

A medieval jousting scene with knights in armor and a lance. The background shows a stone building, likely the White Tower, and a wooden jousting arena. The foreground is dominated by a close-up of a knight's armor and a lance.

WHITE TOWER STORIES

a few inspirational tales...

HUNG QUARTERED AND DRAWN

STORIES OF THE WHITE TOWER

The Tower of London is named after the monumental White Tower, which sits at its heart. Begun by William the Conqueror to consolidate his victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the White Tower is the greatest surviving example of a Norman great tower, or keep. Over the centuries this iconic building has been the setting for many astonishing historical events, and its imposing appearance has inspired more than one legend to grow up around it. There are many stories connected with this magnificent building – some with a basis in historical fact, and others in the vivid imaginations of awe-struck generations. Here are a selection...

In the Beginning

The Construction of the White Tower by William the Conqueror, was begun in 1075-9, in order to quell the unruly citizens of London, and deter invaders coming up river. Built as an impregnable fortress, the White Tower was also designed for the King's occasional use as a residence, and probably for ceremonial occasions. The chapel of St John the Evangelist is the most complete example of a fine palace chapel to survive from the 11th century. A massive stone building, the White Tower would have loomed over the wooden constructions surrounding it, emphasising the strength and longevity of the Norman invaders.

The White Tower

In March 1240, Henry III had the White Tower painted white for the first time, and had a wooden fighting platform built along its top. The fighting platform overlooked the area of the royal lodgings in the bailey and reflected a worry that the castle might be besieged and the lodgings over-run: it might then prove necessary for the royal household to withdraw into the White Tower. This work made the White Tower appear even more formidable.

Myth and Legend

The great antiquity of the White Tower led to its origins being forgotten amongst the majority, and a mythology to grow up around it. Its proximity to the Roman city walls led to a conflation of the history of the Roman Conquest of Britain, and the Norman one. The White Tower became known as Julius Caesar's Tower. Shakespeare referred to the Tower of London and the White Tower as 'Caesar's Tower' in Richard III, for example: [(III:i) Prince: I do not like the Tower, of any place:- Did Julius Caesar build that place, my lord?]

Party Bishop

Bishop Ranulf Flambard shares the distinction of being the Tower's first known prisoner and escapee. He was William Rufus's unpopular chief minister, imprisoned in 1100 on the orders of the new king, Henry I. He was allowed food to the value of 2 shillings a day, and lived well. He ordered feasts for himself and his guards. One day a rope was smuggled in to him in a cask of wine. The wily bishop got his guards terribly drunk, and they all fell asleep. Flambard then attached a rope to a column between two windows, and, clutching his pastoral staff, lowered himself down. His hands were cut to shreds on the rope, which wasn't long enough, causing the rather large bishop to land painfully. His friends and followers bundled him onto a horse, and he made his escape.



John II of France's captivity in the White Tower

The armies of Edward III captured the King of France, Jean le Bon, at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356. Expenses for the captive on his first day as a prisoner in the White Tower in 1360 show that the king was not deprived of his comforts. He and his household were allowed 74 loaves of bread, 21 gallons of wine, peppers, ginger, almonds, 3 mutton carcasses, 1 calf, 1 capon, 12 chickens, salt, herbs and mustard. John was later released on the promise of a large ransom which was never paid: he chivalrously returned to England voluntarily to resume his captivity.

The Ritual of the Knights of the Bath

From the Coronations of Henry IV in 1399 to Elizabeth I in 1558 an investiture of the Knights of the Bath took place at the Tower two days before a coronation at Westminster Abbey, and much of the ceremony revolved around the White Tower. 60 knights were invested prior to Anne Boleyn's coronation in 1533. Their role included serving the queen at dinner, before retiring to the White Tower to bathe. The Chamberlain, accompanied by knights and minstrels playing music approached the initiates in their baths, and exhorted them to uphold the traditions of knighthood, whilst pouring water over them. Then, the initiate was dried in his bed in the chamber. He spent the rest of the night in prayer dressed in dark hermit like robes. At daybreak the initiates were confessed, and attended matins followed by mass. They were dressed and led on horseback to the Great Hall (outside the White Tower). The queen dubbed them knights. They then had to stoically sit still, watching others feast, before escorting the queen on her Coronation procession to Westminster Abbey, where she was crowned.

The Tudors and the White Tower

Henry VIII wanted the Tower to look just perfect for the preliminary celebrations for the coronation of his new Queen Anne Boleyn, and improvements to the White Tower were made in 1532-3, before she was crowned. The battlements were repaired, the beautiful cupolas on the turrets were added, along with gilded and painted weather vanes. In Elizabeth I's reign, the White Tower became a grand and glorious storehouse, where records of state were kept, along with gunpowder, weapons, and suits of armour, which people paid to come and marvel at. Henry VIII's magnificent armour, some of it kept in the White Tower for four centuries, is still on display today.

Flamsteed's Turret

The great height of the White Tower led to its northeast turret being used as an observatory by the first Astronomer Royal John Flamsteed in 1675, during the reign of Charles II. It had its limitations however, and one Tower legend, probably of Victorian origin, is that Flamsteed complained to Charles about the ravens getting in the way of his observations. Charles apparently ordered them to be culled, but, mindful of the story that the kingdom would fall without the ravens, a few were saved. Flamsteed eventually moved to the new Royal Observatory in Greenwich.

The Little Princes' bodies 'discovered'

The sons of the dead King Edward IV, 12 year old Edward V and his younger brother Richard, were bought to the Tower on the orders of their uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. An eye witness last saw the boys alive in June 1483 playing in the gardens or at the windows of the royal apartments. By July they were declared illegitimate, and the Duke was crowned Richard III, King of England. The Princes quietly vanished, and were never seen again...The mystery of the Princes took on a new twist over 160 years later, when a building on the south front of the White Tower was being demolished in 1647. The skeletons of two children were discovered, and identified as those of the Princes. Charles II was king at the time, and had the bones re-buried at Westminster Abbey, the traditional resting place for Kings and Queens.

