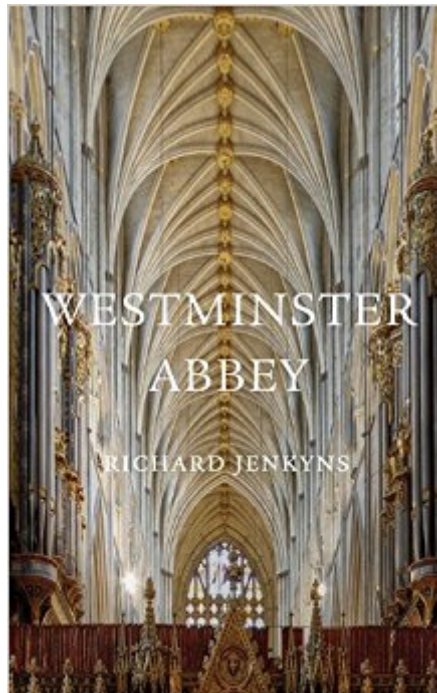


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# Westminster Abbey (Wonders Of The World)



## Synopsis

Read the Bldg Blog interview with Mary Beard about the Wonders of the World series(Part I and Part II)Westminster Abbey is the most complex church in existence. National cathedral, coronation church, royal mausoleum, burial place of poets, resting place of the great and of the Unknown Warrior, former home of parliament, backdrop to the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales--this rich and extraordinary building unites many functions. Westminster Abbey is both an appreciation of an architectural masterpiece and an exploration of the building's shifting meanings. We hear the voices of those who have described its forms, moods, and ceremonies, from Shakespeare and Voltaire to Dickens and Henry James; we see how rulers have made use of it, from medieval kings to modern prime ministers. In a highly original book, classicist and cultural historian Richard Jenkyns teaches us to look at this microcosm of history with new eyes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Far from being the singular expression of a king's will to create a monument for all time, London's imposing masterwork is in fact something like the story of Europe itself: a living geography of accreted history, a "coalescence of functions" that, from one angle, can seem a junk heap of invariably outmoded ideas (sculptural, architectural and even religious), and on the other, a disorganized but breathtaking record of life, death, hope and futility that one wants to get lost in, as if one were experiencing a guided tour of the afterlife by Charon himself. Oxford don Jenkyns

describes architectural qualities in intricate but not overwhelming detail, introducing the novice to new terms and concerns; he is particularly poetic in writing about light in the building, whether describing optical effects in the shadowy alcoves or the differences in the way light filters through new or old glass. In active service as a cathedral, a burial place for the esteemed and a venue for much-televized coronations and funerals, Westminster Abbey is also a clutter of monuments to poets, scientists, saints and kings, the divine and the pedestrian. If Jenkyns is not so omniscient a cultural historian as Simon Schama, he hits all the right notes briskly and cleanly, making this both a perfect tour book and a light educational read. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

**\*Starred Review\*** Westminster Abbey certainly ranks as one of the top tourist draws in the world, especially for American travelers, and those desiring a deeper profile of this London church than what a basic guidebook generally offers will do well to pay attention to this beautifully articulated essay by an Oxford professor, an entry in the publisher's Wonders of the World series. Basically, Jenkyns' discussion points incorporate architecture, history, and culture as he defends and details (the latter not burdensomely so) an impassioned conviction that "the Abbey exists as an idea as well as a building." Exploration of the abbey's evolving functions since its origins in the thirteenth century takes the author specifically into such topics as the nature of Gothic architecture (with particular attention paid to Henry VII's chapel), the circumstances by which the abbey became a royal mausoleum and pantheon of the great, its importance as a gallery of sculpture, its physical setting within London's changing cityscape, and its major function as the site of coronations. A mellifluous writing style caps this splendid reading and learning experience. Brad Hooper Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This little book has a lot going for it. (By little, I mean that it is 5 1/4" wide by 8" tall by 1/2" deep.) It is VERY thorough in what it covers. I learned more about the comparative architecture of great cathedrals of Britain and Europe than I needed to. The historical facts are densely presented, with lots of segues. I think that almost every famous person and personage who mentioned Westminster Abbey in a diary or letter or book is quoted. There is lots of interesting commentary. I particularly found his opinion humorous on whether or not the Stone of Scone should have been returned to Scotland. To me, Richard Jenkyns' book reads like the transcript of a lecture. Maybe "Westminster Abbey Through the Ages" or "Westminster Abbey - Still Relevant Today?" I can imagine him using a slideshow with it. There is much information imparted and it's done so with touches of humor, but

even more touches of hyperbole. An example of the latter, where he is describing the Medieval shrine with the tomb of Edward the Confessor, the *raison d'être* for building the Abbey: "Like the womb, this place is secret and sacred, intimate and exotic; it is the habitation of historic memory, yet mysterious." Hmmm. I've been there, and though it was fascinating, the secret and exotic and mysterious don't seem right. The book includes a small map of the Abbey and 26 black & white photos/illustrations. You can appreciate this book as commentary or as history. I didn't read it until after my trip, and it's the kind of account that would be nice to read before you go. I wouldn't recommend it, though, as a reminder of your visit. For that purpose, I much more enjoyed Tony Trowles' *Treasures of Westminster Abbey*. It has more photos and more information on the tombs and commemoratives that I saw as I toured the Abbey. Happy Reader

A very informative and descriptive book. As I have toured Westminster Abbey several times - it describes the Abbey in both historical and architectural integrity. The author compliments his text with high quality photos in an organized manner as if the reader is walking through the Abbey itself. Rather than buying the high end museum copy, this book is more complete with as much photo and description that brings the impact of the Abbey right into one home or office. The impact on me was to have a handy reference to the Abbey on those days which made me yearn to return and walk those quiet rows. The seller did an accurate portrayal and detail of the book and shipping was fast.

This book is about one of the finest examples of gothic architecture, yet features sorry few diagrams and/or photos. Granted, there is a lot of descriptive language, a lot of amazing description, but when the thing that is described is a visual masterpiece, words fall short.

Professor Jenkyn's little book at only about 8 inches high is nevertheless the horse's mouth on Westminster Abbey, but Jenkyns treats the Abbey not as a rather gloomy pile of stones but as an edifice writhing with history and atmosphere that is, in essence, England. The professor knows every stone and sculpture and tomb and floor mosaic and window in the great cathedral and vividly describes many of them for you, but it's the anecdotes about the people who in whatever way contributed to the history of the Abbey and left their souls there, so to speak, that make this book such a charmer and an absolute cup of tea and a must for the person ga-ga about the Abbey. Like me. Jenkyns relates the Abbey observations of many people over the centuries, including awed remarks by the Americans Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving, Disraeli, and even the young Princess Elizabeth at her father, George VI's coronation, which the eleven year old girl

charmingly describes thusly: "I thought it all very, very wonderful and I expect the Abbey did, too!" Jenkyns is in no way hesitant in giving his opinion about just about everything he describes in the Abbey, and he is often hilarious. For instance, Samuel Johnson's body is buried in the Abbey in a rather humble vault, but Johnson's friends insisted on erecting a large marble statue of him which could not be placed in the Abbey because the sculpture was too big. It was therefore set up in St Paul's and Jenkyns describes the figure: "A marble Johnson larger than life size and in something approximating to Roman dress now stands ... barefoot and bare-chested. With a scowl on his face and with some indeterminate remnant wrapped around his middle, he looks all too like someone who has just leapt from the bath to answer a wrong number." We are treated to the episode of the 17th century diarist Samuel Pepys and Katherine of Valois. Katherine was the French wife of Henry V. During Henry VIII's time her coffin was disinterred and thrown into a niche somewhere completely unprotected. By Pepys's time the coffin had been eroded to the point where you could actually see the skeleton inside. For a shilling or two you could take a special tour for a peek and Pepys actually poked his head inside the coffin and kissed the queen on the lips, bragging about his big coup afterwards in his diary. Poor Katherine! How she would have loathed the thought of that vulgar exhibitionist kissing her! "Westminster Abbey" is both erudite and light-heartedly serious, and is highly recommended! P.S. The modern tourist, except by special arrangement, cannot visit the room where the shrine to Saint Edward the Confessor is. That structure, which was altered by Mary I, is simply too fragile. Edward's body is actually buried under an ancient mosaic floor some yards away in front of the high altar, but the shrine itself could be considered the heart of the Abbey and its holiest place. To see the shrine, close up and in wonderful detail here's an alternative for ya. Buy this game: "Mystery in London." This is a Hidden Object game which I describe here on . Even if the game as such does not appeal to you, chances are you'll be amused by seeing things like a hotdog suspended from the ceiling and the golden effigy of Edward I clutching a bowl of salad, and the panoramas of Westminster Abbey are breathtaking. I have never seen any images from any book that can compare in clarity and detail to the Abbey scenes in this game. You get to visit Saint Paul's, too, and those images are wonderful as well. Many more London locations are represented in the game, but the Abbey scenes and the incredible interiors of Saint Paul's blew me away. To learn more visit "Mystery in London" here on .

Westminster Abbey by Richard Jenkyns (Harvard University Press, 2005) is one of a general series of books called Wonders of the World under the general editorship of Mary Beard. Some of the other books in this series are: The Temple of Jerusalem, The Alhambra, The Parthenon, the Tomb

of Agamemnon, The Colosseum, Stonehenge and the Forbidden City. Each of these books are short, Westminster Abbey is 215 pages and each is in a small compact format which makes for easy reading. Westminster Abbey not only gives a brief history of the Abbey, but talks about its importance in cultural history. In the case of the Abbey, it went from being the mausoleum of the royal family to being the burial place of a wide variety of famous people ranging from Isaac Newton to Lawrence Olivier and the location of ceremonies important to the British people ranging from the coronation of Kings and Queens to royal weddings and even the funeral of Princess Diana. It is a definite must read for all of those interested in the importance of Westminster Abbey in British History. Westminster Abbey (Wonders of the World)

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