

A walk from Paddington to Camden Market

Updated: 16 May 2022

Length: About 3½ miles

Duration: Around 4 hours

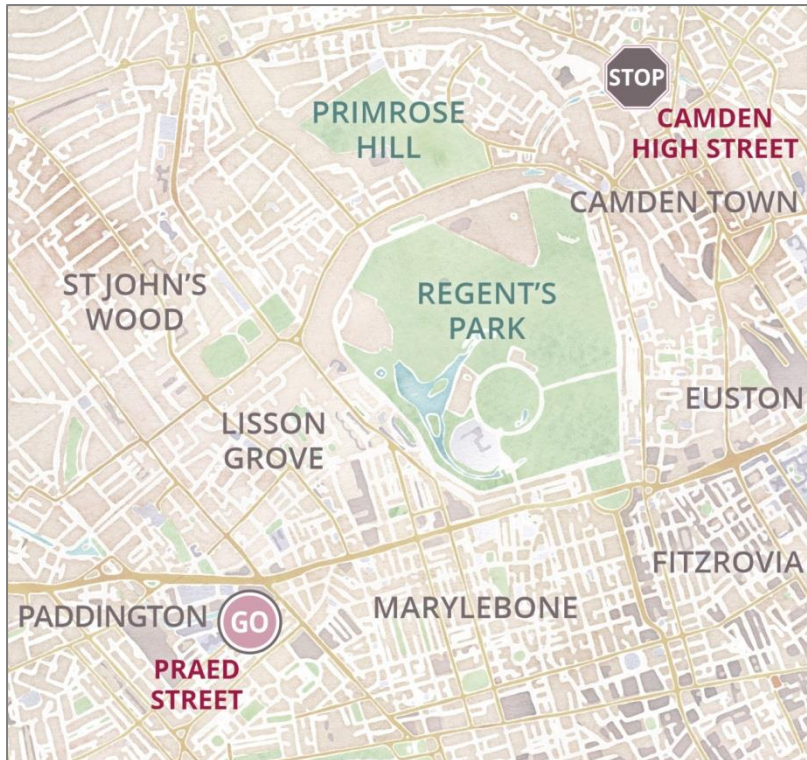
INTRODUCTION

The walk from Praed Street, in Paddington, to Camden Town is via the Regent's Canal towpath (appropriate directions are given in the few places where there isn't a towpath). Besides the fascination of the canal itself, key places visited include Little Venice, the northern edge of Regent's Park, partial views of London Zoo and Camden Market. For those who are interested in visiting the market, now one of London's top tourist attractions, I have included a 'guided walk' around it.

Points to note

1. Be aware of cyclists who sometimes treat the towpath as a racetrack and show little concern for those who are walking.
2. There's a lot of graffiti on the walls beside the Regent's Canal towpath. Some of it is fairly artistic but some is an eyesore and detracts from the canal's photogenic qualities.
3. Once you have passed the Café Laville at the Edgware Road Bridge (start of the Maida Vale Tunnel) there are no toilets particularly close to the canal until you reach Camden Market ... so be warned!
4. The route maps on this page are at half the scale of those for most other walks because the distance between the start and finish points is greater than usual.

The walk starts in Praed Street, just 50 yards or so from Edgware Road, (and a five-minute walk from Paddington station), where the Paddington Basin, which leads into the 'Paddington Arm or Branch' of the Grand Union/Regent's Canal, begins. (I have put more information about the area of Paddington, as well as the station, in the appendix below.)



GETTING HERE

If you are arriving at the **Edgware Road Circle and Hammersmith & City lines underground station** (there are two stations – the other is for the Bakerloo line), then come out of the exit and walk straight ahead down Chapel Street for 100 yards – when you reach Edgware Road cross over and walk straight ahead for 50 yards along the right-hand side of Praed Street.

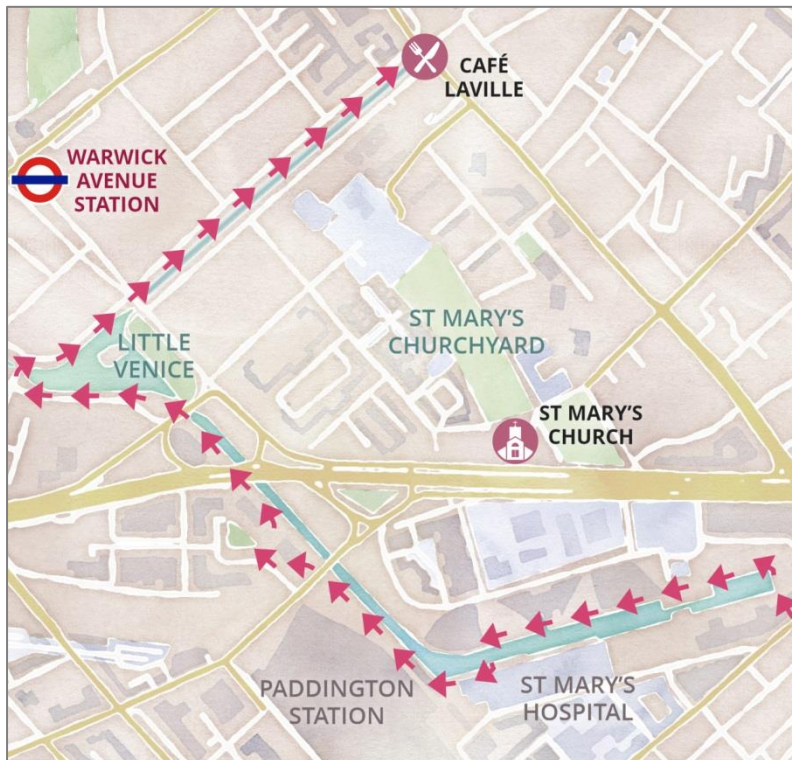
Cross Harbet Road and on the opposite corner you'll see the set-back 'angled' entrance to Paddington Basin – the sign over the entrance arch says 'Balmoral'.

The other Edgware Road station, which serves the Bakerloo line, is a little further up Edgware Road – if arriving here then turn left out of the station; walk under the A40 Marylebone Flyover – when you reach the next turning left (Chapel Street) cross over Edgware Road and continue as above.

If arriving by bus – there are too many bus routes that serve this area to list them all, but head for the Praed Street intersection with Edgware Road, walk down the right-hand side of Praed Street for 50 yards, cross Harbet Road and on the opposite corner you'll see the set-back 'angled' entrance to Paddington Basin – the sign over the entrance arch says 'Balmoral'.

Finally, **if you arrive at Paddington mainline or underground stations** (there are two) then make your way to the front of the station and walk left down Praed Street. You pass St Mary's Hospital on your left – continue walking past South Wharf Road until you reach

Harbet Road. Don't cross over, as on the corner on your left you'll see the set-back 'angled' entrance to Paddington Basin – the sign over the entrance arch says 'Balmoral'.



Route map 1

STARTING THE WALK

Once through the archway you are in the Paddington Canal Basin. This lay virtually derelict for many years but has now been completely transformed; the old warehouse buildings have been demolished and in their place are multi-storey apartment blocks. (Please note – these entrance gates are closed at night.)

Only ten years ago all you would see on both sides were derelict warehouses and wharves where goods were once unloaded from the barges onto horse and carts for transport into the city. The warehouses became derelict when the canal closed and were left empty and crumbling for many years. Hundreds of millions of pounds has recently been invested by developers, who in order to portray a better image for the area, have renamed it **Merchant Square**.

In the water in front of you is an unusual and pleasant 'floating garden'. It's called the Floating Pocket Park, a little green 'oasis' and was made by using a series of interlocking pontoons that were designed to look like reclaimed wood. Built and assembled in Cumbria, taken to Uxbridge by road and then floated down the Grand Union Canal to Paddington.

Walk along the right-hand side of the basin – the ground floor of most of the buildings are bars and restaurants – whilst many of the buildings on the other side of the basin are part of the extensive St Mary's Paddington Hospital complex.

Pass the electric boats that are for hire by the hour (great fun and maybe worth doing if you come back again – but they're not cheap to hire.)

Immediately after the hire boat dock is the most unusual 'Rolling Bridge'. It was designed by Heatherwick Studio to form an integral part of the Merchant Square public realm and their 'challenge' was to make a bridge "defined by the manner in which it opens, rather than its architectural style."

The resulting idea was for a bridge that opens in a special and different way. The deck of the bridge is made in eight sections with seven pairs of hydraulic rams that are set within its balustrades, each set corresponding with the joints along the deck. As these rams extend, they silently push up the handrail, causing the bridge to curl up. The fourteen rams are powered by one master ram set underground. When the curling motion is complete, the two ends of the bridge touch to form an octagon.

Continue on past the little piazza and follow the canal as it bends around to the right. When you reach the modern 'steel' footbridge cross over to the other side (there are steps up to save you from the long walk up the ramp).

Once on the other side turn to the right and after 100 yards is one of the newer side entrances into the Paddington National Rail station, the terminus of Brunel's Great Western Railway. It's also the entrance into the Hammersmith & City/Circle line underground station.

On the canal are two attractive and colourful barges that have been converted into a pleasant bar and restaurant.

You are now alongside the canal – on your left you pass an entrance into both Paddington National Rail and underground station ... pass the two attractive and colourful twin barges that have been converted into a pleasant bar and restaurant.

Walk under **Bishop's Road Bridge** – but as you do, notice the unusually coloured Paddington Bear – this is the start of a 'Paw Print Trail' that was set up to celebrate the release of the film 'Paddington 2' – obviously, this won't be here for ever, so don't be surprised if you can't see it.

As you emerge from under the bridge you are in another recently created and 'property developer named' district – this one is 'Paddington Central'. To take a look at what has been created, **turn immediate left** up alongside Smith's Restaurant; this takes you into yet another new development called **Sheldon Square**. Here there are numerous 'new' office and apartment blocks, hotels, shops and bars – but what I particularly like is the 'amphitheatre' they have built. Various outdoor events are held here in the summer.

(Such is the speed of change around here that none of this existed much more than ten years ago).

Turn first right down alongside **Starbucks** to return to the canal and continue along the waterside path to the left, probably passing moored barges, some of which are 'pop-up' shops and restaurants.

Walk under the flyover that carries the busy A40 'Westway' into the city – but just before you do, look out for the rather lifelike 'statutes' of two men facing each other. I'm not sure what they're meant to represent, but I do like them.

Next on your left is the grubby looking late-1960s **Battleship Building**, built originally as a British Rail maintenance depot that was apparently "something of a minor sensation at the time of its completion and widely touted as the first London building to come to terms with the symbolisation of a modern transport building" – Hmmm!?! It was left abandoned for a number of years before being renovated to become the offices of Nissan Europe Design. (It's apparently even Grade II listed, which I find somewhat surprising.)

The sign in front of the next bridge explains that you that you are entering the area known as **Little Venice**. This is the point where the **Paddington branch of the Grand Union** meets the **Regent's Canal** and begins its 8½ mile journey to Limehouse and the River Thames.

Once you have walked under the next bridge you are met with a scene that particularly in the summer never ceases to amaze me. Suddenly there's this wide expanse of water, with lots of trees and in the distance some very lovely – and very expensive – houses. It's certainly a very lovely spot, and it was hardly surprising that it was here where Richard Branson moored his 'house boat'. For many years it doubled up as both his home and office, though he no longer uses it. However, in what you'd call typical Branson style, he now rents it out for almost £1,000 a week. It's still in the same position as it's always been – moored just alongside the start of the canal.

Sometimes referred to as a 'lagoon', Little Venice was created by the junction of the two canals and the branch of the Grand Union into Paddington. It is often called 'Browning's Pool', reputed to be because the poet Robert Browning lived in a house that overlooked it – though some historians say it was more likely to have been Lord Byron, some fifty or more years earlier, who first came up with the name. The little island in the middle was said to have been planted with trees on Browning's orders.

It was after the death of his wife Elizabeth in Florence in 1861 that Robert Browning came to live here. His house was at 19 Warwick Crescent, where he wrote a number of poems, including the 'Ring and the Book'. His house was just around the corner from his sister-in-law Arabella's home in Delamere Terrace, and he is said to have visited her every evening. (An apartment block has since been built on the land where his house was).

Over the years, Little Venice has been used in a number of films, including *A Hard Day's Night*, *Jason Bourne* and *Paddington 2*.

A **waterbus** operates from here to Camden, where this walk ends – and should you so wish, you can always return here by boat as it offers both single and return journeys. The lovely **Waterside Café barge**, just before the bridge, is recommended if you are already up for a coffee or a sandwich.

Take the ramp up to the bridge and pause there for a moment – The 'Bridge House' on the opposite corner in front of you is a delightful pub that serves good food and has the added attraction of having its own theatre.

The canal that continues straight ahead is the Grand Union, which runs from here for 137 miles, terminating in Birmingham, though with 'arms' to Leicester, Northampton and several other towns.

Turning right, we cross to the other side – but take the footpath along the side the bridge and not the actual pavement that runs alongside the road over the bridge.

You're now on the towpath of the **Regent's Canal**; walk past the unusual 'Puppet Theatre Barge' – which does precisely what the name implies and is very popular with children and walk under **Warwick Avenue Bridge** (it's Bridge No.1 – they are numbered all the way to the end of the canal at Limehouse). The towpath of the next section is used for private moorings, so just under the bridge, take the steps next to the Grade II listed 'Junction House', which was built as the toll keeper's house.

At the top of steps, turn right along **Blomfield Road**. With white stucco mansions and canal views this is a highly desirable enclave where many celebrities and wealthy individuals live. Houses overlooking the canal start at around £6 million and rise to £10 or even £12 million.

On the opposite side of the canal, some 200 yards further on, you'll see the **Church of St Mary's at Paddington Green**, with its prominent 'needlepoint' spire. Its unusual design and history has resulted in it being given a Grade I listing.

Straddling the canal ahead of you is the **Café Laville**. It serves excellent brunch, lunch and dinner and its large windows give a pleasant view back along the water towards Little Venice. The café is built over the entrance to the Maida Vale tunnel; almost a quarter mile-long, the soil and rubble that was removed whilst it was being excavated was transported just half a mile away and used for the building of Lord's cricket ground.

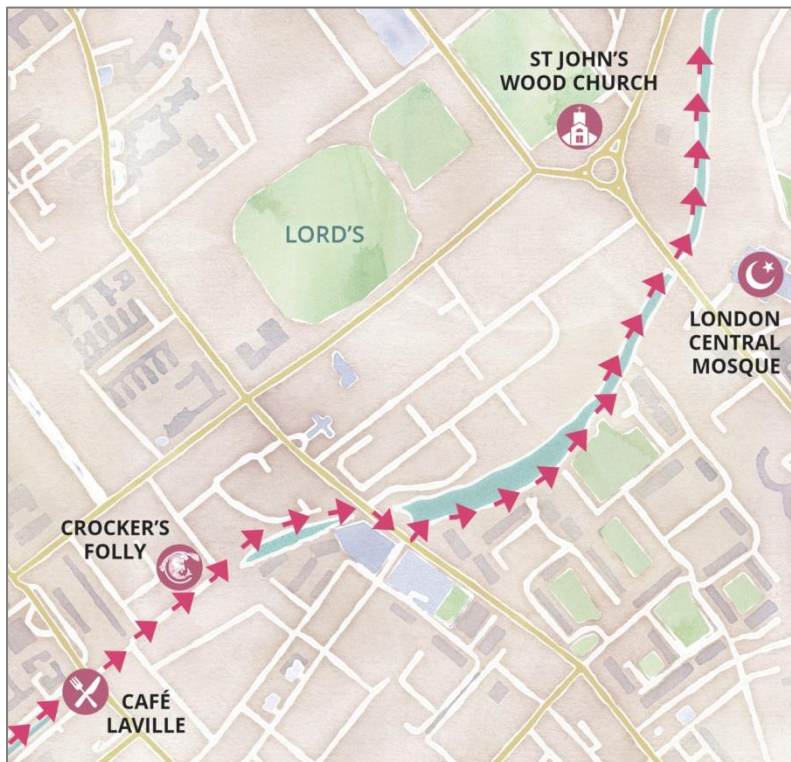
There is no towpath through the tunnel – the horses were unhitched and led by road – the way we now walk – to the other end of the tunnel, whilst the 'bargees' had the unenviable task of laying on their backs and propelling the boats by 'walking' on the tunnel roof. It can't have been a very pleasant job!

I like the quirky looking six-storeyed redbrick and stone terracotta apartment building on the corner of Blomfield Road and the Edgware Road that's in front of you – there are a number of fascinating houses here, including the mock-Tudor Clifton Court opposite.

Cross over the busy Edgware Road – (fortunately, there are pedestrian crossing lights) and walk straight ahead up **Aberdeen Place** – the canal is of course now beneath you in the tunnel.

The **Edgware Road**, which starts at Marble Arch and from here becomes Maida Vale, is the A5, once part of the Roman Watling Street, and runs through the Midlands, eventually ending in Holyhead in North Wales.

The name Maida Vale comes from a pub in Edgware Road called The Hero of Maida, which opened in 1810, four years after the British defeated Napoleonic forces at the Battle of Maida in southern Italy.



Route map 2

Walk along Aberdeen Place, cross Northwick Terrace and on your left you'll see a lovely row of terraced houses – the first house (number 32) was the family home of Wing Commander Guy Gibson, the famous airman who led the incredibly dangerous Dambusters Raid in the Second World War. The raid led to him being awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest military honour. There's a 'Blue Plaque' on the front of the house.

On the corner at the end of the street is **Crocker's Folly**, a renowned Grade II listed pub. It was built and named the Crown Hotel in 1898 by Frank Crocker; he had been told that the

terminus of the newly formed Great Central Railway was to be built nearby. In building the hotel he spared no expense – fifty different kinds of marble were used; rare wood for the panelling, Romanesque columns and carved mahogany. Unfortunately for him, the railway company changed its route and the hotel became a financial disaster. It eventually closed and for many years was left abandoned, but more recently it has reopened as both a pub and Lebanese restaurant and renamed Crocker's Folly. Being a listed building has meant all the original features inside have been fully restored and it really is lovely.

Walk straight ahead, across the street. You will see an alleyway to the right of the block of flats. **Walk down** – and pass through the iron gate and down the metal staircase – (at the bottom you can look back into the Maida Vale tunnel) – **and continue ahead on the towpath.**

Carry on through the next short tunnel which passes under Lisson Grove and continue along the towpath. High above you is the huge **St John's Wood electricity generating station**, which was built in the 19th century and was at one-time the largest power station in Britain. Further along the canal towpath you might notice green steel cabinets marked 'National Grid'. They are here because years ago high voltage electricity cables from the power station were laid under the path – thankfully, they chose this option rather than ugly overhead pylons.

The canal widens at this point as this used to be a wharf where cargo boats were loaded and unloaded and transferred to the Marylebone railway station goods yard. Now it's used as moorings for residential houseboats.

It is fascinating to see how many of them have managed to create tiny gardens alongside the canal path – some with attractive shrubs and plants, tables and chairs and even little garden sheds! However, make sure you step carefully over the little 'humps' in the path that carry the mains services to each of the boats – most are painted yellow, but some are easy to miss.

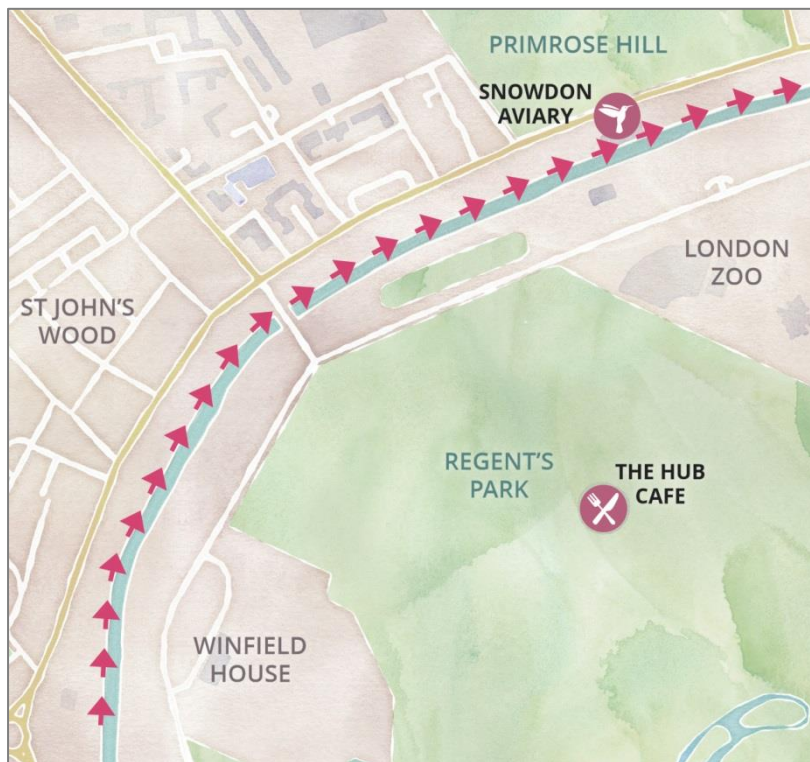
Pass under three railway bridges (Bridges 3A, 4 & 5) that carry two main lines into Marylebone station.

Now there's a complete change of scenery as you are approaching the northern edge of Regent's Park. (I have put more information about the Regent's Park in the appendix below.)

If you look to the right after the next bridge – **Number 7 – Park Road Bridge** – you can see the minaret on top of the enormous London Central Mosque that's situated on the north-western edge of the park.

The grand mansions on your right were built as part of John Nash's original plan for Regent's Park. He had planned to build more along this stretch of the canal, but developers were put

off buying the plots because of concerns that potential wealthy residents might not want to live here in case their wives and daughters could overhear the bad language of the barges!.



Route map 3

One of the largest mansions that you see from the towpath is **Winfield House**, is the home of the US Ambassador to the UK. Several years ago he was said to have invited 3,000 guests to his July 4th Independence Day party and these included some of the most famous names in Britain at the time. Numerous leading politicians such as David Cameron through to stars from the world of film and music all got the highly-prized invites. Mind you, his twelve-acre garden – second only in size in London to the gardens of Buckingham Palace – can certainly take a giant garden party.

Winfield House, which is set in twelve and a half acres of private gardens, was built on the site of one of eight villas (we pass them shortly) that had been constructed by John Nash when Regent's Park was being built. The original house was purchased in the 1930's by Barbara Hutton, the heiress to the Woolworth family fortune (they of one of the earliest 'bargain chain stores' which were a feature of high streets and shopping malls across the USA and Britain for many decades in the 20th century).

She had a new house built on the site in a Neo-Georgian architectural style, but later 'sold' it to the US Government for the princely sum of \$1, and in 1955 it became the residence of the United States Ambassador to Great Britain. (And the name Winfield ... that was the middle name of her grandfather, Frank Winfield Woolworth.)

In addition to the grand mansions on your right, there are some luxurious apartment buildings on your left in Prince Albert Road – needless to say prices are quite astronomical, with three-bedroom flats going for anything from £3½ million upwards.

The next bridge, **Chalbert Bridge (No.8)**, was built to carry a pipe across the canal, through which the River Tyburn flows. The Tyburn starts at Hampstead and empties into the River Thames; rather conveniently, it also supplies water to the Regent's Park lakes. The bridge also provides pedestrian access into Regent's Park.

The scenery now becomes quite rural, and at times it's hard to believe you are in the middle of London.

Bridge No.9 has quite a history. Officially called **Macclesfield Bridge**, it is more commonly known as 'Blow up Bridge', which is as a result of it doing precisely that nearly 150 years ago. A line of barges was being towed by a steam tug and one of them, laden with sugar, barrels of petroleum, as well as five tons of gunpowder that was being taken to a quarry in the Midlands, caught fire just as it passed under the bridge. Not surprisingly the blast was massive, killing the crew, destroying the bridge and blowing out the windows of houses up to a mile away. There were great fears that it may have caused wild animals from the nearby Regent's Park Zoo to escape, so the army were called in to search the area in case any had. There hadn't! The bridge was quickly rebuilt, even using the same iron columns as before, which are the ones you see today. However, the pillars were put back the other way around, so you can now see the marks left by the horses' towing ropes on both sides.

There now follows another fairly long and peaceful stretch with the zoo beginning to become more evident on both sides, particularly after the **Primrose Hill Bridge (No.10)**.

There is a lovely, (but perhaps somewhat tiring) walk from Bridge No.10 to the top of Primrose Hill, which is over on your left. There are some good views back across London from the top of the hill, so you may like to visit it – perhaps walking from Chalk Farm tube station on another occasion.

The London Zoo now becomes very evident, especially when you reach the 'Snowdon Aviary'. It was so named because it was designed by Lord Snowdon, (previously Anthony Armstrong-Jones) and when it opened in the 1960s was quite revolutionary, being the first walk-through aviary in the world. It's basically a giant net that is strung under tension between a 'skeleton' of poles. The aviary closed in September 2018 in advance of its restoration and conversion into a primate exhibit and 'community learning space', which will still have some exotic birds flying around.

Bridge No.11 enables visitors to the zoo to cross from the attractions on one side of the canal to the other, as does **Bridge No.12**. The waterbus from Little Venice to Camden stops here, but it's only for visitors to the zoo to get on or off.



Route map 4

By the time you are at the **Outer Zoo Bridge, No.13**, you might think you're imagining seeing what appears to be a Chinese 'junk' ahead in the distance. You aren't imagining it! It's a moored floating Chinese Restaurant called the **Feng Shang Princess** that was built in the early 1980s specifically for this location.

It's moored in **Cumberland Basin**, at the start of a one-time extension to the canal that ran for half a mile to the Cumberland Market, near Euston. It wasn't used for long, and as early as the 1850s it was regarded as being "no better than a stagnant, putrid, watery ditch". It was finally blocked off in 1938 but a good use was made of the water in it, as it was used by firefighters during the Second World War to refill their pumps when putting out fires in the West End. Another use for the disused canal came even later in the war when it was used as a dumping ground for the thousands of tons of rubble from the many bombed and ruined buildings in the City that had to be demolished. Since then, a section of it has been used as a car park for the zoo.

The canal makes a sharp left turn under the **Prince Albert Road Bridge (No.14)** with St Mark's Church on the left. The church was built in 1853, destroyed in the Second World War and completely rebuilt in 1957.

Bridge No.15 – Regent's Park Road Bridge – is just a couple of hundred yards further on and things change again. I like the row of houses on the right-hand bank (one of which is shown below), especially as most of them have gardens that front the canal – and private moorings as well.

Midway between the two bridges look out for house where they obviously have fresh milk every day as it has its own cow on the balcony. (Don't worry – it maybe life-sized but it's not real!) At this point, also notice that the canal bank has a small indent – this is where a ramp was constructed to enable any horses that were used to pull the barges and might have fallen into the water, to be 'fished' out. A plaque, mounted on the wall on your left, explains this.

The next bridge is **Fitzroy (No.16)** and this is followed almost immediately by two railway bridges (Nos.17 and 18) which carry mainline trains into Euston station.

It's now a distinctly different scene again; one of the aspects of London that I love is how some of the most upmarket areas can be just yards away from areas that are decidedly grubby! This is the case here, as it's where some of the more industrialised stretches of the canal begin. The canal widens out into a small basin where there would have been wharves where cargo would have been loaded and unloaded. Opposite, there's an unusual modern apartment building ... but when you hear the noise of the trains that pass by every couple of minutes, you wonder why anyone would want to live there. Most of the apartments have balconies that overlook the canal where residents can sit on a summer evening ... but with that noise?

Ahead the canal narrows, and you see the '**Pirate Castle**', complete with a castellated bridge over the canal (**Bridge No.20A**).

The 'castle' was built by the famous (though I doubt many people would know of him) 20th century architect Richard Seifert. Some say Seifert has had more influence on London's skyline than anybody else, with the possible exception of the German bombers between 1940 and 1942. His list of 'prestigious developments' is said to be longer than even Christopher Wren's. However, I'm not sure they would all be regarded as architectural gems, as they include Tower 42 (formerly Nat West Tower) and the towering 1960s Centre Point at the junction of Charing Cross Road and Oxford Street, to name just two. He built this 'Pirate Castle' in the late 1970s between abandoned warehouses on the canal.

It was the idea of the eccentric Viscount St David, who wanted a centre for children to learn and enjoy water sports. (And if you want to know just how eccentric he was, his real name was Jestyn Austine Plantagenet Philips – the son of Baroness Strange of Knockin, Hungerford and De Moleyns. As they say, "you just couldn't make it up"!)

The water sports centre had started with just a narrow boat to give children the opportunity to go on the water, but quite quickly, obviously with his encouragement, the children began stopping passing boats and, with collecting tins in their hands, would 'hold them to ransom', not letting them pass until they dropped in a few coins. A little later they even 'captured' the Lord Mayor of London and 'held him to ransom' in their Pirate Headquarters 'dungeon'. He was quickly 'freed' when some of his wealthy fellow councillors made individual donations to the charity. It was all done with great humour and received lots of excellent publicity.

The money the children raised enabled The Pirate Castle to modernise and extend its facilities, which meant disabled children could also take part. It's now used by thousands every year, learning such skills as canoeing, kayaking and canal boating. They take all ages and all disabilities, all social and educational needs, but where possible, concentrate on children who are disadvantaged and vulnerable. Referrals come from social services, schools and others who work with such children. It's a very worthwhile charity indeed. More info – <https://www.thepiratecastle.org/>.

The castellated building on the left of the bridge encompasses a water-cooling station. This supplies water to cool the electricity cables (which I mentioned earlier) that were built under the towpath to prevent the cables from overheating.

Next on your left are the extensive brick buildings of Gilbey's Gin, now converted into residential apartments. These cover an extensive area, though you can't actually appreciate that from the canal. Besides distilleries, Gilbey's had enormous bonded warehouses that also stored the wines they imported from around the world. (This area of Camden was renowned for the number of gin distilleries it had.)

The footpath rises up over a small inlet that allowed boats to access the underground basin of the Gilbey's warehouses. Take a look over the railings to your left and you can see them.

You have now reached Camden Market.

You will shortly see a narrow archway on your left that leads into the market, but I suggest you delay going in for a few minutes and continue on up the raised cobbled 'towpath' that goes over the little black and white bridge. (The reason for the cobbles was to make it easier for the horses towing the barges, who would also have to cross over here.)

Pause for a moment on the little bridge – it's a good place to take photos. Beneath and in front of you are the 'double' **Hampstead Road Locks** – informally known as Camden Lock. This is the highest point on the canal, which now begins to drop down as the canal heads east towards the Thames at Limehouse.

Ahead of you is the **Hampstead Road Bridge**, where we head next. On your left is a little 'wharf' where barges once loaded and unloaded – it's now where the waterbuses run from here to Little Venice and is surrounded by the market's food court.

Finally, to your right is the enormous **Wetherspoon's 'Ice Wharf Bar'**. It's built on a site alongside an ice wharf that was built in 1837. Ships carrying blocks of ice from Norway would sail to London, unloading their cargo at Limehouse on the River Thames and there it would be unloaded and put onto barges. The ice would be unloaded here in Camden and taken to be stored in the adjacent 'ice wells' – deep pits dug out, lined with clay, brick, timber and straw – until needed to be sold.

However, before ice began being imported, the only source of it was from frozen canals and rivers. Bargees, and others who made their living from the Regent's Canal, would be badly

affected in winter when, with seemingly much colder weather than we have today, the waters would freeze over, sometimes for weeks at a time. Not being able to work, the barges wouldn't be paid and in order to try and earn enough money to buy food they would turn to cutting out chunks of the frozen canal water. Unfortunately, the water was usually filthy, disease ridden, often with the rotting bodies of dead cats and dogs. This they would sell to the ice stores, such as the one here, who in turn would supply it to dairies, butchers, the bars in London's posh hotels and clubs – even to houses in wealthy neighbourhoods. Hence the rapid growth in the popularity of the pure, clean, hygienic ice from Norway, which was vastly superior.

The need for ice increased further when Italian immigrants settled in nearby Clerkenwell, bringing with them their skills and traditions of ice-cream making. Londoner's quite soon got a taste for ice-cream, which was sold in special parlours and by boys on bicycles in the streets.

Indeed, by 1875, demand by Londoner's for ice had grown so much that around 175,000 tons a year were coming in by ship from Norway. To cope with this, more ice wells were dug near here and at King's Cross.

If you'd like to find out more about the ice wells, one has been restored in the Canal Museum near to King's Cross station. For more information see the [Canal Museum website](#).

I have also put a little more information about the ice wells in the appendix.

Continue on now to the Hampstead Road Bridge just a few yards in front, which carries Camden High Street over the canal.

If you don't want to visit Camden Market and wish to finish your walk here and return to central London, then ...

To do so by tube – turn right down Camden High Street, passing numerous shops selling more of the same touristy stuff, and having passed a couple more markets on either side of the road, you will reach **Camden Town tube station**. It's about an 8–10-minute walk. (The entrance is around the corner in Kentish Town Road.)

Camden Town station is served by the Northern line – remember though that the line splits after this stop. One line, called the Bank Branch, goes to Angel Islington, Old Street, Moorgate, Bank/Monument, and across the river to London Bridge. The other line, known as the Charing Cross Branch, goes to King's Cross/St Pancras, Warren Street, Goodge Street, Tottenham Court Road (change for the Central line), Leicester Square, Charing Cross, Embankment, and across the river to Waterloo and various points further south.

To return to central London by bus, then when you reach the bridge turn left, walk under the railway bridge with its colourful 'Camden Market' sign and continue ahead for several hundred yards (it now becomes Chalk Farm Road). On the right-hand side of the road you will see the bus stops.

The bus routes you are most likely to need are –

Route 24 goes to Pimlico via Tottenham Court Road station (for Oxford Street), Cambridge Circus, Leicester Square, Trafalgar Square/Horse Guards Parade, Parliament Square, St James's station, Westminster Cathedral and Victoria station.

Route 27 goes to Chiswick, via Warren Street station (Euston Road), Regent's Park, Harley Street, Baker Street, Marylebone station, Edgware Road, Paddington station, Notting Hill, Olympia (Kensington), Hammersmith, and on to Chiswick.

Route 168 goes to Old Kent Road, via Mornington Crescent station, Warren Street station (Euston Road), Tavistock Square, Russell Square, Southampton Row, Holborn station, Aldwych (for Covent Garden/Strand), Waterloo Bridge, Waterloo station, Elephant & Castle and Old Kent Road.

If you'd like to take a look in Camden Market – and providing you have some energy and strength left then I do suggest you do, even if it's only for a few minutes. It's now a world famous tourist destination.

The market is quite a maze of a place, so to make it easier for first time visitors I've put together this little tour. However, things do change – shops and stalls move about ... so this can only be a guide. But if you do get a little lost then there are plenty of signs and people to ask.

The history of the market is quite fascinating, so I have written more about it in the appendix, including a section that explains the background to the Horse Tunnel, the Stables and Hospital, which you see when walking through it.

To get there turn left and walk over the Hampstead Road Bridge and turn left up the raised path with the canal on your left. When you come to a little 'beer garden' (for want of a better word), turn right down the stone steps, and at the bottom turn left – you are now in the outdoor 'food court' (more correctly known as the **West Yard**). The range of food and the quality of it is excellent – so if you are hungry, it's a good place to have something to eat.

Walk to the right (the rear) of the food court area and pass under the archway beneath the **West Yard sign**. Walk through one of the shops facing you – don't worry, you can – this takes you into the passageway behind them – do the same again with the next row of shops (perhaps beside the hat shop) which takes you into a narrow open-air alleyway with yet more shops opposite.

Here turn left, and just twenty yards along you will see the 'Horse Tunnel Market' sign. Turn left through the little 'tunnel' and immediately go through the gate on the right – this takes you into the **Stables Market**.

Although you may not at first realise it, this is a circular building, so provided you keep going in a sort of clockwise direction, then you'll end up back where you started – which is the aim. And there are some quite interesting stalls here.

Once you have done the full circle, take the passage to the immediate **left** of where you came in ... and you 'emerge' from under the railway arches – **turn left** alongside the arches and you are now in the **Stables Market**. A large sign on the wall gives the history of this part of the market, as well as displaying some photographs, all of which is quite really fascinating. I've have reproduced much of the information in the appendix.

Carry on walking up to the **left** – the glass canopy helps if the weather isn't too good. Although this is all part of the original stables, it's only fairly recently become a part of the market, and the quality of what's on sale here is somewhat better than in some other areas – in other words, less imported cheap tat.

Follow the passage to the end (where it bends there's an amazing mural on the wall) and it brings you out into an open-air yard with shops on both sides, some of them selling food. I suggest you ignore the flight of steps leading down to yet more shops on a lower level – and keep walking ahead until you come to a turning to the right marked '**North Yard**' (there's a large clock hanging above and probably a Doc Martens footwear shop). Should you need them, here you will find the entrance to the **toilets**. (They cost 40p to go in, but they are clean.)

Walk through the railway arch in front of you, then turn left and walk straight ahead along a 'canopied' walkway – this takes you out of the market and into **Camden High Street**. On your left is a railway bridge, with its colourful 'Camden Lock' sign. Turn right back over Hampstead Road Bridge and pick up the instructions for getting to the tube, as previously explained.

If you are going back to central London by bus, then turn left and again follow the details for finding the bus stops as also previously explained.

I mentioned earlier about the **waterbus** that goes back to Little Venice – if you are considering using this service then you need to check it's running in advance with the operator – the London Waterbus Company. You can't make reservations – as long as you've checked it's operating, then just turn up. The boat departs from the little 'dock' beside the food court and the journey takes between 50 and 60 minutes.

I hope you've enjoyed the walk. Please let me know your comments, criticisms, suggestions, etc. It really does help.

A future walk will be from Camden Market to King's Cross, a distance of just three-quarters of a mile, continuing on to Islington, which is a further mile.

The walk will eventually continue to Limehouse, where the canal joins the River Thames.

APPENDIX TO THE REGENT'S CANAL WALK

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PADDINGTON

Firstly, the name. It came from a 'farmer' named 'Padda', who in 958 owned land in the area. The 'ton' was added later, as this means 'the settlement or village of', so Paddington was the settlement of Padda.

The history of Paddington is closely wrapped up in transportation; besides the terminus for the Great Western Railway, one of the principle roads into the city is the A40 – now also the eastern extension of the M40. It runs for 260 miles, from Fishguard in the very west of Wales, through Brecon, Cheltenham, the Cotswolds, and Oxford. For hundreds of years it was a very important highway – not only was Oxford important, but so were the Cotswolds. That area had become rich as a result of sheep farming, and wool was one of the 'staples' of the early English economy, with much of the trading taking place in London. However, by the time of the industrial revolution, the coal, iron and steel from South Wales were also becoming vital to London's economy.

But of course, it wasn't just the road and rail links ... the Grand Union Canal, which, as I explain under that section, was extended to allow goods from the industrialised Midlands to be brought into the heart of Paddington, as well as onwards into other parts of the city, the River Thames and then the world beyond.

PADDINGTON STATION

Isambard Kingdom Brunel was only 27 years old when leading businessmen in Bristol decided they wanted a railway to London and chose him to do the job. He was already a successful engineer, having worked with his father on the revolutionary tunnel under the Thames between Wapping and Rotherhithe.

Travelling by horse and cart, he personally surveyed every mile of the possible route between London and Bristol. Having done so, he then had to design the numerous bridges, viaducts and tunnels on his proposed route. By the summer of 1838, the section between London and Maidenhead had opened, though the rest of the line to Bristol, which was by far the more difficult, opened sixteen years later.

Much of Brunel's inspiration for the design of Paddington station came from the engineering wonder called the Crystal Palace. It had been built in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition of 1851 and its construction, using just glass and iron, was revolutionary.

He opened the first part of the new station in 1838, though it was smaller than it is today and not quite on the same site, being then in the nearby Bishop's Bridge Road. It opened on its present site in 1854, with the three original arched roofs that you see today over platforms 1–8. Even though it was then the largest covered railway station in the world,

Brunel had planned it to be even larger. However, as so often happened with his 'vision', the costs were becoming so high he had to reduce its size. But as rail travel soon boomed beyond anyone's belief (except Brunel's!), it was later extended.

Mind you, part of Brunel's enthusiasm for the railway came from his idea – and a very grand and admirable one too – for the railway to link with the docks in Bristol, thus enabling travellers to cross the Atlantic to America in one of his own ships!

In the early 20th century, the station was extended again in order to cover additional platforms – so if you look up you can see the difference in the roof that covers platforms 1 to 8 and the roof above platforms 9 to 16. Brunel's original revolutionary glass roof lasted until the station was renovated and modernised a few years ago, when polycarbonate replaced the glass.

And the Underground at Paddington ...

In 1863, just seven years after the line to Bristol was opened, Paddington became the starting point for London's first ever underground line – the Metropolitan – which ran as far as Farringdon. (Now part of the Circle and Hammersmith & City line.)

Talking of the Underground ... the most exciting development in London for many years is the new Crossrail. Now nearing completion, it's been the biggest ever infrastructure project in Europe – and certainly the most challenging. Recently renamed the Elizabeth Line, it links Reading in the west with stations in both Essex and Kent, whilst travelling under London from Paddington right through to the east of the city – thirteen miles of tunnel in total. It will be serving a number of major stations in London, including Paddington, Bond Street, Tottenham Court Road, Farringdon, Liverpool Street, Whitechapel and Canary Wharf – but many more in both the west and east suburbs of the city.

Costing £15 billion, construction started in 2009 and has seen major disruption in many parts of London, with large areas having to be demolished to both aid the tunnelling as well as the rebuilding of a number of major tube stations.

The new line will provide an alternative to the heavily overcrowded existing Central Line, as well as significantly reducing journey times for people travelling across the city. It was due to open in late 2018 but has now been delayed by a year.

THE GRAND UNION CANAL

The Grand Union is the longest canal in Britain and extends for 137 miles, from Birmingham to London. Its total length is considerably longer, as there are a number of 'arms' that lead off from the 'main canal' into towns including Slough, Leicester and Northampton.

The name 'Union' indicates that it wasn't built as one enterprise, but as amalgamations of various independent waterways.

The 'Paddington Arm' runs from Bulls Bridge, between Hayes and Southall in the London borough of Hillingdon, just a few miles from the southern end of the canal at Brentford, where it links with the River Thames. From Bulls Bridge it's approximately thirteen miles to its junction at 'Little Venice' with the Regent's Canal. From here there's a short stretch that runs into the 'Paddington Basin', just a couple of hundred yards from the Edgware Road.

REGENT'S CANAL

The Regent's Canal opened in 1820, the brainwave of London businessman Thomas Homer. The Grand Union had already opened, linking Birmingham in the heart of the rapidly industrialising Midlands, with Paddington in the west of London.

Homer could see the potential of a new canal that would link with the London docks on the Thames, whilst at the same time, providing easier access for freight to both north and east London.

The area now known as 'Little Venice' was chosen as the point where the Grand Union would link with both its 'Paddington Branch' as well as the Regent's Canal, hence the wide 'basin' at this point.

The Regent's Canal, which runs for 8 ½ miles around the north of the city through Camden, St Pancras, Kings Cross and the East End – all very industrialised areas in the 19th and early 20th century – had two-way traffic. It brought agricultural produce, coal and manufactured goods (and much more) into London, either unloading at various wharves along the route, or taking them to the canal's end at Limehouse on the River Thames to be shipped overseas. Equally, goods from abroad were unloaded in the London Docks at Limehouse and taken by barge to various places along the Regent's Canal in London or carried on through to the Grand Union for transport to the Midlands. The story of the canal, which was designed by the famous architect and town planner John Nash, is closely linked to his other major project ... Regent's Park ... that we cover shortly.

Constructing the canal was certainly challenging – in just an 8 ½ mile length, the canal has 12 locks, nine-foot bridges, six road bridges, ten railway bridges and two tunnels. However, the canal quickly became a success, and it wasn't long before sufficient tolls had been collected to pay off the cost of construction. Following its completion, companies were eager to build warehouses and factories along its banks, with Pickford's, now mainly known for their removals business, having a fleet of over 100 barges in a specially built basin at City Road.

Within seventeen years of the canal opening, London's first mainline station was built nearby at Euston, offering a far quicker link with Birmingham (though ironically, much of the material for building it was brought to the site by canal!) This new railway soon began to threaten the canal's profitability, though as it turned out, they needn't have worried, at least

not for another few years, as in the late 19th century the country's growing population and increasing employment led to a huge increase in the demand for goods. The result was a massive increase in the amount of freight needing to be moved. In addition, demand by factories as well as householders for coal, and later the rapid electrification of London, all meant power stations also needed constant large supplies of coal. All of this helped to keep the barges busy and the canal profitable. (Indeed, the reason that so many of the early power stations were built alongside the canal was simply because it was the best way to obtain their supplies of coal. It was brought down from the coal fields of the north-east of England by colliers – small coastal freighters that carried coal on what was almost a shuttle service.)

Eventually though, despite cutting their tolls and charges, the canal couldn't compete with the railways and became unprofitable. At one time, plans were even being drawn up for the canal to be turned into a railway line, linking the new main stations of Paddington, Euston, St Pancras and Kings Cross and running all the way through to Limehouse on the Thames. Although I love the canal, I have to say that in reality, this would probably have been an excellent idea – as it would have carried freight as well as passengers. However, there was no money for the scheme and it eventually floundered. (Some years later, the Circle Line did cover part of this route, though of course it doesn't carry freight.)

By the early to mid-20th century, the Regent's Canal was hardly used and in places had silted up, whilst the once booming warehouses on the wharves were being abandoned and left derelict. In 1948, canals across the country were taken out of private hands and placed under the control of the British Transport Commission, which eventually became the British Waterways Board, similar to the way railways became British Railways.

The big change began to occur in the 1970s and certainly 80s and 90s when there was growing interest in the use of canals for leisure purposes, both for canal boating, hikers and cyclists. In addition, the many derelict warehouses became sought after by developers for conversion into luxury apartments. As a result, these days the canal seems more popular than ever.

REGENT'S PARK

At the same time as ideas for the canal were being debated, plans were being developed for a new park – known as Regent's Park. In the 16th century, the area had been one of King Henry VIII's hunting grounds. It later became the privately-owned Marylebone Park, owned by the Duke of Portland. His lease ended in 1810 and the Crown offered a prize for the best plans for the entire area. Responsibility for the work was eventually given to John Nash, a well-known architect and town planner, who eventually became responsible for the Regency architecture of much of central London. Amongst other notable projects, he was responsible for public buildings such as Buckingham Palace, Clarence House and the Mall, much of Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus, whilst further afield, he designed the Royal Pavilion in Brighton and even Blaise Castle and Blaise Hamlet in Bristol.

The Prince Regent (who later became King George IV), had thoughts of having a 'Grand Summer Pavilion' in the park and asked John Nash, with whom he was particularly friendly, to include in his plans a design for a 'grand route' from the park, through central London to St James. Regent Street was one of the results of this, which when it was built was far grander than it is today. The 'Grand Summer Pavilion' never became a reality, but Regent's Park certainly did, with Nash building the grand houses that we see in it today.

It is now one of the most expensive areas of London with huge white stuccoed houses, many with Greek or Roman architectural features. Bizarrely, twenty years or so ago, some of the area had fallen out of favour with the rich and elite. Houses which sold then for as little as £800,000 are now going for up to £20million.

Nash, who had also become a director of the company which was building the canal, drew up the plans for its route and wanted it to run through the middle of his new park. These plans even included a large lake in the centre of the park through which the canal would pass. However, both the 'well to do' residents of Marylebone, as well as potential investors in Nash's housing schemes, didn't like the idea of rough, drunken bargemen passing through the area – they were even concerned that prospective house purchasers might be put off in case their wives overheard the bad language. As a result, Nash was forced to change his plans and make the canal go around to the north of the park. And they didn't leave it at that; to avoid even having to see the barges, the posh local residents insisted on the banks being built up on both sides by many more feet than was necessary. (A smaller lake than he had proposed did, of course, get built in the park).

LONDON ZOO

London Zoo is the world's oldest and largest scientific zoo. In 1826 Sir Humphrey Davy* (famous for inventing the safety lamp), Sir Stamford Raffles (one-time Governor of Singapore – hence the famous Raffles Hotel) and others established the Zoological Society of London for the scientific study of animals. The society's Zoological Gardens opened in Regent's Park in 1828 and in the following year George IV granted the ZSL a royal charter.

The zoo opened to the public in 1847 and for 150 years has been extremely popular. However, attitudes to zoos began to change and by the 1990s, there were fears it might have to close. When the public realised this, it prompted a huge campaign to support the zoo which meant massive investment went in to providing better facilities and environments for the animals. For example, the new lion enclosure replicates a real National Park. It is also famous for its Aquarium, which opened in 1853 and was the first in the world.

** And Sir Humphrey Davy's story is fascinating ... He was a chemist from Cornwall, who at one time lived in Bristol where he set up the famous Pneumatic Institute in Hotwells to explore the medical powers of gases. Here, together with Thomas Beddoes, he discovered such things as*

nitrous oxide – otherwise known as laughing gas – and one result of this was his great friendship with an odd bunch of ‘drug fuelled literary types’ including Thomas Chatterton, Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (he must have been on something to write the Tale of the Ancient Mariner!) Davy invented much more – anaesthetics for example, and of course, the famous ‘Davy Lamp’, credited with saving the lives of thousands of miners throughout the world.

CAMDEN TOWN

Camden was originally a sleepy country village with just a few farms and houses that lined the main road out of London heading to the north of the country. By the early 19th century, the Regents Canal had been constructed, together with a link from Paddington to the Grand Union Canal that linked the docks on the River Thames with the rapidly industrialising Birmingham and the Midlands canal. Camden became an important and busy ‘interchange’, where goods would be unloaded both for storage in the warehouses that were being built alongside the canal, as well as for transporting by horse and wagon across London.

Until not so long ago, it remained a very poor working-class area. Unlike many areas of London, where newly opened railway lines built stations in the suburbs, thus attracting a new phenomenon – middle class ‘commuters’ – no such ‘local stations’ were built on this new mainline into Euston, so it tended to remain populated by many poor Irish and Scottish immigrants. By the 1960s, some of them were ‘making good’ and began moving out to other more ‘prosperous’ areas of the city, so students, attracted by the cheap rents, began to move in. This was one of the reasons Camden began to develop a lively music and arts scene – many famous young musicians started out here, from Noel Gallagher to Amy Winehouse. It became a real centre of the ‘underground’ scene and then the punk scene, with large numbers of clubs and pubs offering live music – something very much still the case today.

CAMDEN’S FAMOUS MARKET

Camden Market was built on the site of what was once a massive ‘interchange’, where warehouses were built on the side of the Regent’s Canal to allow goods to be unloaded, stored and subsequently transported by horse and wagon across London.

When the Grand Junction Railway opened a few years later, providing vital transport links from London to Birmingham and the industrial heart of England, this ‘interchange’ between the rail, canal and road network rapidly expanded. Although the railways were using steam engines, the ‘shunting’ of the goods wagons in the adjacent Euston sidings was carried out by horses, who of course, also pulled the barges and the hundreds of hauliers’ carts that distributed everything across London.

Horses obviously needed stables and the original small buildings of just one storey soon became insufficient for the demand. Pickfords, for example, who were agents of the Railway Company, operated their own large warehouses and used over two hundred horses.

Horses and trains originally moved and worked on the same level, but this soon proved to be too dangerous, so a special horse passage was constructed through the catacombs that had been built under the railways in order to raise the levels of the tracks. There were even underground stables, and these remain today and can be found at the end of the vaults that are now used as shops. One passage finished at the horse hospital and another at the stables which allowed a safe route for the livestock who could pass through it unattended and without being frightened by all the activity around them and fear of injury or death from the trains.

Of course, with so many horses, blacksmiths, saddlers and wagon repair workshops were also needed and in the early 1880s, with over four hundred horses here, extra levels were built, linked by ramps and bridges, very much as we see them today. Part of the restoration works that have been, and are still being, undertaken include replacing the bridges and restoring the shops, to allow people, rather than horses, to walk around easily and in safety.

It has all been remarkably well preserved, and this is now the finest example of industrial stabling remaining in England.

By the mid-19th century, this Camden Goods Yard, as it had become known, was the largest of its type in the world. It thrived for many years, but by the 1970s, the majority of the old warehouses were derelict, as were the adjacent disused railway sidings, timber yards, etc. A mixture of students, as well as young 'starving artists' (as they were sometimes nicknamed) started moving in, attracted as always by the cheap rents for large spaces, ideal for studios and the like. Some had begun to open little stalls at weekends, where they would sell cheap antiques, 'New Age' and punk clothes – and it just grew from there.

Over the past few years, the market has expanded beyond anyone's imagination. It has spread from the outside yards into the adjacent stables, the horse hospital, etc., some of which is underground. Indeed, there is said to be a labyrinth of tunnels that were dug out for storage, which extend quite some distance in various directions, some of which are still derelict.

The market is now an amazing eclectic mix of stalls selling the affordable, interesting and quirky ... well, almost anything you can think of. Now there isn't just one market, but several – the Camden Lock Market (said to have been the first), the Camden Stables Market, the Horse Hospital Market, and then a little further along Camden High Street there's the Inverness Street Market, Camden Canal Market and Camden Buck Street Market.

And it's not just cheap clothes anymore! Besides the amazing food market, there are a large number of stalls selling anything from cheaply imported tourist 'tat and junk', alongside some very trendy – and not always cheap – 'arty crafty' stalls. Indeed, a number of young, up and coming designers – and not just of fashion – have stalls here. It's a great way to

showcase their work. In addition, there are a number of bars, clubs and restaurants, so whereas it was once only a daytime venue, it's now also popular at night.

Camden Market is now said to be one of the top three most popular tourist attractions in London, with summer weekends attracting crowds of up to half a million visitors. So many in fact, that at weekends the Camden Town tube station is 'inbound' only – so to get back to London, you have to walk to Chalk Farm or one of the other stations in the area.

However, I do wonder what the long-term future holds. A couple of years ago, a billionaire property magnate bought up much of the land the market is on, together with many of its buildings. Already a large area adjacent to the canal on the other side of Camden High Street is under development, with apartment and office buildings being erected. However, he has apparently said he wants to spend £300 million on 'improving and developing' the market. There is certainly a lot of improvement work taking place within the old stables markets, so let's hope.

CAMDEN AND THE ICE WELLS

I am grateful to a 'local-local' history website for the following information:

"The ice men would descend into the well in the early mornings by a steel ladder and spend up to two hours winching up the ice blocks to the surface. These could weigh from 2 to 4 hundredweight each and might have to be lifted fifty feet or more. The ice was laid in the 'ice table', where each man had to split his blocks with an ice pick into smaller pieces, suitable for the customers. These blocks, carefully swathed in sacking for insulation, were then delivered by cart to restaurants, fishmongers, and private houses. The men arrived back at the ice well for a second delivery by 8.30 in the morning. In hot weather, when the demand was high, they could deliver up to four loads a day."

There are many stories of the ice men walking all the way to London each Spring, from their villages in Switzerland, and back again when the cold weather set in. This travelling and the importation of ice has long ceased. One result of this was that the economies of both Norway and Ticino, the Italian part of Switzerland, where the men were traditionally forced to go abroad for work, were disrupted by the invention of the common refrigerator.

[Click this link](#) if you are interested in reading more about the ice wells and icemaking in London.