# **LONDON**

# **A**s well as being the capital of England, London is the capital of the United Kingdom. It is one of the greatest, most colourful and interesting cities of the world, and it tops the list of the cities I would like to visit. I know a lot about it - I have studied its map, seen a lot of postcards, talked to people who have been there. Sometimes I close my eyes and imagine I walk down Piccadilly, Regent or Oxford Street, cross the Thames by London or Tower Bridge, or knock on the door of Number 10, Downing Street, just to say “Hi!” to Tony Blair.

**L**ondon is a city which was never planned. It has accumulated. So, it includes the City of London, the West End and the East End. The city is really large – more than 8 million people live in so-called Greater London – that is, London and its suburbs. It stands on the both sides of the river Thames and 14 bridges span the river. The Thames, described variously as “liquid history” and the “noblest river in Europe” is graced in London with a score of bridges, tunnels and a barrier, but until 1750, when the first Westminster Bridge opened, London Bridge was the one and the only. The first one built in stone from 1176 to 1209 became renowned throughout Europe for its houses and a chapel dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury. Several of London bridges have special features – Hammersmith Bridge has ornamental metal work and Vauxhall has larger than life bronze figures representing pottery, engineering, architecture, agriculture, science, fine arts, local government and education. Among the boats which ply the river, few attract more attention than the Oxford and Cambridge University Boat Race.

**L**ondon was founded by the Romans in 43 A. D. and was called Londinium. In 61 A. D. the town was burned down and when it was rebuilt by the Romans it was surrounded by a wall. That area within the wall is now called the **City of London**. It is a financial and business center of the country. The Stock Exchange, the Bank of England, offices of major banks and companies are all there. People only come to the City to work, nobody lives there, and at night it becomes deserted.

**H**ere is situated the Tower of London. The Tower was built by William the Conqueror who conquered England in 1066. The Tower of London has been “fortress, palace, home of the Crown Jewels and national treasures, arsenal, mint, prison, observatory, zoo and tourist attraction”, wrote the Duke of Edinburgh in a book celebrating the Tower’s 900th anniversary. It is interesting to mention the tradition connected with the history of Tower. The royal menagerie departed to the Zoo in 1834, leaving only the ravens behind. Tradition says that if the ravens leave, the Tower and the country will fall. So Beefeaters – Warders of the Tower - give ravens meat every night.

**T**he finest part of London is the **West End** with long streets of fine shops, theaters, picture gallery. Soho, the home of strip-tease, the cinema industry and international haute cuisine, is on the edge of theatreland, rich in history and rich in cultural mix. The name Soho probably came from the ancient hunting cry – So – Ho – in its farmland days. By the 19th century it must have seemed a strange area, described by John Galsworthy in the Forsyte Saga as “Untidy, full of Greeks, Ishmaelites, cats, Italians, tomatoes, restaurants, organs, coloured stuffs, queer names, people looking out of out windows, it dwells remote from the British Body Politic”. Today there is a complete China Town and Restaurants serve haute cuisine from scores of countries.

**T**here are beautiful parks in the West End, such as St James’s Park, Green Park, Kensington Gardens, and Hyde Park with its Speaker’s Corner there you can go up on a platform and speak freely on the topic that you find vital. The Royal Parks are central London‘s lungs. Bands play beside lakes, parks have cafes and art galleries.

**T**he Houses of Parliament with its Big Ben, the chimes of which are heard throughout the world on the BBC World Service are also in the West End. Big Ben, the voice of London, has been telling the time to the second since 1859. Construction of the 320 foot clock tower began in the year Queen Victoria came to the throne, 1837, as part of the reconstruction of the Houses of Parliament. The Great Bell cracked, was recast and cracked again, given us the famous resonating boom. Why Big Ben? There are two answers – either can be chosen. It could have been named after Sir Benjamin Hall, chief commissioner of works at that time. Or, perhaps, it was named by workmen – Benjamin Caunt – who brought the bell from Whitechapel Foundry on a cart pulled by 16 white horses. The Palace of Westminster – among the world’s most famous buildings – houses the British Parliament: the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The first palace was built for Edward the Confessor, who came to the throne in 1042. Every British citizen has the traditional right to ask to see his or her Member of Parliament, and they meet in the highly decorative Central Lobby. When Parliament is sitting, it is possible to hear debates from the Strangers’ Galleries. Even the Queen is subject to restrictions. For the State Opening of Parliament she has to sit enthroned in the Lords – a custom which goes back to the era of Charles I. For relaxation, the Members of Parliament have reception rooms which lead onto the riverside terrace. In gardens across the road is the Jewel Tower. Among moderns sculptures to have been placed in the vicinity is the statue of Sir Winston Churchill, with his larger-than-life size sculpture raised on a plinth.

**W**hite Hall and Downing Street are also in the West End. White Hall is a street where most government offices are situated, and I have already mentioned that No. 10, Downing Street is the official residence of the British Prime Ministers for more than 250 years. The famous cul-de-sac of Downing Street was created by Sir George Downing, member of Parliament, around 1680. Number 10 is one of the original Downing Street houses to survive. No 10, with the most photographed door in the world, is guarded outside by a single policeman. By the way the nick-name of British policemen are “bobbies”, because of Sir Robert Peel, who formed the police force.

**T**he Queen, when she is in London, lives in Buckingham Palace. Buckingham Palace facing the white marble and gilded Queen Victoria memorial, flies the royal standard when the Queen is in residence. Today the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh have private suites in the North Wing, overlooking Green Park. Their home is open to around 30.000 guests in summer, attending garden parties. The entry costs around 20 pounds a person. The gardens have a lake, cascading water and the wild life include flamingoes. From the Palace the Queen leaves on ceremonial duties such as the State Opening of Parliament in early winter and Trooping the colour to mark her official birthday in June.

**T**he architecture of London is very impressive. There is St. Paul’s Cathedral, for example, where a lot of famous people were buried. The National and Tate Galleries contain many masterpieces of art.

**W**estminster Abbey has been the setting for every monarch’s coronation, beginning with Edward the Confessor, a saintly man who came to the throne in 1040. The Abbey presents a pageant of noble, military, political and artistic history. It has the graves of queens and kings, of poets, politicians and churchmen. And the High Altar still contains the body of Edward the Confessor, the Abbey’s founder.

**W**estminster Cathedral is the leading Roman Catholic Church in England. It was built half a mile from the Abbey. The single bell in the 280 foot high campanile is dedicated (like the Chapel in the Abbey) to Edward the Confessor. This gift from Gwendolen, Duchess of Norfolk, is inscribed “St Edward, pray for England”.

**T**he **East End** is something quite different. It is the industrial part of London. There are factories and docks there, and blocks of flats where working people live. They form quite a contrast to what we can see in the West End.

**Conclusion**

**“W**hen a man is tired of London, he is tired of life: for there is in London all that life can afford” -, wrote Samuel Johnson in 1777. Naturally, London is a cultural, scientific, and industrial center of the country, and it means that a lot of interesting things are taking place there all the time.

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