

# British Culture 12 - Visit London (Part 2)

## The Tower of London

The Tower of London was built in 1078 by William the Conqueror. He ordered the construction of the fortress to protect the Normans from the native English and symbolize his power.

Throughout history the ever-expanding tower was used as a royal palace, an arsenal, a mint (i.e. a place where money is made) and even a zoo. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Henry VIII, the Tower of London became a sinister prison, synonymous with terror, torture and death. Two of the King's wives were beheaded



in the Tower of London and over 50,000 people were executed.

Today, the Tower of London functions as a museum and treasury. It is guarded by Yeoman Warders, a.k.a. the Beefeaters. They are former officers and sergeants of the British Services. They are called Beefeaters because, in the past, part of their salary was paid with beef!

If you go to the Tower of London, you will see black ravens. According to legend, if the black ravens leave the Tower of London, it will be the end of the British monarchy.

## The Crown Jewels

The Crown Jewels have been kept in the Tower of London since 1303. They were initially kept at Westminster Abbey, but, because of a theft, they were finally transferred to the Tower.



The collection includes St. Edward's Crown, Queen Victoria's Crown as well as the State Sword, the Royal Orb and the world's largest diamond, the 530-carat Star of Africa which is encased in the Royal Sceptre.

The Imperial State Crown was made in 1838. It is adorned with 2868 diamonds, 17 sapphires, 11 emeralds and 5 rubies. It weighs two pounds and a half (1.1 kg).



## Tower Bridge

In 1876 a competition to design a new bridge for London was held. The objective was to ease congestion (traffic) over London Bridge. Construction of Tower Bridge began in 1886 and it took eight years to build the bridge. The elevated walkways stand 143 feet above the Thames. They were used by pedestrians who needed to cross the river when the lower part of the bridge was being raised. Unfortunately, they became the meeting point of the wrong kind of people (thieves, prostitutes, etc.) and they were closed in 1910. They reopened to the public in 1982. They now welcome a permanent exhibition.



## The Globe



The Globe is a faithful reconstruction of the original 16th century Globe Theatre which was co-owned and run by Shakespeare and The Lord Chamberlain's Men, a group of actors. It is located on the south bank of the River Thames, next to the Tate Modern

The original theatre opened in 1599 but burnt down in 1613 during a performance of *Henry VIII* when a cannon ball fired from the stage set fire to the thatched roof. It was rebuilt before being shut down

by the Puritans in 1642.

The new Shakespeare Globe opened in 1997. It took over 20 years to raise the money and 10 years to build it.

The Globe is open from May to October. The programme includes the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and also the work of modern playwrights.

## St Paul's Cathedral

The present building is considered to be the fourth St Paul's Cathedral. There has been a church on the site since 604 AD. In 1666 the Great Fire destroyed 80% of London and Sir Christopher was commissioned to restore St Paul's Cathedral. Construction finished in 1708, on Sir Christopher Wren's 76<sup>th</sup> birthday.



## The British Museum



The British Museum was established in 1753. It was the world's first truly public national museum. Entry to the British Museum is free (i.e. you do not have to pay).

The most valuable collection is probably the ancient Egyptian collection. One of its major objects is the Rosetta Stone which dates back to 196 BC. It was found in 1799. This stone helped Champollion, a French archaeologist, to decipher the secret of the



hieroglyphics.

There are many other collections from different civilisations all around the world to be seen at the British Museum.

## Madame Tussauds



Madame Tussauds is a wax museum. There are 180 wax figures representing famous people from the past and the present. The oldest was made in 1765. Madame Tussaud lived during the reign of Louis XVI and the French Revolution.

The first exhibition of wax figures in London took place in 1835. Each year two and a half million people visit Madame Tussauds.