

TROOPING THE COLOUR:

Brilliant sunshine greets Her Majesty the Queen as she rides down the Mall for the ceremony of Trooping the Colour - weather as perfect as anyone can remember for this most glittering of all military occasions. All eyes are on the youthful sovereign, as she leaves the Mall; but there's a special cheer, too, for the carriage which brings the Queen Mother, Princess Margaret, Prince Charles, and Princess Anne.

The Queen wears a green plume in her tricorne hat - for this year it is the First Battalion, Irish Guards, whose colour is to be trooped. Prince Philip and the Duke of Gloucester ride close behind. The first stage of the ceremony is the royal inspection.

On her scarlet tunic, the Queen wears the riband of the Garter. Her mount this year, for the first time, is the chestnut horse "Imperial" - known at the Palace as "Imp". He bears himself as calmly as his famous predecessor, "Winston".

The Queen takes up her position at the saluting base, ready for the next stage - the trooping itself. The massed bands of the Brigade of Guards march and countermarch across the parade ground in slow time - a stately movement, setting the stage for the dignified and ancient pageantry to come.

The Duke of Edinburgh looks on as Regimental Sergeant-Major Mercer comes forward with the colour - the only occasion when the R.S.M. appears on parade with a drawn sword.

R.S.M. Mercer hands over the colour to the ensign - 19-year-old Second-Lieutenant Palmer. For the rest of the ceremony, the colour will be in the ensign's charge.

Centuries ago, before Britain had a standing army, the regimental colour was the rallying-point in battle, and every man - including the many mercenaries - had to be able to recognise it at once. So morning and evening, the colour was borne through the ranks, while every soldier memorised it. That custom was the foundation of the ceremony Trooping the Colour.

Finally, the march past. Experienced soldiers say the drill this year has been the most faultless of all the post-war troopings; and as the scarlet ranks swing proudly past the saluting base, it is easy to believe them.



High above the parade, the Queen's children watch with Princess Margaret, as the Sovereign's Escort of the Household Cavalry follows the Guards in the march past - cuirasses shining, plumes waving, and horses' raising a cloud dust which seems to add to the glamour of the scene.

The parade is over - but the pageantry has not ended; for thousands who cannot get near to the troping itself, the Queen's ride back to Buckingham Palace, at the head of her Foot Guards and escorted by her Household Cavalry, is worth waiting for hours to see.

On this day, the Queen's official birthday is being celebrated throughout the Commonwealth; but nowhere can it have been so full of colour and spectacle as in London, the centre of the Commonwealth and the home of the Queen.