



WESTMINSTER ROLL OR STROLL

From Big Ben to Trafalgar Square

London is the L.A., D.C., and N.Y.C. of Britain. This tour starts with London's "star" attraction, continues to its "Capitol," passes its "White House," and ends at its "Times Square"...all in about an hour.

Just about every visitor to London traverses the historic Whitehall Boulevard from Big Ben to Trafalgar Square. This quick eight-stop tour gives meaning to that touristy ramble. Under London's modern traffic and big-city bustle lie 2,000 fascinating years of history. You'll get a whirlwind tour, as well as a practical orientation to London.

Access: Westminster Bridge is wheelchair-accessible, and all of the sidewalks for the remainder of the tour have curb cutouts.

THE TOUR BEGINS

- *Start halfway across Westminster Bridge (Tube: Westminster; take the Westminster Pier exit).*

① On Westminster Bridge Views of Big Ben and Parliament

- *First look upstream, toward the Parliament.*

Ding dong ding dong. Dong ding ding dong. Yes, indeed, you are in London. **Big Ben** is actually "not the clock, not the tower, but the bell that tolls the hour." However, since the 13-ton bell is not visible, everyone just calls the whole works Big Ben. Named for a fat bureaucrat, Ben is scarcely older than my great-grandmother, but it has quickly become the city's symbol. The tower is 320 feet high, and the clock faces are 23 feet



across. The 13-foot-long minute hand sweeps the length of your body every five minutes.

Big Ben is the north tower of a long building, the **Houses of Parliament** (AE+A, AI, AT, AL+A, Level 2—Moderately Accessible, see page *TK), stretching along the Thames. Britain is ruled from this building, which for five centuries was the home of kings and queens. Then, as democracy was foisted on tyrants, a parliament of nobles was allowed to meet in some of the rooms. Soon, commoners were elected to office, the neighborhood was shot, and the royalty moved to Buckingham Palace. Although the current building looks

medieval, with its prickly flamboyant spires, it was built in the 1800s after a fire gutted old Westminster Palace.

Today, the **House of Commons**, which is more powerful than the queen and prime minister combined, meets in one end of the building. The rubber-stamp **House of Lords** grumbles and snoozes in the other end of this 1,000-room complex, and provides a tempering effect on extreme governmental changes. The two houses are very much separate: Notice the riverside tea terraces with the color-coded awnings—royal red for lords, common green for commoners. If a flag is flying from the Victoria Tower, at the far south end of the building, Parliament is in session.

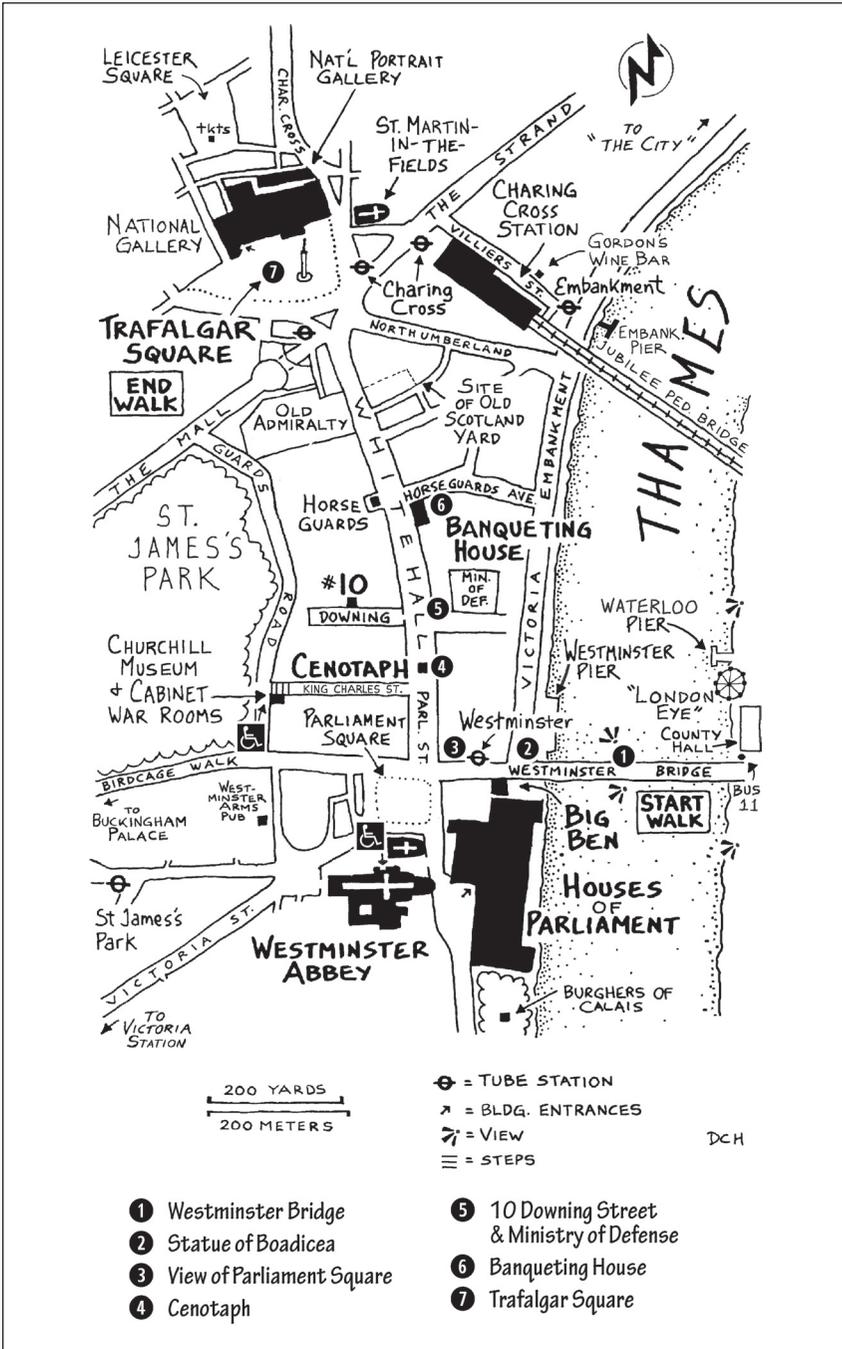
• *Now look north (downstream).*

Views of the London Eye Ferris Wheel, The City, and the Thames

Built in 2000 to celebrate the new millennium, the London Eye (AE, AI, AT, AL, Level 1—Fully Accessible)—known to some as “the London Eyesore”—stands 443 feet tall and slowly spins 32 capsules, each filled with 25 visitors, up to London’s best viewpoint (up to 25 miles on a rare clear day). Aside from Big Ben, Parliament, St. Paul’s Cathedral (not visible from here), and the wheel itself, London’s skyline is not overwhelming; it’s a city that wows from within.



Westminster Roll or Stroll



Next to the wheel sprawls the huge former **County Hall building**, now a hotel and tourist complex. The London Eye marks the start of the **Jubilee Promenade**, a pleasant one-hour riverside path along the “South Bank” of the Thames, through London’s vibrant, gentrified arts-and-culture zone. Along the way, you have views across the river of St. Paul’s stately dome and the financial district, called “The City.”

London’s history is tied to the **Thames**, the 210-mile river linking the interior of England with the North Sea. The city got its start in Roman times as a trade center along this watery highway. As recently as a century ago, large ships made their way upstream to the city center to unload. Today, the major port is 25 miles downstream.

Look for the piers on the Thames. A 50-minute round-trip **cruise** (**AE, AI**, Level 1—Fully Accessible, see page *TK) geared for tourists departs from Waterloo Pier near the base of the Ferris wheel. On the other side of the river, at **Westminster Pier**, boats leave for the Tower of London, Greenwich, and Kew Gardens.

Lining the river, beneath the lampposts, are little green copper **lions’ heads** with rings for tying up boats. Before the construction of the Thames Barrier in 1982 (the world’s largest movable flood barrier, downstream near Greenwich), high tides from the nearby North Sea made floods a recurring London problem. The police kept an eye on these lions: “When the lions drink, the city’s at risk.”

Until 1750, only London Bridge crossed the Thames. Then a bridge was built here. Early in the morning on September 3, 1803, William Wordsworth stood where you are right now and described what he saw:

*This city now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.*

• Go to Big Ben’s side of the river. Near Westminster Pier is a big statue of a lady on a chariot (nicknamed “the first woman driver”...no reins).

② Statue of Boadicea, Queen of the Iceni

Riding in her two-horse chariot, her daughters by her side, this Celtic Xena leads her people against Roman invaders. Julius Caesar had been the first Roman to cross the Channel, but even he was weirded out by the island’s strange inhabitants, who worshipped trees, sacrificed virgins, and went to war painted blue. Later, Romans subdued and

civilized them, building roads and making this spot on the Thames—“Londinium”—into a major urban center.

But Boadicea refused to be Romanized. In A.D. 60, after Roman soldiers raped her daughters, she rallied her people and “liberated” London, massacring its 70,000 Romanized citizens. However, the brief revolt was snuffed out, and she and her family took poison, rather than surrender.

• *There’s an accessible public toilet down the stairs behind Boadicea. Continue past Big Ben one block inland to the busy intersection of Parliament Square.*



③ View of Parliament Square

To your left is the orange-hued **Parliament**. If Parliament is in session, the entrance is lined with tourists, enlivened by political demonstrations, and staked out by camera crews interviewing Members of Parliament (MPs) for the evening news. Kitty-corner across the square, the two white towers of **Westminster Abbey** (AE, AI, Level 2—Moderately Accessible, loaner wheelchairs, see page *TK) rise above the trees. The broad boulevard of Whitehall (here called Parliament Street) stretches to your right up to Trafalgar Square.

This is the heart of what was once a suburb of London—the medieval City of Westminster. Like Buda and Pest (later Budapest), London is two cities that grew into one. The City of London, centered near St.



Paul’s Cathedral and the Tower of London, was the place to live. But King Edward the Confessor decided to build a church (minster) and monastery (abbey) here, west of the city walls—hence Westminster. And to oversee its construction, he moved his court to this spot and built a palace, which gradually evolved into

a meeting place for debating public policy. To this day, the Houses of Parliament are known to Brits as the “Palace of Westminster.”

Across from Parliament, the cute little church with the blue sundials, snuggling under the Abbey “like a baby lamb under a ewe,” is **St. Margaret’s Church**. Since 1480, this has been *the* place for politicians’

weddings, including Churchill's.

Parliament Square, the small park between Westminster Abbey and Big Ben, is filled with statues of famous Brits. The statue of **Winston Churchill**,



the man who saved Britain from Hitler, shows him in the military overcoat he wore as he limped victoriously onto the beaches of Normandy after D-Day. According to tour guides, the statue has a current of electricity running through it to honor Churchill's wish that if a statue were made of him, his head shouldn't be soiled by pigeons.

In 1868, the world's first traffic light was installed on the corner where Whitehall now spills double-decker buses into the square. And speaking of lights, the little yellow lantern atop the concrete post on the street corner closest to Parliament says "Taxi." When an MP needs a taxi, this blinks to hail one.

- Consider touring Westminster Abbey (see page *TK). If you want to visit the Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms, and you need an accessible route there (with no stairs), take Great George Street opposite the Westminster Bridge and turn right on Horse Guards Road to reach the museum. But if you want to skip this sight—or plan to continue this tour for now, then backtrack to the museum later—turn right (north), go away from the Houses of Parliament and the abbey, and continue up Parliament Street, which becomes Whitehall.

④ Rolling or Strolling Along Whitehall

Today, Whitehall is choked with traffic, but imagine the effect this broad street must have had on out-of-towners a century ago. In your horse-drawn carriage, you'd clop along a tree-lined boulevard past well-dressed lords and ladies, dodging street urchins. Gazing left, then right, you'd try to take it all in, your eyes dazzled by the bone-white walls of this man-made marble canyon.

Whitehall is now the most important street in Britain, lined with the ministries of finance, treasury, and so on. You may see limos and camera crews as an important dignitary enters or exits. Political demonstrators wave signs and chant slogans—sometimes about issues foreign to most Americans (Britain's former colonies still resent the empire's continuing influence), and sometimes about issues very familiar to us. (In recent years, the war in Iraq has been the catalyst for student walkouts and protest marches here.) Notice the security measures. Iron grates seal off

the concrete ditches between the buildings and sidewalks for protection against explosives. The city has been on “orange alert” since long before September 2001, but Londoners refuse to be terrorized, as shown by their determination to continue with life as normal after the bombings of July 2005.

The black, ornamental arrowheads topping the iron fences were once colorfully painted. In 1861, Queen Victoria ordered them all painted black when her beloved Prince Albert (“the only one who called her Vickie”) died. Possibly the world’s most determined mourner, Victoria wore black for the standard two years of mourning—and tacked on 38 more.

• *Continue toward the tall, square, concrete monument in the middle of the road. On your right is a colorful pub, the Red Lion. Across the street, a 700-foot detour down King Charles Street (with a steep flight of stairs at the end) leads to the Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms, the underground bunker of 21 rooms that was the nerve center of Britain’s campaign against Hitler (AE, AI, AT, AL, ♥, Level 1—Fully Accessible, loaner wheelchairs; £10, daily 9:30–18:00; see page *TK for details). Note that the stairs at the end of King Charles Street are inaccessible. For an accessible route to the Churchill Museum, you’ll backtrack to Parliament Square (this route is described above).*

5 Cenotaph

This big white stone monument (in the middle of the boulevard) honors those who died in the two events that most shaped modern Britain—World Wars I and II. The monumental devastation of these wars helped turn a colonial superpower into a cultural colony of an American superpower.

The actual cenotaph is the slab that sits atop the pillar—a tomb. You’ll notice no religious symbols on this memorial. The dead honored here came from many creeds and all corners of Britain’s empire. It looks lost in a sea of noisy cars, but on each Remembrance Sunday (closest to November 11), Whitehall is closed off to traffic, the royal family fills the balcony overhead in the foreign ministry, and a memorial service is held around the cenotaph.

It’s hard for an American to understand the impact of the Great War (WWI) on Europe. It’s said that if all the WWI dead from the British Empire were to march four abreast past the cenotaph, the sad parade would last for seven days.

Eternally pondering the cenotaph is an equestrian statue up the street. Earl Haig, commander-in-chief of the British army from 1916 to 1918, was responsible for ordering so many brave and not-so-brave British

boys out of the trenches and onto the killing fields of World War I.

• *Just past the cenotaph, on the other (west) side of Whitehall, is an iron security gate guarding the entrance to Downing Street.*

⑥ #10 Downing Street and the Ministry of Defense

Britain's version of the White House is where the current prime minister and his family live, at #10 (in the black-brick building 300 feet down the blocked-off street, on the right). It looks modest, but the entryway does open up into fairly impressive digs.



There's not much to see here unless a VIP happens to drive up. Then the bobbies (police officers) snap to and check credentials, the gates open, the traffic barrier midway down the street drops into its bat cave, the car drives in, and...the bobbies go back to mugging for the tourists.

The huge building across Whitehall from Downing Street is the **Ministry of Defense** (MOD), the “British Pentagon.” This bleak place looks like a Ministry of Defense should. In front are statues of illustrious defenders of Britain. “Monty” is **Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery** of World War II, who beat the Nazis in North Africa (defeating Erwin “the Desert Fox” Rommel at El Alamein), giving the Allies a jumping-off point to retake Europe. Along with Churchill, Monty breathed confidence back into a demoralized British army, persuading them they could ultimately beat Hitler.

You may be enjoying the shade of London's **plane trees**. They do well in polluted London: roots that work well in clay, waxy leaves that self-clean in the rain, and bark that sheds and regenerates so the pollution doesn't get into their vascular systems.

• *At the equestrian statue, you'll be flanked by the Welsh and Scottish government offices. At the corner (same side as the Ministry of Defense), you'll find the Banqueting House.*

⑦ Banqueting House

This two-story neoclassical building (AE+A, Level 4—Not accessible, see page *TK) is just about all that remains of what was once the biggest palace in Europe—Whitehall Palace, stretching from Trafalgar Square to Big Ben. Henry VIII started it when he moved out of the



Palace of Westminster (now the Parliament) and into the residence of the archbishop of York. Queen Elizabeth I and other monarchs added on as England's worldwide prestige grew. Finally, in 1698, a roaring fire destroyed everything at Whitehall except the name and the Banqueting House.

The kings held their parties and feasts in the Banqueting House's grand ballroom on the first floor. At 112 feet wide by 56 feet tall and 56 feet deep, the Banqueting House is a perfect double cube. Today, the exterior of Greek-style columns and pediments looks rather ho-hum, much like every other white, marble, neoclassical building in London. But in 1620, it was the first—a highly influential building by architect Inigo Jones that sparked London's distinct neoclassical look.

On January 27, 1649, a man dressed in black appeared at one of the Banqueting House's first-floor windows and looked out at a huge crowd that surrounded the building. He stepped out the window and onto a wooden platform. It was **King Charles I**. He gave a short speech to the crowd, framed by the magnificent backdrop of the Banqueting House. His final word was "Remember." Then he knelt and laid his neck on a block as another man in black approached. It was the executioner—who cut off the King's head.

Plop—the concept of divine monarchy in Britain was decapitated. But there would still be kings after **Oliver Cromwell**, the Protestant anti-monarchist who brought about Charles I's death and then became England's leader. Soon after, the royalty was restored, and Charles' son, **Charles II**, got his revenge here in the Banqueting Hall...by living well. His elaborate parties under the chandeliers celebrated the Restoration of the monarchy. But, from then on, every king knew that he ruled by the grace of Parliament.

Charles I is remembered today with a statue at one end of Whitehall (in Trafalgar Square at the base of the tall column), while his killer, Oliver Cromwell, is given equal time with a statue at the other end (at the Houses of Parliament).

• *Across the street on the left are the **Horse Guards**, dressed in Charge-of-the-Light-Brigade cavalry uniforms and swords. Until the Ministry of Defense was created, the Horse Guards was the headquarters of the British army. It's still the home of the queen's private guard. (Changing of the Guard Mon-Sat*



London's crack police force in the days of Sherlock Holmes. Finally, Whitehall opens up into the grand, noisy, traffic-filled...

11:00, Sun at 10:00, dismounting ceremony daily at 16:00.)

*Continue up Whitehall, passing the **Old Admiralty**, headquarters of the British Navy that once ruled the waves. Across the street, behind the old Clarence Pub (AE+A, AI, Level 2—Moderately Accessible, no accessible toilet), stood the original Scotland Yard, headquarters of*

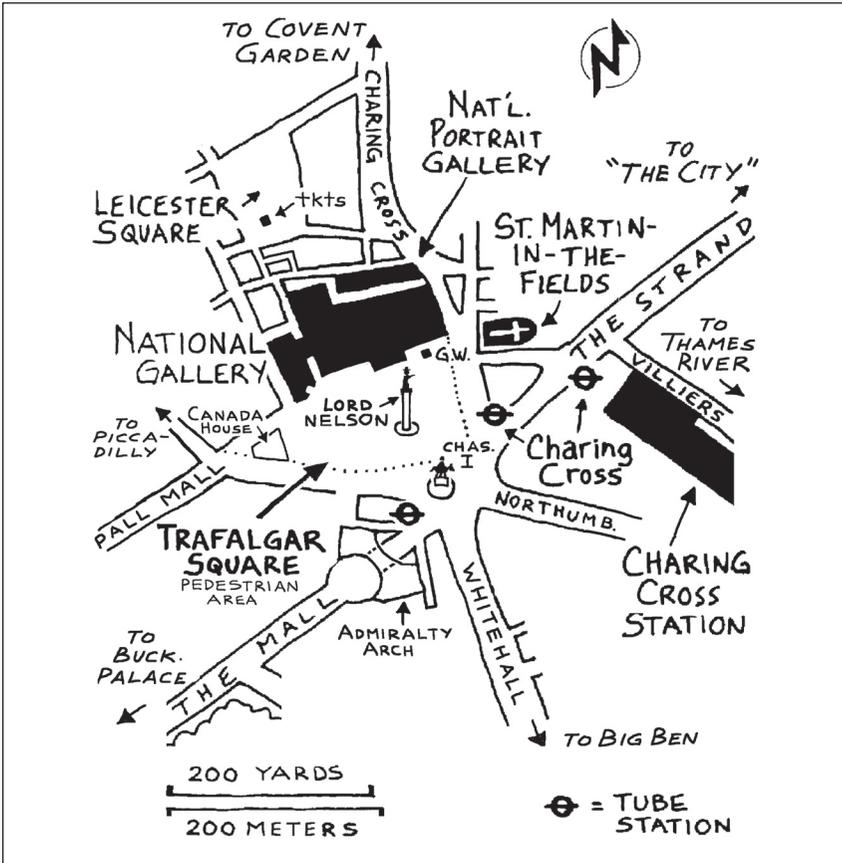
8 Trafalgar Square

London's Times Square bustles around world's biggest Corinthian column, where **Admiral Horatio Nelson** stands 170 feet tall in the crow's nest. Nelson saved England at a time as dark as World War II. In 1805, Napoleon was poised on the other side of the Channel, threatening to invade England. Meanwhile, more than 900 miles away, the one-armed, one-eyed, and one-minded Lord Nelson attacked the French fleet off the coast of Spain at Trafalgar. The French were routed, Britannia ruled the waves, and the once invincible French army was slowly worn down, then defeated at Waterloo. Nelson, while victorious, was shot by a sniper in the battle. He died, gasping, "Thank God, I have done my duty."



At the top of Trafalgar Square (north) sits the domed National Gallery (AE, AI, AL, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible, loaner wheelchairs, see page *TK) with its new grand staircase, and to the right, the steeple of **St. Martin-in-the-Fields**, built in 1722, inspiring the steeple-over-the-entrance style of many town churches in New England (main floor is AE, AI, ♥, Level 2—Moderately Accessible; for concert information, see page *TK). In between is a small statue of America's **George Washington**, looking very much the English gentleman he was. Large statues of important nobodies on pedestals border the four corners of the square. The northwest pedestal remains empty, as Brits debate who should be honored.

Trafalgar Square



At the base of Nelson's column are bronze reliefs cast from melted-down enemy cannons, and four huggable lions dying to have their photo taken with you. In front of the column, Charles I sits on horseback with his head intact. In the pavement in front of the statue is a plaque marking the center of London, from which all distances are measured.



Trafalgar Square is indeed the center of modern London, connecting Westminster, The City, and the West End. A recent remodeling of the square has rerouted some car traffic, helping reclaim the area for London's citizens. Spin clockwise 360 degrees

and survey the city:

To the south (down Whitehall) is the center of government, Westminster. Looking southwest, down the broad boulevard called The Mall, you see Buckingham Palace in the distance. (Down Pall Mall is St. James' Palace, where Prince Charles lives when in London.) A few blocks northwest of Trafalgar Square is Piccadilly Circus. Directly north (2 blocks behind the National Gallery) sits Leicester Square, the jumping-off point for Soho, Covent Garden, and the West End theater district.

The boulevard called the Strand takes you past Charing Cross Station, then eastward to The City, the original walled town of London and today's financial center. In medieval times, when people from The City met with the Westminster government, it was here. And finally, Northumberland Street leads southeast to an accessible pedestrian bridge over the Thames. (Along the way, you'll pass the inaccessible Sherlock Holmes Pub at 10 Northumberland Street, housed in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's favorite watering hole, with an upstairs replica of 221-B Baker Street.)

Soak it in. You're smack-dab in the center of London, a thriving city atop thousands of years of history.