

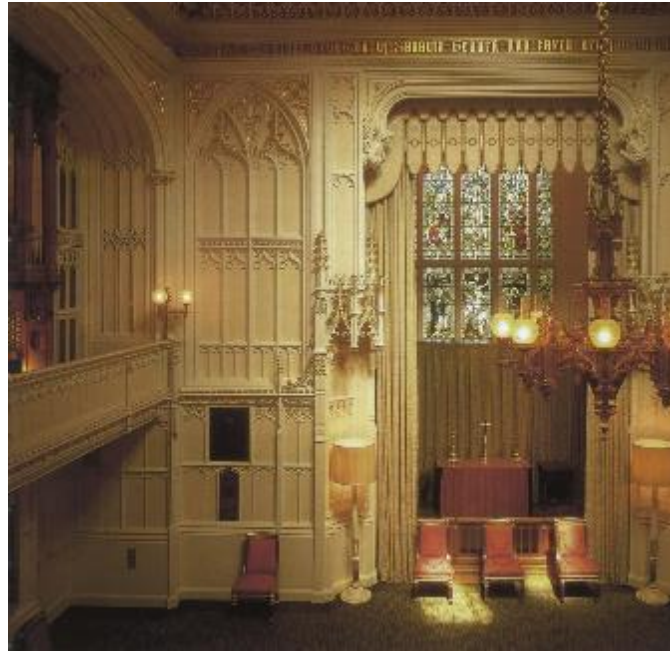
THE FIRE AT WINDSOR CASTLE

Disaster befell Windsor Castle in late November 1992, when fire struck. To get a sense of the scale of the damage done, it is important to remember that the Castle is made up of a series of buildings and towers, and these are known as the three Wards – the Lower, Middle and Upper Wards.



Windsor Castle seen from above

The fire destroyed 115 rooms in total, nine of which were State Apartments, and much of the affected corner of the castle (highlighted above with the red arrow) has now changed beyond all recognition. It all started at 11.30am on 20 November 1992, when a burning smell was detected by a paintings conservator in St George's Hall in the Lower Ward. It turned out that a faulty spotlight had ignited the curtains in Queen Victoria's Private Chapel. The curtains framed the Altar Table and were 19 feet in length. The Victorian Organ was virtually vaporised in the intense heat and the Chapel was quickly reduced to a burned-out shell.



Queen Victoria's Private Chapel before the fire



Queen Victoria's Private Chapel after the fire

One of the reasons the fire spread so rapidly – despite the multiple fire breaks which the fire brigade quickly set up between the rooms – was due to the void above the ceiling. Thankfully, the Waterloo Chamber, where George IV had covered a formerly open courtyard with a baroque ceiling, survived thanks to the thickness of the formerly exterior walls.

The magnificent walls and ceiling of the 180-foot-long St George's Hall collapsed and the flames totally decimated this glorious state banqueting room.



St George's Hall before the fire



St George's Hall after the fire

By 2.30pm on that fateful day, 220 firefighters from seven counties were battling the fire, using 36 pumps and 1.5 million gallons of water.

The Royal Library and Archives, containing drawings and manuscripts by Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, among other Old Masters, was threatened with destruction and these works were taken into the quadrangle, along with paintings by Van Dyck, items of French furniture, and statues from St George's Hall, before being put into a building in Windsor Great Park designated for storage. Ironically – and luckily – several rooms had already been cleared of their artworks prior to the blaze for a major electrical rewiring operation.

The fire spread into the Semi State Apartments and ruined the majestic Crimson Drawing Room, and the State Dining Room. The Brunswick Tower acted like a chimney for the fire to take hold in the State Dining Room and it raged at an unimaginable temperature of 820 degrees centigrade.

The fire continued to burn for 8.5 hours in the Grand Reception Room, which was the ballroom in the reign of George IV and a room frequently used by Queen Elizabeth II as a Reception Room.



The Grand Reception Room after the fire

The tapestries in the Grand Reception Room were rapidly removed because they were attached to the wall with Velcro. Despite the devastation, some of the gilded decoration on the walls was salvaged. Incredibly, just two works of art were destroyed in the inferno – a

rosewood sideboard and a huge painting of George III on horseback reviewing his troops, which had been boxed into the wall due to its size and was therefore difficult to remove.



George III reviewing his troops by Sir William Beechey, lost in the fire

A portrait of the same size – of Frederick, Prince of Wales, has since replaced it.



The Family of Frederick, Prince of Wales

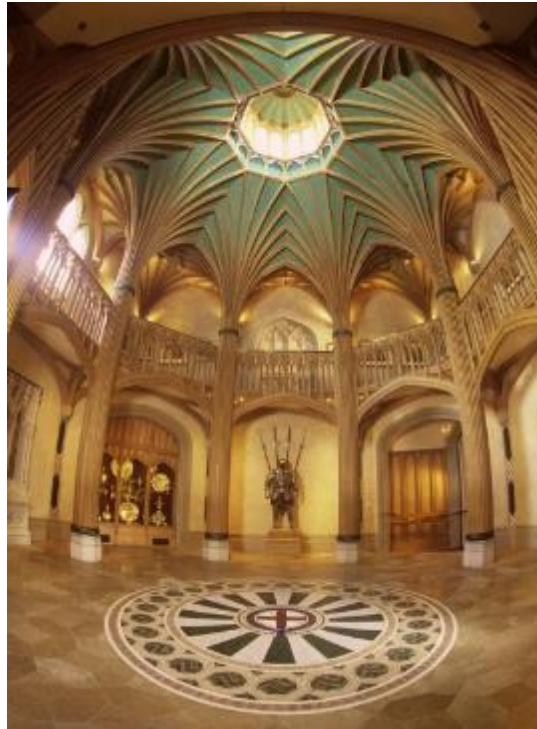
The blaze reached its height at 8pm that evening and was finally extinguished in the early hours of the next morning after a gruelling 15 hours – and after causing £35 million worth of damage to the Castle and its treasured contents.

The work of the Restoration Committee, chaired by The Duke of Edinburgh, soon began. The question was whether to restore the rooms

faithfully to replicate their former designs – or to consider alternative designs. The site of the old Private Chapel was transformed into the Lantern Lobby. The room is situated on a corner between the private apartments and state apartments and, due to its location, The Duke suggested the space would be best converted into a Lobby. Gothic inspiration was drawn on to create a stunning space with high arches like those of Ely Cathedral in Cambridgeshire. The columns are made of oak and they resemble mighty curved trees.



The Private Chapel after the fire



The Lantern Lobby today, on the site of the old Private Chapel

The restoration of St George's Hall was a much more difficult task, because the hall has changed in appearance several times throughout its history.



A view of St George's Hall in the 14th Century



St George's Hall in the 17th Century



St George's Hall in the 19th Century

Charles II replaced the steep roof of the 14th-Century hall with an ornate painted ceiling and walls in the Baroque style. George IV's ambitious vision significantly changed the room again in the 19th century, when a new design was conceived, looking back to the Medieval period.

A new hammer beam roof was constructed in the Gothic style, using 350 sustainably sourced English Oak trees. The wood was cut with modern saws but finished with hand tools that would have been used by medieval craftsmen to create an authentic look.



Constructing the hammer beam roof



The roof today



The Crimson Drawing Room in the 19th Century

The decision was taken to restore the Crimson Drawing Room to its appearance in the reign of George IV, but with some necessary changes to the cost – if made in the same way, George IV’s curtains would have cost £600,000 to replace.



The curtains made for George IV



The curtains today

The restoration was completed by a variety of highly skilled master craftsmen. Carved wood, plasterwork, gold leaf and gilding were all repaired in the restoration. A green malachite urn, weighing two tons, withstood the heat of the fire, but when it was filled with water from the hoses this caused all the pieces of Malachite to fall off. Reassembling it must have been like putting together one of the hardest jigsaw puzzles

in the world, but the restorers managed the complex task with just two small pieces missing!



The malachite urn

The restoration of Windsor Castle took five years to complete – and fittingly, its completion coincided with The Queen and The Duke's 25th wedding anniversary on 20 November 1997. The work was funded by the proceeds from opening the State Rooms of Buckingham Palace to the public.