Greenwich

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Greenwich, located on the River Thames in southeast London, has played a pivotal role in British and global history, its significance stretches from royal heritage and maritime power to scientific discovery and international timekeeping.

In the 15th century, Greenwich became a royal borough when King Henry VII built the Palace of Placentia. This palace later served as the birthplace of notable Tudor monarchs, including Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. During the height of the Tudor dynasty, Greenwich was a centre of court life, diplomacy, and culture. Although the palace was eventually demolished, its legacy endures in the Royal Naval College, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, which now stands on the same site.

Greenwich rose to further prominence in the 17th and 18th centuries as a hub of naval power. The Royal Naval Hospital, later converted into the Royal Naval College, was central to Britain’s maritime dominance. This reinforced Greenwich as both a practical and symbolic centre of naval strength at a time when the British Empire expanded across the globe.

Equally important is Greenwich’s contribution to science and navigation. In 1675, King Charles II founded the Royal Observatory there, with the aim of improving navigation at sea. This site became the birthplace of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and the Prime Meridian line, established in 1884 as the universal standard for measuring longitude. From this point, the world’s clocks and maps were synchronised, cementing Greenwich’s global importance.

In 1675, King Charles II established the **Royal Observatory at Greenwich**, appointing John Flamsteed as the first Astronomer Royal. Its purpose was to improve navigation at sea by creating accurate star charts and methods for determining longitude. Since longitude (east–west position) was difficult to calculate, a fixed reference point was needed. The instruments in the Greenwich Observatory were aligned along a line running north–south — which later became the Greenwich Meridian.

Navigational Importance

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the British Navy and merchant fleet relied heavily on Greenwich charts and tables, particularly the **Nautical Almanac** (first published in 1767). Because Britain was the dominant global maritime power, these charts became the de facto standard for sailors worldwide. Over time, Greenwich’s meridian was used more widely than any other.

International Adoption

By the late 19th century, different countries used different prime meridians (Paris, Washington D.C., Berlin, and others). This created confusion in navigation, trade, and telegraphy. In 1884, the **International Meridian Conference** was held in Washington D.C. Delegates from 25 nations voted to adopt the Greenwich Meridian as the world's Prime Meridian. The reasons were practical:

- Over two-thirds of the world's ships already used Greenwich-based charts.
- Britain's global influence made it the most logical choice.

Legacy

From that point, the Greenwich Meridian (0° longitude) became the universal reference for maps and timekeeping. Alongside it, **Greenwich Mean Time (GMT)** became the basis for the world's standard time zones.

So, Greenwich's role as the Prime Meridian's home grew from a **royal scientific project**, strengthened by **maritime dominance**, and was ultimately **ratified by international consensus**.

An interesting fact is that a ball drop was used to denote the time. This ball would drop at one o'clock every afternoon, allowing the captains of nearby ships to precisely set their chronometers. The first "time-ball" was installed atop England's Royal Observatory at Greenwich in 1833. Around 150 public time-balls are believed to have been installed around the world after the success at Greenwich, though few survive and still work. The tradition is carried on today in places like the United States Naval Observatory in Washington, DC, where a time-ball descends from a flagpole at noon each day – and of course, once a year in Times Square, where it marks the stroke of midnight not for a few ships' captains, but for over one billion people watching worldwide.

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