

# The story of London

*LONDON. Capital of England, capital of Great Britain. Once the biggest city in the world, today just one of the biggest in Europe. Yet if London is no longer one of the biggest cities in the world, it remains one of the most important, and one of the most fascinating. In this article, you can learn something about the history of Britain's capital city.*

## Section 1 The history of London.

### A very historic city



When the French poet and traveller Théophile Gautier first reached London in 1843, by ship, he was quite astonished. He wrote that London was the "*capital of enormities and of proud rebellion*".

"*On this gigantic scale,*" he continued, "*industry almost becomes poetry, a poetry in which nature plays no part, but which is a result of the immense development of human will.*"



In 1843, London really was very different from any other city. It was much bigger than any other city, and it was the capital of the most industrialised nation in the world.

It was already a city with a long history, of course. London had become the British capital in Roman times, but since then, it had been built and destroyed and rebuilt so many times that there were few traces left of the capital city of Roman Britain, except deep below the ground.

Photo left : London's docks, as Théophile Gautier or Charles Dickens would have seen them. Painting by Atkinson Grimshaw, 1880

Today, the oldest buildings in London include the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey, which are almost a thousand years old.



Though the Tower (photo left) was always a part of London, Westminster Abbey was once over a mile from the capital city. For **centuries**, "London" just covered the area corresponding more or less to the Roman city. Today, this part of London is still called the City of London, and is the heart of the bigger "London".

Until recently, "the City" was home to hundreds of thousands of people; but today its population is actually well less than ten thousand! Today the City is the heart of London's financial district, full of bankers and businessmen by day, almost **deserted** by night.

Back in the **Middle Ages**, the City was already becoming too small. In the 11th century, **monks** built a big new **abbey** at Westminster, and King Cnut began to build a palace beside it. King Ethelred, his **successor**, then decided to move his court from the city of Winchester, to the palace of Westminster. Westminster has been the seat of the English, then British, parliament ever since, and London has been the capital city.

While the parliament was established in Westminster, the City's growing population kept

**spreading** to other villages all round. Villages like Chelsea and Hackney **eventually** became **swallowed up** by the metropolis which kept growing and growing.

Today, Westminster, which contains Buckingham Palace, Parliament, Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, and London's most famous shopping district, is part of Central London. Nearby, Chelsea is an expensive residential area, and Hackney is a working-class district: they are all parts of London.

In spite of its age, Central London does not have many very old buildings. The City itself was burnt to the ground in the terrible fire of 1666, and was almost totally rebuilt after it. Large parts of London were also rebuilt in the nineteenth century and have been rebuilt again since then, for different reasons.

Charles Dickens, the author of *Oliver Twist* and other famous **novels**, lived in the London that Théophile Gautier visited, and has left us with terrible descriptions of the conditions in which the poor of London lived and worked in those days. Millions of people worked in the great city, with its docks, its offices and shops, and its services. Most were poor, living in **squalid** conditions, some were very rich, and **a fair number** belonged to the new "middle classes". In this way, London, the biggest city in the world, was also the first "modern" city.

It remained the world's biggest city until after the second world war.

Since then it has continued to change, but got smaller; but with over seven million inhabitants, today's "Greater London" is, with Paris, one of the two biggest cities in Europe; and also one of the most fascinating.

## Section 2 Different parts of London.

### LONDON RICH, LONDON POOR

Like almost every big city, London has its **prosperity** and its poverty.

Most tourists visit the "West End", with its shops, cinemas, theatres and monuments. This is London's front window, where the streets are clean and most people, including the tourists, have jobs, and money to spend.

Harrod's store, in Knightsbridge, claims it is the most famous shop in the world; in theory you can buy anything there, from an elephant to a pencil (though naturally, they would have to order the elephant specially for you, there are none on the shelves!)

In the small streets behind Regent Street, there are all sorts of specialist shops, selling high-quality products to people who **can afford** them. "Gentlemen's tailor since 1788," says the sign outside a tiny shop with beautiful **suits** in its window. Expensive suits. Most of this shop's **customers** are businessmen, celebrities and diplomats; here at least, the foreign customer, after his first English lesson, can say "my tailor is rich".

Two miles to the north east of Regent Street, the scene is very different. Here you are in the "inner city" district of London, where many of the streets are dirty, the shops look cheap, and the people do not look rich.

Few tourists visit Islington, Bethnal Green, Brixton and London's other depressed areas. A lot of the inhabitants here are from ethnic minorities — mostly **West Indian** or Asian — and many of them are unemployed. Those who do have

work are often in unskilled jobs which do not pay well; bus conductors, **dustmen**, shop assistants.

Nevertheless, though these areas of London are poor, they cannot be described as ghettos, and while levels of crime are above **average** in many parts of the inner city, these are not dangerous areas. Ten years ago, there was rioting in Brixton, but since then things have been generally calm

**Word guide :**

**abbey** - big church - **(can) afford**: have enough money for - **average**: normal - **century**: period of 100 years - **customer**: client - **deserted**: empty - eventually : later, in time - **dustman**: man who empties dustbins, rubbish - **fail**: not be a success - **fair number**: some - **fashions**: popular styles - **imply**: signify, mean - Middle Ages - the mediaeval period, about 1000 years ago - **monks**: religious men - **novel** : story - **prosperity**: richness, affluence - **rioting**: collective violence - **scale**: degree - **so far**: until now - **spread**: extend - **squalid**: dirty and unpleasant - **successor**: person who follows - **suit**: matching jacket and trousers - **swallow up**: to eat, to include - **unskilled**: very ordinary, easily learnt - **West Indian**: afro-caribbean - **will**: desire, determination - **worth**: with a value of.

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**Worksheet:**

LONDON

*Read the article above, then answer these questions.*

1. Why was Gautier so surprised when he first saw London?
2. How old is London?
3. Why did Westminster become an important part of London?
4. Why are there not many people in the City of London at night?
5. Explain why London does not have a lot of very old buildings.
6. Why was London the first "modern" city?
7. Why are there more tourists in Knightsbridge than in Brixton?
8. Why was Brixton in the news ten years ago?

**Other ideas?**

EFL teachers: Help develop this resource by contributing extra teaching materials or exercises.

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