

Factsheet

The White Tower

The White Tower was *the* original Tower of London. Begun by William the Conqueror around 1080, it would have made a safe and impressive home for the newly crowned Norman invader. During its long life - it is almost as old as the Millennium - it has served many purposes including Royal residence, Royal Observatory, Public Records Office, State Prison, gunpowder store and is still home to the Royal Armouries.

- The White Tower is 35.9m (118 ft) long, 32.6m (107ft) wide and 27.4m (90ft) high. It would fit into Wembley Stadium 44 times but would entirely cover the Centre Court at Wimbledon and still have 268m² of ancient stonework to spare.
- No one knows the exact start date for the building of the White Tower but tree-ring dating of a plank of wood embedded in a ground floor wall suggests it was underway at least by 1081.
- Perhaps the most confused people were those living at the time of Shakespeare, when it was believed that the White Tower had been built by Julius Caesar - some 1,130 years too early.
- Certainly it was still under construction in 1097 when Londoners forced to do the work were complaining about the conditions they were working under.
- William the Conqueror may have been the first eco-friendly, recycling monarch as he brought his own second-hand stone from northern France to construct the White Tower. He also used rare stone from Quarr, on the Isle of Wight.
- Recent work on the Tower has revealed that it may only have seemed large to the Kings subjects as the walls extended beyond the height of the original roof. The scarring left by the gables of this roof have been spotted half way up the inside wall on the third floor.
- It was during the reign of Henry III(1216-1272) that the building was whitewashed and thus got its name.

- The round turret at the northeast corner of the White Tower was the site of the first Royal Observatory. In March 1674, John Flamsteed set up his telescope at the top of the turret. But he only stayed until August because, according to legend, the ravens were making a mess on the lens of his telescope.
- The White Tower was used as the main repository for gun powder through the seventeenth century. In 1670 there were more than 10,000 barrels of explosives stored here.
- The White Tower has housed several prisoners of royal blood, including John II the Good of France in 1360 and Richard II of England 1399.
- The first recorded prisoner in the Tower was Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham who was imprisoned in the White Tower shortly after its completion in 1100 on the orders of Henry I. He escaped in 1101 using rope smuggled to him in a barrel of wine.
- St John's Chapel within the White Tower has been the setting for several important royal events, including the lying in state of Henry VI in 1471 and later the Queen Elizabeth of York, mother of Henry VIII in 1503.
- Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries the Chapel was used as storage for the Public Record Office.
- It is almost certain that the basement of the White Tower was among the locations for torture during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Jesuit priest John Gerard described two "interrogations" in which he was suspended by manacles on his wrists in 1597
- The Spanish Armoury takes its name from the instruments of torture which were believed to have come from the wrecked holds of ships within the Spanish Armada, 1588
- The Line of Kings has been restored and is now on display in the White Tower after an absence of over 100 years. Several of the horses were stored beneath Whitehall during the war and following a direct hit from a bomb are now encased in rubble. Only a wooden head representing Elizabeth I was salvaged and this is now in the new display.