

Windsor Castle

Windsor Castle is the oldest and largest inhabited castle in the world and has been the family home of British kings and queens for almost 1,000 years. It is an official residence of Her Majesty The Queen and is still very much a working royal palace today, home to around 150 people. The castle is used regularly for ceremonial and state occasions, including state visits from overseas monarchs and presidents.

Some of the greatest treasures in the Royal Collection can be seen in the Castle's magnificent State Apartments. The Royal Archives, the Royal Photograph Collection, the Print Room, and the Royal Library are all based here.

Windsor Castle is also home to St George's Chapel, the spiritual home of the Order of the Garter – the oldest order of chivalry in the world, founded by Edward III in 1348. Today, the Order consists of The Queen, The Prince of Wales and 24 Knight Companions.

The Queen spends most of her private weekends at Windsor Castle and takes up official residence for a month in the spring for Easter Court, and for a week each June, when she attends Royal Ascot and the service of the Order of the Garter.

The Kings and Queens who shaped the Castle

William the Conqueror (r. 1066-1087)

He was the king who first chose the site for Windsor Castle, high above the Thames and on the edge of a Saxon hunting ground. He began building at Windsor around 1070, and 16 years later his castle was complete. It was originally built to secure the western approach to London, but easy access from the capital and proximity to a royal hunting forest recommended it early on as a royal residence.

Henry I (r. 1100-1135)

Henry had domestic quarters within the castle by 1110; his grandson **Henry II** (r. 1154-89) replaced the outer timber fortifications with stone. **Henry III** (r. 1216-1272) continued the work, rebuilding many buildings and improving the royal apartments.

Edward III (r. 1327-1377)

100 years after Henry III's substantial programme at Windsor, Edward III eclipsed it. The King transformed Windsor from a military fortification to a gothic palace, spending £50,000 in the process. The gothic style of building with pointed arches has remained the predominant architectural style at Windsor for 800 years. His aim was to create one large palace which contained both the state apartments for official and ceremonial business, and the King and Queen's own private apartments, in a single unified residence. The work was not completed by the time of Edward III's death, and continued for another six years into the reign of his grandson and successor Richard II (r. 1377-1399).

The Tudors

The Tudors made relatively minor additions and alterations to the fabric of the Castle but remain closely associated with Windsor – one of Britain best-known Kings, **Henry VIII** (r.1509-1547), is buried in St George's Chapel alongside his third and favourite wife Jane Seymour. By the reign of **Elizabeth I** (r.1558-1603) many parts of the Castle were in need of repair and an extensive campaign of work was undertaken in the 1570s. The timber terrace (today the North Terrace), from which Henry VIII would practise shooting at targets and watch the hunt in the park below, was entirely renewed in stone, and a long gallery was built to provide the Queen with a place to walk during inclement weather – this was incorporated into the Royal Library during the 19th century.

Charles II (1630-1685)

During the English Civil War, the castle was frequently used by Oliver Cromwell as his headquarters and as a prison for captured royalist officers. When Charles II (r.1660-1685) came to the throne in 1660, the year of the restoration of the monarchy, he was determined to reinstate Windsor as his principal palace out of town. He appointed the architect Hugh May to supervise the modernisation of the royal apartments, which became the grandest baroque state apartments in England. Charles II's transformation of Windsor from military stronghold to opulent baroque palace was complete by 1683.

George III (1738-1820)

The early Hanoverian monarchs followed William III in favouring Hampton Court and Kensington, and it was not until the reign of George III that Windsor became once again an important centre of court life. The apartments created by Charles II survived virtually unchanged to the end of the 18th century, when, under the direction of draughtsman John Yenn, George III gave several of the baroque state apartments on the north side of the quadrangle a neoclassical dressing. In 1796, the King appointed James Wyatt to transform the exterior of the buildings into a Gothic palace, while retaining the character of the state rooms. Wyatt's expertise in the Gothic style enabled the King to embark on a gothic restoration of the external façades and the creation of a new grand staircase to the state apartments.

George IV (1762-1830)

The gothic transformation of the castle continued after George IV succeeded to the throne in 1820. Mindful of the symbolic importance of Windsor as a bastion of monarchy and the nation, George IV and his artistic adviser Sir Charles Long intended that the exterior of the castle should once more be given an imposing castle-like appearance. This entailed the heightening of Henry II's Round Tower, the re-clothing of the exterior in massive masonry and the addition of towers and battlements. By the time the King finally took up residence at Windsor towards the end of 1828, his improvements to the castle had cost nearly £300,000. Sadly, he was only able to enjoy his new castle for 18 months, as he died in June 1830, aged 67.

Queen Victoria (1819-1901) and Prince Albert (1819-1861)

George IV's restoration of the castle was so comprehensive that comparatively little needed to be done by his successors. Queen Victoria spent the larger part of every year at Windsor. The Castle was visited by sovereigns, ambassadors and ministers from all over the world and was the setting for a series of splendid state visits by foreign monarchs. In Queen Victoria's reign Windsor Castle enjoyed the position of principal palace of the British monarchy and focus of the British Empire, as well as nearly the whole of royal Europe, many of whose families were related to the Queen.

King George VI (1895-1952) and Queen Elizabeth (1900-2002)

When King George VI succeeded to the throne, he and Queen Elizabeth were already living at Royal Lodge in the Windsor Great Park, and considered Windsor very much their home. During the Second World War pictures and works of art were evacuated for safe keeping. The King and Queen were determined to remain at Buckingham Palace at the time of the London bombardments, but they joined Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret at Windsor at evenings and weekends. The Princesses were brought up at Windsor and every Christmas they performed a pantomime in the Waterloo Chamber.

The Windsor fire

The Castle survived the war unscathed, but was to suffer greatly 50 years later on 20 November 1992 when a fire broke out in Queen Victoria's private chapel. The fire quickly engulfed the roof spaces, destroying the ceilings of St George's Hall and the Grand Reception Room, as well as gutting the private chapel, the State Dining Room and the Crimson Drawing Room in particular.

The long process of repair and restoration began immediately, with The Duke of Edinburgh chairing the Restoration Committee. The areas that were most badly damaged, such as St George's Hall, were redesigned in a modern gothic style, while the other parts were restored to the condition in which George IV had left them. The cost, £37million, was largely met from the proceeds of admissions to the Castle precincts and to Buckingham Palace, which was opened to the public for the first time in 1993. The work took five years to complete.

Did you know...?

- The Castle grounds cover 52,609 square metres (13 acres).
- There were more than one million visitors to the Castle between 2010 and 2011.
- St George's Hall is the biggest room in the Castle. It is 55.5m long and 9m wide and can seat up to 162 for a State Banquet.
- 40 monarchs, including Her Majesty The Queen, have called the Castle home.
- The motte on which the Round Tower sits is the oldest part of the Castle. The newest part is the Lantern Lobby in the State Apartments.
- The oldest glazed window in the Castle dates back to approximately 1236. It is thought to have been a wedding gift from King Henry III to his wife Eleanor of Provence.
- The Great Fire at Windsor started on 20 November 1992. It took 15 hours and 1.5million gallons of water to put it out.
- The fire damaged or destroyed 20% of the Castle area.

The Great Kitchen

- The Great Kitchen at Windsor is the oldest working kitchen in the country and has served 32 monarchs, including Her Majesty The Queen.
- The Queen has 33 kitchen staff, 20 chefs and sous chefs, 3 pastry chefs and 10 porters.
- The clocks in the Great Kitchen are always five minutes fast to ensure that the food served to The Queen is never late.

- The whisk in the kitchen can hold up to 250 eggs at one time.
- Some 18,000 bottles of wine are kept in the cellar.

The Round Tower

- During the reign of George IV, the Round Tower was raised by some 30ft to improve the Castle's skyline and to fit in with his romantic ideal of a Gothic castle.
- The Round Tower is not actually round, as it has a square southern side. The foundations on the south side are also more extensive than on the north side.