

A Brief Guide for Visitors to the Houses of Parliament

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The Houses of Parliament (formally known as the Palace of Westminster)



The Houses of Parliament
(viewed from the south bank
of the River Thames)

This is where the upper and lower houses of the British government (the House of Lords and the House of Commons) meet to decide national policies and to create new laws. The current buildings date from the period 1840-60, created after a fire in 1834 destroyed the previous parliament.



Great Hall inside
Westminster Palace

I invite you to follow the route of a tour of the interior of the Houses of Parliament, starting at Victoria Tower and ending at the Great Hall. You can take a tour such as this in August and September each summer. This is when the parliament does not normally meet (unless there is an emergency) and is known as the Summer Opening of Parliament. There are no tours on Sundays or on the last Monday in August (a public holiday).



State Opening, one of the most colourful events of the parliamentary year.



Each year the Queen performs a ceremony called the State Opening of Parliament. This is usually in November, but if there has been a general election it may be soon after that instead.



**The Sovereign's Entrance
at the bottom of Victoria Tower**

**Let's follow the route
which the Queen takes
once she has arrived
for the State Opening
ceremony.**

**You enter Victoria
Tower through the
Royal Entrance.**

ROYAL ROBING ROOM



The Imperial State Crown



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The first room you enter is called the Royal Robing Room. This is where the Queen puts on a special robe and the Imperial State Crown, which has been brought here from the Tower of London.

ROYAL GALLERY



Next you will pass through the Royal Gallery. There are two large paintings on either side: one shows the death of Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar, and the other shows the Duke of Wellington meeting Blucher (his Prussian ally) after the Battle of Waterloo. Heads of State from other countries sometimes give speeches in this room while they are visiting Parliament.

PRINCE'S CHAMBER



The **Prince's Chamber** is a small area used for receiving and writing messages.

This room is above the cellar where **Guy Fawkes** was caught with barrels of gunpowder in November 1605, planning to blow up Parliament at the time when the king (James the First) came for the State Opening. The failure of this plot is celebrated on 5th November each year by letting off fireworks and by burning a straw man known as the "Guy" on a bonfire

**The Prince's Chamber
of the House of Lords,
London, England.**

The House of Lords



The throne in the House of Lords

The **House of Lords** is the **upper house** of the British Parliament. The main role of the House of Lords is to discuss carefully the new laws which are proposed by the House of Commons and to suggest changes when necessary. It can delay the passing of laws, but cannot stop them if the House of Commons wishes to go ahead. While the members of the House of Lords are in Parliament they may be taking part in a debate, examining laws in more detail in a committee, doing research, or perhaps dealing with a member of the public.



At one end of the debating chamber is the **throne**. During the State Opening of Parliament this is where the Queen sits and where she reads out the **Queen's Speech**, which describes the laws which the current government plans to implement during the next year. This speech is written for the Queen by the Prime Minister. Along both sides of the room are the seats where the members of the House of Lords sit. These seats are **red**: this used to be the most expensive colour to create so traditionally it has been used by royalty and the richest members of society.

CENTRAL LOBBY



The Peers Lobby is used as a meeting place for members of the House of Lords. From here you pass through the Press Corridor to the Central Lobby. This is half way between the House of Lords and the House of Commons and is used by members of both houses.

Statue of Winston Churchill in the Commons Lobby ...



... and outside in Parliament Square



His statue is displayed prominently in the lobby (and there is another one outside, in **Parliament Square**). In the past politicians used to rub Churchill's foot before going into the House of Commons: this was believed to bring good luck and to improve their speaking skill (Churchill was famous for his oratory).

HOUSE OF COMMONS



Along both sides of the House of Commons are the seats, which are **green**. At one end is the seat of an official known as the **Speaker**, whose job is to keep order and to manage the debates by deciding who should speak next (people who want to make a comment often stand to attract the speaker's attention). On the speaker's right-hand side sit the members of the current **Government**, and on the left hand side are members of the main **opposition** party.

ST STEPHEN'S HALL



St Stephen's Hall is on the site of the chapel of the old Palace of Westminster in medieval times. This was then used as the first location for the House of Commons: brass studs in the floor show the positions of the speaker's chair (before that the altar was here).

WESTMINSTER HALL



**The medieval wooden ceiling of
Westminster Hall
(which survived the 1834 fire)**

Westminster Hall was once used as a court. People who were put on trial here and condemned to death include William Wallace (1305), Guy Fawkes (1606) and Charles the First (1649). The high court moved to the Royal Courts of Justice (in the Strand) in 1825. Coronation banquets were held here until the rule of George the Fourth (1820-1830).

WESTMINSTER HALL



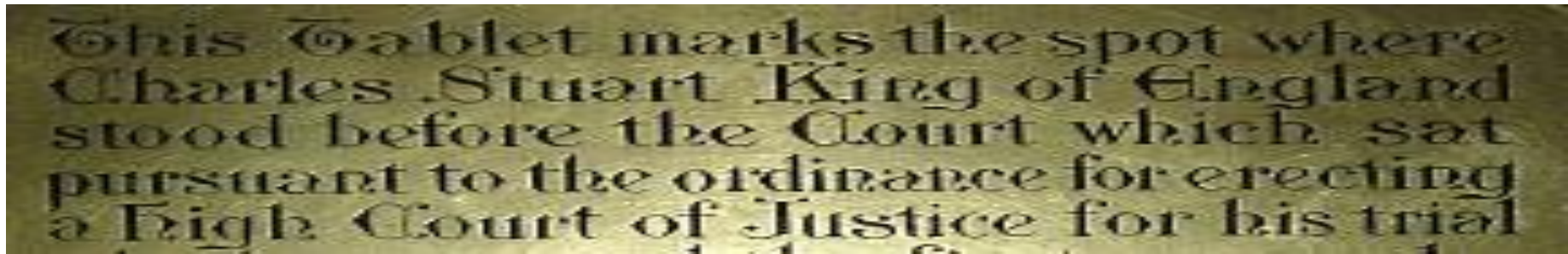
The windows were replaced after being damaged by bombs in World War Two

In more recent times the hall has been used as one of the places where foreign Heads of State give speeches. It is also used for the lying in state of some kings, queens or Prime Ministers (including Winston Churchill in 1965 and the Queen Mother in 2002): their bodies are placed here for a few days after their deaths, so that people can come to pay their final respects.

This hall is the end point for guided tours of Parliament.



This brass plate on the floor of the hall commemorates the trial of William Wallace



... and this one shows where King Charles the First stood during his trial

JEWEL TOWER



The Jewel Tower (opposite the Victoria Tower) was built in about 1365 to house the jewels of King Edward the Third, and is part of the original Palace of Westminster. The building includes an exhibition about the history of Parliament (there is an entrance charge). It is managed by English Heritage.

THE CLOCK TOWER & BIG BEN



The **Clock Tower** is one of Britain's most famous landmarks. The sound of Big Ben being hit is known as a **bong**, and the first of these sounds marks the exact start of the hour. The bongs are broadcast live each evening on BBC Radio 4, at 6pm and at midnight. On New Year's Eve many British television channels show live pictures of the clock face just before midnight, and people celebrate the New Year when they hear the first of the 12 bongs.