



# HOUSES *of* PARLIAMENT



BEYOND BIG BEN

DISCOVER  
THE HISTORY,  
ARCHITECTURE  
AND TRADITIONS  
OF BRITAIN'S  
SEAT OF  
DEMOCRACY



HISTORY ❖ ARCHITECTURE ❖ TRADITION

# Welcome to The Where To Go



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# Houses of Parliament – Beyond Big Ben

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*Many people assume that the Houses of Parliament are out of bounds unless you are a politician, but that is simply not true. When Parliament is not sitting, visitors can book guided tours that take them through some of the most magnificent rooms in the Palace of Westminster. In addition, visitors are welcome to watch debates and committee hearings in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.*

*You will walk through nearly a thousand years of British history, from the medieval splendour of Westminster Hall to the richly decorated House of Lords Chamber and the iconic House of Commons. Whether you are interested in politics, history or architecture, a tour offers a fascinating behind-the-scenes glimpse into one of the world's most recognisable buildings.*

## Introduction



I can hardly remember my first school visit to the Houses of Parliament, but I do remember being told that we were not to sit on the green benches which seemed rather odd, as they didn't look particularly comfortable anyway. Of course, in those days, Parliament was never televised, so there was no connection between those famous despatch boxes and the drama of Prime Minister's Questions.

I did not even realise that we had a local MP who regularly came here to sit on those green benches. Nor did I know that, when you grew older, you were allowed to sit on the red benches without even having to take your coat off. Today, I am much older and, hopefully, a little wiser. It is a pleasure to return to the Houses of Parliament and see this extraordinary building through a fresh pair of (spectacled) eyes.



Standing proudly on the north bank of the River Thames, the Palace of Westminster (home to the Houses of Parliament) is one of the world's most recognisable public buildings and the seat of the United Kingdom's Parliament. Home to the House of Commons and the House of Lords, it has been at the heart of British political life for almost a thousand years.

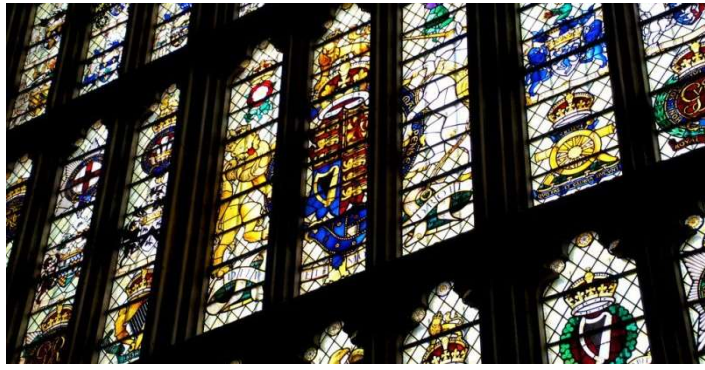


Although Parliament first met here during the Middle Ages, much of the present building dates from the mid-nineteenth century after a devastating fire destroyed the medieval palace in 1834. Architects Sir Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin designed the magnificent Gothic Revival building seen today, creating a masterpiece of Victorian architecture that has become an enduring symbol of democracy.

The Palace contains more than 1,100 rooms, around 100 staircases and several miles of corridors, all richly decorated with carved stonework, stained glass, gilded ceilings and intricate mosaics. In 1987 it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site alongside neighbouring Westminster Abbey and St Margaret's Church.



Perhaps its most famous feature is the Elizabeth Tower, completed in 1859. Its Great Bell, affectionately known as Big Ben, has become synonymous with both Parliament and London itself. Although many people mistakenly refer to the tower as Big Ben, the name actually belongs to the bell inside. Today the Palace of Westminster remains both a working legislature and one of Britain's most visited historic landmarks.



## Westminster Hall

Westminster Hall is the oldest surviving part of the Palace of Westminster and one of the most remarkable medieval buildings in Europe. Built in 1097 during the reign of William II, better known as William Rufus, it has witnessed over nine centuries of British history. Despite fires, wars and countless political changes, the hall has survived largely intact and continues to serve ceremonial functions today.

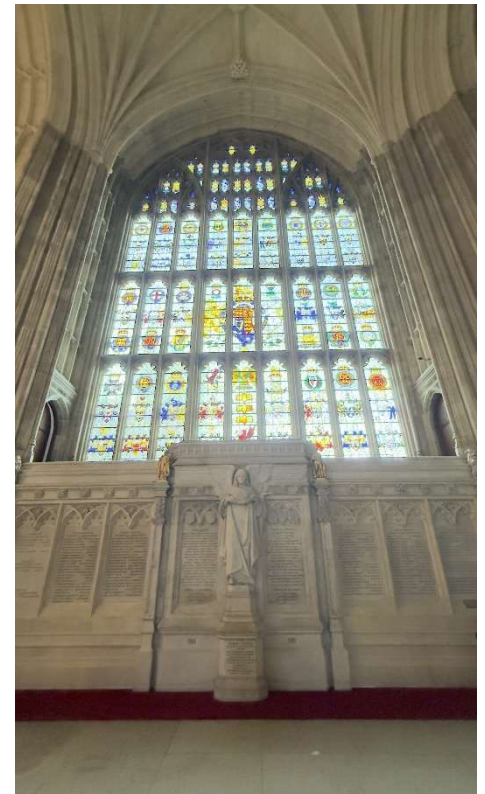
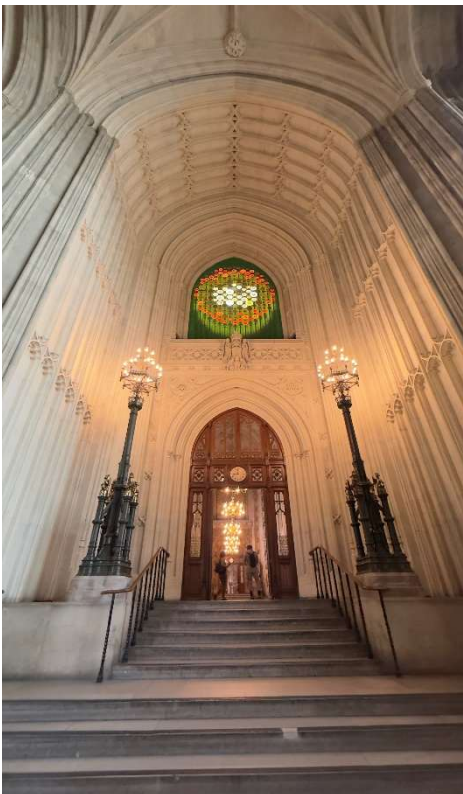


Its most celebrated architectural feature is the magnificent hammerbeam roof, added in the late fourteenth century during the reign of Richard II. Designed by the master carpenter Hugh Herland, it remains one of the greatest achievements of medieval engineering, spanning more than 20 metres without central supporting columns. It remains one of the most spectacular timber roofs ever constructed.



Throughout its long history, Westminster Hall has hosted royal banquets, coronation feasts, state trials and major judicial proceedings. Famous figures including Sir Thomas More, Guy Fawkes, King Charles I and Warren Hastings were tried here. More recently, the hall has become the location where distinguished monarchs and national figures lie in state, allowing the public to pay their respects before state funerals.

As you leave Westminster Hall and pass into St Stephen's Hall, look up above the great archway and you will see one of Parliament's newest and most striking works of art, New Dawn, unveiled in 2016. This contemporary light sculpture by artist Mary Branson commemorates the campaign for women's suffrage and the long struggle to secure the right to vote. This is the first permanent piece of abstract art to be installed in the Palace of Westminster.



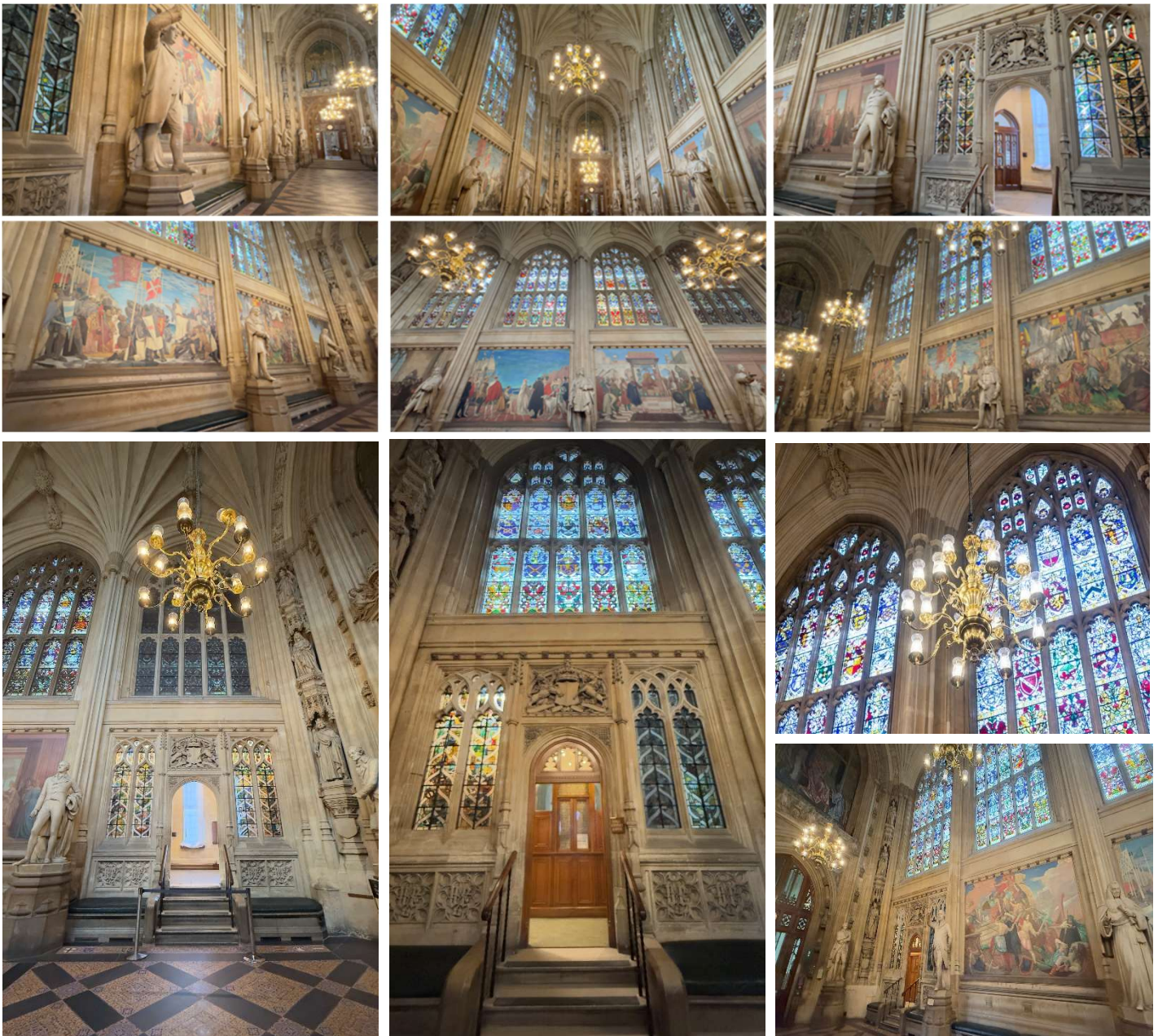
## St Stephen's Hall

Leaving Westminster Hall, visitors enter St Stephen's Hall, one of the grandest spaces within the Palace of Westminster. It occupies the site of the former medieval Chapel of St Stephen, which was converted into the House of Commons Chamber during the sixteenth century and served Parliament until the devastating fire of 1834.

Designed as a magnificent Victorian entrance hall, the present space celebrates Britain's parliamentary heritage. Marble statues line both sides of the hall, commemorating influential statesmen including Sir Robert Peel, William Pitt the Younger, Edmund Burke and Charles James Fox. Their presence reflects the generations of politicians who shaped the nation's history.

The richly decorated walls feature murals depicting key moments in British history, while the elegant Gothic arches and polished stone create a fitting introduction to the parliamentary estate. Bronze plaques embedded in the floor mark the exact location of the Speaker's Chair and the Table of the House from the former Commons Chamber, allowing visitors to stand where centuries of historic debates once took place.

St Stephen's Hall is far more than a corridor. It forms a symbolic bridge between the medieval Parliament and the modern legislature, linking Westminster Hall with Central Lobby and reminding every visitor that today's democratic institutions have evolved over hundreds of years.



## Members' Lobby

Members' Lobby is one of the most important yet least visited rooms within the Palace of Westminster. Situated immediately outside the House of Commons Chamber, it serves as a private meeting place for Members of Parliament, allowing informal discussions before debates and votes. Unlike many of the Palace's ceremonial rooms, Members' Lobby remains primarily a working area reserved for MPs and guests.

The original lobby was destroyed during the Second World War when a German bomb struck the Commons Chamber in May 1941. Following the war, architect Sir Giles Gilbert Scott oversaw the rebuilding of both the Chamber and the surrounding lobby, carefully respecting the traditional style of the Palace while incorporating modern construction techniques.

At the centre of the room stands a large table where parliamentary papers are displayed, while portraits and memorials commemorate former Speakers and Members who have made significant contributions to public life. Nearby are the entrances to the Division Lobbies, where MPs record their votes by physically walking through the 'Aye' or 'No' corridors.....a tradition that has remained largely unchanged for generations.

Although visitors rarely enter Members' Lobby, it represents the everyday heart of the House of Commons, where formal debate gives way to conversation, negotiation and the practical business of representative democracy.

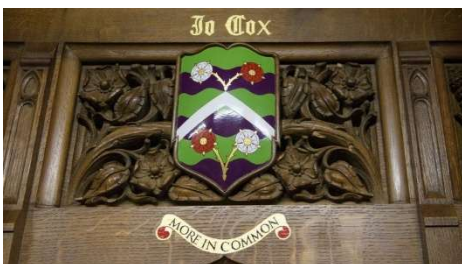


## House of Commons Chamber

The House of Commons Chamber is where elected Members of Parliament debate legislation, scrutinise government policy and represent the interests of their constituents. The most surprising thing about this place is that it is so small and, although it is one of the most famous political chambers in the world, it is surprisingly modest in size, with seating for only around two-thirds of all MPs, reflecting the tradition that not every member attends every debate.

The Chamber is instantly recognisable by its green leather benches..... a colour long associated with the Commons. At one end sits the Speaker, who presides over proceedings and ensures debates are conducted fairly and according to parliamentary rules. Between the Government and Opposition benches stands the Table of the House, where ceremonial objects including the Mace symbolise the authority of Parliament.

The Chamber was rebuilt after being destroyed by bombing during the Second World War. Winston Churchill insisted that the replacement retained the original rectangular layout rather than adopting a semicircular design, believing that the opposing benches encouraged direct debate and vigorous scrutiny. Prime Minister's Questions, major legislative debates and historic announcements all take place here.



As you look towards the Speaker's Chair, two small heraldic shields mounted high on the panelling might easily go unnoticed. They commemorate two Members of Parliament who were murdered while serving their constituents:

Jo Cox, MP for Batley and Spen was killed in 2016, while Sir David Amess, MP for Southend West was killed in 2021. The shields serve as a lasting tribute to all those who devote their lives to public service and underlines Parliament's determination that violence should never undermine democratic representation.

## Central Lobby



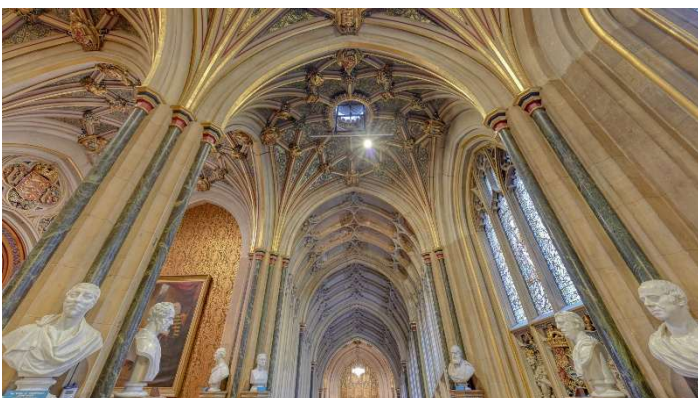
Central Lobby occupies the geographical and symbolic heart of the Palace of Westminster. Designed as an octagonal space where the main corridors converge, it links the House of Commons, the House of Lords, Westminster Hall and the public entrances, making it one of the busiest areas within Parliament.

Architecturally, Central Lobby is one of Augustus Pugin's masterpieces. Every surface is richly decorated with colourful mosaics, carved stone, gilded ceilings and heraldic symbols representing the nations of the United Kingdom. Large statues of leading nineteenth-century statesmen stand around the lobby, while the magnificent, vaulted ceiling draws the eye upwards to intricate Gothic decoration.

Historically, Central Lobby has played an important constitutional role. It was created as a place where ordinary citizens could meet their Members of Parliament. Even today, constituents visiting Westminster traditionally wait here before being collected by their MP, maintaining a centuries-old connection between Parliament and the public.



Because almost every route through the Palace passes through Central Lobby, it is often described as the crossroads of British democracy. Whether Members are heading to debates, peers are crossing to committee meetings or visitors are beginning guided tours, everyone passes through this spectacular space, making it one of the most photographed and recognisable interiors within the Palace.



## Royal Route

The ceremonial route used during the State Opening of Parliament highlights some of the most magnificent interiors in the Palace of Westminster.

Entering through the Norman Porch, the Sovereign proceeds to the Robing Room, where the Imperial State Crown and ceremonial robes are prepared. The route continues through the Royal Gallery and the Prince's Chamber to the House of Lords Chamber.



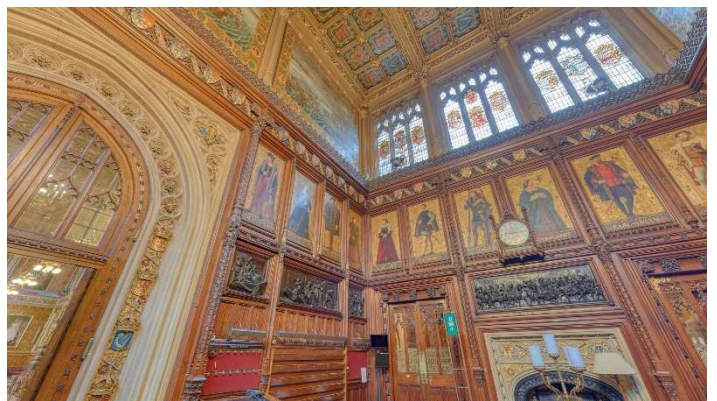
The Robing Room is lavishly decorated with murals illustrating scenes from Arthurian legend, reflecting Victorian ideals of chivalry and monarchy. From here, the procession moves into the Royal Gallery, the largest room in the Palace. Measuring almost 34 metres in length, it is adorned with enormous paintings depicting the victories of Trafalgar and Waterloo, together with richly gilded ceilings and elaborate carved panelling. During State Opening, members of the Royal Family and distinguished guests gather here before the ceremony.





The final stage of the route passes through Prince's Chamber, a richly decorated antechamber lined with portraits of Tudor monarchs. The room provides a dramatic transition into the House of Lords Chamber, where the Sovereign delivers the King's Speech outlining the Government's legislative programme.

Although these rooms are used only occasionally for state ceremonies, they represent the enduring constitutional relationship between the Crown and Parliament, blending royal pageantry with democratic tradition.



## Peers' Lobby



The Peers' Lobby forms the principal entrance to the House of Lords Chamber and is a fine example of Victorian Gothic craftsmanship. Richly decorated with carved stone, colourful marble, gilded ceilings and elaborate mosaics, it was designed to impress both visiting dignitaries and members of the Upper House.

Historically, the lobby has served as a gathering place where peers meet before debates, discuss legislation and receive visitors. Like its counterpart outside the House of Commons, it provides a transition between the public spaces and the formal debating chamber beyond.



Among its notable features are statues and memorials celebrating distinguished political figures, together with heraldic decoration reflecting Britain's constitutional history. The craftsmanship visible throughout the room demonstrates the extraordinary attention to detail employed by Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin during the rebuilding of the Palace following the fire of 1834.

Because it lies immediately outside the House of Lords Chamber, Peers' Lobby becomes particularly significant during ceremonial occasions, including the State Opening of Parliament, when members gather here before taking their places. Although quieter than Central Lobby, it remains an important working space where parliamentary business continues between formal debates, combining historic splendour with the practical demands of a modern legislature.



## House of Lords Chamber



The House of Lords Chamber is among the most magnificent legislative chambers in the world. Dominated by rich crimson furnishings, gilded decoration and intricate Gothic detailing, it reflects both the ceremonial traditions and constitutional role of the Upper House.

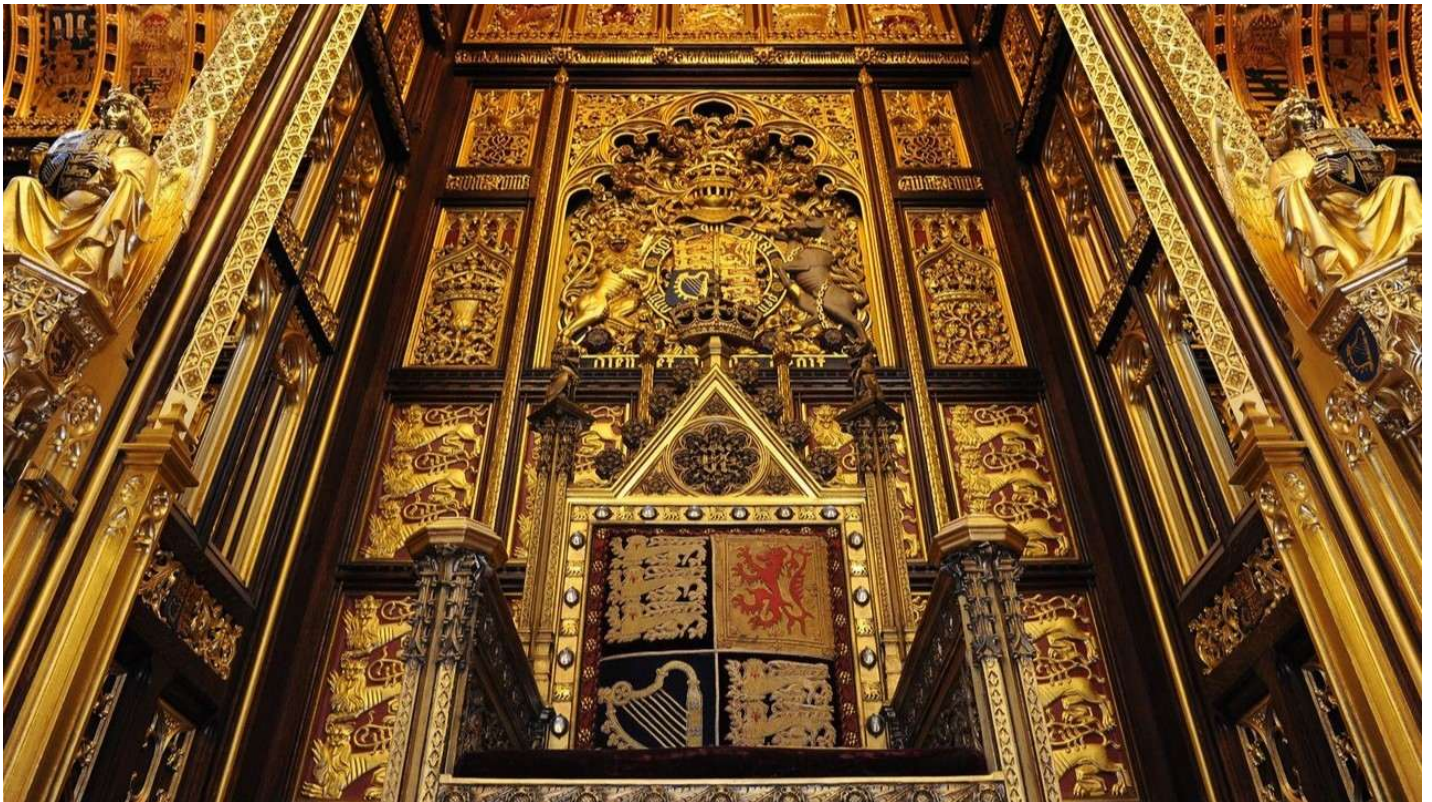
At the southern end stands the Sovereign's Throne beneath an elaborate gilded canopy. During the State Opening of Parliament, the Monarch occupies this throne while delivering the King's Speech, setting out the Government's legislative priorities for the coming parliamentary session.

In front of the throne sits the Woolsack, the distinctive wool-filled seat occupied by the Lord Speaker, symbolising the historic importance of the wool trade to England's prosperity.



The Chamber is arranged with Government benches on one side, Opposition benches opposite and independent Crossbench peers seated across the centre. Unlike the House of Commons, members of the House of Lords are not elected but include life peers, hereditary peers and bishops of the Church of England, each contributing expertise across a wide range of fields.

Although renowned for its ceremonial splendour, the House of Lords performs a vital constitutional function by scrutinising legislation, proposing amendments and holding the Government to account. Together with the House of Commons, it forms an essential part of the United Kingdom's parliamentary system, balancing tradition with the careful examination of modern law.



*Please note that photography beyond Westminster Hall and St Stephen's Hall is strictly prohibited. To help illustrate the remainder of this guide, I have included a number of photographs that I believe are either copyright-free or in the public domain. If I have inadvertently included any image that should not be reproduced, please contact me.*

*That said, not viewing these magnificent rooms through the lens of a camera is, in many ways, a liberating experience. Instead of searching for the perfect photograph, you can simply immerse yourself in the extraordinary architecture, craftsmanship and history that surround you. I would encourage you to embrace that opportunity.*

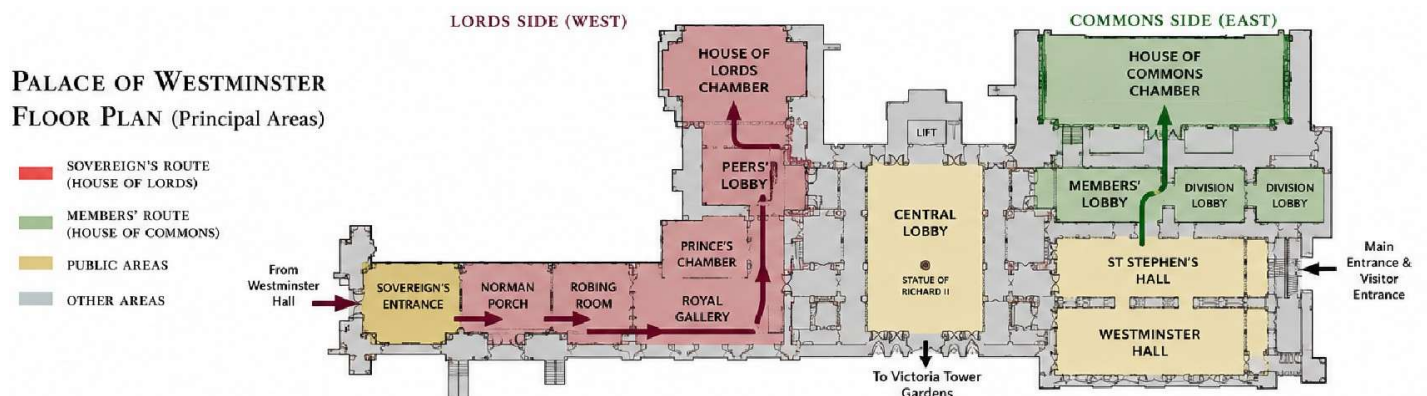
## Reflection

Walking through the Palace of Westminster is about far more than admiring magnificent architecture or ticking another famous landmark off your travel list. Every hall, chamber and corridor tells a story about how Britain has evolved over almost a thousand years. Kings and queens, prime ministers, reformers and ordinary citizens have all played their part in shaping the democracy that exists today.

What struck me most was the contrast between the splendour of the surroundings and the practical business that still takes place within them every day. Behind the gilded ceilings, stained glass and carved stone, Members of Parliament continue to debate, challenge, legislate and represent the people who elected them. This is not simply a museum. It remains the living heart of British democracy.

The Palace also reminds us that democracy is never something to be taken for granted. From the campaign for women's suffrage commemorated by *New Dawn* to the memorials honouring Jo Cox and Sir David Amess, there are constant reminders that progress has often required courage, determination and, at times, great personal sacrifice.

Whether you come for the history, the architecture, the politics or simply because Big Ben is on your bucket list, I hope this guide has encouraged you to look beyond the famous clock tower. The real treasures lie inside, where every room adds another chapter to the remarkable story of the United Kingdom. Thank you for travelling with *The Where To Go*. I hope this guide has helped you discover a side of the Houses of Parliament that many visitors never see, and perhaps inspired you to explore more of Britain's extraordinary history for yourself.



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