

A walk through Westminster

Updated: 31 July 2024

Length: About 2¼ miles

Duration: Around 3½ hours

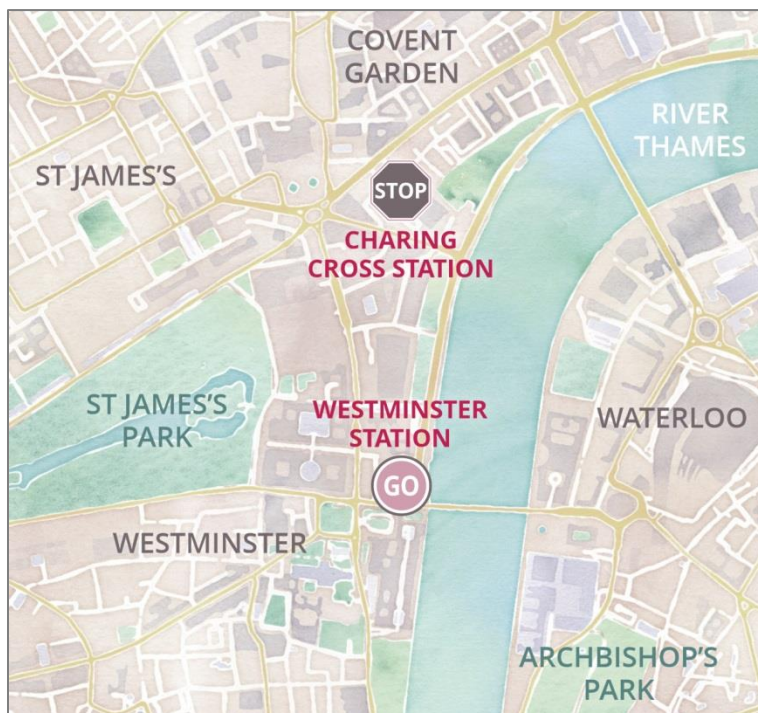
BACKGROUND

Westminster has been at the centre of religion, royalty and political power for over a thousand years, and this walk covers each of these.

The original area on which the Houses of Parliament and the Abbey were built lies on what was called Thorney Island. This was just marshy land where the River Tyburn, which rises in Hampstead, flowed into the Thames. It is known as the 'City of Westminster' because for a short while the Abbey was classified as a cathedral – in the same way that the City of London is called a city because of St Paul's. (The reason for it being called a cathedral is further explained in the notes and appendix.)

WHERE TO START THE WALK

The walk starts outside Westminster tube station, which is served by the Jubilee, Circle and District Lines. The station was rebuilt to accommodate the Jubilee Line in a rather futuristic and 'brutalist' style of architecture (which in this instance I rather like). There are also numerous bus routes that serve the area.



BEFORE YOU BEGIN THE WALK ...

A few words on the River Thames and Westminster Bridge

The bridge and the River Thames are just 100 yards or so away from the station, where the walk begins. So, if you would like to take a look at them first, then leave the station via Exit 1.

Cross the Embankment, passing the statue of Boadicea and her daughters on a chariot. It was erected in in 1902, though not without some controversy as although she may have 'tried to defend our shores by attacking the Roman invaders', in doing so she hung, burnt and crucified tens of thousands of innocent people. She was certainly bloodthirsty! Not the sort of woman you would care to upset.

Standing on Westminster Bridge you have a wonderful view down the Thames. The building to the immediate left of the bridge on the other side was County Hall, headquarters of the London County Council, from where all the affairs of London were controlled. That changed when Maggie Thatcher, fed up with her plans being voted against by the councillors, many of whom she regarded as being 'Labourites', disbanded the Council and set up a more regionalised structure of boroughs. The building is now part hotel and part entertainment complex. I've written a little more about Westminster Bridge in the appendix.



Route map 1

STARTING THE WALK

If you've taken a look at Westminster Bridge, then simply turn around and walk back down Bridge Street until you reach Parliament Square. Otherwise, leave the station via Exit 4 Bridge Street North.

On the other side of the road is **Big Ben** and the **Houses of Parliament**. Walk down to the bottom of Bridge Street, but before you cross over at the pedestrian lights towards the parliament buildings it's a good idea to get your bearings.

This is **Parliament Square**, and the three arms of the state – plus the Church of England – are represented on each side: **Legislature** to the east (the Houses of Parliament), **Executive** to the north (the government offices in Whitehall), **Judiciary** to the west (the Supreme Court) and **Church** to the south (Westminster Abbey). It is an area of the most significant importance to Britain and its influence has been felt across the world. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

So, to your right is Parliament Street, which after a few hundred yards becomes Whitehall. The large open space almost opposite you is Parliament Square – with the rather magnificent statue of Sir Winston Churchill in front of you; whilst diagonally across to the left is St Margaret's Church and Westminster Abbey.

Once you've crossed over, start walking down **St Margaret's Street**, with the enormous Palace of Westminster on your left. I've put a little more information about the Palace of Westminster and how to visit the Houses of Parliament in the appendix, but I think it would help if I give some details now.

The Palace of Westminster is the name of the building that contains both Houses of Parliament – the Commons and the Lords – and is Grade I listed.

The palace was started in the early 11th century by the Danish king Cnut (Canute). The position was chosen because of its proximity to the River Thames and it has been rebuilt and enlarged several times since. In 1066 The French invader William the Conqueror became the first monarch to be crowned here and both he and his son William II further extended the buildings. More additions were made in the 13th century, but sadly in 1834, some five hundred years later, most of it was destroyed in a massive fire.

A competition was held for its rebuilding which was won by architect Charles Barry for the Gothic Revival design you see today. He had enlisted a 23-year-old draughtsman/architect named Augustus Pugin for help with the drawings but was so impressed with his abilities, that he asked him to design the entire interior as well. The magnificence of what Pugin achieved is just breathtaking – it's worth visiting for that alone.

One of the few parts of the Palace that escaped both the 19th century fire and the incendiary bombs of the Second World War was the Westminster Hall. Although both the Hall and the Chamber of the House of Commons had been hit by bombs during the war, firefighters realised only one could be saved and fortunately decided that should be Westminster Hall.

If you get the chance to come back and visit, then you can't help but be amazed at this spectacular building that was built over a thousand years ago. The magnificent timbered

'hammerbeam' roof, which has been described as "the greatest creation of medieval timber architecture", is not the original, and dates back to 1399 – but that still means it's over 600 years old. Some of the original walls, built by William the Conqueror's son in the 1090s, are still there though.

The **first entrance** you come to is known as the **Carriage Gate**, and this is the 'working entrance' for the Houses of Parliament staff, particularly the Commons, as well as by Members of Parliament. This leads into the **New Palace Yard**, a bit of a misnomer as it dates back to the year 1100, though very much larger in the early days. It was at this gate that the recent (2016) terrorist attack took place and since then security has been noticeably strengthened, with extra bollards and more policemen, now equipped with automatic rifles (another good example of the old saying 'shutting the gate after the horse has bolted').

Underneath it is a car park for Members of Parliament, and it was here that Airey Neave, who was an MP, an ex-army officer and a barrister, was killed by a bomb placed there by the IRA. And I must just mention that during the excavations for the car park, the remains of a fountain dating back to the 1600s or even earlier was discovered. I rather like the idea of this fountain, as it apparently 'flowed with wine' when a coronation or other major event was being held here.

You get a good view of **Big Ben** from here. For several years it was covered in an enormous shroud whilst renovations took place, but these have now been completed and it is looking more magnificent than ever.

'Big Ben' is actually only the name of the biggest of the bells in what used to be called the Clock Tower. However, in 2012, a group of MPs (perhaps hoping for knighthoods) suggested the tower should be renamed the **Elizabeth Tower** in honour of the Queen's Jubilee. I guess nobody was brave enough to disagree, so that is now its new name.

- 'Big Ben' is only the nickname of the of the tower's largest bell – there are five bells in total – and this is the one that strikes the hour. The bell's official name is the Great Bell of the Clock Tower, or the Great Bell of Westminster.
- The 'Big Ben' bell alone weighs nearly 14 tons and is 7 feet by 9 feet in size.
- The bells famous chimes are known as the 'Westminster Chimes' and are believed to have been inspired by an aria in Handel's wonderful choral Messiah – "I know that my Redeemer liveth".
- The tower is 315 feet high, with 334 steps to the top.
- It's the tallest four-sided clock in the world; each of those four dials is 23 feet in diameter and each face is made up of 312 panes of glass.
- The hour hand is 9 feet long and the minute hand 14 feet and including counterweights weigh around 220lbs.
- It's accurate to one second, though with the help of a number of coins placed on the pendulum, though this is being rectified during its 2018–20 renovation.

- The BBC first broadcast the chimes of Big Ben on New Year's Eve 1923 – and they have done so every year since.
- In the past Big Ben has rarely stopped – it avoided being damaged in the Second World War and continued to strike, even though the adjacent chamber of the House of Commons was badly damaged.
- The translation of the Latin inscription beneath the clock face is “O Lord, keep safe our Queen Victoria.”

On **Cromwell Green**, just 100 yards further along on the left, is a statue of Oliver Cromwell, holding a sword and bible with a lion at his feet (and to me, looking as miserable and as stern as I've always imagined a Puritan to have been.) The decision to erect his statue, which was to mark the 300th anniversary of his birth, was controversial and many MPs objected, not least because he was the man behind the execution of Charles I. Permission was eventually granted providing no public funds were used and so Lord Rosebery, once a Liberal Prime Minister and who was one of the proposers, paid for it himself. Quite why, I have never found out.

Behind him is the historic and famous Westminster Hall. As I've already mentioned, many historic events took place here, including the trials of Guy Fawkes, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Thomas More and even Charles I. And directly opposite, on the other side of the street, is St Margaret's Church. (There's more information on Westminster Hall in the appendix.)

Continuing along, you come to the **St Stephen's Entrance** – in front of which is where people meeting their Member of Parliament or attending a debate in one of the Chambers assemble, and have to show their relevant passes, although they don't actually enter through it, but turn to the left and walk through Cromwell Green.

The actual St Stephen's entrance leads into St Stephen's Hall and then into the central lobby. From here you can see just how immense the Palace of Westminster really is. Indeed, there are over a thousand rooms, one hundred staircases and three miles of corridors.

Walk on down past Old Palace Yard, behind which is the House of Lords. There's a rather imposing statue of Richard I (otherwise known as Richard the Lionheart) on horseback that was originally made of clay and exhibited in the famous Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851. However, Queen Victoria was so taken with it that she joined a number of others who liked it and between them, raised the money to have it recast in bronze and placed here.

Old Palace Yard once contained a number of small cottages, one of which was where Geoffrey Chaucer, author of *The Canterbury Tales*, once lived, whilst another was rented by Guy Fawkes, the instigator of the Gunpowder Plot.

Guy Fawkes and his accomplices used the cottage to dig a tunnel from there to the cellars under the House of Lords where on the 5th November 1605, they planted twenty barrels of explosives. Their aim was not only to blow up Parliament, but James I as well. They felt he was planning to make life even worse for Catholics.

Fawkes was caught red-handed and alone; his job had been to light the fuses. His plot would probably have succeeded had not one of his 'gang' warned a 'friendly' Catholic member of the House of Lords not to attend parliament that day. He had in turn, passed the information on to others and the authorities soon got to hear about it ... and the rest, as they say, is history. Rather fittingly, the scaffold from which Fawkes and his eight men were hung, drawn and quartered was erected in this same yard! (It was a rather grisly end – the executioner cut out the hearts of each man, held it up to show the crowd, announcing "Here's the heart of a traitor". However, he wasn't the only one to meet a grisly end here – Sir Walter Raleigh did as well, though by execution, a rather less painful way to die. And to this day the Yeoman of the Guard still search those same cellars prior to the State Opening of Parliament.

Next is the **Peers' Entrance**, used, as the name implies, by members of the House of Lords, and then the **Monarch's Entrance**. This is at the base of the **Victoria Tower**, the largest of the palace's three towers and under the rather impressive fifty-foot-high decorated stone archway. The gates you see are only open when the monarch is visiting.

The Victoria Tower was named after Queen Victoria and was originally known as the King's Tower. When it was built in 1858, it was the tallest non-religious building in the world. A wrought iron staircase, with over 550 steps, links all 12 floors. The Tower is home to the Parliamentary archives, where over three million parchment records that include every law passed in Britain since 1496 are stored on over five miles of shelves.

And I'll just mention here that the Union Flag flies on top of the Victoria Tower when Parliament is sitting. However, if the Queen is present, (which is only for the State Opening of Parliament), then her personal ensign is flown. She only ever goes into the House of Lords as monarchs have been banned from the House of Commons since the 1600s as a result of Charles I trying to get in so he could arrest several Members of Parliament. He ended up having his head chopped off, so doubtless other Monarchs would be somewhat dubious about trying to do the same!

This is almost the end of the building but walk a few yards further down and you'll see a sign marked 'Black Rod's Entrance and Garden', which points down to the side. **Black Rod**, whose correct title is 'The Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod', is a sort of manager cum caretaker and general boss of the Houses of Parliament. He or she is appointed by the reigning monarch, a custom that dates back to the early 1300s.

Next to the wide gates and access road into Black Rod's Garden is a little park that's known as the **Victoria Tower Gardens**, the smallest of the Royal Parks and, just inside the entrance to it, you will find a statue of Emmeline Pankhurst.

Visiting the Houses of Parliament

They're open to the public every Saturday from 9.30am – last admission is at 3.30pm – throughout the year and on certain weekdays in the summer recess when parliament isn't

sitting. Tickets can be obtained in advance online (recommended) or from Portcullis House, which is on the corner of the Embankment and Bridge Road. Alternatively, you can also just sit in on a debate in the Chamber of the House. You can't book – just turn up and queue. Finally, you can also request a permit to visit by writing to your Member of Parliament.

I suggest you now turn around and walk back up to the pedestrian lights and cross over. Once you've done so, the medieval building a few yards to the left is the **Jewel Tower**, which is looked after by English Heritage. Built over 650 years ago to house Edward III's private collection of jewels, gold and silver treasures, it's one of only two parts of the original Palace that hasn't been destroyed and therefore rebuilt. (I haven't been in so can't comment on how interesting it may be but bear in mind the Crown Jewels are now kept in the Tower of London.)

Continue back up towards Parliament Square; in the little green area there's a statue of George V who reigned from 1910 until 1936 and then **St Margaret's Church** – known as the 'Parish Church of the House of Commons'. Tourists sometimes confuse this with Westminster Abbey – they get this far, tick the box on their sightseeing schedule and head back to their coaches. People often ask why two such large and important churches are so close together? The answer is simply that Westminster Abbey was originally a Benedictine monastery and not a church.

St Margaret's was built around the end of the 15th century, but it came close to disappearing in the 1540s, when the Duke of Somerset decided he wanted to use the church's stones to build a new palace for himself on the Strand. Fortunately, the idea didn't go down too well with the church's congregation and, although Somerset House was of course built, the materials came from elsewhere.

There have been numerous alterations to St Margaret's Church over the last couple of hundred years, though what we see today isn't too different from when it was built. The stained-glass windows commemorate William Caxton, England's first printer, who lived close by, and the poet John Milton. Both of them worshipped here, as did Sir Walter Raleigh, who is buried in front of the altar. Popular for society weddings, the likes of Samuel Pepys and poet John Milton were married here in the 17th century (though of course not to each other!), while the 20th century saw Winston Churchill and Clementine Hozier tie the knot here.

Once you reach Parliament Square turn to the left – and shortly you have a wonderful view of **Westminster Abbey**. Needless to say, it's had a fascinating history and although I've put a couple of paragraphs about it here, there's quite a bit more in the appendix.

There's said to have been a Christian church here since 605AD, but it was Edward the Confessor who in around 1040 had the vision to rebuild the existing Saxon church and turn it into a church suitable for royal functions and burials. It also became a monastery and was then named St Peter's Abbey. The Gothic-style building you see today dates back to 1245, but there have been many additions and extensions over the years.

Memorialised or buried here are three thousand great men and women from almost every aspect of British life – statesmen and politicians, lawyers, warriors, clerics, writers, artists and musicians, many in areas of the church – classified by their profession, for example ‘Poets Corner’. It is of course particularly famous for being where kings and queens of England, from Harold and William the Conqueror right through until our present monarch, have been crowned. Not only that, but it’s also famous for the royal weddings, as well as being the burial place of numerous monarchs since Edward the Confessor in 1066.

The correct name is not Westminster Abbey but the Collegiate Church of St Peter at Westminster. A ‘collegiate church’ is one that has a dean and a chapter (or ‘college’) of canons but is not a cathedral – although Westminster Abbey actually did become a cathedral for a few years. That was thanks to Henry VIII, as when the Catholic Church of Rome refused to allow him to annul his marriage to Anne Boleyn, he decided to break away from the Catholic traditions and form what became known as the Church of England – with him at its head and not the Pope. Part of this meant he decided to close down all the Catholic abbeys and monasteries in the country – an event known as the ‘Dissolution’. However, that did give him a bit of a problem as he didn’t want to close down Westminster Abbey so, with a bit of quick thinking, he bestowed on it the title of ‘Cathedral’ (though as I explain in the appendix, it didn’t remain one for more than a few years).

A new £13 million entrance lobby is being created, which will enable visitors to use the Great West Door, something often restricted in the past to VIPs and the royal family. It will be a 95ft long by 62ft wide single-storey L-shaped lobby, which will be constructed to complement the Gothic architecture of the building. After purchasing tickets and passing through security, visitors to the Abbey will be greeted with a wonderful view of the famous nave. The project, which is being constructed to honour King Charles, will be completed by 2026.

Visiting Westminster Abbey

It’s open daily from 9.30 until 5pm except Fridays. (Sundays are also closed to visitors, being reserved for those attending church services). Be warned though – in peak season the queues and crowds are frightening. I suggest you make a winter visit!

Continue on past the Abbey and immediately after the ‘stand-alone’ gift shop on your left, you see ‘The Sanctuary’, a lovely old building that is now the offices of a firm of solicitors. There’s an archway you can walk through that leads into **Dean’s Yard** (part of the **Abbey Precincts**), a rather lovely haven of peace as it’s usually ignored by tourists. Most of the buildings in the square are part of the famous **Westminster School**.

The school was set up in the 12th century by the Benedictine monks of the priory on the orders of the Pope and was initially a charitable institution. It was originally called St Peter’s College as St Peter’s is the official name of Westminster Abbey. Today it’s one of the most prestigious schools in the country and one of the most expensive, renowned for having one of the highest level of GCSE passes. The list of ‘school traditions’ is long; one is that the

pupils are allowed privileged and special access into the public galleries of the Houses of Commons and Lords – apparently this was done in order to stop them from climbing onto the roof of the building and trying to get in that way. That was a long time ago though! Another is that the teachers of the school are entitled to get married in Westminster Abbey – as the son of a friend of mine did recently. Quite some perk too!

Retrace your footsteps and leave Dean's Yard back through the archway you came in and directly opposite you, across Victoria Street and slightly to the left, you will see the imposing **Methodist Central Hall**.

To get there cross over Victoria Street at the pedestrian crossing that's just to your left and then cross over **Tothill Street**.

This rather grand Grade II listed building that's home of the Methodist Church of the United Kingdom was built in 1912. It is normally open to the public and if you have time, it's worthy of a visit. Take the steps up to the Upper Entrance Hall and then up the Grand Staircase (there are good views from the windows).

I've written more about it in the appendix, but one of the highlights of the interior is the spectacular inner dome – a single piece of cast reinforced concrete said to be the second largest of its type in the world. Within it is 'The Great Hall', which through the use of cleverly designed cantilevered balconies, can seat around 2,000 people. It is famous for the many important events and speeches that have been made here – for example, besides being the venue of the first meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations, speeches have been made by people such as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Winston Churchill. And if you saw the film 'Calendar Girls' you might even recognise it!

It has an internationally famous organ and many world-class recitals take place here. In the 'basement' you'll find the Wesley Café that serves coffees and light snacks as well as excellent and inexpensive meals. And there are good toilets.

However, its principal function is of course, that of worship – and it attracts large congregations.

Leave Central Hall and walk across the small grassy area in front, passing the modern **Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre** (which to my mind is architecturally awful, being totally out of keeping with its surroundings) and head back towards Parliament Square.

Cross over the road called **Little Sanctuary**. Just ten yards along you can see all that remains of the 17th century Westminster House of Correction (otherwise known as the Bridewell and later Tothill Fields Prison) – it's just an old stone gateway set in the wall, so don't get too excited!

Turn left into Parliament Square. The large white stone building on the left is the **Supreme Court of the United Kingdom**, where the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council meets.

Once again, I only give brief details here, and have put more in the appendix. This is the United Kingdom's highest court, its role being the 'interpretation and development of the law' and it hears both civil cases and criminal cases. It does not hold trials where guilt and innocence are decided; instead points of law are discussed, so the court rooms are specially designed to encourage an atmosphere of learned debate. Therefore, there is no dock or witness stand and 'business attire', rather than robes, is the order of the day.

If you have time, it's definitely worth taking a look inside. Entry is free and there is an excellent permanent exhibition on the lower ground floor that explains its background and purpose, (as well as another very good café!). The building is open to the public throughout the year (except Bank Holidays), from 9am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday and the court itself normally sits Mondays to Thursdays. Guided tours are available on Fridays which last approximately one hour. Security is high, with the same screening process as at airports. Photography is allowed, but *not* when the court is sitting.

Carry on past the front of the Supreme Court, keeping Parliament Square on your right – you can't fail to notice the many statues and I particularly like the one of Abraham Lincoln. Cross over Little Sanctuary (again), pass the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors on your left and directly ahead of you on the other side of **Great George Street** is the enormous **HM Treasury** building.

Cross over Great George Street but before you turn to the right, look through the iron gates into the centre of the Treasury Building. (I mention the central courtyard shortly).



Route map 2

Keeping the Treasury Building on your left turn left up Parliament Street (which a few hundred yards further along becomes Whitehall).

After a few yards, take the first left through the arch into **King Charles Street**. The building on your left is still the HM Treasury (though several other government departments now share it), whilst the equally grand building on the right is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The Treasury building (Government Offices Great George Street) was designed and built in two phases between 1898 and 1917. The project had originally been conceived in 1866 but it took 32 years for all the land to be purchased as this was an area of narrow old streets and more than 100 buildings.

The architect wanted the new building to have as much natural light as possible, so within it there are a number of 'light wells' and, wherever possible, reflective tiles and mirrors. A lot of light comes into the centre of the building via a huge circular courtyard that's known as 'the Drum' and, according to photographs, has a grander façade than that of the outside of the building. Halfway down, look out for the arched entrances with iron gates on the left that lead into the Drum. You can see right through to the entrance gates on the other side, where you were standing a few minutes ago.

There's an equally imposing entrance into the interior of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office building opposite – which is said to be somewhat grander inside, no doubt to impress visiting foreign dignitaries. George Gilbert Scott was responsible for the overall classical design of these offices, which were built in the 1860s and 70s.

At the end of the road, you'll see a bronze statue to Robert Clive of India. Walk down the '**Clive Steps**' that lead to **Horse Guards Road**. On the right at the bottom of the steps you can't fail to miss the memorial carved into the wall that commemorates the many people who were killed in the horrific terrorist attack in Bali in 2002. The granite globe has 202 doves; each one is unique, signifying the individuality of each of the lives lost; the dove of course being the symbol of peace.

On the left side of the steps is the entrance to the subterranean **Churchill War Rooms**. They were built in the basement of the 'GOGGS' building (Government Offices Great George Street) and thick bomb-proof concrete slabs were installed at street level to protect those working below. Some years ago they were opened to the public; you descend a couple of levels below ground to see where the War Cabinet oversaw the Second World War effort.

It's a really fascinating branch of the Imperial War Museum and gives an intriguing insight into the life of Churchill and his War Office colleagues in wartime London. Even better, rather than just being a 're-creation', much of it is exactly what it was like in those days, as the occupants appeared to have simply upped and left at the end of the war, leaving most of their equipment, etc. in place.

It's hard to believe how extensive the War Rooms were, but equally how crowded the offices and various living and sleeping quarters were. It's been done extremely well, well worth a visit. However, there is usually a queue to get in and you need to allow at least an hour and

a half to see it all, so I would suggest you consider coming back on another occasion and making an advance booking. (It's also cheaper).

Turn right up **Horse Guards Road**. On your left you will see the lovely 57-acre **St James's Park**. Again, if you have time you may want to take a little wander inside. It's more extensive than people sometimes imagine and extends across to the Mall and Buckingham Palace.

St James's Park was once just boggy marshland through which the River Tyburn flowed on its way from Hampstead to the Thames, Henry VIII turned it into his own private deer park, enabling him to go hunting without having to venture too far from his nearby Palace. In the early 17th century, James I had the Tyburn partially dammed, creating the beginnings of the lake that we see today. He also constructed two roadways through the park – The Mall and Birdcage Walk – the latter built to enable him to display his collection of exotic birds. And eventually not only birds, as he then also introduced other animals – crocodiles, elephants and camels, which were allowed to wander freely throughout the park.

It became a favourite of Charles I, so much so that whilst being taken to his execution site in Whitehall, he asked to be allowed to walk through it for one last time. His persecutor Oliver Cromwell then ordered the park to be opened to the general public and had the trees cut down to be used as firewood, which resulted in it becoming a wasteland and eventually the most notorious red-light district in London.

During his exile in France, Charles II had been impressed by the gardens of the French royal palaces and upon his return to London, made massive changes to the park, even bringing in designers from the Palace of Versailles to landscape the area. Much of what we see in the park today is as a result of his work. Charles had been given pelicans as a present from a Russian ambassador; he put them in the park's lakes – and it is their descendants that are still here today. He opened the park to the public and would entertain his own guests here, notably Nell Gwyn.

As you continue up Horse Guards Road, you can't fail to notice the delightful little 'fairy tale house' in the park on the left. It's called Duck Island Cottage and was built in 1841 as the home of the Bird-Keeper of St James's Park. Later it became a storeroom for bicycles that were confiscated from people caught riding them in the park – but now it's just an office. And the unusual Swiss chalet design? That was to make it look different from the more grand and formal government buildings surrounding it.

Just a few yards further along are large gates that lead to the 'rear entrance' of Downing Street (we will see the other side shortly). It is through this exit that a Prime Minister who has just lost an election 'slinks' away from Downing Street. Leaving by the 'back door' ensures there is no embarrassment by potentially meeting the new incumbent as they enter through the main entrance in Whitehall! However, if the incumbent PM has won, then they still have to visit Buckingham Palace, but can leave triumphantly (or maybe just relieved) out of the front door of No.10, and directly into Whitehall, where crowds will have gathered.

Carry on for just a few more yards and you reach the magnificent **Horse Guards Parade**, which was the 'recreational grounds' of the Palace of Whitehall and where Henry VIII held jousting competitions, spectacular pageants and the like.

Horse Guards Parade was later used by the British Army, whose headquarters were nearby, but it's now used for all manner of official ceremonies including the Annual Trooping of the Colour and Beating the Retreat. On the occasion of the VE Day celebrations In May 2015, even Status Quo performed a concert here! For the benefit of younger readers, VE stands for Victory in Europe, which was when the Germans finally surrendered, meaning the end of the Second World War in Europe.

It might sound odd today, but from the 1950s onwards, Horse Guards Parade was actually turned into a car park for top civil servants. However, after the IRA launched a mortar attack from a parked vehicle, even though it was on the other side of Whitehall, it was felt that using it as a car park was a security risk, so the civil servants lost their privileged parking and thankfully it was returned to public use!

There are a number of statues around the parade ground, particularly in the front of the actual Horse Guards Building, mostly dedicated to Britain's top soldiers. One of the most important is in the small-grassed area on the right and is Earl Mountbatten of Burma. He was born in 1900 and died in 1979 as a result of a terrorist attack in Ireland. During the Second World War, he was Chief of Combined Operations from 1941 – 1945, after which he became the last Viceroy of India, then following independence, Governor General. He then became the First Sea Lord and finally Chief of Defence. He was a great friend of the Royal Family, particularly Prince Charles to whom he was 'uncle'. He was of mixed German-European descent and his name had to be changed during the war from the German 'Battenberg' to Mountbatten. No wonder he has such a prominent statue!

And I must just mention that the lovely buildings on the north side (your left as you walked across Horse Guards Parade), are the Old Admiralty Buildings. They are exceptionally elegant buildings, but I won't put more about them here as they're not actually covered on this walk – though I'm sure they will be including in a future one.

Walk across **Horse Guards Parade** towards the arch between the two statues of soldiers mounted on horses. The one on the left is Field Marshall Viscount Wolseley, Commander in Chief of the British Army at the end of the 19th century, whilst on the right is Field Marshal Earl Roberts, who followed Wolseley as Commander in Chief.

To the left of the arch is the entrance to the Museum of the Household Cavalry, who are the soldiers that you see guarding the entrance to Horse Guards on the Whitehall side. (I say 'guard', but there are now always several armed police officers alongside them to 'guard' from terrorist attacks, as they have been subjected to many threats.)

Pass through the arch – and if you are visiting between 10 am and 4 pm you will normally see two sentries on horseback.

You are now in Whitehall – and we turn to the right, passing both the **Scottish Office** and the **Cabinet Office**, as well as several other (to me at least) rather nondescript buildings, until you get to **Downing Street**.

Downing Street must be one of the most well-known addresses in Britain. Unfortunately, these days you can no longer walk along it. That was stopped by Maggie Thatcher, because of the IRA bombing campaign, which is a shame; I can still remember doing that and chatting and posing for a photo taken with the policeman on duty outside No 10 – there was always one standing there, as there still is today (though I'm assured not the same one!)

The street is named after the man who built the houses here in 1682 – a diplomat called George Downing. As I explain in the appendix, he was not a particularly nice man!

Only three of the original houses still stand; they are Numbers 10, 11 and 12. Number 10 is both the office and home of the First Lord of the Treasury (more commonly known as the Prime Minister) and is much larger than it looks, being joined to a larger and rather elegant building behind it. In total there are around 150 rooms, including several very large 'drawing rooms' where Heads of State are entertained. There is also a half-acre garden. So probably not a bad place to live!

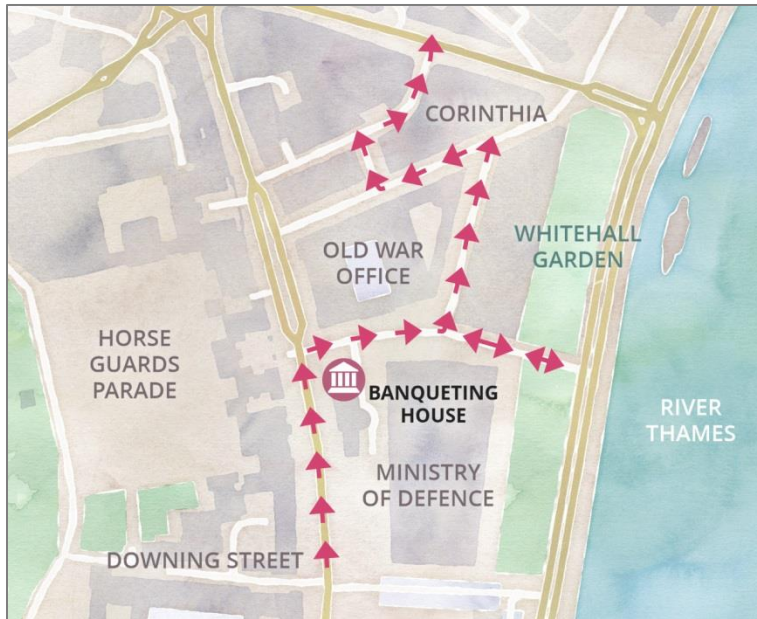
People often ask where within the building the Prime Minister and their family actually live. In the past they have occupied a private apartment on the third floor of No.10. However, as both Tony Blair and David Cameron had fairly large families, they occupied the considerably more spacious apartment next door in No.11 (bet the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose home and offices that is, loved that). A long corridor passes from No.10, through No.11 and even into No.12, the office of the Chief Whip.

Despite not having a family, Mrs May, the current prime minister, has continued with this latest trend and moved into the more spacious apartment in No.11. (It has been suggested that, as Mrs May has previously said she likes cooking, her decision may have been influenced by the top-of-the-range kitchen installed by David Cameron.) And the Chancellor of the Exchequer – he's been given the smaller flat in No.10! And I will just add one more little-known fact – there is a tunnel that runs from Number 10 all the way to Buckingham Palace. It was built at the height of the Cold War as a way of escape for both the Prime Minister and royalty in the event of nuclear attack, as it leads to an underground facility known as **Q-Whitehall**, which I've written more about in the appendix.

A SHORTENED VERSION OF THE WALK

If you are pressed for time or tired, then you can end the walk here and simply continue on down Whitehall to Westminster tube station, where we started, passing the Cenotaph on the way.

BUT IF YOU DECIDE TO CARRY ON ...



Route map 3

Leave Downing Street and wherever it's convenient cross over Whitehall.

On the other side, start walking to the left (back up again, so away from Parliament Square and Westminster). You pass the 'Women at War' memorials and the **Ministry of Defence**, the monolithic, eight-storey, white stone building that's fronted by statues of several military heroes, including Field Marshall 'Monty' Montgomery and Viscount Slim. However, first notice the rather quirky red brick building with the name 'Ty Gwydyr'. That probably gives away its connection with Wales, and indeed it's the **Welsh Office**. (Interestingly, it was used for the office of the Prime Minister in the sitcom 'Yes Minister'.)

The Ministry of Defence building was constructed for the Board of Trade but wasn't finished until the 1950s. Building work was meant to have started in 1915, but it was delayed by the First World War, then the 1930s depression, followed by the Second World War. However, when the three Armed Forces merged in 1964 and the Ministry of Defence was formed, they moved in.

Next you see the **Banqueting House**, the only remaining part of Henry VIII's Whitehall Palace.

Designed by the famous architect Inigo Jones it opened in 1622 and in its design, he introduced a whole new Italian style of architecture to Britain, commonly known as Palladian. He later used a similar style of architecture for the Queen's House at Greenwich (now part of the National Maritime Museum), part of the buildings in the centre of Covent Garden and hundreds more around the country.

It wasn't just for banquets though; huge court events, balls and ceremonies were conducted within its building and gardens. The main feature of the House – and if I'm honest, the only part I think is particularly worth seeing – is the first floor Banqueting Hall. It is truly amazing,

particularly the nine ceiling paintings that were the work of the Flemish artist Rubens and which have also been restored.

And I will just add that it was on a scaffold outside of the Banqueting House where Charles I ended up having his head chopped off. I explain a little more about the Banqueting House in the appendix.

It is open daily to the public from 10am – 4.30pm.

Turn right down the side of the Banqueting House into **Horse Guards Avenue**, and pass the main entrance of the **MOD building**, with just the pillars and the statues on either side (apparently meant to represent Earth and Water, though I struggle to see this).

The building on the other side of the road is the huge (over a thousand rooms and more than two miles of corridors) **Old War Office**. Built in the lovely neo-Baroque style (used by architects at the time for many of London's prestigious public buildings), it stands on the site of what were once the kitchens of Whitehall Palace. It was the headquarters of the British Army from 1906 until the mid-1960s and was where such military luminaries as Lord Kitchener, David Lloyd George and TE Lawrence once worked. And of course, not forgetting Sir Winston Churchill, who had his offices here for a few years.

The Old War Office had been built in 1906. Some years ago, the government decided that it was now superfluous to requirements and in 2014 it was purchased by the Hinduja, said to be Britain's richest family.

The amazing restoration project has since cost around £1.4 billion, and the building has become the first Raffles Hotel in London – the company had been looking for a site in the capital for almost thirty years. (Raffles of course is the famous hotel in Singapore, and home of the Singapore Sling cocktail).

There are only 120 bedrooms; I understand more were originally planned, but conservationists were 'enraged' at the way the building was going to be so altered and so many objections were received by the planning authority that I guess a compromise must have been reached.

The finest room is the Haldane Suite, which can cost between £18,000 and £25,000 a night, depending on demand. For this you get a massive main room with sofas and enormous desk. The main bedroom – obviously equally huge – has a separate sitting area as well as a large dressing room. The suite's butler's pantry (obviously this would be essential ...!) was originally Winston Churchill's private lift. This private lift was used by Christine Keeler, when she used to make her illicit visits to see John Profumo, then Secretary of State for War.

For those of us who might find that a little too pricey, other rooms are available from around £1,000 a night, though that is just the lowest rate normally ever available – most rooms are from £3,500 a night.

There are three bars and numerous restaurants, a spa with nine treatment rooms and a double storey 20-metre swimming pool, which had to be dug out deep beneath the hotel.

Whilst the OWO Hotel occupies the entire block, only half is used as a hotel, as the other half now contains 85 private residences. These range in price from £4 million for a one-bedroomed apartment, to around £40 million for a duplex corner penthouse.

The War Office building has been used several times in James Bond films, especially in the closing scenes of 'Skyfall' when Bond stands on the roof and looks wistfully towards Big Ben and Westminster Abbey before Moneypenny hands him a gift from the late 'M'. In the 1983 film 'Octopussy', the building doubles as the MI6 headquarters and there are also scenes of it in 'A View to a Kill', 'Licence to Kill' and 'Spectre'.

On the corner of this building and Whitehall Place (which we shall be walking along shortly), notice the rather splendid memorial statue to the Ghurkhas, the brave soldiers of Nepal who have fought with the British Army for many years.

Continue down on the right-hand side almost to the bottom of Horse Guards Avenue but stop when you reach the end of the MOD Building. The site of the building, and indeed much of the surrounding land, is where Whitehall Palace once stood, which I write a little about next, but now just look down to the lower ground level at the rear of the building and you will see a 'sunken terrace' with stone steps.

Other than the Banqueting House that you passed just now, this is all that remains of the huge Whitehall Palace.

The palace was originally known as York Place and was the London home of the Archbishop of York from 1240 onwards. It was rebuilt by Cardinal Wolsey, and as I explain in the appendix, was 'acquired' from him by Henry VIII around 1530. Henry married two of his wives here, which was where he also died in 1547 aged 55.

It later became the home of Queen Mary II and in 1691 she decided to take advantage of its perfect riverside position and had Sir Christopher Wren design a 300-foot-long terrace that extended some seventy feet into the Thames. She then had a set of stone steps built at each end that gave her access to the Royal Barge. Excavations during the construction of the MOD building revealed Wren's original river wall as well as these steps, which are known today as the 'Queen Mary Steps'. I have put more information about Whitehall Palace in the appendix, as I have for the Banqueting House.

The rather pleasant grassed area that runs from here down to the Embankment contains a number of rather fascinating statues and memorials that have been erected to commemorate various branches of the Army, Navy and Air Force. We're not going to walk through the garden (unless of course you particularly want to take a look). My two favourite memorials are firstly the 'Aviator' that stands on a plinth with huge outstretched wings,

which commemorates those who lost their lives serving in the Fleet Air Arm. The second is almost at the far end and is the memorial to those who served and died in Iraq.

The rather fine statue nearest you, by the entrance to the garden, is of Major General Charles Gordon, the famous soldier who fought in the Crimean War and in China but was eventually killed in Khartoum in 1885.

We turn around now and walk back up **Horse Guards Avenue**, but as you do, notice the extremely elegant building on the other side of the road that is fronted by rather lovely embankment gardens. It's known as **One Horse Guards Avenue** and is the southernmost section of Whitehall Court, a Grade II* listed building that was financed by Jabez Balfour, a Liberal MP and speculative property developer. Whitehall Court was built between 1884 and 1887. Several years later it was discovered that Balfour had used the building as an elaborate 'pyramid scheme' in which thousands of people lost their savings, and although he fled to South America, he was arrested and brought back to Britain and spent fourteen years of 'penal hard labour servitude'.

The architects were Thomas Archer, Arthur Green and Alfred Waterhouse, and their neo-Gothic style was strongly influenced by the architecture of the French Renaissance châteaux of the Loire Valley. At the time of its construction, Whitehall Court was regarded as being quite 'cutting edge' – it was the first building in London to have a lift and be lit by electric lighting. (You may notice that the building has similarities with the equally huge Natural History Museum in South Kensington, which Waterhouse also designed.)

Although you can't really appreciate it from this 'side-on view', it's enormous and was actually designed and built as two separate buildings, though joined together. Looking at this end of it, the lower ground floors may appear unoccupied, but One Horse Guards is used for conferences and other functions, while the upper floors still contain private apartments.

Turn right down **Whitehall Court**, which of course is the name of the building that we are talking about, and which runs its full length. Besides what's written above, I've put more about this famous and historic building in the appendix, including why the many residents of the apartments never realised the commissioners and doormen were actually special branch police officers.

Notice the blue lamps numbered 4 down to 1 over the buildings four entrances. Numbers Four and Three lead into the into relevant reception areas for the private residences, whilst numbers Two and One now lead into the Royal Horseguards Hotel. Previously they had led into the National Liberal Club that was established by William Gladstone's Liberal party in 1884. When it opened, it was said to be one of the biggest 'clubs' in the world. It is now considerably smaller than it once was, as much of it was sold to the Royal Horseguards Hotel.

Directly in front of you at the end of Whitehall Court is another very large 5-star hotel, called the Corinthia, but before you **turn left into Whitehall Place**, notice the memorial to the army's Tank Regiment on the corner. It depicts the five-man crew of a World War Two 'Comet Tank' and was unveiled by the Queen in 2002. I think it is rather special.

Walk just a few yards up **Whitehall Place** then turn right under the archway alongside the Corinthia Hotel into **Scotland Place**. However, before you do, notice the building that runs from the corner of Scotland Place to the top of Whitehall Place, where it joins Whitehall. It's yet another rather grand building but this one is very special – this is the iconic **Old Scotland Yard** police building, which dates back to 1829 when the then Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel first established the police force as we know it today. It was the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police for many years. In 2015 the building, which is Grade II listed, was purchased for £110 million by the Indian billionaire Yusuff Ali. He then spent another £50 million on renovations, adding two extra floors and excavating the basement. It has now opened as an exclusive five-star Hyatt luxury hotel.

Many of the original features, including the iconic green front doors that were mentioned in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes' stories, remain. Displays in the lobby include 19th century police artefacts and some of the hotel bedrooms have carpets that integrate concepts of police badges and uniforms in the design. The 40 Elephants Bar is inspired by the infamous all-female syndicate of thieves who operated in London for over two hundred years. Best known for their smash and grab jobs, they were based in Elephant and Castle.

The hotel has 151 rooms, 15 suites and a stand-alone Georgian-fronted townhouse that can be booked for £10,000 a night. Room rates are currently from about £350 a night.

Although the Met's original headquarters was here in Whitehall Place, the street at the rear of the building was called Great Scotland Yard, where there was a public entrance into the building as well as a police station. So that name stuck!

The Met's headquarters have moved three times since; firstly, to a building on the Victoria Embankment that became known as New Scotland Yard and then to another nearby building on the Victoria Embankment, which retained the name New Scotland Yard. More recently they have moved again, but still remained close by.

But of course, that hasn't explained the 'Scottish connection'. Great Scotland Yard was so named because it was near the site of the house where kings of Scotland stayed when they visited Henry VIII and Elizabeth I at nearby Whitehall Palace.

Walk to the end of the short Scotland Place and **turn right into Great Scotland Yard**. Notice though the two large wooden doors (that are usually open) ahead of you. What this is might be given away by the smell of manure and hay ... yes, the doors are the entrance to stables where police horses are kept. If the doors are open, then take a little look inside – whenever I've done that, nobody has seemed to mind.

Walk right down **Great Scotland Yard** – a rather nondescript street, but a few rather eminent people have lived here in the past – two architects for starters: Christopher Wren and Inigo Jones, as well as the poet John Milton. On the left, in what was once a fire station, you'll see the rather inviting outdoor terrace of a bar and restaurant – unfortunately though it's only for members of the Civil Service Club.

Great Scotland Yard leads to the unusually wide **Northumberland Avenue**, once part of the estate of the dukes of Northumberland. It's much broader than many surrounding roads because in 1874 it was bought by the Metropolitan Board of Works for the building of new hotels to cater for the rise in visitors to the city, particularly from America. To preserve the avenue's elegance it was decided that no hotel or other building could be taller than the road was wide, a problem they got around by simply increasing the width of the street.

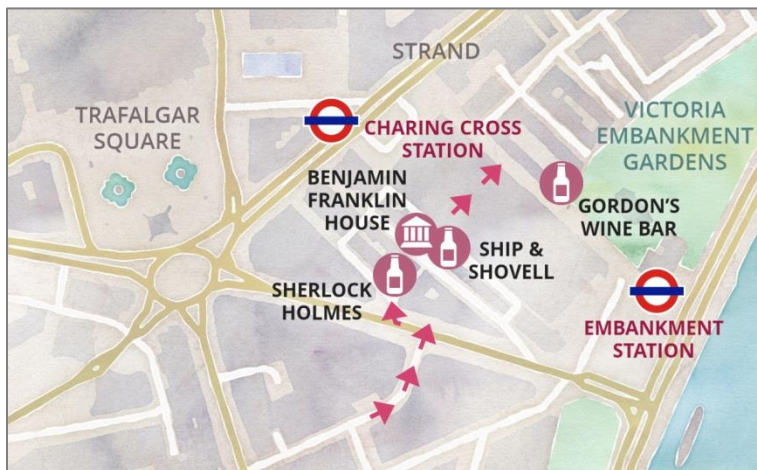
You now you have two choices

The walk carries on for just a little bit further, but if you are short of time or a little weary, you can end it here. If you do, then:

To get to the **Embankment station** (Circle, District and Northern tube lines) turn right down Northumberland Avenue and almost at the end, but before you reach the Embankment, turn left under the railway arches immediately after the Playhouse Theatre, and you come to the Embankment station.

To go to **Trafalgar Square** (and onwards to Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus, etc.), turn left and it's just a few minutes' walk.

To go back to **Westminster station**, turn left and walk up Northumberland Avenue and turn left down Whitehall (about fifteen minutes' walk).



Route map 4

OR ... To continue to the end of the walk – which will also take you to Trafalgar Square, Charing Cross station (Northern and Bakerloo lines) and the Strand – **cross over**

Northumberland Avenue and almost opposite on the other side, you'll see the **Sherlock Holmes pub** at the start of Northumberland Street. Turn right up the side of the pub, and walk up **Craven Passage** to the top where it meets **Craven Street**.

If you look to the left at the end of Craven Street you will see a modern office building with four unusual 'chimney columns' on the roof. These 'chimneys' are actually the top of an enormous chamber some ninety feet below that allows air to escape from the underground lines deep beneath Charing Cross station.

One of the London Underground's Secret Tours (run for anoraks and sad people with too much time on their hands!) that I have been takes you down into these tunnels – you climb through into the bottom of one of the vents where you can stand looking up this enormous shaft that stretches high up above.

Cross over **Craven Street** and carry on up **Craven Passage**, which continues opposite.

The house where Benjamin Franklin lived – now a museum to him – is just up Craven Street to the left.

Pass the rather unusually named (and often mispronounced) pub called the **Ship and Shovell**, which is Grade II listed. The pub is also unusual as it is on both sides of the lane.

Carry on through what becomes the Arches shopping arcade beneath the railway lines that run into Charing Cross station and you emerge into **Villiers Street**.

For the **Embankment tube station**, turn right – it's just a couple of hundred yards to your right. And if you fancy a drink then on your left, just before the Embankment gardens and station, you pass **Gordon's**, a wine bar established in 1890 and one of my favourites. It's small inside but has a long outside terrace and a great selection of wines by the glass and light meals.

For **Charing Cross station and The Strand**, turn left and they're just 50 yards' walk.

If you want to get to **Trafalgar Square**, then turn left along the Strand.

HOPE YOU'VE ENJOYED THE WALK!

Please – any comments, criticisms or suggestions are very much welcomed! I've tried hard to make the walk and all the associated information as accurate as possible, but there's definitely always room for improvement. To send me a message, please use the contact form at <https://mylondonwalks.org.uk/contact/>.

APPENDIX TO THE WESTMINSTER WALK

WESTMINSTER BRIDGE was erected in 1750, but only after a very lengthy battle with vested interests! (Some things never change!) It was the ferrymen who had strongly objected – for centuries they had made a good living taking people back and forth across the Thames. But another strong objector was the Archbishop of Canterbury; his interest was in a horse ferry he owned a little further up the river, and which was apparently very profitable! And as the nearest bridge upstream at the time was eleven miles away at Kingston, it's easy to see why the ferries were so profitable.

The original bridge had to be replaced a few years later due to subsidence and structural problems and the one you see today opened in the early 1860s, though it was refurbished and repainted in 2007.

The view from the opposite side of the river, looking back across to Westminster and the rest of London, inspired the poet William Wordsworth, who had stood there very early one September morning in 1802, to write the poem entitled -

“Composed Upon Westminster Bridge”, September 3rd 1802

“Earth has not anything to show more fair,
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty;
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!”

WESTMINSTER, the early buildings and WESTMINSTER ABBEY

The land immediately surrounding the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey was wet and marshy as the two tributaries of the Tyburn, a river that rises in Hampstead, flows into the Thames at this point. As a result, the early buildings, that later became the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey, were built on an 'island' of slightly higher ground that had formed between the river's two tributaries. It was known as Thorney Island because it was covered with thorn bushes.

The first building here is said to have been a Roman temple to the God Apollo that was subsequently destroyed in an earthquake. However, no actual proof has been found of its existence, though it is known that because the River Thames was slow moving at this point, the Romans had built a ford, making it an attractive spot for a settlement to be established.

Trying to establish precisely who and when built what here is difficult, as it seems to vary according to which historian's account you read. Almost certainly, the first Christian church on the site was built around the early 7th century by one of the Saxon kings, and I have read conflicting accounts of which one that was. Some say that it was Offa of Mercia (him of the Dyke), whilst others say that he was behind the original church on the site of St Paul's Cathedral and that the one in Westminster was the work of King Sebert, who founded a monastery here.

An interesting 'legend' is that the reason for a church being built here and called 'St Peters' was that it was where a fisherman called Edric, having seen the Apostle Saint Peter standing on the riverbank, then rowed him across. As a thank you to Cedric, Saint Peter is said to have rewarded him by enabling him to have huge catches of fish. Whatever the truth is, there are depictions of salmon in the floor of one of the older parts of the Abbey. In addition, the Worshipful Company of Fishermen, one of the City of London's livery companies, offers a salmon to Westminster Abbey each year in memory of this 'event'.

Over the following centuries, various religious and royal 'notables' have been involved in the development of what became Westminster Abbey. St Dunstan reformed the church as a Benedictine Abbey around 960, when it was also first adopted as a royal church, and the Viking invader Cnut, (Canute), is also said to have enlarged both the church and a nearby palace, remains of which have been found close to today's Parliament Square.

Edward the Confessor, the last of the Saxon kings, had a 'vision' in around 1040 that called on him to rebuild and significantly extend the Saxon church so as it would be suitable for royal functions and burials and to include a monastery. He was the first monarch to be buried here, and from that time on, many kings and queens have been buried here.

After St Edward the Confessor's coronation in 1042, the church was considerably enlarged, the real beginning of the Westminster Abbey as you see it today, building it in the increasingly popular Romanesque style that was popular in France, whilst at the same time, building himself a royal palace. He died in 1065, a year after the Abbey was completed, and was buried here.

Over time, the church had begun to be known as a 'minster' – the word meant a church linked to a monastery – and because there was already a minster a couple of miles to the east called St Pauls, this one became known as the 'Westminster'. Which, of course, has stuck!

In 1066, the Norman king William the Conqueror sailed from France to invade England and he adopted both Edward's monastery and palace as his own, which he also set about

enlarging. William was the first monarch to be crowned here, something that has remained the custom to this day.

For several centuries, the capital of England had been in the city of Winchester but, as a result of William's influence, that began to change and very gradually the seat of power moved to Westminster. His son, William II, expanded Westminster Palace still further.

King John, who ruled from 1199 until 1216, continued the progression of moving the centre of power from Winchester to Westminster and by 1245, the Royal Throne was erected in Westminster Hall. Some fifty years later, the Chancery (the administrative branch of the Crown) was also established here. A key element of the Magna Carta had been having the 'Court of Common Pleas' based in one place, as opposed to moving around the country, and this also moved to Westminster.

Around 1245, Henry III made many more changes to both the Palace and Abbey, retaining just the nave and rebuilding much of the church in the new Gothic style that we see today. At enormous expense, he also built a shrine to his predecessor, Edward the Confessor, who had become a Saint in 1161, which is now one of the most visited parts of the Abbey.

As already explained, the Abbey was both a Benedictine Monastery and church, but following Henry VIII's split with the Catholic church of Rome, because it wouldn't allow him to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, he closed most of the monasteries in England – an act that is known as the 'Dissolution of Monasteries'. However, he was then faced with the problem of what to do with this 'Church of St Peter' as it also had a monastery. He cleverly solved the problem by simply bestowing it with the title of 'Cathedral'. That meant it then came under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London, who caused great controversy when it was discovered he was diverting Westminster Abbey's considerable finances to St Paul's Cathedral, which was his own personal favourite. And that is where the expression 'Robbing Peter to pay Paul' is said to have originated!

It wasn't under the Bishop of London's control for long, as a few years later, Elizabeth I declared it to be a 'Royal Peculiar'. That meant that although it still remained a part of the Church of England, it came under the control of the reigning Monarch of the day, and not a Bishop or Archbishop which it still is today. (Other examples of Royal Peculiars include the Queen's Chapel in St James's Palace, the Chapel of St John in the Tower of London and the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy, which is behind London's Savoy Hotel).

And I find it is interesting that until the 19th century, Westminster Abbey was the third 'seat of learning' in England, after Oxford and Cambridge.

Today the Westminster Abbey is the largest church in Britain and has the highest nave; it is also one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture.

And finally, despite everyone knowing it as 'Westminster Abbey', its official name is the Collegiate Church of St Peter at Westminster (collegiate meaning a non-cathedral church).

THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER

The history of the early Palace of Westminster is closely linked with that of the nearby Abbey. The palace was built by Edward the Confessor in the mid-eleventh century, at the same time as he was building the Abbey. However, we can still see today some of the building that was carried out by his son William II and which I mention shortly.

It became the principal residence of kings and queens until 1534, when partly because of a fire in the royal private quarters, but also because he was envious of Cardinal Wolsey's considerably larger York Palace that was close by, Henry VIII ousted Wolsey and broke with tradition by moving there himself, renaming it Whitehall Palace.

Further additions were made to the Palace in the 13th century but sadly in 1834, some five hundred years later, most of it was destroyed in a massive fire, with just the 11th century Westminster Hall surviving. That was the earliest, and said to be the finest, part of the palace and it can still be visited today on tours of the Houses of Parliament. From the 13th century onwards, the English parliament had more or less continually met in Westminster Palace, (and still does, as it is the official name of the Houses of Parliament), though until it was rebuilt following the fire, they met in Westminster Abbey.

(And I must just mention that the fire was watched from the other side of the Thames by the famous painter JMW Turner who, using his wonderful sense of colour for further dramatic effect, produced several amazing paintings - my favourite being the one aptly called, 'The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons'.)

Interestingly, William IV, who apparently not liking Buckingham Palace, offered parliament the opportunity to move there, but they said was unsuitable for their requirements and politely declined. (I find it interesting that few royals have actually liked Buckingham Palace; our present Queen is said to prefer Windsor Castle. Indeed, St James's Palace is still today the official home of the reigning monarch.)

Following the fire, a competition was held for the rebuilding of the Palace of Westminster and it attracted nearly a hundred entries. It was won by architect Charles Barry, who had suggested the Gothic Revival design we see today. He enlisted Augustus Pugin, a little known 23-year-old draughtsman/architect, to help with him with the drawings, but became so impressed with his abilities, that he asked him to design whole of the interior. And the magnificence of what Augustus Pugin achieved is quite breath-taking - it's worth visiting just to see that!

During the Second World War, the House of Commons was badly damaged by a bombing raid and the House of Lords allowed them to use their facilities. After the war, another famous architect, Sir Giles Scott, was awarded the commission to rebuild it, but because of the country's post-war economic difficulties, strict limits were imposed as to how much could be spent. This resulted in a design for a simpler Chamber than before, though still in

keeping with the work of Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin and with the 'gravity that one would expect from our state parliamentary buildings'.

WESTMINSTER HALL is said to be one of finest examples of neo-gothic architecture and interiors in the world and not surprisingly, is both Grade I and UNESCO listed. Parts of it, including the outer walls, are a thousand years old! Its magnificent timbered 'hammer-beam' roof, the hall's most outstanding feature, has been described as 'the greatest creation of medieval timber architecture', though it's not quite as old as the walls that support it, having been replaced in the late 1300s. So, it's only 700 years old!

Westminster Hall had survived the fire 1834 and, thanks to the quick thinking by firemen, the ancient hall was one of the few parts that escaped being damaged in a bombing raid in the Second World War. Bombs had hit both the Hall and the Chamber of the House of Commons Hall and the firemen realised straight away that there was only time to save one of them; fortunately, they chose to save the ancient Westminster Hall. If you get the chance to come back and have a tour of the Houses, you can't help but be amazed by the sight of Westminster Hall.

Following the fire, rebuilding eventually took place and following a competition when nearly one hundred architects submitted their plans, they eventually chose those of Charles Barry.

But back to its origins; the Hall was used for ceremonial purposes almost from its inception; this includes things too varied to mention, but to give more recent examples, both Sir Winston Churchill and the Queen Mother were 'Laid in State' here; several notable and world famous persons have addressed a joint assembly of MP's and Peers here, including the Pope, Nelson Mandela, and President Obama as well as celebrations to commemorate events, including the 50th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War and several of the current Queen's anniversaries, such as her Jubilee.

THE PALACE OF WHITEHALL

It's hardly surprising that people can get confused about the Palace of Whitehall – particularly as it no longer exists, and it was only a few hundred yards apart from the Palace of Westminster.

Although parts of it had existed before, Whitehall Palace is considered to date back to 1240 when it was the residence of the Bishop of York. However, by the 1500s it had become the home of Cardinal Wolsey who, besides his religious duties, was Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor and responsible for many things including England's foreign affairs. He amassed great wealth, some of which he used to enlarge the Palace. With over 1,500 rooms, it became one of the largest palaces in Europe, only Versailles later exceeding it.

Spread over 23 acres, from Northumberland Avenue in the north to present day St James's Park in the south and from Horse Guards Road to the River Thames, it was bigger and better

than the nearby Palace of Westminster where Henry VIII was then living. Needless to say, the king was rather envious. Not long afterwards, Henry and Wolsey fell out after the latter sided with the Pope and refused to sanction Henry's request to have his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled to enable him to marry Ann Boleyn.

Following a fire in Henry's private apartments in Westminster Palace, he became increasingly envious of Wolsey's Whitehall Palace, and is said to have eventually confronted him with the words "What use is such luxury to a man of the cloth?" The Cardinal wisely decided not to argue and agreed to give it to him. Unfortunately, it didn't do the Cardinal much good; Henry still had him arrested, and Wolsey died *en route* to his trial. Henry of course, did marry Anne Boleyn, with the ceremony taking place in his new palace, as he did later to Jane Seymour. He died here in 1547.

Until 1530, the Palace of Westminster had been the principal London residence of English monarchs, but this changed when Henry moved into Whitehall Palace and it continued to be the main residence of British monarchs until it was burnt down and was destroyed in 1698. Following this, reigning monarchs returned to live at Westminster Palace, but eventually St James's Palace and then Buckingham Palace became their favoured residence.

Today, with the exception of the Banqueting House, which I mention next, the only remnants of Whitehall Palace are the old stone steps that lead down to the river and you see these on the walk. (The palace's enormous wine cellars are still in place but being under the nearby Ministry of Defence building are sadly 'out of bounds'.)

THE BANQUETING HOUSE was a later addition to the palace and built in 1622 by James I. It was designed by the renowned architect Inigo Jones who, following a period of time that he spent in Italy, introduced a new Italian style of architecture to Britain. The style was known as 'Palladian', after the Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio, who in turn had been influenced by both Greek and Italian architecture. (Jones later adopted the same Palladian style for other London buildings, such as the Queen's House at Greenwich that's now part of the National Maritime Museum and much of Covent Garden.)

The Banqueting House wasn't just for banquets though; huge court events, balls and ceremonies were conducted within its building and gardens. Whilst it's not high on the list of most visitors to London, I have to say the enormous first floor room, known as the Banqueting Hall, where besides great feasts, many balls and other ceremonies took place, is magnificent and particularly worth seeing.

For many people, its most spectacular feature is the wonderful, colourful painted ceiling - actually nine individual paintings that were commissioned by Charles I to be inserted into Inigo Jones' beautifully carved ceiling. They were painted by the famous Flemish Baroque artist Peter Rubens in 1636.

The building has been fully restored and has become a national monument and part of the Royal Palaces collection and is open to the public.

And ironically, it was on a scaffold outside the Banqueting House and overlooking Whitehall, where Charles I ended up having his head chopped off! He was led out to the scaffold from a first-floor window, handed his gloves to the Bishop who was there to give the Last Rites, and said, "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown". The executioner, having just wielded his axe, held up Charles' head and said to the crowd who had come to watch, "Behold, the head of a traitor".

If you'd like to visit, it's at the end of Horse Guards Avenue, on the corner of Whitehall, where we walk next. It is open to the public daily from 10am to 4.30pm.

And just for added background interest – The idea of a 'banquet' comes from medieval times. Rather than simply a sumptuous feast as we might regard it today, it was then a rather unusual meal of exotic deserts and snacks that was eaten on special occasions after the meat course, whilst waiting for the evening's entertainment to begin. As time went on, people began to build special rooms or even 'houses' to hold them in, often a short walk away from the main dinner hall. James I's Banqueting House in Whitehall was the biggest and grandest of these buildings. Whilst it was formerly used as an impressive reception hall for ambassadors, it was then intended for the 'playful activities' that took place after dinner, such as parties and court masques. These were extravagant theatrical productions, performed for and by the Stuart kings and queens and their courtiers, which portrayed them as God-like kings who brought peace and prosperity to a troubled land.

WESTMINSTER SCHOOL was set up in the 12th century by the Benedictine monks of the priory on the orders of the Pope. It was initially a charitable institution and called Saint Peter's College, as St Peters being the official name of Westminster Abbey. Today it's one of the most prestigious schools in the country, as well as one of the most expensive and is renowned for having one of the highest levels of passes at GCSE.

The list of 'school traditions' is long – one being that the pupils are allowed special privileged access into the public galleries of the Houses of Commons and Lords – this was apparently given in order to stop them from climbing onto the roof of the building and trying to get in that way. That was a long time ago though! Another is that the teachers of the school are entitled to get married in Westminster Abbey, which is quite some perk!

METHODIST CENTRAL HALL

This rather grand Grade II listed building was built in 1912 as the 'home' of the Methodist Church. It is normally open to the public, free to enter, and definitely worth at least a quick visit. Take the steps up to the Upper Entrance Hall and then continue on up the Grand Staircase (there's a good view from the window on the stairs.)

The spectacular inner dome – a single piece of cast reinforced concrete - is said to be the second largest of its type in the world. (The outside dome rises 70 feet above this). Within this is the building's principal feature, 'The Great Hall', which by making use of cleverly designed cantilevered balconies, can seat around 2,000 people. The hall is famous for some of the many important meetings that have been held here. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Winston Churchill are among the many who have delivered speeches in the hall. It was also where, in 1946, the first meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations was held. And bringing us back to earth, you may also recognise it if you saw the film 'Calendar Girls'! It's also famous for its organ and internationally famous organists regularly give concerts and recitals. (William Lloyd Webber, father of Andrew, used to play the organ here and was also the Director of Music.)

However, of course its principle function is that of a place of worship and its Sunday services attract large congregations.

Finally, I will just mention that on the lower level is the Wesley Café, which serves excellent and not expensive meals, as well as coffees and light snacks. And there are good toilets as well! (And it's worth remembering that this lower level floor was used during the Second World War as an air raid shelter, with up to 2,000 people a night sleeping here.)

THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

This is where the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council meets.

Since the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005 provided for the establishment of a Supreme Court that separated senior judges from Parliament, this Court has taken over the role previously held by the 'Law Lords'. It's now the highest court in Britain and its role is the 'interpretation and development of the law', hearing criminal and civil cases from England, as well civil cases from across the UK. It also deals with matters of 'devolution'.

The court receives cases from lower courts where there is sufficient insecurity about how the law should be interpreted and applied and what precedent the lower courts should follow in future.

The justices themselves decide which cases they will hear, depending on the extent to which they raise 'points of law of general importance'.

Basically, if a lower court feels insecure about making a judgement, particularly when due to difficulty in interpreting a particular aspect of law, then it can refer the case to the Supreme Court. It does not hold trials where guilt and innocence are decided, so there is no dock or witness stand – instead points of law are discussed - so the court rooms are specially designed to encourage an atmosphere of learned debate. Lawyers normally wear business dress rather than formal legal wear. Interestingly, the Supreme Court is the only court in the UK where proceedings are routinely filmed and available to watch online.

How the Cases are heard - normally a panel of five justices hear each case and the Court's President and Deputy President select them. The panel can be increased to seven or even nine justices, depending on the importance or complexity of the case. (It is always an odd number to ensure that a majority decision can be reached.) The average length of a case is two days, but it can be as long as four or more.

The building it occupies was originally the courthouse for the old county of Middlesex. With the growing population (and presumably similar increase in crime), the building became too small and was demolished in 1889. Some twenty or so years later, the rather magnificent building that you see today opened. It's described as 'neo-Gothic with Flemish-Burgundian references' ... (hmm, yes of course - we can all see that as soon as we look at it!). It housed both the headquarters of Middlesex County Council as well as the Quarter Sessions. (Quarter Sessions were the criminal courts that were held quarterly in various parts of the country, replaced in the 1970s by Crown Courts).

When in 1964 the county of Middlesex was absorbed by neighbouring counties and much of it became part of Greater London, it ceased to become an administrative county, so the building was no longer needed

If you have time, it's worth taking a look inside. There is an excellent permanent exhibition on the lower ground floor that explains the background, as well as another very good café!

It's open to the public from 9am to 4.30 Monday to Friday throughout the year (except Bank Holidays), and the court itself normally sits Mondays to Thursdays. There are guided tours available on Fridays that last for approximately one hour. Security is high, with the same screening process as at airports. Photography is allowed, but *not* when the court is sitting.

And an interesting additional point ... It is built on land that was originally occupied by Westminster Abbey's 'Sanctuary Tower and Belfry', a place where those who were wanted by the law could seek refuge from their pursuers on an island.

ST JAMES'S PARK

Previously just an area of marshland, James I had it drained and landscaped. Although usually crowded with tourists in the summer, it is a lovely haven of peace in the midst of the busy city. There's a lovely lake that was formed by partially damming the River Tyburn that flows from Hampstead down to the River Thames, with plenty of flamingos, swans and other waterfowl. As you continue up Horse Guards Road, you can't fail to notice the delightful 'fairy tale house' in the park on the left. It's called Duck Island Cottage and was built in 1841 as the home of the Bird-Keeper of St James's Park. In addition, it had a 'club room' for use by members of the Ornithological Society of London, who helped look after the ducks and geese. It was designed to look like a Swiss chalet so as to make it different from the more grand and formal government buildings in the area. Later, it became a

storeroom for bicycles that were confiscated from people riding them in the park – but now just simply an office.]

DOWNING STREET

Arguably the second most well-known address in Britain (Buckingham Palace has to be the first), it was constructed in 1682. Unfortunately, there's not too much to see, as you can no longer walk along it. (I can still remember the days when you could stroll down it and chat to the policeman that was always standing outside the entrance of Number 10!))

Firstly, its name. It is called Downing Street after George Downing - a greedy, conniving and treacherous 'diplomat' (not to put too fine a point on it!) who would change his allegiances to whichever country paid him the most money, even selling Britain's own state secrets. However, by selling even more of another country's secrets to the British, he obtained himself a Royal Pardon. He then invested his money in property and managed to wheedle himself into favour with the Crown, persuading them to sell him the land Downing Street is on, and there he erected around seventeen extremely badly built terraced houses. (And if you are ever in a pub quiz when the question "Did a Mr Chicken ever live in 10 Downing Street?" the answer is "yes". He was one of the last occupiers before Prime Minister Robert Walpole moved there in 1735, having first made extensive renovations to the poorly built property.

However, there are only three of the original houses left in the street – Numbers 10, 11 and 12.

Number 10 is both the office and home of the First Lord of the Treasury (more commonly known as the Prime Minister) together with numerous offices where meetings are held, and business conducted. In total there are around 150 rooms, including several very large 'drawing rooms', where heads of state on official visits are entertained. The building is much larger than it appears from the outside, joined to a larger and more elegant building behind it and at the rear is a terrace and a half-acre of garden.

People often ask where the Prime Minister and his family live – they occupy a private apartment on the third floor. However, with both Tony Blair and David Cameron having fairly large families, they used the considerably more spacious apartment in No 11 next door. A long corridor passes from Number 10, through Number 11 and into Number 12. Mrs May has probably moved back into No 10.

No 11 is the home and working offices of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whilst No 12 is that of the Chief Whip.)

'Q-WHITEHALL'

I mentioned this very briefly in the walk, so I'll add a little more here. 'Q-Whitehall' is the name given to a network of tunnels that were built in the Second World War under

Whitehall, and extended at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s. A 'miniature city', though that's far too grand a name for it, was built here that would provide a safe refuge for politicians, military leaders and the royal family in the event of a nuclear attack. Tunnels connect it with both Downing Street and Buckingham Palace, but there are extensions leading to the former Trafalgar Square tube station. There's another entrance under the Treasury building linking with what were the war time Cabinet War Rooms, and another that connects to a lift shaft in the government telephone exchange in Craig's Court.

There are said to be a number of other similar tunnels under central London that are also still covered by the Official Secrets Act; the restriction was put in place for seventy-five years, meaning that details could be released anytime within the next ten years. Until then, this is still top secret, so I suggest that once you have read this page you chew it up and swallow it!

CABINET WAR ROOMS

After the end of the First World War, the government felt they should strengthen the Cabinet¹ War Rooms in case aerial bombing might be used more often in a future war.

Many top senior army officers thought this was very unlikely, no doubt the same ones who had tried to stop the Royal Air Force being formed after the First World War, on the grounds that it would never be needed!

Fortunately, the government ignored them, and once the Second World War began and they realised that aerial bombardment was indeed the future, the basements of the Treasury were turned into bomb proof bunkers, with layers of thick concrete slabs placed above them to provide additional protection. They even put netting across the top of the surrounding buildings to try and catch any falling bombs, and seals on the entrance doors in case of gas attacks. It became a completely self-contained unit – some called it a fortress. Interestingly, Churchill didn't like them, but was forced to 'toe the line' and use them.

Although when you visit there seems a lot to see – around thirty different rooms, some of which are very large - this is only a small part of an incredible three acres of underground facilities. There were two levels that included a hospital with an operating theatre, first aid posts, a firing range, canteens, emergency power station, and of course dormitories where staff could sleep. The BBC put in a studio to enable the Prime Minister to broadcast to the nation and there was even a 'dummy private toilet', said to be for Churchill's use only, that actually contained a phone permanently connected to the President of the USA.

¹ The Cabinet is the supreme directing body of central government, bringing together the Prime Minister and the principal government ministers. In wartime, the Prime Minister assembles a select group of ministers to form a War Cabinet, with executive powers to facilitate the decision-making process. Churchill succeeded Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister in May 1940 and his War Cabinet of eight members was a coalition of both Conservative and Labour Ministers. Churchill also took on the role of Minister of Defence.

Much of what you see today has hardly changed since the war ended and these facilities were abandoned – for example, many original maps, posters and signs are still on the walls.

You discover all this and of course much more by visiting the War Rooms. I don't suggest you try and combine it with this walking tour – firstly, to avoid long queues you normally need to book in advance, and in addition you need to allow a couple of hours to take it all in. There really is a lot to see and read.

WHITEHALL COURT

Running the full length of the street of the same name, this enormous and rather beautiful neo-Baroque building opened in the 1890s. It's actually modelled on a French chateau and is two separate buildings that are joined.

However, as the Royal Horseguards Hotel have now taken over a considerable part of Whitehall Court, the division between some floors between the two buildings have been removed.

Built to house luxurious residential apartments, many well-known figures such as Lord Kitchener, HG Wells and George Bernard Shaw have lived here.

In the text of the walk I mention that few, if indeed any, of the early occupants of these apartments probably ever realised that the building's doormen and commissionaires were actually special branch police officers - the reason being that at one time the top floor of part of the building was the offices of the newly formed secret service, known now as MI6, and they were there to keep an eye on who came in and out of the building, in particular, looking out for foreign spies or agents. Indeed, MI6's presence was kept so secret that not only were the other residents unaware of it, but even those who probably should have known weren't aware either! So much so that when he first moved in, Commander Mansfield Smith-Cumming who had just been appointed head of MI6, on a number of occasions wrote in his diary, "Another day without visitors", apparently little realising that the authorities had kept it so secret that no one knew he was there or how to find him!

The eastern end of the building was once owned by the Liberal Party, the political party started by William Gladstone, and known as the National Liberal Club, but it's now a Gentleman's Club, said to be the one of the largest in the world. Besides its elaborate Thames side terraces, dining rooms and spacious function rooms, there were at one time over 140 bedrooms for its members. During the First World War it was taken over as billets for Canadian troops, later reverting back to be the Liberal Club, which has been the site of a number of major political events.

During the Second World War, it was again taken over by the government and used by both MI5 and MI6, despite receiving a direct hit from a war time bomb. In 1973, it was damaged once again, this time by an IRA bomb.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the club's membership was dropping and they couldn't afford to undertake the amount of renovations that were needed. As a result, they decided to sell a considerable part of the building, including 140 bedrooms and two ballrooms, to the adjacent Royal Horseguards Hotel, which had opened there in 1971 after MI5 and MI6 had moved out.

The hotel is now spread over nine floors and has 282 rooms. Following a fairly recent major upgrade, it now has a five-star grading and due to its proximity to Parliament, has become very popular with politicians and civil servants. (There is even a 'division bell' in the bar and public rooms to alert MP's when a vote is being taken in the House of Commons, which they then hurry across to.) As mentioned before, the hotel also owns the conference and events centre within the same building.

Despite all of that, the National Liberal Club is still there, and whilst somewhat slimmed down, still retains some of its elaborate Thames-side terraces, dining rooms and function rooms.

As a matter of interest, many people may have seen various parts of the inside of the Club, as over the years it has been used in countless films, a list far too long to mention.

(And a final note - I mentioned previously that part a major part of the building's original purpose was for residential apartments and a number are still there – recently I noticed a flat in the building being advertised for over £4 million.)