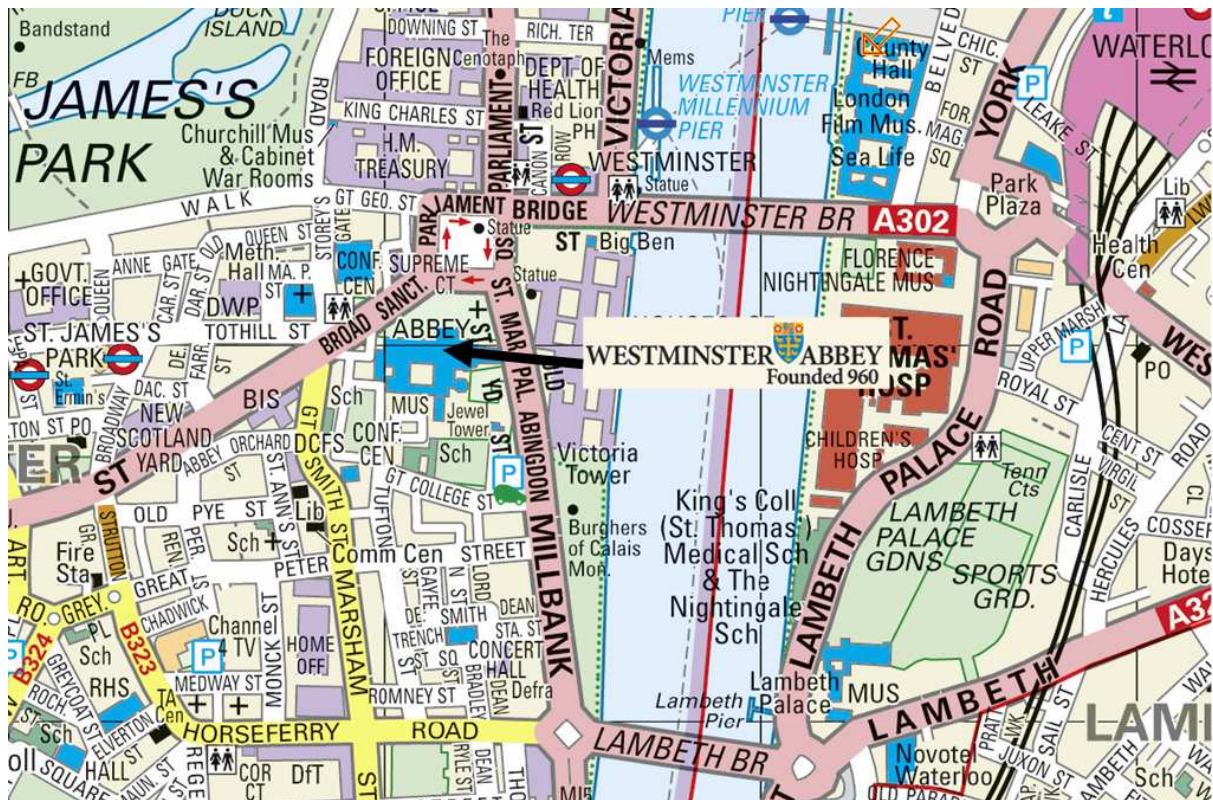




# City of Westminster

## Westminster Abbey





Westminster Abbey is steeped in more than a thousand years of history. Benedictine monks first came to this site in the middle of the tenth century, establishing a tradition of daily worship which continues to this day.

The Abbey has been the coronation church since 1066 and is the final resting place of seventeen monarchs.

The present church, begun by Henry III in 1245, is one of the most important Gothic buildings in the country, with the medieval shrine of an Anglo-Saxon saint still at its heart.

A treasure house of paintings, stained glass, pavements, textiles and other artefacts, Westminster Abbey is also the place where some of the most significant people in the nation's history are buried or commemorated. Taken as a whole the tombs and memorials comprise the most significant single collection of monumental sculpture anywhere in the United Kingdom.

The Library and Muniment Room houses the important (and growing) collections of archives, printed books and manuscripts belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, providing a centre for their study and for research into all aspects of the Abbey's long and varied history.

### **Visiting the Abbey**



### **General Opening Times**

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 9.30am - 4.30pm (last admission 3.30pm)

Wednesday 9.30am - 7.00pm (last admission 6.00pm)

Saturday 9.30am - 2.30pm (last admission 1.30pm)

Sunday Worship only No Tourist Visiting

Kings, queens, statesmen and soldiers; poets, priests, heroes and villains - the Abbey is a must-see living pageant of British history. Every year Westminster Abbey welcomes over one million visitors who want to explore this wonderful 700-year-old building. Thousands more join us for worship at our daily services. The Abbey is in the heart of London. Once inside audio guides are available in eight languages or there is the highly-popular verger-led tour.

### **Individuals**

- Adults £16.00
- Concessions £13.00 (Over 18 students (on production of a valid student card) and 60+)
- Schoolchildren (11 - 18 years) £6
- Entry for all the above includes a free audio-guide each



### Retable

A recent addition to the Museum display is the 13th century Westminster Retable, England's oldest altarpiece. It was most probably designed for the High Altar of the Abbey. The Westminster Retable is acknowledged to be one of the most important surviving examples of panel painting from 13th century England. It returned to the Abbey in 2005, following conservation work just after celebrations to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of the birth of Abbey founder, Edward the Confessor.

### Brasses

The Abbey has a fine series of monumental brasses dating from the late 13th century onwards. A brass consists of engraved metal plates, shaped and cut to fit into a matrix prepared for them on a tomb. The earliest figure brass in England is that to Sir John D'Abernon, 1277, at Stoke D'Abernon in Surrey. Brasses are important for the history of costume and armour but



many were destroyed or melted down at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s and during the English Civil War.

### Wall paintings

The most important wall paintings in the Abbey are from the late 13th century i.e. the figure of St Faith in her chapel and the figures of Christ with St Thomas and St Christopher in the south transept. The series of 14th century paintings of the Apocalypse and the Last

Judgement in the Chapter House are the most extensive.



### Cosmati pavement

The great pavement in front of the High Altar of Westminster Abbey is a unique and remarkable object. The complexity and subtlety of the design and workmanship can be seen nowhere else on this scale. It was laid down in 1268 by order of Henry III who had started re-building Edward the Confessor's Abbey in the new Gothic style in 1245.

### Museum



The Museum is housed in the magnificent vaulted undercroft beneath the former monks' dormitory. This is one of the oldest areas of the Abbey, dating back almost to the foundation of the Norman church by King Edward the Confessor in 1065.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is the Abbey's collection of royal and other funeral effigies. This collection includes the effigies of Edward III, Henry VII and his queen, Elizabeth I, Charles II, William III, Mary II and Queen Anne. Later wax effigies include a striking likeness of Horatio, Viscount Nelson (pictured here) wearing some of his own clothes and another of the famous Prime Minister William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, modelled by an American lady called Patience Wright. During recent conservation of Elizabeth I's effigy a unique corset dating from 1603 was found on the figure and is now displayed separately.

Other items on display include the funeral saddle, helm and shield of Henry V, some panels of medieval glass, 12th century sculpture fragments, Mary II's coronation chair and replicas of the Coronation regalia.

A recent addition to the display is the late 13th century Westminster Retable, England's oldest altarpiece. It was most probably designed for the High Altar of the Abbey, although it has

been damaged in past centuries. The panel has been expertly cleaned and conserved. One section shows the figure of St Peter, the patron saint of the Abbey (pictured).

The Museum is open daily from 10.30 to 16.00 but may be closed for State and other special events. Some postcards and books are available at the Museum.

## Architecture



The present building dates mainly from the reign of King Henry III. In 1245 he pulled down the eastern part of the 11th century Abbey, which had been founded by King Edward the Confessor and dedicated in 1065. Earlier in Henry's reign, on 16 May 1220, he had laid the foundation stone for a new Lady Chapel at the east end of the Confessor's church, but as the Abbey's own financial resources were not sufficient to continue the rebuilding of the whole church at this time no other work was carried out.

It is said that Henry's devotion to St Edward later prompted him to build a more magnificent church in the newest Gothic style, and also to provide a new shrine for the Saint, near to whom Henry himself could be buried. The three master masons supervising the work were Henry of Reyns, John of Gloucester and Robert of Beverley. It is not known if Henry was English or French but the architect was greatly influenced by the new cathedrals at Reims, Amiens and Chartres, borrowing the ideas of an apse with radiating chapels and using the characteristic Gothic features of pointed arches, ribbed vaulting, rose windows and flying buttresses. The design is based on the continental system of geometrical proportion, but its English features include single rather than double aisles and a long nave with wide projecting transepts. The Abbey has the highest Gothic vault in England (nearly 102 feet) and it was made to seem higher by making the aisles narrow. The Englishness is also apparent in the elaborate mouldings of the main arches, the lavish use of polished Purbeck marble for the columns and the overall sculptural decoration. The east-west axis was determined by the existing position of the Lady Chapel.

A spacious area between the high altar and the beginning of the quire was necessary to provide a 'theatre' where coronations could take place. The stonework (which came from Caen in France and Reigate in Surrey), the sculptured roof bosses and the other carvings would have been brightly coloured and the wall arcades may have been decorated in vermilion and gold. The walls were adorned with fine paintings, and two, depicting St Thomas and St Christopher, were rediscovered in the 1930s. Some of the original colour on the ceiling angels in the south transept was discovered at about the same time. Brilliant ruby and sapphire glass, with heraldic shields set in a grisaille (or grey monochrome) pattern, filled the windows. The chapel screens and tombs added to the display of colour. By 1269 the apse, radiating chapels, transepts and choir were complete and the new shrine received the bones of St Edward on 13 October.

When Henry III died in 1272 only one bay of the nave beyond the choir screen had been completed. The old Norman nave remained attached to the far higher Gothic building for over a century until more money became available at the end of the fourteenth century. The western section of the nave was then carried on by Abbot Nicholas Litlington using money bequeathed by Cardinal Simon Langham (Litlington's predecessor as abbot) and work slowly progressed for nearly a hundred and fifty years. It was probably Litlington who insisted that the general design of Henry III's masons should be followed thus giving the Abbey great architectural unity. Master mason Henry Yevele made only minor alterations in the architectural design but it can be seen on closer inspection that the diaper (or rosette) decoration on the spandrels of the arches was discontinued in the nave, and other details are not as elaborate as the older work. In the bay of the nave just to the west of the quire screen can be seen the junction of the old and new work.





In 1422 Henry V was buried at the eastern end of St Edward's Chapel. In accordance with his will a lavishly sculptured chantry chapel was built over the tomb, with two turret staircases leading to an altar above. The designer was John Thirske, who was probably also responsible for the carved altar screen in the Confessor's chapel added at this period, showing representations of events in the life of St Edward. Abbot John Islip, died 1532, added his own Jesus chapel off the north ambulatory and finally completed the nave vaulting and glazed the west window, but the top parts of the west towers remained unfinished.

The next great addition to the Abbey was the construction of a magnificent new Lady Chapel by Henry VII between 1503 and 1519 to replace the 13th century chapel. The Perpendicular architecture here is in total contrast to the rest of the Abbey. No accounts for this building have been found but it is thought that the architects were Robert

Janyns and William Vertue. It has been called "one of the most perfect buildings ever erected in England" and "the wonder of the world". Henry spent lavish sums on its decoration. The glory of the chapel is its delicately carved fan vaulted roof, with hanging pendants. These are constructed on half-concealed transverse arches. All around the chapel are Tudor emblems such as the rose and portcullis, and nearly one hundred statues of saints still remain in niches around the walls. The original jewel-like stained glass by Bernard Flower has, however, disappeared.

The last phase of building was the completion in 1745 of the West Towers in Portland stone, to a design by Nicholas Hawksmoor, the Abbey's Surveyor.

