and events.

Few outsiders could guess, commented one adviser, whether or not he was "just putting on a game face".

Sir Christopher Airy, who became his private secretary in 1990, was once reprimanded for suggesting to Charles that a forthcoming visit was "your duty". The Prince shouted at him: "Duty is what I live — an intolerable burden."

Prince Charles and Camilla travel in style. Photo / Getty Images

At home, his demands were constant, which meant an assistant had to be on call in Charles's office until he went to sleep.

All his aides were subject to familiar daily tirades. "Even my office is not the right temperature," he'd moan. "Why do I have to put up with this? It makes my life so unbearable."

Sir John Riddell, his private secretary for five years from 1985, once told a colleague that Charles was better suited to being a second-hand car salesman than a royal prince.

"Every time I made the office work," Riddell observed, "the Prince f***ed it up again."

"He comes in, complains that his office is 'useless' and people cannot spell and the world is so unfair, then says: 'This is part of the intolerable burden I put up with. This incompetence!'"

When Charles entertained at home, everything was geared to his own habits and convenience. Dinner would be served to guests at 8pm, but he wouldn't arrive until 8.15pm, because he'd decided against eating a first course.

It was fine, therefore, for dinner guests to start without him. Not at breakfast, though: visitors to Highgrove were cautioned by Camilla not to begin eating before the Prince appeared.

He was also unusually particular about his gardens at Highgrove. Because he refused to use pesticides, he employed four gardeners who would lie, nose-down, on a trailer pulled by a slow-moving Land Rover to pluck out weeds.

In addition, retired Indian servicemen were deployed to prowl through the undergrowth at night with torches and handpick slugs from the leaves of plants.

Charles also gave rein to extravagance in his office, where he employed an individual private secretary for each of his interests — including the charities, architecture, complementary medicine and the environment.

And anyone visiting the office at St James's Palace would be escorted to it by no fewer than three footmen, each responsible for a short segment of corridor.

A weekend with the Prince at Sandringham, meanwhile, can be a decidedly odd experience. One group of writers and journalists, invited five years ago, arrived to find that each of them had been assigned a servant.

Friday after dinner was listed as a cinema night. The chosen film was Robert Altman's Gosford Park, depicting upstairs/downstairs life to an audience surrounded by the reality of that social order. The film became a regular feature of Charles's culture weekends.

Michael Fawcett, the Prince's former valet and fixer, supervised the placing of chairs in front of a screen in the ballroom. In the front row were two throne-like armchairs for Charles and Camilla.

Soon everyone was seated, and servants entered with silver platters of ice cream. The film started. Charles and Camilla instantly fell asleep, and the ice cream slowly melted away.

On Saturday, the guests took a walk with Charles, during which he spoke about his belief in a sustainable environment. They were careful to avoid debate: their host, they had been cautioned, was easily offended.

"People think I'm bonkers, crackers," Charles groaned suddenly, in the middle of a field. "Do you think I'm mad?" he asked, in a manner that forbade a positive reply.

The two-hour walk ended back at the house, where the guests were served tea.

"Right, we're off," Charles announced, striding out of the house after a quick cup. Jumping into his Aston Martin, he drove at breakneck speed down narrow, twisting lanes, reassured that police motorcyclists had cleared other traffic.

His guests followed in a fleet of gleaming Land Rovers, arriving at Charles's local church in time to hear a short concert.

On Sunday, female guests had been instructed to wear appropriate hats and gloves for a trip to the local Anglican church, St Mary the Virgin and St Mary Magdalen. The two who chose to go to mass at a nearby Roman Catholic church felt Charles's displeasure.

By Sunday dinner, some of the guests had become puzzled about their host. His habit of commandeering a small bowl of olive oil just for himself provoked one visitor to recount a story of Charles during a recent trip to India.

Prince Charles' Highgrove home in Tetbury, England. Photo / Getty Images

The Prince had invited the banking heir Lord billionaires to be rounded up to accompany him. During the tour, a sumptuous lunch was held in a maharaja's palace.

Unexpectedly, a loaf of Italian bread was placed on the table. As an American billionaire reached out to take a piece, Charles shouted: "No, that's mine! Only for me!"

In reply to that story, another visitor recalled that on a previous weekend at Sandringham, a guest had brought Charles a truffle as a gift. To everyone's envy, Charles did not share the delicacy at dinner but kept it to himself.

As they listened to these curious tales, Charles's guests did not laugh; there was merely bewilderment.

At the end of the Sandringham weekend — the guests were asked not to leave until the Monday morning — some were told to leave £150 in cash for the staff, or to visit the estate's souvenir shop.

Most would tell their friends that Charles seemed genuine, but that the weekend was surreal.

Those who know him have often asked themselves why Prince Charles is so extraordinarily self-indulgent. Why can't he be more like his mother, who lives without complaint under leaky roofs and in rooms that haven't been repainted since her Coronation?

In 2006, for instance, Charles used the royal train simply to travel to Penrith to visit a pub — at a cost of £18,916 (\$36,544) — as part of his 'pub in the hub' initiative to revitalise village life.

And he spent £20,980 (\$40,530) for a day trip by plane from Scotland to Lincolnshire to watch William receive his RAF wings.

By contrast, the Queen travelled by train — courtesy of First Capital Connect — to Sandringham at Christmas. Her ticket cost £50, instead of the £15,000 her journey would have cost by the royal train.

Some have speculated that Charles's extravagance is a kind of revenge on the Duke of Edinburgh, for sending him to Gordonstoun in Scotland during his formative years. The Prince loathed the school's Spartan regime, but his father insisted he stay there to complete his secondary education.

The other mystery is why Charles has never seemed to appreciate his great good fortune. Instead, he has given vent so frequently to resentment that one friend has dubbed him "an Olympian whinger".

With a personal income of millions from the Duchy of Cornwall (£16.3 million (\$31.5million) in 2007 alone) he could afford to indulge his slightest whim — yet even that didn't satisfy him. One evening, the Prince was particularly maudlin at a dinner hosted by a billionaire in Klosters, Switzerland, for a number of the super-rich. When they'd finished eating, Charles huddled in a corner with King Constantine of Greece. "We pulled the short straw," sighed the Prince.

Compared with others in the room, he complained, both he and the King were stuck for cash. In his case, he explained, the Duchy of Cornwall administrators would repeatedly tell him what he couldn't afford to do.

In fact, Charles doesn't have to answer to anyone over his use of the duchy's income.

At the time of his complaint, among his 124 staff — most of them paid for by taxpayers — were four valets.

Why four for one man? So that two would always be available to help him change his clothes, which he did up to five times every day.

It could be argued that it is his association with billionaires that has made Charles so dissatisfied with his lot. During a recent after-dinner speech at Waddesdon Manor, Lord Rothschild's Buckinghamshire home, Charles complained that his host employed more gardeners than himself — 15 against his nine.

Fortunately, the public were unaware of such gripes. His staff, however, began to realise that his extravagance was threatening to undermine his public image.

To counter this, Michael Fawcett told a charity donor: "His Royal Highness lives modestly. He hasn't got a yacht and doesn't eat lunch."

This had the benefit of being partly true: Charles has never bought a yacht and prefers not to eat lunch — though he could easily afford both.

More worryingly, the Prince's then private secretary Sir Michael Peat decided to brief a journalist that "Charles does not enjoy a champagne and caviar lifestyle".

Contrary to the public's perception, he continued, the Prince possessed only one car, and did not even own his own home.

In reality, Charles had access to a fleet of at least six cars, including two Aston Martins, a Bentley, an Audi, a Range Rover and a Land Rover.

Prince Charles. Photo / Getty Images

And Peat's quibble about the legal ownership of the six homes variously occupied by the Prince (Clarence House, Highgrove, Birkhall, the Castle of Mey, Balmoral and Sandringham) was clearly disingenuous.

Among other things Peat failed to mention was that when Charles moved into Clarence House, in 2003, the cost of refurbishment had soared from £3 million towards £6 million — all funded by the taxpayer.

Or that the 15-bedroom Castle of Mey, had been rebuilt with the help of a £1 million gift from Julia Kauffman, a Canadian-born heiress living in Kansas City.

Foreign Office officials, however, were well aware of the Prince's tendency to demand the best of everything, without dipping into his own pocket.

Indeed, relations with the heir to the throne became increasingly strained as he continued to insist on travelling on private planes, especially to the Continent.

After one particularly nasty spat, Charles reluctantly agreed to fly commercial in Europe. But on his return, he refused ever again to take a BA plane.

"He wanted the convenience — and not to mix with hoi polloi," observed one mandarin dryly. "What's this!" asked Charles. 'Clingfilm, darling'

By the third anniversary of the Prince's marriage, Charles and Camilla's domestic life had settled into a happy routine. Although the staff occasionally heard arguments, the Duchess of Cornwall had become Charles's anchor and protector.

But even she could sometimes be amused by his loftiness. "I've been on the Tube, you know," he once told a friend after they'd returned from the theatre to Clarence House for dinner.

"Yes, but only to open a line," was the accurate riposte. That same evening, Camilla had told the staff to leave salads and cold cuts of meat on the sideboard.

"Let's see what's for dinner," said Charles after finishing his martini. He walked into the dining room and shrieked.

Fearing the worst, Camilla dashed in after him. "What's this?" asked her husband, pointing at the food.

"It's cling film, darling," she replied.

There's little Charles loves more than his garden at Highgrove in Gloucestershire, which is why he prefers to live there rather than in London.

Although it's a two-hour drive from the capital, he often summons people from London for the briefest of meetings — and regularly keeps them waiting. Very few refuse.

The outstanding garden, more than 35 years in the making, was designed by a succession of experts.

Molly Salisbury, Rosemary Verey, Miriam Rothschild, Julian and Isabel Bannerman, one after another, were enlisted to fill the landscape with trees, hedges, wildflowers, fountains, rare breeds of farm animals and architectural features, all blended into a romantic safe haven.

In return, the heir to the throne offered conditional gratitude. Professional gardeners were divided about the extent of Charles's own contribution.

The art historian and noted gardener Sir Roy Strong was summoned to advise on the cultivation of hedges. He spent days with his own gardener perfecting his ideas.

At the end, he submitted his employee's bill for £1,000 — and was never asked to return, or even thanked.

'He's shocked by the sight of an invoice,' Strong noted. 'So, he likes people who don't charge for their services.'

One of the few people known to have rebuffed the Prince was Lucian Freud. Would he swap one of his oils — worth millions of pounds — for one of Charles's watercolours, he was asked? 'I don't want one of your rotten paintings,' Freud replied.