



WESTMINSTER HALL

Over 900 years of history...

Westminster Hall is the oldest remaining part of the original Palace of Westminster and has great historical and architectural importance. It has witnessed many events during its 900 year history, including fire, dramatic legal trials and coronation banquets. It has even been a shopping arcade and has housed law courts. Today it is used for ceremonial addresses and public exhibitions.

LYING IN STATE

The Hall has been used for the lying-in-state of monarchs and great parliamentarians, including George V, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, William Ewart Gladstone and Sir Winston Churchill.

BEHEADED

Oliver Cromwell's head was impaled on a spike on Westminster Hall's roof after his body was exhumed and decapitated in 1661 by Charles II's supporters, following the restoration of the monarchy. It remained there for at least 20 years.

Building the Hall

The Hall was commissioned in 1097 under William II (Rufus), the son of William the Conqueror, and was completed two years later. At the time, the Hall was by far the largest hall in England, and probably in Europe, measuring 73m by 20m, covering a floor area of 1547m.

The Hall's walls were built two metres thick. Inside, there was an arcade with large arches and windows. Above the windows was a chequer-work pattern of light and dark stones. The Hall's inside walls were plastered and painted with decorative hangings draped from the arcade.

The hammer-beam roof

The magnificent hammer-beam roof of Westminster Hall is the largest medieval timber roof in Northern Europe. Measuring 20.7 by 73.2m, the roof was commissioned in 1393 by Richard II and is a masterpiece of design.

The design work was undertaken by the King's chief mason Henry Yevele and by carpenter Hugh Herland. Great oak beams provided horizontal support and the walls were strengthened by massive buttresses. Wooden arches joined to the beams met centrally across a span of 18m or more.

Craftsmen then built the roof with its weight borne by the beams which were in turn supported by the buttressed walls.

Richard II commissioned other additions to the Hall, including angels carved on beams and sculptures of England's kings since Edward the Confessor, complete with gilded crowns and painted robes.

A royal palace

The Hall played an important role in royal life through the centuries. Feasts and entertainments were held there with masques, music, dancing and jousting taking place in front of hundreds of guests.

Between 1189 and 1821, the Hall was the traditional venue for coronation banquets for newly-crowned monarchs. Richard III's coronation banquet was attended by 3000 guests with galleries specially built to accommodate them. The King's champion rode through the Hall on horseback, challenging anyone to deny the King's right to succeed.

On becoming King in 1830, William IV chose not to hold a coronation banquet in the Hall on the grounds of expense and the tradition ended.

The Hall in danger

In 1834, a fire started in the House of Lords and spread northwards towards the Hall, destroying existing buildings in its path and threatening the Hall's wooden roof. The Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, quickly directed efforts to douse the roof with water, saving the Hall although much of the Palace's other buildings were lost

In May 1941, on the last day of the blitz, both the House of Commons Chamber and Westminster Hall were hit by incendiary bombs. A decision was made once again to concentrate efforts on saving the medieval Hall at the cost of the Chamber which was completely destroyed.

Trials in Westminster Hall

The Hall has witnessed many high-profile legal trials, including Sir William Wallace the Scottish patriot, Sir Thomas More adviser to Henry VIII, Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, all of whom were sentenced to death. The most famous trial held in the Hall was the trial of Charles I who was sentenced to death there on 27 January 1649.

The Royal Courts of Justice were based in Westminster Hall until moving to the building they currently occupy on The Strand in 1882. Alongside the law courts, there were shops selling legal paraphernalia, wigs, pens and stationery.

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