History at the Tower

Your short guide to the history of the Tower of London.

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Visiting the Tower

Unlike most heritage sites, the Tower of London spans almost 1000 years of history, and has been the host of some of the nation’s most significant events. Because of this we would recommend that you plan your trip in advance, using the preliminary visit voucher where possible to ensure your familiarity with the Tower.

The following information is a quick guide, broken into several sections:
• Brief history of the Tower
• What to see
• Frequently asked questions about the Tower

Please note that some teachers’ notes have also been prepared and can be downloaded from our website. Go to www.hrp.org.uk, navigate to Learning and then select Resources from the Related Links column.
Brief History of the Tower

Roman origins
The Tower was built on the south-eastern corner of the wall that the Romans built around Londinium circa AD 200. Parts of this wall are still visible within the Tower site.

William the Conqueror
After the successful Norman invasion, William the Conqueror set about consolidating his new capital by building three fortifications. The strongest of the three was the Tower, which controlled and protected the eastern entry to the City from the river, as well as serving as a palace.

Work on the White Tower began in 1078 and probably took twenty-five years to complete. It was one of the first great stone towers to be built in Britain and the tallest tower in the country, dominating the skyline of the capital.

Medieval Tower
During the reigns of Richard I (1189-1199) and Henry III (1216-1272) the Tower defences were strengthened by the addition of a curtain wall surrounding the keep. Henry III's son, Edward I (1272-1307), built a second curtain wall, surrounded by a moat.

By the end of the fourteenth century Richard II (1377-1399) had completed the wharf, separating the outer wall from the river. Apart from later minor changes, Richard's fortress is the one we know today.

The Tudors
During Henry VIII's long reign, the Tower's use changed as the Tudor dynasty grew in self-confidence. Royal palaces were no longer designed as defensive strongholds and the King's favoured residences (Hampton Court, Greenwich, Nonsuch and Whitehall) emphasised the King's wealth and splendour. The final great expenditure on the Tower as a royal residence was for the splendour of Anne Boleyn's coronation.

Although no longer a principal royal residence, the Tower’s strength as a defensive stronghold was utilised as a safe home for the royal mint, and a safe place to keep political prisoners in times of peril. The list of Tudor prisoners kept at the Tower is as long as it is famous, including Thomas More, Anne Boleyn, Lady Jane Grey, Walter Raleigh, Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex and Princess Elizabeth herself.

Although often remembered as a site of execution, only seven people were executed inside the Tower. Many more were executed outside the Tower complex on Tower Hill. Only very important prisoners were granted the privacy of an execution safely within the Tower walls.
The Stuarts
The seventeenth century was one of the most tumultuous centuries in Britain's history and events at large were represented within the Tower’s walls. Only two years into the reign of the new Stuart King James I (1603-1621), the failed gunpowder plotter, Guy Fawkes, was imprisoned and tortured at the Tower. Although the place of his torture is unknown, his interrogation was known to have taken place in the Queen’s House. Following the Civil War, Oliver Cromwell, as Lord Protector, ordered the original crown jewels to be melted down during the 1650s, quite possibly in the mint itself. Upon the restoration, Charles II had the jewels remade, only for a daring theft attempt to be made on them in 1671 by the notorious Thomas “Colonel” Blood. He was captured and, rather remarkably, pardoned by Charles II.

Throughout the late Stuart period the Tower was used as a prison, storehouse for munitions and the Royal Mint, soon to employ its most famous Master, Sir Isaac Newton.

Victorian era
During the Victorian period, leisure time for workers increased greatly and the Tower witnessed a large rise in paying visitors. As the site developed into the tourist attraction we know today, changes were made to the Tower to make it appear more “medieval”. Part of this programme was the rebuilding of the Lanthorn Tower in 1885, after it had been pulled down in the previous century.

The White Tower was also home to important government departments during Victoria’s reign including the Royal Mint, Public Records Office and the Board of Ordnance, the department which controlled and issued all supplies for the army and navy.

20th Century
The emphasis has been on conservation rather than rebuilding in the twentieth century, as the Tower developed into one of Britain’s most popular visitor attractions.

Conservation was a special concern during the blitz when many buildings in the Tower were destroyed, including the eighteenth-century office of the Master Assayer of the Mont, the North Bastion and the Main Guard.

Echoes of the Tower’s former use were evident a year later when Rudolf Hess was imprisoned in the same Queen’s House where Guy Fawkes was interrogated three hundred years earlier. Also, Joseph Jakobs, a German spy, was executed by firing squad in the Outer Ward between the Constable and Martin Towers.
What to see!

Not to be missed
We would recommend that all visitors

• Visit the Jewel House to see the world famous Crown Jewels. Large queues can form outside the Jewel House during peak periods (12 – 3pm) and so we would recommend you make this stop early in your visit.

• Stop by the South Lawn to see the famous ravens. Their wings are clipped, for the legend states that should they ever leave, the Tower and the Kingdom of England will fall.

Exhibitions and presentations
A number of exhibitions are suitable for education visitors at the Tower. Often these are not situated in one place but in several locations around the site.

Fortress
This series of new displays explores the role of the Tower as a fortress and opened in July 2008. Learn how a rabble of peasants managed to successfully invade the Tower during the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381.

Explore our new displays including a reconstructed fighting platform on the East Wall Walk and discover what it was like to be part of the medieval garrison defending the Tower.

Also, lookout for the siege engines in the moat as well as the beautifully constructed metal garrison of soldiers now in place around the visitor route.

Prisoners
There have been prisoners at the Tower almost since it was built. For nearly 900 years, traitors, kings, queens, saints and sinners have been held here against their will.

Our interactive displays, in many of the towers where prisoners were kept, will help children and adults explore their stories. These include electronic voters where you can give us your own views on how to tackle crime.
By period
If you are visiting to discover about a certain time period, the following will be useful for planning your visit.

Roman
- Find the eastern line of the old Roman city wall to the east of the White Tower, and the southern line of the old Roman city wall to the south of the Medieval Palace Shop

Norman
- Visit William the Conqueror’s White Tower.

Medieval
If you have one hour...
- Visit the Medieval Palace and explore Edward I’s reconstructed bedchamber.
- Visit the Bloody Tower where the two Princes may have been kept.

If you have two hours, as above and...
- Explore the medieval East Wall Walk.
- Visit the Salt Tower, erected as part of Henry III’s defences.
- Look out towards the river from the Cradle Tower. The Wharf in front of you was completed in 1387 by the Clerk of the King’s Works, Geoffrey Chaucer.

If you have three hours, as above and...
- Visit the White Tower and learn how the oldest part of the Tower developed during the medieval period. It was from the Chapel here that the revolters of 1381 dragged Simon Sudbury to Tower Hill to be executed.
- Visit the Lower Bowyer Tower to learn of the mysterious death of George Duke of Clarence.

Tudor
If you have one hour...
- Visit the White Tower to see Henry VIII’s armour and weaponry.
- Visit the Execution site where Anne Boleyn, Catherine Howard and Lady Jane Grey were executed.

If you have two hours, as above and...
- Visit the Beauchamp Tower to see prisoner inscriptions from the Tudor period.
- Visit the Lower Wakefield Tower to see the Tudor torture exhibition.

If you have three hours, as above and...
- Visit the Bloody Tower and see how a celebrity Tudor prisoner might have lived by exploring Sir Walter Raleigh’s lodgings.
- Visit the Salt Tower where Tudor prisoners, both rich and poor, were held, including the famous Elizabethan priest John Gerard.
Historic Royal Palaces
TOWER OF LONDON

Stuart

If you have one hour...
• Visit the White Tower to see armour and weaponry from the Stuart period.
• Visit the Bloody Tower to see how Walter Raleigh lived as a prisoner of James I.

If you have two hours, as above and...
• Walk up to Tower Green and find the Queen’s house where Guy Fawkes was interrogated after the gunpowder plot.
• Visit the Broad Arrow Tower to discover gunpowder plotter’s graffiti.
• Stand at the end of Mint Street where the Royal Mint was based during the seventeenth century. This is where Oliver Cromwell may have melted down the first crown jewels and was the place of work of the Master of the Mint, a position held by Sir Isaac Newton, among others.

Victorian

• Visit the Lanthorn Tower, pulled down in 1776 and rebuilt in 1883.
• Visit the White Tower, home of the Board of Ordnance in the Victorian period, and visit the basement display of the great Tower fire in 1841.
• Visit the Victorian era Waterloo Block.
**Why are the ravens kept at the Tower of London?**
Legend has it that John Flamsteed, Astronomer Royal, who was based at the Tower, complained about the ravens to King Charles II. Charles was to have the birds removed when he was told the tale that if the ravens ever left the Tower, then the White Tower, the monarchy and the Kingdom itself would crumble to the ground. Rather than remove the ravens, he removed Flamsteed to Greenwich, where the Royal Observatory was built with materials from the Tower itself.

No one can be sure when ravens first became a feature of Tower life, but ravens used to be common in London, especially near the old meat markets and may have roosted in the Tower grounds for many centuries. There are currently six ravens kept at the Tower and their wings are clipped to prevent them from flying away.

**Which animals were kept in the menagerie?**
The Tower’s menagerie stemmed from the medieval practice of Kings giving each other strange and rare animals as gifts. The menagerie was situated just by the modern day entrance to the Tower (west gate) and in its time it housed a thirteenth century polar bear and elephant, an eighteenth century ostrich and seventeenth century lions (King James I allowed free entry if you brought a dog for the lions to feast on!). The Holy Emperor Frederick II gave Henry III three ‘leopards’ which were most probably lions, and were to become the three lions that still adorn the England football shirt. The menagerie closed in the 1830s due to the prohibitive expense of keeping so many animals. Some of the animals were re-housed in the new London Zoo in Regent’s Park.

**When did Kings and Queens stop using the Tower as a palace?**
After the dynastic feuds of the Wars of the Roses and the relatively secure Tudor dynasty, Henry VIII built much more luxurious and magnificent palaces to live in, that did not need rigorous defences like less secure Kings before him. Defence was not a primary concern in regards to the King’s dwelling, so the Tower fell out of fashion. However, in one sense it continued to be a royal dwelling well into the Stuart period. It had become a tradition that the monarch spend the night before their coronation at the Tower. The next morning they would travel at the head of a great procession through the city and to Westminster. All of the Tudor monarchs observed this tradition, and although the Royal residences had fallen into neglect by 1660, Charles II made a point of starting his royal procession from the Tower on his coronation day, even though he was unable to spend the previous night there.
What happened to the two princes?
Prince Edward (12) and his younger brother, Prince Richard (10), were last seen alive in June of 1483 inside the Tower of London. After this time they disappeared and their fate remains unknown. They may have been murdered upon the order of their uncle and protector, Richard Duke of Gloucester. He considered the Princes to be illegitimate due to their father’s pre-contract to marry a woman other than their mother. A month after the last reported sighting of the princes, Richard Duke of Gloucester pronounced himself King Richard III. This fact alone has prompted many to view the Princes’ disappearance as premeditated murder. In 1674, the bodies of two boys were found when a twelfth century building was demolished. The identity of the bodies has never satisfactorily been established.

How many people were executed here?
Despite the Tower’s bloody reputation, only 7 people were executed within the Tower complex. Many more were imprisoned here before being marched out onto Tower Hill for execution. The Tower is probably remembered as a bloody place because of the high profile of the people who were executed on Tower Green. These people included three Queens of England in Anne Boleyn, Catherine Howard and Jane Grey. Others died here, who were not officially executed, including the two princes and the Duke of Clarence.

Who are the Beefeaters?
The Beefeater’s official title is ‘Yeoman Warder’. Their nickname may have derived from being ‘Yeomen of the Guard’, the King’s bodyguards, permitted to eat beef from the King’s table from at least 1509 (Henry VIII). Today’s Yeoman Warders have all served at least 22 years honourable service in the armed forces.

Are the Crown Jewels real?
Yes! Much of the original crown jewel collection was destroyed by Oliver Cromwell in 1649, but when Charles II came to the throne he had them remade. The ‘coronation spoon’ is the only piece to survive Cromwell and is 800 years old. The rest of the collection has been added to during subsequent reigns, but the entire collection is real. If you were to visit the Tower at the opening of Parliament, you would notice that some of the jewels would be missing and in its place you would find a notice saying ‘in use’!

Where were the prisoners tortured?
No official records exist as to where in the Tower prisoners were tortured. What is certain is that there were not as many cases of torture as is popularly imagined; no more than forty-eight cases received official sanction between 1540 and 1640. There were three main forms of torture, the most common and famous form being the rack. In addition you might be forced into the ‘scavenger’s daughter’, a set of leg, wrist and neck irons, which forced the victim into bone-crushing contortions. Finally there were the manacles, which were clamped around the victim’s wrists and then hung high up on a wall. There is a suggestion that the Jesuit priest John Gerard suffered such torment in the base of the White Tower.
Does anyone still live here?
Yes. The Yeoman Warders and their families all live within the Tower in the Casemates, the Old Hospital Block and on Tower Green. Each night they are locked in, which means the Tower has its own resident Doctor and pub of course!

Who owns the Tower?
The Tower of London is owned by HM Queen but run on behalf of the nation by Historic Royal Palaces, an independent charity (that also runs Hampton Court, Kensington and Kew Palaces, as well as the Banqueting House in Whitehall). HRP receives no funding from the Government or the Crown, so we depend on the support of our visitors, members, donors, volunteers and sponsors.

What was it like to be a prisoner here?
Not as bad as people think! The Tower’s role as a prison was only incidental to its main functions as a Royal palace and stronghold. This is underlined by the absence of any purpose built accommodation for prisoners. Prisoners were often housed wherever they could be, and for wealthier prisoners this could mean often luxurious accommodation (see Sir Walter Raleigh’s quarters in the Bloody Tower). The Tower is best known as a prison for important or politically sensitive prisoners, but even for the least important prisoner, life was better here than in the Fleet or Clink prison, where death by disease was commonplace.

Who built the Tower?
The first part of the Tower to be built (and the most famous) is the White Tower, and this was initiated by William the Conqueror, although he died before its completion. Henry III, King for much of the thirteenth century, built what is now recognisably the inner wall, including the Lanthorn, Wakefield and Bloody Towers. Henry’s son, Edward I, built much of the outer wall, transforming the Tower into a ‘concentric’ castle. Richard II completed the wharf, separating the Tower from the Thames. Although additions and rebuilding works were continued by all subsequent generations and royal dynasties, the Tower’s present day appearance essentially dates from Richard II.

Is the Tower haunted?
There have been many reported ghostly sightings down the years. The most famous resident ghost appears to be that of Anne Boleyn. She has occasionally been spotted near the Queen’s House, the site of her imprisonment prior to her execution. On the anniversary of her death, she has also been spotted leading a ghostly procession inside the Chapel of St Peter Ad Vincula, where she is buried.

Walter Raleigh has been spotted as recently as 1983, by a Yeoman Warder in the Byward Tower. An unseen and terrifying presence is said to inhabit the Salt Tower after dark, and the ghost of a giant bear was said to appear from inside the Martin Tower in the nineteenth century!