

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Cabinet War Rooms, the surviving and most significant portion of the underground emergency accommodation which was provided to protect Winston Churchill, his War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff of Britain's armed forces against air attacks during the Second World War.

The Cabinet War Rooms lie some 10 feet (3 metres) below ground in the basement of the Government Offices Great George Street, and were established here in the summer of 1938 as the threat of war with Germany increased. This basement was chosen for the proposed emergency headquarters because of its proximity to Whitehall and because of the extra security offered by the steel-framed structure of the building above. Originally comprising only three rooms, the Cabinet War Rooms were soon extended and by late 1939 they embraced much of the area now preserved. They became operational on 27 August 1939, a week before war was declared, and remained in use until Japan formally surrendered in September 1945.

Apart from providing the War Cabinet, its secretariat and the Chiefs of Staff with a protected meeting place and working accommodation, the Cabinet War Rooms served as an information and planning centre and housed members of the Joint Planning Staff and Joint Intelligence Committee, who were responsible for preparing and co-ordinating combined strategic and operational plans under the Chiefs of Staff. In 1940, when the

danger of German invasion was at its height, the Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces, and his staff also had rooms here.

At the end of the war, several of the most important rooms were preserved intact. Since 1981, when the decision was taken to open the site to visitors on a regular basis, these and other rooms have been carefully restored to their wartime appearance. The restricted space in certain areas of the basement has made it necessary to create some new openings to enable visitors to enter or see into all the rooms but, wherever possible, such alterations have been kept to a minimum. The Cabinet War Rooms are now administered by the Imperial War Museum on behalf of the Property Services Agency of the Department of the Environment.

Before starting your tour you will find, in the foyer, introductory displays explaining the general historical background to the Cabinet War Rooms.

1

THE CABINET ROOM

Your tour proper begins in a special viewing area from which you may see into the room used by the War Cabinet itself. Although the War Cabinet met here only once while Neville Chamberlain was Prime Minister, Churchill's War Cabinet held over one hundred meetings in this room between May 1940 and May 1945. It was used most frequently from September to November 1940 during the Blitz, and again from June to September 1944 and January to March 1945, during the German V-weapons offensive. The Defence Committee, which included the service ministers and Chiefs of Staff and which was, for a time, Churchill's principal instrument for conducting the war, also met here regularly in 1940-41.

Churchill sat in the large wooden chair on the far side of the room, in front of the map of the world. At meetings of the War Cabinet, Clement Attlee, as Deputy Prime Minister, sat on Churchill's immediate left (your right). On the Prime Minister's right sat the senior members of the War Cabinet Secretariat, who ensured that an accurate record of proceedings was kept and that decisions reached would be conveyed to the appropriate Government departments for further action. When the Defence Committee met, the Chiefs of Staff occupied the seats facing Churchill on the inside of the hollow square formed by the tables. Above the door on the left you will see two small electric bulbs, painted red and green, which indicated whether or not an air raid was in progress. Note also the cream-painted ventilation duct with its adjustable nozzles.

The room has been laid out as it was for the War Cabinet meeting of 15 October 1940. A seating plan for this meeting is included in the supporting display.

2

MAIN CORRIDOR NORTH

After viewing the Cabinet Room, you turn right into a short stretch of corridor. On your immediate right is a wooden hatchway leading to the sub-basement below, where many of the staff of the Cabinet War Rooms slept during the worst periods of bombing. Next you will pass the small lobby which incorporates the outer and inner doors to the Cabinet Room. When meetings were in progress a Royal Marine sentry stood inside the lobby, between the two doors, and another was stationed here in the corridor, guarding the outer door.

Also on the right, as you turn into the main corridor, is the door to the former Mess Room, where staff working in the Cabinet War Rooms could obtain snacks and drinks prepared by Royal Marine orderlies. This area served, in addition, as a waiting room for those attending meetings in the basement. The heavy door, like several others in the Cabinet War Rooms, has a raised sill, enabling it to be sealed tight against gas or flooding.

You are now at the northern end of the main basement corridor. Fixed to the wall on the left, a few steps further on, is a wooden holder containing indicator boards, which once gave news about the weather outside to staff working underground. The board marked 'Windy' was often inserted as a joke during air raids. On the opposite side of the corridor is a doorway through which you may look into an office allocated, in the latter half of the war, to John Martin, Churchill's Principal Private Secretary from 1941 to 1945.

3

THE TRANSATLANTIC TELEPHONE ROOM

Continuing along the corridor, you come to an opening on the left leading to a viewing area where you can see into one of the most important rooms in the entire complex. From here Churchill could speak directly by telephone to President Roosevelt in the White House.

During the war, transatlantic calls were sent by radio-telephony. Devices known as scramblers were used to transform conversations into a

meaningless noise until they were unscrambled at the other end. However, no really secure link existed between Whitehall and Washington until mid-1943, when an advanced scrambler, developed by the Bell Telephone Laboratories in the United States, was shipped to Britain. The machine, code-named 'SIGSALY', was too big for the Cabinet War Rooms and was installed in the basement of Selfridges department store in Oxford Street. An underground cable connected it to the terminal in this room, which consisted of an intermediate scrambler and a specially adapted American telephone. The call-sign for the London terminal was 'X-Ray'.

A reconstruction of the cabinet housing the intermediate scrambler can be seen in the left foreground, while a replica of the telephone used by Churchill stands on the table at the far end of the room. Next to the telephone are the 'X-Ray Instructions' warning the user to speak in a normal voice to avoid impairing the quality of transmission. On the wall to the right is a clock with two black hands showing London time and two red hands indicating the time in Washington.

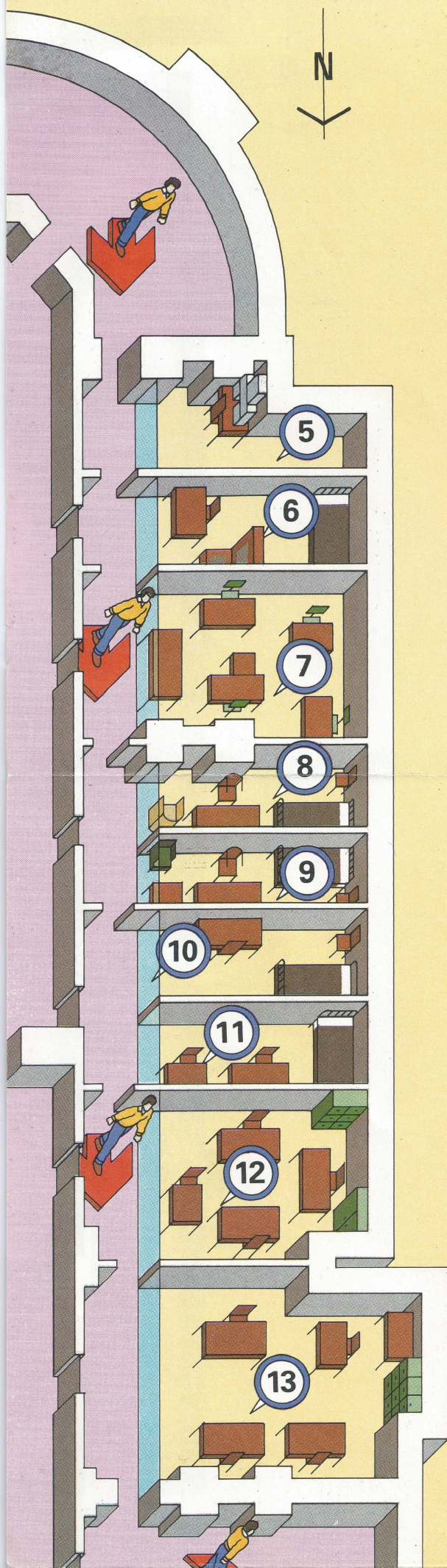
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MAIN CORRIDOR SOUTH

Returning to the corridor, you will see, on your left, the outer door to the transatlantic telephone room. Its special lock, marked 'Vacant' and 'Engaged', came from a toilet door. Jutting out into the corridor at this point is a blast wall, built to diffuse the effects of shock waves from bombs. Some 46 feet (14 metres) to the south, on the left, is a door marked with a 'D'. This was the main wartime entrance to the Cabinet War Rooms at basement level. At the southern end of the corridor is a room bearing the number '59'. Inside the room, which once housed members of the Joint Planning Staff, are displays illustrating the role and development of the Cabinet War Rooms. Please look at these displays before proceeding on your tour.

In the winter of 1940-41 a concrete slab – 3 feet (914mm) thick and reinforced with steel rails and tramlines – was installed above the basement. The improved overhead protection allowed the Cabinet War Rooms to expand into other parts of the basement to the east of the rooms you will see today. These additional areas, which are not accessible to the public, were known during the war as the 'Courtyard Rooms' and the 'CWR Annexe'.

However, if you glance up to your left just before you leave Room 59, you will see that the wall has been cut away to reveal a section of the slab itself. You are now about to enter a succession of rooms which together formed the original nucleus of the Cabinet War Rooms. Each room is referred to by its wartime number or title.



5

ROOM 60 LEFT

Room 60 became part of the Cabinet War Rooms in August 1938. The timber props and beams which you see were installed here, and in other rooms, between September 1938 and March 1939, as an early precaution against the possible collapse of the building above in an air raid. At the same time Room 60 was divided in two by a partition wall and this half – Room 60 Left – was used by the BBC to house outside broadcast equipment of the type now on display. Such equipment enabled the Prime Minister to broadcast direct from the War Rooms.

6

ROOM 60 RIGHT

The northern half of Room 60 has been laid out to show how it looked between 1939 and 1941, when it was used as emergency office accommodation for shorthand-typists and also housed a small telephone switchboard. Later in the war it became an office for the Royal Marine detachment which provided guards and orderlies for the War Rooms.

7

ROOM 60A

Room 60A has also been restored to its pre-1941 appearance. Until the summer of that year it was occupied by typists working principally for the Joint Planners. Those on late shifts often slept in the sub-basement. The typists received regular ultra-violet treatment to counter the effects of living and working underground. After July 1941 the timber props and beams were removed and the room was partitioned for emergency use by various members of the War Cabinet Secretariat. Note the hand-cranked duplicating machine on the table in the centre.

8

ROOM 61 LEFT

Following the partitioning of Room 61 early in the war, Room 61 Left served chiefly as emergency office and sleeping accommodation for General Ismay's Private Secretaries, Commander Maurice Knott RN and Lieutenant-Commander Ian McEwan RNVR.

9

ROOM 61 RIGHT

Throughout the war, except for a few months in 1940-41, this room was allocated to General Sir Hastings Ismay, the Deputy Secretary (Military) of the Cabinet and from May 1940, Chief of Staff to Churchill when the latter assumed the additional role of Minister of Defence. As head of the military wing of the War Cabinet Secretariat and Churchill's personal representative on the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Ismay played a key part in ensuring that the machinery for the direction of Britain's war effort ran smoothly.

10

ROOM 61A LEFT

First absorbed by the Cabinet War Rooms in June 1938, Room 61A was partitioned in 1939. Thereafter, Room 61A Left was used mainly by successive Private Secretaries to Sir Edward Bridges, including Ronald Harris and Captain John Curle before 1944 and then William Armstrong with George Blaker and, later, David Hubback in 1944-45.

11

ROOM 61A RIGHT

This room was reserved for Sir Edward Bridges, Secretary to the War Cabinet from 1939-45. Though overall head of the War Cabinet Secretariat and responsible for its efficiency, Bridges left the military side of its business largely to Ismay and concentrated on the civil and political aspects. He thus became, in fact, Churchill's principal civilian staff officer. In contrast to Ismay, who disliked sleeping underground, Bridges often stayed here at night, particularly during the Blitz.

12

ROOM 62

From July 1940 to January 1941, Rooms 62 to 62B were taken over by the Advanced Headquarters of the GHQ, Home Forces. It was from here that the defence of Britain would have been co-ordinated in the event of invasion. Room 62 is shown today as it appeared during those critical months, when it was allocated to junior staff officers of the Advanced Headquarters. The latter moved out of this part of the basement in January 1941 and Room 62 subsequently became an emergency office for personal secretaries and typists working for members of the War Cabinet Secretariat.

14

13

ROOM 62A

In the summer and autumn of 1940, Room 62A was earmarked for senior staff officers of the Advanced Headquarters, including the Chief of Staff, Home Forces, Lieutenant-General Bernard Paget. It was later turned into a Mess for the Royal Marines on duty in the War Rooms.

14

ROOM 62B

After housing the Joint Planners for a brief period, Room 62B was allocated in July 1940 to the Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces, General Sir Alan Brooke. Then, in 1941, it became the office of the Camp Commandant, who, together with George Rance, the civilian representative of the Ministry of Works, was responsible for the security, domestic arrangements and day-to-day running of the Cabinet War Rooms.

The Camp Commandant had previously used Room 63, the room next door to the north. However, when the slab was installed above the basement in the winter of 1940-41, Room 63, which occupied the space beneath the staircase leading to the War Rooms from the ground floor entrance on the St. James's Park side, also had to be filled with concrete to plug a dangerous gap in the defences. The Camp Commandant therefore took over Room 62B instead, the Advanced Headquarters of the GHQ, Home Forces, having already moved elsewhere in the basement.

You leave the Camp Commandant's office by means of a new tunnel cut through the concrete which fills the space formerly occupied by Room 63. The concrete is 16½ feet (5 metres) thick at this point.

15

THE MAP ROOM ANNEXE (ROOM 64)

You emerge from the tunnel at the western end of Room 64, which, like the Map Room and Room 65A to the north, formed part of the War Rooms complex from the very beginning. It was originally selected as a meeting room for the Chiefs of Staff but by mid-1940 it was being used as overflow accommodation for the main Map Room and as a place for the preparation of reports and intelligence summaries.

As you turn to walk up the centre of the room you will see, on your left, a large map of Western, Central and Eastern Europe, made up of many separate sheets. During the war this map, which was then mounted in the main Map Room next door, was used, in particular, to plot the progress of the fighting on the Russian front. On your right is a telephone switch frame

which enabled individual officers and officials to make secure calls from their own rooms using a single scrambler on a time-sharing basis. Near it, on the right-hand wall, are statistical charts relating to the German V-1 flying bomb attacks in 1944.

16

THE MAP ROOM (ROOM 65)

From the Map Room Annexe, you pass into the main Map Room, which was manned day and night throughout the war. Here the latest information about operations on all fronts was collected, sifted and presented on maps, and in written summaries, for the King, the War Cabinet, the Chiefs of Staff, the Joint Planners and the Joint Intelligence Committee.

On your left, as you enter, you will see the long tables where the Map Room officers sat. These men, drawn from the three services, were mostly retired officers recalled from civilian life. They worked on a rota system in shifts, or 'watches', of six hours or more. The Map Room was normally manned by at least one officer from each service. Another, selected from each service in turn, acted as Duty Officer. He occupied the place at the northern, or right-hand, end of the tables. The RAF mapkeepers also sat at the northern end of the tables, on the side nearest to the main corridor, with the officers representing the Ministry of Home Security to their left. Those representing the Army and Royal Navy sat opposite, with the naval mapkeepers at the southern end. Their routine tasks included the preparation of a weekly summary of events for the Chiefs of Staff and others, and the production of a daily news-sheet, copies of which were circulated to the War Cabinet with one copy being taken to Buckingham Palace by the Duty Officer every morning.

The coloured telephones on the wooden bridge just above the tables linked the Map Room to the individual service War Rooms, the Home Security War Room and other important centres. The ivory telephone near the Duty Officer's place was a direct line to No. 10 Downing Street. Those with green handsets were fitted with scramblers. Note the indicator lights which could be used instead of bells to alert the Map Room officers to incoming calls.

All the maps seen here were in use in the last months of the war and were left in place when the Map Room closed down in August 1945. Occupying almost the entire wall of the southern end of the room is a large map of the world on which the movements of convoys and individual warships were plotted. To its right is a map of the British Isles, showing the North Sea and the Western Approaches. Most of the remaining maps relate to South-East Asia and the Far East. A map of the Pacific theatre covers the wall at the northern end of the room.

16

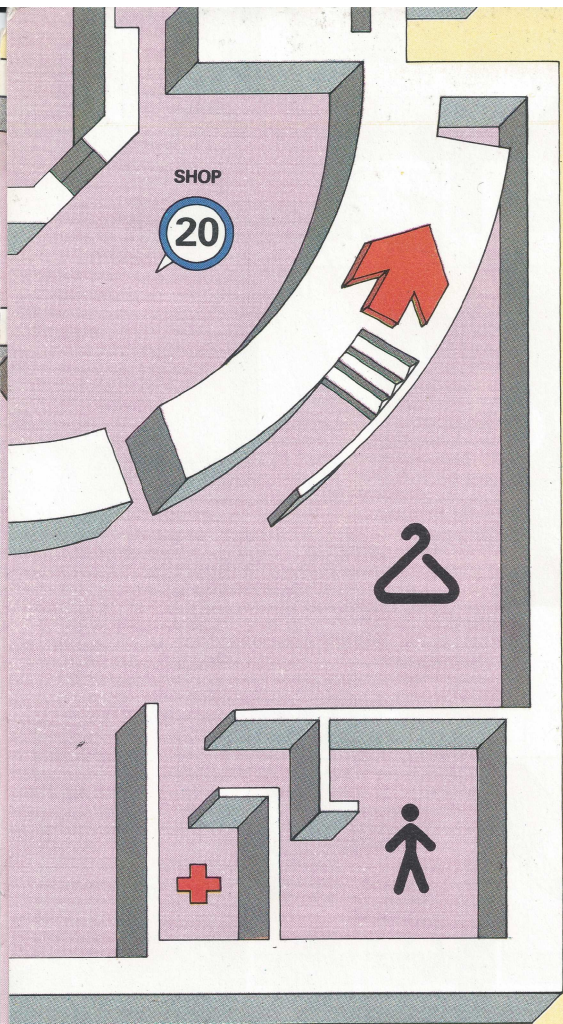
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THE PRIME MINISTER'S ROOM (ROOM 65A)

Adjacent to the Map Room, on its northern side, is Room 65A. Selected in 1938 as a possible meeting room for the Cabinet, it was never used for that purpose and in July 1940, after housing members of the Joint Planning Staff for a few months, it was allocated to Churchill himself as a combined office and bedroom, serving as his personal emergency accommodation in the basement until the end of the war. In fact, the Prime Minister slept here on only three occasions during the Blitz in the autumn of 1940, and from December 1940 onwards he and Mrs Churchill lived in private apartments which had been specially prepared for them on the ground floor of the building. The ground floor suite became known as the 'No. 10 Downing Street Annexe'. On the other hand, the Prime Minister did make a number of his famous broadcasts from this room in 1940, including an invasion warning on 11 September, a broadcast to the French people on 21 October and another to the Italian people on 23 December. He also broadcast from here on 8 December 1941, following the outbreak of war with Japan.

As you look at the room through the glass viewing panel at its eastern end, you will see the desk from which Churchill made these broadcasts. On the right-hand, or northern, wall is a map showing Britain's main wartime coastal and air defence installations. The map behind the Prime Minister's desk is of the area between London and Suez. The curtains were hung so that they could be drawn across the maps to conceal them whenever necessary.

18

ROOMS 66 AND 66A

You now pass through two rooms which, from July 1940, were reserved for the Prime Minister's staff, including his Private Secretaries. The first of these rooms – Room 66 – is now used as a temporary exhibition area where you can see changing displays of material associated with Winston Churchill, the Cabinet War Rooms and the Second World War.

The second of these two rooms – Room 66A – was allocated to General

Ismay for a brief period in 1940 before he reverted to using Room 61 Right, in the southern half of the basement, as his emergency quarters.

19

ROOM 67

In the summer of 1940, once Room 64 had become part of the Map Room suite, the Chiefs of Staff were given Room 67 as an emergency conference room. It was later taken over by the Prime Minister's Private Office. Today Room 67 also houses temporary exhibitions.

20

ROOM 68

Finally, you enter the former Mess Room (Room 68) which you passed, on the corridor side, earlier in your tour. This room has been converted into a shop, where you may buy postcards and souvenirs of your visit. Also on sale here is an illustrated booklet which contains a more detailed account of the origins and development of the Cabinet War Rooms.

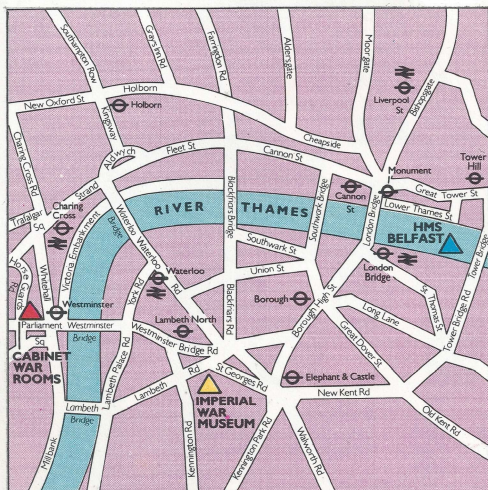
You have now reached the end of your tour of the rooms themselves. As you leave the site, look along the side of the building facing St James's Park and you will see at ground level a concrete apron wall with a sloping top. This was built in 1940 to give additional protection to the War Rooms at the point where the overhead concrete slab ended.

We hope that you have found the tour interesting and that you have enjoyed this unique insight into the way in which Britain's war effort was directed between 1939 and 1945.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Visitors to the Cabinet War Rooms may like to be reminded that they can pursue their study of the Second World War and other conflicts since 1914 in the exhibitions, reference collections and archives of the Imperial War Museum at its headquarters in Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ (01-735 8922); on board the cruiser HMS *Belfast*, moored at Symon's Wharf, Vine Lane, Tooley Street, London SE1 2JH (01-407 6434); or at Duxford Airfield, Cambridgeshire (0223-833963).

HOW TO GET THERE



Cabinet War Rooms Clive Steps, King Charles St., London SW1A 2AQ (01-930 6961 or 01-735 8922)

Open: Tuesday-Sunday, 10am – 5.50pm and on Easter Monday, Spring Bank Holiday and Summer Bank Holiday. Last admission 5.15 pm.

Closed: Mondays and New Year's Day, Good Friday, May Bank Holiday, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. The Cabinet War Rooms may be closed at short notice on State occasions.

Nearest Underground Station: Westminster

Buses: 3, 24, 29, 77, 77a, 109, 72, 184, 11, 88, 170, 12, 53, 70, 159, T6 (Mondays – Saturdays only)