Westminster Abbey
Learning

Elizabeth I's reign and legacy: a four-minute film - teachers' notes

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this five-question survey.

Watch the film here: https://youtu.be/M1WKR2IxjGM

Follow-up discussion questions

After watching this short film, your students could debate one of these questions verbally or provide a written response for homework.

- Elizabeth I's effigy is white marble but originally she was wearing an ermine lined crimson robe and coloured dress, the orb was blue and her face had flesh colouring. The lions were also gilded (covered thinly with gold). No trace of this colour now remains, but what difference would this make to your impression and interpretation of her tomb?

- Elizabeth I carefully controlled her image. Consider how the effigy compares to other images of her. Why might there be differences?

- Elizabeth I's body was moved from the main Lady Chapel in 1606 by James VI/I into the smaller side chapel. Some suggestions are made in the film; why do you think this might have been the case?

- Using your contextual knowledge explain why you think Mary I and Elizabeth I's joint tomb only has an effigy of Elizabeth?

- Mary, Queen of Scots was buried in Peterborough Cathedral in 1587. What do you think the intention was when James VI/I had her body moved to Westminster Abbey in 1612?

- The full Latin inscription around Elizabeth I's tomb reads:

  To the eternal memory of Elizabeth queen of England, France and Ireland, daughter of King Henry VIII, grand-daughter of King Henry VII, great-grand-daughter to King Edward IV. Mother of her country, a nursing-mother to religion and all liberal sciences, skilled in many languages, adorned with excellent endowments both of body and mind, and excellent for princely virtues beyond her sex. James, king of Great Britain, France and Ireland, hath devoutly and justly erected this monument to her whose virtues and kingdoms he inherits.

© 2026 Dean and Chapter of Westminster

Sacred to memory: Religion to its primitive purity restored, peace settled, money restored to its just value, domestic rebellion quelled, France relieved when involved with intestine divisions; the Netherlands supported; the Spanish Armada vanquished; Ireland almost lost by rebels, eased by routing the Spaniard; the revenues of both universities much enlarged by a Law of Provisions; and lastly, all England enriched. Elizabeth, a most prudent governor 45 years, a victorious and triumphant Queen, most strictly religious, most happy, by a calm and resigned death at her 70th year left her mortal remains, till by Christ's Word they shall rise to immortality, to be deposited in the Church [the Abbey], by her established and lastly founded. She died the 24th of March, Anno 1602 [this is Old Style dating, now called 1603], of her reign the 45th year, of her age the 70th.

Using your understanding of the historical context, assess how convincing this description is in relation to Elizabeth I.

- Elizabeth I's legacy is independent from that of her Tudor family. To what extend do you agree?

- To what extent can Elizabeth I's legacy be seen in Westminster Abbey? Consider the different ways a monarch can impact how we perceive a period of history.

Transcript

Westminster Abbey is the final resting place of Elizabeth I, the last of the Tudors.

I'm standing in the Lady Chapel, at the east end of Westminster Abbey. This chapel was built by Elizabeth's grandfather, King Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch. And there are Tudor symbols everywhere, including the Tudor rose, the Beaufort portcullis and other emblems. Henry VII cared deeply about the security of his dynasty; he believed that burial amongst medieval English kings here at Westminster Abbey gave his family legitimacy.

Originally Elizabeth was buried here, next to her grandparents Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, and near to her brother Edward VI. Her body was later moved; let's see where her tomb lies today.

In this small space is the tomb of Elizabeth I, but she is not alone. Her elder sister Mary is buried directly below Elizabeth. Mary has no effigy, only this difficult to read marker: *Partners both in throne and grave, here rest we two sisters, Elizabeth and Mary, in the hope of the Resurrection.*

But in life they were not always partners - in fact they were often divided. Following their father Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church, Elizabeth was raised a Protestant whilst Mary remained a devout Catholic. As queen, Mary even had Elizabeth imprisoned for a short time. Do you think they would be pleased that they are buried together?

Let's look more closely at the life size white marble effigy of Elizabeth. The sculpture was based on portraits of Elizabeth in later life. She is wearing grand Tudor clothing, draped with pearls – a symbol of virginity. On her head sits a crown, and in her hands an orb and sceptre. These objects emphasise that she was wedded to her role as monarch. She is surrounded by lions, symbols of power, bravery and kingship.

© 2026 Dean and Chapter of Westminster

Above the inscription begins: *To the eternal memory of Elizabeth queen of England, France and Ireland, daughter of King Henry VIII, grand-daughter of King Henry VII, great-grand-daughter to King Edward IV. Mother of her country...*

This inscription is yet another reminder of the powerful Tudor legacy she continued but it is also a reminder that Elizabeth was 'mother of her country' rather than mother of any children of her own.

Her successor was James Stuart, who was already King James VI of Scotland and who later became James I of England. It was James who moved Elizabeth's body out of the main Tudor vault and into this space. And this was not the only change James made. He also organised for the body of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, Elizabeth I's rival cousin, to be brought to the Abbey and re-buried. James commissioned this much larger tomb for his mother, costing three times that of Elizabeth's tomb. It is covered in symbols of Scottish royalty - thistles and unicorns.

So the two queens lie in parallel, equidistant from their joint ancestor, Henry VII. Was James trying to make a statement about Elizabeth's betrayal of Mary, Queen of Scots or was he trying to illustrate his dynastic inheritance, just as his great-great grandfather Henry VII did in this same space?

We often learn about Elizabeth I in isolation. But here, where she is buried above her sister, opposite her cousin, and close to her grandparents, she is placed firmly in the context of her family who cared so much about legacy.

And we can see Elizabeth's legacy everywhere - in her courtiers, explorers and writers who are remembered here as people who defined the Elizabethan age. Her legacy is in the very essence of this church; we see the impact of her religious settlement and the establishment of the Church of England through the services held here every day.

Within Westminster Abbey, Elizabeth is remembered for both the dynasty she ended and the legacy she left behind.

© 2026 Dean and Chapter of Westminster