



HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

The Fire of 1834 and the Old Palace of Westminster



A Georgian Conflagration

The terrible fire which engulfed the old Palace of Westminster in 1834 was a turning point in the history of Parliament and of London. Until recently, however, it was a largely forgotten catastrophe. Part of the reason for this national amnesia is because the new Palace of Westminster, created by Charles Barry and AWN Pugin, became so famous so rapidly that it swiftly obliterated its predecessor from the collective memory.

Yet in the middle ages, the old Palace of Westminster was not only the main royal residence in London, but also the home of the law courts (held in Westminster Hall) and the site of various government departments. Westminster became fixed as the location of Parliament in the late fourteenth century. The Lords had sat in the Palace since the thirteenth century whenever Parliament was held in London, but it was only with the abandonment of the building by Henry VIII in 1512/13 (due to another fire), and then the Reformation, that the Commons found a permanent home in the former royal chapel of St Stephen's. Over the next few centuries the ancient complex was expanded and altered constantly, until by the late Georgian period there were so many winding passages, flimsy partition walls and rambling staircases that the sprawling collection of buildings had become an accident waiting to happen.

The long-overdue catastrophe finally occurred on 16 October 1834. Throughout the day, a chimney fire had smouldered under the floor of the House of Lords chamber, caused by the unsupervised and ill-advised burning of two large cartloads of wooden tally sticks (a form of medieval tax receipt) in the heating furnaces below. Warning signs were persistently ignored by the Housekeeper and Clerk of Works, and the Prime Minister would later declare the disaster, 'one of the greatest instances of stupidity upon record'.

At a few minutes after six in the evening, a doorkeeper's wife finally spotted the flames in the Lords chamber where they were emerging through the floor.

There was panic within the Palace for the next 25 minutes but no-one seems to have raised the alarm outside, perhaps imagining that the fire - which had now taken hold and was visible on the roof - could be brought under control quickly.



Wooden tallies, 13th century.
Parliamentary Archives, HLI/PO/RO/11/195/4-6



Old Palace Yard before the fire. The Lords is in the middle, with John Soane's Royal Entrance on the far right. The block on the left contains Commons committee rooms and Bellamy's restaurant, with the south gable of Westminster Hall peeping out behind. WOA 1329

They were mistaken. A huge fireball exploded out of the building at around 6.30pm, lighting up the evening sky over London, and immediately attracting hundreds of thousands of people. It turned into the most significant blaze in the city between 1666 and the Blitz and burned fiercely for the rest of the night. The fire could be seen from across the home counties and at least 44 artists are known to have painted the catastrophe itself or the ruins of the ancient building it left behind.

Many of these paintings and sketches are now in the Parliamentary Art Collection. In some cases, these depictions are the only record we have of parts of the magnificent but degraded buildings of the old Houses of Parliament.

The fire was fought by parish engines, insurance companies and the private London Fire Engine Establishment. Hundreds of volunteers, including MPs and Peers, staffed

the pumps on the night, and were paid in beer for their efforts. Contrary to popular opinion, the thousands of onlookers in the vast crowds did not generally stand around cheering. Most were awestruck and terrified by the spectacle, others were injured in the crush, and plenty were pickpocketed.

Fire in the Palace of Westminster by Hercules Brabazon Brabazon, 1834. WOA 273



*“Damn the House of Commons, let it blaze away!”
cried the Chancellor of the Exchequer, “But save,
O save the Hall!”*



*‘The Destruction of the Houses of Lords and Commons by Fire on the 16th of October 1834’
Hand coloured lithograph, 1834, by William Heath.*

The subtitle to this thrilling depiction of the fire, looking north across Old Palace Yard, proudly states, ‘Drawn on stone...from a sketch taken by him by the light of the Flames, at the end of Abingdon Street’. The light from the gigantic fire was so bright that in the dark it was possible to read the small print of a newspaper in Pedlar’s Acre, a quarter of a mile away, as if it were daytime. WOA 589

The Painted Chamber



The Painted Chamber around 1820. WOA 922

The Painted Chamber was perhaps the greatest artistic treasure lost in the fire. When constructed in the thirteenth century by Henry III (1216-1272), it took its name from the magnificent paintings which decorated its walls. In the middle ages, the opening of Parliament took place in this room, and it was the venue for the signing of Charles I's death warrant by Oliver Cromwell and the other regicides in 1649. But over the centuries the famous and beautiful walls were whitewashed, papered over, and forgotten. It is tantalising to speculate what might have happened to the wonderful medieval art if the 1834 disaster

had not happened. Just a generation on, and the wall paintings – all destroyed in the fire – might have been fully restored to their original glory. Today, however, all we have left are antiquarian watercolours and this one, in the Parliamentary Art Collection, shows the Painted Chamber around 1820 being used as the Court of Requests (a national civil claims court). On display in the window splays are the figures of some of the vices and virtues. Following the fire, the sturdy medieval walls had a final gasp of life as the temporary House of Lords from 1835 to 1847 before being pulled down in 1851.

St Stephen's Chapel



'The first reformed House of Commons, 1833'
by Sir George Hayter, oil sketch.

This is one of the last images executed of the interior of the old House of Commons before its destruction in the fire of 1834, and shows the wooden panelled interior, cramped, hot and smelly which MPs had been complaining about for years. There is nothing on display of Edward III's gothic chapel hidden underneath.
WOA 363

There were several chapels in the medieval Palace, but the principal one was St Stephen's, begun by Edward I in the 1290s and refounded with a college of lay canons by his grandson, Edward III, in 1348. The glorious tracery of its stonework and the wall paintings were gradually hidden from the mid-sixteenth century onwards when the chapel was converted for use as the House of Commons chamber.

AWN Pugin, designer of the Houses of Parliament, was in the massive crowd watching the flames devour the House of Commons at around 8pm on that fateful October night.

The tottering ruins of St Stephen's were cleared to make way for the new Palace shortly afterwards, but Charles Barry designed St Stephen's Hall, the wide passageway from Westminster Hall to the Central Lobby of his new Palace, on exactly the same footprint as the old House of Commons. This explains why, today, its walls are not quite in alignment with the rest of the new building.

"Truly astonishing...from the the flames were rushing out or six minutes and the effect and awfully grand" Pugin



Panorama of the Ruins of the Old Palace of Westminster
In this panoramic view of St Stephen's Chapel and the Cloister, Pugin is shown damping down the embers in the Cloister, and dazed Palace

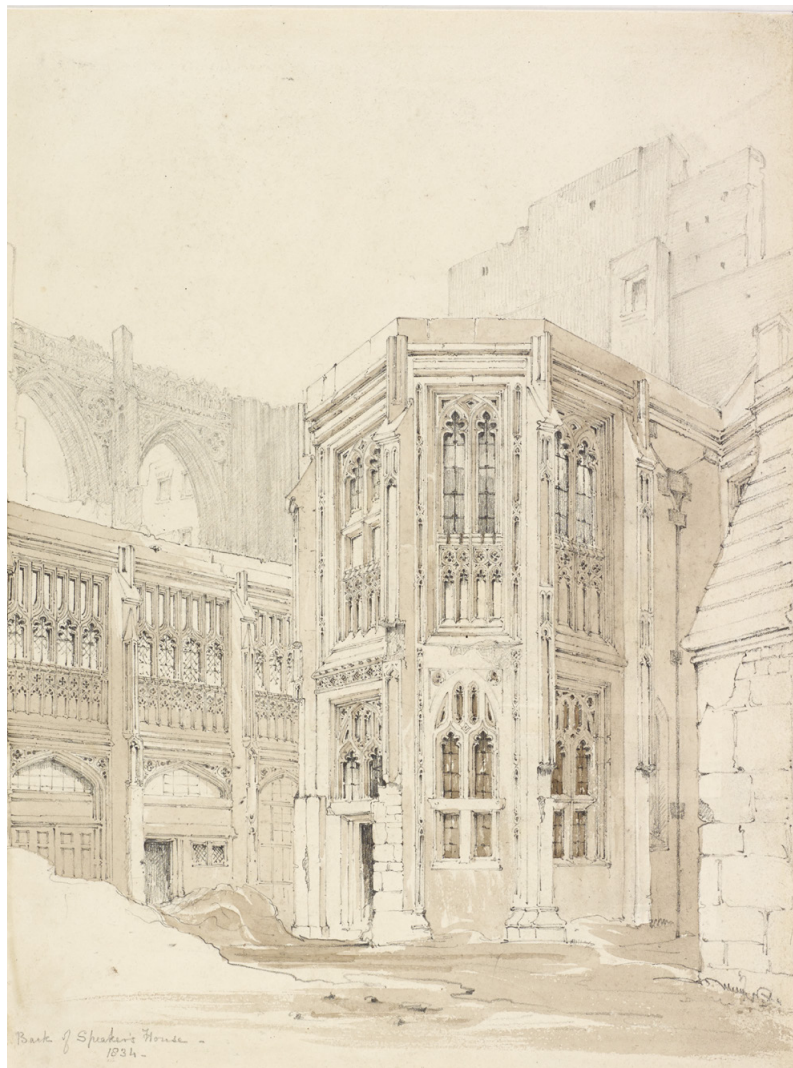
*time of the House of Commons first taking fire till
of every apperture [sic] it could not be more than five
of the fire behind the tracery &c was truly curious*



er, 1834 by George Scarf (oil on canvas, 1834)

er the scale of the damage done to the old Houses of Parliament is evident. A fire pump is still in action
residents wander through the devastated shell of the old House of Commons. WOA 3793

The Cloister and Undercroft Chapel



Sketch of St Stephen's Chapter House in the cloister following the fire, by Anthony Salvin (1799-1881), ink on paper, 1834, *Parliamentary Archives, SAL/1*



The Undercroft Chapel shortly after the fire: the state dining room was turned into a store for salvaged stone from the ruined House of Commons directly above it. G. Moore, "St Stephen's chapel ruins, after the fire, 1834", Watercolour on paper. WOA 5195

Adjoining St Stephen's Chapel was a tiny but perfectly-formed perpendicular cloister, with its own miniature chapter house, dating from 1526. At the time of the fire it was part of the Speaker's residence, and although half was badly damaged by the fire it was restored by Charles Barry. One of the great treasures of late medieval gothic architecture, the cloister and chapter house still survive today, wrapped inside the new Houses of Parliament.

Underneath St Stephen's Chapel, which was on the first floor of the old Palace, was a

ground floor undercroft chapel. In 1834 it was in use as the Speaker's state dining room. The fire raged above and all around the undercroft on the night of the disaster, but although the stonework was badly affected, the overall structure survived and was incorporated by Barry into the new Palace as a chapel for Parliament. Today, the Undercroft Chapel of St Mary – as restored and decorated by EM Barry, son of the great architect – is in regular daily use, but not usually open to the public.

Westminster Hall



Westminster Hall on fire, 1834 by George B. Campion (watercolour on paper, 1834). WOA 1669

By the middle of the evening it was clear that the fire was uncontrollable in most of the Palace. Westminster Hall became the focus for the firefighters and hundreds of volunteers. Its thick stone walls provided an excellent barrier against the spread of the fire, but the 14th century oak roof timbers were in great peril and were saved only by repeated dousing with water from the hoses.

It was only the arrival of the London Fire Engine Establishment's great, floating, barge-mounted fire engine which finally started to quell the flames in the early hours, and ulti-

mately saved Westminster Hall. It had been prevented from getting upriver before 2am due to the low tide. The lack of nearby water had also hampered the land-based engines in the gardens to the east of the Palace as they tried in vain to save St Stephen's and most of the Speaker's House. The fire crews finally left five days later, having damped down the last embers.

The following day revealed a shattered and smoking collection of buildings, most of which were cleared in the months that followed and the stone sold to salvage

Aftermath



The Palace of Westminster on fire, 16th of October 1834 by William Grieve, 1834.

In the weeks following the fire, the enterprising seized on the commercial opportunities provided by this great national calamity. As well as the many cheap prints of the fire which circulated, souvenirs were created out of salvaged stone, lead and wood from the destroyed buildings. A number of stage representations and dioramas (a kind of 19th century virtual reality show) of the fire were advertised in the newspapers, and this watercolour by William Grieve, a stage designer at Covent Garden Theatre, bears all the hallmarks of his profession. WOA 1054

merchants or pushed into the river. Temporary chambers and committee rooms were available for occupation by February 1835, and a government competition commenced to design a new Houses of Parliament on the ruined site. Charles Barry, aided by AWN Pugin, won the commission and together they created the most famous building in the United Kingdom. Only Westminster Hall, the Undercroft Chapel of St Mary and part of the Cloister remain today of the survivors of 1834.

The damage to the wrecked and uninsured Palace was estimated at £2 million. No-one however was prosecuted, though the public inquiry which followed found various people guilty of negligence and foolishness. The fire ultimately resulted in the establishment of the first public London Fire Brigade and the creation of a National Archives for the United Kingdom.



This poignant drawing from the *Illustrated London News* shows the gigantic new Palace rising up around the old, just before the final remnants disappear forever in the early 1850s. WOA 2389 (Detail)

Coming at a moment in British history between the Georgian and Victorian ages, the stagecoach and the railway, the demise of the medieval city of London and the birth of the modern one, it is easy to load the great fire of 1834 with a wider historical significance. Later commentators have seen it as symbolic of the constitutional changes brought about by the Great Reform Act of 1832, but at the time people were more likely to have seen it as a judgement from God for the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, against which Charles Dickens railed in *Oliver Twist*.



If you enjoyed this short leaflet, you can find out more about the history of the old Palace and the story of the 1834 fire in *The Day Parliament Burned Down* (OUP, 2012) by Caroline Shenton, available from the Houses of Parliament Shop.

Collections relating to the fire can be found at
www.parliament.uk/art
www.parliament.uk/archives

To find out more about the history of the Palace of Westminster before and after the fire
www.parliament.uk/livingheritage