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Tower of London

The Tower of London and Dover Castle were the strongest castles of medieval England. There are those who would put Dover first and London second, but this is a matter of preference. Both castle retain their majesty in spite of extensive later mutilation. It must be admitted that Dover makes the most of its glorious position; whereas the Tower derives no advantages from its site.

Squatting on the north bank of the Thames, and now overshadowed by the glass skyscrapers of the City, the grandeur of the complex is not immediately apparent. Nevertheless, its sheer size-eighteen acres-cannot fail to impress and the majestic keep and concentric curtains are visible from all directions. The prime role of the Tower was to overawe the defiant citizens of the capital. This may seem less strategic than Dover's coastal defense, but English kings generally had more to fear from their own subjects than from external attack. One claim can never be denied. That is the fact that, in terms of historic intensity, the Tower has no equal.

The interior of the White Tower is somewhat obscured by the vast array of arms and armor on display. This magnificent collection recalls one of the chief functions of the Tower of London as its use as a palace declined - that of arsenal and armory for the realm. Until 1812, it housed the mint and the Crown Jewels are still entrusted to the Tower's safe keeping.

Above all, the Tower is celebrated for the sinister events arising from its use as a prison for illustrious captives, many of who languished here en route to the block. Indeed, imprisonment within the Tower, and decapitation on Tower Hill, were jealously guarded privileges of the nobility. A list of victims reads like a roll call of tragic heroes and villains.