



# Regal Splendour Rules in the New State Coach Britannia

Words by Rose Peterson, photos courtesy of Jim Frecklington

**The awe-inspiring beauty of the craftsmen-built new State Coach Britannia, designed and built in Australia and now receiving its finishing touches in its Sydney workshop, proudly displays the very best in traditional ceremonial pageantry and arts and is a great tribute to the recreation of the rapidly declining art of coach building.**



Artist, Paula Church painstakingly paints the Royal Coat of Arms onto the body of the coach.

The new State Coach Britannia is the realisation of the unique vision of one extraordinary man, W J 'Jim' Frecklington OAM, a proud Australian and equally proud monarchist and a man of uncommon and amazing creativity and skill.

Jim Frecklington was born in the town of Parkes, New South Wales, Australia and built his first horse-drawn vehicle at the age of eight – a small cart to be pulled by a Shetland pony that refused to accept a rider. As an

adult, after an adventurous working life that also took in the Polar North, Jim Frecklington was engaged at Windsor Castle as part of the team looking after the Duke of Edinburgh's four-in-hand team of horses. Later he moved to the Royal Mews in London where he drove the carriages on ceremonial occasions. In 1977 he was invited to manage the Queen's Silver Jubilee Exhibition which included the Glass Coach and the Edward VII Landau during its tour of Australia. In 1981 he assisted with the processional at the wedding of His Royal Highness Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer.

In 1986, with his characteristic purposeful determination, Jim Frecklington set about making his dream of designing and building a new State Coach for Queen Elizabeth II a reality. It would be the first such vehicle to be built for the Royal Household since 1902.

With Her Majesty's permission and the Australian Government's endorsement, the building process began but unavoidable delays meant that the superb Australia State Coach had to be completed in less than a year – an almost impossible challenge that was flawlessly met. In 1988 it officially became Australia's Bi-centennial gift to Her Majesty. It is an enduring showcase of Australian materials and craftsmanship, a fusion of traditional arts and cutting edge technology and a tangible expression of Australia's historic connection with the British Monarchy. The Australia State Coach is housed in the Royal Mews at Buckingham Palace and is used by Her Majesty on important State occasions.

After working on a project for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Jim Frecklington finally turned his attention to an idea he had been nurturing for some time of creating one more addition to the fleet of

Royal coaches – a postilion carriage that integrates New Millennium technology from around the world and that is a visual embodiment of history, heritage, pageantry and great artistic beauty with the distinguished title of the State Coach Britannia. A labour based on inspiration and perfection had begun.

Jim Frecklington has scoured the world for the finest materials and for craftsmen and women from the most diverse backgrounds and nationalities who have contributed their rare, even unique skills and talents to the pursuit of excellence in building the coach.



Jim Frecklington, carriage maker.

### *It's all in the detail*

The project has the approval of Buckingham Palace and Prince Phillip has played a part in some innovations such as recommending “metal wheels using an appropriate alloy. They can be made indistinguishable from wood and they are safer and more reliable.” Following this suggestion the spokes were cast in aluminium in Queensland, then gilded, creating a most effect, and making them “indistinguishable from wood.”

The State Coach Britannia is over 18 ft long and 10ft 6in high and weighs 2.5 tons. The body is essentially aluminium and for the paintwork the very latest two component acrylic enamel technology was used. Three coats of black basecoat were applied above the top moulding, and below three coats of Royal Mews Jubilee Claret. The different colours become visible in different lights, creating a distinctive chromatic effect and adding to the style of the coach.

The perch, designed and built by Jim Frecklington himself, is composed of 22 layers of laminated spotted gum, steamed then hand bent into flowing ‘goose neck’ curves and finally gilded.

The steel cee springs, made from the richest ore mined in Australia, were individually cut to size and curved by Robert Lovell and a team whose genius in using hand tools, forges and “line of sight” proved essential to the task.

The Royal Coat of Arms has been exquisitely emblazoned by hand four times directly on to the body of the coach; along with other heraldic symbols, by accomplished Irish-born Sydney artist Paula Church, making each a unique work of art in its own right. Paula is a perfectionist who also extended her artistic skills, learning to gild under the expert tutoring of Erik West FRSA, the retired coach restorer at the Royal Mews and closely studying the symbols of heraldry in order to create works of great historic and artistic merit

before applying her newly acquired skills to the coach.

The beautiful design of the gilded scroll or filigree pattern, highlighted in relief over the whole design in shades of brown oil-based glaze over the gilding, enriches the decorations of the coach.

### *Symbols of a nation*

Four magnificent lamps were spun in brass and the tops adorned with the Imperial Crown and then plated with 22-carat gold. The lamps incorporate the finest crystal glass panels hand-blown and cut by Edinburgh Crystal. The crystal in each lamp is individually etched with a symbol – the rose, the flax, the thistle and the leek – thereby creating a lamp of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively.

The interior is richly lined and upholstered with 20 metres of the finest pale gold silk brocade especially woven in England by master silk weavers.

The fabric also incorporates the heraldic symbols of the rose, the flax, the thistle and the leek, while for the backs of the seats the Royal Coat of Arms has been woven into the silk as a special feature.

Proudly adorning the roof of the State Coach Britannia is the gloriously carved and gilded Imperial Crown. It is supported by four lions statant guardant, the heraldic symbols of strength. These lions are derived from the Royal Lions on the front gates of Buckingham Palace. There has been an interesting departure from the generally accepted protocol that the lions look over their left shoulders in that two of them are represented with heads turned to their right. These have been cast in brass and then gilded, along with the English rose, the Scottish thistle, the Irish flax and the Welsh leek which also form part of the ‘gallery’ or roof decoration.

Two door handles, designed by Jim Frecklington and inlaid by New Zealand jeweller Mike Baker, are each decorated with 24 diamonds and 130 sapphires.

### *A time capsule*

It is interesting to note that the style, decorations and symbols used follow with few exceptions the traditional artistry of the Royal coaches, yet remarkably the State Coach Britannia also makes a very important departure. It seamlessly fuses the history, the visual imagery and the traditional artistry with all that is best in Third millennium technology. It features electric windows, hydraulic independent suspension, electric lighting and electric heating, with all the controls cleverly concealed in the armrests made from timber taken from the former Royal Yacht Britannia.

It is obvious that no amount of labour, expense or ingenuity has been spared in perfecting every aspect of the State Coach Britannia, but what gives it an even greater dimension and truly sets it apart is Jim Frecklington's unique idea of also making the State Coach Britannia a time capsule. The coach showcases elements of some of the greatest icons of British history and tradition,

*The sumptuous interior is lined with finest gold silk brocade; woven into its design again are the symbols of the rose, flax, thistle and leek. While the seat backs also feature the Royal Coat of Arms. Inlaid into the door panels and interior are numerous artefacts from British history.*



spanning millennia – sourced both nationally and internationally through the goodwill of many individuals and the governments of Britain, Scotland, Canada and Australia. Never before has such a compendium of a great nation's heritage been incorporated in a vehicle that is itself the epitome of majesty and historic grandeur.

## *History in the making*

More than a hundred treasured items, all authenticated with supporting documentation, have been incorporated and artfully inlaid in various parts of the coach, including the special segments on the interior panels of the doors. In this way the State Coach Britannia is a monument not only to current endeavours and achievements, but also to many of the outstanding endeavours and achievements of bygone eras.

The scope and diversity of these historic items is breathtaking. They range from palaces, castles and stately homes such as Holyrood, Glamis, Hampton Court, Althorp and Kensington to battlefields as far afield in time and space as Gallipoli, the Western Front, and Waterloo. Many Cathedrals including Canterbury, Lincoln, St Pauls and York Minster; sporting grounds such as Lords and Wimbledon, and halls of power such as 10 Downing Street and Westminster are represented. There are items from ships such as the Cutty Sark, Captain Cook's Endeavour, the Mary Rose, the former Royal Yacht Britannia and the c3,800-year-old Ferriby Boat.

Items recalling great writers, explorers, scientists and inventors: such as a wooden gear from one of the clocks created in 1726 by John Harrison, famous for his invention of the chronometer; a piece of apple tree from Sir Isaac Newton's home and William Shakespeare's mulberry tree; Sir Robert Scott's sledge from his 1912 South Pole expedition and a piece of barrel from Sir John Franklin's ill-fated 1845 Northwest Passage Expedition. Items relating to Sir Joseph Banks and to Charles Darwin all take their place alongside artefacts of great significance, such as a Micro card of the Magna Carta and the Domesday Book; such symbols of the RAF as a Lancaster bomber that once flew with the 617 Squadron known as 'the Dambusters' and a Spitfire from the time of the D-Day raids.

## *Past and present combine*

Proudly centred on the roof of the State Coach Britannia is the gilded Imperial Crown, previously mentioned. The wood, from which this crown was carved by Lincolnshire based master wood sculptor O H Boyd, came from Lord Nelson's ship HMS Victory. The cross on top of the crown is a symbol that the Royal authority is derived from the Divine and in keeping with this symbolism a small capsule set into the top of the cross houses a quantity of gold (from Peak Hill, NSW) and Frankincense and Myrrh from the East, the traditional origins of the Three Wise Men associated with the Nativity of Christ.

The interior of the crown has also been hollowed out allowing for the installation of the latest in third millennium technology – media cameras – a masterful synergy of past and future.

Another item related to monarchy is the Stone of Scone, also referred to as the "Stone of Destiny", the "Coronation Stone" and in tradition as the pillow stone used by the Biblical Jacob.

Again, the scope and the breadth of British heritage and endeavour represented by these historic inclusions are breathtaking.

For a complete list of the items please refer to the website: [www.downau.com/britannia](http://www.downau.com/britannia).



*The top of the coach is decorated with the gilded Imperial Crown, supported by four lions statant guardant.*

There is no doubt that the innate and intuitive design skills of Jim Frecklington, working without the assistance of Computer Aided Design (CAD), without plans or models has resulted in an inspired, authentic and regal coach that combines craftsmanship, engineering and romance. Interestingly, measurements and calculations show that its proportions converge with the Golden Mean, the ancient mathematical formula for excellence and beauty.

In every sense of the word then, the State Coach Britannia is truly an inspired work of fine art.

Master coach builder Jim Frecklington has worked tirelessly to try and preserve the vanishing art of coach building but he very much doubts there will ever be a coach like Britannia built again. He strongly feels that, "Great processions involving royal carriages have been so much a part of British tradition and I want to see that tradition continue for a long, long time." Undoubtedly, with the completion of the State Coach Britannia that hope and that tradition will remain well preserved for posterity for centuries to come.



*The finest crystal glass was hand blown and carved by Edinburgh Crystal for the four lamps. Each is etched with a symbol of the British nation – the rose, England; the flax Ireland; the thistle, Scotland and the leek, Wales. Each lamp is of spun brass topped with 22-carat gold plate and adorned with the Imperial Crown.*

