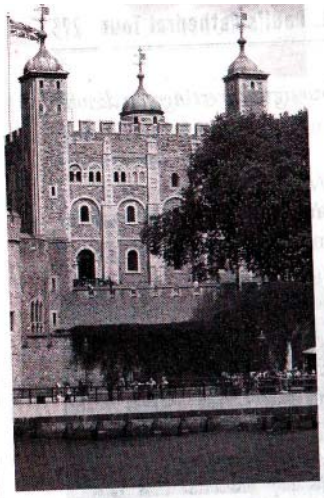
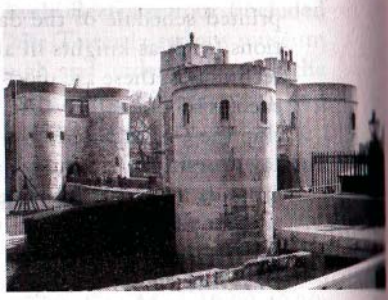


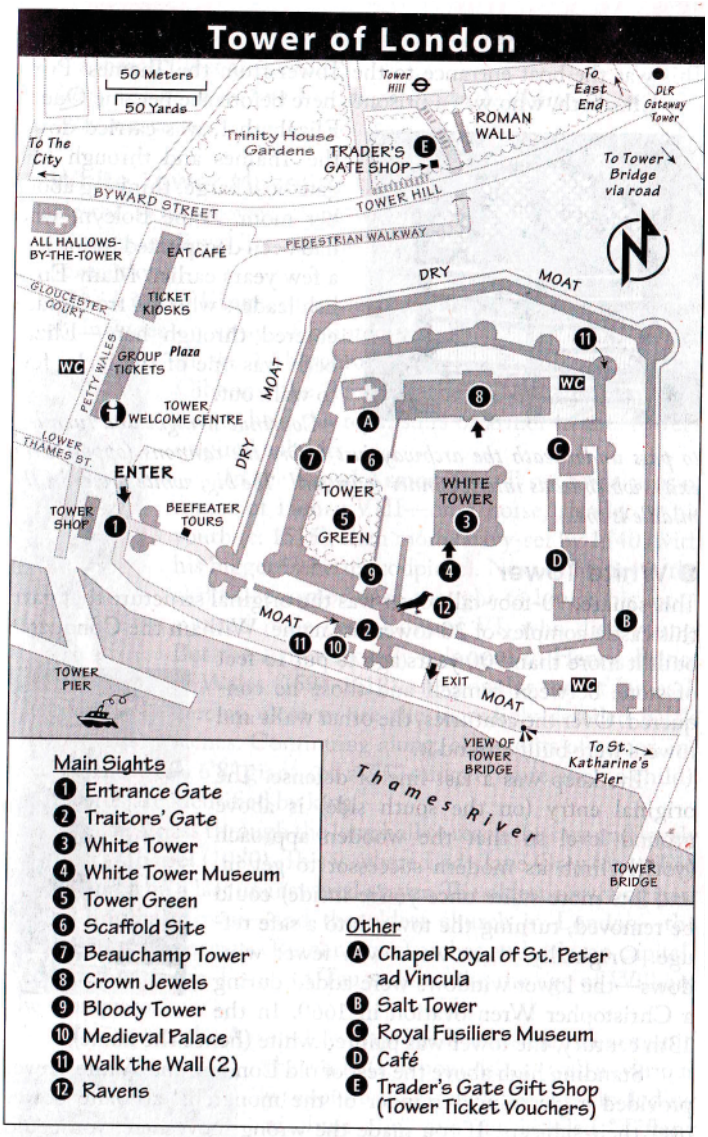
TOWER OF LONDON TOUR

The Tour Begins

❶ Entrance Gate



Even an army the size of the ticket line couldn't storm this castle. After the drawbridge was pulled up and the iron portcullis slammed down, you'd have to swim a 120-foot moat; cross an island prowled by wild animals; then toss a grappling hook onto a wall and climb up while the enemy poured boiling oil on you. If you made it this far, you'd only be halfway there. You'd still have to swim a second moat (eventually drained to make the grassy parade ground we see today), then, finally, scale a second, higher wall. In all, the central keep (tower) was surrounded by two concentric rings of complete defenses. Yes, it was difficult to get into the Tower (if you were a foreign enemy)...



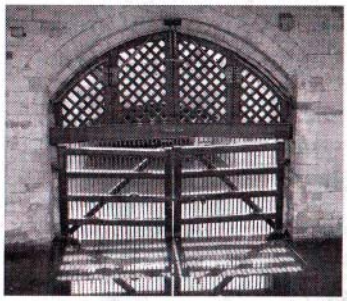
but it was almost as impossible to get out (if you were an enemy of the state).

• *Show your ticket, enter, consult the daily event schedule, and consider catching a one-hour Beefeater tour. If you didn't get a free map on the way in, pick one up at the bookstore up ahead (you may have to ask for it). WCs are 100 yards ahead.*

When you're all set, go 50 yards straight ahead to the...

❷ Traitors' Gate

This was the boat entrance to the Tower from the Thames. Princess Elizabeth, who was a prisoner here before she became Queen Elizabeth I, was carried down the Thames and through this gate on a barge, thinking about her mom, Anne Boleyn, who had been decapitated inside just a few years earlier. Many English leaders who fell from grace entered through here—Elizabeth was one of the lucky few to walk out.



• *Continue straight and turn left to pass underneath the archway just before the cannons (opposite the exit), which leads into the inner courtyard. The big, white tower in the middle is the...*

❸ White Tower

This square, 90-foot-tall tower was the original structure that gave this castle complex of 20 towers its name. William the Conqueror built it more than 900 years ago to put 15 feet of stone between himself and those he conquered. Over the centuries, the other walls and towers were built around it.

The keep was a last line of defense. The original entry (on the south side) is above ground level so that the wooden approach (you'll climb its modern successor to get in, and lots more stairs once you're inside) could be removed, turning the tower into a safe refuge. Originally, there were even fewer windows—the lower windows were added during a Christopher Wren-ovation in 1660. In the 13th century, the tower was painted white (hence the name).

Standing high above the rest of old London, the White Tower provided a gleaming reminder of the monarchs' absolute power over their subjects. If you made the wrong move here, you could be feasting on roast boar in the Banqueting Hall one night and chained to the walls of the prison the next. Torture ranged from stretching on the rack to the full monty: hanging by the neck until nearly dead, then "drawing" (cut open to be gutted), and finally quartering, with your giblets displayed on the walls as a warning. (Guy Fawkes, who tried to blow up Parliament with 36 barrels of gunpowder, received this treatment after being tortured here.) Any

cries for help were muffled by the thick stone walls—15 feet at the base, a mere 11 feet at the top.

• *Either now or later, find time to go inside the White Tower for its excellent museum.*

❶ White Tower Museum

Inside the White Tower, a one-way route winds through exhibits re-creating medieval life and the Tower's bloody history of torture and executions.

The **Line of Kings,** greeting you and spread throughout this level, includes an array of painted wooden horses, some carved in the 17th century by revered sculptor Grinling Gibbons, the "King's Carver." For centuries, these horses held the royal suits of armor in the Tower's original exhibits.

In the **Royal Armory,** you'll see some suits of armor of Henry VIII—on a horse, slender in his youth (c. 1515), then more heavy-set by 1540 (with his bigger-is-better codpiece). Next to Henry is the child-size armor once thought to be for his long-awaited male heir, Edward VI, who died young. But the armor actually belonged to Henry, Prince of Wales (1594-1612), the popular son of James I. Get up close to see the incredibly detailed battle scenes. Continuing along, other suits of armor, including those of a 6'8" giant and a 3'1" midget (more likely a child), and swords are identified by king.

Upstairs, pass through the long hall to reach the rare and lovely **St. John's Chapel** (1080). This is where Lady Jane Grey (described later) offered up a last unanswered prayer. The oldest surviving part of the original Tower—and the oldest church in London—the chapel's round Norman (Romanesque) arches and column capitals decorated with the T-shaped Tau cross evoke the age of William the Conqueror.

Moving on, the **Arsenal** displays the heaviest suit of armor in the world (130 pounds!), as well as various weapons used through the ages, including machine guns and the jeweled "Tiffany Revolver."

On the top floor, ogle the giant dragon made out of old weapons. In the case at the end of this hall, see the Tower's actual **execution ax** and chopping block. In 1747, this seven-pound ax sliced through the neck of Lord Lovat, a

The Beefeaters

The original duty of the Yeoman Warders (called "Beefeaters") was to guard the Tower, its prisoners, and the jewels. Their nickname may come from an original perk of the job—large rations of the king's beef. The Beefeaters dress in blue knee-length coats with red trim and a top hat. The "ER" on the chest stands for the monarch they serve—Queen Elizabeth II (Elizabetha Regina in Latin). On special occasions, they wear red. All are retired noncommissioned officers from the armed forces with distinguished service records.

These days, the Yeoman Warders are no longer expected to protect the Tower. Instead, they've evolved into great entertainers, leading groups of tourists through the Tower. At night, they ritually lock up the Tower in the Ceremony of the Keys (possible to watch if you book upwards of four months in advance). There are 35 Yeoman Warders, including one woman. They and their families make for a Beefeating community of 120 that live inside the Tower.

Scottish supporter of Bonnie Prince Charlie's claim to the throne. With his death, the ax was retired.

In the next room, kid-oriented, hands-on exhibits bring the history engagingly to life. I learned how hard it is to nock an arrow (to properly align the arrow on the bow prior to release).

• *Back outside, find the courtyard to the left of the White Tower, called...*

❺ Tower Green

In medieval times, this spacious courtyard within the walls was the "town square" for those who lived in the castle. Knights exercised and jousted here, and it was the last place of refuge in troubled times. The Tower is still officially a royal residence, and the Queen's lodgings are on the south side of the green, in the white half-timbered buildings where a bearskin-hatted soldier stands guard.

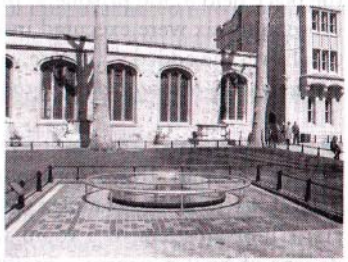
The north side of the Green is bordered by the stone **Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula** ("in Chains"). The current structure was built by Henry VIII, and his most famous victims are buried here (among them his wives Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard). The

chapel's interior is open only on the Beefeater tour, except during the last hour of the day, when anyone can go inside to see it. If you aren't on a tour, wait for one to come around, discreetly squeeze into the group while the Beefeater is talking outside the chapel, and go in with the group.

• *Near the middle of Tower Green is a granite-paved square marked* Site of Scaffold.

❻ Scaffold Site

The actual execution site looks pleasant enough today; the chopping block has been moved to inside the White Tower, and a modern sculpture encourages visitors to ponder those who died.



It was here that enemies of the Crown would kneel before the king for the final time. With their hands tied behind their backs, they would say a final prayer, then lay their heads on a block, and—*shlit*—the blade would slice through their necks, their heads tumbling to the ground. The headless corpses were buried in unmarked graves in Tower Green or under the floor of the Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula. The heads were stuck on a stick and displayed at London Bridge. Passersby did not really see the heads—they saw spheres of insects and parasites.

Tower Green was the most prestigious execution site at the Tower. Common criminals were hanged outside the Tower. More prominent evil-doers were decapitated before jeering crowds atop Tower Hill (near today's Tube station). Inside the Tower walls was reserved for the most heinous traitors.

Henry VIII axed a couple of his ex-wives here (divorced readers can insert their own cynical joke). Anne Boleyn was the appealing young woman Henry had fallen so hard for that he broke with the Catholic Church in order to divorce his first wife and marry her. But when Anne failed to produce a male heir, the court turned against her. She was locked up in the Tower, tried in a kangaroo court, branded an adulteress and traitor, and decapitated.

Henry's fifth wife, teenage Catherine Howard, was beheaded and her body laid near Anne's in the church. Jane Boleyn (Anne's sister-in-law) was also executed here for arranging Catherine's adulterous affair behind Henry's back. Next.

Henry even beheaded his friend Thomas More (a Catholic) because he refused to recognize (Protestant) Henry as head of the Church of England. (Thomas died at the less-prestigious Tower Hill site near the Tube stop.)

The most tragic victim was 17-year-old Lady Jane Grey, who was manipulated into claiming the Crown for nine days during the scramble for power after Henry's death and the six-year reign and death of his sickly young son, Edward VI. When Bloody Mary (Mary I, Henry's daughter) took control, she forced her Protestant cousin Jane to kneel before the executioner. Young Jane bravely blindfolded herself, but then couldn't find the block. She crawled around the scaffolding pleading, "Where is it?!"

Years ago, a Beefeater, tired of what he called "Hollywood coverage" of the Tower, grabbed my manuscript, read it, and told me that in more than 900 years as a fortress, palace, and prison, the place held 8,500 prisoners. But only 120 were executed, and, of those, only six were executed inside it. Stressing the hospitality of the Tower, he added, "Torture was actually quite rare here."

• *Overlooking the scaffold site is the...*

❼ Beauchamp Tower—Prisoners

The Beauchamp Tower (pronounced "BEECH-um") was one of several places in the complex that housed Very Important Prisoners. Climb upstairs to a room where the walls are covered with dozens of final messages—graffiti carved into the stone by bored and despondent inmates.

Picture Philip Howard, the Earl of Arundel (c. 1555-1595), warming himself by this fireplace and glancing out at the execution site during his 10-year incarceration. Having lived a devil-may-care life of pleasure in the court of Queen Elizabeth, the pro-Catholic Arundel was charged with treason by the Protestant government. He pleaded with the queen—his former friend—to at least let him see his wife and young children. She refused, unless he would renounce his faith. On June 22, 1587, he carved his family name "Arundell" into the chimney (graffiti #13) and wrote in Latin: "*Quanto plus afflictionis...*" ("The more we suffer for Christ in this world, the more glory with Christ in the next.") Arundel suffered faithfully another eight years here before he wasted away and died at age 40.

Graffiti #85 belongs to Lady Jane Grey's young husband, Lord Guilford Dudley. Locked in the Beauchamp Tower and executed the same day as his wife, Dudley vented his despair by scratching "IANE" into the stone. Cynics claim he was actually whining for his mommy, who was also named Jane.

Read other pitiful graffiti, like the musings of James Typping (#18). Imprisoned for three years "in great disgrace," he wonders

what will happen to him: "I cannot tell but be death." Consider the stoic cry of Thomas Miagh (#29), an Irish rebel, who writes: "By torture straynge my truth was tried," having suffered some form of the rack. Thomas Clarke (#28), a Catholic priest who later converted to Protestantism, wrote pathetic poetry: "Unhappy is that man whose acts doth procure / the misery of this house in prison to endure." Many held on to their sense of identity by carving their family's coats of arms.

The last enemy of the state imprisoned in the Tower complex was one of its most infamous: the renegade Nazi Rudolf Hess. In 1941, Hitler's henchman secretly flew to Britain with a peace proposal (Hitler denied any such plan). He parachuted into a field, was arrested and held for four days in the Tower, and was later given a life sentence.

• *Join the looooong line leading to the crown jewels. Pass time in line reading ahead—it's too dark inside to read.*

❽ Crown Jewels

When you finally enter the building, you'll pass through a series of rooms with instructive warm-up videos. Don't let the crowd rush you—just step aside if you want to keep watching. The videos touch on the many kings and queens who have worn the crown jewels, from William I the Conqueror (1066), to Henry VIII, to his daughter Elizabeth I, to the current Queen Elizabeth II. Film clips show you close-up highlights of coronation regalia, as well as the most recent coronation—Elizabeth II's, in 1953.

After the videos, you enter the exhibits, seeing each of the actual coronation items in the order that they're used whenever a new king or queen is crowned. First, you walk down a hallway displaying the ceremonial maces, swords, and trumpets that lead the actual coronation procession into Westminster Abbey.

Next comes a room with the royal regalia. The monarch-to-be is anointed with holy oil poured from the eagle-beak flask; handed the jeweled Sword of Offering; and dressed in the 20-pound gold robe and other gear. (Other items in the first case are simply standing by. The 12th-century coronation spoon, last used in 1953 to anoint the head of Queen Elizabeth, is the most ancient object here.) Most of the original crown jewels from medieval times were lost during Cromwell's 1648 revolution.

After being dressed and anointed, the new monarch prepares for the "crowning" moment.

• *Five glass cases display the various crowns, orbs, and scepters used in royal ceremonies. Ride the moving sidewalk that takes you past them. You're welcome to circle back and glide by again (I did, several times). Or, to get away from the crowds, hang out on the elevated viewing area with the guard. Chat with the guards—they're actually here to provide*

information (and to keep you from taking photos, which aren't allowed). As you glide by on the walkway, you'll see the following items. (The collection rotates, so you may not see all of the crowns described here.)

Scepter and Orb: After being crowned, the new monarch is handed these items. The **Sovereign's Scepter** is encrusted with the world's largest cut diamond—the 530-carat Star of Africa, beefy as a quarter-pounder. This was one of nine stones cut from the original 3,106-carat (1.37-pound) Cullinan diamond. The **orb** symbolizes how Christianity rules over the earth, a reminder that even a "divine monarch" is not above God's law. The coronation is a kind of marriage between the church and the state in Britain, since the king or queen is head of both, and the ceremony celebrates the monarch's power to do good for the whole of the nation.

St. Edward's Crown: This coronation crown is the one placed by the archbishop upon the head of each new monarch on coronation day in Westminster Abbey. It's worn for 20 minutes, then locked away until the next coronation. The original crown, destroyed by Cromwell, was older than the Tower itself and dated back to 1061, the time of King Edward the Confessor, "the last English king" before William the Conqueror invaded from France (1066). This 1661 remake is said to contain some of the original's gold amid its 443 precious and semiprecious stones. Because the crown weighs nearly five pounds, weak or frail monarchs have opted not to wear it.

Other Crowns: Various other crowns illustrate a bit of regalia symbolism. Kings and queens get four arches on their crowns, emperors get eight arches (e.g., the Imperial Crown of India in the next case), and princes get only two (for example, see the crowns of Prince George—before he became King George V—and Prince Frederick; today's Prince Charles keeps his two-arch crown in Wales).

The Crown of the Queen Mother: This crown, last worn by Elizabeth II's famous mum (who died in 2002), has the 106-carat Koh-I-Noor diamond glittering on the front. The Koh-I-Noor diamond is considered unlucky for male rulers and, therefore, only adorns the crown of the king's wife. If Charles becomes king, Camilla might wear it, but most Brits prefer to imagine it atop Kate's regal dome. This crown was remade in 1937 and given an innovative platinum frame.

• *Continuing on from the moving walkway, but in the same room (toward the exit), you'll find...*

Queen Victoria Small Diamond Crown: It's tiny. Victoria had a normal-sized head, but this was designed to sit atop the widow's veil she insisted on wearing for decades after the death of her husband, Prince Albert. This four-ounce job was made in 1870 for £50,000—personally paid for by the queen.

• Moving on, you'll see gilded platters and bowls used in the post-coronation banquet before you reach one final room, with one last crown.

The **Imperial State Crown** is what the Queen wears for official functions such as the State Opening of Parliament. When Victoria was queen, she insisted on wearing her small crown, but by law, this State Crown had to be carried next to her on a pillow, as it represents the sovereign. Among its 3,733 jewels are Queen Elizabeth I's former earrings (the hanging pearls, top center), a stunning 13th-century ruby look-alike in the center, and Edward the Confessor's ring (the blue sapphire on top, in the center of the Maltese cross of diamonds). When Edward's tomb was exhumed—a hundred years after he was buried—his body was "incorrupted." The ring on his saintly finger featured this sapphire and ended up on the crown of all future monarchs. This is the stylized crown you see representing the royalty on Britain's coins and stamps. It's depicted on the Beefeater uniforms and on the pavement at the end of the sliding walk.

• The final room is the epilogue of the jewels collection, with videos showing attendants putting all of these precious items back into their cases after the last coronation—emphasizing that these aren't just pretty museum pieces, but a vital part of an ongoing tradition.

Leave the jewels by exiting through the thick vault doors and head back toward the Scaffold Site. Find the entrance to the Bloody Tower, at the far end of Tower Green.

❾ Bloody Tower

Not all prisoners died at the block. The 13-year-old King Edward V and his kid brother were kidnapped in 1483 during the Wars of the Roses by their uncle Richard III ("Now is the winter of our discontent...") and locked in the Bloody Tower, never to be seen again. End of story? Two centuries later, the skeletons of two unidentified children were found here. The 2013 discovery of the remains of Richard III (in Leicester, in central England) may allow modern forensics to solve this centuries-old mystery.

Sir Walter Raleigh—poet, explorer, and political radical—was imprisoned here for 13 years. In 1603, the English writer and adventurer was accused of plotting against King James and sentenced to death. The king commuted the sentence to life imprisonment in the Bloody Tower. While in prison, Raleigh wrote the first volume of his *History of the World.* Check out his rather cushy bedroom,

study, and walkway (courtesy of the powerful tobacco lobby?). Raleigh promised the king a wealth of gold if he would release him to search for El Dorado. The expedition was a failure. Upon Raleigh's return, the displeased king had him beheaded in 1618.

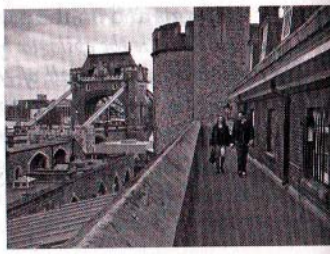
• *Next door to the Bloody Tower, inside the base of the Lower Wakefield Tower, is a cellar filled with some replica torture equipment. To reach the next sight, walk under the Bloody Tower, cross the cobbled road, and bear right a few steps to find the stairs up onto the wall.*

⓾ Medieval Palace

The Tower was a royal residence as well as a fortress. These rooms were built around 1240 by Henry III, the king most responsible for the expansive Tower of London complex we see today. The well-described rooms are furnished as they might have been during the reign of his son, Edward I ("Longshanks"). You'll see his re-created bedroom, then—up a flight of stairs—his throne room, both with massive fireplaces to keep this cold stone palace cozy. After Cromwell temporarily deposed the monarchy (in the 17th century), the Tower ceased to be a royal residence except in name.

• *From the throne room, continue up the stairs to...*

⓫ Walk the Wall



The Tower was defended by state-of-the-art walls and fortifications in the 13th century. This walk offers a good look. From the walls, you also get a fine view of the famous bridge straddling the Thames, with the twin towers and blue spans. It's not London Bridge (which is the nondescript bridge just upstream), but **Tower Bridge.** Although it looks somewhat medieval, this drawbridge was built in 1894, of steel and concrete. Sophisticated steam engines raise and lower the bridge, allowing tall-masted ships to squeeze through.

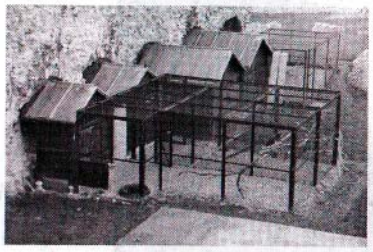
Gaze out at the bridge, the river, City Hall (the egg-shaped glass building across the river—see page 95), the Shard (London's bold exclamation point—see page 94), and life-filled London.

• *Between the White Tower and the Thames are cages housing the...*

⓬ Ravens

According to goofy tradition, the Tower and the British throne are only safe as long as ravens are present here. These eight impressive birds—the traditionally required six, plus two spares—have clipped wings to keep them close. World War II bombing raids reduced the population to one. Some years ago, with their clipped

wings, the birds had trouble mating, so a slide was built to help them get a bit of lift to facilitate the process. Happily, that worked, and a baby raven was born. A children's TV show sponsored a nationwide contest to come up with a name. The winner: "Ronald Raven." Today, they mimic and answer tourists like Edgar Allan Poe's Magic 8 Ball (though I've only heard them answer German *Fraus* with something akin to "Google it") and are as much a part of the Tower as the jewels. As you leave through the riverside exit, look into the moat on the right for the tiny raven graveyard. There lie Cedric (2003), Gundolf (2005), Hardey (2006), and Jubilee and Grip (2013). RIP.



Other Sights

Get out your Tower-issued map to check out other areas you can visit. The **Salt Tower** has graffiti by Henry Walpole, a staunch Catholic who was imprisoned here by Queen Elizabeth I, tortured on the rack, and had a finger torn off. At the **Royal Fusiliers Regimental Museum** you can see the uniforms, swords, and fusils (flintlock rifles) of the army of Redcoats who fought Napoleon, the American War of Independence, two World Wars ("Monty"—Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery of D-Day fame—was a Fusilier), and wars in the Persian Gulf.

Take one final look at the stern stone walls of the Tower. Be glad you can leave.