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THE TOWER OF LONDON AND THE CREATION OF A VICTORIAN MYTH

The Tower of London is an iconic ancient monument and World Heritage Site that occupies a special place in the history of the English Nation. Popular images of ravens, Yeoman Warders and a morbid fascination with the notion of a grim prison-fortress bring 2½ million visitors inside the castle's walls each year and an unknown number to view them from the outside.

The history of the Tower, including its buildings and institutions, is a vast, fascinating and complex story. However, much of the fabric we see today, externally at least, is the product of 50 years of frenetic rebuilding that followed a catastrophic fire in 1841. The great 'remedievalisation' of the Tower falls into three phases and provides a fascinating insight into one of the earliest state-sponsored restorations of its kind in the United Kingdom. The first phase, including the construction of the Waterloo Barracks and Officers' Block, was supervised by Major Alexander Hall of the Royal Engineers and was completed by 1850. One of Major Hall's prime concerns was to produce buildings that complimented and enhanced the medieval aspects of the Tower. Two buildings constructed in a gothic style earlier in the 19th century provided precedent. The first, the New Horse Armoury, was erected against the south side of the White Tower in 1825 to house major parts of the Armouries. Clearly intended to harmonise with the great Norman donjon, the result did not meet with universal approval – one critic in the *Builder* magazine arguing that the 'perpetrator' of the design 'deserved to be beheaded'. The second building, the New Jewel House, was raised against the Martin Tower in 1840-2. Again the external pretensions of the edifice failed to impress all, though most criticisms were reserved for the interior. The rooms were constantly damp, the jewel chamber was not properly fireproofed or secure against theft, while the lighting of the jewels themselves was inadequate.

Beginning in 1852, restorations at the Tower were directed by the eminent architect Anthony Salvin. Salvin was first consulted about the Beauchamp Tower where the discovery of commemorative inscriptions by famous prisoners had led to calls for the building to be opened to the public. The architect surveyed the building in April 1851, but nothing seems to have happened until the following

year when certain accretions were removed. Thereafter walls were refaced, windows and doorways replaced and battlements recreated.

Salvin's next commission concerned the Salt Tower. In 1846, when various adjoining buildings were demolished, the fabric of the 13th-century tower was found to be in a very poor state. Queen Victoria was informed and eventually, on 14 June 1855, Prince Albert paid a visit of inspection. In the Prince's opinion the restoration needed to be part of a comprehensive plan for the Tower, executed by a single architect. This was to be Salvin and work on the Salt Tower, which was carried out in 1857-8, followed closely the Beauchamp Tower pattern.

Prince Albert's call for greater control of building works was to have a major influence on the outcome of a landmark dispute concerning the Casemates in the Outer Ward. Work on these bomb-vaulted structures had started in 1853, but was suspended after the outbreak of the Crimean War the following year. In 1856 the War Office prepared to continue the range. However, the Lieutenant of the Tower and other influential individuals intervened, describing the new Casemates as having a 'modern façade of Brickwork ... which might be handsome for a Brewery or Factory' but hardly suitable for a medieval castle. The War Office protested that the building contract was let before the introduction of the Prince Consort's rule and the principles adopted by Salvin. In the event a compromise was reached - the extant Casemates were to stand, but the new ones had to be built in stone to a style recommended by Salvin. The tussle over the Casemates marked a watershed in the building history of the Tower, from now on historic as well as any aesthetic considerations would have to transcend all others in determining the appearance of new buildings or alterations to existing ones.

By April 1858 a new Public Record Office in London was sufficiently well advanced to receive the thousands of historic manuscripts held in the White Tower. This allowed Salvin to begin a programme of repairs and alterations to the historic centrepiece of the fortress. The most important part of the building, the Chapel of St. John, was not taken in hand until 1864, when the walls were scoured of all accretions, including medieval painted plaster, and the existing windows introduced. For the first time, however, Salvin's actions attracted adverse comment, with calls being made for a gentler, less intrusive, approach to the repair of historic fabric.

In June 1862 part of the south-east turret of St. Thomas's Tower collapsed, thus providing an opportunity to restore another important building. Constructed in the 1270s as part of Edward I's private apartments, the building comprised a wealth of post-medieval alterations. These included the timberwork of the roof and rear elevation, which formed part of the works for the coronation of Ann Boleyn in 1533 and the early 18th-century windows to the south and flanks walls, introduced when the building became an infirmary. This photograph also shows one of the last additions before the collapse of 1862 – a tarpaulin stretched over Traitor's Gate intended to prevent visitors from seeing naked soldiers who were using the water-filled basin beneath the building as a sort of large bathing pool!

Between 1867 and 1870 Salvin directed his last major restoration at the Tower – the conversion of the Wakefield Tower into a new depository for the Crown Jewels, thus allowing the ill-fated 1840s Jewel House to be demolished. Throughout the remainder of the 19th century the Office of Works architect, John Taylor, directed operations. These included some rather savage repairs and alterations to the Chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula and the riverside defences. Taylor is best remembered, however, for recasting the Inmost Ward during the 1880s. Amongst other things his plan envisaged demolition of the 14th-century eastern annex to the White Tower and the 13th-century Record Office attached to the Wakefield Tower. Alarmed by reports, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, which had been founded by William Morris in 1877, intervened in an effort to stop the scheme, describing the proposals as 'mischievous, illusory and ridiculous'. Moreover, officers drew particular attention to the antiquity of the Record House, which had formed part of Henry III's private apartment, and argued that under no circumstances should this be demolished to make way for a pastiche. In the event, however, although the Society won all the academic and ethical arguments, a blind, but determined officialdom prevailed. As far as the correspondence is concerned the Society had the last word, for in March 1883 their secretary, Thackeray Turner, declared that his Committee

'ventures to suggest that in a few years the views it now sets forth will be thought not popular yet so generally received by educated people that the notion of building a medieval Tower to show what England was like in the 13th century will finally be given up and in place of it a respect for genuine remains of former times will prevail'

Much of the rebuilding at the Tower during the 19th century was associated with the castle's transformation from a great collection of official stores, workshops and offices into a mass tourist

attraction. This development is clearly reflected in the visitor numbers that rose from 10,200 in 1837 to over half a million by the end of the century. Accompanying and supporting these changes was the manufacture of a romantic interpretation of the site that found expression in the guidebooks and literature of the day. Of these, Harrison Ainsworth's *The Tower of London: A Historical Romance*, first published in 1840, was by far the most influential and helped determine the way that parts of the site were physically presented and how the Yeoman Warders described the history of the fortress to the public.

This relationship is clearly demonstrated in the case of the so-called 'Scaffold Site', a notional place of execution that in his novel Ainsworth placed on the south side of the Chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula. Consequently, when in 1861 Queen Victoria asked for the location of Ann Boleyn's demise to be marked, a commemorative plaque was placed on Ainsworth's imaginary site. Two years later the spot was enhanced by the addition of railings. Overnight all the Tower's short list of documented executions were said to have been carried out here though, in the case of Anne Boleyn and Robert Devereux, Tudor documents make it certain that events took place in the area of the Parade Ground between the Waterloo Barracks and White Tower to the west.

An essential ingredient in the burgeoning prison myth was the instruments of torture. A collection of fearsome looking weapons and instruments of torture had been on public display at the Tower since late Elizabethan times. The objects, said to have been taken from the disastrous Armada of 1588, were clearly intended to show what the Pope and his supporters had in store for Protestant England. In reality few, if any, of the objects were Spanish and in 1837 the collection was renamed the 'Elizabethan Armoury' and promoted as part of the indigenous dark and bloody history of the Tower. To enhance the new story additional items were purchased or manufactured. Perhaps the most famous fake was the 'Executioner's Mask' seen here on display in the Horse Armoury in 1871 with a collection of other threatening looking items. Later in the 19th century the function of the mask reached a sort of apogee when it was displayed with the block and axe. Unlike the mask, the block and axe are genuine historic artefacts, though they have different ancestries and did not co-exist.

Perhaps the most famous element in the Victorian myth is the ravens. Two, possibly three, birds had been kept as pets in the Tower during the 1870s and 80s and became visitor attractions in their own right. When a cock bird absconded in 1890 a replacement was soon found for Jenny, his other half, left high and dry at the Tower. Then, at some stage between 1895 and 1903, and in circumstances

that are not fully explained, the number of birds was increased to five. At the same time visitors were told that the ravens were part of the official establishment and that their association with the fortress stretched back hundreds of years into the mists of time.

The mythical fortress that the Victorian guides and writers promoted, with its grossly distorted tales of torture and punishment, with its invented execution site and with its resident ravens, formed a heady mix that was never going to be subjugated easily. That said, under the benevolent direction of the government's Ancient Monuments Branch efforts were made throughout much of the 20th century to promote a more accurate and serious view of Tower's well-documented history. This approach is demonstrated in the Ancient Monuments last official guidebook published in 1984, in which the late Professor Allen Brown stated that 'if the morbid ravens were shooed away or shot the history of the Tower of London would be better served'.

Since the mid 1980s the government in the UK has increasingly withdrawn from direct involvement in the management and presentation of publicly owned historic buildings and ancient monuments, leaving the task to agencies, charities and other bodies. As with London's unoccupied royal palaces, including the Tower of London, one of the key objectives was to promote self-funding status. Inevitably this has led to a considerable growth in commercial activity in which marketing plays an evermore-important role. As a consequence I find myself sitting on the Underground on the way into work looking at posters that urge visitors to come to the Tower to see for themselves the scene of a violent and murderous past. Attempts to get the marketing people to think about the implications of glib and misleading headlines seem to have little effect. Moreover on the ground a rush of new displays on prisoners, torture and punishment has underpinned a return to 19th-century perceptions. A new monument is planned for the 'Scaffold Site' where no one ever died and good-old informative signage has given way to fashionable costumed interpretation. Whether you think this type of drama aids interpretation, or simply provides good fun, its presence does seem to encourage the concept of a 'Merry olde England'.

In conclusion, I am sure the 19th-century novelists and tour guides would whole heartily approve of the return to the concept of the prison-fortress that they worked so hard to create. By comparison I am also sure that the enlightened William Morris and his colleagues, who fought so hard to preserve the genuine remains of the past, would argue that the challenge facing the custodians of the fortress today is not embrace 19th-century mythology but to place it in context and move on.