

The Significance of Westminster Abbey in English History

Westminster Abbey is a destination priority for anyone visiting London, England. It is an integral part of the nation's rich history and holds far more importance to England than its beauty. The historically significant church is large, embellished, and brings a feeling of grandeur to the people who visit it. The practices of the monarch are deeply rooted in the building which holds the very essence of the ritualistic values of the government. A long line of the royal family has been sworn in, married, and buried within the walls of Westminster Abbey. The significance of Westminster Abbey in English history is that it was designed and built to honor those who led the nation. It is a destination location for events that have a significant impact the country.

Westminster Abbey has a long history dating back to 1065. St Edward the Confessor had built a church on the site. Henry III decided in 1245 to pull down the whole church beside the nave. He then replaced it with a Gothic style that represented the period, which is the present-day Westminster Abbey. It took around fifteen years to be build. According to Penrhyn the king used one-tenth of the kingdom's property to build the church. It was intended, by design, to be unique and to impress the commoners. "Its fame as a new style of composition lingered in the mind of men for generations."¹ The grandeur details and careful planning ensured the facility had all that it needed in order to become a historical monument representing the nation. King Henry VII built the glorious lady chapel, and it was consecrated on February 19, 1516. There were additions and changes to Westminster Abbey from the 13th to the 16th centuries. It quickly became a significant part of British history and allowed the nation to establish a shrine for many famous

¹ Arthur Penrhyn, *The Historical Memorials of Westminster Abbey* (London:1869),.22-23.

and great leaders of the nation. The foundation for its formation was to have a place that best represents the country and its leaders.

The church had gone through several names and references before it officially became Westminster Abbey. “The church became known as the ‘west minster’ to distinguish it from St Paul’s Cathedral — or the east minster — in the city of London”² During this time, a large church was called a Minster, typically when they were representative of status. In 1065 when the church was consecrated, the king was too ill even to participate, and he died only a few days later. Edward the Confessor was the first to have his remains at Abbey’s High Altar. King Henry declared the church was built and designed to be a place of worship and a great monastery. In addition, the building was to be a place for burials and the coronation of monarchs. A significant part of the building as we know it today can be attributed to King Henry’s reign and vision. In 1272, the king died before the completion of the central part of the church for laity or nave. Henry was then buried near Edward’s shrine. The kings that followed over the centuries had tombs in the building, and the leaders added lavish décor to the chapels. It provides details of the leaders of the past while honoring the monarchs of the future. The final phase of Westminster Abbey was completed in 1745 and included the West Towers.

One way to view Westminster Abbey is as a source of power for England. “Westminster Abbey became a church of royal importance in the 1040s, when Edward the Confessor, one of the last Anglo-Saxon kings of England, replaced an older monastery dedicated with a new construction of suitably royal proportions”³ The building of the church became a project of

² Kelly Hayes, ‘Westminster Abby: A history of England’s royal famous church’ *Fox 13*, 14 September 2022. <<https://www.q13fox.com/news/westminster-abbey-history-london-england-royal-church>> (accessed 20, November, 2022)

³ Paul Hammer, ‘Westminster Abbey has witnessed nearly a millennium of British history – but many rituals, like those at royal funerals, aren’t so old’ *The Conversation*, 20 September, 2022 <<https://theconversation.com/westminster-abbey-has-witnessed-nearly-a->

national importance. Edward and his royal Abbey were considered historical characters and were included in the seventy-meter-long tapestry that portrays the 1066 Norman conquest of England. Edward, upon his death, was also buried in the Abbey. It was not until a century later that Edwards was canonized as a saint, and his tomb was turned into a royal shrine. Edward's successor to the throne, William the Conqueror, was coronated in Westminster Abbey. The crowning of William was the start of a new tradition that mandated the coronations would take place in the Abbey. It is expected that Charles III will also have his coronation in Westminster Abby in 2023, much like those who preceded him. It shows the church is far more than a building or a significant landmark; it is a part of the historical rituals that have taken place in England for centuries.

The deep history and objects that are trusted in Abbey are vital for England's history. Westminster Abbey's things and relics related to them are in Edward the Confessor's shrine chapel. It is where the queens and kings of England are customarily buried. It is a part of what makes the church so vital to England's past and present. These relics "constituted a discrete collection, curated by a dedicated monastic officer titled 'the keeper of St Edward's shrine and the relics of St Peter's church'."⁴ Present-day governmental officials analyze these documents to examine the content of the collections, the way the related object and relics were taken care of, and the monastic interest of the content. Westminster Abbey has an eclectic number of historical pieces that hold different values to the governmental leaders.

Westminster Abbey's sanctuary is the center of the Abbey and contains monuments of important Brits. It has a Poets' Corner where intellects throughout history are honored. "You see

[millennium-of-british-history-but-many-rituals-like-those-at-royal-funerals-arent-so-old-190878](#)> (accessed 20 November,2022).

⁴ Julian Luxford (2019) 'Recording and curating relics at Westminster Abbey in the late Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History*, 45:2, 204-230,(p.1). DOI: 10.1080/03044181.2019.1593626.

the monument to William Shakespeare that was made in 1740, this monument is surrounded by monuments to other great British writers: Robert Burns, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters”⁵ The church has a coronation chair that has been used since 1307. It is in St Georges Chapel, and it is one of the most important pieces of furniture in the world. The chair is the oldest piece of furniture in England. For seven hundred years, the new royal king or queen has sat in that chair for their coronation. Because of its historical significance and importance to the nation, it is moved in front of the High Alter for the ceremony. It is a symbol of the monarchy, and there is no way to express the value of this piece of furniture. The ceremonial practices and resources are all deep within the Abbey. It tells a story to all who visit the greats who passed through the church’s doors. It represents all the great people who were a part of England’s history, the past, the present, and the future.

The library in Westminster Abbey was designed to keep important governmental documents. On February 3, 1624, it was declared that “whereas letters from his Majesty directed unto us under the great Seal of England for all such dubble manuscripts as we have dubble in our library towards the furnishing of a Library in the Church of Westminster newly erected or augmented by the new Lord keeper”⁶ Outside the library's governmental documents, the Abbey has shrines for late kings and queens, including Edward I and Eleanor of Castile, Henry V, and Richard II and Anne of Bohemia. The church has hosted 3,300 burials and held far more memorials. The church halls have over 600 wall tablets and monuments, including the nation's most important collection of sculptures. It was the location for the unknown warrior whose burial

⁵ Luxford, Julian, ‘Recording and curating relics at Westminster Abbey in the late Middle Ages’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 45.2, 2019, 204-230.

⁶ Joseph Armitage Robinson, Montague Rhodes James, *The Manuscripts of Westminster Abbey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908) <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511920110.007> [Accessed 20 November 2022].

is a place of pilgrimage. Political figures and influential individuals who visit England will inevitably find themselves at Westminster Abbey. It has many purposes and holds many of England's traditions within the church's walls.

Westminster Abbey holds the nation's history, and all the great leaders who ruled throughout the years depended upon the church for all aspects of their role. The church was the location for coronations, weddings, and funerals. It holds essential documents, monuments, and shrines of those who contributed to the nation's history. Westminster Abbey is not only a significant part of the nation but a part of the royal family. The church is just as important as the events inside the walls. To visit Westminster Abbey is to walk through a nation's deep history and be a part of the rich traditions that govern the country. It represents the past and the future of England. Every phase of its construction was done with a purpose, and the Abbey will continue to be a top destination for those who visit England.

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