Westminster Abbey

From Collins English Dictionary

1 a Gothic church in London: site of a Benedictine monastery (1050–65); scene of the coronations of almost all English monarchs since William I.

Summary Article: Westminster Abbey from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

Gothic church in central London, officially the Collegiate Church of St Peter. The present church was built 1245–1745, but an earlier building was consecrated under Edward the Confessor in 1065. The west towers are by Nicholas Hawksmoor, completed after his death in 1745. Since William I nearly all the English monarchs have been crowned in the abbey, and several are buried here. Some 30 scientists, among them Isaac Newton and James Prescott Joule, are interred or commemorated here, as are many writers at Poets' Corner, including Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy. In the centre of the nave is the tomb of an 'Unknown Warrior' of World War I.

The Coronation Chair until recently included the Stone of Scone, on which Scottish kings were crowned, and which was brought here by Edward I in 1296. Poets' Corner was begun with the burial of Edmund Spenser in 1599. Westminster School, a public school with ancient and modern buildings nearby, was once the Abbey School.

Legendary history The legendary history of the abbey goes back to the foundation of a church by Lucius, the legendary 2nd-century 'first Christian king' of Britain, upon the alleged site of a temple of Apollo. This was supposedly followed by the building of another church by Sebert, the first Christian king of the East Saxons, and was consecrated in 616 by the Apostle St Peter, who appeared on earth for the occasion.

Origins and architectural history The authentic history of the abbey begins with a charter (preserved in the chapter-house) of Offa of Mercia, who in 785 granted lands and privileges to the church of St Peter at Thorney; but certainly there was a Benedictine monastery here in the 10th century. About 1050 Edward the Confessor began building an immense church on this site, the island of Thorney. Fragments of this church, which was consecrated in 1065, are embodied in the present structure. The style was that of the advanced schools of Romanesque architecture. By the early 13th century the old sanctuary had become cramped and inconvenient, and Henry III decided on a new building and a fitting shrine for the canonized Confessor.

Demolition began in 1245, and by 1258 the new east sanctuary was completed. In 1258 the demolition of the Norman nave was begun, and in 1269 the body of St Edward was placed in a gold shrine which stood on the present marble mosaic base. Nothing was done to complete the nave until 1275, when the remainder of the Norman nave was demolished, and it was completed in a style similar to that of the 13th-century work, by Henry Yevele, designer of the Perpendicular nave of Canterbury Cathedral.

Ecclesiastical history In 1298 a great fire destroyed all the monastic buildings. The whole of the damage was not made good until the time of Abbot Nicholas Litlyngton (1362–86). The monastery, which had been one of the greater Benedictine houses for over 400 years, was suppressed in 1540, and the abbey raised to the rank of a cathedral. When the only Bishop of Westminster ever appointed resigned in 1550 the see was united to that of London. In 1556, under Mary I, it became a monastery again. This was suppressed in 1560 by Elizabeth I, who established it as a 'Royal peculiar', a collegiate church with a dean and chapter, which it has remained.

Architectural detail The general plan of Henry III's church is very complex, but it was designed to meet the diverse needs of the monks, the king and his court whose royal chapel it was. The extreme length is 162 m/530 ft, the breadth 67 m/220 ft, the length of the nave 47 m/154 ft, and its height 31 m/103 ft, making it the highest English church. The triforium is one of the most impressive of all the constituent portions of an early Gothic church in England. Structurally, Henry III's is a French church, but much of the detail is English. The royal chapels at the east end contain several monumental tombs of the highest medieval craftsmanship. On the back of the tomb of Philippa of Hainault is the Westminster Retable, a 13th-century oak altarpiece with what is considered to be probably the finest early medieval painting in Europe.

Jerusalem Chamber, part of the deanery, was originally the abbot's parlour and dates from the late 14th century. The origins of its name are unclear but possibly it derives its name from the tapestries of the history of Jerusalem that formerly adorned it.

Henry VII's Chapel, which replaced the Lady Chapel of 1220, was begun in 1503. This was the work of the brothers William and Robert Vertue. The fan vault is technically remarkable from the fact that the architects discarded the use of ribs, the unribbed vault...
being fitted together with as much precision and accuracy as the parts of a mosaic.

The chapter-house was built from 1245 to 1250 and is one of the largest in England. From the reign of Edward I until 1547 parliament generally met here. It was completely restored by Sir Gilbert Scott in 1865. The tile pavement dates back to about 1250. The mural paintings have been skilfully restored. South of the chapter-house is the chapel of the Pyx, a vaulted chamber built about 1050. The king's treasure chamber was once the crypt under the chapter-house. On the left is the dark cloister, from which a doorway leads to the Norman undercroft of the dormitory, now the abbey museum.

**Tombs and monuments** Westminster Abbey is not only the scene of the crowning of British sovereigns (the Coronation Chair (1300–01) is in the Confessor's Chapel), but the great national mausoleum, and many kings, statesmen, soldiers, writers and others are buried or commemorated there. Edward the Confessor, Henry III, Edward I, Henry VII, Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, Charles II, William III, Anne, and George II are buried in the abbey. Other monuments include the tomb of the 'Unknown Warrior' and a memorial in the apse bay of Henry VII's Chapel to the airmen of the Battle of Britain. From a very early date the east corner of the south transept has been called Poets' Corner; among the writers, playwrights, poets, and actors buried are Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Dickens, and Laurence Olivier.

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