



House of Commons

A GUIDE FOR VISITORS  
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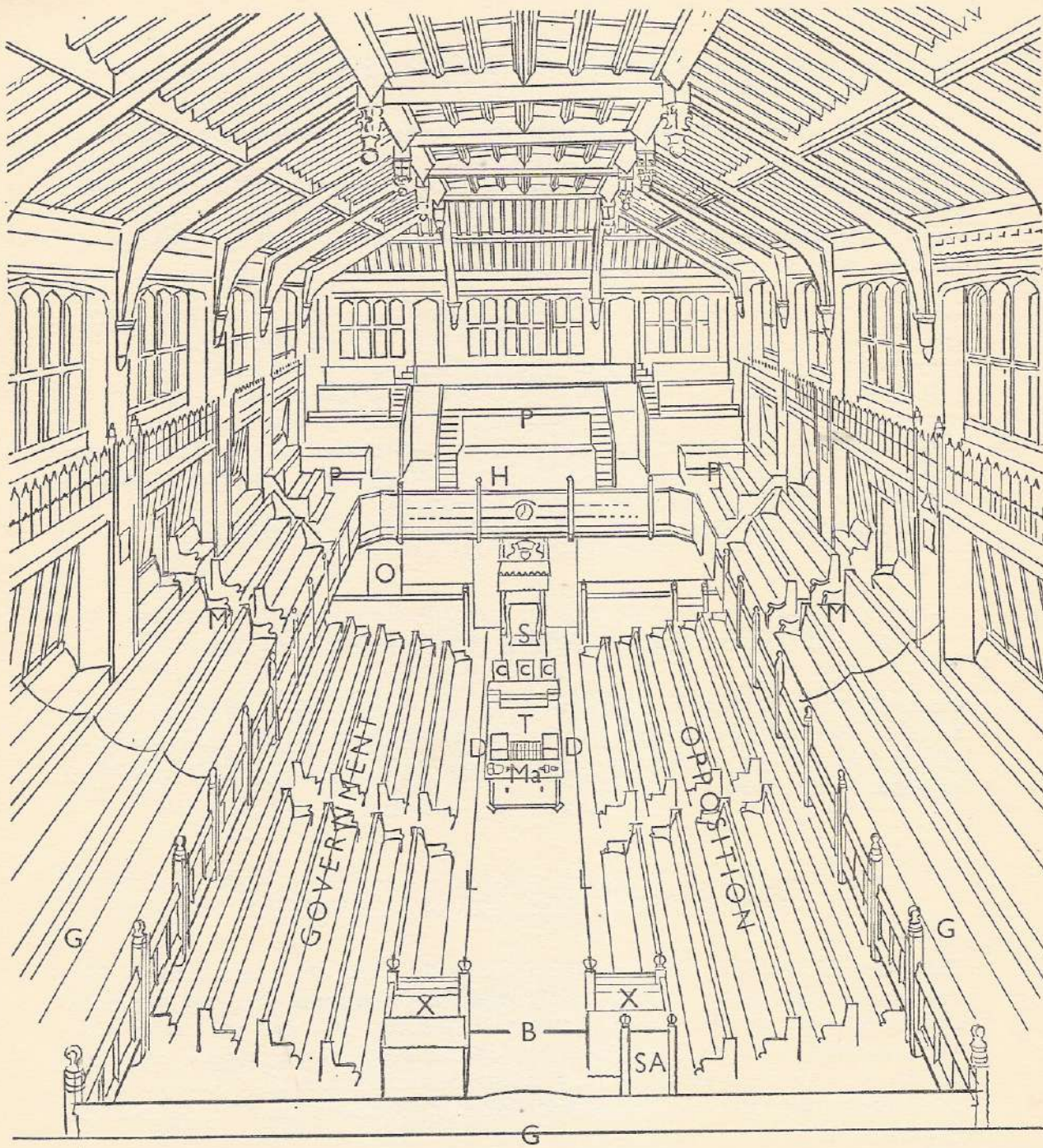
## THE CHAMBER OF THE HOUSE

The present Chamber of the House of Commons was designed by the late Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and was opened in 1950. It replaced the Chamber designed by Sir Charles Barry, first used by the Commons in 1852, and destroyed by German bombing in 1941. The Commons acquired their first permanent home in 1547, when St. Stephen's Chapel was made available, and the chapel was used by the House until 1834, when it was destroyed by the fire which ravaged almost the whole Palace of Westminster. The lower chapel of St. Stephen's survived the fire, and is now known as the 'Crypt Chapel'. St. Stephen's Hall, through which visitors approach the Central Lobby, is on the same site and is the same size as the old Chamber.

In its shape and size the present Chamber is almost a replica of Barry's, though its decoration is less ornate, and larger galleries have been provided for visitors. The general seating arrangements of the House are in effect merely an enlargement of those in use over four hundred years ago in St. Stephen's Chapel, when Members sat in the choir stalls, and the Speaker's Chair stood on the altar steps. There are 630 Members of Parliament; but there is seating accommodation (including the side galleries) for only 437. This restriction is deliberate: the House is not a forum for set orations; its debates are largely conversational in character; and for many of them—highly specialised in theme, or of a routine nature—few Members are present, being engaged on other Parliamentary duties in the Palace of Westminster. Thus, a small and intimate Chamber is more convenient. Conversely, on great occasions, when the House is full and Members have to sit in the gangways, or cluster round the Speaker's Chair, at the Bar and in the side galleries, the drama of Parliament is enhanced, and there is, as Sir Winston Churchill once put it, 'a sense of crowd and urgency'.

*Amplifiers are incorporated in the woodwork in the back of each bench. If visitors lean back slightly rather than lean forward they will be able to hear more clearly.*





*Drawing by John Mansbridge*

**KEY:** S—Mr. Speaker. P—Press Galleries. H—Hansard Reporters. O—Government Officials' Box. C—Clerks of the House (when the House goes into Committee, Mr. Speaker leaves the Chair, and the Chairman sits in the chair of the Clerk of the House, which is the one on the left). T—Table of the House. D—Despatch Boxes. Ma—Mace (when the House goes into Committee, the Mace is put 'below the Table' on hooks). L—Lines over which Members may not step when speaking from the front benches. B—Bar of the House. X—Cross Benches. SA—Serjeant at Arms. M—Members' Galleries. G—Public Galleries.



## ORDER OF BUSINESS

The work of the House of Commons is regulated by an elaborate code of procedure and it is hoped that these notes will make it easier for visitors to follow the proceedings.

The business of the House of which notice is required is set out in the Order Paper given to all visitors. Except on certain days specially reserved for Private (i.e. 'back-bench') Members, the Government determines the order in which the business will be taken, after consultation with the Opposition.

## TIME OF SITTING

When Parliament is in session the House of Commons meets at 2.30 p.m. from Monday to Thursday, and at 11 a.m. on Friday. The proceedings open with Prayers read by Mr. Speaker's Chaplain before the galleries are opened.

*After Prayers* Mr. Speaker takes the Chair and visitors enter the galleries.

## PRIVATE BUSINESS AFTER PRAYERS

Under this first heading on the Order Paper ten minutes are available for certain business, such as the presentation of Petitions by Members and the consideration of Private Bills (set out in the Order Paper). Then (or, if there is no Private Business, immediately after Prayers) follow—

## QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER\*

The names of Members who have Questions on the Order Paper are called by Mr. Speaker. The appropriate Minister, standing at the Government Despatch Box, reads a prepared reply. At Mr. Speaker's discretion, Members may then ask one or more 'supplementary' questions, to which the Minister may reply. Questions on urgent matters of public importance, of which private notice has been given, do not appear on the Order Paper, and may be asked at the end of Question Time if Mr. Speaker has given his consent.

*Note: On Tuesdays and Thursdays the Prime Minister answers Questions at 3.15 p.m. These Questions are numbered Q1, Q2, etc., and are printed at the end of the list of Questions for Oral Answer on the Order Paper.*

\* *There are normally no Questions for Oral Answer on Fridays.*



When Question Time is over, a number of short, although sometimes very important, items may be taken. These are some of the matters which may be raised at this time:

- (a) *Ministerial statements*
- (b) *Business statements.* On Thursdays the Leader of the House informs the House of the business set down for the following week. When the announced arrangements are altered, he takes the earliest opportunity of informing the House.
- (c) *Introduction of new Members*
- (d) *Proposals to move the Adjournment of the House* 'on a definite matter of urgent public importance'. It is the responsibility of Mr. Speaker to rule whether or not the application comes within the appropriate Standing Order. If he rules that it does, the application must have the unanimous approval of the House or, failing that, of at least forty Members. In either case, the Motion is taken at 7 p.m.
- (e) *Ballot for notices of motions.* All back-bench Members may compete in this ballot; the three successful ones give notice of subjects of their own choice to be debated on the day set aside for Private Members' Motions for which the ballot is being held.
- (f) *Matters of Privilege.* Parliamentary Privilege protects Members from interference in their parliamentary duty and forms part of the law of England. A Member who wishes to draw the attention of the House to an alleged breach of Privilege must do so at the earliest opportunity, making a brief explanation of the grounds of his complaint. Mr. Speaker decides (if necessary, after 24 hours' reflection) whether on the face of it a case has been made for giving the complaint priority over the business already set down for that day. If he does so decide, the matter is usually referred at once to the Committee of Privileges.

*Note: Of the miscellaneous items mentioned above, only that described under (e) would appear on the Order Paper.*

## AT THE COMMENCEMENT OF PUBLIC BUSINESS

Under this heading on the Order Paper there may be found—

- (a) *Presentation of Public Bills.* The First Reading of a Bill is purely formal, and cannot be debated or opposed.
- (b) *Government Motions relating to Business*
- (c) (On Tuesdays and Wednesdays only) a Motion for leave to bring in a Bill, familiarly referred to as a '*Ten-Minute Rule*' Bill, since a short explanation of his Bill is allowed to the Member sponsoring it. Another Member may briefly oppose it. The House then decides whether leave should be given for the Bill to be introduced and given a First Reading.



## NOTICES OF MOTIONS AND ORDERS OF THE DAY

Under this heading will be found the principal business of the day (i.e. the main subjects of debate). Mr. Speaker will either call upon the Member in whose name the first Motion stands, or direct the Clerk of the House to read the Orders of the Day.

The business for the day must be completed by 10 p.m. on weekdays (4 p.m. on Fridays) unless it is one of the several exceptions which are known as 'exempted business', or unless the House agrees to a Government motion (to be taken at 10 p.m. without debate) to suspend the Standing Order which regulates the hours of sitting.

## DAILY ADJOURNMENT DEBATE

The subject for this debate will be found on the Order Paper under the items of business set down for the day. The debate on the Adjournment cannot last for more than half an hour after 10 p.m. (4 p.m. on Fridays). It gives Members the opportunity (for which they ballot or are selected by Mr. Speaker) of raising subjects of particular interest to them or their constituents, leaving time for the Minister concerned to make a short reply.

At the end of the Adjournment Debate Mr. Speaker—or the Deputy Speaker—declares the House adjourned, and the Serjeant at Arms removes the Mace from the Table.

## PROCEDURE IN DEBATE

Members are called to speak by Mr. Speaker or, if the House is in Committee, by the Chairman. The Member selected must address the Chair, and must refer to other Members by their constituencies or to a Minister by his office. Thus a Member will open his speech by addressing Mr. Speaker or the Chairman, and will refer to other Members as 'The Right Honourable Member for ———' (if this Member is a Privy Councillor), 'The Honourable and Gallant Member for ———' (if this Member was a serving officer in Her Majesty's Forces), or 'The Honourable and Learned Member for ———' (if this Member is a Queen's Counsel). Other Members are simply referred to as 'The Honourable Member for ———' or, if the Member referred to sits on the same side of the House, 'My Honourable Friend'. Only when the Chair is selecting a Member to address the House is he called by his name and not by that of his constituency.

Members must rise and speak from wherever they are sitting in the House; by custom, only Ministers and members of the Opposition Front Bench may speak from the Despatch Boxes. Only one Member can address the House at the same time, and if the Member who is speaking refuses to 'give way' to another who wishes to interrupt him, the other Member must resume his seat, unless the interrupter rises 'on a point of order'.

Members cannot address the House from 'beyond the Bar', as this is technically 'outside the House', and all interruptions from this source are improper. Members bow to the Chair on entering and leaving the Chamber, in token of the respect of Members for the House of Commons.

Although there are microphones in the Chamber, no proceedings of the House are broadcast or electrically recorded, even within the Palace of Westminster. The proceedings



of the House are recorded *verbatim* by the staff of the Official Report (*Hansard*).<sup>\*</sup> The Journals of the House, which record what the House *decides* and contain no reference to speeches or Questions, are kept by the Clerks at the Table, acting under the authority of Mr. Speaker. A simplified version of the Journal—*The Votes and Proceedings of the House of Commons*—is published daily.

At the beginning of a debate a Member moves a Motion (e.g. 'That this House is of the opinion . . .', or 'That the Bill be now read a Second Time'), and when he sits down the Chair *proposes* the Question in the terms, 'The Question is that ["this House is of the opinion that . . .", or "the Bill be now read a Second Time" etc.,]' and *debate* begins. At the end of the debate† the Chair *puts* the Question to the House, adding, 'As many as are of that opinion say "Aye", the contrary "No" . . .' He then 'collects the voices' and says 'I think the Ayes [or the Noes] have it'. If this view is challenged by Members the order is given to 'Clear the Lobby', and the Members' Lobby is cleared of Strangers. Division bells ring in all parts of the Palace of Westminster used by the Commons.

## DIVISIONS

Members have six minutes in which to reach the appropriate Division Lobby. Two minutes after he has first put the Question Mr. Speaker—or the Chairman—repeats it, and if his opinion is still challenged he names four 'tellers'—two from each side—to count Members as they come out of each Lobby, one of the Tellers loudly calling out the numbers. The exit door for the Aye Lobby is just outside the southern end of the Chamber (beneath the public galleries) between the House and the Members' Lobby: that for the Noes is at the northern end beyond the doors behind Mr. Speaker's Chair.

Six minutes after the Question has first been put, the order is given to 'Lock the doors', and all the entrance doors to the Division Lobbies are locked, so that only those Members who have already entered the Lobbies may vote. The name of each Member voting is recorded by a Clerk and the list is subsequently published in a supplement to the *Votes and Proceedings* and in *Hansard*.

When all Members wishing to vote have done so, the Tellers come to the Table and inform the Clerk of the numbers, and the paper with the numbers is handed to the senior Teller for the winning side. The Tellers line up in front of the Mace—the winning Tellers to the right—bow, advance one step, bow again, and the senior Teller for the winning side reads out the numbers. The paper is then handed to a Clerk standing by the Opposition Despatch Box, who takes it to the occupant of the Chair, who repeats the figures, adding 'So the Ayes [or the Noes] have it'. That is the moment of decision. The House then proceeds to the next business.

If a Member raises a point of order while a Division is in progress he must do so from a seated position, and must wear a hat.

<sup>\*</sup> Named after Mr. T. C. Hansard, who undertook the publication of reports of debates in 1811, and whose family carried on the business for nearly eighty years.

† In theory, there is no time-limit for debate, but the duration of it is usually arranged between the Government and Opposition. Debate may be ended by any Member moving the 'Closure'—i.e. 'That the Question be now put'—and if this is accepted by the Chair no discussion is allowed; if a vote is taken, 100 Members must vote in the majority for the Motion to make it effective. The original Question is then put at once.

