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# London's underground Churchill War Rooms tells secret WWII story

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The entrance to Churchill War Rooms

*Mary Gilbert*

Unlike [Buckingham Palace](#), [Westminster Abbey](#), [Tower Bridge](#) and other easily recognizable icons that comprise [London's](#) skyline, [Churchill War Rooms](#), one of the city's most fascinating historic sites, isn't readily visible.

Rather than scan the horizon, look underground instead.



*Mary Gilbert*

Beneath the Treasury building (formerly the New Public Offices) in Whitehall lies Churchill War Rooms. Hurriedly adapted from the basement storage area in 1938 just prior to the start of [World War II](#), this subterranean warren of rooms and connecting corridors was the emergency working refuge where **Prime Minister Winston Churchill** led Britain's wartime government from 1940-1945.

Churchill War Rooms enabled Churchill, his war cabinet, chiefs of staff and a vast support staff to conduct business in a facility more safeguarded against air attacks. Because it was not a purpose-built bunker, however, a direct hit by a large bomb could have collapsed the building. Other fears included flooding, infiltration by spies or enemy parachutists, and poison gas attack. Secrecy was essential to keep the location safe.

Due to the supremely vital nature of the work, the pressure was great and the hours were long and grueling, especially during the Blitz, when the German Luftwaffe bombed [London](#) for 57 days straight.

Nowadays, Churchill War Rooms is part of the **Imperial War Museum** and is open to the public

for self-guided and private tours. It's a step back in time to a pivotal period in history and the workings of a country determined to defeat Nazi Germany. The rooms are a veritable time capsule, kept as they were during the war when they were in constant use day and night.

Displays of old photographs and informational panels help provide context. A more recent addition to the complex is a museum dedicated to the life and legacy of Churchill, who was twice prime minister.

**The Map Room** was the nerve center of the hidden headquarters. Staff collected and sorted through the latest information about military operations on all fronts and presented it on wall maps and charts for use by government ministers and military strategists. Colored map pins tracked the position of ships, troops and armaments, and are still in place. Color-coded phones, books and various documents remain as well.

There were even secret areas within the secret facility itself. To disguise the true nature of the room where Churchill held private transatlantic phone calls with his ally President Franklin Roosevelt, a fake toilet lock was installed on the door.

Given that Churchill War Rooms was planned for the short-term, accommodations were spartan and services were limited. Buckets and bowls were available for washing. The chemical toilets emitted odors. Rooms were generally smoke-filled, partially contributed by Churchill and his ever-present cigars. Vitamin D deficiencies were common as a result of working underground during long periods of daylight, so people received sunlamp treatments. The noise of the

air supply system was never-ending.

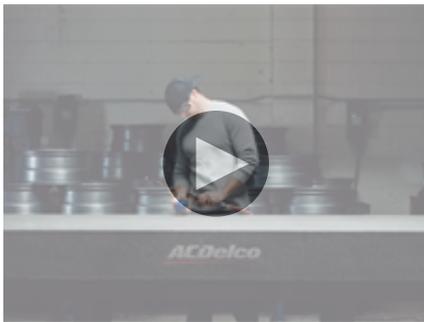
The underground Churchill War Rooms lives on as a unique view of London's secret history during World War II and the bravery and resiliency of its citizens.

### **When you go**

Churchill War Rooms is located at Clive Steps, King Charles Street, London SW1A 2AQ, England. Phone is 020 7930 6961. Check the [website](#) for more information.

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**Mary Gilbert**

Charlotte Travel Examiner

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