

# CHURCHILL WAR ROOMS



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When I mentioned to a friend that we would shortly be travelling to London, she said, “Whatever you do, even if you see nothing else, don’t miss the Churchill War Rooms.”

This was an intriguing directive, since although I had visited London a number of times, I’d never heard of the Churchill War Rooms. It was also a topical suggestion, with the recent release of the British film, *Darkest Hour*, which centres on Winston Churchill and the events of the Second World War.

We booked our tickets online, ahead of our arrival in London, and this allowed us to skip the queue. Descending a relatively short flight of stairs, we stepped abruptly back in time and into a series of rooms from



*Map showing location of Churchill War Rooms in Westminster, London*

which Winston Churchill and his cabinet directed the British Government’s war effort.

The idea for establishing a central war room was prompted by the increasing likelihood of another war involving Britain. When Germany invaded Austria in 1938, international tensions led to an urgent need

for an operational refuge for the Cabinet, as well as for key personnel from the army, navy and air force. As this need became increasingly critical, an underground site was chosen beneath the New Public Offices, near to the Parliament and to Downing Street. The Churchill War Rooms Guidebook outlines the “extraordinary transformation” carried out in the basement of the New Public Offices as follows:

*"Rooms were cleared, alcoves sandbagged, glass doors replaced with teak, brick partitions built, telephone lines installed, and a broadcasting connection was established by the BBC. By the end of August, the Map Room had been manned and tested and plans were well under way for air locks and steel doors to defend against gas attack."*



*The Map Room - underground headquarters of the British High Command served as the nerve centre of Britain's war effort during World War II.*

This construction work was conducted secretly - it wasn't until nearly forty years after the Second World War that the general public learned of the war rooms' existence.

Neville Chamberlain was Britain's Prime Minister when the War Cabinet was being established; however Chamberlain resigned near the beginning of the Second World War, following a military defeat in Norway, and Winston Churchill replaced him. Churchill took control of the secret subterranean rooms and it was from here that he and his Cabinet managed the war.

When Japan surrendered in August 1945, the war ended and everyone who had worked in the war rooms simply vacated the building. With the exception of some minor changes the following month, it was decided



*Transatlantic Telephone Room*

to leave the war rooms largely intact, and in 1948 the British Parliament declared that the surviving Cabinet War Rooms would be preserved. Although a few people had seen the rooms, they weren't open to the general public until after 1981, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher decreed they should be made widely available. The Imperial War Museums (IWM) opened the rooms to the public in 1984; this was enhanced by the addition of the Churchill Museum in 2005, and the site is now known as the Churchill War Rooms.

To me, the highlights of Churchill War Rooms were the little Transatlantic Telephone Room, where Churchill and United States



*Churchill's Bedroom*



*Churchill's Private Dining Room*



*Chiefs of Staff Meeting Room*

President Roosevelt would communicate (after April 1944); the map room with its colour-coded telephones; and Churchill's bedroom, which he regularly used for afternoon naps, but rarely slept in at night, preferring instead to sleep in private rooms provided for him and Mrs Churchill in the floors above the war rooms.

The Churchill Museum, which is situated in an annexe next to the war rooms is also a fascinating place to visit. There are clothes, and documents, letters and photographs, from throughout Churchill's life, as well as recordings of some of his most famous speeches.

We spent several hours in the museum and the Churchill War Rooms, and I would agree with my friend's advice: when visiting London, a trip to the Churchill War Rooms is not to be missed.