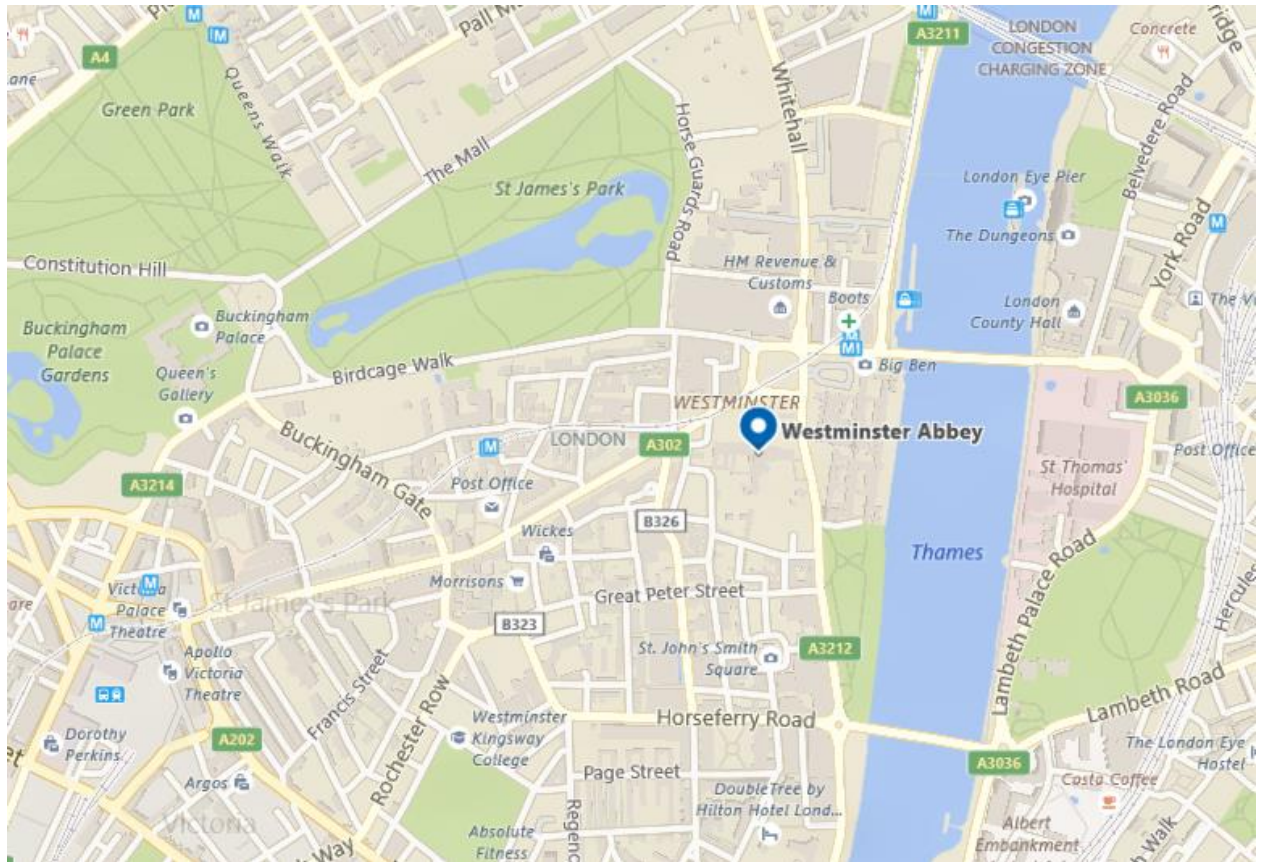


Westminster Abbey



History

A late tradition claims that Aldrich, a young fisherman on the [River Thames](#), has a [vision](#) of [Saint Peter](#) near the site. This seems to have been quoted as the origin of the salmon that Thames fishermen offered to the abbey in later years - a custom still observed annually by the [Fishmongers' Company](#). The recorded origins of the Abbey date to the 960s or early 970s, when [Saint Dunstan](#) and [King Edgar](#) installed a community of [Benedictin monks](#) on the site.

1042: Edward the Confessor starts rebuilding St Peter's Abbey[\[edit\]](#)



St Peter's Abbey at the time of Edward's funeral, depicted in the [Bayeux Tapestry](#)

Between 1042 and 1052, King [Edward the Confessor](#) began rebuilding St Peter's Abbey to provide himself with a royal burial church. It was the first church in England built in the [Romanesque](#) style. The building was completed around 1060 and was consecrated on 28 December 1065, only a week before Edward's death on 5 January 1066.^[a] A week later, he was buried in the church; and, nine years later, his wife [Edith](#) was buried alongside him.^[a] His successor, [Harold II](#), was probably crowned in the abbey, although the first documented coronation is that of [William the Conqueror](#) later the same year.^[a]

[Lords](#) as of right. Released from the burdens of spiritual leadership, which passed to the reformed [Cluniac movement](#) after the mid-10th century, and occupied with the administration of great landed properties, some of which lay far from Westminster, "the Benedictines achieved a remarkable degree of identification with the secular life of their times, and particularly with upper-class life", Barbara Harvey concludes, to the extent that her depiction of daily life^[13] provides a wider view of the concerns of the English gentry in the [High](#) and [Late Middle Ages](#).^[citation needed]

The proximity of the Palace of Westminster did not extend to providing monks or abbots with high royal connections; in social origin the Benedictines of Westminster were as modest as most of the order. The abbot remained [Lord of the Manor](#) of Westminster as a town of two to three thousand persons grew around it: as a consumer and employer on a grand scale the monastery helped fuel the town economy, and relations with the town remained unusually cordial, but no enfranchising charter was issued during the Middle Ages.^[14] The abbey built shops and dwellings on the west side, encroaching upon the sanctuary.^[citation needed]

The abbey became the coronation site of Norman kings. None was buried there until Henry III, intensely devoted to the cult of the Confessor, rebuilt the abbey in [Anglo-French Gothic style](#) as a shrine to venerate King Edward the Confessor and as a suitably regal setting for Henry's own tomb, under the highest Gothic [nave](#) in England. The Confessor's shrine subsequently played a great part in his [canonisation](#). The work continued between 1245 and 1517 and was largely finished by the architect [Henry Yevele](#) in the reign of [Richard II](#). Henry III also commissioned the unique [Cosmati](#) pavement in front of the High Altar (the pavement has recently undergone a major cleaning and conservation programme and was re-dedicated by the Dean at a service on 21 May 2010).^[15]

[Henry VII](#) added a [Perpendicular style](#) chapel dedicated to the [Blessed Virgin Mary](#) in 1503 (known as the [Henry VII Chapel](#) or the "Lady Chapel"). Much of the stone came from [Caen](#), in France ([Caen stone](#)), the [Isle of Portland](#) ([Portland stone](#)) and the [Loire Valley](#) region of France ([tuffeau limestone](#)).^[citation needed]

16th and 17th centuries: dissolution and restoration^[edit]

In 1535, the abbey's annual income of £2400–2800 (equivalent to £1,320,000 to £1,540,000 as of 2015),^[16] during the assessment attendant on the [Dissolution of the Monasteries](#) rendered it second in wealth only to [Glastonbury Abbey](#).

1540–1550: 10 years as a cathedral^[edit]

[Henry VIII](#) assumed direct royal control in 1539 and granted the abbey the status of a cathedral by charter in 1540, simultaneously issuing [letters patent](#) establishing the [Diocese of Westminster](#). By granting the abbey cathedral status, Henry VIII gained an excuse to spare it from the destruction or dissolution which he inflicted on most English abbeys during this period.

After 1550: turbulent times^[edit]

Westminster diocese was dissolved in 1550, but the abbey was recognised (in 1552, retroactively to 1550) as a second cathedral of the [Diocese of London](#) until 1556.^{[17][18][19]} The already-old expression "[robbing Peter to pay Paul](#)" may have been given a new lease of life when money meant for the abbey, which is dedicated to [Saint Peter](#), was diverted to the treasury of [St Paul's Cathedral](#).



The [Nave](#) of Westminster Abbey.

The abbey was restored to the Benedictines under the Catholic [Mary I of England](#), but they were again ejected under [Elizabeth I](#) in 1559. In 1560, Elizabeth re-established Westminster as a "[Royal Peculiar](#)" – a church of the [Church of England](#) responsible directly to the Sovereign, rather than to a diocesan bishop – and made it the **Collegiate Church of St Peter** (that is, a non-cathedral church with an attached chapter of [canons](#), headed by a dean.) The last of Mary's abbots was made the first dean.

It suffered damage during the turbulent 1640s, when it was attacked by [Puritan iconoclasts](#), but was again protected by its close ties to the state during the [Commonwealth](#) period. [Oliver Cromwell](#) was given an elaborate funeral there in 1658, only to be [disinterred](#) in January 1661 and posthumously hanged from a [gibbet](#) at [Tyburn](#).

1722–1745: Western towers constructed[\[edit\]](#)

The abbey's two western towers were built between 1722 and 1745 by [Nicholas Hawksmoor](#), constructed from [Portland stone](#) to an early example of a [Gothic Revival](#) design. Purbeck marble was used for the walls and the floors of Westminster Abbey, even though the various tombstones are made of different types of marble. Further [rebuilding and restoration](#) occurred in the 19th century under [Sir George Gilbert Scott](#).

A [narthex](#) (a portico or entrance hall) for the west front was designed by [Sir Edwin Lutyens](#) in the mid-20th century but was not built. Images of the abbey prior to the construction of the towers are scarce, though the abbey's official website states that the building was without towers following Yevele's renovation, with just the lower segments beneath the roof level of the Nave completed.

Until the 19th century, Westminster was the third seat of learning in England, after Oxford and Cambridge. It was here that the first third of the [King James Bible Old Testament](#) and the last half of the [New Testament](#) were translated. The [New English Bible](#) was also put together here in the 20th century. Westminster suffered minor damage during [the Blitz](#) on 15 November 1940. Then on May 10/11 1941, the Westminster Abbey precincts and roof were hit by incendiary bombs. All the bombs were extinguished by [ARP](#) wardens, except for one bomb which ignited out of reach among the wooden beams and plaster vault of the lantern roof (of 1802) over the North Transept. Flames rapidly spread and burning beams and molten lead began to fall on the wooden stalls, pews and other ecclesiastical fixtures 130 feet below. Despite the falling debris, the staff dragged away as much furniture as possible before withdrawing. Finally the Lantern roof crashed down into the crossing, preventing the fires from spreading further.

In the 1990s, two icons by the [Russian](#) icon painter [Sergei Fyodorov](#) were hung in the abbey.^[20] On 6 September 1997, the [funeral](#) of [Diana, Princess of Wales](#), was held at the Abbey. On 17 September 2010, [Pope Benedict XVI](#) became the first pope to set foot in the abbey.^[21]