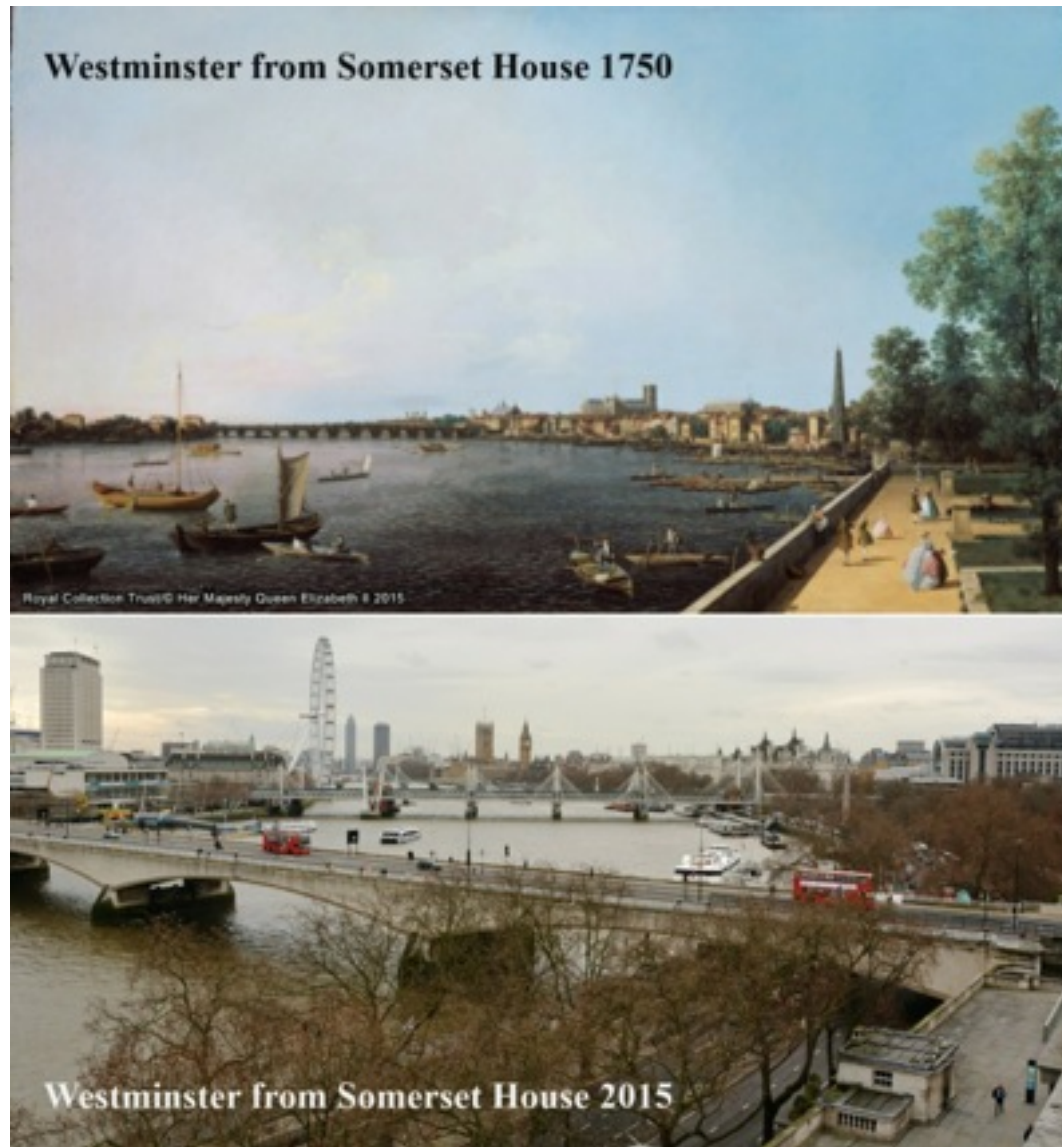


## Then and Now 2 - Westminster from Somerset House



Top Picture - Westminster from Somerset House by Canaletto (1750)

Canaletto (1697-1768) was a landscape painter from Venice. He became a popular artist amongst British aristocracy in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century who had been to Italy on the [Grand Tour](#). In 1746 he came to London and painted these two views of the Thames in about 1750. Because we know that the location for the paintings is [Somerset House](#), it gives us a unique opportunity to compare London in 2015 with London over 260 years earlier from a primary source. The paintings were bought by George III in 1762 from Joseph Smith. They are still in the Royal Collection and form part of the [The First Georgians: Art & Monarchy 1714-1760](#) exhibition at the [Queens Gallery in 2014](#)

Look at both pictures and find these comparative details:

### Canaletto Painting - 1750

- 1: Westminster Bridge had only just been opened in 1750, despite opposition from the watermen and the Corporation of London.
- 2: There has been a church on the site of Westminster Abbey from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. William the Conqueror was crowned there on Christmas Day 1066. All subsequent British Monarchs have been crowned there. The present building was started in 1245 by Henry III.
- 3: Banqueting House was the only surviving part of Whitehall Palace in 1750. It was the main residence of the British Monarch from 1530 until 1698 and became the largest palace in Europe, bigger even than Hampton Court and Versailles. King Charles 1 was beheaded on scaffolding built outside the first floor windows of the Banqueting House in 1649. Two fires in 1691 and 1698 destroyed most of the buildings and it was never used again as a royal palace.
- 4: Whitehall Palace stretched right down to the river and had its own waterworks called York Buildings, built after 1629 but demolished in 1829. The water tower, shown in detail on the right, was made of wood.
- 5: As in the first painting, there are many small boats on the river as well as some larger barges. The [high resolution version](#) of the painting reveals that there are two large ornate state barges being rowed by 16 [Royal Watermen](#).
- 6: 18<sup>th</sup> century costumes. These were probably rich Londoners walking on the river terrace of Somerset House. The Waterman had poorer clothes.
- 7: There were some timber yards on the south bank as Westminster bridge, built of wood, had only just been completed.
- 8: The Palace of Westminster is just visible at the North end of Westminster Bridge. This has been the site of Parliament since about 1259. The building visible in the painting is Westminster Hall, dating back to 1097, built by Rufus I, son of William the Conqueror.



## Photograph - 2015

- 1: The piers of [Westminster Bridge](#) (current version built 1862) are just visible underneath Hungerford Bridge.
- 2: The outline of the towers of [Westminster Abbey](#) are just still visible on the skyline. It remains much the same as when Canaletto painted it in 1750.
- 3: [Banqueting House](#) is still the only surviving part of [Whitehall Palace](#). The House is open to visitors and has a beautiful painted ceiling by Reubens. It is no longer in view having been dwarfed by the government buildings between Whitehall and the river.
- 4: The obelisk in view is [Cleopatra's Needle](#) (shown in detail right). It is probably about 3400 years old and has Egyptian hieroglyphs carved on the side. It was presented to Britain in 1813 by the ruler of Egypt but not erected until 1877, after the [Victoria Embankment](#) was built. It bears a remarkable similarity to the wooden water tower which stood near there in 1750, but that was further back, near the buildings, in what is now the [Embankment Gardens](#)
- 5: There are still tourist and commuter ferries on this stretch of the River Thames.
- 6: Modern clothing of someone walking on the terrace of Somerset House in exactly the same place as in the old painting.
- 7: The [South Bank](#) is now a distinct cultural centre. The dominant structure here is the [London Eye](#), which provides great views over this part of the river and central London.
- 8: The view of the Victoria Tower at the [Palace of Westminster](#), which contains [Big Ben](#) and the Westminster chimes, which is famous all over the World today. Most of the Old Palace of Westminster was destroyed by fire in 1834. The New Palace, the neo-Gothic building we see today, was designed by Sir Charles Barry, with assistance from Augustus Pugin, and finished in 1860. The slightly lower tower of Westminster Abbey can still just be seen to the right of the Victoria Tower.
- 9: This photograph was taken from the roof of Somerset House, looking South-West, towards Westminster Bridge.

