

# A walk from Clerkenwell to Islington

**Updated:** 16 July 2019

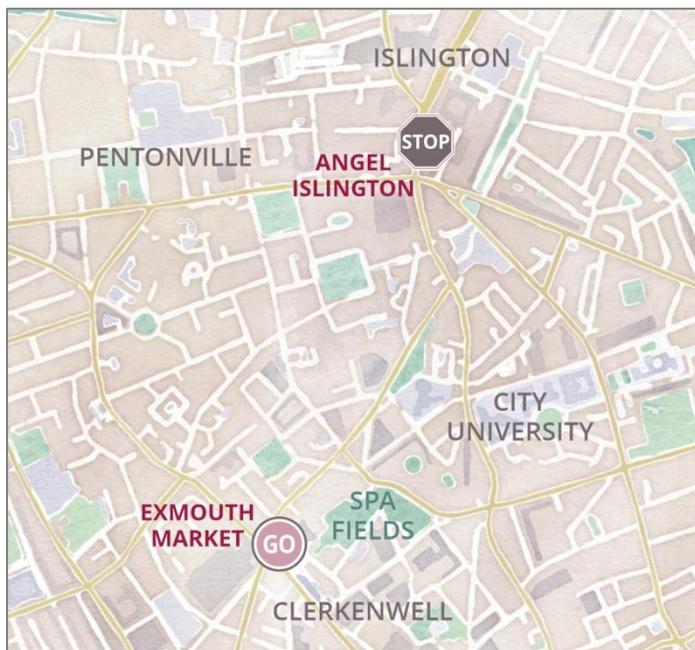
**Length:** About 1¾ miles

**Duration:** Around 2 hours

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WALK

Exmouth Market, Finsbury Town Hall, New River Head, Sadler's Wells, Myddleton Square and St Mark's Church, Pentonville Road, The Angel, Islington Tunnel, Camden Passage, Business Design Centre.

Please note – this walk can also be done as an extension to the Farringdon to Clerkenwell walk.



## GETTING HERE

### Coming by bus

There are a number of bus routes that serve the area, including:

**Number 19** – from Battersea and other points south of the river, Hyde Park Corner, Piccadilly Circus, Cambridge Circus.

**Number 38** – from Victoria, Piccadilly Circus, Cambridge Circus, Gray's Inn Road.

**Number 63** – from Blackfriars, Newgate Street (Old Bailey/City Thameslink station)

Farringdon Station.

**Number 341** – Waterloo, Aldwych (Somerset House), Holborn.

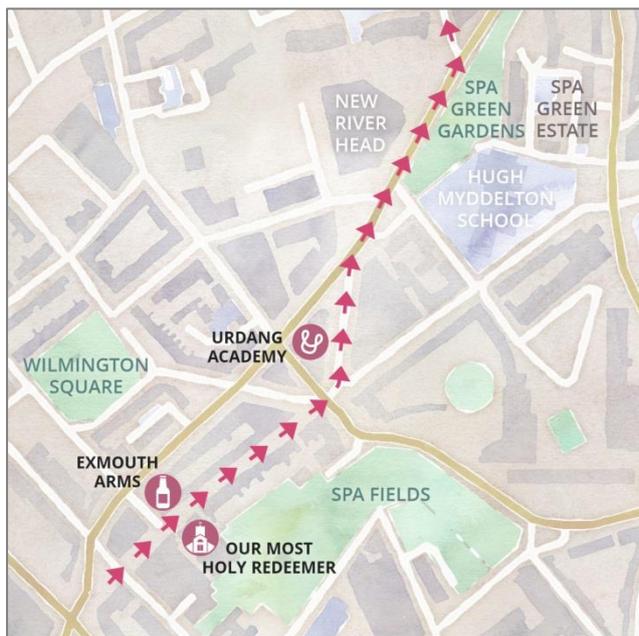
If you intend to travel here by bus, you may wish to use TfL's journey planner before you set off: [tfl.gov.uk/plan-a-journey/](https://tfl.gov.uk/plan-a-journey/).

### By tube

The closest tube station is **Farringdon** (on the Circle, Hammersmith & City and Metropolitan lines). From there it's a 10–15 minute walk (just under half a mile).

Assuming you're exiting via the old part of the station, turn to the left. After twenty yards turn left up **Turnmill Street**, which runs up alongside the station. (It is so named because of the watermills that used to operate here. These were powered by the River Fleet, which now runs under the adjacent Farringdon Road.)

Continue on up **Farringdon Lane**, passing the **Betsey Trotwood** pub on your left – it's built directly over top of the railway lines. Carry on walking straight ahead up Farringdon Road until you reach the top of the gradient, and **Exmouth Market** is just before the traffic lights at the junction with Rosebery Avenue. Then turn right along Exmouth Market and pick up the walk as below.



Route map 1

## STARTING THE WALK

**The walk starts in Exmouth Market**, a lively, semi-pedestrianised thoroughfare that at one time had a popular street market – but after it closed the street became rather run down. More recently a number of bars, restaurants and 'gift' shops have opened and as a result it's become a busy and lively place, particularly in the evening. Many of the bars and restaurants have outside seating, making it a particularly attractive place to visit in nice weather. A food market has also

been introduced on weekdays, which has become popular with both residents and those working locally at lunchtimes.

Walking from the Farringdon Road end of Exmouth Market, you pass the **Church of Our Most Holy Redeemer**. I like its Italianate look and it's one of a select few basilica-style churches in London.

If it's open, take a look inside. You could easily believe this is a Catholic church, but it's actually Church of England, although known as 'Anglo-Catholic'. This means that it is within the 'Catholic tradition' of the Church of England and receives 'alternate episcopal oversight' from the Bishop of Fulham. (Episcopal oversight is commonly known as a 'flying bishop' – a Church of England bishop assigned to minister to those clergy and parishes that 'are unable to receive the ministry of women bishops or priests'.)

Almost opposite the church is a pub called the **Exmouth Arms** – the street was originally called Baynes Row, but in 1939 it was renamed after the pub.

At the end of Exmouth Market, we head more or less straight across the junction – **crossing over Tysoe and Rosoman Streets** and **turning left up Garnault Place**. On your left is the large and architecturally unusual (but now sadly a little tired looking) building that was once **Finsbury Town Hall**. It ceased to be this when the Borough of Finsbury was absorbed by the neighbouring Borough of Islington in the 1960s. In the entrance lobby there's a brass plaque that lists all the mayors of Finsbury since 1900.

Finsbury Town Hall is quite unusual, being built in a 'Flemish Renaissance style of redbrick with elaborate stone dressing'. It is Grade II\* listed and registered with English Heritage as a building of 'great historical importance'. It was unveiled in 1895 by Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, (who also gave his name to Rosebery Avenue, the main road that runs alongside that had only just been built.)

One of the reasons the building is architecturally so important are the many Art Nouveau features, both internally and externally – quite radical considering the age of the building.

The building was eventually acquired by the Urdang Academy that had been established as a ballet school by the dancer Leonie Urdang in Covent Garden and it has become a highly regarded school of the performing arts. The academy has restored much of the building, paying special attention to the architectural features of the Great Hall and Council Chamber, which are now used for a variety of events, including weddings, banquets and much else. However, the outside does look a little neglected and somewhat shabby.

I've written a little more about Finsbury Town Hall in the **appendix**.

**At the top of Garnault Place** use the crossing to walk across **Rosebery Avenue**. We're going to walk to the right – but as you do you can't fail to notice the large and attractive building that's slightly offset, partly facing back down Rosebery Avenue.

The sign carved into the stone above the grand wooden front doors explains that this was once the '**Head Office of the Metropolitan Water Board**'. It has kept its original name of the '**New River Head**', though now converted into some very expensive apartments. On several occasions I have tried to look inside, but the door was always locked, so on the last occasion I stood outside and waited until a resident went in, then slipped in behind him. Fortunately, the porter was really friendly and helpful and let me take a brief look and I have to say the enormous and quite

magnificent reception area has been beautifully preserved. On the first floor is the 'architecturally renowned' Oak Room, which is open to the public on special occasions.

As you continue along **Rosebery Avenue**, look back to the New River Head building and you can see just how large it is. It's set in the extensive grounds where the water that was brought in from Herefordshire via the New River and conduits was stored and treated. There was even a windmill here to drive the pumps – the windmill has been demolished but the base is still there.

You pass the private gardens belonging to the apartments, complete with a small fountain and at the far end is the '**Laboratory Building**'. It was built in 1938 for undertaking research and quality testing of the water supply and as with New River Head it has now been converted into apartments.

The New River is recognised as being the birthplace of the principles of modern water supply. Indeed, it's so important that I've put a lot more information about it in a separate section in the appendix.

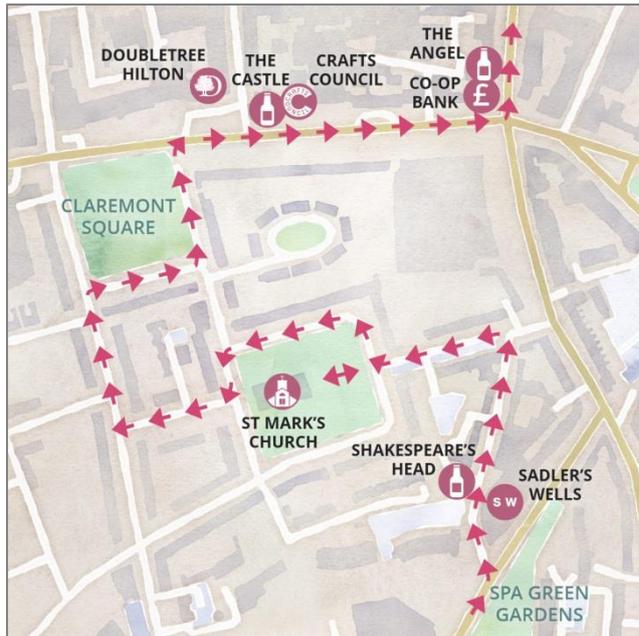
As London's population continued to grow, the supply of fresh water became more of a problem. For centuries people had obtained their water from wells, springs, streams or of course the River Thames, but with no other way to dispose of rubbish it was easy to just chuck everything, from toilet waste, household rubbish to dead dogs, into the nearest watercourse. Hardly surprisingly, it meant that over the years they had become increasingly polluted. Not only that, but due to the increased use, many were drying up.

This resulted in an increase in the number of outbreaks of waterborne disease, particularly typhoid and cholera. Eventually things got so bad that the City of London Corporation together with the government were forced to find a solution and a plan was devised to bring freshwater in from Hertfordshire, some twenty or so miles to the north.

The job of organising the project was eventually passed to Hugh Myddelton, who I give more details about in the appendix. Together with his Chief Engineer, he came up with the idea of cutting an artificial channel, called the New River, from fresh spring waters at Amwell in Hertfordshire to Clerkenwell, a distance of some 28 miles.

Having raised the money from a variety of sources and helped by an investment from King James I, work commenced in 1609. This site in Clerkenwell was chosen as the place where the New River would terminate for various technical reasons, which again I explain in the appendix. A forty-mile channel was dug, 10 feet wide and 4 feet deep. This was nearly twice as long as the 'crow flies' distance but, due to the hills between, it needed to be this length to ensure the incline remained sufficient for the water to flow naturally to Clerkenwell.

The project, which was a truly amazing engineering triumph, was completed in 1613, and terminated here adjacent to what is now Rosebery Avenue.



Route map 2

The small park on the opposite side of Rosebery Avenue was once part of the extensive Islington Spa gardens, which were in competition with the Sadler's Wells Gardens opposite.

**Islington Spa**, also called the New Wells and later the 'New Tunbridge Wells', on account of the medicinal quality of its waters apparently being as good as those of Royal Tunbridge Wells, opened in 1737. It was claimed the water could cure all manner of ailments including 'Hysterics, Vapours, Dropsies, Swellings of the Legs, Rheumatics, Scurvy, Jaundice, Want of Digestion, Gravel, Gout, Strangury, and more.' At the height of its popularity up to 1,600 people a day visited the gardens, where entertainments included a miniature zoo, a Merlin's Cave and coffee houses. The area began to be built over from 1810 onwards, though the spring waters flowed until the 1860s.

**Turn left up alongside the Laboratory Building into Arlington Way** – and on the other corner you can't miss the **Sadler's Wells Theatre**.

The Sadler's Wells Theatre has had a long and rather chequered history. It opened in 1683, then only the second theatre in London to open following the Reformation. For a time, it was as renowned for its medicinal spa waters as it was for its entertainment. It was famous at one time for its pantomimes, boxing matches and even roller-skating. Now, several hundred years later, it is known for dance performances. Following a huge rebuilding and refurbishment, it has a new auditorium that seats audiences of up to 1,500 and is one of the most modern, purpose-built theatres in London.

I will also mention that they have a nice café (and toilets) – it's not in the main theatre, so to find it you need to walk on up Rosebery Avenue, and you'll see it at the far end of the building.

(I've written more about Sadler's Wells in the **appendix**.)

## The wells at Sadler's Wells

In June 1683 Dick Sadler built a 'musick house' near a country footpath that led from Clerkenwell to Islington. He discovered a medieval well in the grounds of his house and believing that the waters had 'miraculous medicinal powers', people flocked to the new Sadler's Wells to enjoy the musical entertainment as well as to stroll in the gardens and 'take the water'.

Dick Sadler himself claimed that the water would be effective against a range of illnesses, including "dropsy, jaundice, green sickness and other distempers to which females are liable, including ulcers, fits of the mother, virgin's fever and hypochondriacal distemper."

To this day the water still flows from the aquifer that lies beneath the building. When the current building opened in 1998 (the fifth Sadler's Wells theatre to be built on the site) it was the first building in London to use its groundwater in the air conditioning system.

In 2004 Sadler's Wells entered into an agreement with Thames Water for the re-use of excess water flowing from the ground below the theatre, rather than allow it to drain wastefully away.

**Continue up Arlington Way**, passing the Shakespeare's Head pub and a rather rundown apartment building on the left, there's a nice row of terraced houses on the opposite side, many of which were once shops with living accommodation above.

**At the top turn left** into the very wide **Chadwell Street**, which has some interesting and surprisingly large terraced houses on both sides. Next to the Thomas Treacy Funeral Directors on the corner on the left is an elegant Grade II listed building that was built in 1824 built for Calvinistic Methodists and called the Providence Chapel. It's now the Angel Baptist Church.

Chadwell Street runs into the enormous **Myddelton Square**, with the equally large **St Mark's Church** and churchyard in the centre.

This large and lovely square with some beautiful Georgian houses was laid out in the 1820s as part of the New River Estate and named after Sir Hugh Myddelton, who we read more about shortly. The square, church and surrounding houses were built by the Chief Engineer of the New River project, Robert Mylne. He had a fascinating life, and if you'd like to know more then take a look at his biography on Wikipedia.

The church and northern side of the square were destroyed by bombs in the Second World War, but were rebuilt in almost identical Georgian style.

**Walk through the gate** that's directly ahead of you into the churchyard. Unfortunately you can't walk across and out the other side, so having had a look around leave by the gate on the left-hand side and walk around the square to the front of the church.

**Leave the square along Inglebert Street** that is directly opposite the front entrance of the church and **at the end turn right**, then walk up the equally wide **Amwell Street**, taking the next right into **Claremont Square**.

The large grass mound on your left is the Claremont Square Reservoir, which was built in 1709 by the New River Company to store water being brought in from Herefordshire via the New River. It was originally called the Upper Pond, but in the 1850s the Metropolis Water Act was

passed, which prohibited open areas of standing water in London and so it was covered and grassed over and is still in use today.

At the end of the road turn to the left and continue up Claremont Square – but straight ahead of you is Claremont Close. Although we don't actually walk down it, I will just mention that Claremont Close was originally the site of livery stables and pens for cattle en route to Smithfield Market. The eight blocks of apartments that now surround the close were built in the mid-1930s – much later than the rest of the area, but again built by the New River Company.

**At the top is Pentonville Road**, one of London's busiest streets, which runs up from King's Cross.

**Turn right** along Pentonville Road then cross over to the other side at the pedestrian traffic lights opposite the **DoubleTree Hilton Hotel** and continue walking down to the right.

Notice **Maynard House**, with the 'horse heads' on the double gates. This was the site of a well-known horse dealer called 'A. Freeman'. When making long journeys, coachmen would exchange their horses here for others that had been rested and fed – the Great North Road is just a few yards away, as is the Angel coaching inn where passengers would have rested. The small gate to the left is usually open and, in the archway, you can see original tiled murals of scenes involving horses.

Next to it is a lovely building, a former non-conformist chapel (1819) that is now the head office of the **Crafts Council**, currently undergoing refurbishment (early 2019).

The Crafts Council was originally set up in 1971 as the Craft Advisory Centre, to advise the government on the 'needs of the artist craftsman and to promote a nationwide interest and improvement in their products'. Renamed the Craft Council several years later, it then received a Royal Charter. It runs a variety of courses, holds exhibitions and undertakes lobbying on matters affecting craftspeople, as well as having an excellent shop.

Notice the impressive houses on the other side of the road – but no matter how nice, I can't imagine living on what is one of London's noisiest main roads!

Where the pavement widens look ahead for 50 yards or so – on the left is a refurbished 1980s office block, which, thanks to its unusual Danish brick façade, is visually interesting.

Look along a little further and you can see a much older, large sandstone building with a domed roof – the **Angel Islington**. It's on the corner of the busy junction of **Pentonville Road** and **Islington High Street, into which we turn left**.

The Angel Islington is well-known to many people through the game of Monopoly as the fairly cheap light blue property. However, there is much more to it than that! Over the past century the name 'Angel' has become associated with this area of Islington, probably because when the 'tube' station opened here in 1901 it was given the name 'Angel'.

An inn that had been here since 1614 and originally called the 'Sheepcote' changed its name to Angel on account of the sign that hung outside it which showed the Angel of Annunciation. (This was the occasion when the Angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary to tell her that she was going to have a baby).

The inn had been popular with drovers bringing sheep and cattle down to London for sale in the nearby Smithfield Market. After a journey that sometimes would have taken many weeks, the drovers would pay the local landowners, who had fields on either side of both roads, to allow their cattle to graze in order to fatten them up ready for the market.

The Angel stood at the start of the Great North Road, where in 'Oliver Twist' Charles Dickens described it as being the 'place London begins in earnest'. During the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the increase in the number of people travelling between London and the north of the country meant that more coaching inns were needed, and the Angel became the biggest of these. It was the last coaching inn before travellers arrived into London and many preferred to overnight here, rather than risk travelling across the open road that led into the city, which was notorious for highwaymen.

(William Hogarth used the Angel Inn for his famous 18th century satirical painting depicting a 'stage-coach, about to depart the country inn yard at the Old 'Angle' Inn at election time' (with a very fat lady being pushed up into the carriage by the guard, a tradesman haggling with the conductor about his ticket and all the while an election riot taking place in the background.)

By the mid-late 19th century, the cattle for Smithfield were starting to be brought in by the newly introduced railway. Around the same time there was a big increase in demand for housing in London. The result was that the fields where the cattle had previously rested on route to the market began to be built on, and the inns and taverns where the drovers once stayed began to go into decline. For many years though the Angel was one of the few survivors.

In 1756, the site was bisected by the New Road, now known as the Pentonville Road, and at first the additional traffic benefitted the Angel Inn. Business then began to decline and in 1820 it was redeveloped, reduced in size and the land adjoining it was sold off, which allowed the development of houses and shops. It was now promoted as the "Angel Inn Tavern and Hotel for Gentlemen and Families", and the front of the tavern changed so that it faced the New Road. By the 1850s it was said to be in decline; the New Road was becoming busier than ever and was renamed the Pentonville Road, which it is still called today. The owners of the Angel put shops along the front of the building and considerable refurbishment took place inside.

At the beginning of the 20th century the Angel was rebuilt, using a pale terracotta stone and the 'signature' corner cupola was added. The brewers Truman, Hanbury, Buxton & Co who had brought the building a few years before announced that it was now the 'widest known hostelry in the world'. It remained as a pub until 1921 when it opened as a Lyons Corner House Restaurant.

The Angel closed in the 1960s when plans were announced for the building to be demolished as part of a traffic improvement scheme, which never actually went ahead. Having been closed for a number of years, it was subsequently refurbished in 1982 and rather oddly a branch of the Co-op Bank opened on the ground floor, with offices above. (More recently the Wetherspoons chain has opened a pub next door, calling it the Angel). And after such a fascinating history, the current building, which has stood here in its present form since the beginning of the last century, is now a Grade II historic landmark.

These days, Islington, and in particular Upper Street, has become well-known for its nightlife, with numerous bars and restaurants. However, that's nothing new as its entertainment facilities have seemingly always attracted people from elsewhere in London, at one time being known as 'Merry Islington', because of its music halls and theatres. (Even the Angel's galleried yard, where the stage coaches would arrive, was at one time used by travelling players to put on performances.)

On the other side of the road, on the corner of Pentonville Road and Islington High Street, the enormous modern office building is known as **Angel Square**. It is actually three separate buildings that surround a courtyard and was constructed in 1991 over the top of the **Angel tube station**. It is home to a number of companies, one of the biggest being the online hotel and travel company Expedia.

### **A SHORTENED VERSION OF THE WALK**

To head back into central London by tube, take the Northern line one stop to King's Cross – there you can connect to several other tube lines including the Piccadilly, Circle and Victoria.

I have continued the walk a little further to give a flavour of this fascinating and popular part of Islington which is famous for antiques, interesting little shops, cafés and restaurants. It should take no more than 20–30 minutes (obviously depending on how often you stop to look in shops or maybe have something to eat).

### **AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLINGTON**

The origin of the name 'Islington' dates back to Saxon times, when it was known as 'Gislandune' – meaning 'Gisla's Hill' – by the Saxons. At one time it was called Isledon, and by the 17th century had become Islington.

It developed as a spread-out hamlet, which gradually became a village, along what is now Upper Street, a major highway that seems to have existed as far back as the 14th century, and possibly much earlier. It became known as the Great North Road (now known as the A1) that runs from central London as far north as Edinburgh. Together with the Liverpool Road (originally known as Back Street) that runs parallel to Upper Street, it was regularly used by drovers, bringing their cattle from the north down to Smithfield Market in Farringdon. In the fields between the two roads 'lairs' were built for cattle to rest and fatten before their arrival at Smithfield. The lower part of Upper Street still has the wide raised pavements, which were built so women out shopping here wouldn't have their clothes ruined by mud from the passing cattle.



Route map 3

**Walk on ahead** for a couple of hundred yards – **cross over White Lion Street**, then cross **Liverpool Road** that branches off to your left – and then **cross to your right** over **Islington High Street and turn to the left**. Islington High Street widens at this point and now becomes Upper Street. Rather bizarrely, Islington High Street doesn't actually disappear but becomes the narrower and eventually pedestrianised lane that forks off to the right – **which is where we walk next**.

After 50 yards or so, you pass the **York pub** that's set back from the road. It was originally a private house with fields running up to the rear of it, before being rebuilt as The York Hotel in 1851, acquiring its name because this was once the major road for the stage coaches heading north from London to York.

Running down the side of the pub is **Duncan Street** – and if you have the time and energy for a short ten-minute extension then it's worth walking down it for about 150 yards to **Duncan Terrace** at the bottom. The gardens that you see on the left and right that run down the middle of Duncan Terrace were created to cover the New River, the waterway we discussed earlier, which brings fresh water down from Hertfordshire into London.

At the very bottom of the street is **Colebrooke Row** and directly below is the **Regent's Canal** and the start of the tunnel that takes it for just over a quarter mile to the other side of Islington High Street/Upper Street. Pass through the gate and walk down the short, steep path to see the canal and the entrance to the tunnel. (The canal runs from the River Thames at Limehouse to Paddington.)

The canal is much lower at this point, and rather than building a flight of locks to lift the canal up, the Regent's Canal Company held a competition to design a tunnel under the higher ground of Islington. The entries were so disappointing that James Morgan, the Chief Engineer, ended up designing the tunnel himself. It took three years to build, from 1815 to 1818 and was dug by a band of navvies using explosives, wheelbarrows, horses and sheer physical strength.

And a point of (very little) interest ... ex-London Mayor and present Prime Minister Boris Johnson until recently lived in one of the houses along Colebrooke Row, though he has now moved out and I read recently that it was available to rent at £2,000 a week! (Yes, week!) And if you fancy buying a house along here, then the average value appears to be around £3 million. They are quite nice ... and it's quite near to some nice shops ... and a Waitrose!

**Retrace your steps back up Duncan Street to the York pub then turn right**, continuing now along the narrower **Islington High Street** (not the considerably wider main Upper Street). Look up at the front of the house on the corner and you'll see an old sign that says, 'Islington High Street leading to Camden Passage', which is where we are heading.

(And from here look across to the other side of Upper Street and notice the raised pavements – these were built to help ladies who were out doing their shopping to avoid stepping into the piles of animal dung caused by the huge numbers of cattle that were brought along the street en route to Smithfield Market.)

The unusual brick building in front of you that sits between Upper Street and the pedestrianised Islington High Street (currently a Sofa shop, but I doubt for much longer) was once London Transport's 'transformer station'. It subsequently became an antique mall, though sadly now just a furniture shop.

Whilst the road bends to the left we continue on down the narrower, pedestrianised **Camden Passage** – which is where some of the interesting little shops and restaurants really begin. The lane on the right, called Pierrepoint Row, has an open space on the corner, where there are usually a few market stalls; it's the site of a house that was bombed in the Second World War and never rebuilt. The little market is open on Wednesdays and Saturdays and usually has an interesting selection of antiques or books, depending on which day it is.

Look to your left when you reach **Charlton Place** and on the other side of Upper Street you can glimpse the enormous **Business Design Centre**, which we see later.

**Continue on up Camden Passage** – and look out for No.43 on your left: the window contains a fascinating collection of antique games, toys and fun curios. Apparently, it's not actually a shop, but the home of a collector. He's clearly got a great sense of humour!

I love some of the quirky and unusual shops and eating places in the passage – everything from a Japanese tea shop and opposite a Japanese art shop; a shop just selling speciality cheeses, whilst others offering vintage clothes and antiques ... all good for browsing. (I just hope these independent shops survive so that the high-fashion chain shops with deep pockets don't start moving in.)

When we reach the **Camden Head** – a traditional pub that opened in 1899 with a popular outside terrace that serves decent pub food – we're going to turn to the left, up Camden Passage. At the top is the **Essex Road** and across it the miniature **Islington Green**, which divides it from Upper Street, which forks to the left at the point.

**Cross over the busy Essex Road at the traffic lights** that are just to your left (the street is so named because that's where it leads) and on the green in front of you will see an imposing statue to Sir Hugh Myddelton, founder of the New River Company.

From the green continue on across **Upper Street** then **walk down to the left**.

After a few yards you reach Berners Road. Take a look up to the right and you can see the **Business Design Centre** and to the right of it is the **Hilton Angel Islington**.

The design centre is used for many exhibitions and is built on the site of the huge Royal Agricultural Hall. This extends through to the Liverpool Road behind, though there is no public access from that side. (To see it you have to walk to the right up Berners Road, right again into Bromfield Street, right again into Liverpool Road – so unless you are keen on architectural history, I suggest you don't bother.)

The Royal Agricultural Hall was opened in 1862 to host that year's annual Smithfield Show but soon became popular for other purposes, including the Royal Tournament and the Crufts Dog Shows. At the time it was London's biggest building of its kind and until the 20th century the capital's principal exhibition site. Its main hall was 75 feet high with a 125 feet arched glass roof and it held up to 50,000 people.

During the Second World War it was used as a postal sorting office, but it never reopened after the war ended. The main hall is now part of the Business Design Centre, which you can see as you enter the building.

Continue on down Upper Street for a few more yards until you come to a pedestrianised lane between more modern shops (there's a sign above that says, 'Angel Central'), which leads through a shopping and cinema complex into **Liverpool Road**, where there's yet more shops.

Liverpool Road was known as the Back Road and was primarily a 'drovers' road'. Animals that were being brought to London from the north and east, sometimes for huge distances of hundreds of miles, would rest and be fattened here before going on to Smithfield Market. The fields on either side were used for grazing, and pens and sheds were erected.

**Continue on down Liverpool Road** (you'll see the old Chapel Market over on your right) **until after a couple of hundred yards it joins Upper Street.**

**Cross over Upper Street** and turn to the right for the Angel tube station or to the left for buses – there are a number of different routes from the row of bus stops here, including numbers 19, 30, 38, 73, 341, 476.

## **APPENDIX TO THE ISLINGTON WALK**

### **FINSBURY TOWN HALL**

This unusual building, built on the intersection of six streets in the heart of Clerkenwell, was once the town hall for the Borough of Finsbury, which was absorbed by the neighbouring Borough of Islington in 1965. It's Grade II\* listed and registered with English Heritage as a building of 'great historical importance'. It was unveiled in 1895 by Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, (who gave his name also to Rosebery Avenue, the main road that runs alongside, which had only been built a month before).

One of the reasons the building is architecturally so important are the many Art Nouveau features, both internally and externally – quite radical considering the age of the building.

In 2007 the building was acquired by the Urdang Academy, originally established as a ballet school by the dancer Leonie Urdang in Covent Garden and now a highly regarded performing arts school. They carefully restored the building, paying special attention to the wonderful features of the Great Hall and Council Chamber and these are now used for a variety of events, including weddings, banquets and much else.

### **SADLER'S WELLS**

Sadler's Wells was the second theatre to open in London after the Restoration (the Theatre Royal in Dury Lane being the first). It was opened by Dick Sadler in 1683 and known then as a 'musick house' and has been a place of entertainment ever since.

Shortly after opening, an ancient medicinal well was discovered in the grounds and the enterprising Mr Sadler was quick to promote the water's health-giving properties. The spa soon became as popular an attraction as his musick house, hence it got the name of Sadler's Wells. He claimed that amongst many ailments the iron-rich water would be effective against 'dropsy, jaundice, scurvy, green sickness and other distempers to which females are liable – ulcers, fits of the mother, virgin's fever and hypochondriacal distemper.

By the beginning of the 18th century, interest in 'taking the waters' at Sadler's Wells had dropped and entertainment was again the main attraction. Everything from jugglers to rope dancers, wrestlers to stage-fighters – even dancing dogs and a singing duck trod the boards there!

With the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden and in Dury Lane only opening during the autumn and winter, Sadler's Wells began a summer entertainment season, which became very popular. In the late 1700s Thomas Rosoman became manager and built a new theatre that began to feature opera.

The famous Regency actor, comedian and dancer Joseph Grimaldi became a Sadler's Wells star thanks to developing the first English pantomimes here. It was he who introduced the custom of the 'pantomime dame', as well the tradition of audience participation that continues to this day.

In 1844, Samuel Phelps took over and he turned Sadler's Wells into '... a theatre as it ought to be – a place just representing the work of our great dramatic poets'. When he left some twenty years later Sadler's Wells repertoire returned to variety and melodrama and went into decline, eventually being converted into a roller-skating rink and later a prize fight area.

After re-opening as a theatre in 1879, it became more of a music hall, but again became increasingly run-down and eventually closed in 1915.

A public appeal was made in 1925 for funds to set up a charitable foundation to enable Sadler's Wells to be bought for the nation, and the committee responsible for raising the money consisted of some of the leading lights of politics, theatre and the arts.

By the early 1930's, when the theatre reopened, a ballet company had been started, which was the beginning of the Sadler's Wells connection with dance. Since then it has enjoyed widely varying degrees of success, with everything from ballet to Gilbert and Sullivan being featured.

In 1998 a new theatre opened – the contemporary and extremely well-designed building you see today – with facilities that are still lacking in many London theatres – for example sufficient toilets for ladies!

## **THE NEW RIVER COMPANY**

As London's population continued to grow, the supply of fresh water became more of a problem. For centuries people had obtained their water from wells, springs, streams or of course the River Thames, but with no other way to dispose of rubbish it was easy to just chuck everything, from toilet waste, household rubbish to dead dogs, into the nearest watercourse. Hardly surprisingly, it meant that over the years they had become increasingly polluted. Not only that, but due to the increased use, many were drying up.

This resulted in an increase in the number of outbreaks of waterborne disease, particularly typhoid and cholera. Eventually things got so bad that under pressure the City of London Corporation came up with a plan to construct a channel to bring freshwater in from springs in Hertfordshire, some twenty or so miles to the north. Parliament passed the plans and the job of organising the project was eventually passed to Hugh Myddelton, a unique individual in that he was a Member of Parliament, a banker, goldsmith and engineer. The company that was formed to undertake what at the time was a major feat of engineering was given a Royal Charter and Hugh Myddelton was appointed as its first governor.

Together with Robert Mylne, who he had appointed as Chief Engineer, Myddelton came up with the idea of cutting an artificial channel from the fresh spring waters at Amwell in Hertfordshire to Clerkenwell, a distance of some 28 miles.

Myddelton managed to persuade business colleagues, friends and others to form a partnership – they called themselves the "Adventurers" and they managed to raise about half the money needed. However, they struggled to raise the other half and the City of London Corporation refused to help, saying the project was now financially too risky (never mind the poor people drinking polluted water!) Disputes with landowners along the route caused further problems and, with money running out, Myddelton appealed to James I for his help. He agreed, though in return for putting up the other half of the money he demanded a 50% share of the profit – probably fair enough I'd say!

Having eventually raised the necessary finance, work commenced in 1609. This northern part of Clerkenwell was chosen as the place where the New River would terminate. The site needed to be on the more impervious London clay, which provided a better 'bed' for a reservoir than the free-draining gravel of southern Clerkenwell. It needed to be on ground lower than the springs in Hertfordshire, from where it flowed, yet still high enough above most of London to enable the water to continue to flow by gravity. A channel, or canal, 10 feet wide and 4 feet deep was dug and, whilst it had to be kept as level as possible, it obviously needed a gradient to ensure the

water would flow by itself down to Clerkenwell. That gradient was just five inches in the mile. However, there were a number of hills along the route so, in order to maintain those levels, the channel ended up being nearly forty miles in length – twice as long as the ‘as the crow flies’ distance.

It took five years for the channel, which they called the ‘New River’, to be constructed, which finally opened in 1613, terminating at the ‘New River Head’. It emptied into a small pond named the ‘Round Pond’, which was previously just a ‘duck pool’ and enlarged to become a small reservoir where the water could be stored. Once it was full, the outward flow of water was controlled through a cistern and stopcocks in the basement of the Water House, which I explain next, on the southern edge of the ‘pond’. From here the water flowed out in pipes made from hollowed out elm trees down into the City of London, providing it with its first ever supply of fresh water.

The official opening in 1613 was performed by Myddelton and was recorded as follows: “the flood-gates flew open, the streame ranne gallantly into the cisterne, drummes and trumpets sounding in a triumphall manner.”

### **The ‘Water House’**

To house the equipment needed and supply offices and accommodation for staff, a building called the Water House was built adjacent to the Round Pond. Seemingly, no money was spared on its construction or its ‘Oak Room’, where the company would hold prestigious meetings and dinners. Although built as far back as the 17th century, its carved oak interior (hence the name) is beautifully preserved, and its Late Renaissance style was regarded by many as an architectural gem, as it still is today, which I explain shortly.

Growing competition in the 18th century from other companies that were being formed to supply water meant that it was important for the New River Company to be able to supply more water and at a more regular pressure to other parts of London. To help achieve this they built an additional ‘higher level’ reservoir, called the Upper Pond half a mile or so to the north in a site in Claremont Square, adjacent to the Pentonville Road, which we walk past on the walk. This additional ‘head of pressure’ allowed the company to then begin supplying districts further away, one of which was London’s West End. However, it did of course mean that water had to be first pumped up there and initially this was done by a windmill (the base of which is still visible in the grounds) but this didn’t prove to be particularly successful, so a steam engine was installed around 1768.

Eventually the original fresh water springs in Hertfordshire weren’t sufficient to supply the growing needs of the New River Company and they began to take water from the River Lea as well, which by the 1850’s was supplying nearly all of it.

By 1819 the company had replaced its original wooden pipes with cast-iron mains.

### **Metropolitan Water Board**

An Act of Parliament that was passed in 1902 created a Metropolitan Water Board to take over London’s various private water companies, including the New River Company. The importance of the New River Head in the history of London’s water supply was reinforced when, in 1913, the board decided to locate its headquarters there. By 1920 they desperately needed more space and the original Water house was demolished, and a new headquarters called the New River Head built on the site, the building you see today.

The famous 'Oak Room', which I previously mentioned, was fortunately regarded as being so special that it was carefully taken from the original position on the ground floor of the old Water House and carefully reassembled on the first floor of the new building, a truly remarkable example of the early architectural preservation. The Oak Room is open for the public to see on special occasions, such as the annual London Open House weekend in September.

### **Privatisation and Thames Water**

When in 1989 the water industry was again privatised and Thames Water took over the responsibility for supplying Greater London, Berkshire, Wiltshire and even parts of Kent with water, they set up their new headquarters in Reading, which meant the Metropolitan's existing headquarters in the New River Head was then largely redundant. However, due to its historical importance and considerable expanse of open green space, building on the land was prohibited, and instead it was decided to turn the existing buildings into residential accommodation.

Also included in the redevelopment was the Water Testing Laboratory that had been built in 1938 by the Metropolitan Water Board to monitor the biological, bacteriological, chemical and chlorination aspects of London's water, which was carried out by a team of seventy technicians. This was closed down and the building converted into thirty-five flats in 1998.

Over time the operation grew so much that it covered around seven acres, though there is little sign now of any that. The numerous filter-bed sites were gradually covered over with lawns and gardens, although on the site today there is still the base of an 18th century windmill that once helped pump water into London. As this didn't prove to be practical, a steam pumping engine was then installed and the subsequent 'engine house building' that once accommodated it is also still there.

Amazingly, the site is still part of London's water supply and there's a small pumping station and a deep access shaft connected to the London Thames Water Ring Main, a 50-mile concrete tunnel that circles London, carrying some 250 million gallons of water.

Clearly Sir Hugh Myddelton was a remarkable man, and later in the walk you see a statue of him that was erected on Islington Green.

If you would like to know more about the New River Company, there is an excellent article on the City of London's Corporation website.