



Introduction to the War Office

The War Office was a **Department of the British Government** responsible for the administration of the **British Army** between 1857 and 1964 when its functions were transferred to the newly-created **Ministry of Defence** (MoD). It was equivalent to the **Admiralty**, responsible for the **Royal Navy** (RN) and, much later, the **Air Ministry** overseeing the **Royal Air Force** (RAF). The name 'War Office' is also given to the former home of the department, located at the junction of Horse Guards Avenue and Whitehall in central London.¹ The Old War Office is the site of the original Palace of Whitehall, home to Henry VIII and other British monarchs before it was mostly destroyed by a fire in 1698.

The landmark building was sold on 1st Mar 2016 by HM Government for more than £350 million on a 250-year lease for conversion into a luxury hotel and residential apartments.



Picture Credit/Attribution: The view looking northwest along Horse Guards Avenue. The War Office itself was abolished in 1964. The design of the building was the subject of a competition in the mid-1890s. The judge was the assistant surveyor for London, John Taylor (1833-1912). He declared the winner to be the Scottish architect William Young, who started work in 1898. Unfortunately, Young died two years later before the design was complete. John Taylor himself, with the assistance of Young's son, Clyde, completed the job, and the building was completed in 1906. The picture is dated 29th July 2010. Source: Flickr: [The Old War Office Building, Whitehall](#). The author is [Robert Cutts](#). This picture file is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic](#) license.

¹ This section, sourced and excerpted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_Office

Before and After 1855

Before 1855, the 'War Office' signified the office of the **Secretary at War**. In the 17th and 18th centuries, several independent offices and individuals were responsible for various aspects of Army administration. The most important were the **Commander-in-Chief of the Forces**, the **Secretary at War**, and the twin **Secretaries of State**, most of whose military responsibilities were passed to a new **Secretary of State for War** in 1794. Others who performed specialist functions were the controller of army accounts, the Army Medical Board, the Commissariat Department, the Board of General Officers, the **Judge Advocate General of the Armed Forces**, the Commissary General of **Muster**, the **Paymaster General of the forces**, and (particularly concerning the **Militia**) the **Home Office**.

The term **War Department** was initially used for the Secretary of State for War; in 1855, the offices of Secretary at War and Secretary of State for War were amalgamated. After that, the terms War Office and War Department were used somewhat interchangeably.

History

The War Office developed from the **Council of War**, an *ad hoc* grouping of the King and his senior military commanders, which managed the **Kingdom of England's** frequent wars and campaigns. The management of the War Office was directed initially by the **Secretary at War**, whose role had originated during the reign of **King Charles II** as the secretary to the **Commander-in-Chief of the Army**. In the latter part of the 17th century, the office of Commander-in-Chief was vacant for several lengths of time, which left the Secretary at War answering directly to the Sovereign; and after that, even when the office of Commander-in-Chief was restored on a more permanent basis, the Secretary at War retained his independence.

The department of the Secretary at War was referred to as the 'Warr Office' (sic) from as early as 1694; its foundation has traditionally been ascribed to **William Blathwayt**, who had accompanied King William III during the Nine Years' War and who, from his appointment as Secretary in 1684, had greatly expanded the remit of his office to cover general day-to-day administration of the Army.

After Blathwayt's retirement in 1704, the Secretary at War became a political office. In political terms, it was a relatively minor government job (despite retaining a continued right of access to the monarch) that dealt with the minutiae of administration rather than grand strategy. The Secretary, who was usually a member of the House of Commons, routinely presented the House with the Army Estimates and occasionally spoke on other military matters as required. He was seen as signifying parliamentary control over the Army in symbolic terms. Issues of strategic policy during wartime were managed by the Northern and Southern Departments (the predecessors of today's Foreign Office and Home Office).

From 1704 to 1855, the job of Secretary remained occupied by a minister of the second rank (although he was occasionally part of the Cabinet after 1794). Many of his responsibilities were transferred to the Secretary of State for War after the creation of that more senior post in 1794 (though the latter was also responsible for Britain's colonies from 1801 and renamed Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, an arrangement which only ceased with the establishment of the Colonial Office in 1854).

From 1824, the **British Empire** (except India, which was administered separately by the **East India Company** and what was then the **India Office**) was divided by the War and Colonial Office into several administrative departments.

In February 1855, the new Secretary of State for War was additionally commissioned as Secretary at War, thus giving the Secretary of State oversight of the War Office and his own department. The same procedure was followed for each of his successors until the office of Secretary at War was abolished altogether in 1863.

Board of Ordnance

In 1855, the **Board of Ordnance** was abolished due to its perceived poor performance during the **Crimean War**. This powerful independent body, dating from the 15th century, had been directed by the **Master-General of the Ordnance**, usually a very senior military officer who (unlike the Secretary at War) was often a member of the Cabinet.

The Crimean War

The disastrous campaigns of the Crimean War resulted in the consolidation of all administrative duties in 1855 as subordinate to the Secretary of State for War, a Cabinet job. However, he was not solely responsible for the Army as the Commander-in-Chief had a virtually equal degree of responsibility. This was reduced in theory by **the reforms** introduced by **Edward Cardwell** in 1870, which subordinated the Commander-in-Chief to the Secretary for War. In practice, however, a considerable amount of influence was retained by the exceedingly conservative Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal **Prince George, 2nd Duke of Cambridge**, who had the job between 1856 and 1895. His resistance to reform caused military efficiency to lag well behind Britain's rivals, a problem that became obvious during the **Second Boer War**. The situation was only remedied in 1904 when the job of Commander-in-Chief was abolished and replaced with that of the **Chief of the General Staff**, which was replaced by the position of **Chief of the Imperial General Staff** in 1908. An **Army Council** was created with a format similar to that of the **Board of Admiralty**, directed by the Secretary of State for War, and an **Imperial General Staff** was established to coordinate Army administration. The creation of the Army Council was recommended by the War Office (Reconstitution) Committee and formally appointed by **Letters Patent**² and by **Royal Warrant**³.

First World War through to 1964

The management of the War Office was hampered by endless disputes between the civilian and military parts of the organisation. The government of **H. H. Asquith** attempted to resolve this during the **First World War** by appointing **Lord Kitchener** as Secretary for War. During his tenure, the **Imperial General Staff** was virtually dismantled. Its role was replaced effectively by the **Committee of Imperial Defence**, which debated broader military issues.

The War Office decreased significantly in importance after the First World War, emphasised by the drastic reductions of its staff numbers during the inter-war period. Its responsibilities and funding were also reduced. In 1936, the government of **Stanley Baldwin** appointed a Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, who was not part of the War Office. When **Winston Churchill** became Prime Minister in 1940, he bypassed the War Office altogether and appointed himself Minister of Defence (though there was, curiously, no **ministry of defence** until 1947). **Clement Attlee** continued this arrangement when he came to power in 1945. In 1964, the present form of the **Ministry of Defence** was established, unifying the War Office, the Admiralty, and the Air Ministry.

The Building

As early as 1718, letters from the Secretary at War were addressed from 'The War Office'. His department had had several London homes until it settled at **Horse Guards** in **Whitehall** during 1722, where it was to remain until 1858. Then, following the dissolution of the Board of Ordnance, the War Office moved into the Board's former offices in **Cumberland House, Pall Mall**; over the ensuing years, it expanded into adjacent properties on Pall Mall, before finally being relocated to purpose-built accommodation in what is now known as the Old War Office Building in 1906.

Between 1906 and its abolition in 1964, the War Office was based in a sizeable **neo-Baroque** building, designed by **William Young** and completed during 1906, located on Horse Guards Avenue at its junction with **Whitehall** in central London. The construction of the War Office building required five years to complete, at what was then a considerable cost of more than £1.2 million.

² Dated 8th February 1904

³ Dated 12th February 1904

The War Office and Conversion to Luxury Homes and a Raffles Hotel

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club

The building is somewhat oddly shaped, cleverly forming a **trapezoid** shape to maximise the usage of the irregularly-shaped plot of land on which it was built. It had around 1,100 rooms on seven floors. The striking architecture of the facade was in tune with the new Imperialism of the 1880s with its four domed turrets.

After 1964, the building continued to be used by the **Ministry of Defence** by the name *Old War Office*. On 1st June 2007, the building (other than the steps that give access to it) was designated as a protected site for the purposes of Section 128 of the **Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005**. The Act's effect made it a specific criminal offence for anybody to **trespass** into the building.

In August 2013, it was announced that the building would be sold on the open market.⁴

Conversion to Luxury Flats and Raffles Hotel



Picture Source: [How the Old War Office was Reimagined as a New London Landmark](#), Courtesy of Grain, London.

Introduction

The 760,000 sq ft development of the Old War Office Building, a Grade II* listed building in Whitehall, London SW1, will bring the Old War Office back into use, creating a luxury world-class 5-star Raffles Hotel and 85 luxury apartments. Works will include developing a six-storey basement and constructing a three-storey roof extension. Conversion, comprising 125 guest rooms and the 85 apartments, is to the designs of EPR Architects.⁵

⁴ The sale was completed on 1st Mar 2016 for more than £350 million, on a 250-year lease, to the Hinduja Group and OHL Developments for 'conversion to a luxury hotel, possibly to be called the OWO Hotel and residential apartments'.

⁵ See: <https://www.buildington.co.uk/london-sw1/whitehall/old-war-office-building/id/3281>

The Building

The Grade II Listed Old War Office Building was completed in 1906 and had around 1,100 rooms across seven floors, linked by more than two miles of corridors. The building was a focal point for military planning throughout the major conflicts of the 20th century, housing numerous Secretaries of State, including Sir Winston Churchill.

The OWO Residences by Raffles

The duplex, lateral and penthouse residences range in size from studios to 5-bedroom homes. Two spectacular turret residences are also for sale. Each residence is unique and tailored to suit its location in the building. With ceiling heights in the homes that reach over 12 feet and full-length windows, the interior proportions reflect classic Edwardian architecture that has been adapted for modern living. The homes feature interiors created by design studio *1508 London* with bespoke handcrafted kitchens from British brand *Smallbone of Devizes*, *Waterworks brass ironmongery*, and *Onyx marble*. Many homes incorporate original heritage features such as oak panelling and mosaic flooring.⁶

Charlie Walsh, head of residential sales at *The OWO*, said: "The key attraction at *The OWO Residences* over, say, a standalone home, will be the five-star, turnkey service delivered by Raffles, one of the world's leading luxury hotel brands. Residents will have 24/7 access to the hotel, as well as their own collection of dedicated amenities designed exclusively for them."⁷

Raffles Hotel OWO

Homeowners will benefit from having all the facilities of a world-renowned hotel on their doorstep without having to compromise on the highest levels of privacy and seclusion within their homes. Raffles Hotels & Resorts will be operating the 125-room and suite flagship hotel at *The OWO*, as well as the 85 branded residences. New York-based designer Thierry Despont is designing the hotel interiors. Once complete at the end of 2022, the former Old War Office will span 760,000 square feet comprising 85 branded residences, 120 hotel rooms and suites, nine restaurants and bars, amenity offerings, and a spa. Visit the website: [HERE](#).

The Developer

The conversion is a development by 57 Whitehall Limited - a joint venture between Hinduja Group and OHL Desarrollos. Developer Hinduja Group is an international multi-billion turnover group founded in 1914 and passionately committed to the building since its acquisition in 2014. The company has worked with experts, including *Historic England* and the *Museum of London Archaeology*.



Picture Credit: "London 2017 2017-06-25 (21)" by diannroy.com is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0

Recommended Reading

"*The Old War Office Building: A History*", published by the Ministry of Defence, is available as a pdf, [HERE](#).

⁶ Source: Archdaily. [HERE](#).

⁷ Reported in Forbes, [HERE](#).