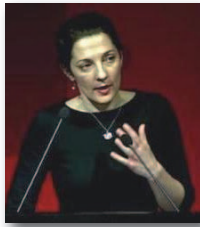


The politics of disguise: the new Palace of Westminster

By Christine Riding

During the night of 10 and 11 May 1941, areas of the Palace of Westminster were set on fire by German incendiary bombs. In deciding which parts to save from destruction, the London fire brigade concentrated its efforts on the medieval Westminster Hall, with the result that the Victorian Commons debating chamber, first used in 1850, was reduced to smouldering rubble. Why, during a period of national crisis, would an old hall with no specific or regular parliamentary function, take precedence over the working heart of the British parliament?



Christine Riding is Senior Curator of Arts at the National Maritime Museum and formerly Curator of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Art at Tate in London. She was a co-editor of *The Houses of Parliament. History, Art, Architecture* (Merrell, 2000) and has written several educational texts on the Palace of Westminster.

Answering this question goes a long way to understanding the architectural politics of the Palace of Westminster, one of the most instantly recognisable buildings in the world: why it was designed to exude continuity, permanence and stability, while, ever since it was constructed in the 1840s and 1850s, representing an increasingly anachronistic vision of the British constitution. After all, precisely the same concern to save Westminster Hall and other medieval structures had occurred just over a century before the Second World War, during the great fire of 16 October 1834 that swept through the central section of the old Palace site. There were some who viewed this catastrophe as an act of divine punishment, above all for the so-called Great Reform Act of 1832, which (in their view) had dramatically undermined the time-honoured political clout of the aristocracy in favour of the middle classes, and thus destabilised the balance of the British constitution. For those of a more liberal, progressive frame of mind, the fire could seem like an act of cleansing, allowing parliament a "fresh start", by sweeping away the ramshackle collection of buildings that had accumulated over the centuries, to create a new, purpose-built parliamentary complex. But what sort of building would it be? Would it look forward or backward? And where would it be?

Arguably the most radical decision at this time would have been to remove Parliament from Westminster altogether. Given London's dramatic expansion, Westminster was long-thought to be

inconvenient to get to, as well as positioned on the banks of the River Thames, a busy, noisy and polluted waterway that in hot, summer months could be a positive health hazard. Although there were suggestions for an alternative site, the most interesting being Green Park, the overwhelming feeling was that Parliament was Westminster and vice versa: *genius loci* had triumphed. Once this was confirmed, it was unlikely that Parliament would be rehoused in a building that would be an uncompromising, physical statement of modernity. While this would have underlined Britain's position as a leading industrial and global power, it would also have reflected profound changes in the balance between the three parts of the constitution: the monarch as Head of State, the Lords and the Commons. Nevertheless, the palace was made to be thoroughly modern, at least under its highly decorative, "historical" skin, where cutting-edge construction and engineering methods were employed, with the massive, now world-famous clock tower down one end and Victoria Tower down the other. Impressive indeed.

But what sort of image or identity did it project? Much of the perceived success of the palace, then and now, is how well it "fits in" to the Westminster area, in particular, its relationship in scale and architectural style to Westminster Abbey, itself predominantly medieval. Indeed, the parliamentary committee that was set up in 1835 to oversee the design competition for the new building, elected not only to instruct competitors to submit designs in the Gothic style and to incorporate Westminster Hall (an eleventh-century royal structure, remodelled by Richard II in the 1390s) into the plans, but guided them towards perpendicular Gothic. This was a late form of Gothic associated in Britain with the Tudor dynasty (1485-1603) and was the style of the Lady Chapel built by the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, at the east end of Westminster Abbey, that is the closest part of the abbey to the palace site.



Westminster Hall. President Barack Obama addresses both Houses of Parliament on 25 May 2011. Built in 1097, Westminster Hall is the oldest part of the Palace of Westminster.
Image: Mark Dimmock / Parliamentary copyright

The architect Charles Barry, who won the design competition, transposed many of the details and motifs from the chapel to the new parliament building, including the *Tudor rose* and the *portcullis*, the latter originally a royal badge but soon to be the symbol of Parliament at Westminster. The transferral of old to new, from monarch to Parliament, thus was seamless. The history of the Gothic Revival in Britain, of which the Palace of Westminster is a preeminent example, is complex and nuanced. Importantly, in the years following the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, Gothic was perceived as the national style (in contrast to the neo-classical style associated with France) and, reassuringly in moments of national crisis, the style of political, social and cultural continuity, not only at Westminster but across the whole country. The new Palace of Westminster thus anchored the British into a highly partial, national narrative, one that was ancient, Christian (as underlined by the great medieval cathedrals) and royal. After all, it was referred to as the *Palace* of Westminster, despite the fact that monarchs had ceased to reside there for centuries.

Thus on the outside and inside of the new building, statues of monarchs (and bishops) were positioned in the niches carved into the facades, with Queen Victoria, who came to the throne in 1837, presiding in sculptural form over the door to the sovereigns entrance and in the Prince's Chamber, and throughout the building with carved "VR" monograms. And interestingly, within the palace, the most ornate areas of the palace were those designated as royal (situated within the House of Lords side of the building), with the House of Lords in close second, and the House of Commons very much in third place. While this pretty fairly represented the predominance of the monarch as Head of State and the aristocracy when the Gothic style first came into being, it only loosely described the state of political affairs in the 1830s, let alone 1941, or indeed 2011. Does the symbolism of the building still matter? Do people read buildings in this way?

In *The English Constitution* (1867), the political journalist Walter Bagehot argued that, as day-to-day power was in the hands of the elected - and hence transitional - House of Commons, that hereditary monarchy, with its ancient origins, associations and traditions, represented the antithesis of change and thus "acts as a disguise", enabling "our real rulers to change without heedless people knowing it". I think the same is true of the Palace of Westminster, and always has been.