The Bank’s mission

The Bank of England is the central bank of the United Kingdom.

Sometimes known as ‘the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street’, the Bank was founded in 1694 during a period of economic turbulence, in order to ‘promote the public good and benefit of our people’ by acting as the Government’s banker and debt manager.

The Bank Charter was sealed on 27 July 1694, and the Bank opened for business shortly after.

William III By Henry Cheere

William III was the monarch at the time of the Bank’s founding in 1694. This statue was commissioned by the Bank and unveiled in its new premises in Threadneedle Street on 1 January 1735.

Originally established as a privately owned institution, the Bank was nationalised on 1 March 1946, but retained its broad – but largely informal – public service mission.

Although the Bank’s role and responsibilities have evolved and expanded since its foundation, its mission today remains true to its original purpose: to promote the good of the people of the United Kingdom by maintaining monetary and financial stability.

In 2013, a new legal framework governing the Bank of England conferred greater statutory duties on the Bank than at any time in its history. The Bank needs to be understood, credible and trusted so that its policies are effective. The Bank is therefore committed to being transparent, independent and accountable to stakeholders.
The Bank today

The Bank’s mission to maintain monetary and financial stability is overseen, in the first instance, by the Bank’s Governors.

Responsibility is shared between three main bodies: the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), the Financial Policy Committee (FPC) and the Prudential Regulation Committee (PRC). As well as senior Bank staff, the MPC, FPC and PRC include external members to ensure that thinking and expertise in addition to that gained inside the Bank of England is considered.

Monetary stability

Monetary stability means stable prices and confidence in the currency.

The Bank has been issuing banknotes for more than 300 years. During this time, both the notes themselves and their role in society have undergone continual change. The Bank is responsible for providing banknotes that the public can use with the confidence that they are genuine. Maintaining confidence in the currency is a key role of the Bank and one which is essential to the proper functioning of the economy.

The Prudential Regulation Authority
Monetary Policy Committee (MPC)

The Bank of England Act 1998 delegated responsibility for formulating monetary policy to the Bank’s Monetary Policy Committee. The Act sets out that the monetary policy objective is to deliver price stability and, subject to that, to support the Government’s economic objectives including those for growth and employment.

Stable prices are defined by the Government’s inflation target, which the Bank seeks to meet through the decisions delegated to the MPC. The MPC meets regularly to monitor developments in the economy so it can set the interest rate and adjust the amount of money in the economy to meet the Government’s target.

Financial stability

Financial stability requires an efficient flow of funds in the economy and confidence in financial institutions.

The Financial Services Act 2012 established an independent Financial Policy Committee and the Prudential Regulation Authority as part of the Bank.

Financial Policy Committee (FPC)

The FPC’s primary role is to identify, monitor, and take action to remove or reduce risks that threaten the resilience of the UK financial system as a whole. The Committee has a secondary objective to support the economic policy of the Government, including its objectives for growth and employment.

Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA)

The PRA is responsible for the supervision of banks, building societies and credit unions, insurers and major investment firms. In total the PRA regulates around 1,700 financial firms. The PRA has two primary objectives – to promote the safety and soundness of these firms and, for insurers, to secure protection for policyholders. It also has a secondary objective to facilitate effective competition. The PRA focuses on the harm that financial firms can cause to the stability of the UK financial system. The most significant supervisory decisions are taken by the Prudential Regulation Committee.

A stable financial system is one in which firms continue to provide critical financial services to the economy – a precondition for a healthy and successful economy.
Early years

The Bank spent its earliest years in rented premises, first in the Mercers’ Hall (1694–95) and then in the Grocers’ Hall (1695–1734). During this time, the business of the Bank took place in the main hall of this building, but the Directors met and made their decisions in the small private rooms, or ‘parlours’. It is likely that the term ‘Parlours’, which is nowadays used for that area of the Bank where Governors and Directors have their offices and hold their meetings, originates from this time.

18th century

In 1734, the Bank moved to its own purpose-built premises on the site of the house in Threadneedle Street of Sir John Houblon, who had been the Bank’s first Governor. The building was designed by the little-known architect George Sampson.

As the Bank’s business grew, so did its buildings. From 1765 to 1788, Sir Robert Taylor, a sculptor who turned to architecture later in life, extended the Threadneedle Street façade of the Bank. The east wing was completed first, and after the demolition of the church of St Christopher-le-Stocks, the west wing, which included the Court Room and the Committee Room, was added.

19th century

In 1788, Sir John Soane was appointed ‘Architect and Surveyor’ to the Bank, a post he held for over 40 years. By 1828, Soane had completed the expansion of the Bank, filling the present 3.25 acre site and surrounding it with an immense curtain wall. His Bank of England building became a landmark distinguished for its architecture as well as its functions. The Bank remained little changed through the rest of the 19th and 20th centuries.
The modern Bank

By the 1920s it was clear that the Bank required larger premises, and Sir Herbert Baker was engaged as the architect for a complete rebuilding of the Bank. Demolition began in 1925. To ensure that business could carry on as usual, the Bank was divided into sectors with each demolished and rebuilt in turn. Sir John Soane’s outer curtain wall was retained.

Two rooms were also retained in a reconstructed form – the Court Room and the Committee Room. Both date from between 1767 and 1774 and were designed by the architect Sir Robert Taylor. Baker moved these from the ground floor to the first floor, and most of the original features were incorporated into the reconstruction.

During the rebuilding, only the best materials, artists and craftsmen were employed: limestone from the Hopton Wood quarry in Derbyshire for the interior; Portland stone for the exterior; and bronze for the external doors, window frames and the internal doors in all public areas. Among those involved with the internal decoration were the sculptor Charles Wheeler, and Boris Anrep the Russian mosaic artist.

The new building, the one we occupy today, was finally completed in 1939.
On each of the two bronze doors at the imposing main entrance of the Bank in Threadneedle Street is a caduceus – the staff of Mercury, the patron saint of bankers. One door shows the symbol of the old means of communication – a sailing ship. The other shows the symbol of the new – electricity.

Lions are the traditional guardians of a treasure house and they decorate the Bank in many forms. They appear in bronze on doors and windows and in plaster and stone on interior and exterior walls.

Mosaics
The mosaics were laid by Boris Anrep, a Russian, whose work can also be seen in the National Gallery and Westminster Cathedral. Throughout the ground floor corridors, the mosaic design themes are mainly of coins from Roman times until 1928, and of trade, including the Roman god Mercury’s caduceus, symbols of communication and cornucopiae.

St George
A mosaic depicting St George slaying the dragon from the reverse of the Henry VIII George Noble coin (1526).
Front hall, mosaics and cantilever staircase

Mycenaean lions

The central mosaic in the inner vestibule depicts two lions modelled from those which guarded the royal treasury of the ancient city of Mycenae in Greece. At the feet of the lions the south coast of England can be seen, and a small red tile marks the village of Cobham in Kent, the birthplace and home of the architect, Sir Herbert Baker.
War memorials

The engraved rolls of honour show names of Bank staff who served in the armed forces during:

– 1914–18 First World War
  All Bank staff who served in the war; those who died are marked with a gold cross.

– 1939–45 Second World War
  Bank staff who died during the war.

Cantilever staircase and Roman mosaic

When constructed, this cantilever staircase, at 165 feet, was reputed to have been the longest in Europe. At the foot, the architect, Sir Herbert Baker, placed a 2nd century Roman pavement uncovered during the rebuilding in 1925–39.
Garden Court has its origins in the churchyard of St Christopher-le-Stocks, which was marked for demolition in 1781 to make way for the expansion of the Bank. One of the conditions attached to the Act of Parliament permitting the demolition of the church was that its graveyard should remain undisturbed; and so it was until the interwar rebuilding by Sir Herbert Baker.

Most of the sculpture is by Charles Wheeler and includes Lord Norman (Governor 1920–44) and Charles Montagu, 1st Earl of Halifax (1661–1715), Chancellor of the Exchequer to William III.

The four mulberry trees are reminders of the origins of paper money: the earliest form of paper money was produced in China in the 7th century and printed on paper made of beaten mulberry bark.

**War memorial**

St Christopher with the infant Christ by Richard Goulden is the Bank’s memorial to the two world wars.
Ground floor Ante-room and first floor landing

William Paterson, a founder of the Bank, by Charles Wheeler

The motto ‘Sic Vos Non Vobis’ is associated with Paterson and now more generally with public service. Its loose translation is ‘Thus you labour, but not for yourselves’ and epitomises the philosophy of a central bank.

Brussels tapestry

This late 16th century Brussels tapestry, believed to represent the meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, was presented to the Bank in 1946 by the Banque Nationale de Belgique in recognition of services and hospitality given to their representatives during the Second World War.

Above the colonnade are some examples of the changes to Britannia through the years. Britannia has been on every Bank of England note since 1694.
Ante-room

The Ante-room is primarily used as a reception area. Much of the furniture in this room dates from the late 18th century.

Dividend Day at the Bank of England (George Elgar Hicks, 1859) shows a throng of stockholders collecting their dividends in one of the public offices built by Sir John Soane.

The Terrestrial globe from 1806 shows evidence of new mappings being pasted onto it as exploration expanded the limits of the known world.
Designed by Sir Robert Taylor between 1767 and 1774, the Committee Room was reconstructed by Sir Herbert Baker during the rebuilding of the Bank (1925–39) when he altered and simplified some of the decoration. Originally used for the meetings of the various Standing Committees whose members were drawn from the Bank's Court of Directors, today it is used for various meetings including those of the Bank’s Monetary Policy Committee.
Court Room

Designed by Sir Robert Taylor between 1767 and 1774, the Court Room was reconstructed by Sir Herbert Baker during the rebuilding of the Bank (1925–39) when he altered and simplified some of the decoration, although most of the original features are incorporated in this reconstruction. It was originally intended to accommodate the weekly meetings of the Court of Directors, the Bank’s governing body, but today is used for other meetings and official functions.

This room abounds with symbolism such as the winged head of Mercury, the Roman god often associated with trade and commerce, his magic wand or caduceus and, above the doors to the Committee Room, griffons guard the mythical pile of gold at the Earth’s centre.

The wind-dial
Electronically controlled today, it is a reproduction of the one originally installed in 1805 as an aid to forecasting the arrival of merchant shipping in the Port of London and its consequent effect on market rates, commodity prices and so on.

The clock
designed by Sir Robert Taylor (1771) with the works by Edward Tutet (who became Master of the Clockmakers Company in 1786).

The perfume burners
by Matthew Boulton (1780) who, together with James Watt, was the first in the world to employ steam power in the production of coin.

The Wilton carpet,
laid in May 1939, broadly reflects the pattern of the plasterwork on the ceiling, a common 18th century feature.

The mahogany ballot box
was designed by Sir John Soane for use by the Bank’s Court of Directors. Its form is that of a miniature ancient Greek temple with a roof made of palm leaves.

When in use, it allowed a voter to cast their ballot in secret by reaching inside and dropping a small wooden ball to either the left side for ‘yes’, or right for ‘no’. The two drawers, lined with baize to muffle the noise, could be removed in order to count the number of balls – hence votes – in each direction.
To find out more about the history and the work of the Bank:

Visit the Museum: Discover the history of the Bank, its buildings, and the people who have shaped it over more than 300 years. Check our website for details of our talks, presentations, tours and events.

Visit the Bank’s website:
www.bankofengland.co.uk

YouTube
Watch our film about the work of the Bank ‘Keeping on an even keel’, and see so much more on our YouTube channel:
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Monday to Friday (last entry 4.30pm)
Closed on weekends and Bank Holidays (except for special events)
Free entry

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