

# British Culture 12 - Visit London (Part 1)

## General Facts



Situated on the river Thames, London is the capital and largest city in England and the United Kingdom. The city has a long history: the first major settlement was founded by the Romans in 43 AD.

There are almost eight million inhabitants spread out over 610 square miles. The population is composed of many different ethnic groups and cultures.

London has a moderate oceanic climate with warm summers and cool winters.

Each year, approximately 14 million tourists travel to London, making it the world's most visited city. People

come to London for its rich history and culture as well as its numerous attractions.

## The Houses of Parliament

The neo-gothic parliament building, also known as Westminster Palace, was built in 1840, incorporating the old Westminster Hall and the remains of St. Stephen's Chapel, including the crypt. There are 11 courtyards, 100 stairwells and 1100 offices. The old palace endured a number of fires and was devastated by World War II.

The British parliament is composed of two houses: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Their sessions are open to the public and tourists.

The building has three towers: Victoria Tower, the Central Tower and the Clock Tower (Big Ben). Victoria Tower is the tallest at 120 meters and Big Ben is the most famous.



## Big Ben



Big Ben is actually not the name of the tower! The name of the tower is the Clock Tower. It was completed in 1859. Big Ben is the nickname of the Great Bell.

The Great Clock, a.k.a. the Westminster Clock, is the largest, most powerful, and most accurate public clock in the world. The minute hand is 14 feet (4.27 m) long and the hour hand is nine feet (2.74 m) long. The faces of Big Ben are cleaned every five years.

The Great Bell is seven feet six (2.32 m) high, nine feet (2.74 m) wide and eight inches (20.32 cm) thick. It weighs 13.5 tons. It is not the biggest bell in the world and it is no longer the biggest bell in the United Kingdom, but it is the most famous bell in the world! The sound of Big Ben is transmitted live on the BBC at 6pm and midnight.

# Westminster Abbey

Westminster Abbey is a large gothic abbey located next to the Palace of Westminster. The place is very old: its origins date back to the tenth century when Benedictine monks came to the site. In 1050, the last Anglo-Saxon King of England, Edward the Confessor, decided to build a stone abbey which, unfortunately, did not stand the test of time. The medieval building we can see today was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when Henry III decided to rebuild the abbey to honour Edward the Confessor.

For centuries Westminster Abbey has been the place for royal weddings, coronations, funerals and burials. Inside Westminster Abbey



you can admire the tombs of famous British monarchs as well as renowned British writers and poets such as Charles Dickens.

In the abbey you can also see the Coronation Chair. It was made in 1300-01. Since the coronation of Edward II in 1308 almost every monarch has been crowned in this chair! The Coronation Chair used to enclose the Stone of Scone (also called the Stone of Destiny) upon which the kings Scots are crowned. The Stone was returned to Scotland in 1996 but will be placed again in the Coronation chair at future coronations.

# Buckingham Palace

Buckingham Palace has been the official residence of the British monarchy since the 19th century. The original building was constructed in 1703, but, in 1820, King George IV commissioned John Nash, the most famous architect of the time, to transform the palace. Buckingham Palace finally became home to the British



Royal Family in 1837, under Queen Victoria's reign.



Buckingham Palace is open to the public during the summer months. In the meantime, the Royal Family goes to Scotland.

Buckingham Palace has 775 rooms, 78 bathrooms and 92 offices. Every day, at 11.30 a.m. (official start time), you can follow the Changing of the Guard in front of Buckingham Palace.

# 10 Downing Street

10 Downing Street has 3 main functions:

- 1) it has been the official residence of the British Prime Minister since 1735,
- 2) it is the British Prime Minister's office,
- 3) it is a place where the Prime Minister gives receptions and welcomes world leaders.

