Welcome to Bute House –

the official residence of the First Minister of Scotland, and one of the finest examples of Georgian architecture in the heart of Edinburgh.

When I walk through the front door of this magnificent building, I am always struck by a sense of history, a recognition that this house has an illustrious past.

In the Drawing Room, for example, I never tire of the spectacular surroundings and frequently imagine many of the unique gatherings that this room has hosted in the past. Today I use the Drawing Room to welcome visiting dignitaries to Scotland, for press conferences and Ministerial receptions. The Dining Room is more formal, but just as impressive, and an excellent asset when it comes to hosting formal dinners as the First Minister of Scotland.

While Bute House is undoubtedly an important part of our history, and the location for many ceremonial occasions, it is also at the heart of modern Scottish government. Each week the cabinet meets to discuss and drive forward improvements in public services and consider the impact of our plans to grow the Scottish economy.

When I am working in Edinburgh on day-to-day government business, I use Bute House as often as I can. I never take Bute House for granted and I am delighted that more people in Scotland can now see behind its doors.

I am honoured that my name has been added to the list of those who have lived in Bute House and to play my part in the building’s history.

I hope that you enjoy your visit to Bute House as much as I enjoy living and working here.

Jack McConnell, MSP
Charlotte Square was designed by Robert Adam, the leading Scottish architect of his day. The plans for the Square were drawn up in 1791, when Adam was at the height of his powers, and were commissioned by the Lord Provost and the City of Edinburgh Council as the splendid architectural culmination of Edinburgh’s first New Town. Sadly Adam was to die in 1792 and his completed designs had to be realised by others. The north side of the Square was built first and is faithful to his intentions. The Square was not completed, however, until after the Napoleonic Wars, and involved some modification of Adam’s original proposals. The most serious alteration was the simplification of his elaborate design for the integral Parish Church (now West Register House, part of the National Archives of Scotland), which forms an axial focus for George Street. Nonetheless, Charlotte Square is now recognised as Adam’s town planning masterpiece and one of the finest urban spaces in Europe.

Bute House occupies No. 6 Charlotte Square and is the central house on the north side. This plot was sold in 1792 by public roup to Mr Orlando Hart, shoemaker, for £290. In 1806, Sir John Sinclair, Bart. of Ulbster bought the house for £2950. Sir John was a great agriculturist, and was founder and President of the Board of Agriculture. He organised the compilation of the first Statistical Account of Scotland. Sir John sold the house in 1816 and a little over a century later, having changed hands several times, it became the property of the Fourth Marquess of Bute.

Lord Bute had a particular enthusiasm for the amenity value of the Scottish townscape and from 1903 he began to buy-up the central houses on the north side of Charlotte Square, with the intention of restoring Adam’s original design which had been compromised by 19th-century intrusions, including ugly dormer windows and alterations to the proportions of the first-floor windows. He acquired the house at No. 5 first and thoroughly restored its interior in a sumptuous Adam Revival style, furnishing the principal rooms with antique furniture so that it could function as the Bute’s town house in Edinburgh. He subsequently acquired Nos 6, 7 and 8, which, after the restoration of Adam’s design externally and internally, were let to sympathetic tenants. Lord Bute’s enthusiasm for Charlotte Square was given permanent expression when the City of Edinburgh invoked the Town Planning (Scotland) Act of 1925 to effect the Edinburgh Town Planning (Charlotte Square) Scheme Order, 1930. The Bute family thereafter moved from the house at No. 5 to the neighbouring property at No. 6, taking many of the contents of No. 5 with them.

**Bute House – No. 6 Charlotte Square**
In 1966, No. 6 Charlotte Square together with Nos 5 and 7 were conveyed to the National Trust for Scotland through the procedures of the National Land Fund in part satisfaction of duty on the estate of the Fifth Marquess of Bute who had died in 1956. It was decided at this time that No. 6 would make an admirable residence for the Secretary of State for Scotland, as a building where he could reside when in Edinburgh and where distinguished visitors could be received and entertained. The Bute House Trust was formed to bring this idea to fruition. The Trustees raised the money for the alterations to, and the redecoration of, the house, and for its furnishings. The interior decoration and colour schemes were the responsibility of the late Lady Victoria Wemyss and the late Colin McWilliam, then Curator of the National Trust for Scotland. Because funding was tight, the House was dependent on a number of loans.

Bute House was the Edinburgh base for the Secretary of State for Scotland until devolution in 1999. With the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and the appointment of a First Minister for Scotland it was inevitable that the way in which Bute House functioned had to be revised. The smoothness of the transition owed much to the late Donald Dewar, who succeeded directly from the office of Secretary of State for Scotland to become Scotland’s first First Minister.

With a Parliament based in Edinburgh, Bute House began to be used much more regularly and a Cabinet Room therefore had to be established in what was formerly the Secretary of State’s study. Sadly, it was at this time that many of the early loans of furnishings to Bute House were recalled. The National Trust for Scotland has endeavoured to replace these losses with furniture from its own collections. It has been the aim of the Bute House Trustees and the National Trust for Scotland to furnish the house in a suitable late 18th-century idiom, so that the interior harmonises with the classic elegance of Adam’s exterior. This aim is consistent with the general approach of the Fourth Marquess of Bute’s public-spirited restoration of Adam’s great design.
As the central house in Adam’s design, Bute House must have been relatively expensive to build with its four pilasters under the central pediment and a wealth of carved architectural ornament. Adam went to great pains, however, to harmonise the architecture of the houses on the north side of the Square to create an unbroken palace front from a series of individual terraced houses. Bute House’s neighbours include one house consisting of a single bay, and two others built on a ground plan made up of interlocking L-shapes. The elegance of Adam’s façade owes much to the restoration programme orchestrated by the Fourth Marquess of Bute. Regrettably, however, he was unable to restore the tripartite Venetian windows to No. 5 and No. 7 to match that of No. 6. For some years No. 6 functioned as a hotel and the fixings for the letters can still be seen above the entrance door.
It is very unusual for a New Town house to have a central front door: the main entrance door would more normally be placed on the same side as the staircase. Here, however, the central door was a necessary function of Adam’s Palace front. The original plan of the Bute House entrance Lobby or Vestibule is not known. The present Vestibule and its decoration was designed for the Fourth Marquess of Bute in 1923 by his architect, Balfour Paul. The thoroughness with which this space was redecorated suggests that the Vestibule as inherited by Lord Bute may have been heavily adapted to suit Victorian taste.

Balfour Paul’s treatment of this space is as elegant as it is intricate. Because the Vestibule does not open directly into the stairwell, it might appear dark and forbidding. Whereas most lobbies were fitted with enclosed stoves, Balfour Paul resolved this problem by deciding to greet the visitor with a welcoming open fire. The plan of the Vestibule is T-shaped: the visitor is channelled beneath an archway into the right-hand inner Lobby, giving a smooth, and architecturally-impressive transition to the conventional stairwell.

Balfour Paul built up his architectural effects with highly decorative plasterwork in the Adam Revival style. However, the design of the plaster ornament in this miniature space is much more elaborate than Adam would himself have planned for a town house. The intricacy and depth of projection of the plasterwork suggests that the surfaces were intended originally to be painted in a single flat colour, as is shown in an early photograph.

Balfour Paul’s very architectural effect was completed with a new stone pavement inset with black dots in the Georgian manner. This has darkened with age and, sadly, is not wearing well.

To offset the move from the bright daylight outside, to the dark Vestibule, the National Trust for Scotland has installed over the chimney-piece a Regency convex mirror, bequeathed to the Trust in 1998 by Mr H. and Miss M. Alexander. The painting on the east wall is by the Scottish artist the late James McIntosh Patrick, who is celebrated for his brilliantly detailed views of the cultivated landscapes around Dundee and the Carse of Gowrie. The picture is part of the original contents of Bute House and was gifted by the Tamie Trust.
The top-lit Staircase is unusually dark for an Edinburgh New Town house because it continues up to the attic floor. The cantilevered stone steps would normally stop at the second or bedroom floor, with a cupboard-like arrangement of wooden stairs continuing to the attics. The uppermost flight at Bute House was probably added in 1889 by the architect Thomas Leadbetter, at the request of Sir Mitchell Thomas of Cammo, a Lord Provost of Edinburgh who wanted a Billiard Room on the top floor of 6 Charlotte Square, in order to take advantage of the spectacular northern views to the Firth of Forth. The staircase dome with its festoons of decorative plasterwork may be original.

To offset the darkness on the ground floor, with its new stone pavement by Balfour Paul introduced in 1923, the walls were repainted in 2001 with a very light stone colour, repeating the existing scheme. The balusters, however, which were originally painted black, were repainted in white – a common late 18th-century treatment.

The handsome long case clock by James Ivory of Dundee was gifted to Bute House in 1970 by Mr and Mrs Eric Ivory. Eric Ivory was the Chairman of the Administrative Committee established to equip Bute House in 1966. The clockmaker was an ancestor of Eric Ivory.

The Staircase
The Drawing Room

The original elaborate plasterwork of the ceiling in this room is the great glory of Bute House. Its geometrical design and neo-classical ornament are a very restrained version of Adam’s own ceiling designs, but with the lightness of touch and delicacy that characterises the styles of the 1790s. The contemporary frieze repeats the same festoons found in the ceiling decoration, but intersperses them with elegant vases. Decorative plasterwork of this quality is not a common feature of New Town houses.

In 1923, Lord Bute and Balfour Paul complemented this ceiling by introducing new doorcases in the same Adam style, together with a handsome inlaid chimney-piece with a central tablet depicting Venus and Cupid and vases echoing the frieze. The new single-leafed doors replaced 19th-century double doors, which connected this large Drawing Room at the front of Bute House, to the back Drawing Room that is now the Cabinet Room.

The firegrate, like the others in the public rooms, was transferred by the Bute family from their original Edinburgh town house at No. 5, next door. The grate was later purchased by the National Trust for Scotland. The continental glass chandelier is one of three spectacular Bute family pieces, accepted in lieu of death duties by the Treasury and subsequently transferred with the House into the care of the National Trust for Scotland. The chandelier has a fascinating history: during the last war, Felix Harbord, the interior decorator who helped Lady Bute with the arrangement her family homes, was serving in the Forces and was charged with repatriating works of art. One day he came upon this chandelier abandoned in one of the streets of Cleves and had it packed in empty munitions boxes, which he addressed to No. 6 Charlotte Square. With the help of Edinburgh antique dealers, Lady Bute traced suitable replacements for the missing pieces of glass and successfully assembled and installed the light fitting in the Drawing Room at Bute House. She always ensured, however, that the Drawing Room curtains were left open at night, so that passers-by could share her enjoyment in the chandelier’s unexpected arrival.
The fine gilded rococo chimney-glass is attributed to John Mackie, a London cabinet-maker who was possibly of Scottish north-east origin. The mirror was originally made for Duff House in Banffshire, where it was described in the 1761 Inventory as being in the Private Drawing Room. At the sale of the contents of Duff House around 1906 the chimney-glass was purchased through Partridge, the London antique dealers, by the Fourth Marquess of Bute for the Drawing Room of No. 5 Charlotte Square, which he had refitted in a sumptuous Adam Revival style.

The very large mahogany-glazed bookcase on the east wall was presented to the Bute House Trustees by Mr Ian Crabbie when the House was first furnished. It now displays the Bute House glass collection, engraved by Harold Gordon with images of the birds and wild flowers of Scotland. The glasses were originally intended for use in the Dining Room.

The other paintings in the room are on generous loan from the National Galleries of Scotland and are individually labelled. The pair of gilded oval pier glasses, one of which is a modern copy of an original Georgian antique glass, are on loan from the National Trust for Scotland. The present green colour scheme dates from 1985 when the damask curtains were introduced.

Until 1999 this room housed an exceptional 18th-century Scottish over-mantel mirror and two pier tables, which were on loan to Bute House from the Dundas-Bekker family of Amiston House in Midlothian. An outbreak of dry rot at Amiston House had led to the Drawing Room and Dining Room being temporarily dismantled to allow restoration work to take place. The furniture was returned to Amiston on completion of the repairs, and two original Bute family pieces have recently been moved here from the Dining Room to replace them.

The full-length portrait on the north wall was painted by the distinguished Scottish artist Allan Ramsay and shows John Stuart, Third Earl of Bute (1713-1792), the first Scottish-born British Prime Minister. Though long thought to be a copy by Ramsay’s Studio, this painting is now acknowledged to be the original portrait commissioned in 1758 by the Prince of Wales, later King George III. It was largely through the success of this portrait, together with another commissioned by Bute of the Prince of Wales, that Ramsay later succeeded in 1761 to the position of Principal Painter in Ordinary to George III. Ramsay’s portrait of the Third Earl of Bute is one of the most important pictures in the care of the National Trust for Scotland.
The Cabinet Room

When Bute House was first furnished in 1970, this room was intended as the Library, or private study, for the Secretary of State. With the shift in purpose of Bute House from the Official Residence of the Secretary of State for Scotland to that of the First Minister, this room had to be adapted to serve as Scotland’s Cabinet Room.

The original appearance of the Study, with its robust colour scheme picking up the brown marble of the chimney-piece is recorded in Harry More Gordon’s conversation piece portraying all the successive Secretaries of State for Scotland. The portrait was commissioned by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and can be viewed in the Gallery’s collections at Queen Street, Edinburgh.

This room probably retains its original cornice but the inlaid marble chimney-piece and the shaped treatment of the south wall, which replaces the 19th-century double folding doors that led into the Front Drawing Room, were introduced in 1923 by Lord Bute and Balfour Paul.

The late Colin McWilliam designed a desk and a bookcase incorporating copies of the portrait medallion of Robert Adam by James Tassie, for this room. The furniture was made in the workshops of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society in Beith.

The modern reproduction Georgian ladder-back chairs were intended to complement the existing suite of dining chairs at Bute House. The chandelier was originally in the Butes’ Dining Room on the ground floor and now belongs to the National Trust for Scotland.
The Dining Room

This probably retains its original comice but the chimney-piece and the rather slim sideboard recess were introduced by Lord Bute and Balfour Paul in 1923.

To suit this relatively narrow room, in 1967 the Bute House Trustees commissioned the mahogany pedestal dining table from Leslie and Leslie of Haddington. The table is in a late 18th-century style, as is appropriate to the character of the house, and was sponsored by Miss Elizabeth Watt. The 18 mahogany ladder-back Georgian-style dining chairs were copied by Whytock and Reid, the Edinburgh cabinet-makers, from an original set supplied to Penicuik House.

Miss Watt, who subsequently bequeathed her collection of Surrealist Paintings to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, also commissioned, in an inspired act of patronage, the modern rosewood sideboard from the celebrated cabinet-maker, Edward Barnsley (1900-1987). The sideboard was designed especially to suit the narrow recess in this room, and the upper section was intended to hold the Bute House glass collection (presently in the Drawing Room). This rather modern piece, although conceived in the idiom of a late-Georgian sideboard, subsequently fell from favour and was replaced with an antique sideboard. Happily, however, the Barnsley sideboard has recently been reinstated. The doors in the upper section are hinged along their lower edges and pull down to form horizontal serving surfaces. The way the curved handles are organically integrated into the design is a characteristic feature of Barnsley’s later work. The piece bears his simple stamped signature on the upper inside edge of the left-hand drawer.

The gilded curtain boxes were made by Scott Morton and Company, the Edinburgh architectural woodworkers, for the Back Drawing Room of No. 5 Charlotte Square. Scott Morton copied their design from Adam’s own published designs for fitting up the Third Earl of Bute’s country seat of Luton House in Bedfordshire. Much of the Adam Revival decoration for the Fourth Marquess of Bute at No. 5 Charlotte Square was based on Adam’s designs for Luton.