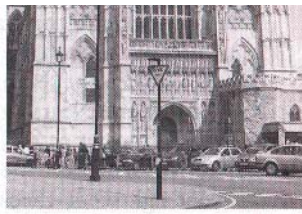


WESTMINSTER ABBEY TOUR

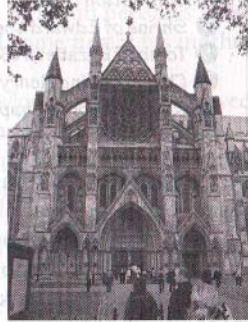


Length of This Tour: Allow 1.5 hours. If you have less time, focus on the main part of the church, skipping the cloister.

The Tour Begins

You'll have no choice but to follow the steady flow of tourists through the church, along the route laid out for the audioguide. It's all one-way, and most days the crowds are a real crush. Here are the Abbey's top 10 (plus one) stops.

• *Walk straight in, entering the north transept. Pick up the map flier that locates the most illustrious tombs and borrow the included audioguide. Follow the crowd flow to the right, passing through "Scientists' Corner," with memorials to Isaac Newton (to the left of the choir entrance), Michael Faraday, Charles Darwin (on the floor), and others. Enter the spacious...*



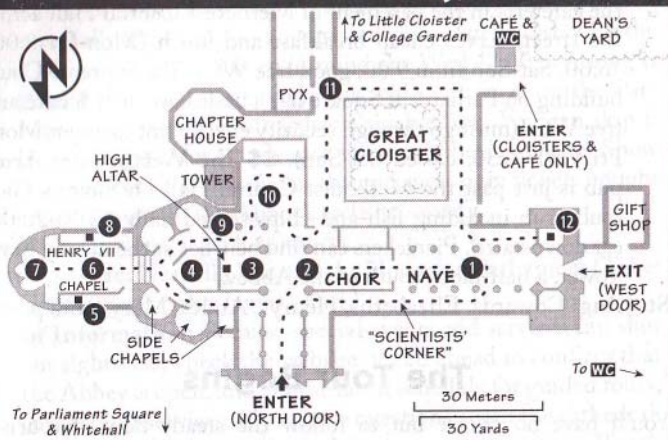
1 Nave

Look down the long and narrow center aisle of the church. Lined with the raying hands of the Gothic arches, glowing with light from the stained glass, this is more than a museum. With saints in stained glass, heroes in carved stone, and the bodies of England's greatest citizens under the floor stones, Westminster Abbey is the religious heart of England.

The Abbey was built in 1065. Its name, Westminster, means Church in the West (west of St. Paul's Cathedral). The king who built the Abbey was Edward the Confessor. Find him in the stained glass windows on the left side of the nave ("left" as you face the altar). He's in the third bay from the end (marked *S: Edwardus rex...*), with his crown, scepter, and ring. Take some time to thank him for this Abbey.

For the next 250 years, the Abbey was redone and remodeled to become essentially the church you see today, notwithstanding an extensive resurfacing in the 19th century. Thankfully, later archi-

Westminster Abbey Tour



- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 Nave | 8 Tomb of Mary, Queen of Scots |
| 2 Choir | 9 Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries |
| 3 Coronation Spot | 10 Poets' Corner |
| 4 Shrine of Edward the Confessor | 11 Great Cloister |
| 5 Tomb of Elizabeth I & Mary I | 12 Coronation Chair |
| 6 Chapel of King Henry VII | |
| 7 Royal Air Force Chapel | |

itects—ignoring building trends of their generation—honored the vision of the original planner, and the building was completed in one relatively harmonious style.

The Abbey's 10-story nave is the tallest in England. The chandeliers, 10 feet tall, look small in comparison (16 were given to the Abbey by the Guinness family).

On the floor near the west entrance of the Abbey is the flower-lined **Grave of the Unknown Warrior**, one ordinary WWI soldier buried in soil from France with lettering made from melted-down weapons from that war. Take time to contemplate the million-man army from the British Empire, and all those who gave their lives. Their memory is so revered that, when Kate Middleton walked up the aisle on her wedding day, by tradition she had to step around the tomb (and her wedding bouquet was later placed atop this tomb, also in accordance with tradition). Hanging on a column next to the tomb is the US Medal of Honor, presented by General John J. Pershing in 1921 to honor England's WWI dead. Closer to the door, also on the floor, is a memorial to a hero of World War II, Winston Churchill.

• Now walk straight up the nave toward the altar. This is the same route every future monarch walks on the way to being crowned. Midway up

the nave, you pass through the colorful screen of an enclosure known as the...

2 Choir

These elaborately carved wood and gilded seats are where monks once chanted their services in the “quire”—as it’s known in British church-speak. Today, it’s where the Abbey boys’ choir sings the evensong. You’re approaching the center of a cross-shaped church.

The “**high**” (main) altar—which usually has a cross and candlesticks atop it—sits on the platform up the five stairs in front of you.

• *It’s on this platform that the monarch is crowned.*



3 Coronation Spot

The area immediately before the high altar is where every English coronation since 1066 has taken place. Imagine the day when Prince William becomes king. (Or you can picture Prince Charles, who’ll come first if his mother doesn’t manage to outlive him.)

The nobles in robes and powdered wigs look on from the carved wooden stalls of the choir. The Archbishop of Canterbury stands at the high altar. The coronation chair (which we’ll see later) is placed before the altar on the round, brown pavement stone representing the earth. Surrounding the whole area are temporary bleachers for 8,000 VIPs, going halfway up the rose windows of each transept, creating a “theater.”

Long silver trumpets hung with banners sound a fanfare as the monarch-to-be enters the church. The congregation sings, “I will go into the house of the Lord,” as William parades slowly down the nave and up the steps to the altar. After a church service, he sits in the chair, facing the altar, where the crown jewels are placed. William is anointed with holy oil, then receives a ceremonial sword, ring, and cup. The royal scepter is placed in his hands, and—dut, dutta dah—the archbishop lowers the Crown of St. Edward the Confessor onto his royal head. Finally, King William V stands up, descends the steps, and is presented to the people. As cannons roar throughout the city, the people cry, “God save the king!”

Royalty are also given funerals here. Princess Diana’s coffin was carried to this spot for her funeral service in 1997. The “Queen Mum” (mother of Elizabeth II) had her funeral here in 2002. This is also where most of the last century’s royal weddings have taken place, including the unions of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip (1947), her parents (1923), her sister Princess Margaret (1960),

and her son Prince Andrew (to Sarah Ferguson, 1986). Most recently, in April 2011, Prince William and Kate Middleton strolled up the nave, passed through the choir, climbed the five steps to the high altar, and became husband and wife—and the future King and Queen of the United Kingdom and its Commonwealth. Though royal marriages and funerals can happen anywhere, only one church can hold a coronation—the Abbey.

• *Now veer left and follow the crowd. You'll walk past the statue of Robert ("Bob") Peel, the prime minister whose policemen were nicknamed "bobbies." Stroll a few yards into the land of dead kings and queens. Use the audioguide to explore the side chapels—the Chapel of St. John the Baptist and Chapel of St. Michael. There you'll see effigies of the dead lying atop their tombs of polished stone. They lie on their backs or recline on their sides. Dressed in ruffed collars, they relax on pillows, clasping their hands in prayer, many buried side by side with their spouses.*

After exploring the chapels, pause at the wooden staircase on your right.

4 Shrine of Edward the Confessor

The holiest part of the church is the raised area behind the altar (where the wooden staircase leads—sorry, no tourist access except with verger tour). Step back and peek over the dark coffin of Edward I to see the tippy-top of the green-and-gold wedding-cake tomb of King Edward the Confessor—the man who built Westminster Abbey.

God had told pious Edward to visit St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. But with the Normans thinking conquest, it was too dangerous for him to leave England. Instead, he built this grand church and dedicated it to St. Peter. It was finished just in time to bury Edward and to crown his foreign successor, William the Conqueror, in 1066. After Edward's death, people prayed at his tomb, and, after getting good results, Pope Alexander III canonized him. This elevated, central tomb—which lost some of its luster when Henry VIII melted down the gold coffin-case—is surrounded by the tombs of eight kings and queens.

• *Continue on. At the top of the stone staircase, veer left into the private burial chapel of Queen Elizabeth I.*

5 Tomb of Queens Elizabeth I and Mary I

Although only one effigy is on the tomb (Elizabeth's), there are actually two queens buried beneath it, both daughters of Henry VIII (by different mothers). Bloody Mary—meek, pious, sickly, and Catholic—enforced Catholicism during her short reign (1553–1558) by burning "heretics" at the stake.

Elizabeth—strong, clever, and Protestant—steered England on an Anglican course. She holds a royal orb symbolizing that

she's queen of the whole globe. When 26-year-old Elizabeth was crowned in the Abbey, her right to rule was questioned (especially by her Catholic subjects) because she was considered the bastard seed of Henry VIII's unsanctioned marriage to Anne Boleyn. But

Elizabeth's long reign (1559-1603) was one of the greatest in English history, a time when England ruled the seas and Shakespeare explored human emotions. When she died, thousands turned out for her funeral in the Abbey. Elizabeth's face on the tomb, modeled after her death mask, is considered a very accurate take on this hook-nosed, imperious "Virgin

Queen" (she never married).

The two half-sisters disliked each other in life—Mary even had Elizabeth locked up in the Tower of London for a short time. Now they lie side by side for eternity. The Latin inscription ends, "Here we lie, two sisters in hope of one resurrection."

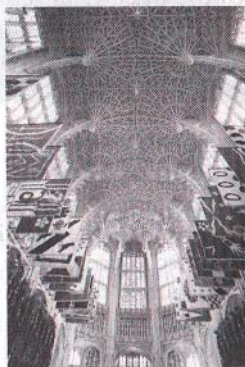
• Continue into the ornate, flag-draped room up a few more stairs, directly behind the main altar.

6 Chapel of King Henry VII (The Lady Chapel)

The light from the stained-glass windows; the colorful banners overhead; and the elaborate tracery in stone, wood, and glass give this room the festive air of a medieval tournament. The prestigious Knights of the Bath meet here, under the magnificent ceiling studded with gold pendants. The ceiling—of carved stone, not plaster (1519)—is the finest English Perpendicular Gothic and fan vaulting you'll see (unless you're going to King's College Chapel in Cambridge). The ceiling was sculpted on the floor in pieces, then jigsaw-puzzled into place. It capped the Gothic period and signaled the vitality of the coming Renaissance.

The knights sit in the wooden stalls with their coats of arms on the back, churches on their heads, their banner flying above, and the graves of dozens of kings beneath their feet. When the Queen worships here, she sits in the southwest corner chair under the carved wooden throne with the lion crown (immediately to the left as you enter).

Behind the small altar is an iron cage housing tombs of the old warrior Henry VII of Lancaster and his wife, Elizabeth of



York. Their love and marriage finally settled the Wars of the Roses between the two clans. The combined red-and-white rose symbol decorates the top band of the ironwork. Henry VII, the first Tudor king, was the father of Henry VIII and the grandfather of Elizabeth I. This exuberant chapel heralds a new optimistic postwar era as England prepares to step onto the world stage.

• *Go to the far end of the chapel and stand at the banister in front of the modern set of stained-glass windows.*

7 Royal Air Force Chapel

Saints in robes and halos mingle with pilots in parachutes and bomber jackets. This tribute to WWII flyers is for those who earned their angel wings in the Battle of Britain (July-Oct 1940). Hitler's air force ruled the skies in the early days of the war, bombing at will, and threatening to snuff Britain out without a fight. But while determined Londoners hunkered down underground, British pilots in their Spitfires and Hurricanes took advantage of newly invented radar to get the jump on the more powerful Luftwaffe. These were the fighters about whom Churchill said, "Never...was so much owed by so many to so few."

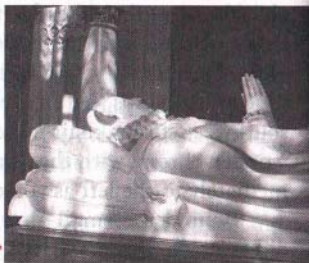
The Abbey survived the Battle and the Blitz, but this window did not. As a memorial, a bit of bomb damage has been preserved—the little glassed-over hole in the wall below the windows in the lower left-hand corner. The book of remembrances lists each of the 1,497 airmen (including one American) who died in the Battle of Britain.

You're standing on the grave of Oliver Cromwell, leader of the rebel forces in England's Civil War. Or, rather, what had been his grave, when Cromwell was buried here from 1658 to 1661. Then his corpse was exhumed, hanged, drawn, quartered, and decapitated, and the head displayed on a stake as a warning to anarchists.

• *Exit the Chapel of Henry VII. Turn left into a side chapel with the tomb (the central one of three in the chapel).*

8 Tomb of Mary, Queen of Scots

Historians get dewy-eyed over the fate of Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587). The beautiful, French-educated queen was held under house arrest for 19 years by Queen Elizabeth I, who considered her a threat to her sovereignty. Elizabeth got wind of an assassination plot, suspected Mary was behind it, and had her first cousin (once removed) beheaded. When Elizabeth died



childless, Mary's son—James VI, King of Scots—also became King James I of England and Ireland. James buried his mum here (with her head sewn back on) in the Abbey's most sumptuous tomb.

• *Exit Mary's chapel. Ahead of you, again, is the tomb of the church's founder, Edward the Confessor. Continue on, until you emerge in the south transept. Look for the doorway that leads to a stairway and elevator to the...*

9 Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries

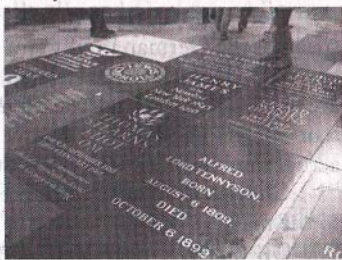
In 2018, the Abbey opened a space that had been closed off for 700 years—an internal gallery 70 feet above the main floor known as the triforium. This balcony now houses the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries, a small museum with exhibits covering royal coronations, funerals, and much more from the Abbey's 1,000-year history, including the coronation chair of Queen Mary II and Prince William and Kate's marriage license. There are also stunning views of the nave straight down to the Great West Door. Because of limited space, a timed-entry ticket is required (see page 131).

• *After touring the Queen's Galleries, return to the main floor. You're in...*

10 Poets' Corner

England's greatest artistic contributions are in the written word. Here the masters of arguably the world's most complex and expressive language are remembered. (Many writers are honored with plaques and monuments; relatively few are actually buried here.)

• *Start with Chaucer, buried in the wall under the blue windows, marked with a white plaque reading Qui Fuit Anglorum...*



Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400) is often considered the father of English literature.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* told of earthy people speaking everyday English, not French or Latin. He was the first great writer buried in the Abbey (thanks to his job as a Westminster clerk). Later, it became a tradition to bury other writers here, and Poets' Corner was built around his tomb. The blue windows have blank panels awaiting the names of future poets.

• *The plaques on the floor before Chaucer are gravestones and memorials to other literary greats.*

Lord Byron, the great lover of women and adventure: "Though the night was made for loving, / And the day returns too soon, / Yet we'll go no more a-roving / By the light of the moon."

Dylan Thomas, alcoholic master of modernism, with a Ro-

mantic's heart: "Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means, / Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea."

W. H. Auden, Brit-turned-American modernist on love, politics, and religion: "He was my North, my South, my East and West / My working week and Sunday rest / My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song / I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong."

Lewis Carroll, creator of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*: "Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe..."

T. S. Eliot, American-turned-British author of the influential *Waste Land*: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain."

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, conscience of the Victorian era: "'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all."

Robert Browning: "Oh, to be in England / Now that April's there."

• *Farther out in the south transept, you'll find a statue of...*

William Shakespeare: Although he's not buried here, this greatest of English writers is honored by a fine statue that stands near the end of the transept, overlooking the others: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."

George Frideric Handel: High on the wall opposite Shakespeare is the German immigrant famous for composing the *Messiah* oratorio: "Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah." The statue's features are modeled on Handel's death mask. Musicians can read the vocal score in his hands for "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth." His actual tomb is on the floor, next to...

Charles Dickens, whose serialized novels brought literature to the masses: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

On the floor near Shakespeare, you'll also find the tombs of **Samuel Johnson** (who wrote the first English dictionary) and the great English actor **Laurence Olivier**. (Olivier disdained the "Method" style of acting—experiencing intense emotions in order to portray them. When co-star Dustin Hoffman stayed up all night in order to appear haggard for a scene, Olivier said, "My dear boy, why don't you simply try acting?")

And finally, near the center of the transept, find the small, white floor plaque of **Thomas Parr** (marked *THO: PARR*). Check the dates of his life (1483-1635) and do the math. In his (reputed) 152 years, he served 10 sovereigns and was a contemporary of Columbus, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Shakespeare, and Galileo. Famous simply for supposedly being an "Old, Old, Very Old Man," as poet John Taylor dubbed him in 1635, Parr is mentioned in works

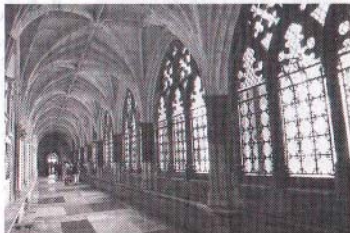
by celebrated writers such as Charles Dickens, Henry David Thoreau, Bram Stoker, Robert Graves, and James Joyce.

• *Exit the church (temporarily) at the south door, which leads to the...*

11 Great Cloister

The buildings that adjoin the church housed the monks. (The church is known as the “abbey” because it was the headquarters of the Benedictine Order until Henry VIII kicked them out in 1540.) Cloistered courtyards gave them a place to meditate on God’s creations.

The **Chapter House** is where the monks had daily meetings. It features fine architecture and stained glass, some faded but well-described medieval paintings and floor tiles, and—in the corridor—Britain’s oldest door. A few steps farther down the hall is the **Pyx Chamber**. This old, thick-walled room once safeguarded the coins used to set the silver standard of the realm (a pyx is a small box that held gold and silver coins).



As you return to the church, look back through the cloister courtyard to the church exterior, and meditate on the **flying buttresses**. These stone bridges that push in on the church walls allowed Gothic architects to build so high.

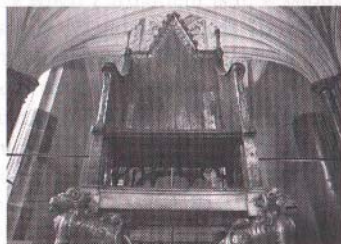
If you need a bite or drink, or the WC, head for the abbey café.

• *Go back into the church for the last stop.*

12 Coronation Chair

A gold-painted oak chair waits here under a regal canopy for the next coronation. For every English coronation since 1308 (except two), it’s been moved to its spot before the high altar to

receive the royal buttocks. The chair’s legs rest on lions, England’s symbol. The space below the chair originally held a big sandstone rock from Scotland called the Stone of Scone (pronounced “skoon”), symbolizing Scotland’s unity with England’s monarch. But in the 1990s, Britain gave Scotland more sovereignty, its own Parliament, and the Stone, which Scotland has agreed to loan to



Britain for future coronations (the rest of the time, it's on display in Edinburgh Castle).

Next to the chapel with the chair hangs a 600-year-old portrait of King Richard II. The boy king is holding the royal orb and scepter, wearing the crown, and seated upon this very chair.

Finally, take one last look down the nave. Listen to and ponder this place, filled with the remains of the people who made Britain a world power—saints, royalty, poets, musicians, scientists, soldiers, politicians. Now step back outside into a city filled with the modern-day poets, saints, and heroes who continue to make Britain great.