

Palace of Westminster

The Houses of Parliament occupy the site of a royal palace which flourished from the time of Edward the Confessor until Henry VIII moved to Whitehall and St. James's. Although the Tower of London could accommodate the royal entourage, most kings found Westminster more congenial than the volatile city of London. There was convenient transport between the two by barge along the Thames.

Parliament's relationship with the palace is an old one, since the House of Lords regularly met in the private royal apartments from the fourteenth century and the House of Commons used the collegiate chapel.

Several royal palaces were unfortified even in Norman times and Westminster was one of them. The precinct wall that surrounded the palace never quite developed into a defensive curtain, though Edward III commissioned a youthful Henry Yevele to build two towers along its line in 1365. One of them, the original Clock Tower, has disappeared beneath its famous successor. The Jewel Tower survives owing to later use as a repository for Parliamentary records. Now an isolated structure facing, and overawed by, the Victoria Tower, it occupied the southwest corner of the medieval palace precinct.

The present windows, enlargements in 1718, do not conceal the defensive character of the tower, and the ground floor is covered by a vault with beautifully carved bosses. As a matter of fact, the Jewel Tower, as its name suggests, was built as a secure place for the extensive treasures of the King's privy wardrobe.

The tower is a rectangular structure with a smaller wing at right angles, carefully contrived to stand completely outside the angle of the precinct and thus not encroach upon the King's private garden, which lay behind. The moat, reinstated at this point, had to be pushed out onto a piece of land appropriated from Westminster Abbey, much to the annoyance of the abbot and monks.