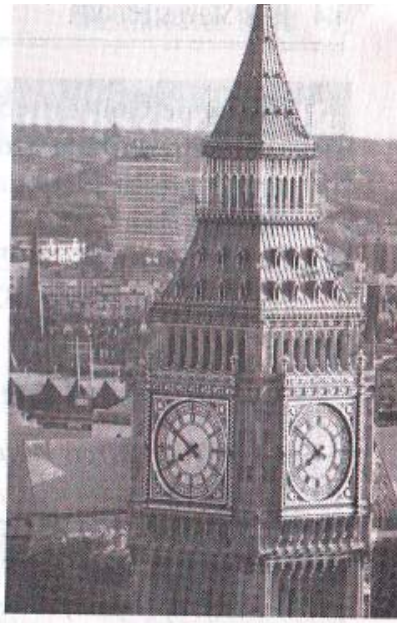


WESTMINSTER WALK

From Big Ben to Trafalgar Square

Just about every visitor to London strolls along historic Whitehall from Big Ben to Trafalgar Square. This quick nine-stop walk gives meaning to that touristy ramble. Under London's modern traffic and big-city bustle lie 2,000 fascinating years of history. You'll get a whirlwind tour as well as a practical orientation to London.

Orientation

Length of This Walk: Allow one hour for a leisurely walk, and add more time if you tour the Churchill War Rooms (1-2 hours) and the Banqueting House (30-60 minutes). Other nearby sights include the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, and St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

Getting There: Take the Tube to Westminster, then take the Westminster Pier exit. The walk ends at Trafalgar Square (nearest Tube stop: Charing Cross).

Churchill War Rooms: £21, daily 9:30-18:00, last entry one hour before closing.

Supreme Court: Free, Mon-Fri 9:30-16:30, closed Sat-Sun, £1 guidebooklet, requires security check, tel. 020/7960-1900, www.supremecourt.uk.

Banqueting House: £8, includes audioguide, Fri-Wed 10:00-17:00, closed Thu, may close for government functions—though it always stays open at least until 13:00.

Horse Guards: It's free to watch the Horse Guards change at Horse Guards Parade on Whitehall (Mon-Sat at 10:30, Sun at 9:30, dismounting ceremony daily at 16:00).

Tours: 🎧 Download my free Westminster Walk audio tour.

Services: WCs along this walk are at Westminster Pier (pay), in

Supreme Court (free), at the intersection of Bridge Street and Whitehall (underground, pay), and at Trafalgar Square (free, in square, at National Gallery, and downstairs at St. Martin-in-the-Fields).

Eateries: See page 405 for recommendations near Trafalgar Square, and page 132 for places near Westminster Abbey.

The Walk Begins

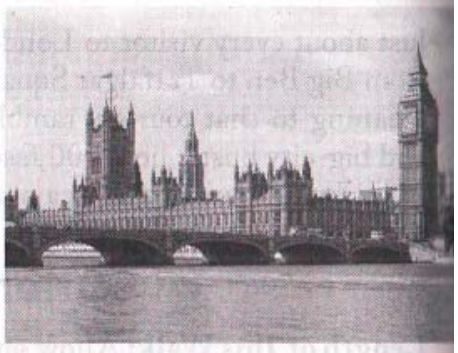
• *Start halfway across Westminster Bridge.*

❶ Westminster Bridge

Views of Big Ben and Parliament

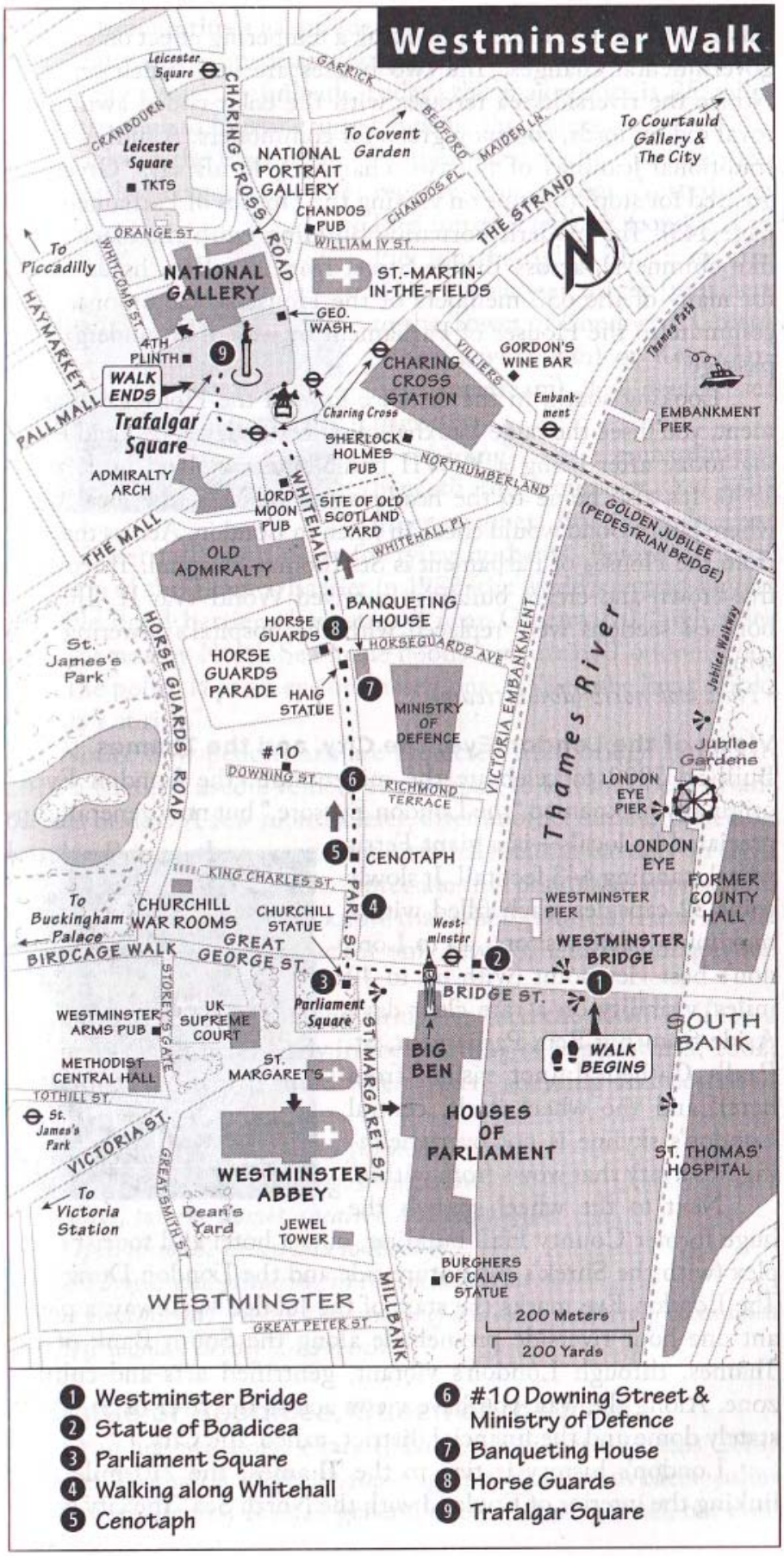
• *First look upstream, toward the Parliament.*

Ding dong ding dong. Dong ding ding dong. Yes, indeed, you are in London. **Big Ben** is actually "not the clock, not the tower, but the bell that tolls the hour." However, since the 13-ton bell is not visible, everyone just calls the whole works Big Ben. Named for a fat bureaucrat, Ben is scarcely older than my great-grandmother, but it has quickly become the city's symbol. The tower—officially named the "Elizabeth Tower" in honor of Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee—is 315 feet high. The clock faces are 23 feet across, and the 13-foot-long minute hand sweeps the length of your body every five minutes. For fun, call home from near Big Ben at about three minutes before the hour to let your loved one hear the bell ring. (If the bell is silent during your visit, it's due to a multiyear renovation of the tower and clock mechanism.)



Big Ben hangs out in the north tower of the Houses of Parliament (still known to Brits as the "Palace of Westminster"), which stretches along the Thames. Britain is ruled from this long building, which for five centuries was the home of kings and queens. Then, as democracy was foisted on tyrants, a parliament of nobles was allowed to meet in some of the rooms. Soon, commoners were elected to office, the neighborhood was shot, and the royalty moved to Buckingham Palace. While most of the current building looks medieval with its prickly flamboyant spires, it was actually reconstructed in the "Neo-Gothic" style after an 1834 fire destroyed the palace (which itself had been rebuilt following a fire in 1512).

Today, the House of Commons meets in one end of the building. The House of Lords debates and advises in the other end of


Westminster Walk
Leicester Square
CHARING CROSS ROAD
GARRICK
CRANBOURN
Leicester Square
TKTS
To Covent Garden
BEDFORD
MAIDEN LN.
To Courtauld Gallery & The City
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY
CHANDOS PL.
CHANDOS PUB
THE STRAND
ORANGE ST.
WILLIAM IV ST.
To Piccadilly
WHITCOMB ST.
NATIONAL GALLERY
ST.-MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS
HAYMARKET
GEO. WASH.
4TH PLINTH
9
VILLIERS
GORDON'S WINE BAR
Thames Path
CHARING CROSS STATION
WALK ENDS
Trafalgar Square
Charing Cross
Embankment
EMBANKMENT PIER
PALL MALL
SHERLOCK HOLMES PUB
NORTHUMBERLAND
ADMIRALTY ARCH
LORD MOON PUB
WHITEHALL
SITE OF OLD SCOTLAND YARD
GOLDEN JUBILEE (PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE)
THE MALL
OLD ADMIRALTY
WHITEHALL PL.
BANQUETING HOUSE
HORSE GUARDS
8
HORSEGUARDS AVE
St. James's Park
HORSE GUARDS PARADE
HAIG STATUE
7
MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
VICTORIA EMBANKMENT
Thames River
Jubilee Walkway
HORSE GUARDS ROAD
#10
DOWNING ST.
6
RICHMOND TERRACE
Jubilee Gardens
LONDON EYE PIER
5
CENOTAPH
LONDON EYE
KING CHARLES ST.
PARL. ST.
4
To Buckingham Palace
CHURCHILL WAR ROOMS
CHURCHILL STATUE
WESTMINSTER PIER
FORMER COUNTY HALL
BIRDCAGE WALK
GREAT GEORGE ST.
West-minster
2
WESTMINSTER BRIDGE
STOREY'S GATE
3
Parliament Square
1
BRIDGE ST.
WESTMINSTER ARMS PUB
UK SUPREME COURT
ST. MARGARET ST.
SOUTH BANK
BIG BEN
WALK BEGINS
METHODIST CENTRAL HALL
ST. MARGARET'S
TOTHILL ST.
St. James's Park
VICTORIA ST.
HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT
ST. THOMAS' HOSPITAL
GREAT SMITH ST.
WESTMINSTER ABBEY
To Victoria Station
Dean's Yard
JEWEL TOWER
BURGHERS OF CALAIS STATUE
MILLBANK
WESTMINSTER
GREAT PETER ST.
200 Meters
200 Yards
1 Westminster Bridge
2 Statue of Boadicea
3 Parliament Square
4 Walking along Whitehall
5 Cenotaph
6 #10 Downing Street & Ministry of Defence
7 Banqueting House
8 Horse Guards
9 Trafalgar Square

this 1,000-room complex, providing a tempering effect on extreme governmental changes. The two houses are very much separate: Notice the riverside tea terraces with the color-coded awnings—royal red for lords, common green for commoners. Alluding to the traditional leanings of the two chambers, locals say, "Green for go...red for stop" (for tips on visiting the Houses of Parliament, see page 143). The modern Portcullis Building (with the black tube-like chimneys), across Bridge Street from Big Ben, holds offices for many of the 650 members of the House of Commons. They commute to the Houses of Parliament by way of an underground passage.

Looking south, in the distance beyond the Houses of Parliament, you'll see the huge Vauxhall district—redeveloped and thriving today after being a WWII bomb-site wasteland until about 1990. It's also home to the headquarters of MI6 (the local CIA) where James Bond would check in when in London. Across the river from the Houses of Parliament is St. Thomas Hospital. Three of its five brown-and-cream buildings survived World War II. The two bombed sections were replaced with the hospital's towering new wing.

• *Now look north (downstream).*

Views of the London Eye, The City, and the Thames

Built in 2000 to celebrate the millennium, the London Eye—originally nicknamed "the London Eyesore," but now generally appreciated by locals—is a giant Ferris wheel standing 443 feet tall. It slowly spins 32 capsules, each filled with a maximum of 28 visitors, up to London's best viewpoint (with up to 40 miles' visibility on a rare clear day). Aside from Big Ben, Parliament, St. Paul's Cathedral (not visible from here), and the wheel itself, central London's skyline is not overwhelming; it's a city that wows from within.

Next to the wheel sprawls the huge former County Hall building, now a hotel and tourist complex (with the Shrek's Adventure ride and the London Dungeon). The London Eye marks the start of the Jubilee Walkway, a pleasant one-hour riverside promenade along the South Bank of the Thames, through London's vibrant, gentrified arts-and-cultural zone. Along the way, you have views across the river of St. Paul's stately dome and the financial district, called The City.

London's history is tied to the **Thames,** the 210-mile river linking the interior of England with the North Sea. The city got its

start in Roman times as a trade center along this watery highway. As recently as a century ago, large ships made their way upstream to the city center to unload. Today, the major port is 25 miles downstream, and tourist cruise boats ply the waters.

Look for the **boat piers** on either bank of the Thames. Several tour-boat companies offer regular cruises from Westminster Pier (on the left) or London Eye Pier (on the right). This is an efficient, scenic way to get from here to the Tower of London or Greenwich (downstream) or Kew Gardens (upstream). For details, see page 36.

Lining the embankment, beneath the lampposts, are little green copper **lions' heads** (just about 2 feet tall) with rings for tying up boats. Before the construction of the Thames Barrier in 1982 (the world's second-largest movable flood barrier, downstream near Greenwich), high tides from the nearby North Sea made floods a recurring London problem. The police kept an eye on these lions: "When the lions drink, the city's at risk."

Notice how pedestrians are protected from bridge traffic. In 2017, a terrorist used a vehicle as a weapon to kill four pedestrians on this bridge. A few months later, after another similar attack on London Bridge, the government installed security barriers on eight Thames bridges. Londoners appreciate this pragmatic approach to keeping people safe—they know that when politicians and media overreact to a terrorist attack it only rewards and encourages the evil.

Until 1750, only London Bridge crossed the Thames. Then a bridge was built here. Early in the morning of September 3, 1802, William Wordsworth stood where you're standing and described what he saw:

This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

• *Near Westminster Pier is a big statue of a lady on a chariot (nicknamed "the first woman driver"...no reins).*

❷ Statue of Boadicea, Queen of the Iceni

Riding in her two-horse chariot, daughters by her side, this Celtic Wonder Woman leads her people against Roman invaders. Julius Caesar was the first Roman general to cross the Channel, but even

he was weirded out by the island's strange inhabitants, who worshipped trees, sacrificed virgins, and went to war painted blue. Later, Romans would subdue and civilize them, naming this spot on the Thames "Londinium" and building roads that turned it into a major urban center.

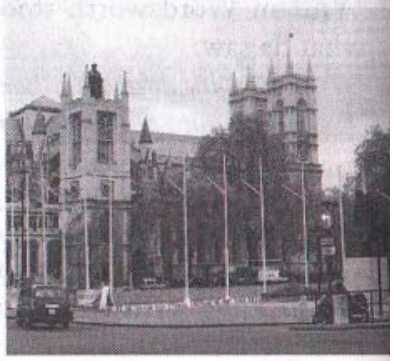
But Boadicea refused to be Romanized. In A.D. 60, after Roman soldiers raped her daughters, she rallied her people and "liberated" London, massacring its 60,000 Romanized citizens. However, the brief revolt was snuffed out, and she and her family took poison to avoid surrender.

• *There's a civilized public WC down the stairs behind Boadicea. Cross the street to just under Big Ben and continue one block inland to the busy intersection of Parliament Square. Pause here to survey the square.*

❸ Parliament Square

To your left are the sandstone-hued **Houses of Parliament.** If Parliament is in session, the entrance (midway down the building) is likely lined with tourists, enlivened by political demonstrations, and staked out by camera crews interviewing Members of Parliament (MPs) for the evening news. Only the core part, Westminster Hall, survives from the circa-1090s original. While the Houses of Parliament are commonly described as Neo-Gothic (even in this book), this uniquely English style is more specifically called Neo-Perpendicular Gothic. For a peek at genuine Perpendicular Gothic (the fanciest and final stage of that style), simply look across the street at the section of Westminster Abbey closest to the Houses of Parliament—it dates from 1484.

Kitty-corner across the square, the two white towers of **Westminster Abbey** rise above the trees. The broad boulevard of Whitehall (here called Parliament Street) stretches to your right up to Trafalgar Square.

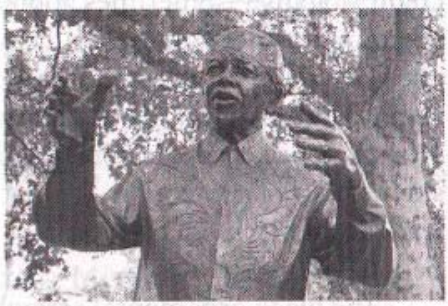


Parliament Square is the heart of what was once a suburb of London—the medieval City of Westminster. Like Buda and Pest (later Budapest), London is two cities that grew into one. In Roman and medieval times, the city was centered farther east, around St. Paul's Cathedral. But in the 11th century, King Edward the Confessor moved his court here, and the center of political power shifted to this area. Edward built a palace and a church (minster) here in the west, creating the city of "West Min-

ster." Over time, the palace evolved into a meeting place for debating public policy—a parliament. Today's Houses of Parliament sit atop the remains of Edward's original palace.

Across from Parliament, the cute little church with the blue sundials, snuggling under the Abbey "like a baby lamb under a ewe," is **St. Margaret's Church.** Since 1480, this has been *the* place for politicians' weddings, including Winston and Clementine Churchill's.

The expanse of green between Westminster Abbey and Big Ben is filled with statues that honor famous statesmen for their contributions to Britain and to mankind. The statue of **Winston Churchill,** the man who saved Britain from Hitler, shows him in the military overcoat he was fond of wearing. According to tour guides, the statue has a current of electricity running through it to honor Churchill's wish that if a statue were made of him, his head wouldn't be soiled by pigeons. At the opposite corner of the square from Churchill stands **Nelson Mandela,** who battled South African apartheid. Nearby is the robed statue of **Mahatma Gandhi,** who helped liberate India from the British. And behind them (across the street) stands the man who liberated America's slaves, **Abraham Lincoln** (erected in 1920, patterned after a similar statue in Chicago's Lincoln Park).



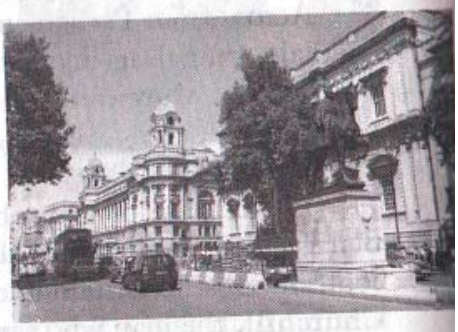
The white building (flying the Union Jack) at the far end of the square houses Britain's **Supreme Court.** You can wander the building after going through security, see a small exhibit on this recently sanctioned legal body, and observe any courts currently in session (it also has a café and WCs).

In 1868, the world's first traffic light was installed on the corner where Whitehall now spills double-decker buses into the square. Another reminder of a bygone era is the little yellow "Taxi" lantern atop the fence on the street corner closest to Parliament. In pre-mobile phone days, when an MP needed a taxi, this lit up to hail one. And here's one more ancient artifact: Along the north side of Parliament Square are some nearly obsolete remnants of 20th-century technology—red phone booths, mainly used today by tourists wanting a photo-op with Big Ben.

• *Consider touring Westminster Abbey (📖 see the Westminster Abbey Tour chapter). Otherwise, turn right (north), walk away from the Houses of Parliament and the Abbey, and continue up Parliament Street, which becomes Whitehall.*

❹ Walking Along Whitehall

Today, Whitehall is choked with traffic, but imagine the effect this broad street must have had on out-of-towners a little more than a century ago. In your horse-drawn carriage, you'd clop along a tree-lined boulevard past well-dressed lords and ladies, dodging street urchins. Gazing left, then right, you'd try to take it all in, your eyes dazzled by the bone-white walls of this man-made marble canyon.



Whitehall is now the most important street in Britain, lined with the ministries of finance, treasury, and so on. You may see limos and camera crews as important dignitaries enter or exit. Political demonstrators wave signs and chant slogans—sometimes about issues foreign to most Americans (Britain's former colonies still resent the empire's continuing influence), and sometimes about issues very familiar to us (the wars in the Middle East and the economy). Notice the security measures. Iron grates seal off the concrete ditches between the buildings and sidewalks for protection against explosives. And concrete balustrades and black bollards protect key government departments and pedestrians alike.

The black ornamental arrowheads topping the iron fences were once colorfully painted. In 1861, Queen Victoria ordered them all painted black when her beloved Prince Albert ("the only one who called her Vickie") died. Possibly the world's most determined mourner, Victoria wore black for the standard two years of mourning—and then tacked on 38 more. (For more on Victoria, see the sidebar on page 102.)

• *Continue down Whitehall. On your right is a colorful pub, the* ***Red Lion.*** *(It's known for its bell that gave an eight-minute warning, calling MPs back for votes.) Across the street, a long one-block detour down King Charles Street leads to the* ***Churchill War Rooms,*** *the underground bunker of 27 rooms that was the nerve center of Britain's campaign against Hitler (see page 43 for details). Farther along, you reach a tall, square stone monument in the middle of the boulevard.*

❺ Cenotaph

This monument honors those who died in World Wars I and II. The monumental devastation of these wars led to the drastic decline of the British Empire.

The actual cenotaph is the slab that sits atop the pillar—an empty tomb. You'll notice no religious symbols on this memorial. The dead honored here came from many creeds and all corners of Britain's empire. It looks lost in a sea of noisy cars, but on each

Remembrance Sunday (closest to November 11), Whitehall is closed to traffic, the royal family fills the balcony overhead in the foreign ministry, and a memorial service is held around the cenotaph.

The year 2014 marked the centennial of the start of what Brits call "the Great War"—World War I. It's hard for an American to understand the war's long-term impact on Europe. On a single day (at the Battle of the Somme, 1916), the British suffered roughly as many casualties as the US did in the entire Vietnam War—nearly 60,000. It's said that if the roughly one million WWI dead from the British Empire were to march four abreast past the cenotaph, the sad parade would last for seven days.

• *Just past the cenotaph is a crosswalk. On the other (west) side of Whitehall is a black iron security gate guarding the entrance to Downing Street.*

❻ 10 Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence

Britain's version of the White House is where the prime minister and her husband live, at #10. It's the black-brick building 100 yards down the blocked-off street, on the right; there's a lantern and usually a security guard.

Like the White House's Rose Garden, the black door marked #10 is a highly symbolic point of power, popular for photo ops to mark big occasions. This is where suffragettes protested in the early 20th century, where Neville Chamberlain showed off his regrettable peace treaty with Hitler, and where Winston Churchill made famous the V-for-Victory sign. It's where President Barack Obama came to discuss global economic issues with Gordon Brown, and where David Cameron suffered his stunning Brexit defeat—which resulted in the appointment of a new prime minister, Theresa May.

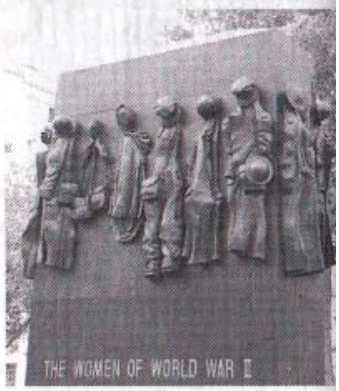
It looks modest, but #10's entryway does open up into fairly impressive digs—the prime minister's offices (downstairs), her residence (upstairs), and two large formal dining rooms. The PM's staff has offices here. Many on the staff are permanent bureaucrats, staying on to serve as prime ministers come and go. The cabinet meets at #10 on Tuesday mornings. This is where foreign dignitar-

ies come for official government dinners, where the prime minister receives honored schoolkids and victorious soccer teams, and where she gives monthly addresses to the nation. Next door, at #11, the chancellor of the exchequer (finance minister) lives with his family, and #12 houses the PM's press office.

This has been the traditional home of the prime minister since the position was created in the early 18th century. But even before that, the neighborhood (if not the building itself) was a center of power, where Edward the Confessor and Henry VIII had palaces. The facade is, frankly, quite cheap, having been built as part of a middle-class cul-de-sac of homes by American-born George Downing in the 1680s. When the first PM moved in, the humble interior was combined with a mansion in back. During a major upgrade in the 1950s, they discovered that the facade's black bricks were actually yellow—but had been stained by centuries of Industrial Age soot. To keep with tradition, they now paint the bricks black.

The guarded metal gates were installed in 1989 to protect against Irish terrorists. Even so, #10 was hit and partly damaged in 1991 by an Irish Republican Army mortar launched from a van. These days, there's typically not much to see unless a VIP happens to drive up. Then the bobbies snap to and check credentials, the gates open, the car is inspected for bombs, the traffic barrier midway down the street drops into its bat cave, the car drives in, and... the bobbies go back to mugging for the tourists.

The huge building across Whitehall from Downing Street is the **Ministry of Defence** (MOD), the "British Pentagon." This bleak place looks like a Ministry of Defence should. In front are statues of illustrious defenders of Britain. At the far right (in the beret, hands behind his back) stands "Monty"—**Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery** of World War II—who beat the Nazis in North Africa (defeating Erwin "The Desert Fox" Rommel at El Alamein), which gave the Allies a jumping-off point to retake Europe. Along with Churchill, Monty breathed confidence back into a demoralized British army, persuading them they could ultimately beat Hitler. A **memorial** honoring the women who fought and died in World War II stands in the middle of the street. Its empty uniforms evoke the often-overlooked sacrifices of Britain's female war heroes.



You may be enjoying the shade of London's **plane trees.** They do well in polluted London: roots that thrive in clay, waxy leaves

that self-clean in the rain, and bark that sheds and regenerates so pollution doesn't enter the trees' vascular systems.

Farther up Whitehall, flanked by the Welsh and Scottish government offices and (I hope) eternally pondering the cenotaph is an equestrian statue. **Field Marshal Douglas Haig** (marked with his honorary title, *Earl Haig)* was commander in chief of the British army from 1916 to 1918. He was responsible for ordering so many brave and not-so-brave British boys out of the trenches and onto the killing fields of World War I.

• *At the corner (same side as the Ministry of Defence), you'll find the...*

❼ Banqueting House

This two-story building is just about all that remains of what was once the biggest palace in Europe—Whitehall Palace, which once stretched from Trafalgar Square to Big Ben. Henry VIII started building it when he moved out of the Palace of Westminster (now the Parliament) and into the residence of the archbishop of York. Queen Elizabeth I and other monarchs added on as England's worldwide prestige grew.

Today, the exterior of Greek-style columns and pediments looks rather ho-hum, much like every other white marble building in London. But in 1620 it was a one-of-a-kind wonder—a big white temple rising above small half-timbered huts. Built by architect Inigo Jones, it sparked London's interest in the classical style. Within a century, London was awash in Georgian-style architecture, the English version of Neoclassical.

Facing the Banqueting House, look at the first-floor windows (with the balustrade)—the site of one of the pivotal events of English history. On January 30, 1649, a man dressed in black appeared at one of the windows and looked out at a huge crowd that surrounded the building. He stepped out the window and onto a wooden platform. It was King Charles I. He gave a short speech to the crowd, framed by the magnificent backdrop of the Banqueting House. His final word was "Remember." Then he knelt and laid his neck on a block as another man in black approached. It was the executioner—who cut off the king's head.

Plop—the concept of divine monarchy in Britain was decapitated. But there would still be kings after Oliver Cromwell, the Protestant antimonarchist who brought about Charles I's death and then became England's leader. Soon after Cromwell's death, royalty was restored, and Charles' son, Charles II, got his revenge here

in the Banqueting Hall...by living well. But, from then on, every king knew that he ruled by the grace of Parliament.

• *You can pop into the Banqueting House, following the self-guided tour below. Otherwise, skip to "Horse Guards."*

Banqueting House Interior

Start with the 10-minute video on the history of the House, which shows the place in banqueting action. History buffs might consider the included 45-minute audioguide. The low-ceilinged ground floor, a.k.a. the Undercroft, was King James I's personal wine cellar and tasting room. Climb to the first floor to find a portrait of the doomed king.

The main hall is impressive—two stories high, white with gold trim, full of light, and topped with colorful paintings in a gold-coffered ceiling. At 55 feet wide, 55 feet high, and 110 feet long, it's a perfect double cube. The chandeliers can be raised and lowered to accommodate any event. The throne is a modern reconstruction, but it gives an idea of the king's canopied throne that once stood here.

Ceiling Paintings: Charles I, who inherited the Banqueting House from his father, commissioned the famed Peter Paul Rubens to complete the decor. The paintings glorify Charles' dad, James I, the man who built the Banqueting House and who once told Parliament: "Kings are called gods...even by God himself."

To view the large oval painting in the center, ***The Apotheosis of James I,*** approach from the entrance, like a visiting ambassador, and watch the scene unfold. King James I (in red robe, with gray beard) rests his foot on a globe, as king of the whole world. Lady Faith (with a torch) and Miss Justice (with scales) lead him up into heaven, where baby angels blow trumpets and the goddess Minerva crowns him with the laurel wreath of wisdom. Minerva sticks her foot in our face, a triumph of illusion three centuries before 3-D glasses.

The painting above the throne, ***The Peaceful Reign of King James,*** shows wise King James seated on his throne, flanked by corkscrew columns from the temple of wise King Solomon. To the left, Peace embraces Plenty. Two angels swoop down at dramatic angles to adorn James with laurels, while a cherub holds

his royal crown. Below, the Roman gods—Mercury, Mars, Minerva—arrive to help James subdue the serpents of rebellion.

In the painting above the entrance, ***The Union of the Crowns,*** James points his scepter at two ladies—England and Scotland—warning them to get along. James united the two bickering countries, having been crowned both King of Scots (in 1567) and King of England (1603). Smoke clouds of peace rise in the background as Cupid (bottom left corner) torches the weapons of war. The ladies place a crown on a baby's head and lead him to the throne. It's James' son, the future Charles I. When Charles grew up, he had this painting hung so that he could see it (right-side up) while seated on the Banqueting House throne.

• *When you're finished ogling the paintings, head back outside. Continue up Whitehall on the left (west) side, where you'll see (and smell) the building known as Horse Guards, guarded by traditionally dressed soldiers—who are also called Horse Guards.*

❽ Horse Guards

For 200 years, soldiers in cavalry uniforms have guarded this arched entrance along Whitehall that leads to Buckingham Palace and one of its predecessors as royal residence, St. James's Palace.

Two different squads alternate, so depending on the day you visit, you'll see soldiers in either red coats with white plumes in their helmets (the Life Guards), or blue coats with red plumes (the Blues and Royals). Together, they constitute the Queen's personal bodyguard. Besides their ceremonial duties here in old-time uniforms, these elite troops have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both Prince William and Prince Harry have served in the Blues and Royals.

Stroll between the two guards, into the courtyard. The Horse Guards building was the headquarters of the British army from the time of the American Revolution until the Ministry of Defence was created in World War II. Back when this archway was the only access point to The Mall (the street leading to Buckingham Palace), it was a security checkpoint. Anyone on horseback had to dismount before passing through. Today, by tradition, you must dismount

your bicycle, Vespa, or Segway and walk it through. During the 2012 Olympics, the broad expanse of Horse Guards Parade was covered in sand to host beach volleyball.

The Household Cavalry Museum (through the arch and to the right) offers a glimpse at the stables and a collection of uniforms and weapons (for details, see page 48).

• *Continue up Whitehall, passing the Old Admiralty (#26, on left), headquarters of the British navy that once ruled the waves. Across the street, behind the old Clarence Pub, stood the original Scotland Yard, headquarters of London's crack police force in the days of Sherlock Holmes. Finally, Whitehall opens up into the grand, noisy, traffic-filled Trafalgar Square.*

Marking the top of Whitehall (on the closest side of the square) is a small but proud statue of Charles I, erected here after the Restoration of the monarchy. The king, who was beheaded in 1649, looks all the way down the grand boulevard to the Houses of Parliament, which to this day symbolizes the people power that (under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell) made him a foot shorter at the top.

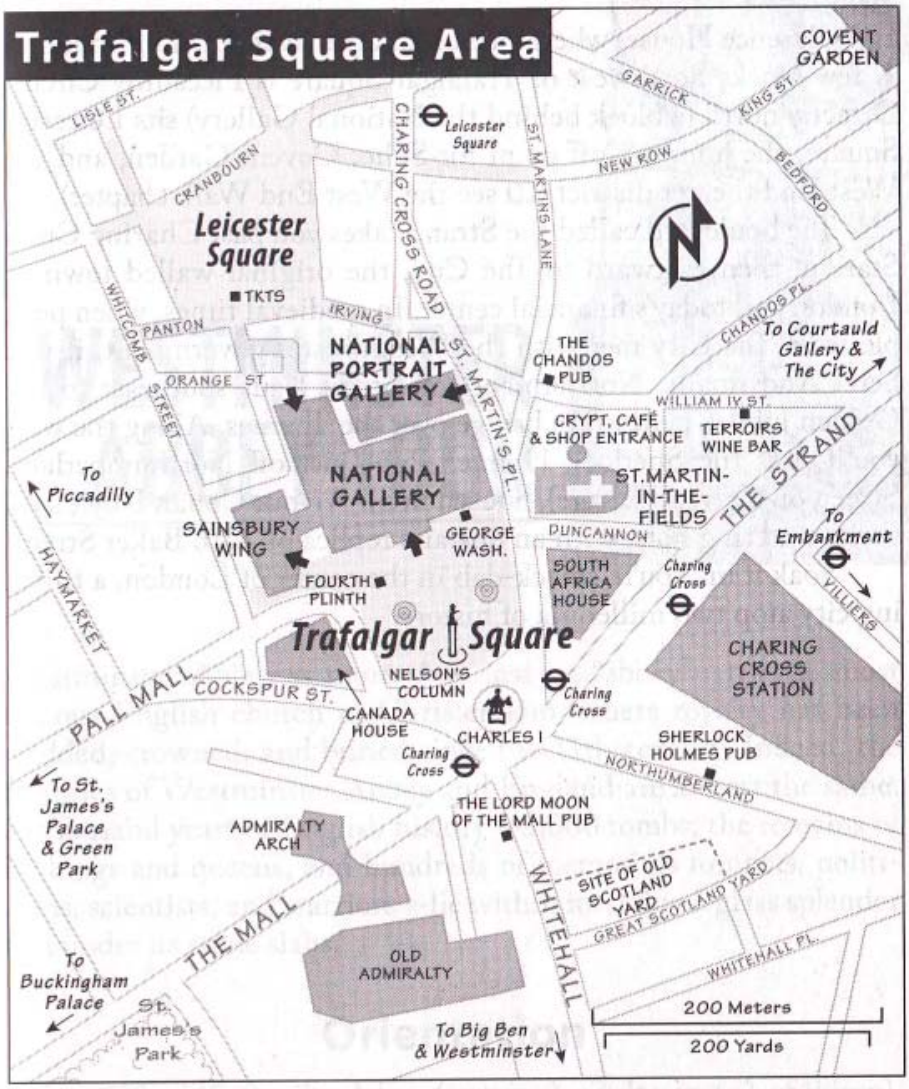
To reach the center of the square, cross a few streets at the crosswalks.

❾ Trafalgar Square

London's central meeting point bustles around the world's biggest Corinthian column, where **Admiral Horatio Nelson** stands 170 feet off the ground, looking over London in the direction of one of the greatest naval battles in history. Nelson saved England at a time as dark as World War II. In 1805, Napoleon was poised on the other side of the Channel, threatening to invade. Meanwhile, more than 900 miles away, the one-armed, one-eyed, and one-minded Lord Nelson attacked the French fleet off the coast of Spain at Trafalgar. The French were routed, Britannia ruled the waves, and the once-invincible French army was slowly worn down, then defeated at Waterloo. Nelson, while victorious, was shot by a sniper in the battle. He died, gasping, "Thank God, I have done my duty."

At the top of Trafalgar Square (north) sits the domed **National Gallery** with its grand staircase, and, to the right, the steeple of **St. Martin-in-the-Fields,** built in 1722, inspiring the steeple-over-the-entrance style of many town churches in New England (free lunch concerts—see page 453).

At the base of Nelson's column are bronze reliefs cast from melted-down enemy cannons, and four huggable lions dying to



have their photo taken with you. Of the many statues that dot the square, the pedestal on the northwest corner (the "fourth plinth") is periodically topped with contemporary art. The fountains, lit by colored lights, can shoot water 80 feet in the air.

Trafalgar Square is the center of modern London, connecting Westminster, The City, and the West End. Spin clockwise 360 degrees and survey the city:

To the south (down Whitehall) is the center of government, Westminster. Looking southwest, through the Admiralty Arch and down the broad boulevard called The Mall, you can see Buckingham Palace in the distance. (Down Pall Mall is St. James's Palace

and Clarence House, where Prince Charles lives when in London.) A few blocks northwest of Trafalgar Square is Piccadilly Circus. Directly north (a block behind the National Gallery) sits Leicester Square, the jumping-off point for Soho, Covent Garden, and the West End theater district (📖 see the West End Walk chapter).

The boulevard called the Strand takes you past Charing Cross Station, then eastward to The City, the original walled town of London and today's financial center. In medieval times, when people from The City met with the Westminster government, it was here. And finally, Northumberland Street leads southeast to the Golden Jubilee pedestrian bridge over the Thames. Along the way, you'll pass the Sherlock Holmes Pub (just off Northumberland Street, on Craven Passage), housed in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's favorite watering hole, with an upstairs replica of 221b Baker Street.

Soak it in. You're smack-dab in the center of London, a thriving city atop two millennia of history.