

History at the Tower

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What to see and do

The Tower of London refers to the White Tower - a Norman Fortress completed in 1078 - and around thirty other buildings that have been added to the site over time. Throughout its history, the Tower has been a secure fortress, a royal palace and an infamous prison. Kings and queens demonstrated their power from here, shaping society and influencing our world.

Explore its three different functions using the visit suggestions below. Please consult our website [here](#) for up-to-date closures.

The Tower as a Fortress

The Tower of London is a military site of exceptional security. For centuries, kings and queens have used the Tower as a stronghold and defensive base, as well as a secure fortress to protect the nation's treasures.



Wellington.

- **Visit the Jewel House** to see the world famous Crown Jewels. Kings and queens of England have stored crowns, robes, and other items of ceremonial regalia at the Tower of London for over 600 years. Since the 17th century, this collection has been commonly known as the 'Crown Jewels'.
 - **Walk along the outer walls, known as the Battlements.** This second line of defence was added by Henry III during the mid-thirteenth century. From here you can explore seven towers: the Salt, Broad Arrow, Constable, Martin, Brick, Bowyer and Flint Tower. Learn how a rabble of peasants managed to successfully invade the Tower during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and discover what it was like to be part of the medieval garrison defending the Tower.
 - **Marvel at the Moat.** The moat contributes to the Tower's function as a secure fortress. To this day, the medieval defences are essentially unchanged, except for the draining of the moat and its conversion into a dry ditch at the request of the Duke of Wellington.
- **Visit the Fusilier Museum**, which tells the story of the British infantry regiment from its formation at the Tower in 1685 to present day. The building still houses the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers' headquarters, which is the Tower's continuing link to the British army.
 - **Observe the sentries** outside the Queen's House and Jewel House. The Tower has always had a garrison (group of soldiers) stationed here to defend the site or to wait to be sent on duty elsewhere. These are real soldiers on active duty.
 - **Find the exhibition about Wellington's fortress** located in the upper Flint Tower. It tells the story of the Duke of Wellington, one of Britain's greatest military leaders, who became the Constable of the Tower in 1826. He was still Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and became Prime Minister twice while serving as Constable of the Tower.

Besides draining the filthy moat, Wellington is known for adapting the fortress for modern warfare where possible and for a more professional army. Under his command, the number of visitors soared, despite his reservations about public access to a military site.

- **See the Tower's Mint exhibition**, located on the original site where the Mint was situated for over 500 years. Discover the surprising stories and unique history of this little known area of the Tower, including Isaac Newton's efforts to rid London of counterfeiters, Elizabeth I's restoration of the currency following her father's disastrous meddling, and Charles II's rejection of Commonwealth money. It explores how medieval coins were made, how new technology revolutionised the Mint, and why the Mint eventually moved out of the Tower in the reign of George III after a huge financial crisis.
- **Spot a Yeoman Warder**. Our famous "Beefeaters" are some of the most photographed guards in London and have been guarding the Tower of London since Tudor times. Yeoman Warders were originally part of the Yeoman of the Guard - the monarch's personal bodyguard. Henry VIII was the first to recognise that the Tower needed a dedicated guard too. The Yeoman Body of 37 men and women are all drawn from the Armed Forces. They need to have at least 22 years' military service; have reached the rank of warrant officer and to have been awarded the long service and good conduct medal; and to be between 40 and 55 years old upon appointment
- **Walk along the Wharf**. The Tower of London was built here because of its strategic riverside position. From this location, it was possible to control and tax cargo boats coming from the City of London and supply and distribute arms throughout the world.
- **Find the Roman remains (opposite the Raven Shop and by the White Tower)**. Roman invaders chose to site their city of Londinium at this first viable crossing point of the River Thames. As you look around the Tower, you will see the remains of the Roman city wall. These standing Roman defences are the reason why William the Conqueror chose to build the Tower of London here. It was already a key location and ideally placed to defend royal power.
- **Look at the arms and armour inside the White Tower**. As a secure fortress, the Tower was a major military centre and weapons store for supply and distribution to the armed forces. The Office of Ordnance (responsible for heavy weaponry) was based here from the late 1700's. It supplied and stored arms and armour for Britain's wars from 1066-1850. It was also one of the first places to use weapons as decoration and in 1820s, the collection was recognised to be of national importance.

The Tower as a Palace

The Tower is a royal palace, used by kings and queens as a royal residence and ceremonial space. It was designed as a symbol of royal power and wealth.

- **Visit the Medieval Palace.** St Thomas' Tower, the Wakefield Tower and the Lanthorn Tower are today known collectively as the 'Medieval Palace'. They lie at the heart of what was formerly the residential area of the Tower - richly decorated and comfortable lodgings grand enough for any medieval monarch. Built by Henry III (1216-72) and his son Edward I (1272-1307), they have been re-presented for today's visitor to evoke a vivid picture of 13th-century life.
- **Spot where the Yeoman Warders live.** People have always lived at the Tower of London and this continues today. Yeoman Warders and their families live here as a part of the Tower community. You will see their houses and gardens scattered throughout the Tower site.
- **Look at the famous ravens.** Legend says that the kingdom and the Tower will fall if the ravens ever leave the fortress. It was Charles II, according to stories (but probably not historical fact), who first insisted that the ravens should be protected and they each now have one wing clipped to prevent them from flying too far. There are seven to nine ravens at the Tower most of the time - the required six, plus at least one spare!
- **Count the chapels.** Monarchs were expected to be Christian leaders. The Chapels Royal were an integral part of the royal palace, used by kings, queens and the Tower community. At the Tower, there are two, The Chapel of St Peter ad Vincula (1520 AD) and The Chapel of St John the Evangelist (1078AD) inside the White Tower. The Chapel of St Peter ad Vincula is usually open to the general public after 3pm.
- **Find the life-sized sculptures of animals around the Tower by the artist Kendra Haste.** These represent the royal menagerie, which was founded at the Tower of London by King John in the early 1200s. The Tower of London eventually became home to more than 60 species of animals, the more exotic the better. They were kept as status symbols, reflecting the monarch's power and influence throughout the world.
- **Stand at the south lawn.** This is the site of the lost Tudor Palace. In c1100-1600, this area was the very heart of the castle, packed with palace buildings. Henry VIII built fashionable new apartments here in preparation for Anne Boleyn's coronation
- **Walk along the wharf.** The Tower's position on the river meant that the royal household, diplomatic and foreign visitors could arrive by water. You can see where the entrances by boat would have been.
- **Look up at the White Tower,** begun by William the Conqueror as a stronghold, a palace and a symbol of royal authority. It is amongst the best preserved and the most interesting 11th-century buildings in Europe. The "onion domes" or cupolas on top of the four turrets were added by Henry VIII as part of his spending spree on improvements in the run up to Anne Boleyn's coronation.

The Tower as a Prison

The Tower was previously used as a prison, where people who posed a serious threat to royal and national security were held while awaiting trial or punishment. Throughout its history, over 8000 people were thought to have been incarcerated here.

- **Reflect at the execution site memorial.** It commemorates 10 people who were condemned to death on Tower Green., three of whom were English queens: Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Henry VIII, Catherine Howard, Henry's fifth wife and Lady Jane Grey, queen for nine days.
- **Try to spot Tower Hill** (outside the Tower walls). Hundreds of prisoners spent their last night at the Tower before being executed on Tower Hill or other public execution sites around London.
- **Visit the Torture at the Tower** exhibition, on the ground floor of the Wakefield Tower. Physical torture did take place at the Tower but rarely and only in certain circumstances. Psychological torture like solitary confinement was much more commonplace.
- **Explore the Salt and Beauchamp Towers** to see where prisoners were kept and the graffiti they left behind. You will notice that the levels of comfort differed depending on the individual prisoner's status and wealth.
- **Stand by Traitors' Gate** where prisoners accused of treason were supposed to have passed through, including Queen Elizabeth I (although our curators tell us she probably entered the Tower via a different water gate).
- **Go inside the White Tower.** The unpopular Bishop and royal tax collector Ranulf Flambard became the first prisoner in the White Tower. Flambard's celebrated escape, after plying his guards with wine and climbing down a rope hidden in the barrel, was the first escape in the Tower's history.



Further information and key-stage specific resources can be found on our website [here](#).

Chronology

From AD50	The walls of the Roman city of Londinium are built by the river on the site the Tower now occupies.
1066	William the Conqueror establishes the Tower to keep hostile Londoners at bay.
1080s	Work on the White Tower is under way.
1101	Ranulf Flambard, the first known prisoner at the Tower, makes a daring escape.
1251	A polar bear joins the Tower menagerie.
1275-79	Edward I builds St Thomas's Tower and the Watergate now known as Traitors' Gate
1279	The London Mint moves inside the Tower.
1360	John II 'the Good' of France lives in great splendour as a prisoner.
1381	Simon of Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, is dragged out of the Tower and murdered on Tower Hill during the Peasants' Revolt.
1389	Geoffrey Chaucer, clerk of works, oversees completion of Tower Wharf. Chaucer is better known for having written The Canterbury Tales.
1483	The Princes in the Tower disappear, presumed murdered.
1485	Henry VII founds the body of Yeoman Warders or 'Beefeaters'.
1533	Anne Boleyn's coronation procession begins from her lavish new rooms in the Tower.
1536	Anne Boleyn is beheaded by a swordsman brought especially from France.
1554	Lady Jane Grey, the 'nine days' queen', is executed. Princess Elizabeth, later Elizabeth I, is imprisoned in the Tower.
1605	Guy Fawkes is tortured at the Tower following the failed Gunpowder Plot to assassinate James I and blow up Parliament.
1671	Colonel Blood attempts to steal the Crown Jewels.
1696	Isaac Newton is appointed Warden of the Mint
1780	The last hanging takes place on Tower Hill.
1812	The Mint moves out of the Tower to a new factory on Tower Hill
1826	Duke of Wellington becomes Constable of the Tower and appoints Yeoman Warders based on their exemplary military service.
1835	Tower Menagerie closes. The animals are transferred to the new London Zoo.
1841	Crown Jewels are saved from fire.
1850	Koh-I-Noor diamond is presented to Queen Victoria.
1941	Nazi Deputy Fuhrer Rudolph Hess is held at the Tower
1952	East end London gangsters Ronnie and Reggie Kray are held at the Tower.
1988	The Tower becomes a UNESCO World Heritage site
1994	Queen Elizabeth II opens the new Jewel House in the Waterloo Block
2007	The Tower's first female Yeoman Warder is appointed
2012	Thousands of gold, silver and bronze medals were securely stored in the vaults for the London Olympics and Paralympics

For more information on the history of the Tower, please visit our website [here](#).