Introduction

This resource was designed to help teachers plan a productive on-site school visit to the Tower of London, and to support the study of history at Key Stage 3 (range and content: British history d, g). The notes explore the ways in which the Tower - as a fortress and symbol of royal power - helped medieval monarchs retain control over their kingdom.

This resource includes:

• an introduction to using these notes
• links to related resources
• learning objectives, activities and outcomes
• a map of the relevant locations to visit
• pupil and teacher notes for sites around the Tower of London
The Tower of London is one of the best-preserved medieval castles in Europe. For much of the Middle Ages it was an important royal palace. The remaining defences and several buildings from this royal palace can be visited today. They were the setting for sieges, rebellions, murders, abdications and many other crucial events in English history.

This resource explores the medieval Tower of London focussing on three areas:

• **White Tower** – the role of this iconic, imposing structure
• **Inner and outer curtain walls** – a close look at the castle’s defences
• **Medieval Palace** – how the king’s residence contributed to royal power

The notes also refer to a number of primary sources throughout, which have been highlighted in shaded boxes.

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The Tower’s menagerie began when medieval kings exchanged rare and strange animals as gifts.

**Henry III** kept an African elephant here from 1255.

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Related resources

This resource is supported by the following fact sheets available at [www.hrp.org.uk/learning](http://www.hrp.org.uk/learning):

**Fact sheets**

• *The Tower of London: 1066-1554* – a timeline of significant moments and events in the fortress’s history
Teaching on site

Getting started

Begin at the base of the White Tower. Look at the outside and give an introductory briefing before going inside and then on to the other sites around the Tower as laid out in these notes.

This will give you a roughly chronological visit in terms of when the various parts of the Tower were built.

Key points for emphasis

• Though begun by the Norman kings, the Tower of London was continually extended throughout the Middle Ages in roughly concentric phases. The White Tower is the oldest part.

• Show pupils the visible ruins to the south and east of the White Tower. Explain that although many medieval features survive, some have disappeared.

• The Tower was a medieval castle, pre-dating its infamous Tudor role as state prison and execution ground.

Learning objectives

Pupils should learn:

The Tower was the setting for many of the crucial events in medieval history

The military aspects of the Tower typify one means of royal control

The domestic aspects of the Tower typify another complementary means of royal control

Teaching activities

Take pupils to the key locations in the Tower

Use observation of the physical characteristics and survivals of the buildings to prompt questions and responses about their purpose

Learning outcomes

Pupils should understand:

The many different functions of the Tower in the Middle Ages

How to interpret physical evidence surviving from the Middle Ages

Defending the medieval Tower of London from on top of the curtain walls.
### Key sites to visit

**The Tower: Medieval England’s political powerhouse**

Important locations for studying the medieval Tower of London.

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[Map of the Tower of London with key sites marked]
The White Tower

One of the most important surviving buildings from the period of the Norman Conquest.

Outside the White Tower

> For pupils

Q: Why did the Normans build the Tower of London?

> For teachers

(See primary source 1.1.) William the Conqueror ordered the construction of at least three castles in London, one of them is assumed to be the precursor of the present Tower. The castles would initially have consisted of an earthen motte and bailey, with timber fortifications.

The White Tower was probably not started until ten years after the Battle of Hastings. It took around 25 years to complete, and William the Conqueror died long before it was finished.

Primary source 1.1
Why was the Tower built?

From William of Poitiers, chaplain to William the Conqueror

‘William sent men ahead into London to build a fortress in the city...[He] left London until several fortresses were being built to protect [it] from a rising of the huge and fierce population of London. He could see that his first task was to bring the Londoners completely under control.’

> For pupils

Q: What are the features of the White Tower? What do they tell us about its purpose?

> For teachers

It is large. Most other buildings in London would have been only one storey high. The White Tower is around 90 feet high, and would have been visible for miles.

It is strong. It would have been difficult to attack. The walls are up to 15 feet thick. Its only windows were small and low down (too narrow for anyone to climb through) and the main door was at the top of a wooden staircase.

It is built of stone. Almost all London’s houses were built of wood. Some of the stone came by ship from Normandy.
It was difficult to build. William and his son, William II, forced the Anglo-Saxons from several counties as well as London to work on the building of the White Tower.

It stood close to the River Thames at the east end of London. The White Tower would have been the first sight of all ships as they arrived in London. They had to sail past to get to the city.

The White Tower’s purpose was two-fold. It was used for protection: guarding the king and queen as well as valuables and holding prisoners. It was also used for control: intimidating London’s citizens and new arrivals, and for its strategic position to deflect attack by sea via the river.

Inside the White Tower

> For pupils

Q: What are the features of the interior of the White Tower?

> For teachers

The rooms are very large; each floor contains only three. Their impressive size made them appropriate for meetings of counsellors or large banquets. They could also be cold and dark.

Notice the fireplaces and toilets. These provide the best evidence that people did live in the White Tower. They are among the earliest surviving fireplaces and toilets in the country.

Only one room is decorated. The Chapel of St John on the floor above the entrance has carved stone decoration on its pillars. Religion was vastly important to the Normans and the chapel would not have been used only for prayers. It would have frequently been inhabited by priests (the only people who could read and write) writing documents concerned with England’s government.

Documents of this kind show the importance of the written word in the administration of Norman England. By the 14th century, such documents were being stored in the chapel in large wooden chests.

The rooms are multi-functional. Originally built as a palace, this particular function of the tower was less than useful when the king and queen decided to live elsewhere. The huge rooms were also used for storing weapons, documents, plate and even, on occasion, the Crown Jewels.

They were also used for imprisonment. Just one story has survived which describes the Normans using the White Tower in this way. In 1100, Henry I imprisoned the Bishop of Durham, Ranulf Flambard (see primary source 1.2).
Primary source 1.2
Ranulf Flambard’s escape

Story taken from Orderic Vitalis, a monk living in Normandy

‘It was the King’s order that he should have food to the value of 2 shillings sterling every day, and he lived the high life in prison, with help from his friends. Every day he would order a marvellous feast for himself and his guards.

One day, a rope was smuggled to him in a cask of wine. The generous bishop then laid on a lavish banquet at which the guards ate and drank with him and in due course, became intoxicated with all the wine they had consumed. When they were all completely drunk and snoring soundly, the bishop fastened his rope to a column between two lights of a window in the tower, and still clutching his pastoral staff, he began to let himself down. But he had forgotten to put on gloves to protect his hands and they were cut to the bone by the roughness of the rope.

The rope itself was too short to reach the ground, and the fat bishop had to fall heavily to the ground: the drop nearly flattened him and he howled miserably with the pain. His faithful friends and trusted supporters were waiting in great fear at the foot of the Tower, with the fastest horses ready for him.’

> For pupils
Q: What can Flambard’s story tell us about the Middle Ages and the White Tower?

> For teachers

Flambard’s story could tell us several things. For example, bishops were important in Norman England to live so comfortably even in prison. The White Tower was suitable for great banquets. Norman knights sometimes misbehaved. And a castle like the Tower of London was only a powerful fortress or prison if those in charge were good at their jobs.
Moat and curtain walls

Background for teachers

The Tower of London has two complete circuits of stone walls, and evidence of what would have been a water-filled moat. Its strength did not lie in the White Tower, but in the defences around its edges.

Most of the walls were built during the reigns of King Henry III (1216-72) and Edward I (1272-1307). These improvements made the castle immensely strong, but also made it look immensely strong, which was perhaps more important.

One of the very few descriptions of the completed Tower of London in the Middle Ages was written in 1323 by two Franciscan friars travelling from Ireland to the Holy Land. The friars noted the palace’s imposing presence (see primary source 1.3).

Primary source 1.3
A medieval description of the Tower

From Simon Simeon and Hugh the Illuminator

‘And at the edge of the city as you go towards the sea, is the most famous and impregnable fortress, with its twin walls and exceedingly-broad ditches containing immensely-deep water, surrounded by other devices of warfare. In its centre is that most-famous tower which is named ‘The Tower of London’, standing to a wonderful height and built with immeasurable solidity of cut and dressed stone’.
> For teachers

Henry III built most of the inner curtain wall. When Henry first came to the throne – at only 9 years old – much of the country was in the hands of the nobility, in revolt against his father King John. More, most of southern England’s most important castles were controlled by the French, including the Tower of London.

Supporters of the young king succeeded in driving the French out and regaining control, but these events must have convinced Henry of the importance of strong fortifications in protecting the kingdom, and the Tower in particular.

Henry III’s son, Edward I, was one of England’s most successful warrior kings and responsible for the outer curtain wall. He built it immediately after returning from the siege of Acre (in modern Israel), presumably as part of reasserting royal authority after returning from a crusade. This popular style of building two walls also began to emerge during the Crusades. The king might have noticed several of his barons building their own castles in this way.

Documents tell us that at every stage of development, the castle’s stone walls were surrounded by a moat or ditch as an extra line of defence. The ditches ordered by Henry III and Edward I were directed by expert engineers from Flanders. While the moat design counted on water from the River Thames flowing around the Tower, the ditch often dried up into a large pile of mud. The moat was filled in completely in the 19th century.

The Tower’s gates

Note: The area around the West Gate can get very busy. Yeoman Warder tours begin here and draw large crowds. You might discuss the gate before entering the Tower, or after leaving, while standing on Tower Hill or the wharf to the south.

> For pupils

Q: How have the gates been strengthened?
> For teachers

A castle’s gate could be its weakest point. The Tower’s main entrance is a set of gateways built by Edward I between 1275 and 1281. Three stone bridges or causeways were built across the moat, linked by three gateways.

The first was a D-shaped artificial island that was later called the Lion Tower. While it has now disappeared below the ground, parts of it can still be seen in the pits beside the Middle Tower. It contained a courtyard (or ‘barbican’) where visitors would wait until the main gates were opened. From the 14th century it housed the royal collection of exotic animals, especially lions.

Middle Tower and Byward Tower are the two main gates: visitors needed to pass through them one after the other. Quite low and narrow, the gates have large round towers and on either side. Archers could perch inside these towers, able to shoot out through the narrow slits (or ‘loops’).

Inside the gate passage, both towers had wooden gates and two portcullises each, one in front of the gate and one behind it. It would have been impossible for a battering ram to break one gate, let alone two. If an attacker set fire to the gates, the defenders over the gateway could pour water down through the three ‘murder holes’ in the arch. There is no evidence that boiling oil was ever used, in part because there wasn’t anywhere to boil the oil.

In front of all three gateways were wooden drawbridges set in the roadway. The pit from under the Lion Tower drawbridge can still be seen.

> For pupils

Q: What was the purpose of the moat?

The moat kept attackers away from the castle and prevented them from digging tunnels underneath the walls. It was also stocked with fish to provide a store of food.

> For teachers

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The Tower’s walls

> For pupils

Q: Why are there two sets of walls?
> For teachers
The inner curtain wall and outer curtain wall created a form of castle we now call concentric.

This ‘two-wall’ defence was intended to provide additional protection for defenders to retreat to should attackers capture the outer wall.

In Edward I’s time castle-builders made the outer curtain wall lower than the inner. This was so archers on the inner wall could shoot out over top of archers on the outer wall, creating a hail of arrows to drive any attackers back. Many arrow slits can still be seen in the outer curtain wall. The battlements along the tops of both the inner and outer curtain walls are modern, but there would always have been something similar to protect the castle’s defenders.

The towers

Note: Doorways and staircases within the towers can be narrow if you are taking your group on the East Wall Walk. Groups of more than 15 people may find some areas difficult in terms of circulation.

> For pupils
Q: What was the function of the towers? Were they purely defensive?

> For teachers
Towers were strong-points in the castle defences, and were spaced to avoid having large stretches of wall undefended. The inner curtain wall has 12 towers. Several can be visited including the Beauchamp Tower on the Tower’s west side and the eastern wall’s Salt Tower, Broad Arrow Tower, Constable Tower and Martin Tower.

On their exteriors, the lower floors of the Beauchamp and Salt towers show clearly where archers would have stood to shoot through the arrow loops. These rooms were uncomfortable without windows or, often, fireplaces.

The upper floors often also had arrow slits for defence. During peace time, however, they served as living spaces, so they were more comfortable than the lower floors and had windows and fireplaces.

The towers were also used as prisons. For example, King John Balliol of Scotland was held in the Salt Tower between 1296 and 1299.

Summing up: The Tower’s defences

> For pupils
Q: Was the Tower of London a strong castle?
The castle’s walls, moat, towers and gates show us that the Tower of London was designed to resist attack.

It was also usually filled with weaponry (see primary source 1.4).

### Primary source 1.4

**A weapon inventory**

*From an inventory of the Tower of London, 1327*

‘101 iron helmets, 10 of them with visors, 1 gilded helmet with leather padding, 74 shields with the King’s arms and 1 large blank shield, 8 coats of chain-mail, 25 steel-tipped lances, 51 pairs of plate-armour gloves, 10,070 assorted crossbow bolts, 94 crossbows, 36 bundles of arrows, 2 engines for throwing stones...’

And its imposing presence seems to have been enough to deter attack. While exact evidence is uncertain, it seems the Tower was actually attacked not more than five or six times.

In 1267 the Tower was successfully defended from an attack by the Earl of Gloucester (see primary source 1.5).

### Primary source 1.5

**Earl of Gloucester attacks**

*From a chronicle entitled ‘The Flowers of History’*

‘At the approach of reinforcements, the Earl of Gloucester, swollen in the fullness of his arrogance, attacked the Tower of London with great ferocity, but was not able to take it...’

However, the Tower’s defences were not impenetrable. In 1381 a crowd of peasants – in protest against Richard II’s unpopular advisors – broke into the Tower of London and caused a great deal of damage (see primary source 1.6). The protestors murdered some of those inside, including the Archbishop of Canterbury.
Primary source 1.6
The Peasants’ Revolt

Thomas Walsingham, monk of Saint Albans

‘At that time, the Tower contained 600 fighting men, fully-armed, brave and experienced, and 600 archers. [Walsingham exaggerates. There were usually only 30 to 40 soldiers.] The strange thing is, all of them completely lost their nerve, so that you would think them more like dead men than living. Certainly all memory of their former deeds of arms died in them, together with any recollection of their previous strength and glory.

In short, faced by the whole English peasantry, their courage wilted away. Who could ever believe that these people, not just peasants, but the most wretched peasants, not in a horde but only a few, would fearlessly enter the King's bedchamber or his mother’s, brandishing their foul sticks?

That they could scare off all of the knights with threats, that they could stroke or pull the beards of the greatest nobles with their uncouth and filthy hands?...While all this was going on and, as I have said, a few of the peasants had got into the King’s chamber, they were insolently sitting or lying on the King’s bed, joking: most horrible of all, some of them even asked the King’s mother to kiss them.

But strangest of all, out of all those knights or squires, not one dared to come in to stop such intolerable behaviour, to make the peasants take their hands off her, or even refrained from telling them all the secrets of the place.’
The Medieval Palace

Wakefield Tower and Saint Thomas’s Tower are rare survivals from a large and important royal palace.

Note: Rooms within the Medieval Palace are fairly large, but the doorways, corridors and staircases are narrow. Groups of more than 15 people may find some of the interiors difficult in terms of circulation. Also, from time to time, costumed presentations and education sessions may take place inside St Thomas’s Tower.

Background for teachers

The Tower of London has always been a royal palace, and it frequently played this role between the 12th and 15th centuries. The buildings that survive, and evidence for those that have been lost, tell us something of how medieval kings and queens lived, and how they wished to be seen by others.

The monarchs did not actually live inside the White Tower. From the second half of the 12th century the Tower of London’s palace was in the bailey. This enclosed area in front of the White Tower would have been a busy complex of buildings serving the royal residence.

When Henry III rebuilt the palace in the 13th century he took a personal interest in its decoration and furnishing. Most of his palace’s buildings do not survive today; but the king’s letters – which have – are very useful for reconstructing them (see primary source 1.6).

Primary source 1.6

By order of the king

Letter of King Henry III, 24 February 1240

‘The King sends greetings to the keepers of the Tower of London. We command you to fit wooden panelling without delay in the Queen’s chamber in the Tower, to paint the chamber white and paint roses in it. You are to whitewash our great chamber in the Tower and paint it again, to repair all its window with new wooden shutters, hinges and latches and paint the shutters with the royal coat of arms.’
Henry III’s palace contained a great hall for banquets and public occasions, with its own kitchens and rooms to store bread and wine. It also had private chambers, one for the king and one for the queen.

The palace stood on the north bank of the Thames, and the royal barge was able to land directly at its door. The riverside door of the palace is displayed at the foot of the Wakefield Tower. The Wakefield Tower itself was part of Henry III’s palace: the room on its upper floor was probably his most private room.

By pushing back the river bank, King Edward I created a new strip of land between the palace and the riverside. Here he built a new extension to the palace called St Thomas’s Tower. At its lower level it contained a large gate opening on to the river where he could enter the castle from his royal barge. The upper floor contained a set of new rooms facing out over the River Thames. These were also fairly private rooms, some distance away from the public space of the Great Hall.

The Medieval Palace today

The first room introduces the Medieval Palace of Henry III and Edward I and contains a short film (with subtitles and narration). It also displays materials used in the re-creation of the king’s bedchamber in the next room. The bedchamber has been presented as it might have looked during Edward I’s brief stay in 1294.

Just inside the wall walk beyond Wakefield Tower is where the rest of Henry III’s lodgings (now lost) once stood. The re-built Lanthorn Tower, originally part of the queen’s lodgings, contains a presentation on medieval courtly life and displays several objects.

Inside the palace

> **For pupils**

Q: What are some of the features of the Medieval Palace?

> **For teachers**

The style of wall painting in the king’s bedchamber – where wall plaster is painted with red lines to imitate squared stonework – was common in the 13th century. The wall paintings are based on the floral ‘pointing’ described in accounts for Edward’s mother at the Tower.

The palace contained furniture of different types. The bed is based on 13th-century accounts of one ordered by Edward I. Edward, known as ‘Longshanks’, was 1.88m [6’ 2”] tall so his bed had to be suitably large.

Chests were important items for storing hangings and furnishings. Medieval records also tell us royal chambers would have been furnished with tables, benches and chairs.

The walls would certainly have been hung with tapestries and other textiles. Tapestries were rare and expensive: as well as making the rooms more
comfortable, they also showed the king’s power and wealth. These wall hangings combine the arms of Edward I and his first wife, Eleanor of Castile.

Edward I and Henry III spent lavishly on stained glass windows. St Thomas’s Tower had 34 windows added in 1276-7. Henry’s shutters in his great chamber were painted with the Royal Arms.

The small hexagonal room in the king’s bedchamber was a private chapel. Though it accommodated just one or two people, it was near enough the main room for others to hear the religious services inside.

When the king and queen were absent, a chaplain still might be paid to say prayers for them. There is another private chapel in the Wakefield Tower. It was established during Henry III’s reign when this tower served as a royal chamber. Henry III was very religious and liked to hear mass three times a day.

> For pupils

Q: How did the palace help the monarchs keep control?

> For teachers

The palace was larger and more highly decorated than other buildings. It showed the monarch to be rich and powerful.

Proximity of the king’s chambers to the chapels was meant to show a close connection between the king’s authority and the spiritual authority of God.

The king’s power and authority were further demonstrated to outsiders by having his palace – and his court when in residence – located in the centre of this powerful castle filled with soldiers, weapons and a prison (see also primary source 1.7).

Primary source 1.7

The king’s aura of power

*Matthew Paris, monk of Saint Albans, describing events in 1236*

‘On the first day of the royal council, the King withdrew to the Tower of London, which many saw as a cause of murmuring and a bad sign rather than a good one. The nobles were unwilling to meet the King inside the Tower either singly or in numbers, because they were afraid that he, in an ill-considered moment, would vent his rage on them.’

And even when the king was elsewhere, the Tower remained an important centre of royal justice. The Great Hall was used as a law court for trials in the City of London. Defendants on trial would face the king’s judges, who would sit on the king’s throne in the Great Hall.