



## Factsheet G11 General Series

Revised August 2005

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House of Commons Information Office

# The Palace of Westminster

This Factsheet gives information about the Palace of Westminster as a building. The Palace, home of the Houses of Parliament, is an internationally famous building. The Factsheet looks at the history of the building, its construction and current uses.

This Factsheet and links to related documents are available on the Internet through:  
<http://www.parliament.uk/factsheets>

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## The Site and its Royal Associations

The site of the Houses of Parliament was known in early mediaeval times as Thorney, the island of briars. It was a low, marshy area; the River Thames being much wider and shallower than at present. Two tributary rivers entered it from the north bank: a little further upstream was the Horse ferry which was a shallow ford at low tide.

There were positive considerations for choosing this fen as a site for a Royal Palace. It was sufficiently far from London (with whose citizens Kings sometimes found themselves in disagreement), adjacent to the river for ease of transport of people and goods and next to the great church refounded by Edward the Confessor (c1065). Indeed, it is said that Thorney had been a royal residence and a religious site in the reign of King Canute (1016-1035). During the construction of the first Abbey building, Edward also set up residence in Thorney, to an area generally to the east of the Church. Although nothing remains of this Saxon palace, it was Edward's residence here that directly gave rise to the present location of Parliament and also to the division of the capital into the trade and business centre, the City, and the administrative area, based upon Thorney, which became known as Westminster, the church in the West.

Edward was succeeded by William the Conqueror (1066-1087) who, having established his first stronghold at the Tower, later moved to the Westminster Palace. Although William probably made changes to the site, it is from the reign of his son, William Rufus (1087-1100), which the first surviving buildings on the site date, including Westminster Hall, the Great Hall, built at the northern end of the Palace and still standing today after 900 years of continuous use. The existence of this Hall, which at that time was the largest in Europe, helped to make Westminster the ceremonial centre of the kingdom.

The Palace was one of the monarch's principal homes throughout the later Middle Ages and for this reason the institutions of Government came to be clustered in the Westminster area. Royal Councils were sometimes held in Westminster Hall but Parliament never met there on a regular basis. To the east and south of the Hall lay the domestic apartments of the mediaeval Palace. The Kings worshipped in St. Stephen's Chapel and their courtiers in the crypt chapel below. When in residence at Westminster, the King was attended by his court. The Royal Council of bishops, nobles and ministers also assembled here. The special, later form of this Council, which came to be known as Parliament, was the forerunner of the present House of Lords.

From the mid-13th century it became increasingly usual to summon knights from the shires and burgesses from the towns. In the 14th century they began to meet together, apart from the Lords, and from this assembly evolved the modern House of Commons. The future architectural development of the Palace was therefore inextricably bound up with its role as the meeting place both of Parliament and of the Courts of Law.

During the Middle Ages, it was often not possible to accommodate the whole of Parliament within the Palace. The State Opening Ceremony would be held in the King's private apartment, the Painted Chamber. The Lords would then retire to the White Chamber for their discussions, but the Commons at this time did not have a recognised home of their own. On occasions, they remained in the Painted Chamber but at other times they held their debates in the Chapter House or the Refectory of Westminster Abbey.

There have been numerous fires on the site. It was after such a fire in 1512 that Henry VIII decided to abandon the Palace as a residence and move to Whitehall Palace. The Canons of St Stephen's, the religious order which had held the services for the royal family, were dismissed in

1547 and by 1550 St Stephen's Chapel had become the first permanent home of the House of Commons.

The other rooms vacated by the royal family were occupied by Members and Officers of both Houses. The site thus came to develop as a Parliamentary building, rather than a royal residence. However, it and its successor remained a Royal Palace, with the official title the Palace of Westminster.

## **Westminster Hall and the other Medieval Survivals**

Westminster Hall, of which the walls were built in 1097, is the oldest surviving building on the site. Its floor area is about 1,547 sq m (1,850 sq yds) and it is one of the largest mediaeval halls in Europe with an unsupported roof. The roof was originally supported by two rows of pillars, but the present magnificent hammerbeam roof was designed in the reign of Richard II (1377-1399). The mason/architect of the 14th century rebuilding was Henry Yevele and the carpenter/designer of the roof was Hugh Herland.

During this period the Hall, with its many shops and stalls, selling wigs, pens, books and other legal paraphernalia, became one of the chief centres of London life. It housed the courts of law and was the place of many notable state trials: William Wallace (1305), Thomas More (1535), the Gunpowder Plot conspirators (1606), Charles I (1649), and Warren Hastings (1788-95). Westminster Hall was also the traditional venue for Coronation banquets. The Hall is now used for major public ceremonies.

Among events there have been the presentation of Addresses to the Queen on the Silver Jubilee in 1977, the Golden Jubilee in 2002, to mark 50 years since the end of World War II in 1995, and the opening of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in 1986. A similar event took place in 1988, to mark the tercentenary of the Glorious Revolution, and in 1989 the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Centenary Conference was held there. In 1995, the Government organised a ceremony to mark 50 years of the United Nations. On these occasions, the Hall is brightly lit and decked with flowers and coloured hangings, and presents an altogether different public face from its normal, rather sombre, appearance.

It is also the place where lyings in state, of monarchs, consorts, and, rarely, very distinguished statesmen, traditionally takes place, the most recent having been those of King George VI in 1952, Queen Mary in 1953, Sir Winston Churchill in 1965 and Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother in 2002.

An exhibition to commemorate Westminster Hall's 900th anniversary was held in the summer of 1999, the 'Voters of the Future' exhibition was held there between April and September 2000 and an exhibition commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot in 2005. A refreshment facility for the public, the Jubilee Café, opened in May 2002. The café is situated near the North Door of Westminster Hall and opens out on to New Palace Yard.

The other mediaeval buildings on the site are not accessible to the public. These are the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft, which is the lower part, at ground level (not subterranean) of the former Chapel of St Stephen, which was built between 1292 and 1297 as a magnificent showpiece based on the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. The upper part of St Stephen's, destroyed in 1834, had been the Commons Chamber from 1547. The Cloisters were built between 1526 and 1529.

Much restored, they are used as offices and writing rooms and include an oratory, the lower part of which is the private office of the Serjeant at Arms.



"QUEEN ELIZABETH IN PARLIAMENT"

A. 1st Chancellor B. Marquises, Earles & C. Barons D. Bishops E. Judges F. Masters of Chancery G. Clerks H. Speaker of the Commons  
I. Black Rod K. Serjeant at Arms L. Members of the Commons house M. St. Francis Walsingham Secretary of State.

Queen Elizabeth in  
Parliament four  
hundred years ago

The Jewel Tower, now on the other side of Abingdon Street, was formerly the muniment room (storage of land/title deeds) of the Palace, and is now administered by English Heritage. Since 1992, the tower has been the setting for a permanent exhibition on the history and work of Parliament, called Parliament Past and Present. The tower and exhibition are open to the public. [There is an admission charge].

## **The Fire of 1834 and Rebuilding**

On 16 October 1834, the mediaeval palace with its later additions was virtually entirely destroyed by a fire, which started by the overheating of a stove. It was decided to redevelop the site comprehensively; not keeping to the original layout of buildings. A public competition was won by Charles Barry and provided for the retention of Westminster Hall, the Crypt and Cloisters. In the execution of the design and building, Barry was assisted by Augustus Welby Pugin, particularly in the matter of detail, fittings and furniture. The site was extended into the river by reclaiming land, and now covers about 8 acres.

The new Palace was begun in 1840 and substantially completed by 1860, but only in 1870 actually finished. It is in the Gothic style and its adoption for the parliamentary buildings was an influence on the design of public buildings such as town halls, law courts, and schools throughout the country. The effect on the imaginations of the public and 19th century architects of the huge new building towering over the three-storey yellow brick terraces and ramshackle half-timbered houses of mid-Victorian Westminster was enormous.

## **The Bombing of 1941**

On 10 May 1941, the Commons Chamber was destroyed by bombs and a subsequent fire. To replace the devastated Chamber, a new block was designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott. A steel-framed building, it effectively incorporates five floors, two of which are taken up by the Chamber. Both above and below it are offices. The new air-conditioned Chamber was used for the first time on 26 October 1950. In Parliament 1939-50 (produced by the House of Commons Library and available for purchase from The Stationery Office)<sup>1</sup> explains and illustrates the bombing and reconstruction.

## **Brief Description of the Palace**

The building is on four main levels. The ground floor river front houses offices, private dining rooms, bars and meeting rooms; the first or principal floor the Chambers, Libraries, and dining rooms. The second or Committee floor is given over on the river front to Committee rooms, as is the third or Upper Committee floor. At either end are houses for the Speaker and Lord Chancellor (the remnant of a number of private apartments once provided) and there are two great towers, the Clock Tower (often called Big Ben) and the Victoria Tower. The very distinctive Central Tower is built over the Central Lobby.

Along the whole length of the building, at ground level parallel to the river, is a roadway leading into several courtyards, with a further line of courts on the west side. The arches over the roadway are made to the dimensions of horse-drawn carts, and are difficult to traverse with modern delivery lorries.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tsoshop.co.uk/>

From St Stephen's Porch and Hall, the main entrance, a member of the public enters the Central Lobby, or Octagon Hall, which is the centrepiece of the building. To the north the Members' Lobby and House of Commons; to the south, and thus in a straight line, the Peers' Lobby, House of Lords and Royal Gallery and Robing Room. In general, the Lords end of the building is more ornate than the Commons, with red furnishings, and much gilt and brasswork. By contrast, the Commons' accommodation is definitely austere, as befitted its period of construction, the late 1940s. The colours used in the two Chambers are discussed in **Factsheet G10**.

A good deal of internal restoration has taken place over the last thirty or so years, including the reinstatement of Barry and Pugin's original designs and details wherever possible. Carpets and wallpaper have had to be made especially for the purpose. A complete rebuilding of the House of Lords Chamber ceiling was necessary in the early 1980s.

Among the parts of the Palace inaccessible to the public are the two Houses' Libraries (ten rooms on the principal floor), Ministers' rooms (under the Chamber and to the west of Speaker's Court), dining rooms, departmental offices, etc. There are four acres of green, laid to lawns. The Terrace of the Palace, which was raised by some 4ft in 1970-71, extends along the whole river front. Two prefabricated pavilions are erected here in the summer months.

Old Palace Yard, by St Stephen's Entrance, and the cobbled New Palace Yard, under which is the House of Commons car park, opening from the corner of Bridge Street and St Margaret's Street, are reminders, in their names, of the earliest times. New Palace Yard was laid out as a garden, with a fountain that commemorates the Silver Jubilee of 1977. In October 2002 an analemmatic sundial, the Parliamentary Golden Jubilee gift to The Queen, was installed in Old Palace Yard. (Analemmatic sundials use the shape of a person to cast the necessary shadow)

### **Statues and Works of Art**

Many works of art are displayed in the Palace. Notable among the statues are the modern bronzes of Churchill, Lloyd George and Attlee, in the Members' Lobby; and a marble statue of Gladstone in the Central Lobby. Barry, the architect of the Palace, is commemorated by a large marble statue at the foot of the main staircase leading to the Committee floor. There are numerous frescoes and mural paintings as well as a most extensive collection of free-hanging pictures of subjects connected with British, particularly Parliamentary, history. A series of reconstructions of the paintings which were found in the old St Stephen's Chapel in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century are on the Terrace Stairs. Many of the items of furniture and fittings of the Palace, in which the design and influence of Augustus Welby Pugin is clearly seen, can be classed as works of art in their own right. The fine mediaeval statues of kings at the south end of Westminster Hall were conserved in 1992/93.

### **Stone Restoration and Conservation**

The Palace was faced with Anston stone, a magnesian limestone. However the alkaline stone suffered badly because of the atmospheric pollution of London, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with its reliance on the burning of coal, and consequent acidification of the rain. The decision was therefore taken in 1928 to replace the worst decay, and a general programme of masonry replacement on the perimeter was finished in 1960.

Many of the statues placed round the outside of the building had decayed badly and, from 1962, many have been replaced. A new programme of stone-cleaning and restoration was started in 1981: the north, west, and south fronts, the river front and Clock Tower being finished by 1986. The Victoria Tower, whose cleaning was completed in 1993, was the last part of the



exterior to be dealt with. Of the inner courts the Speaker's Court was the first to be tackled; work started in January 1994. An exhibition on the Restoration Programme was mounted in Westminster Hall from January – April 1994.

### **Expansion**

The House of Commons has taken over other nearby buildings as its functions and staff have increased. These include the two Norman Shaw Buildings (see **Factsheet G13**), 3 Dean's Yard (now vacated) and 7 Millbank. It expanded further, into numbers 35-47 Parliament Street, renamed the Parliament Street Building, in 1991 (see **Factsheet G14**). A new Parliamentary building, designed by Michael Hopkins and called Portcullis House, was completed in Autumn 2000 on the site of numbers 1 and 2 Bridge Street, St Stephen's House, St Stephen's Club and Palace Chambers. The new building has provided additional committee rooms, refreshment facilities and Members now all have their own offices for the first time.

### **Control**

Control of the Houses of Parliament, as a Royal Palace, was vested in the Lord Great Chamberlain as the Queen's representative. In 1965, however, control passed to the Speaker, for the House of Commons part of the building, and to the Lord Chancellor, for the Lords' part. The Lord Great Chamberlain retains joint responsibility with the Speaker and Lord Chancellor for the Crypt Chapel and Westminster Hall. The Parliamentary Estate is cared for and maintained (since 1992) by the Parliamentary Works Directorate of the Serjeant at Arms Department. The title to the outbuildings was transferred from the Department of the Environment following passage of the *Parliamentary Corporate Bodies Act 1992*.

The Palace is very much a living community, whose citizens are not only Members, but their personal staffs, maintenance and cleaning personnel, and permanent House staff, who work in many different offices and departments. The Palace is not, however, simply a place for work. There are a number of social clubs and groups, places for recreation, sitting and talking, sleeping, eating and drinking. It is not, therefore, simply a huge office block peopled from 9 to 5 and at other times absolutely deserted – indeed, it has a resident population, for there are still some apartments for officers and staff of the Houses. It was designed as, and remains, something of a village.

## **Visiting the Palace**

UK residents wishing to tour the building should contact the Member for their constituency for a permit. At most times of the year, people holding such permits visit at a prearranged time on Monday to Wednesday mornings, and all day on Fridays (after 3.30 pm if the House is sitting) Permits (which admit up to 20) are rationed, so visitors are advised to contact their Member well in advance.

Due to the recent changes in the sitting hours of both Houses, it is no longer possible to provide overseas visitors with permits to tour the Houses of Parliament during session. We apologise for any disappointment this may cause. Overseas visitors can tour the Houses of Parliament during the period of the summer opening and, during session, are able to attend debates in either House.

Guided tours of the Palace of Westminster were established in 2000 and have taken place during the summer recess each year since then, with tours operating every few minutes from 9.15am to 4.30pm. For details see:

<http://www.parliament.uk/parliament/tours.htm>

The Education Unit organises a programme of visits for students. The Autumn Visits Programme is for Year 11-13 students. The Discover Parliament Programme is aimed at Year 8-10 and the Citizenship for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century programme covers Years 3-9. The Education Unit also holds a series of Pupil (Mock) Parliaments and teacher seminar days.

For further information contact:

Parliamentary Education Unit  
House of Commons  
London SW1A 2TT

Fax: 020-7219 0818

Email: [edunit@parliament.uk](mailto:edunit@parliament.uk)

Website: <http://www.explore.parliament.uk>

It is not possible to have a tour of the Palace just by turning up. Advance arrangements, as above, must be made although some tickets may be available on the day during the summer opening.

### **The Line of Route**

Those in possession of permits enter at the point on the plan (Appendix B) marked *Entrance (tours)* and then proceed, after security examination, via the Robing Room, Royal Gallery, Princes Chamber, Peers Lobby, Central Lobby, Members Lobby, No Lobby, to the Commons Chamber. They then return to Central Lobby and go via St Stephen's Hall to Westminster Hall, leaving the premises via New Palace Yard.

Parts of the Route may be closed, particularly for maintenance work, from time to time.



## Appendix A

### Some statistics relating to the Palace

#### General

Length of River Front	265.8m*	872ft
Height of roofline	21.3m	70 ft
Dimensions of Terrace	206.7m x 10m	678 ft x 33 ft
Area of masonry (superficial)	83,610 sq m	900,000 sq ft
Length of North Front	70.7m	232 ft
Length of South Front	98.2m	322 ft

Area of site:	3.24 hectares	approx 8 acres
Staircases:	100	
Length of passageways:	about 3 miles	4.8km
Rooms:	1,100	

#### Towers

Clock Tower	Height	96.3m	316 ft	12.2m square	40 ft square
Central Tower	Height	91.4m	300 ft	22.9m across	75 ft across
Victoria Tower	Height	98.5m	323 ft	22.9m across	75 ft square
Flagstaff on Victoria Tower	Height	22.3m	73 ft		

#### Principal rooms

St Stephen's Hall	29m x 9.1m	95 ft x 30 ft		
Royal Gallery	33.5m x 13.7m	110 ft x 45 ft	Height 13.7m	45 ft
Lords Chamber	24.4m x 13.7m	80 ft x 45 ft	Height 13.7m	45 ft
Peers' Lobby	11.9m x 11.9m	38 ft x 38 ft	Height 10m	33 ft
Central Lobby	18.3m	60 ft across octagon	Height 22.9m	75 ft
Members' Lobby	13.7m x 13.7m	45 ft x 45 ft		

#### Commons Chamber

Floor of Chamber	20.7m x 14m	68 ft x 46 ft
Across Galleries	31.4m x 14.5m	103 ft x 48 ft
Height	14m	46 ft
Distance between red lines on carpet	8 ft 2½ ins	2.5m

Commons Library (6 rooms)	79.3m x 9.1m	260 ft x 30 ft
	(main rooms each – 16.8m x 9.1m (55 ft x 30 ft))	

Lords Library (4 rooms)	51.8m x 9.1m	170 ft x 30 ft
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Crypt Chapel of St Mary Undercroft	27.4m x 8.5m	90 ft x 28 ft	Height 6.1m	20 ft
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\*(Metric figures are rounded to one decimal place)

**Westminster Hall**

Length	73.2m	240 ft
Width	20.7m	68 ft
Height	28.0m	92 ft

**The Great Clock**

Hands:	Minute (copper)	Length 4.3m (14 ft)	Weight 101.6kg (2 cwt)
	Hour (gunmetal)	Length 2.7m (9 ft)	Weight 304.8kg (6 cwt)
Pendulum:	Total Length	4.4m (14 ft 5 in)	
Length of Roman numerals:		61cm (2 ft)	
Minute squares:		30.5cm (1 ft)	
Number of panes of glass in each clockface		312	

**The Bells**

Big Ben (the Great Bell)		Weight 13.8 tonnes	13 tons 10 cwt 99 lb
Note E:	Hammer Weight	203.2kg	4 cwt

**Quarter Bells**

1	Note G sharp	Weight 1 ton 1 cwt 23 lb	1.07 tonnes
2	Note F sharp	Weight 1 ton 5 cwt 30 lb	1.28 tonnes
3	Note E	Weight 1 ton 13 cwt 69 lb	1.71 tonnes
4	Note B	Weight 3 tons 10 cwt 69 lb	3.59 tonnes

**Time between Strikes:**

From start of chime to 12 <sup>th</sup> strike =	95 seconds
Big Ben: From 1 <sup>st</sup> strike to 12 <sup>th</sup> strike	54 seconds, 5 seconds between strikes

## Appendix B

### The Palace of Westminster Principal (1<sup>st</sup> Floor) plan

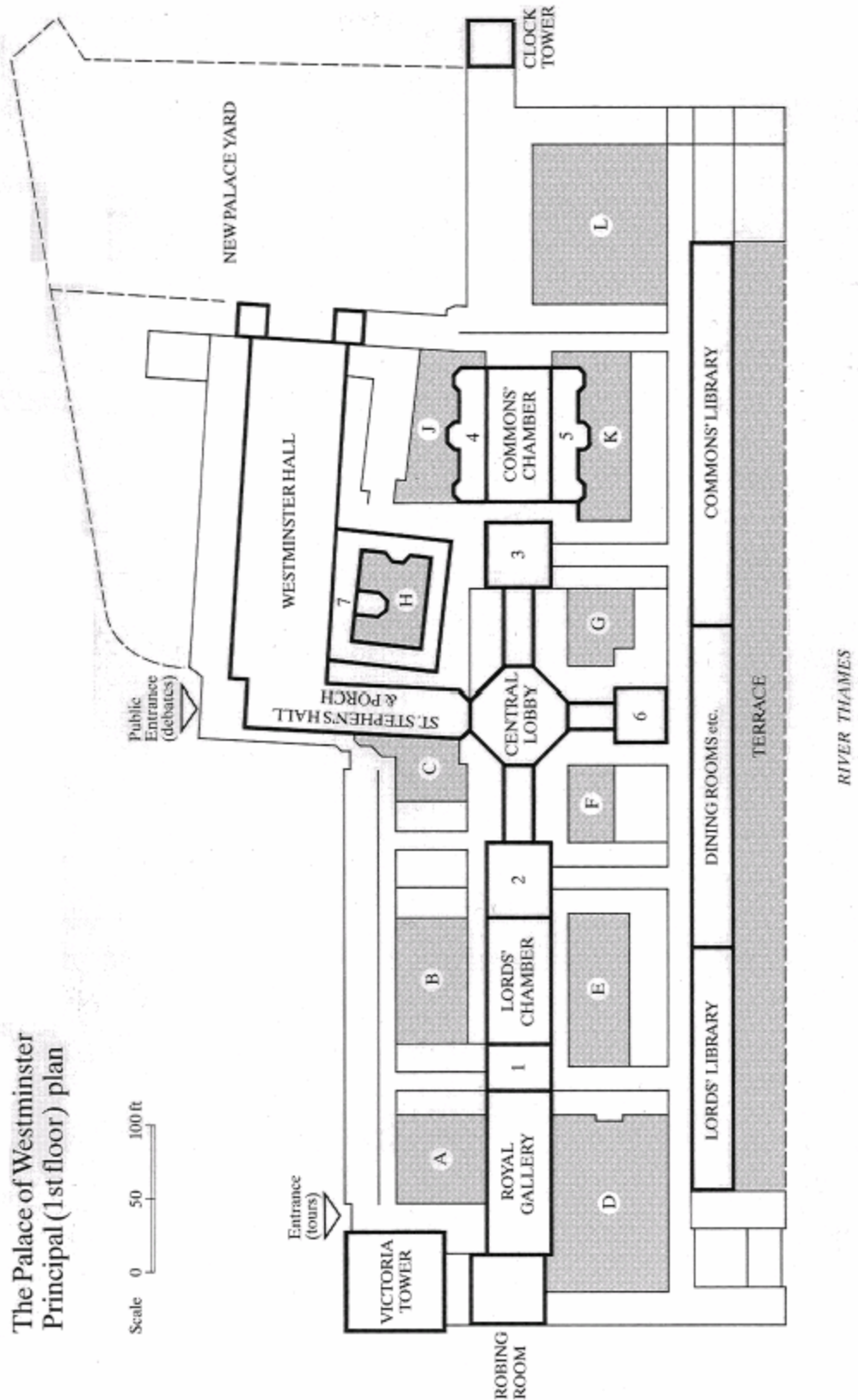
#### Key to the plan

Courts, etc.

- A – Chancellor's
- B – State Officers'
- C – St. Stephen's
- D – Royal
- E – Peers'
- F – Peers' Inner
- G – Commons'
- Inner
- H – Cloister
- J – Star Chamber
- K – Commons
- L – Speaker's

Rooms, etc.

- 1 – Princes
- Chamber
- 2 – Peers' Lobby
- 3 – Members'
- Lobby
- 4 – Aye Lobby
- 5 – No Lobby
- 6 – Cromwell
- Lobby (Lower
- Waiting Hall)
- 7 – Cloisters



## Further reading

Robert Wilson  
The Houses of Parliament  
Jarrold Publishing 1994

Nigel Smith  
The Houses of Parliament: their history and purpose  
Wayland 1997

Christine Riding and Jacqueline Riding  
The Houses of Parliament: History, Art and Architecture  
Merrell 2000

Edited by Robert Smith & John S Moore  
The House of Commons: seven hundred years of British tradition  
Smiths Peerage Ltd. 1996

Edited by Robert Smith & John S Moore  
The House of Lords: a thousand years of British tradition  
Smiths Peerage Ltd. 1994

## Useful websites

The Parliamentary website:  
[www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)  
The Education Unit website:  
[www.explore.parliament.uk](http://www.explore.parliament.uk)  
The British Monarchy website:  
[www.royal.gov.uk](http://www.royal.gov.uk)

## Contact information

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London SW1A 2TT  
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[hcinfo@parliament.uk](mailto:hcinfo@parliament.uk)  
[www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)

House of Lords Information Office  
House of Lords  
London SW1A 0PW  
Phone 020 7219 3107  
Fax 020 7219 0620  
[hlinfo@parliament.uk](mailto:hlinfo@parliament.uk)

Parliamentary Education Unit  
House of Commons  
London SW1A 2TT  
Phone 020 7219 2105  
Fax 020 7219 0818  
[edunit@parliament.uk](mailto:edunit@parliament.uk)

Parliamentary Bookshop  
12 Bridge Street  
Parliament Square  
London SW1A 2JX  
Phone 020 7219 3890  
Fax 020 7219 3866  
[bookshop@parliament.uk](mailto:bookshop@parliament.uk)

## Factsheet G11 The Palace of Westminster

It would help greatly to ensure that Factsheets fulfil their purpose if users would fill in and return this brief pre-addressed questionnaire, or email a response. Negative responses can be as useful as positive.

### For your purposes, did you find this Factsheet

- |                |                          |                  |                          |                |                          |
|----------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Very useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Fairly useful    | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not much use   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Too long    | <input type="checkbox"/> | The right length | <input type="checkbox"/> | Too short      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Clear       | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not always clear | <input type="checkbox"/> | Rather unclear | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Any comments?

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