

# **THE TOWER OF LONDON AND ITS DEFENCES**

The Tower of London, officially Her Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress, is a very famous castle that has been developed over nine hundred years. It has had various uses and functions during this time and the existing structures and artefacts show the history, development and importance of this castle. Being nearly a millennium old, this castle is not only the most ancient prison in England but the oldest fortress and royal palace as well. It is surprising that it mostly unscathed; this is due to its tactical concentric defences.



*Aerial photograph of The Tower of London today*

## **Type of Castle**

The Tower of London could fit into three categories of types of castle: Concentric, Norman Stone Keep and Motte and Bailey. The castle has developed over time to include the three categories. It started off its journey as a humble Motte and Bailey before it was developed using stone. Once progression was made to do with the material, it adopted the style of a Norman Stone Keep. The White Tower which stills stands today was the central keep. Over time, the walls around the tower became robust and plentiful. This meant it could be classified as a concentric castle.

## **The History**

The castle was built by William the Conqueror after he was crowned. The very first foundations were laid in 1078, based on a plan introduced in 1066, following the Norman invasion of England. William chose this place because the remains of a previous castle, built 1000 years earlier by a Roman

Emperor were a key defence structure. Furthermore, his choice of location, in central London, was to make a statement to the riotous peasants that he was now King; he had gained this title through power and destruction and he was determined to keep England under his control until they accepted defeat. The function of the castle has been very versatile through the ages, stretching from a prison to a museum, from a palace to a fortress. The castle was first used as accommodation for the wealthy and a refuge for nobility when there was trouble in the area. King Henry the Third adopted the castle as his home in 1240 and added a menagerie (a zoo for exotic animals). After this, in the year 1279, a Royal mint was installed into the building by Edward the First.

The Tower has held the Crown Jewels since the seventeenth century along with many other personal belongings, such as jewellery from the royal family and other nobility.

The palace mainly prospered as a prison and although it was deemed a cruel and unforgiving fate, wealthy prisoners, if they were favoured by the monarch, lived in luxury. Executions also took place there, including the famous Anne Boylen's beheading and Guy Fawkes' hanging.

Throughout the World Wars the castle was not badly damaged. The site was used for executing the opposition's spies. This tower is now used today by the keeper of the infamous ravens. The ravens themselves are kept at the Tower of London because of a superstition that the castle will fall along with the Commonwealth of England if the ravens leave. Not only are they kept there but their wings are clipped so they are unable to escape.



📷 Josef Jakobs, the last person executed at the Tower of London in 1941.

*Last person executed at the Tower of London*

## **The Development**

William the Conqueror first commissioned a Motte and Bailey castle to be built on this site. Soon after, the first defensive structure was built. It was a timber fence-like wall called a palisade. This was built on the north and west side of the Motte and Bailey. The east and south sides occupied a wall built by the Romans thousands of years earlier. This was the first enclosure of the Motte and Bailey and a good layer of defence for anyone residing in it.



*Photograph of part of the original Roman Wall*

In 1078, William the Conqueror demolished the motte and bailey and changed it into a Norman Stone Keep. This was a very key development because the castle now had stone walls rather than timber ones making it harder to invade as the walls couldn't be burnt or penetrated easily. They called this tower the 'Great Tower'. This tower is the central keep that still stands today.



*Primary Source: William from the Bayeux Tapestry*

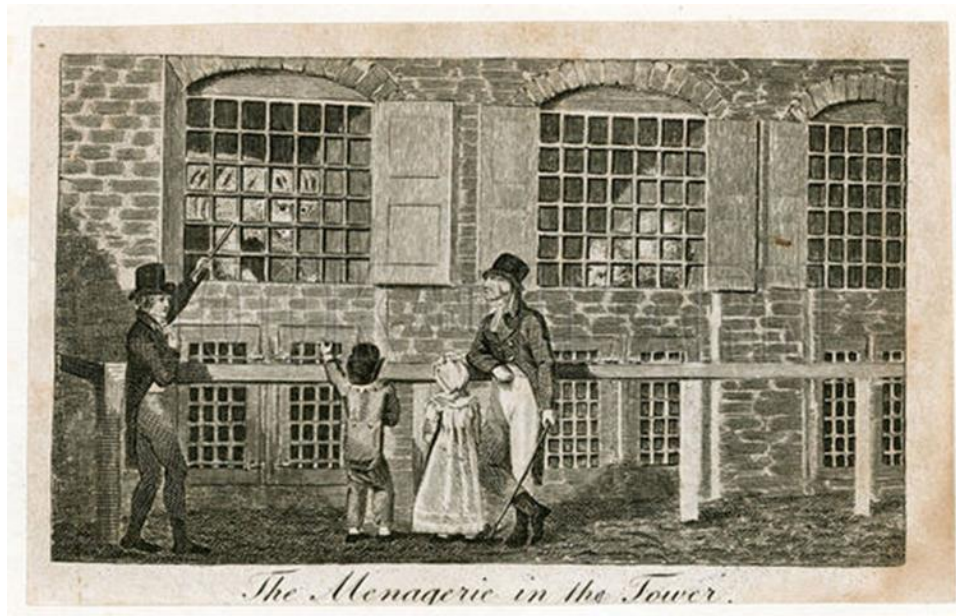
Later, in 1097, the Great Tower was finished, just ten years after William the Conqueror died. The tower was designed and directed by Norman masons, but the hard labour was done by the English.

The next significant developments were undertaken in 1190. Two curtain walls, which were defensive walls between two turrets, were built. These made the keep safer because the invaders would have to get through the new wall before they could reach it. Alongside this was a great ditch, which enclosed the tower; a curtain wall, which extended off the original Roman wall; another ditch, which was supposed to be made a moat from the Thames but failed; a second curtain wall, which was on the north side of the tower. All these things added other layers of defence onto the castle as they stopped attackers reaching the inside efficiently.

The castle was developed further in the same year; the Wardrobe Tower was completed, and the Bell Tower work commenced. The Wardrobe Tower kept clothes and jewellery belonging to the monarch. The Bell Tower is quite famous because of Mary Queen of Scots' long imprisonment there. It housed a bell, hence the name, which rang as an alarm for an attack. Fortunately, nowadays that doesn't happen, and the bell is only used for the closing time of the museum.

From 1199, eight years after the first siege of the Tower of London, a menagerie was installed to keep all the exotic pets that his esteemed guests brought him.





Primary Source: People looking at the animals in The Menagerie © New York Library Public

Six years before the Bell tower was completed, St Peter's church was finished and in use. This was completed in 1204.

Henry the Third made many advancements to the defences of the castle. First, he ordered a new wall on the west side. The new wall was another defence that attackers would need to get through to have a chance of besieging the main tower. He then made space for more accommodation in the White Tower by renovating the Great Hall and the kitchens.

From 1238-1272, ten new towers were built including the very famous Bloody Tower! The Bloody tower is closely associated with deaths and gore. One of the most famous deaths in the tower is that of Edward the Fifth. He and his younger brother mysteriously disappeared from the tower and were never found. There are more deaths too as this tower also held Tudor prisoners. An example of this is Sir Walter Raleigh. Keeping prisoners in a well-defended castle was a defensive advantage because not only would the prisoners not be able to escape but it would intimidate anyone who dared revolt.

The Great Tower was whitewashed in 1240, around the same time Henry the Third took the castle as his home. The White Tower is the oldest tower building and would have originally been the central keep. When it was in use as a palace, the first royal observatory was housed here. The White Tower now contains rooms displaying torture devices, weapons and instruments.



*Photograph of the White (Great) Tower*

Luxurious lodgings were also built during this time period: the Wakefield Tower for the King and the Lanthorn Tower for the Queen. The Wakefield Tower is associated with death as it is the place where Henry the Sixth was brutally murdered in the Wars of the Roses. In 1471, the King was stabbed multiple times in the chapel whilst praying. Lanthorn (lantern) Tower was called this because it was used as a sort of lighthouse for navigation. The towers that were built, were not only used as accommodation but were vantage points above the rest of the city. This was useful because if there was a siege, the people in the tower could see three-hundred and sixty degrees, which meant they could be ready for anything and prepared for a battle.

A new entrance was also built. Although it had a drawbridge which would have been protecting the way in, this could be a disadvantage. It was another way for the attackers to easily get through one of the many defences.

A great curtain wall was built along the north, east and west sides of the castle. The wall would have been a vital defence when the castle was under siege because of its great length and its strong stone material. This was also an advantage because it doubled the amount of space inside the grounds of the castle which meant room for more vantage points and accommodation.

In addition, the moat was successfully flooded which meant that it was almost impossible to get past without the drawbridge or a boat.

In 1272-1307, another two curtain walls and a great ditch were added.

As 1275 commenced, the building of St Thomas Tower, Beauchamp Tower and the Well Tower began. Built by King Edward the First, St Thomas Tower had many purposes over time. It could have been a prison, a fortress or accommodation. There is an important gate that this tower is furnished by: Traitor's Gate. This was also built by King Edward the First. The view of this water gate could be a devastating one for many. Originally a harbour, this was the last sight any traitor would see before heading to their execution, which was quite often a beheading. Beauchamp Tower is the tower where they kept the richer and higher-class prisoners. For example, Lady Jane Grey's husband was kept here before being executed with Lady Jane Grey herself. The Well Tower had reinforced edges for better resistance against battering rams, arrow loopholes for archers and was near an essential well that was used in times of siege. It was a very strong tower and therefore added massively to the defence of the Tower of London. At this time, the moat was also completed.



Primary Source: Painting of the Execution of Lady Jane Grey -

The National Portrait Gallery



*Photograph of Traitor's Gate*

Another tower was built: the Develin Tower. This was built between 1275-1285. Originally a post to a grand door that is now demolished, the tower is one of the lesser known towers of the castle. It was built on the outer defence of the south east wall, situated on the very edge of the moat.

More defensive curtain walls were built between 1307-1327. These added to the defensive features of the castle and protected the people inside.

Unfortunately, 73 years after the moat was completed, it had to be emptied again on account of the Black Death. The Black Death was a horrible disease killing around 20 million people in Europe. It devastated London too and the rest of England killing nearly half the population.

The next three advancements happened between 1360-1377. A new gatehouse was built which meant the it was harder to get to the main entrance of the keep. The Bloody Tower was rebuilt and another vantage point - Cradle Tower – was started.



*Primary Source: Image of The Tower of London 1400's Charles, Duke of Orléans (British Library, MS Royal) (1391–1465)*

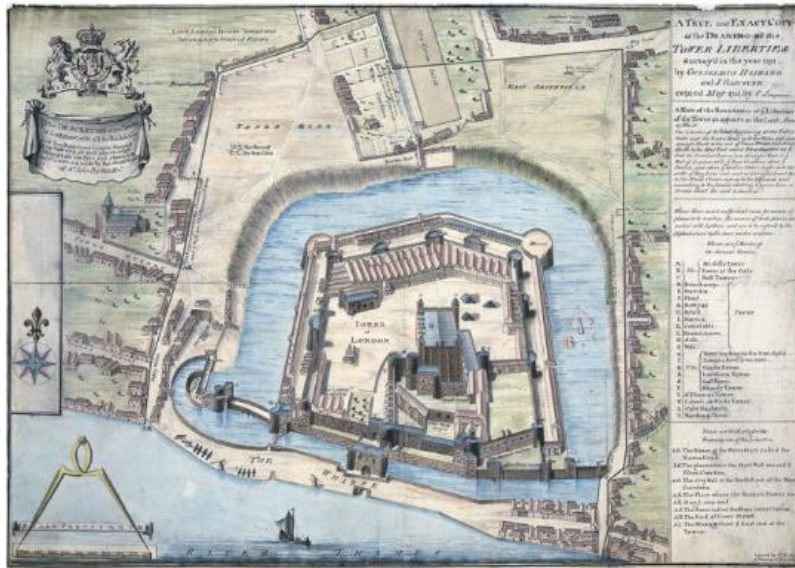
Edward the Fourth maintained the tower's defences during his reign.

During the Wars of the Roses, an outer defence was built past the western entrance. This was good because not only did it add another layer of defence it covered up a way do get in easily to the castle.

1515 marked the start of the White tower's roof being strengthened. It was originally meant to have held a cannon, for an attacking point, but the strengthening of the roof was a good defensive technique anyway.

15 years later, the work began on building the onion-shaped domes on the Tower of London's central keep (the White Tower). These are possibly one of the most famous features for attraction nowadays.



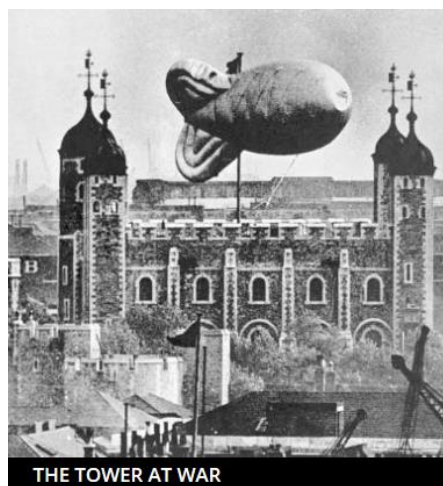


*Primary Source: A map based on a survey in 1597*

The Lion Tower was demolished, and the animals were moved to London Zoo. This event took place in 1834.

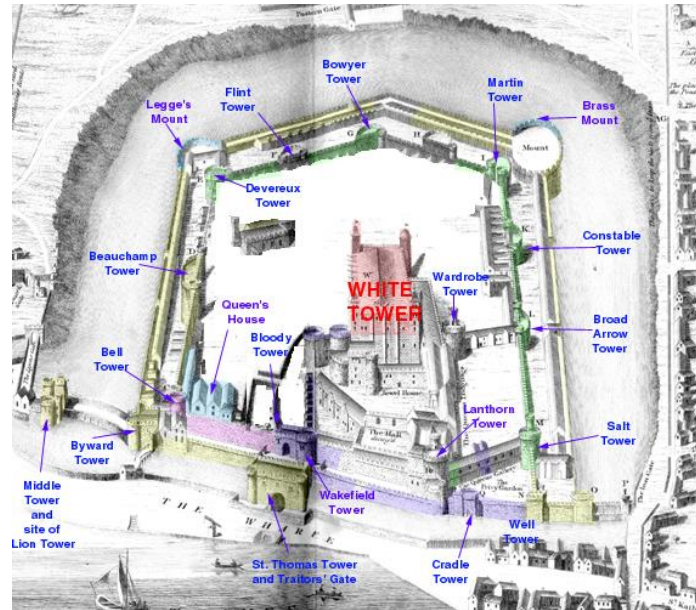
During the First World War, the castle was not too damaged. A bomb hit the moat but didn't do too much damage to many towers.

Unfortunately, in the Second World War, the castle was unluckier. Many of the towers were damaged but it was not too devastating and was not beyond repair.



*A photograph of The Tower of London during the war*

Between 1995 and 1999, excavations took place. They unearthed the Beauchamp Tower's remains and some of the 13<sup>th</sup> century defences that had been damaged by the war.



*Map of The Tower of London showing The Different Towers*

This castle has had extra-ordinary development since its first foundations in 1066. In addition, it had so many features that strengthened it as a fortress and has unbelievably survived over the long period of time it has taken to become the majestic castle that is worldwide known today.

## **Sieges**

As you can see in the development of the castle, many defences and security measures were built in order to keep this place from sieges and revolts in London. However, when the security of the castle was breached, this was due to human judgement.

The most famous siege at the Tower of London is that of 1381.

The Peasants' Revolt was sparked by a rise in tax that was unfair according to the poverty of the peasants at the time. It was not too long after the Black Death and people were just recovering the money they needed to survive.



*Primary Source: The Peasants Revolt Detail of British Library dated: 1385-1400*

Around 10,000 men with various jobs led an uprising originating from the South East. They blamed the governors who did taxing and accounts for Richard the Second. The servants and nobility of Richard and his mother found refuge in the Tower of London as it was the strongest fortress. King Richard, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, stood up to the peasants outside of the Tower of London. They managed to break into the tower and kill the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Although the tower was broken into, it is suggested that there was some loyalty inside the tower gates: the guards. This is shown when Jean Froissart writes: "The king had ridden out to meet the rebels at Mile End. The Tower's drawbridges and portcullis gates had not been raised behind him, and a mob of at least 400 men stormed the castle. The men-at-arms guarding the Tower put up no resistance, and the peasants shook their hands as brothers and stroked their beards in a friendly fashion..." Therefore, we cannot tell how good the defences of the castle were through this incident.

### **Main Features of the Castle's Defence**

The main features of the Castle's defence included concentric defences, many vantage points, thick stone walls and moat. These combined structures meant the castle was almost impenetrable through the ages.

### The Concentric Walls:

The Tower of London has concentric defences, which is when there is more than one wall circling the central keep for defence. This was very useful for defending the castle because once any attackers had got through the first wall, they still would have had another wall to penetrate before they have a chance of getting into the central keep. Also, high up on the battlements, were archers who could fire in either direction and shoot down attackers whether on the inside of the walls or on the streets of London outside the walls.

### The Many Vantage Points:

With twenty-one towers circling three hundred and sixty degrees around the castle, it is no surprise that you can see over almost all of London. This meant people living in the castle could be prepared for attacks and if the invaders managed to get through the concentric defences, then archers could fire off the battlements on the towers.

### Thickness of the Walls:

The walls of the castle are up to 15 feet thick. Imagine trying to get through that! If you wanted to go over the walls, then they are up to 30 feet high. This was a key defence because it was almost impossible to scale the wall or smash your way through it. Therefore, the walls were virtually undefeatable.

### Moat:

Although the moat had to be drained a few times, it was also key to the defence of the castle. There were only two way to access, thanks to the water: by a barge or a drawbridge. The drawbridges could only be opened from the inside and this narrowed it down for many invaders. The barge went in through another gate, which would have been closed and guarded by Yeomen.

### **Living in the Tower of London in the Middle Ages?**



This is my interpretation of what it was like to live in the prison, in the Tower of London in the 1100's. I have based my diary entry on factual information on the first prisoner to be held there.

May 1101

Dear diary,

I am Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, first prisoner ever to live in the Tower of London. I will not be here long though, because I have a plan formed. It is a very luxurious prison and if I wasn't a prisoner, I might stay and enjoy the indulgence I receive. I am going to escape and be done with this place, because although it is a nice way to live it keeps playing on my mind, that I am stuck here, not in my homeland Normandy and not in my rightful place as Bishop. My plan is simple. If I smuggle in a rope, from a wine barrel perhaps (I can actually hold a feast with the guards) or by some other sneaky means I shall be out before you can shout the words 'Guards, escapee'. This will be so easy if I time it just right. I do not know what I plan to do next. Maybe I will flee to Normandy or recover my title here.

*Ranulf Flambard*

### **Summary**

The Tower of London, located in the centre of the city, is a concentric castle with a Norman Stone Keep. William the Conqueror commenced the building of the castle in 1066 but it was not finally finished, as we know it today, until the 1530's. There has been huge development over time with many changes, new robust structures and different functions. Some of these functions included a fortress, a Royal Mint, a zoo and a prison. The main features of the castle's defence have been concentric walls, many vantage points and the sheer thickness of the walls and the surrounding moat. Although there have been a few sieges, such as the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, the castle's defences have stood strong and untested as most of the success of entry to the castle was due to insider loyalty. The Tower of London has been a successful, secure, robust military fortress which is now known world-wide.

