



Abbey and Parliament trail – teachers’ notes

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool during your visit to Westminster Abbey.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we’d really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this [five-question survey](#).

Throughout this trail we will use the terms Parliament, Government, House of Commons, and politicians. You may wish to remind students of what these terms mean before starting the trail.

1) The Chapter House

Discuss with a partner: Why would this room be a good meeting place? **Students might mention:**

- That there is a lot of space.
- The echo means you can hear each other across the room.
- The high windows mean no one can see in.
- Only one entrance allows for privacy.

Can you count how many walls this room has? **The chapter house has eight walls.**

Timeline of the Chapter House:

1250s – Used by monks for daily meetings and as a meeting place for the King’s Council.

1265 – May have been the meeting place of the very first Parliament, led by Simon De Montfort.

1352 – House of Commons began using it as a meeting place.

1512 – Palace of Westminster became the permanent home of Parliament.

1540 – Chapter House became repository for State records (until 1800s).

When Charles Barry created his design for the new parliament building in the 1800s, he took inspiration from Westminster Abbey. He particularly echoed features from the Chapter House and the Lady Chapel, which we will come to later in this trail.

Make your way through the cloisters and into the Abbey.

2) The Coronation Chair

Does this chair look fit for a King or a Queen? How would you change the chair to make it look more royal? **Students might mention that the chair looks uncomfortable, plain, damaged or old. They might want to add decorations, patterns, gems, gold or cushions.**

Do you think causing damage is a good way to protest a cause? **You may wish to facilitate a discussion with your group on this. Damaging important objects can bring causes a lot of attention as the act is often ‘newsworthy’ and gets people talking about it. However, damaging something**

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important might create criticism and negative perceptions of a cause/organisation and might detract from the message and aims of the protest.

Activist groups are still using this form of protest today, for example *Extinction Rebellion* and *Just Stop Oil* have thrown paint on artworks in recent years. A member of *Fathers 4 Justice* sprayed paint on a painting of Queen Elizabeth II here at the Abbey in 2013. There is a memorial plaque to the suffragist Millicent Fawcett inside the Chapel with the Coronation Chair.

Originally the chair would have been covered with gold leaf gilding and coloured glass, with patterns of birds, foliage, animals, saints and a king. It was built to hold the Stone of Scone, the Scottish coronation stone, after it was captured by King Edward I. The Stone has since been returned to Scotland but is reunited with the chair for coronations. King Charles III sat on this chair during his coronation in 2023.

The Coronation Chair was so important that it is believed the Sovereign's Throne in Parliament was designed to look like it. You might wish to compare these chairs back in the classroom and discuss their significance before asking students to design their own. ([The Sovereign's Throne - UK Parliament](#))

You may also wish to point out Winston Churchill's memorial stone if your students have learnt about him in school. Many prime ministers are remembered here, and we will be learning about some of them later in this trail.

Ask a Marshal in a red gown to let you through the blue rope.

3) The Unknown Warrior

Can you find the missing words from this line? **Life itself.**

Can you think of a time you have voted? **Students may have voted in school for school council representatives, class captains etc. They may have voted at home to decide what film to watch, what treats to have, what to name a pet. You may want to come up with something for your group to vote on as an example.**

You could ask students what poppies remind them of. They might have seen people wearing poppies or have worn them themselves. They may have learnt about Remembrance Day or attended a service.

This soldier represents all those who died fighting for Britain and have no known grave. Many countries from across the British Empire fought for Britain during WWI, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the West Indies and Australia. The Unknown Warrior could have been from one of these countries. No one walks on this grave, out of respect. Even the king walks around the grave when he visits the Abbey.

Before WWI only men over the age of 21 who owned property or paid a certain amount of rent could vote. The Representation of the People Act, 1918, gave the vote to all men over 21 and

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women over 30 who owned property or paid rent of more than £5 a year. Universal suffrage, when all people over 21 could vote, was not introduced until 1928.

4) Candles

You might like to pause for a moment at the candles to think about something you are allowed to do that you are grateful for.

Students are welcome to light a candle with adult supervision (please remind them to be careful of sleeves and long hair) or you could light one candle as a group. You may wish to encourage students to think about this quietly for a moment before sharing.

During King Charles III's coronation, the coronation oath was prefaced with "the church established by law, whose settlement you will swear to maintain ... will seek to foster an environment in which people of all faiths and beliefs may live freely". Leaders of different faiths also blessed King Charles as he left the Abbey. The king wanted to acknowledge the religious freedom we have and the importance of other faiths in this country.

Upon taking their seats in Parliament, MPs take the parliamentary oath. This oath used to be sworn on the Christian Bible only, but today MPs can choose any faith text to swear the oath upon and atheists are able to 'affirm' rather than take the oath.

Make your way up the nave and through the gold screen to the quire. As you pass you might want to point out Nelson Mandela's memorial stone which lies just in front of the nave seating in the middle of the aisle.

5) The quire

Does this remind you of another place where people sit facing each other? **Parliament.**

Discuss with a partner: Do you think our politicians should sit opposite each other? Is there another shape that would be better? **Sitting opposite each other means that everyone can see each other clearly and will be able to hear each other and follow debate. However, sitting opposite each other fosters the two-party nature of our politics; it's not fair on the smaller parties. A circle or a square might make it more equal. Most parliaments in other countries sit in circles.**

Can you find the names of four countries on the wall of the quire stalls? **South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Canada.**

These countries have permanent seats as they were the founding members of the Commonwealth, along with the UK. The monarch's role as Head of Commonwealth is to respect and recognise the various faiths and cultures across the Commonwealth, and to promote tolerance and understanding.

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St Stephen's Chapel was a chapel inside the old Palace of Westminster. As they enter the House of Commons, politicians bow to the Speaker as they would have bowed to the altar in St Stephen's Chapel when they used it as a debating chamber.

6) The High Altar

Do you think we should always follow the rules? What could you do if you don't agree with the rules? How could you change them? Write down three ways you can make change.

The trail has already mentioned protest and voting as ways of impacting change. Other ideas might be:

- Writing letters to politicians or leaders.
- Running for office (school council etc).
- Signing petitions.
- Raising awareness by talking to people.
- Raising money for organisations.

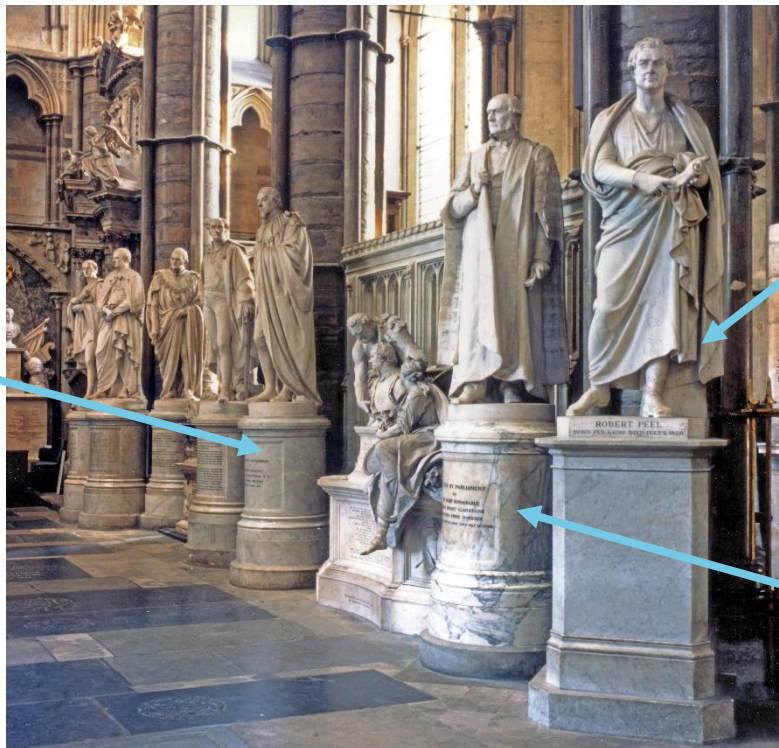
To help students think about this question you might want to remind them of the different types of rules they have to follow, for example there is the rule of law, but they might also have rules at home or at school. Often classes have their own class rules and sometimes they come up with them together. What could they do if they didn't like the rules at school?

7) Statesmen's Aisle

Stand by the blue rope to the left of the High Altar in front of this row of statues. Whilst you will not be able to go up close to these statues, it is possible to identify the memorials from the rope.

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Benjamin Disraeli

Robert Peel

William Gladstone

8) The Lady Chapel

Can you find this shape? Count how many you can find. **There are many portcullis shapes in the Lady Chapel; encourage the students to look at the ceiling, walls and above the entrance. It might take students a long time to count all the portcullises in this space, so you may wish to put a time limit on this activity.**

The portcullis is a Tudor symbol. This chapel was built by King Henry VII, the first Tudor king. Your students might also spot Tudor roses around this room.

The old Palace of Westminster was nearly burned to the ground by an accidental fire in 1834. In June 1835 a public competition to design the new Palace of Westminster was launched. 97 proposals were submitted but the deciding Commission were unanimous in its choice of Charles Barry's design.

Barry took inspiration from Westminster Abbey for his design for the new Parliament. This can be particularly seen in Parliament's Central Lobby which echoes the shape the Chapter House and the stonework replicates the sculptures in the Lady Chapel. Barry had casts taken of ornamental sculpture in the Abbey as a guide for sculptors decorating the new Parliament building. The exterior

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decoration also resembles that of the Lady Chapel which sits opposite Parliament. Charles Barry is buried at the Abbey; his design of the Houses of Parliament is engraved on his grave.

9) Poets' Corner

What could you write about to raise awareness for a cause? **Encourage students to think about something important to them, e.g. protecting the environment, looking after animals, poverty, everyone having access to books or school. What story could they tell to show why these things are important?**

Students could come up with a theme at the Abbey and then use this as a starting point for a creative writing task back in the classroom.

Famous writers and poets are buried and remembered in Poets' Corner. You might notice some other well-known names as you move around this space e.g. Shakespeare, C.S Lewis, Lewis Carroll, Jane Austin, Rudyard Kipling.

10) The cloisters

At the end of your visit please explore the cloisters and use this space to reflect on your time in the Abbey.

If you have time, why not pop into St Margaret's Church, next door to the Abbey. St Margaret's is the parish church of the House of Commons. Regular prayer services are held here for MPs and interesting political figures are remembered here including the abolitionists Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano.