

A walk around Covent Garden

Updated: 8 May 2023

Length: About 2 miles

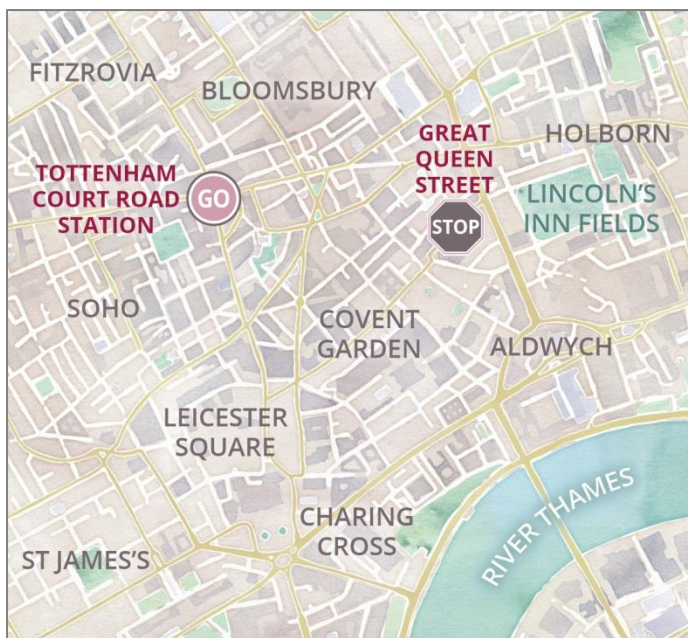
Duration: Around 3 – 4 hours

INTRODUCTION

The area now popularly known as Covent Garden has expanded considerably over the years. Whilst many people now assume it includes much of the area between Tottenham Court Road station and Holborn station, and down as far as the Strand in the south, more specifically it could be said to lie between Long Acre to the north, St Martin's Lane to the west, Drury Lane to the east and (probably) the Strand to the south.

However, with no 'fixed boundary', it's debatable to say where it starts and finishes, and areas such as St Giles and Seven Dials are included in this walk.

As always, the duration of the walk will depend not only on your pace but also on how many sights you visit along the way (or pubs you pop into) and whether you follow any of my suggested diversions to view some of the buildings just off the recommended route. However, I reckon this walk needs at least three hours in order to do Covent Garden justice.



GETTING HERE

Tottenham Court Road station is served by the Northern and Central tube lines and the Elizabeth line. There are also many buses that will take you close to this location, including the 1, 8, 12, 14, 19, 22, 38, 55, 73, 88, 94, 98, 139, 159, 176 and 390.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COVENT GARDEN

From being an orchard garden of Westminster Abbey to London's first residential square to its wholesale fruit and vegetable market, and now one of the city's most popular tourist, shopping and nightlife areas that attracts over 45 million visitors a year, Covent Garden has certainly had a remarkable history.

Recent archaeological investigations have shown that in the 7th century an Anglo-Saxon harbour and village were in existence at the southern edge of present-day Covent Garden. However, after the Viking invasion of Britain in the 9th century this disappeared, and the area was abandoned.

During the 13th century the fertile land here was claimed by the Abbot and Co[n]vent of St Peter's Abbey – the forerunners of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey – as a garden to provide them with fruit and vegetables. This 40-acre plot is the reason for the area's long-lasting name of 'Covent Garden'. (In those days the word 'convent' hadn't yet appeared in the English language. It was always 'covent' back then.)

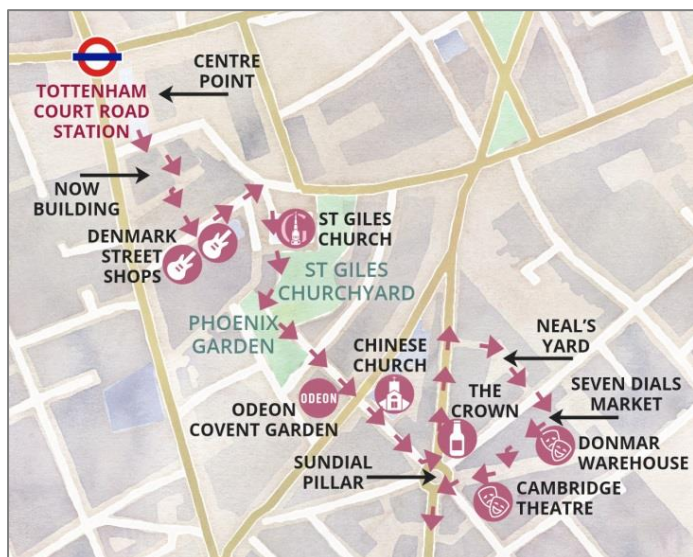
On this detail of Ralph Agas's map of London (c.1572) the walled garden is tinted green.



Note that the trees in the garden are nowhere near being to scale. Real fruit trees would have been a fraction of the size that Agas drew them, as would the animals and people in the surrounding fields and lanes.

Then, fast forwarding to the 17th century, the 5th Duke of Bedford, whose father had been given the land and had built Bedford House as his home, employed the famous architect Inigo Jones to build what is widely accepted as London's first 'residential square', setting the trend for numerous other squares in later years. The duke also granted permission for a few market stalls nearby, which over time saw it become London's biggest fruit, vegetable and flower market.

STARTING THE WALK



Route map 1

The walk begins outside **Tottenham Court Road** tube station, on the corner of Charing Cross Road and New Oxford Street.

It's a key central London junction, being at the crossroads of Oxford Street, Tottenham Court Road and Charing Cross Road and is served by numerous buses, whilst Tottenham Court Road station is served by the Elizabeth, Northern and Central lines.

If you've arrived by tube at the station, then leave by **Exit 4**, signed '**Charing Cross Road**'. The escalator will take you precisely to the point where the walk begins, which is in front of the two large gold and black cube-like buildings, (which the walk will pass between).

If you haven't arrived by tube, then head for the junction of **Charing Cross Road** and **New Oxford Street**. You'll see the two glass 'conservatory' exits from the tube station – walk to the rear of them, and you'll see the two large gold and black cube-like buildings.

We're standing at the corner of an area that for hundreds of years had been called 'St Giles'. It had gone from being one of the better class areas of London in the early 18th century to being one of the worst in the 19th and early 20th. This was once the site of one of London's notorious gallows; it was also where condemned prisoners being taken from Newgate prison by cart to the gallows at Tyburn, near Marble Arch, would be allowed to stop and enjoy a last glass of ale in the Bowl Inn, which stood where Centre Point stands today, looming over you.

Centre Point, the enormous 34-storey office tower block, has been a London landmark since it was built 1966 and regarded as being one of London's first skyscrapers. Previously offices, it was refurbished in 2016 and is now luxury apartments. (I recently saw a three-bedroomed apartment on sale here for over £7 million.) Though it is now Grade II listed, Centre Point was once described by the famous architectural critic Nikolaus Pevsner as "coarse in the extreme."

It was built as a speculative venture by the property magnate Harry Hymans, who leased the site back in the 1970s for 150 years for just £18,500 a year. Possibly a lot of money back then – but

certainly not now. At the time, it was regarded as a major turning point in the construction of high-rise structures.

The site was made difficult because of several tube tunnels and sewers beneath it and at the time it was believed to be impossible, or certainly very difficult, to build tower blocks like Centre Point on London's clay.

The construction engineer in charge of the project was Czechoslovakian-born Wilem Frichmann. He had survived the holocaust in the Second World War and came to Britain as a refugee in 1946.

He used a method of drilling close-packed piled foundations into the ground and designed the building to be as light as possible. The external structure was made of extremely strong precast Portland concrete, brought directly to the site from Portland in Dorset. Being pre-cast enabled the building to be constructed extremely quickly, actually at the rate of one storey a week. (It was a similar process to that which was used to construct New York's Empire State Building, though that was built at an incredible rate of four and a half storeys a week).

Once completed, the building lay empty for several years; the developer, Harry Hymans, wanted to let the entire building to one tenant and this took several years to achieve. He didn't seem bothered though as at the time land and property prices were rising. However, Centre Point became the scene of considerable protests about the unjustness of the building being left unoccupied during a time of increasing homelessness. A group of housing campaigners organised a weekend occupation of it. In another response a charity opened a homeless shelter close by and named it 'Centrepoin't' - which of course today is one of the country's largest charities that help homeless people.

From 1980 to 2014 the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) occupied much of Centre Point and after their departure work began the following year to convert it into residential use.

We start by walking through the passageway between the two open fronted video display areas in front of you, with the **Now Building** on your right and **Now Trending** on your left.

They are part of the enormous 'billion-pound' new development called **Outernet London**, which is comprised of sixteen separate buildings, some new and some restored, extending back to Denmark Street, which we visit shortly.

The unmissable floor-to-ceiling high resolution LED screens - 23,000 square feet of them - are said to be the "largest deployment of video screens in the world." These show constant film footage, ranging from spectacular nature scenes through to pop videos. It's apparently paid for by the promotional advertisements that appear at regular intervals, as well as hosting regular pop-up events.

Facing you at the end of the short passage is the entrance to the underground '**HERE**' event space. This inconspicuous doorway gives no indication that it's the entrance to a subterranean 2,000-capacity music & performance space (the largest new live events venue to be built in central London since the 1940s). This was a feat of engineering as it was excavated between the new Crossrail (Elizabeth) line and the buildings above.

Follow the short passage to the right, and then to the left (with yet more video screens), but as you do, notice the door on the right - the entrance to **a rooftop restaurant called Tattu**, which serves a Chinese-fusion menu, with Japanese and other influences. It is divided into a series of

sections which appear to have rather obscure names, such as Dragon, Koi, etc. When I enquired about this, I was told they were all names of 'powerful animals'. (No, I don't know why either.) But there are certainly some stunning views from some of the tables that overlook the top of Charing Cross Road. The small bar also has an outside seating area.

Behind the new development, Outernet also includes **Chateau Denmark**, which has hotel rooms and apartments spread across 16 buildings in Denmark Place and Denmark Street.

Rather than try to explain what Outernet is, I've taken some quotes from their 'enthusiastic' website. Indeed, as the *Guardian* newspaper pointed out in an article about the development ... "the project comes with virtuoso PR gobbledegook that deprives sentences of basic sense". The hotel apparently "brings together creative expression and fine architectural detail to present something fierce ... bedrooms come with strong accents of punk rock and a rebellious statement piece."

Outernet's own website describes it as "an immersive entertainment district in the heart of central London where communities can come together to enjoy culture in breath-taking new ways. We've brought together the best content partners and the latest immersive video technology to create new experiences for music, arts, culture and creators ... it is a global network of connected entertainment districts where communities can come together to enjoy culture in new breath-taking ways. We create & curate cultural moments allowing audiences to see the world differently."

So now you know!

The passageway leads you into **Denmark Street**, where we will be turning left ... but first notice the line of guitar and other musical instrument shops facing you. One of the oldest is **Rose Morris** over on your right, which was established in the 1920s. And as you walk along to the left you can see several more. It is fascinating to look into the windows of these shops and see the range of highly valuable 'vintage' guitars – and their prices! On a recent visit I saw a 1961 Fender priced at £14,000 and a 1952 Gibson for £13,000.

The street's long connection with music dates back to the 17th century. Then it was known for the printing of sheet ballads and some of the buildings still date back to around that time, particularly numbers 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10. Because of its large number of music shops the street became known from the 1920s as "Britain's Tin Pan Alley", after the Manhattan original.

In the early 1960s Denmark Street became the hub of London's modern music scene, with shops selling both music and instruments. There were also recording studios, bars and hangouts that hosted musicians including Elton John, David Bowie, the Rolling Stones and later the Sex Pistols. Paul Simon, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Wonder and Bob Marley all recorded here, and the Kinks even wrote a song about it. At one point, there were 12 live music venues within a five-minute walk of Tottenham Court Road, but thanks to rising commercial rents and the gentrification of the area by 2017 only one remained. Actually, the process was speeded up by the building of Crossrail (the Elizabeth line), which resulted in much demolition and redevelopment.

When the plans for the massive redevelopment of Denmark Street were announced, there were protests from people who feared many of the buildings were going to be demolished. However, now the redevelopment has taken place, it is clear that those worst fears were not realised and some of those original shops selling guitars and other instruments are still very much here.

Turn left along Denmark Street, where you pass **Hanks**, which proudly advertise that they are 'London's most famous guitar shop', though I notice it didn't actually open until some sixty years or so after Rose Morris.

Originally the street contained the offices of the UK's top sheet music publishers, whilst a number of shops selling instruments also opened here. Live music clubs, production facilities, music agents and managers offices were here. Indeed, anybody who had anything to do with popular music has been involved with Denmark Street at some stage.

The music publisher, Francis, Day and Hunter, had set up offices close by in 1897, and in 1911, the songwriter and music publisher Lawrence Wright opened at No. 8. They later moved to No. 19, which became known as Wright House. Here they began publishing the magazine Melody Maker and in 1952, another very popular music magazine, New Musical Express, started life here. It became known as the NME, becoming the UK's best-selling music paper and the first to list the top ten music charts.

Many bands have rehearsed and some recorded albums in studios in the street, including the Rolling Stones, who recorded their first two albums in Regent Sounds at No. 4. Other well-known music figures associated with the street include Elton John (who wrote several songs here and recorded cover versions of several of his well-known songs for the budget label 'Embassy'), the Kinks and Small Faces. In the early days of his career, David Bowie was so keen to be in the street that he camped here in a converted ambulance, whilst some years later The Sex Pistols launched their career from a flat in the street.

Sadly, over the past few years, the street had become quite rundown. There were rumours that some, or indeed many, of the buildings would be sold to a developer and the iconic music venues demolished. However, whilst the development company did buy a number of the buildings, rather than demolish buildings they embarked on a massive regeneration scheme, restoring some of the historic buildings, including one that over the past 300 or so years has been used as stables and blacksmith's forge and more recently the famous 12 Bar Club. Past performers there have included the Libertines, Jeff Buckley, Adele, KT Tunstall and Seasick Steve. The club had been closed and boarded up for several years but has reopened as The Lower Third – a reference to David Bowie's connections with the street.

The fictional character, Cormoran Strike, a private detective created by J K Rowling, alias Robert Galbraith, had his offices above 12 Bar Café in the long running BBC TV series Strike. The whole series was filmed in and around Denmark Street.

Interestingly, whilst the redevelopment was taking place, this particular building was placed on a concrete raft and moved out of the way, then lifted back on to its original site by a 750-ton crane.

In total the redevelopment has included three new music venues, including one that's underground, with a 2,000-capacity, as well as new shops, a restaurant, hotel and offices.

Continue straight ahead along Denmark Street and at the end you'll notice the complex of enormous colourful office and apartment buildings that have finally removed any last traces of the old St Giles, beyond the church that gave the district its name.

Walk past the front of the **Church of St Giles-in-the-Fields** and take the **second gated entrance down its left side**. The path leads you around the back of the church and through the gardens – it's quite a peaceful little area – then leave through the gate at the far end and walk down the short St Giles Passage.

The site of St Giles Church was once a leper hospital, founded here in 1101 by Queen Matilda, wife of Henry I. The hospital had a small chapel which, in 1542 and long after leprosy had died out in England, became a parish church.

In those days this was an isolated area, and the church served a large parish, much of it still countryside with just a few small hamlets – hence its name ‘In the Fields’. By 1600, the area had begun to be a wealthy suburb of London, and a much grander church was built in its place. However, within thirty years, that was demolished and another, even more grand church built. Finally, in 1734, as the population continued to increase, a new church was built in the popular Palladian style.

I’ll also mention here, though I explain more about it later, that in 1664–5 St Giles was badly affected by the plague and thousands of victims were buried in pits in the St Giles graveyard.

The church is open Monday – Friday 9 – 5pm, Saturdays 11 – 3pm and on Sundays during the morning and evening church services.

Whilst the area is no longer known as St Giles (as you’ve already seen, nearly all of the older buildings have now been demolished and replaced), it was once a wealthy suburb, outside of the jurisdiction of the City of London. In 1668, after the Great Fire of London had devastated so much of the old city, tens of thousands of people moved out, with many settling in St Giles. Later there was another influx of people leaving the countryside to seek work in London. These had few skills and little if any money. Then soon after, many hungry and poor immigrants arrived, particularly after the potato famine in Ireland. Again, few had either money or the skills appropriate for living in a city. (The situation was the same in the adjacent Seven Dials area, which I cover shortly.)

The result was a rapid rise in enormous social problems, particularly overcrowding and crime. A survey of the parish in 1849 revealed that the population had risen to almost 40,000 and in many of the crumbling and dilapidated houses there were between fifty and ninety people sleeping each night.

By the mid-19th century, the parish of St Giles had rapidly declined from once being described as “a most wealthy and populous parish”, into one of London’s worst and most notorious slum areas. It was a den of depravity, crime, vice and prostitution with countless brothels, with some having beds for up to 200 prostitutes. It was soon known as a ‘rookery’, which was a 19th-century term for the miserable housing found within some of the worst of the slum areas of London. Many families lived in these overcrowded, poorly ventilated and scantily equipped houses, often sharing just a small, single room. Corrupt landlords made large sums of money by packing dozens of desperate families into such houses. An enlightened clergyman, Thomas Beames, was so appalled by the conditions in these places that he wrote an eyewitness account in a book he published in 1850 called *The Rookeries of London*. In it he described the “human masses pent up, crowded, thrust together, crammed into courts and alleys, where, as by a fatal attraction, opposite houses grow together at the top, seeming to nod against one another, conspiring to shut out the little air which would pierce through for the relief of those beneath.”

St Giles was described as a “cesspit of humanity, a harbour for rebels & criminals” – and in John Timbs’ 1855 book *Curiosities of London* he wrote that it was “one dense mass of houses, through which curved narrow tortuous lanes, from which again diverged close courts ... the lanes were thronged with loiterers, and stagnant gutters, and piles of garbage and filth infested the air.”

Charles Dickens also wrote about it in the *The Old Curiosity Shop*, saying “How many people may there be in London who, if we had brought them deviously and blindfold to this street, fifty paces from the Station House and within call of Saint Giles’s church, would know it for a not remote part of the city in which their lives are passed? How many who, amidst this compound of sickening smells, these heaps of filth, these tumbling houses with all their vile contents, animate and inanimate, slimily overflowing into the black road, would believe they breathe this air?”

In 1847 New Oxford Street was built in an attempt to break up the notorious slums. This involved demolishing some of the more notorious alleys and tenements, but as always, the best intentions led to far worse overcrowding in other areas as the people were forced to move elsewhere.

On your right is the **Phoenix Garden**, an attractive community-run haven of greenery that’s open to the public during the day. Cross over **New Compton Street** and after just a few yards you reach **Shaftesbury Avenue**.

Cross over Shaftesbury Avenue into **Mercer Street**, alongside the **Chinese Church**. It was built in 1888 as a ‘Strict Baptist’ church and, after a confusing history, it became the Soho outreach centre of the Chinese Church in London in 2004. Services are held here every Sunday in Cantonese, Mandarin and English.

If you look back across Shaftesbury Avenue you can see the unusual frieze that runs along the front of the **Odeon cinema**, which opened in 1931 as the Saville Theatre – the last ‘live’ theatre to open in Shaftesbury Avenue. It is built in a distinctive art deco design, complete with the distinctive 125-ft frieze depicting ‘Drama through the Ages’. There are representations of ‘St Joan’, an ‘Imperial Roman Triumphal Procession’, ‘Harlequinade’, ‘War Plays’, etc. Prior to their installation, sections of the frieze were displayed at the Royal Academy in 1930. Along the top of the façade are a series of plaques representing ‘Art through the Ages’ which, as with the frieze, were sculpted by Gilbert Bayes.

The Saville Theatre suffered bomb damage in the Second World War, though it was quickly repaired and reopened. It had a complete turnaround in its fortunes in 1965 when it was leased by the impresario Brian Epstein to hold Sunday pop concerts, though plays continued to be performed during the week. It was like a ‘who’s who’ of the pop world in the 60s, with the likes of Junior Walker and the All Stars, Pink Floyd, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, The Who, Procol Harum, Fairport Convention, the Rolling Stones, the Bee Gees, Cream, Nirvana and many others.

Two of the last performers on the stage here (but not together) were Dennis Waterman in a play called ‘The Enemy’ and the drag artist Danny la Rue.

Shortly after, ABC (Associated British Cinemas) needing a showcase for movies being produced by their parent company (EMI), purchased the theatre and converted it into a two-cinema complex, fortunately keeping the exterior intact. Several major films had their premieres here – one in particular was *Murder on the Orient Express*, starring Albert Finney, which was attended by Her Majesty the Queen, HRH the Duke of Edinburgh and HRH the Princess Anne.

However, despite its luxurious interior it was too far from the major cinema area of Leicester Square and, after being sold, was converted from two screens to four.

It’s now a Grade II listed building and despite several attempts to turn it into a hotel, it still survives and today shows many ‘off-beat independent films’ rather than the big blockbusters.

Many of the original features of the theatre still exist, though often behind panelling, and the stalls bar – the longest of any theatre in London – is still in place, though no longer used.

(Thanks to cinematreasures.org for much of this information.)

Walk up **Mercer Street**, which was previously called Little White Lion Street (most streets in the area have had their names changed over the years). And when you reach the top, you are at the centre of **Seven Dials**.

Seven Dials began its existence as an upmarket locality but it descended to the lowest imaginable depths before its modern renaissance as a trendy shopping, dining and entertainment zone.



This was an area of land laying between St Giles High Street and Covent Garden, the lease of which was granted to Thomas Neale, a Member of Parliament and Master of the Royal Mint, in 1690 by William III, in return for the various 'favours' he had done, as well as raising money for the Royal Treasury.

Neale planned to make Seven Dials a fashionable address in London, similar to that achieved by Inigo Jones with Covent Garden – though by then their development was already losing its appeal to the wealthy and aristocratic. And to help attract the wealthy, he even chose names for the seven streets that he thought would attract them (though to avoid confusion with other streets in London, most of these names have since been changed).

He came up with an ingenious way to maximise his rental income, whilst at the same time increasing the number of houses he could build on the land. Rather than build the houses in squares, which had become fashionable since the Covent Garden development, he instead built seven streets radiating off in a 'star pattern' from a central point, which is where we stand now. This both made the development more interesting, as well as significantly increasing the number of houses that could be built in the space.

To add grandeur to his new development, Neale commissioned the erection of a tall pillar, surmounted by a circle of sundials. As for why there are only six dialstone faces in the circle, some say it's because there were originally going to be six radiating roads and work had already begun on the pillar when the plan was changed. And it's certainly true that Little White Lion Street (now the southern section of Mercer Street) was a late addition to the scheme. However, others say the column itself was intended to act as the seventh sundial by casting a shadow, in which case there should once have been a noon mark somewhere on the ground. But perhaps the horologist simply found it a lot easier to work with six?

The pillar was dismantled and removed in 1774 and ended up in Weybridge, Surrey. The original still stands there; the local authority has refused to allow it to be returned to Seven Dials, so the column we see today is a replica that was erected here in 1989. It was officially unveiled by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands as part of the tercentenary celebrations of the arrival in England of Prince William of Orange and Queen Mary III, daughter of King James II. (Thomas Neale was one of the party that greeted William when he landed in Devon in November 1688 and led him to London and through the complications of what came to be known as the Glorious Revolution.)

Sadly for Neale, his aim of Seven Dials attracting wealthy residents was short lived. Whilst early occupants were lawyers and other professionals, over the next fifty years, many of these moved away and were replaced by tradesman such as woodcarvers, watch repairers, ironmongers and wigmakers. As these too moved away, so large numbers of very poor and homeless people began moving in, with several families sometime occupying a single house, and later even just a single room.

Along with St Giles, it became one of the worst slums in London, notorious for violence and mob rule 'where no decent person would dare to even walk through'. The situation became worse as many Irish labourers moved in, forced out of their own country by lack of work. As the economic situation in Ireland was worsened by the 'Potato Famine', whole families began arriving, bringing with them little or nothing in the way of possessions or money. Indeed, some accounts at the time were saying it became known as 'Little Dublin'.

There was little work in England, and many had to resort to begging in order to survive, whilst others became 'street sellers'. The journalist Henry Mayhew wrote in the 1850s that he estimated there were some 10,000 Irish street sellers in London "many taking over the nut and orange trade from Jews." It wasn't long before it became one of London's worst slums, known for its gin-palaces, pubs, brothels and gaming dens. There was a pub on the corner of each of these seven streets, with countless 'gin houses' and it became one of London's most dangerous areas. Muggings, violence, drunkenness, debauchery, pickpocketing and gang warfare became a daily occurrence, and it was said to have become 'a breeding ground of vice, disease and crime'.

In 1852 the author and minor poet Thomas Miller described Seven Dials as a place "where misery clings to misery for a little warmth, and want and disease lie down side-by-side, and

groan together.” (For reasons too convoluted to go into, several sources wrongly attribute this quote to John Keats.)

Charles Dickens was drawn to the area when it was “infamous for its slums, crime and numerous accompanying evils.” He wrote about it in his essays called *Sketches by Boz*:

“The stranger who finds himself in Seven Dials for the first time ... at the entrance to seven obscure passages, uncertain which to take, will see enough around him to keep his curiosity awake for no inconsiderable time.

“The peculiar character of these streets, and the close resemblance each one bears to its neighbour, by no means tends to decrease the bewilderment in which the unexperienced wayfarer through ‘the Dials’ finds himself involved. He traverses streets of dirty, straggling houses, with now and then an unexpected court composed of buildings as ill-proportioned and deformed as the half-naked children that wallow in the kennels.

“Here and there, a little dark chandler’s shop, with a cracked bell hung up behind the door to announce the entrance of a customer, or betray the presence of some young gentleman in whom a passion for shop tills has developed itself at an early age: others ... brokers’ shops, which would seem to have been established by humane individuals, as refuges for destitute beggars, interspersed with announcements of day-schools, penny theatres, petition-writers, mangles, and music for balls or routs, complete the ‘still life’ of the subject; and dirty men, filthy women, squalid children, fluttering shuttlecocks, noisy battledores, reeking pipes, bad fruit, more than doubtful oysters, attenuated cats, depressed dogs, and anatomical fowls, are its cheerful accompaniments.”

Walter Thornbury wrote in his book *Old and New London*, which was published in 1873, that “the business carried on in Seven Dials seems to be of a very heterogeneous character. It is the great haunt of bird and bird-cage sellers, also of the sellers of rabbits, cats, dogs, etc.; and as most of the houses, being of an old fashion, have broad ledges of lead over the shop-windows, these are frequently found converted into miniature gardens, which help, in some degree, to counterbalance the squalor and misery that is too apparent in some of the courts and lanes hard by.”

When the poor inhabitants who’d been living in Seven Dials were eventually moved out, they left behind many empty and half-derelict buildings. This got worse after the Covent Garden market relocated south of the river in 1974 and, even as late as the early 1980s, it was not an area where people wanted to live. As a result, the council drew up plans to demolish much of the entire area, including the market buildings.

However, thanks to the amazing efforts of the Seven Dials Trust and the Covent Garden Community Association, both community-run organisations, and notably the ‘Queen of Covent Garden’, most of the original Georgian and Victorian buildings of the Seven Dials district are still intact, with many now Grade II listed. The same applies to the actual Covent Garden market area, which we reach later in the walk. As a result, and in just a very short time, the overall area has become one of London’s most popular tourist districts, for sightseeing, shopping and nightlife.

If Covent Garden were to have had a queen, then it would well have been Christina Smith. After working with the designer Terence Conran in the 1950s, she left to start a wholesaling business in a rundown property in Covent Garden. Despite the empty warehouses and dilapidated buildings, Christina recognised Covent Garden’s future potential.

Over time she built a considerable property empire, as well as becoming a restaurateur, retailer, philanthropist and conservationist.

She played a major part in thwarting the plans of developers and the local council, who wanted to demolish the central market buildings and erect tower blocks on the site in the 60s and 70s.

She was a major supporter of London's theatres, investing in the Ambassador Theatre Group, now the largest live theatre company in the world, and helped fund and support others, including the Donmar Warehouse in Covent Garden and the Trafalgar Studios 2.

In 1984, Christina opened the huge Belgium-themed 'mussel' restaurant, initially called Smith's that later became Belgo Centraal. (One of her early members of staff, was a waiter by the name of Graham Norton, well before he became a household name as a radio and TV star).

Christina was later the subject of a book called *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, and I've written more about this amazing woman in the appendix (below).

Turn left into **Monmouth Street**, alongside the **Mercer Street Hotel**, which is owned by the Radisson/Edwardian Group.

On the opposite corner is the **Crown pub**. There have been licensed premises on this site since the beginning of the 18th century. The present pub opened in 1833 and was described by Charles Dickens as being a "hot bed of villainy."

On the wall adjacent to the pub's entrance is a small plaque that explains how the sundials on the top of the column in the centre of Seven Dials work. But in truth, having read it, I'm still not sure I could actually use the dials to tell the time.

Halfway down the street is the five-star **Covent Garden Hotel**, but notice the inscription in the stone facia along its upper level, which reads, 'Nouvel Hôpital et Dispensaire Français'. The hotel, which is owned by Kit and Tim Kemp as part of their Firmdale Hotels group, opened in 1996, though the building dates back to the 1890s when it was indeed a French Hospital. The hotel's interior is beautiful, with a sweeping stone staircase, a wood-panelled drawing room and library, both with log burning fireplaces. It's become popular with 'celebrity' guests, who have included Meryl Streep, Robert de Niro, Kate Winslet and Stephen Fry.



As you walk around Seven Dials, you may notice on street signs, etc. the emblem of a wounded hind (female deer), which was a symbol of St Giles and part of the heraldic crest of the ancient parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields. According to one version of the saint's story, Giles was walking in the woods one day when he came across a hind wounded by a hunter's arrow. He took her home, healed her wound and the hind afterwards became his devoted companion.

Directly opposite the hotel, notice the 'sacking wrapped bale' hanging from a hoist above a narrow passage. You see a number of these hoists on the older buildings around Covent Garden, harking back to when many of these buildings were warehouses and goods were hauled up and stored before being taken to the market.

As the sign says, this narrow passageway is the entrance to **Neal's Yard**, (formerly called King's Head Court), which we now walk through. It's a colourful little place with small 'rainbow painted' shops and, perhaps not surprisingly considering its name, it's where 'Neal's Yard', the now famous organic and natural cosmetics company, opened back in 1981. It is said to have been Britain's first certified natural and organic health and beauty company.

Neal's Yard was also where the animation, editing and recording studios of Monty Python were between 1976 and 1987. It was owned by Michael Palin and Terry Gilliam, and apparently Michael lived here for a time – though that may be just rumour. And if you look up above the Neal's Yard shop on the left you can see a blue plaque that reads – 'Monty Python, Filmmaker, lived here'. Well, you wouldn't expect anything else from them, would you?

What is hard to imagine is that years ago, this was another area that was once dangerous and avoided by any respectable citizen. In Jerry White's book *London in the 20th Century* he tells of John Capstick, a newly recruited young policeman posted to Bow Street in Covent Garden around 1926:

"As I patrolled down Monmouth Street, painstakingly inspecting each shop door, a scruffy young fellow dashed up to me, shouting, 'Quick, mate! There's a fight in Neal's Yard.'

"He ducked into the shadowy alley that led to the yard, and like mug I followed him. Too late I saw that one flickering gas lamp had been put out. Before I could draw my truncheon, I was on the ground, with four or five ruffians working me over with fist and boot. I staggered back to Bow Street police station minus helmet, whistle and truncheon. My face and body were covered with bruises, and I knew I was lucky to have escaped so lightly. But there was no sympathy in my sergeant's eyes as he asked, 'And what's happened to you?'

"I told him I'd been attacked by a gang of roughs. He asked me where, and I said Neal's Yard, to which replied, 'I thought so, that's where they break all you young coppers in.'"

Until the 1970s Neal's Yard was just another run-down courtyard of buildings that the council planned to demolish and redevelop. It was saved by Nicholas Saunders, who was said to have been a "figurehead of London's alternative scene." (As an activist, Saunders wrote books teaching people how to enjoy London without lots of money – advocating for living in communities and emphasising spirituality.)

He purchased premises that were previously part of the Covent Garden Fruit and Vegetable Market, paying just £7,000. He wanted to live there, but the council wouldn't allow it, so in 1976 he opened a wholefood store there instead, despite being told he couldn't do that either. The business was hugely successful and presumably the authorities took no action as he went on to expand into a chain of eco-friendly businesses trading under the Neal's Yard name – Neal's Yard Coffee House, Neal's Yard Bakery, etc.

He later approached Romy Fraser, a farmer turned entrepreneur and health advocate, and asked her to take over the Neal's Yard shop, offering her a loan guarantee to do so. She did, and set up the Neal's Yard Apothecary, later dropping the Apothecary name and changing it to 'Remedies'. In 2005, wanting to move to Devon to set up her own sustainable farm, Romy Fraser sold the business to Peter Kindersley, the co-founder of publisher Dorling Kindersley. Despite receiving other proposals, she apparently opted for Kindersley's offer – estimated at £10 million – because she thought he would keep the original spirit of the firm alive. The company has since grown into what is described as a 'global leader', with the USA now being its biggest market for sales. It still makes products at an 'eco-factory' in Dorset, as well as offering treatments such as massages and facials at some of its 40 or so outlets in Britain.

Keep to the left as you leave Neal's Yard, passing the popular **Barbary** restaurant with its attractive horseshoe shaped bar, that's popular for both drinks and its 'Berber' food.

We are going to cross over **Short's Gardens** and into the **Seven Dials Market** building, but first notice the sign on the wall above the entrance which still says it was 'Thomas Neal's Warehouse'.

This enormous 22,000 square foot building was a warehouse for storing bananas – whole pallet-loads were picked green, shipped over from Central America (and later the Canary Islands) and stacked floor to ceiling to be ripened under the steel-framed glass roof.

The first commercial refrigerated shipment of bananas had come to Britain around the turn of the 20th century and for many it was the first time they'd ever seen such exotic fruit. Until then, most people only ate fruit that was grown in the UK, such as apples and pears. Many other buildings around Covent Garden were once used to store fruit before it was moved to the nearby market for sale.

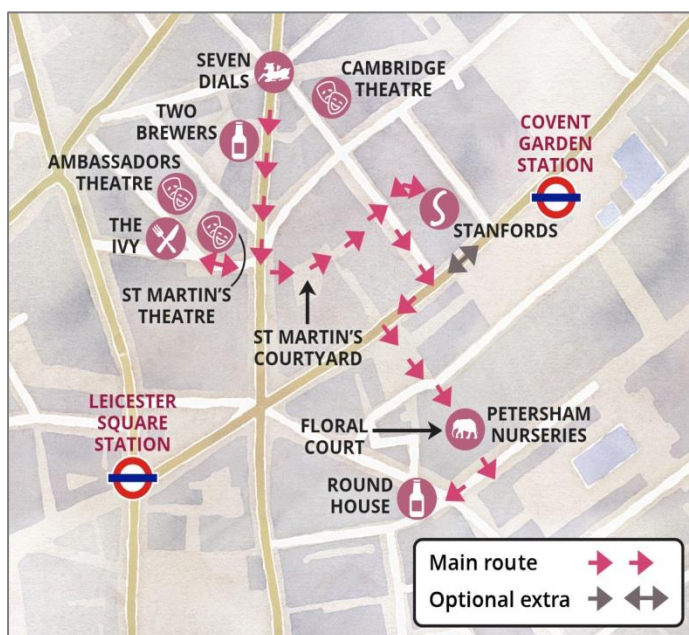
The building has had several other uses since, but more recently was converted into the huge and very popular indoor food court that you see today.

As you enter there's a line of fast-food booths on the left – but turn right into the open-plan area and walk around. All around you are various food stalls whilst below is a huge eating area.

We leave by the rear entrance on the left and turn right into **Earlham Street**, but if you look to your left, then a little further down you'll see the **Donmar Warehouse**.

Described as a 'theatrical gem', the Donmar was once part of the former banana warehouse and later a brewery. In the early 1960s it was used as a rehearsal space, after which it became a studio theatre for the Royal Shakespeare Company. After they moved out it was taken over as a fringe theatre venue by Donald Albury and Margot Fonteyn (the name derives from an amalgamation of their Christian names). This tiny theatre is run as a not-for-profit company and has a capacity of just 251 seats but is laid out so nobody in the audience is less than four rows away from the action. It offers an exciting range of productions, including many limited run and experimental plays. The Donmar has received 43 Olivier Awards since 1992 and often attracts big names.

On your left at the top of the street is the 1,231-seat **Cambridge Theatre**. It opened here in 1930 – which by West End theatre standards is quite recent.



Route map 2

You are now back in the centre of **Seven Dials**, with the **Crown pub** on your right, which we saw earlier.

From the top of **Earlham Street** walk across the centre of Seven Dials and take the second left into the attractive southern section of **Monmouth Street**, which has more small boutiques and shops.

Like all the streets in Covent Garden, it's very different now from what it had been in the past. In his 'Meditations on Monmouth Street', Charles Dickens describes it as being "given over mainly to the sale of second-hand clothes."

And here's what the author and publisher Charles Knight had to say about Monmouth Street in 1841:

"The classical reader may possibly retain from his schoolboy days a recollection of a race of people called Troglodytes – dwellers in caves, an intermediate species between the man and the rabbit. Their descendants still flourish in Monmouth Street. Cellars serving whole families for 'kitchen, and parlour, and bed-room, and all,' are to be found in other streets of London, but not so numerous and near to each other. Here they cluster like cells in a convent of the order of La Trappe, or like onions on a rope. It is curious and interesting to watch the habits of these human moles when they emerge, or half emerge, from their cavities. Their infants seem exempt from the dangers which haunt those of other people: at an age when most babies are not trusted alone on a level floor, these urchins stand secure on the upmost round of a trap-ladder, studying the different conformations of the shoes of the passers-by. The mode of ingress of the adults is curious: they turn their backs to the entry, and, inserting first one foot and then the other, disappear by degrees. The process is not unlike (were such a thing conceivable) a sword sheathing itself. They appear a short-winded generation, often coming, like the otter, to the surface to breathe. In the twilight which reigns at the bottom of their dens, you can sometimes discern the male busily cobbling shoes on one side of the entrance, and the female repairing all sorts of rent garments on the other. They seem to be free traders: at certain periods of the day tea-cups and saucers may be seen arranged on their boards; at others, plates and pewter pots. They have the appearance of being on the whole a contented race."

Charles Knight, *London, Volume III*, Chapter LXVII, 'St Giles's, Past and Present'

In 1873 Walter Thornbury described it as being "devoted chiefly to the sale of old clothes, second-hand boots and shoes, etc.; ginger-beer, green-grocery, and theatrical stores. Cheap picture-frame makers also abound here."

Halfway down on the right is the **Two Brewers** pub. Prior to 1935 it was known as the Sheep's Head Tavern – it even had the severed head of a sheep hanging outside. It has long been popular with theatrical folk, and there are many autographed photographs adorning its walls.

Along the Georgian terrace on the other side of the road, look up to the top of No.67 where a restored painted sign explains what previously went on here. It says: 'B. Flegg, Est^d. 1847 – Saddler & Harness Maker. Large stock of secondhand saddlery & harness, horse clothing'. At the bottom of the signwriting, the house number – '18' – dates back to the time when this was Little St Andrew Street; the northern half of what's now all Monmouth Street was Great St Andrew Street.

On the right at the bottom of Monmouth Street is an attractive-looking branch of the **Rossopomodoro** chain of Neapolitan restaurants, which I can recommend for excellent pasta and very friendly service.

Ahead is a monstrous modern 16-storey white and glass office block called Orion House. (I sometimes wonder how they get planning permission for such inappropriate development in an area like this.)

It was once the site of Aldridge's Horse Bazaar and Repository for Horses and Carriages, described in 1895 as "especially famous for the sale of middleclass and tradesmen's horses." The last horse sale was held here in 1926, after which it was mainly used for the sale of greyhound dogs, and then from 1907 onwards, motor cars. It closed in 1940 and the buildings were demolished in the late 1950s, following which an office block called Thorn House was built on the site. This was remodelled in 1988-90 as the awful Orion House we see today.

Cross **Tower Street** and turn right alongside Orion House into **West Street**, with the offices of Equity, the Actors' Union, on the corner. Facing you after a few yards is the world-famous **Ivy restaurant**. Nowadays there are dozens of Ivies but this is the original. It was a favourite in the past of major theatrical figures like Noël Coward and John Gielgud, and is still popular today with celebrities, as well as others with equal amounts of money to spend. (Whenever I have passed in the evening there are numerous paparazzi outside waiting to photograph whichever celebrities happen to be dining there.)

When Abel Giandolini and Mario Gallati opened a simple café here in 1917, they could have never dreamt it would one day be one of the world's most famous restaurants. Because of its location, their friendly service and long opening hours, it quickly became popular with the West End theatre community. For those who may be interested in reading more about the history of this famous restaurant, I have included a more detailed description in the appendix (see below).

On your right is the **St Martin's Theatre**. This is where Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* has been playing now for 70 years – the longest-running play in the world.

The play started out in November 1952 in the **Ambassadors Theatre**, which is just a few yards further up on the same side, before moving to St Martin's in 1974. Both theatres were designed by the same architect, and both are relatively small by West End standards, with the Ambassadors seating 453 and St Martins 550.

Turn around, cross over **Upper St Martin's Lane** and walk up the passageway directly opposite leading to **The Yards** – there's a sign above the entrance saying ... 'The Yards'. (It's next door to the Dishoom Restaurant, where, as with the others in the chain, there always seems to be a queue outside.)

You are now in **Slingsby Place**, in a new development called St Martin's Courtyard, with several bars and restaurants on the ground floor of the buildings. Continue under the arch – the sign says 'To Mercer Walk' – cross over **Mercer Street (where we will shortly turn right)** but first carry on ahead for another few yards up **Mercer Walk** (which, like St Martin's Courtyard, is part of The Yards) to take a look at the world-famous **Stanfords Map and Travel Bookstore**, which was established in Covent Garden by Edward Stanford in 1853.

Notice the attractive 'aluminium tree' on the wall ahead. It's by far the largest of a number of works around Mercer Walk by the sculptor Jill Watson. Called 'The Dorothea', it's a 15-metre high espalier fruit tree (growing apples, oranges, limes, lemons and pears), celebrating the orchard that once stood here and named in honour of Dorothea of Caesarea, a patron saint of gardeners.

Stanfords is just on your right around the corner. It's a wonderful British institution; a shop that not only offers what is said to be the world's largest collection of travel books, maps and other related products, but also serves coffee and light snacks. In the past Stanfords has supplied cartography for the British Army as well as for James Bond films. In 2019, Stanfords moved from the original premises around the corner in Long Acre, where they'd been since 1873.

Past customers at Stanfords have included Florence Nightingale, Captain Scott and Ernest Shackleton and more recently Kate Adie, Griff Rhys Jones and Bill Bryson. And it was to Stanfords that prime minister Neville Chamberlain turned to in 1939 in order to have maps produced highlighting the growing concern of Hitler's Germany.

And more recently, it was from Stanfords that former Monty Python star Michael Palin set off on his 1988 tour to travel *Around the World in 80 Days*, which launched his travel writing career.

Next door to Stanfords is the Pineapple dance shop, whilst their studios are facing you across the road. **Pineapple Studios** are said to be the world's premier dance studios and where the likes of Madonna and Beyoncé have rehearsed.

The studios were started by Debbie Moore, a former model, who had started dance lessons to try and reduce some of the weight she had put on as a result of having problems with her thyroid. She had been attending another studio nearby, but when that closed and she was unable to find another, she opened her own. That was in 1979 and, as it was based in a former pineapple storage warehouse, she called it the 'Pineapple Dance Studios'. It has been a huge success story, with the BBC calling it "one of the world's premier dance studios."

There are 12 dance studios which between them host over 200 classes a week, open to both members and the public. It's the headquarters of the Pineapple Performing Arts School and the company's own dancewear and clothing brand. But even this is just one part of what they now do, as the studios are regularly used by television and film companies, model agencies and much else. The Pineapple's rehearsal studios have been used by the likes of Girls Aloud, Beyoncé, Madonna and Kylie Minogue.

Walk back from Stanfords and turn left into Mercer Street. On your right, pass two interesting brick buildings, **Tonbridge House** and **Maidstone House**, whilst on the left is **Jebson House**. They were built as artisans' dwellings in 1909 by the Mercers' Company and whilst they may not particularly look it, they are now very desirable (and expensive) apartments.

By now you're likely to have come across the name 'Mercers' several times on this walk. The reason is because much of the land here was once owned by the Mercers' Company, and some still is. (The dictionary describes mercers as dealers in expensive fabrics such as silk and other textiles as well as wool, which was once very highly prized.)

London's livery guilds were formed by members of various trades and professions as far back as the 13th century and grouped together to protect the interests of their respective members. They also ensured that members adhered to certain standards to ensure fellow guild members and the public could rely on them. Indeed, in many ways they operated a very 'anti-competitive' monopoly situation, as no one who wasn't a member of the particular guild could trade in those particular crafts or services.

The Mercers' Company is one of the oldest, having been formed in 1394, and over the years they amassed considerable wealth, primarily through the land they owned. In the past they opened

schools for the education of children of Mercer's and had funds available to assist those who had fallen ill or on hard times.

And as with many of the other guilds that survive today, they are now primarily a charitable institution who use their significant wealth to help others. I've read that the Mercers donate as much as £15 million annually to charity.

At the end of **Mercer Street**, look up to the top of the building on the corner on your left and you'll see a hand-painted sign saying, 'Connaught Coachwork' and 'Armstrong Siddeley - London Agents'. There were once a number of workshops and sale rooms associated with carriages around here, including at least eight premises marked on old Ordnance Survey maps as 'coach manufactories'.

The walk takes us to the right along **Long Acre**, but first you may want to walk to the left for 100 yards or so to see some of the early buildings that are still standing, many of which have fascinating architectural detail. There's a lovely Italianate building, dating from the 1870s, with a sign high up on the front saying 'Carriage Manufactory', and another well-restored building just three doors further up, called Avon House.

Long Acre takes its name from a field that had been a part of the Covent Garden district since the Middle Ages.

Long Acre marks the boundary between the Earl of Bedford's estate and that of the Mercers and was laid out as a street between the walls separating the two estates, by the Earl of Bedford in the early 1600s. (Nowadays the street marks the boundary between the jurisdictions of the City of Westminster and the London Borough of Camden.)

The area between the street and the wall was let out in garden plots, the tenants being required to pitch, pave and clean Long Acre and, if they built houses, to do so "substantially and strongly and in a convenient, decent and comely form, and three storeys in height with the forepart or front thereof at the least of brick."

Long Acre is one of the longest streets in the area and runs across much of the Covent Garden area. Whilst most of the original buildings still stand, they have changed from being workshops and warehouses to the ground floors becoming shops, as Covent Garden's popularity with tourists has kept growing. I love that the buildings are mostly of individual design.

Just 40 yards or so past Mercer Street, and on the other side of the road, we turn left into **Conduit Court**, a narrow alleyway that's easy to miss - it's currently next to TK Maxx, though of course that could change.

At the end of the short Conduit Court corridor continue ahead into **Floral Court**. This has been redeveloped to accommodate the **Petersham Nurseries restaurant and shop**, with lots of flowers and shrubs. There's also an almost life-size wooden statue of an elephant made by a collective of artists in Tamil Nadu, in southern India, from dried *Lantana camara*, an invasive species of weed which chokes their forest habitat.

In their café/bistro they offer an afternoon 'Elephant Family Tea', which draws on Indian flavours and delicacies. It's priced at £55 per person, with £10 going to the charity.

According to an article in Billionaire magazine, Francesco and Gael Bogle moved their young family from South Kensington to Richmond's Petersham House in 1997, after their friend Mick

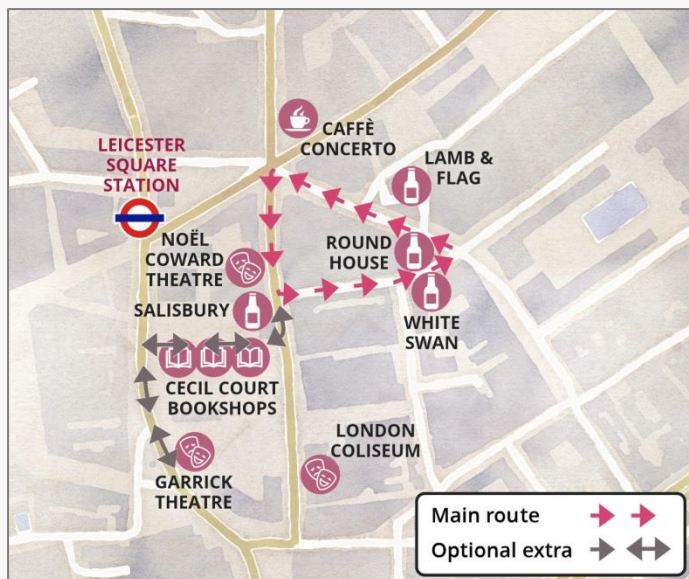
Jagger had mentioned that a place down the road from him was on the market. When the neighbouring Petersham Nurseries also came up for sale, the Bogliones decided to buy that too – and subsequently added a café and a teahouse. In 2017 they branched out into Covent Garden, where their cluster of premises around King Street and Floral Court now includes The Petersham, La Goccia and The Deli.

Turn right into **King Street**. As you exit you can see one of the famous ‘gas lamps’. And if you look up above the exit of Floral Court, then you can see a blue plaque explaining that this was where the theatre music composer Thomas Arne lived. He was born in 1710 and died in 1778. He was best known for composing the music for ‘Rule Britannia’. He was buried in the nearby St Paul’s Church.

(And if you look to the left, you can see the Covent Garden market buildings, which we will be reaching soon.)

At the end of **King Street** turn right into **Garrick Street** – though I will mention here that if you’re getting tired or running out of time, you can miss out the next few minutes of the walk as we do a ‘loop’, returning here shortly, but from a different direction. But I would suggest you keep going if at all possible.

On the other side of the road is **The Round House**, which I explain more about later, at the end of the ‘loop’.



Route map 3a

Optional ‘loop’ from the Round House

Turn right along **Garrick Street**, which opened in 1860 to improve access to Covent Garden market. Over 500 people were made homeless during the street’s construction – and, as was the case in those days, their houses were just demolished, and no compensation or help were offered to rehome them. The road was called New King Street at first and gained its present name following the arrival here of the Garrick Club (see below).

Just a few yards along you cross **Rose Street**; during the 18th century it was renowned for its squalor and the overcrowding of the dwellings that lined it. Debauchery of one kind or another was rampant, with prostitution, gambling, bare-knuckle boxing and cockfighting being just four of the 'attractions'. If you look up the narrow street, you can see the frontage of the **Lamb & Flag**, a famous old pub where many of these activities took place.

It is one of the oldest and most interesting of the area's pubs (and there are certainly plenty of them). Dating back to the 17th century, it underwent some restoration in the 1950s, but it is still essentially as it's been for several hundred years, especially inside. It's very compact, with just two small and usually crowded bars, and an old staircase that leads up to the well-preserved first floor. The pub is so popular and so cramped that even in the winter many customers have to enjoy their drinks outside, though now without the 'attractions' mentioned above.

The pub used to be nicknamed the 'Bucket of Blood' on account of the regular bare-knuckle boxing fights that were held in the rear room or in the courtyard outside. It did have a more cultural aspect to it as well, as in the 17th century, popular plays would be performed in the small courtyard in front of the pub.

The Lamb & Flag was popular with a range of customers; Charles Dickens was a frequent visitor, as was John Dryden, the poet, literary critic, translator and playwright who in 1668 was appointed England's first Poet Laureate. Unfortunately, he was mugged in the alley next to the pub by friends of a man who alleged Dryden had insulted him. He was attacked again here several months later, this time having been said to have written (though it turned out he hadn't) some 'derogatory remarks' about the Earl of Rochester, who clearly must have been upset over them as he paid for some ruffians to "teach Dryden a lesson."

Continue along **Garrick Street**. The somewhat dirty grey and severe looking building next on your left is the private members' **Garrick Club**. The club was founded in 1831 and moved to its present, purpose-built home in 1864. There's been considerable controversy lately as, despite today's equality laws, it still doesn't allow women to join. (There is no sign or name on the building – I guess they simply don't need to!)

The club's website explains that it was founded in 1831 by a group of literary gentlemen under the patronage of the King's brother, the egalitarian Duke of Sussex. They announced that the Club would be a place where "actors and men of refinement and education might meet on equal terms," and where "patrons of the drama and its professors were to be brought together", and where 'easy intercourse was to be promoted between artists and patrons.'

The website goes on to say it was "named after the great eighteenth century actor David Garrick. Attracted by the combination of the traditions of the eighteenth-century literary society with the advantages of a well-run dining and social club, the first members of the Garrick were a sophisticated and cosmopolitan group that included twenty-four peers of the realm as well as writers, actors, musicians and publishers."

It still has strong connections with the theatre world, and members are said to include Stephen Fry, Benedict Cumberbatch, Sir Trevor McDonald, John Simpson, Damien Lewis and Hugh Bonneville.

Finally, I must just mention an incident that is said to have occurred in the club. W.S Gilbert, who wrote the libretti of the Gilbert & Sullivan operettas and who was a member of the club, was there shortly after his partner Sullivan's death. Another member, not knowing that Sullivan had just passed away, asked him, "Where's Sullivan, is he somewhere composing?" "On the contrary," said Gilbert. "He is decomposing." If the story is true it certainly demonstrates his way with words.

On the opposite side of the road, on the corner of Floral Street, is **Le Garrick** restaurant, which has been serving excellent French food since 1986. Having eaten there on several occasions I can thoroughly recommend it.

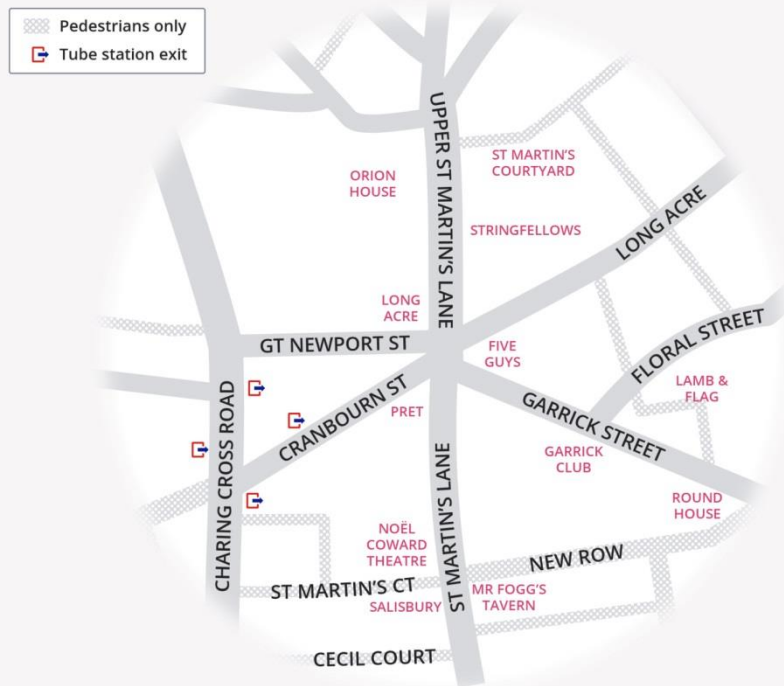
Cross **Floral Street** – where the original Stanfords Map and Travel Bookshop was until 2019, when it moved to Mercers Court. The ecclesiastical-looking building with a stone figure of Jesus Christ above the entrance on the corner of Floral Street was formerly a Mission House and school. Built in 1860, it is now Grade II listed and used as offices.

When you reach the end of **Garrick Street** you find a confusing (at least to pedestrians trying to cross) 'staggered junction', where several streets meet. On your right is **Long Acre**, where we were earlier, and going anti-clockwise the next street is **Upper St Martin's Lane**. On the corner of those two streets is the excellent **Caffè Concerto**, which, besides having a café/bar on the ground floor, also serves excellent Italian meals on the first, where the large glass windows give good views of the surroundings. Almost next door to it in Upper St Martin's Lane is Stringfellows, the world-famous 'late night venue' that opened here in 1980.

Peter Stringfellow was born in Sheffield in 1940 and opened his first club in Covent Garden in 1980. After leaving school he worked in a cinema and became a salesman in an Austin Reed men's clothing shop before a short stint in the merchant navy. After leaving the navy, he had several jobs. He was later arrested for selling stolen carpets and served a short prison sentence. When he was released, he was unable to find work, so he started renting a church hall in Sheffield to put on pop concerts. These soon became popular, with artists such as Dave Berry and Gene Vincent performing. Things really took off in 1963 when he booked the Beatles, and demand for tickets was so great that he had to switch to a much larger venue. He then went on to open more clubs, several of which became extremely successful and which he later sold to some of the big entertainment companies, Granada being one.

In 1980 he moved to London and opened Stringfellows in Covent Garden. It was a huge success, though then just a nightclub and restaurant, without the semi-naked laptop and table dancing for which it later became famous. He took over the Talk of the Town, an enormous entertainment venue in Leicester Square, and reintroduced its original name – the 'Hippodrome'. He began opening further 'Stringfellows' clubs in New York, Los Angeles and Miami and also opened further 'sex clubs' in London. Peter Stringfellow died of lung cancer at the age of 77 in 2018 and two years later the club was "secretly sold in a multi-million pound deal."

For the more observant, if you notice a sign a little further up Upper St Martin's Lane saying 'The Yards', then yes, this was where you were earlier. We do rather criss-cross and zig-zag on this walk!



The two streets opposite both lead to Charing Cross Road. However, the walk continues to the left, down **St Martin's Lane**.

On your right you pass the **Noël Coward Theatre**, which opened in 1903 as the New Theatre.

On the next corner is the **Salisbury**, built around 1890 on the site of an earlier pub. It's Grade II listed and in CAMRA's (Campaign for Real Ale) National Inventory as an "historic pub interior of national importance." They particularly mention the quality and opulence of the etched and polished glass and the hand-carved mahogany counters and woodwork. (The SS motif in some of the glass is as a result of it being originally called the 'Salisbury Stores'. The use of the word 'Stores' was common with pubs of that time. It usually meant the establishment was also licensed for off-sales – and may have sold some groceries too.) It is also worth a mention that the Salisbury had been a 'gay-friendly' pub since the time of Oscar Wilde. The 1961 suspense film *Victim* – said to have been the first British film to include the word 'homosexual' – used the Salisbury as a shooting location.

If you look further ahead you can see in the distance the church spire of **St Martin-in-the-Fields**, as well as the amazing roof and globe of the **London Coliseum**. Although we don't walk down that far, I will just mention a little more about the Coliseum which, when it opened in 1904, was one of London's most luxurious and biggest theatres, with a seating capacity of almost 3,000. It's still one of the biggest, with seating today for almost 2,400. It's presently the home of English National Opera and also stages performances by English National Ballet, somewhat different from the theatre's original aims, which was to be a place "not of highbrow entertainment." Despite various restorations over the years, the theatre still retains many of its original features and is Grade I listed. And having been to several operas there myself in recent years, I can definitely recommend a visit if you get the opportunity.

I have written a little more about this fascinating theatre in the appendix (see below).

The walk will continue to the left along **New Row**, (which is almost opposite the Noël Coward Theatre), but first, I would strongly recommend crossing over to the opposite (right-hand) side then after just another 20 yards or so turn right into the pedestrianised **Cecil Court** – particularly if you are interested in antique books, maps, prints and the like.

Cecil Court is a fascinating and peaceful street, dating back to the 17th century. It's one of my favourite little streets in London, so I make no apology for the detail I give here.

Two things I particularly like – the first is the perfect symmetry of the architecture on both sides of the court, particularly the brickwork.

Second are the Victorian gas lights that still illuminate the street today. As you will appreciate if you visit after dark, they give a lovely soft, rich glow and help give Cecil Court its special '19th-century atmosphere'. On a dark winter's evening, pull up the collar of your coat, listen to your footsteps clack on the flagstones and you can imagine yourself in a Charles Dickens novel. Or Sherlock Holmes or indeed any other of the many historical mysteries set in London in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It's hardly surprising that it's said to have been one of the inspirations for Diagon Alley in the Harry Potter books.

However, in 2022, Westminster Council decided to remove the Victorian gas lights and convert the lighting to LED. Tim Bryars, who owns a bookshop in Cecil Court, saw council workers digging a hole beside one of the lamps and when he asked what they were doing, they said 'checking to see whether these old gas lamps could be converted to electricity'.

This forced Tim into action. Together with others keen to preserve these Victorian lamps, they formed the 'London Gasketeers' and began campaigning. And seemingly, at least for the moment, they appear to have won. (I say more about gas lamps in London when we reach the parish church of St Paul's in Covent Garden.)

The court was laid out in the late 17th century, taking its name from its owners, the Cecils of Hatfield House in Hertfordshire. They were the descendants of Robert Cecil, created first Earl of Salisbury by James I (James VI of Scotland) as a reward for his help with the transition of the Crown from the Tudors to the Stuarts.

Whilst performing in London in 1764, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart lived briefly at No. 9 and it was said he composed his first symphony here, although this is disputed by some historians.

Cecil Court was once known as Flicker Alley. Back at the end of the 19th century and through into the early 20th, this was the centre of the early British film industry in London, with companies from around the world having offices here. Many international companies responsible for making films – distributors, importers, agents, etc. – were based in this short narrow pedestrian lane.

Those film connections have long since gone and Cecil Court is now better known as 'Booksellers Row' because of the number of specialist antique and collectable bookshops. What I particularly like is the way the shops specialise – for example, Travis & Emery in books on music, Marchpane in children's books (particularly those by Lewis Carroll), whilst Goldsboro deal in signed first editions.

One of Britain's greatest 20th-century novelists, Graham Greene, once said, "Thank God Cecil Court remains Cecil Court." And I couldn't agree more. However, with rapidly rising rents in the area, there is a concern that it could go the way of the nearby Charing Cross Road, once world-famous for its bookshops, where many have now been forced to close as more 'touristy' shops have taken their place. Indeed, more recently, several antique map, coin and other 'collectible' shops have opened here – a trend I hope won't continue.

If anybody would like to visit the Garrick Theatre, then continue to the end of Cecil Court and turn left down Charing Cross Road.

Named after the 18th-century actor David Garrick, the 700-seat theatre was built in 1889 and restored in 1986. Significant problems arose during the building of the theatre, when early excavations uncovered an old river that – despite being known by the Romans 2,000 years before – had been forgotten. This was said to have caused W.S. Gilbert (he of Gilbert & Sullivan) who was putting a considerable amount of money into the building of the theatre, to comment that he wasn't sure "whether to continue with building the theatre or rent out the ground for fishing rights."

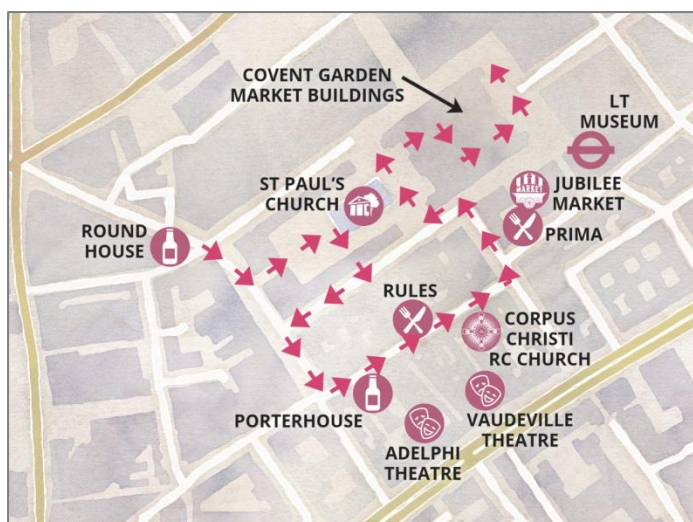
One of my personal favourite plays – J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* – had an exceptionally long and successful run here in the 1990s.

Return to the **Salisbury** in St Martin's Lane, cross over and head along **New Row** (formerly New Street), with Mr Fogg's Tavern on the corner. It should perhaps now be renamed 'Food Row', as it seems to be one restaurant, café or bar after another. There are a couple of notable exceptions, such as a branch of Laird hatters and a Waterstones bookshop.

New Row's food connections go back a long way: according to a book entitled *Taverns in Town* it was formerly nicknamed 'Porridge Island'. The book goes on to say that "hereabouts were once the Bermudas, a maze of obscure little alleys, renowned for their unwholesomeness, and the name Porridge Island was on account of the great preponderance of inexpensive cook shops which used to line it." The book adds that the whole area was cleared in the late 1820s "in the reforms that preceded the laying out of the nearby Trafalgar Square."

Of particular interest is **The White Swan** pub; it's a small and lovely old coaching inn that was mentioned by Samuel Pepys in his diaries. However, New Row is certainly no longer as described on a sign on the pub's wall – "a street fizzing with character and intrigue." Packed with tourists maybe, but certainly not character and intrigue anymore. Once owned by Hoare & Co, the famous London banking firm, (a large mirror inside still promotes 'Hoare & Co's Celebrated Imperial Stout & Sparkling Ales'). The pub was featured in Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey novel, *Murder Must Advertise*.

You are now at the top of New Row and you have completed the 'loop' and are back to the **Round House**.



Route map 3

If you skipped the 'loop', then this is where you should pick up the walk again.

Built soon after the creation of Garrick Street, the Round House was originally called Petter's Hotel and was popular with both market workers and theatregoers.

In 1943, and clearly inspired by the shape of the building, the name was changed to the Round House. Since then, the pub has changed very little.

Turn right down **Bedford Street**, cross over and then after 20 yards turn left through the iron gates into **Inigo Place** (topped with the coat of arms of the Russell family who still own the land), which leads into the churchyard of the **parish church of St Paul's**.

The church garden is surrounded on three sides by tall 18th century houses. I do find it interesting how the developers left the rear of the houses so plain yet with such attractive architectural features on their frontages – clearly a simple way to save money on building costs.

It is a delightful haven of peace amidst the bustle all around. Trees give shade and a number of benches allow you to sit and rest. These have been dedicated by the families or friends of the deceased, most of whom were associated with the theatre – St Paul's is known as the Actors' Church. It is interesting to read some of the inscriptions – Beryl Reid, John Thaw (of *Morse* fame), Carmen Silvera, (of *'Allo 'Allo!*) and many more. There's a rosebush in the garden dedicated to Bill Fraser (of *Bootsie & Snudge* fame, for those old enough to remember), with the lovely inscription 'fell asleep'.

The garden is so well cared for, and on several occasions when I have visited, I've been fortunate enough to meet and chat to one of the hardworking 'unofficial custodian gardeners', a delightful lady who gives up a couple of days a week to care for the flowers and plants. And on a visit during the pandemic I met one of her younger colleagues, an actress who was volunteering while the West End theatres were closed. Her name is Kathryn Meisle, and she told me that one of her early stage appearances was playing Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* – delightfully appropriate as we were standing just a few yards from where Eliza first met Professor Henry Higgins.

What really add to the atmosphere of the garden are the original gas lamps, still in situ, despite Westminster Council's plan to remove them and convert the lighting to LED, which I mentioned

earlier. It's only if you come here after dusk that you can appreciate the subtle light these lamps give. Gas lights glow with a soft parchment-coloured light; very different from the often bright and harsh white light generated by the more modern electric lamps.

For years the gas lamps of London were lit at dusk by lamplighters – there were hundreds of them – who would walk the city with long, lighted poles to spark the gas running up the iron posts. Today, most of the lamps have a tiny pilot light that is constantly lit, and each evening at dusk timers are fitted that open a valve to open the gas supply, which then lights the mantles.

However, some of the older timers have to be manually adjusted every fortnight to allow for changing daylight hours, and all the lamps still need to have the glass casings polished and the mantles replaced – a job that is done by just five specialist British Gas engineers who call themselves 'Custodians of the Lamps'. They have such enthusiasm for the lamps and the role they play in maintaining them, that there is very rarely a vacancy – they carry on until they retire.

Paul, the engineer who looks after the lights in the Covent Garden area, told a national newspaper, which was running a story about the threat from Westminster Council, that he'd waited for over 28 years for a vacancy before one finally occurred. He explained he normally arrived to start work on his first lamp shortly after daybreak and said that such is the enthusiasm of the team that they often work as many as sixty hours a week taking care of their 'charges'.

If the church is open, then I do suggest that you take a look inside. Around the walls are plaques to so many familiar names. Some of the earliest well-known people to be buried here include the artist J.M.W. Turner and Sir William Gilbert, who wrote the libretti for the G&S operas. Indeed, the relationship with the acting profession goes back to when the church first opened, particularly as a result of its connection with the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, just a few hundred yards away. It was also the burial place of Margaret Pondeous, who is sometimes said to have been the first known victim of the 1665–6 outbreak of the plague in London (but Daniel Defoe wrote of earlier victims, and I'll say more about that when we reach Drury Lane).

Incidentally, whilst you appear to enter the church through the rear, this is in fact the main entrance. This certainly wasn't planned; the main entrance doors were meant to have been at the other end of the church, beneath the portico that face the Covent Garden square, as you will see shortly. But they never were. As this was the eastern side of the church, the Bishop of London insisted the altar must follow tradition and be placed against this east wall, so an entrance here was impossible. As a result, only the rear and side doors are used to access the church. However, despite this setback, the architect, Inigo Jones, stuck with his original plan for a neoclassical portico to front the piazza – and even included a false door.

Inigo Jones was the first significant English architect of the early modern period. He was the first to introduce the classical architecture of Rome and the Italian Renaissance to Britain, in preference to Gothic.

He was the son of a Smithfield clothworker and, according to Sir Christopher Wren, he had served an apprenticeship as a joiner near St Paul's Cathedral. However, he quickly showed exceptional talents as an artist and a designer, and he travelled to Italy to study the works of their famous architects and builders. He became greatly enthused by the work of Andrea Palladio and upon his return to Britain began designing buildings in what became known as the Palladian style.

As the King's Surveyor of Works he was responsible for the architecture of grand buildings in London such as the Banqueting House in Whitehall and the New Exchange in the Strand. Inigo was also renowned for his ability as a theatrical set and costume designer.

His Covent Garden Piazza was the first regularly planned square in London, which then became a model for future developments in the city.

Once Inigo Jones had been tasked by Francis Russell with designing and developing Covent Garden, he began by building the church that Francis had felt obliged to provide. Russell was a 'low churchman', so didn't want to go for any fancy embellishments, and neither did he want to spend too much money on it. He said to Inigo, "I would not have it much better than a barn." However, according to Horace Walpole, Jones replied, "Well then, you shall have the handsomest barn in England."

Building began 1631 and took just two years. Influenced by his fascination with Italian architecture, Inigo designed the church following the principles of the 1st century Roman architect Vitruvius. His belief was that all buildings should be designed on three major principles – Strength, Utility and Beauty, with everything in correct proportion. The church is said to have been designed in the style of a classical Roman temple and was regarded as being the first classical building to have been built in London for many years. It was not only the first new Anglican church to be built in the city but also the first to be built on a new site in England since the Reformation of the previous century.

As a result of delays caused by the English Civil War (1642–51) it was a few years before St Paul's received approval to be a parish church, which it did in 1660.

Thomas Hardwick directed a major renovation in 1789 which included refacing the exterior brick and stuccoed walls with stone and replacing the tiled roof with slate. A newspaper at the time commented that it would have cost little more to have built a new church, but it appears that no one in the parish was "so deficient in understanding as to propose rebuilding a church which for a century and a half has been the admiration of scientific men from all quarters of the globe."

Sadly, just six years later, in 1795, a fire broke out and the church was all but destroyed. The fire was caused by a simple oversight by workmen who had been working on the steeple. A pot of lead boiling over a fire had been left unattended which quickly spread to the church's wooden roof. By the time it was finally brought under control, only the outer walls of the St Paul's were left standing.

Unfortunately, the fire had occurred while the church was uninsured, and as a result the entire cost of rebuilding fell upon the parish. However, funds were raised, and the church was rebuilt, though with a few new aspects, including the cupola we see today.

In 1888 Hardwick's stone facing was removed as it was found to have been just a thin covering, and the church was re-clad in the unrendered brick that we see today.

Leave the church through the narrow archway to the right of the church's entrance (as you face the church), pass the blue Tardis-styled booth (which is used for storing cleaning equipment but I don't know whether that was always its purpose) and exit through the passage that leads into **Henrietta Street** – named after the wife of Charles II.

Turn right. You can now see how attractive the frontages of these buildings that back on to the churchyard are.

The film-maker Alfred Hitchcock lived at No.3 for a while and used Henrietta Street in his thriller *Frenzy*, which was about a Covent Garden fruit vendor who becomes a serial sex killer. Alfred must have known the market well, as his father had been a wholesale greengrocer there.

The novelist Jane Austen lodged in the street during one of her many visits to London. Her brother Henry was a banker, and lived above the offices of Austen, Maunde and Tilson's at Number 10. Her verdict on Covent Garden at the time was: "an area all dirt and confusion, but in an interesting way."

At No.25 a green plaque marks the site of Rawthmell's Coffee House, where the social reformer and inventor William Shipley founded the Society of Arts (it later it became 'Royal') in 1754.

At the end of **Henrietta Street, turn left back into Bedford Street.**

After the Great Fire of London, a number of businesses moved out of the city, with some settling in Bedford Street. In 1720 historian and biographer John Strype wrote, "Bedford Street, a handsome broad street, with very good houses, which, since the Fire of London, are generally taken up by eminent tradesmen, as Mercers, Lacemen, Drapers, etc."

In the late 19th century Bedford Street had become a centre for London publishing houses. Among others, it was home to the offices of Heinemann, JM Dent, Frederick Warne and Macmillan.

In 1875 the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh worked in an art dealer's shop at No 25, though apparently his moody behaviour so upset the management that he was transferred back to Paris.

In 1860 a Jewish tailor had relocated his business from the East End to Bedford Street and decided to change his name from Moses Moses to Moses Moss. When he died in 1894, he left his business to Alfred and George, two of his five sons. It eventually became better known as 'Moss Bros'. A gentleman went into their tailor's shop one day asking if he could borrow a suit, as he couldn't afford to have one made, and came back several times to ask the same thing ... and the rest, as they say, is history. Moss Bros became a household name. Their success was such that the company eventually owned a number of properties along the street. (And as an update to this, the company was badly affected by the Covid pandemic but, having closed a number of less profitable stores, they have apparently bounced back as a result of moving into selling more casual clothes.)

And as we turn left in Maiden Lane, I will just mention that when I first started preparing this walk, the building on the left-hand corner of Bedford Street and Maiden Lane was the offices of the upmarket magazine *The Lady*. They had been here for well over 100 years but have recently moved out and the premises have been sold.

The Lady magazine, known as the 'Old Lady of Bedford Street', has been run by the same family since 1885. It was founded by Thomas Gibson Bowles, the grandfather of the aristocratic and controversial Mitford sisters. He also founded *Vanity Fair* magazine.

The Lady has had an interesting history and it's considered to be the 'first port of call' for anyone looking for domestic staff – indeed, both the Queen Mother and Prince Charles are said to have used their services.

It had been launched in nearby Tavistock Street in 1885 and moved into Bedford Street in 1890. The building, which at one time was used as a tea warehouse, has had various occupants over the years, though most of their leases expired some years ago, eventually leaving The Lady as the sole occupier. After the business came under the control of a great-grandson of the founder of the company, the building was sold (apparently for £18 million) to Capital & Counties Properties (now Shaftesbury Capital, who own the freehold of most of the buildings in central Covent Garden). And whilst I'm sure it will soon be redeveloped, looking in the windows at the time of writing it looks as though little has changed since they first moved in, well over 100 years ago.

Take the next left into **Maiden Lane**.

Maiden Lane was once part of an ancient track that ran through the convent garden to St Martin's Lane. The right-hand side was said to have been the old mud wall of the garden, which after 1610 was rebuilt in brick. Behind the wall were other gardens, with stables and haylofts. After building began here, around 1635, several alleys connected the lane to the Strand, and three are still left today. One is Exchange Court, which you see after you've turned left into Maiden Lane, and it runs down the side of the Porterhouse pub. The painter J.M.W. Turner lived in a house that was once on this site, where his father had worked as a barber and wigmaker.

The Porterhouse, which has an outdoor seating area in front, is a cavern-like place, with an industrial-styled interior of steel beams and exposed pipework. It's on several levels (must be a nightmare for anyone who arranges to meet somebody here – you'd never find them). It's owned by the Irish Porterhouse Brewery Company and sells an extensive range of its own beers and ales.

Next to it is one of two stage doors in the street of the **Adelphi Theatre** and a few yards further on the left is **Rules**, arguably London's oldest and most famous restaurant. (Wiltons was founded earlier but it has moved around St James's at least six times over the course of its existence whereas Rules has stayed put in Maiden Lane.)

The restaurant was opened in 1798 by Thomas Rule, initially (like Wiltons) as an oyster bar. It was rebuilt in 1873 and soon became a favourite of the future Edward VII. When he was Prince of Wales, he used to sit at the table by the latticed window on the first floor, entertaining his 'girlfriend' Lilly Langtry.

For many years it was popular with members of the theatrical profession. The list of famous actors who were regular visitors, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reads like a 'Who's Who' of the theatre and includes such figures as Henry Irving and Laurence Olivier. Indeed, still on the walls of the restaurant are portraits of many actors who have been past diners. (Having said that, I don't think there are many 21st century actors visiting today – these days they are more likely to be seen in places such as the Ivy and other somewhat 'trendier celebrity hangouts').

Rules is still noted today for the quality of its food, which tends to be very traditionally English, offering oysters, pies and game. Indeed, not many restaurants today serve dishes that range from steak and kidney pie and roast crown of mallard to whole roast grouse. Apparently, they even have their own 'game estate' in the High Pennines – the restaurant is said to serve around 18,000 game birds a year.

Directly opposite, on the rear wall of the **Vaudeville Theatre**, a blue plaque explains that the French philosopher, satirist and playwright Voltaire lived here back in 1727. He had been exiled

to England as an alternative to imprisonment in France and lived here for part of the time, as this enabled him to be close to his publisher. Voltaire mixed with other intellectuals and literary figures during this time and published several essays in the English language. He was allowed back into France after two-and-a-half years in exile.

Just a little further along, again on the right, is the Roman Catholic **Corpus Christi Church**. Its entrance is easy to miss and might not look particularly welcoming, but once down the steps and through the small wooden door you find the most beautifully ornate and decorated church.

The church was built in 1874, "as an act of reparation for sins against the Blessed Sacrament during the Reformation," and since then the church of Corpus Christi has held a special place in the hearts of Catholics. The hymns 'Sweet Sacrament Divine' and 'O Sacred Heart' were composed here by a former parish priest, Father Francis Stanfield, and Monsignor Ronald Knox preached his many homilies on the Blessed Sacrament from the church's pulpit.

As home to the Catholic Association for Performing Arts (previously the Catholic Stage Guild), Corpus Christi has, like St Paul's Covent Garden, become known as the Actors' Church, providing a place of contemplation and worship for Catholic actors performing in the West End. The church is normally open on weekdays between 8am and 7pm and from 9am to 6pm on Sundays.

At the end of Maiden Lane turn left into **Southampton Street**. Look to the right along Tavistock Street and you'll see the terrace of the **Prima Saponi d'Italia** restaurant. As you're now past the halfway point in the walk, I can thoroughly recommend it if you're feeling hungry. It's open all day and early evening. But stay on Southampton Street unless you're making a diversion to eat at Prima.

On your left are two terraced houses dating from 1708, though both have undergone some alterations since then. **Number 27**, which we pass first, is particularly important (and Grade II* listed) because more of its original features have been preserved – and it was the residence of David Garrick, who you can read more about in the appendix. Having paid 500 guineas for the house, he and his new wife Eva Maria moved in soon after their marriage in 1749. It remained their city home for 23 years. The house doesn't have a blue plaque (nobody gets two, and David's is at Garrick Villa, his summer retreat by the Thames in Hampton) but above the doorway there's a bronze memorial tablet that was commissioned by the Duke of Bedford in 1900 and designed by his personal architect Charles Fitzroy Doll.

In 1903 the ground floor of number 26 was converted into a shop, which is now Abuelo, an "Australian meets South American coffee-house and kitchen."

At the top of Southampton Street we at last arrive at the famous **Covent Garden market piazza**.

VISITING THE MARKET AREA

On the right at the top of Southampton Street is the **Jubilee Market Hall**, which opened in 1904 as the 'Foreign Flower Market' and was Grade II listed in 1980. Restoration began in late 1985. Offices and flats were built above the western section as part of a deal to save the whole of the market from redevelopment. During the excavations in 1985 the first Anglo-Saxon remains were found in Covent Garden. The Jubilee Market was opened by the Queen two years later.

On Mondays the Jubilee Market specialises in antiques and collectables; from Tuesday to Friday there's a general market with a mixture of permanent and pop-up stalls selling everything from clothes and bags to posters and 'knick-knacks'; on Saturday and Sunday there's an emphasis on arts and crafts.

There is a plaque on the rear wall of the building put up in memory of the many thousands of donkeys that for centuries (and some as recently as 1970) were used to pull the carts of produce around the market.

From here I suggest you begin exploring by walking in a clockwise direction around the piazza to visit the central market buildings.

So, turn left out of Southampton Street and immediately turn right, passing on your left the front of **St Paul's Church**, which you visited a few minutes ago.

The church has an impressive Tuscan portico over what was intended to be its entrance. However, as I've already explained, the church authorities insisted that the altar had to be at this – the eastern – end of the church, so the main entrance had to go on the other side.

It was under this portico that Professor Henry Higgins met Liza Doolittle, the Covent Garden flower seller, in George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play *Pygmalion*, which was later turned in to the 1964 musical *My Fair Lady*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison.

It was also in front of the church that on Friday 9 May 1662 the first known performance of a 'Punch and Judy' show took place. We know the date as it was watched – and recorded – by Samuel Pepys. In his diary he wrote: "Thence ... into Covent Garden ... to see an Italian puppet play that is within the rayles [rails] there, which is very pretty, the best that ever I saw ..." He was so impressed that he brought his wife back to see another show two weeks later.

'Punch & Judy' had been brought to London by an Italian puppeteer by the name of Pietro Gimonde. Back then the puppet was called Punchinello (an anglicisation of the Italian *Pulcinella*), whilst his wife, at first called Joan, joined him shortly afterwards. It clearly took off very rapidly, as less than six months later he performed in front of Charles II. He then took his show to France, Germany, Russia and several other European countries. Gimonde's success apparently 'went to his head' and he became infamous for disrupting the shows of other puppeteers. Over time Punchinello became known as Mr Punch, whilst his wife became Judy. And their dog, who in early performances had been played by a real live dog, became Toby.

Charles Dickens was a fan and mentioned 'Punch & Judy' in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Back then the performances were said to be far more aggressive and naughtier than they are today, and in the 1840s campaigners wrote to Charles Dickens, asking him to support their efforts to have the shows banned. Dickens replied, "In my opinion the Street Punch is one of those extravagant reliefs from the realities of life which would lose its hold upon the people if it were made moral and instructive. I regard it as quite harmless and as an outrageous joke which no one in existence would think of regarding as an incentive to any kind of action or as a model for any kind of conduct. It is possible, I think, that one secret source of pleasure very generally derived from this performance is the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstances that likenesses of men and women can be so knocked about without any pain or suffering."

I've written a little more about Punch & Judy in the appendix (below).

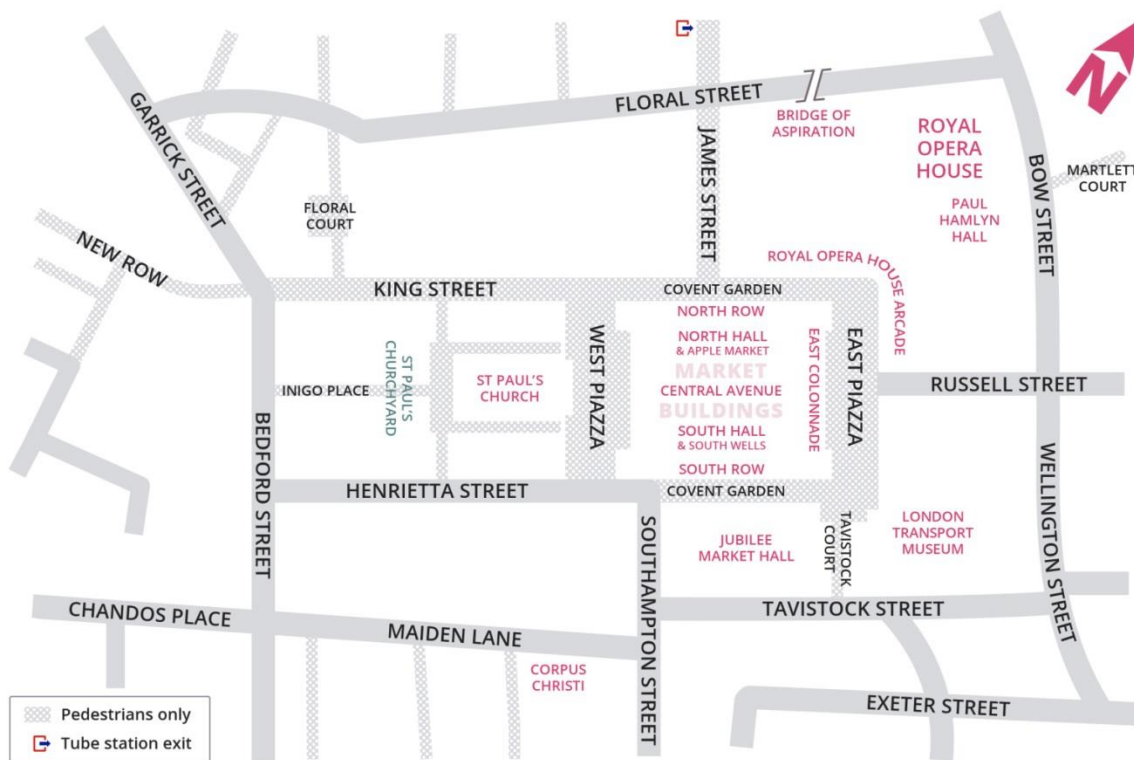
There's still a link of sorts with the puppet today, as over on your right is the Punch & Judy pub, though it's in a building that dates from two centuries after that first performance took place here.

Nowadays, the area in front of the church is normally busy with the many buskers (or, to use today's correct terminology, 'street performers') for which Covent Garden has become renowned.

It's now time to visit one of the focal points of this walk – the Covent Garden Market.

The market buildings, which are on your right, are divided into three main sections – the North Hall (and Apple Market), Central Avenue, and the South Hall – each of which runs through from west to east.

After visiting the market, the walk continues from the opposite (east) side. The map here shows the market buildings and the surrounding area:



Some background to the market

The fruit, vegetable and flower market began in 1656 with a few 'temporary' stalls erected in the garden of Bedford House, home of the Earl (later Duke) of Bedford. Controversy soon began, with concern over the amount of rubbish being left at the end of each working day.

In 1670 the 5th Earl of Bedford and his heirs were granted a licence by Charles II to hold a market for 'fruit, flowers, roots and herbs' and to collect tolls and fees from the dealers every day of the year, with the exception of Sundays and Christmas Day.

Then just eight years later, the lease was obtained by Adam Piggot, which gave him the right to erect twenty-two permanent shops with cellars against the garden wall of Bedford House to buy

and sell fruit, flowers, roots and herbs. After the house was knocked down, a row of 48 shops was built nearer to the centre of the piazza, which I do find surprising as whilst all of this was taking place, this was still a fashionable residential area to live, though that soon changed.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries the market became busier, and rather than just selling fruit, vegetables and flowers, these new traders began selling various other goods. The original stall holders protested and refused to pay their rent until this was stopped.

The land and freehold were still owned by the Duke of Bedford, and he obtained permission from parliament to decide on new rules and erect new buildings where market holders could carry on their business. Completed in 1830, these buildings (now the North and South Halls) were a great success – so much so that they later had to be extended with new buildings, such as the covered Central Avenue, which was created in two stages in 1875 and 1889, and the neighbouring Jubilee Market (1904), which we've already visited.

Despite the ever-growing market soon becoming 'unfit for purpose', it continued on the same site until 1974, when it relocated to Nine Elms, south of the Thames. I've previously referred to (and will mention again later) the Greater London Council's plan – and fortunately subsequent failure – to demolish many of the market buildings, and indeed other buildings in the area, after the market had left.

Those plans were dropped thanks to the campaigning work of conservation groups and local people and, after the GLC was abolished in 1986, the Covent Garden Trust was formed in 1988. It was set up to take over the GLC's responsibility for Covent Garden and protect this historic area. It is a charitable Trust that is funded by the properties it protects and holds a 150-year lease on the main buildings of the piazza.

The Rent Ceremony

The Trust pays an annual 'peppercorn' rent of five apples and five posies of flowers, and these are handed over to the owners of the freehold at an annual ceremony. Simply called the 'Rent Ceremony', it is worth seeing if you happen to be in the area that day. (It is normally held on St Peter's Day, 29th June).

As well as being a symbolic way of recognising the legal contract between the landlords of the buildings and the Trust, it is a definitely a ceremony of fun.

Anyone who is in the Piazza at the time can take part in the parade and enjoy the spectacle. It begins with the Town Crier announcing the event by ringing his handbell and shouting out "the Covent Garden Area Trust is paying its rent!"

Then follows a parade around the Piazza, with the Trustees, local mayors and councillors, musicians and local entertainers – and, well, anyone who wants to join in – taking part.

From St Paul's Church, I suggest you enter the market buildings through the North Hall, on the left, with its Apple Market section at the front as you enter.

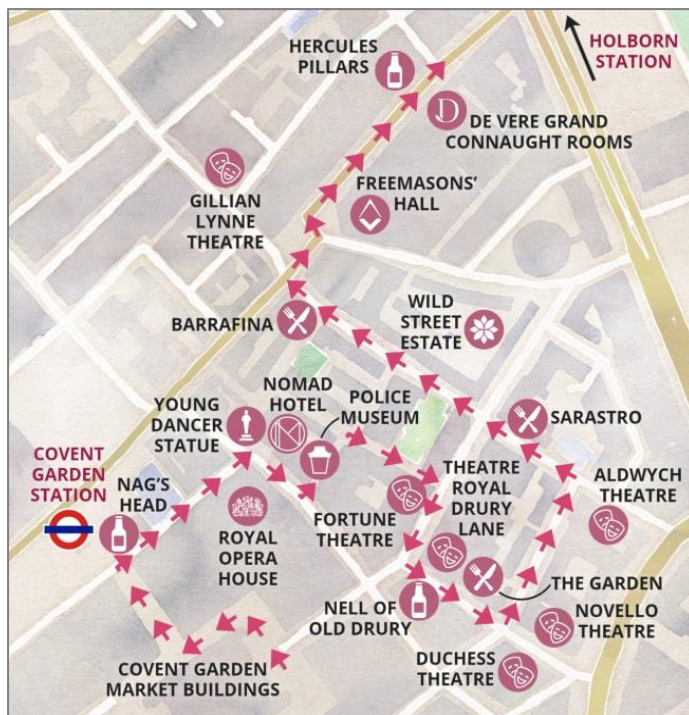
The Apple Market usually has stalls selling handmade jewellery and other craft items, whilst behind are food outlets – turn right before them and go through the passageway signed **Central Avenue**. This 'middle hall' has rather expensive shops, and unless you are interested, I suggest you carry on through into **South Hall**, and turn left. (To the right at the end is the entrance to the Punch & Judy pub, whilst on the lower level is a food court, accessed through the pub).

However, turn left and walk through South Hall. Further along is another lower-level food court where there are often live opera or classical music singers performing.

At the end of the halls are a number of stalls and barrows selling a variety of jewellery, crafts, etc. and this brings you out into the open-air **East Colonnade**. I suggest you pause here for a moment whilst I explain a couple of things before we turn left.

To your right is the excellent **London Transport Museum**, which opened here in 1980 in the brick and glass building that was built nearly one hundred years before, as part of the flower market.

Much of it is underground and features a fascinating array of horse-drawn carriages, trams, buses and even tube trains that show the history of London's transport. I don't suggest you try and find time to visit it now – maybe come back at the end of the walk, or at another time. I will add though that there is an excellent shop selling an enormous range of transport-themed gifts, books, memorabilia, etc., which is free to enter without needing to visit the museum. There is also an excellent upper-level café and toilets as well, and you don't need to pay to go through the museum to access them. As with the museum, they are open daily for 362 days of the year.



Route map 4

Russell Street branches off at a right angle from the middle of the East Piazza. We don't walk along this street but it's worth glancing down it as you pass the junction, with the view of the Theatre Royal at the far end. And on the right, No. 8 is currently Balthazar Boulangerie, a trendy patisserie. From around 1760 this was the newly-built bookshop and home of Thomas Davies, who was a friend of Dr Samuel Johnson, the poet, playwright, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer. It was here on 16th May 1763 that Davies introduced Johnson to James Boswell, which began a very long friendship.

Having something of a fascination with Dr Johnson, I've quoted Boswell's account of the meeting, from his *Life of Johnson*:

At last, on Monday the 16th of May, when I was sitting in Mr Davies's back parlour, after having drunk tea with him and Mrs Davies, Johnson unexpectedly came into the shop; and Mr Davies having perceived him through the glass-door in the room in which we were sitting, advancing towards us, – he announced his awful approach to me, somewhat in the manner of an actor in the part of Horatio, when he addresses Hamlet on the appearance of his father's ghost, "Look, my lord, it comes."

... Mr Davies mentioned my name, and respectfully introduced me to him. I was much agitated; and recollecting his prejudice against the Scotch, of which I had heard much, I said to Davies, "Don't tell where I come from."—"From Scotland," cried Davies, roguishly.

"Mr Johnson," said I, "I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it." I am willing to flatter myself that I meant this as light pleasantry to soothe and conciliate him, and not as a humiliating abasement at the expense of my country. But however that might be, this speech was somewhat unlucky; for with that quickness of wit for which he was so remarkable, he seized the expression "come from Scotland," which I used in the sense of being of that country; and, as if I had said that I had come away from it, or left it, retorted, "That, sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help."

This stroke stunned me a good deal; and when we had sat down, I felt myself not a little embarrassed, and apprehensive of what might come next. He then addressed himself to Davies: "What do you think of Garrick? He has refused me an order for the play for Miss Williams, because he knows the house will be full, and that an order would be worth three shillings."

Eager to take any opening to get into conversation with him, I ventured to say, "O sir, I cannot think Mr Garrick would grudge such a trifle to you." "Sir," said he, with a stern look, "I have known David Garrick longer than you have done: and I know no right you have to talk to me on the subject."

[Though "much mortified" by this rude response, Boswell was so keen to strike up a friendship with Johnson that he persevered with the conversation. And the rest is history.]

Still looking down Russell Street you see on the left the enormous and beautifully restored **Covent Garden Opera House**, which occupies the whole of this block, extending back to Bow Street and north from here to Floral Street, as we shall see shortly. Indeed, with the exception of the ground floor, which is called the **Royal Opera House Arcade** and occupied by high-end shops, everything above them is part of the opera house. Incidentally, the Royal Opera House Arcade shouldn't be confused (though it often is) with John Nash's Royal Opera Arcade, which runs between Pall Mall and Charles II Street in St James's.

It's hard to appreciate just how big the opera house complex is until we have walked around it, which we will soon do.

Walk to the top of the **East Piazza** – the more discreet 'rear entrance' of the **Royal Opera House** is in the right-hand corner of the colonnades. (The main entrance is in Bow Street, which we see shortly). However, if you would like to take a look inside this entrance, there's an interesting shop, café and, importantly, very nice toilets. I do recommend the opera house guided tour – you need to book in advance – which takes you through many 'backstage' areas of the building. You get to see some of the many aspects involved in the production of opera and ballets, for example where costumes, wigs, props and stage sets are made.

The building we see today is the third on this site. The original opened in 1732 as the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, and was said to be where the first ballet was presented on the stage in England. George Frideric Handel was the first director of music, and later gave the first London performance of his *Messiah* here, before going on to write several operas and oratorios specifically for Covent Garden. These included *Samson*, *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Theodora* and he continued to give regular performances until his death in 1759. The theatre burnt down in 1808,

and a new building opened soon after. This was where the first ever performances took place in England of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro* as well as Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*.

A third major fire destroyed the building in 1856. A new building opened in 1858 and this remains the nucleus of the theatre that we can still see today.

During the First World War the theatre was used by the government for storage. In 1932 Sir Thomas Beecham assumed the role of artistic director and conductor. The opera house closed again during the Second World War; this time being used as a dance hall. After the war, it became the home of the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company, later known as the Royal Covent Garden Ballet Company as well as the Covent Garden Opera Company, which later also had the 'Royal' prefix.

In 1996–9 a major £213 million reconstruction project took place which extended the complex to the corner of James Street and Floral Street and replaced most of the secondary spaces. The amazing glass ceiling and barrelled roof of the Floral Hall (officially called the Paul Hamlyn Hall since 2007) was restored – and it's worth going inside the main Bow Street entrance to see it. From here an escalator leads to the amphitheatre bar – the biggest of its kind in London, seating 250. New seating, lighting and air conditioning were installed in the auditorium, together with much else. Further works took place in 2014 when the foyer and entrances were made more attractive and accessible.

The theatre currently seats just over 2,200 people.

Follow the shopping colonnade around to the left and then turn to the right up the wide pedestrianised **James Street**, where you'll likely see more street entertainers. If for any reason you have to curtail the walk at this point, then Covent Garden tube station (on the Piccadilly Line) is just ahead at the top of James Street.

Halfway up James Street turn right into **Floral Street**. (Yes, this is the same street we were in earlier in the walk – though we are now at the opposite end.)

On both corners of Floral Street are two famous old pubs – the **White Lion** and the **Nag's Head**. The White Lion has been here since at least 1825, though the pub you see today was rebuilt in 1888. It gave its name to a radical political group in the 1820s and 30s – the White Lion Group – as it was where they held their first meeting.

The Nag's Head is even older in origin, having been on this site since 1670. The present building dates from around 1900 and the Hertfordshire-based McMullen brewery purchased it in 1927. The pub still serves traditional McMullen ales, brewed in Hertford using local malt and whole hops. For many years the pub would open at 5am to serve the many market porters. Unlike the White Lion, the Nag's Head is Grade II listed.

As with many of the buildings in Covent Garden, those on your left along Floral Street were once workshops and warehouses – notice the large windows, designed to allow in as much light as possible. I'm delighted they have been repurposed rather than being knocked down and replaced with yet more 'inappropriate' structures as we see so often in London – it is now the home of the **Royal Ballet School**. And you can't fail to notice the unusual bridge – called the **Bridge of Aspiration** – above, which connects it to the Royal Opera House. Its "award winning design addresses a series of complex conceptual issues and is legible as a fully integrated

component of the building it links and as an independent architectural element." And they're not my words; they are the words of the architects.

At the end of Floral Street, we are going to turn right down **Bow Street** (said to have been so named because of its "curved course" – though it certainly doesn't look bow-shaped to me) – but before you do, across the road you'll see a life-size sculpture of a female dancer, located under a tree in the wide entrance to Broad Court.

The beautiful bronze sculpture of a ballerina was installed here in 1988 and called *Young Dancer*. Sculpted by Enzo Plazzotta, an Italian who loved ballet, it pictures the dancer seated on a stool. Her right leg bent slightly at the knee, points to the ground with her toe just touching. Her left leg is across the right with her hands resting on it. She has a calm look and appears to be resting.

Although Bow Street is so close to Covent Garden, it had been ignored by Inigo Jones. The houses built there between 1631 and 1636 weren't designed to appeal to the aristocracy, as Covent Garden was, but instead "fitt for the habitacions of Gentlemen and men of ability" – in other words, the middle class as opposed to the upper class. However, that changed in 1732 when a rear alley was built from Bow Street to give access to the 'pit', which was where the 'lower classes' would sit, in the recently opened Theatre Royal. This saw a rapid rise of problems including drunkenness, prostitution and general street crime, which resulted in the street's reputation rapidly declining. Whilst there were just forty houses in the street, there were eight licensed premises. And things got worse when the Bow Street police station and magistrates court opened, which I've explained elsewhere.

Walk down on the left side of Bow Street, passing the famous **Bow Street Magistrates Court**. It opened some 270 years ago, though on the side of the road where the Royal Opera House is today. It moved across into the purpose-built court building with the adjacent police station in 1881.

The police station closed in 1992, followed by the court in 2006 and the building remained boarded up for many years. However, it has now been converted into the five-star 90-room NoMad Hotel, at a cost of over £50 million. (Rooms here start at around £500 a night and up to £2,500 a night for the Royal Opera Suite).

Those who were more reluctant visitors (to the magistrate's court and not the hotel, I would hasten to add) have included Oscar Wilde, the murderer Dr Crippen, the East End gangsters the Kray twins, the suffragette Pankhurst sisters, Second World War traitor William Joyce (otherwise known as Lord Haw Haw) and Lord Jeffery Archer.

Another high profile 'guest' here in 1968, was James Earl Ray. He had assassinated civil rights activist Martin Luther King Junior and fled to Canada and then came to London. He was stopped at passport control at Heathrow Airport and brought to Bow Street for possession of false documents, as well as a firearm. He was then extradited to the US, where he was tried and sentenced to 99 years in prison for the murder. Bow Street court was also where a number of members of the IRA, who were facing terrorism charges, appeared.

Many people appeared before the magistrates here because it was a 'legal gateway' to the Old Bailey and the Crown Courts. What also gave these courts their unique status was that it dealt with such serious matters as terrorist offenses, extradition cases and prosecutions under the Official Secrets Act.

Adjoining the courts was the equally famous **Bow Street Police Station**, home of the Bow Street Runners, the forerunners of today's modern police forces, and there's a small museum that gives more information about them around the corner in Martlett Street.

Bow Street has been closely linked with upholding the law since as far back as 1740. That was when Sir Thomas de Veil, a local magistrate and former army captain, opened what was then called the Bow Street Public Office, in his home at No.4 Bow Street (located on the site of today's Royal Opera House). Taking it upon himself to investigate local crime, he acted as a police officer, judge, and jury. Despite being said to have been corrupt, he did make a good start at tackling crime.

However, things really took off eight years later when Henry Fielding (who later became Sir Henry Fielding) was appointed magistrate by George III. Together with John, his blind brother, who had written several books about the problems of crime, they set up the first detective police force in London. Initially consisting of just six men and known as 'Mr Fielding's People', this soon grew in number and they became known as the Bow Street Runners. Within fifty years their numbers had grown and by 1828 they had 288 men with the motto 'Be Sober - Be Vigilant'. A Bow Street Night Foot Patrol would consist of a captain, armed with carbines, pistols and a cutlass, and a number of men with just a cutlass. They patrolled the chief streets in the city and to deter highway robbery on the outer edges of London, there were mounted and fully armed horse patrols.

And the nickname still sometimes used for policemen - 'coppers' - came about because they had copper buttons on their uniform jackets.

I've written more about the story of the Bow Street Magistrates Court and Police Station in the appendix (see below).

Before we turn left, look across at the magnificent frontage of the **Royal Opera House**.

Take the next left into **Martlett Court** and on the left is the entrance to the **Bow Street Police Museum**. This small museum explains how the Bow Street Runners became Britain's - and possibly the world's - first organised police force. Much of the story is told using information boards, but you visit one of the original cells, including the larger one known as the 'holding tank' where the drunks and disorderly were put for the night before appearing in the morning before the magistrates. You can also see one of the docks from the original court rooms whilst other exhibits include a cutlass that was used by the early Bow Street runners, various truncheons, early policemen's notebooks, etc. It's open Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 11am to 4.30pm.

Facing you at the end of the street is **Fletcher Buildings**, one of the many huge social housing buildings in this area. We pass several others shortly and I explain more then.

Turn right down **Crown Court**, passing an unusual building on your right. I say unusual, as it contains both a church and a theatre - the entrance to both the church hall and the stage door are here, whilst their main entrances are around the corner in Russell Street, where we walk next.

This is the **Crown Court Presbyterian Church of Scotland**, which was built in 1711. Back then the church owned the entire building, but in the early 20th century it was purchased by the Fortune Theatre. The church was allowed to stay, though much of it being rebuilt in 1909.

The Crown Court Presbyterian Church of Scotland, which is also known as the 'Kirk of the Crown of Scotland', is the longest-established Presbyterian church south of the Scottish border, dating back to 1711, though much of what we see today was rebuilt in 1909.

Little can be seen of the exterior of the church as it shares walls with the theatre building. From the entrance, a long corridor and flight of carpeted stairs, hung with ancient portraits of previous ministers, leads into the main body of the church. Despite the early 20th-century rebuilding it has retained a 17th-century feel with wooden pillars, ceiling beams and ancient flags from Scottish regiments and Royal Caledonian schools. Above the wooden pulpit is a huge, magnificent Royal Crest of George I, in gold and covered with thistles, roses and a St Andrew's cross. The side walls feature many square stained-glass windows, one filled with women of the Bible and another with famous Scots, John Knox being central.

A Scottish Presbyterian congregation was first established in London during the reign of King James I of England and VI of Scotland, following the Union of the Crowns in 1603. Some of his Scottish courtiers worshipped in a chapel near the old Whitehall Palace, which is said to have been the reason for the Metropolitan Police's headquarters became known as 'Scotland Yard'.

Turn right into **Russell Street**, passing the entrance to both the Fortune Theatre and the church – the latter being a fairly insignificant wooden door with a stone cross above it.

The **Fortune Theatre**, called a 'jewel of a theatre' and designed in the beautiful art deco style, opened in 1924 and was one of the first buildings in London to be built in concrete.

It sits on the site of the ancient Albion Tavern, said to have been a haunt of actors and playwrights. It was named after the Fortune Playhouse (in turn named after the Roman goddess Fortuna), which had opened in 1600 in Cripplegate, just outside the jurisdiction of the City of London and where Shakespeare himself may have performed.

From August 1989 until March 2023 the theatre hosted the horror-mystery play *The Woman in Black*. Seen by two million people, it was London's second longest-running non-musical play after *The Mousetrap*.

However, the Fortune Theatre is dwarfed by the Grade I listed **Theatre Royal Drury Lane** opposite. Cross over and walk along under the colonnade with its gold tipped railings and turn left down **Catherine Street**.

Notice the drinking fountain on the corner. It is a memorial to **Sir Augustus Harris**, the manager of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane during its heyday from 1873 to 1896. He played a huge part in its success during this time, but sadly died of exhaustion at the early age of forty-four.

The memorial fountain is built of red granite and Mansfield stone, with bronze enrichments, whilst the base is of polished Norwegian granite on a Sicilian marble base. Water for the fountain is delivered by a lion's head into the circular basin. Above the basin and the rusticated granite base is a panel illustrative of dramatic art, having figures carrying masks, and above this panel rises a classic pediment, supported by two polished granite columns, having drums at the base with musical instruments (in bronze) carved on them, whilst the capitals of the columns are also in bronze. Under the pediment (which has tragedy and comedy masks, and a central lyre on the acroteria blocks) is a niche containing the bronze bust, which is by Sir Thomas Brock, with the inscription 'Augustus Harris'.

For this information I once again thank the absorbing website, arthurlloyd.co.uk – which is dedicated to the history of theatre and music hall and to Arthur Lloyd.

The **Theatre Royal** (its 'Royal' title is because it was one of just two theatres given a royal patent by Charles II) is London's third largest theatre, with seating capacity of over 2,000. It is the fourth theatre to be built on the site, the first opening in 1633, making it the oldest in London (at least by one definition). This was a three-tiered wooden structure which could accommodate 700 people. To allow in daylight (no stage lighting in those days) there wasn't a roof and performances usually began at 3pm to take advantage of whatever light there was. It burnt down in 1672, and two years later a new theatre was built. The theatre we see today was built in 1812, though there were considerable renovations in the 1920s.

The theatre was purchased by Andrew Lloyd-Webber in 2000 and to mark the theatre's 350th anniversary in 2013, he began a major £4 million restoration. This returned some of the original features of the theatre back to their Regency style.

From the theatre continue on down **Catherine Street**. Notice alongside the theatre a delightful café/bar called **The Garden at the Lane**. It's in a narrow, covered passageway and is open from 9.30 in the morning, serving coffee, brunches and afternoon refreshments and in the evenings cocktails and light snacks.

Opposite the theatre is another of London's many fascinating pubs, the **Nell of Old Drury**, named after Nell Gwynne, the Covent Garden orange seller who became a famous actress and then mistress of Charles II. Whilst this isn't the original pub, there has been one here since the late 16th century.

Also on that side is the **Opera Tavern**. There's been a pub on the site since 1791, when it was called the Yorkshire Grey, and later the Sheridan Knowles. It was renamed the Opera Tavern in 1861 and rebuilt in its present form in 1879. I like its striking grey façade – but it wasn't always so plain. In 1970 the Covent Garden volume of the Survey of London said: "The narrow front is a design of extremely eclectic character, the wilful distortions of standard Italianate and neo-classical motifs made even more striking by the present application of bold colour."

Take the next left into **Tavistock Street**, alongside the **Novello Theatre**, whilst on the other side is the **Duchess Theatre** – not without good reason is this area known as 'London's theatre district'.

The nondescript building on your right with the 'New York style of iron outdoor fire escapes' is the rear of the **Waldorf Hotel**, though from here you wouldn't realise it had five stars.

On the left are the **Stirling Buildings**, one of a number of apartment buildings that were built by the Peabody Trust in the late 19th century, and still run today by the Peabody Trust housing association. A resident of Stirling Buildings who I chatted with outside told me the flats were a mixture of one, two and three-bedrooms, and that they'd all been refurbished several times since being built around 1881. She added that whilst some were still rented on a social-housing basis, many had now been purchased. I'll say more about the man behind the Peabody buildings when we come to his next development.

Back in the 1970s the Greater London Council were desperately trying to demolish much of Covent Garden (which I've referred to elsewhere) and Stirling Court was one of many planned to go under the 'wrecker's ball'. The building, together with others nearby, were to be knocked down in order for a four-lane road to go through here, as well as to build an extension to the

adjacent Waldorf Hotel. They even got as far as evicting tenants, giving them just £30 to cover their expenses. However, extensive campaigning, including protest marches and picketing, eventually saw the council retract their plans and these, together with many other buildings within the central Covent Garden area, are fortunately still with us today. (I've previously explained more about the work of the conservation groups who did so much to ensure that Seven Dials and Covent Garden was saved from demolition and subsequent modern development.)

Pass the stage door of the **Aldwych Theatre** on the right and turn left up Drury Lane. Facing you is the St Clement Danes Church of England Primary School. As the frieze inscription states, the school was founded in 1700 and rebuilt in 1907. (St Clement Danes Church is situated a few minutes' walk away in the Strand, and I explain more about its history in my Charing Cross to St Paul's walk.)

Drury Lane, like much of this area, has had a long and at times troubled history. For a start, it is here that the Great Plague of 1665–6 was said to have begun.

In Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, he records that two Frenchmen living at the upper end of Drury Lane had died of the plague around the beginning of December 1664. Within a few weeks two more people had died at different houses nearby.

"This turned the people's eyes pretty much towards that end of the town; and the weekly bills showing an increase of burials in St Giles's Parish more than usual, it began to be suspected that the plague was among the people at that end of the town; and that many had died of it, though they had taken care to keep it as much from the knowledge of the public as possible. This possessed the heads of the people very much, and few cared to go through Drury Lane, or the other streets suspected, unless they had extraordinary business that obliged them to it."

Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary that walking along Drury Lane he saw two or three houses marked with a red cross. (This was a sign that people inside were suffering from the plague, and usually they added the words, 'Lord have mercy upon us'). Pepys goes on to say that he buys some tobacco to smell and chew, "which took away my apprehension." (It was believed back then that tobacco would ward off the plague, as rumour had it that no tobacconist had ever died from the plague.)

The renowned 17th century English physician Thomas Sydenham, talking about the plague, observed "its malignity being mostly discovered among the poorer sort of people in St Giles's." The death toll in this parish in 1665 was in excess of three thousand.

By the 18th century the popularity of its theatre, attracting both the rich and poor, resulted in numerous gin-houses, coffee houses and pubs, bringing with them yet more drunkenness, prostitution, pickpockets and other more serious crimes. In 1743 there were eight licensed premises in a street of less than forty houses.

London in the 18th and 19th centuries was rife with prostitution. Covent Garden, because of its theatres, was one of the more popular places for this activity, particularly with the 'higher-class' of prostitutes. They would come from far afield and would compete with each other to try and attract the wealthiest of the men.

Indeed, theatres were regarded as 'parade-grounds' for prostitutes, and the nightly walking up and down of the women was known as 'mutton walks'. These were as popular to watch as anything going on inside the theatres. Promenading women handed out printed business cards

to likely clients, a London fashion until at least 1870, and the income from commercial sex was said to be a necessary subsidy to dramatic art. The bars at either end of the theatre's salons were said to unite "the profits of a tavern to those of a brothel."

Indeed, so notorious did the Covent Garden area become as a 'red light district' that it inspired *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies*, a "lurid pocketbook catalogue of prostitutes, their physical appearance, their sexual specialities and where to find them." Priced at two shillings and sixpence, it sold over 250,000 copies between 1757 and 1795.

Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, a German nobleman and writer who visited Drury Lane in 1826, complained, "It is often difficult to keep off these repulsive beings, especially when they are drunk, which is seldom not the case." The lobbies of theatres were said to be full of "women half-dressed and men half-drunk." Sometimes things got out of hand. In 1835, "forty or fifty viragos" (domineering, violent or bad-tempered women) stripped a young man "completely naked" in the lobby of Drury Lane Theatre and stole his clothes.

Thanks to the excellent *London in the 19th Century* by Jerry White for some of the above information.

And there is of course the famous Muffin Man nursery rhyme ... though I have no idea how it came about ...

Do you know the muffin man?
The muffin man, the muffin man.
Do you know the muffin man
Who lives in Drury Lane?

Cross over, and on your right is another large residential apartment building, originally a charitable lodging house. However, what sets this apart from other blocks in the street is not only its Grade II listed architecture but its attractive greenery. And in addition to that, there's the eclectic collection of items on the pavement which you see as you walk past; there's an old-fashioned, battered music organ beside the pavement and then a few steps further on are a couple of wrought iron seats.

When I first came here, I'd walked from the opposite direction and saw this greenery in Kemble Street, which runs alongside. Intrigued, I then looked into the very dusty and dirty side windows and was further intrigued by the old books, antique lamps and other bric a bac I could see on the window shelves. Without then walking any further to investigate, I concluded that perhaps they were the windows of an apartment occupied by somebody possibly elderly and rather eccentric.

However, as soon as I turned the corner to where you are now standing, I realised that actually it is the home of the extraordinary **Sarastro** (well, not quite sure what you'd call it) theatre, music hall, opera house ... and certainly a restaurant.

I've read it being described as not just a "feast for the palate but for the eyes and ears as well" with operatic and other music filling the room, with "a highly charged atmosphere said to reflect that of the ebullient founder Richard Niazi, who was said to have been passionate about food, wine and opera – though not necessarily in that order!" Richard opened Sarastro here in 1996.

I've taken this from their website, as I feel it gives an excellent description of the building and venue:

“On approaching the Sarastro, the eye is enchanted by the voluptuous floral displays which adorn the exterior of the Grade II listed Victorian building. Closer to, the intriguing ‘old curiosity shop’ interior can be glimpsed through the semi-circular paned glass windows, drawing visitors into the heart of the restaurant to exclaim with joy at the unexpected vision that unfolds before them.

“As imaginative and remarkable as a scene from The Arabian Nights, the interior of the Sarastro is ablaze with swirling colour and visual excitement. The bustling main floor is surrounded on three sides by ten distinctive opera boxes, based on English, Gothic, Rococo, Ottoman and Byzantine styles, whilst the exclusive and prominent ‘Royal Box’ commands the centre position at the far end.

“As the first restaurant in London to feature balconies, and with bannisters taken from the Royal Opera House, Sarastro offers a diverse range of seating accommodation, much of which is partially enclosed to offer partial privacy for diners of a more discreet nature. Please note, however, that the erotic artwork which is such a memorable feature of our rest rooms is artistic yet could hardly be called discreet!

“Sarastro restaurant, named after a character in Mozart’s Magic Flute, first opened in 1996. Housed in what was once a public house on 19th century gin-soaked Drury Lane, and latterly part of Peabody Housing, Sarastro quickly established itself as one of London’s most unique and must-see restaurants.

“Appropriately located in the heart of Theatreland, Sarastro is a rich tapestry of flamboyant artwork, gilt furniture and wall mounted opera boxes, amongst which are numerous props and knick-knacks collected from nearby shows.”

Carry on ahead across Kemble Street – on the opposite corner is the new Amano Hotel, which opened in 2022. It has a 6th floor part-covered rooftop bar, so pleasant for an alfresco summer drink.

Continue up **Drury Lane** and you see one of the largest Peabody housing estates in the area. Known as the **Wild Street Estate**, it takes up the entire block from Drury Lane through to Wild Street.

Terraced housing had been built on this site in the late 1740s and within a century it had become a notorious slum known as the Wild Court rookery. When Wild Court was taken over by Lord Shaftesbury’s Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes in 1854, they found over a thousand people living in 13 ten-room houses with virtually no sanitation. As part of a slum clearance ordered by the then Metropolitan Board of Works, the Peabody charity built an estate in 1881 to help those being rehoused. Indeed, it turned out that so many people needed rehousing that the charity built 13 six-storey blocks on the site and made them a storey higher than usual. Whilst the buildings offered laundry facilities and outside recreational space, there was still no running water in the flats.

As a result of war damage in 1941 and 1944 two blocks in the centre of the estate were later demolished. The remaining flats were modernised in the 1960s to make them self-contained.

More on the Peabody estates

The living conditions of the Peabody housing developments were a big improvement on the slums that they replaced. For example, each block of flats was detached, to improve ventilation,

and they were built of unplastered brick, so that lice couldn't live in the walls. Laundry facilities were generally provided on the top floor of the buildings. The estates also included an area for children to play. The rents were set at a very reasonable 2/6 for a single room, 4/- for a two-roomed flat and 5/- for 3 rooms. Not surprisingly, they were very popular. These estates were well-run, and occupants had to abide by a number of rules. I like one old sign I saw still on the wall of one of the buildings that read, 'Hawkers, traders and others are prohibited from calling, shouting or using any bell or other instrument in this estate'.

Who was George Peabody?

George Peabody was born in the USA in 1795 and thanks to his outstanding generosity to others became known as the 'Father of Modern Philanthropy'. His was a true 'rags-to-riches' story. Being forced to leave school at the age of eleven and begin working as his parents couldn't afford to continue paying for his education, had a huge effect on him and played a considerable part in his becoming such a generous benefactor.

It was up to George and his brothers to financially support their mother and sisters. Thus began a life of hard work, importing wholesale dry goods in Baltimore, then in 1837 he moved to London (then the world's financial capital) where he established a merchant bank, George Peabody & Co, which made his fortune. He also acted as the unofficial 'American Ambassador'.

Peabody donated to many causes during his lifetime and in both Britain as well as America, but it was those that he could relate to as a result of his very poor upbringing where he felt particularly moved to help, concentrating on funding education, as well as the arts and housing for the less well-off.

He later said of his childhood poverty, "It is now too late for me to learn, and I can only do to those that come under my care, as I could have wished circumstances had permitted to others to have done by me."

However, for a man with an enormous fortune, he had a reputation for being extremely financially careful and rarely spent any money on himself. He wouldn't spend money on dining out and did not even own his own carriage, something that was very unusual for a wealthy man in those days. Indeed, he was once seen waiting in the rain outside his office, and when a colleague asked him why, and whether he was going home, Peabody replied, "I am, but there's only been a two-penny fare bus come along so far, and I'm waiting for the one-penny one."

His amazing generosity made him famous and a hero both in the United States as well as in Britain. He was offered a title by Queen Victoria, which he declined, though he was made a Freeman of the City of London, the first American to be so honoured. The British Royal Family even offered him the opportunity of being buried in Westminster Abbey, but he'd already decided his remains would go to the small town in Massachusetts where he had grown up. However, as he died in England, his body was temporarily buried in Westminster Abbey, before being returned to America. Such was the honour and respect in which he was held by both countries, he was taken back home in a joint squadron of American and British naval vessels.

There is a statue of George Peabody at the north-east corner of the Royal Exchange, just off Threadneedle Street.

After a few yards you'll see the small **Drury Lane Gardens**, with a children's playground that, with so many flats in the area, must be very popular. There's a basketball court as well. The

keeper's lodge was on one side of the entrance to the gardens, and you can still see the building today, whilst on the other side was the mortuary.

In the 1840s London was rapidly running out of space to bury their deceased inhabitants and it was clear that existing burial grounds would soon be full. However, it was another ten years later before the burial grounds were closed for internments. A report written by the sanitary reformer Sir Edwin Chadwick said it would be in the public's interest for spaces that had hitherto been used for burials to be kept as gardens for the public to enjoy, and the Open Spaces Act was subsequently passed in 1877. The Act made it illegal to build on any ground that had previously been set aside for internments and enabled some former burial grounds to be acquired and converted into public gardens.

Drury Lane Gardens was one of five former burial plots that were converted into public gardens, and whilst small, is considered to be a pioneer of the many public gardens in London.

Just before the junction with **Long Acre** are two places on the left that I can recommend for sustenance – the **Barrafina** tapas bar and restaurant and next-door **Cecilia's** wine bar.

We turn right at the junction into **Great Queen Street**.

Long Acre is to your left whilst Drury Lane carries on ahead. (The founder of the supermarket giant Sainsbury's opened his first food shop at **173 Drury Lane** in 1869. Initially it just sold fresh foods, before expanding into packaged groceries such as tea and sugar. His trading philosophy, as stated on a sign outside his first shop was, 'Quality perfect, prices lower'. However, the building no longer exists, as it's now a very modern block next to the Gillian Lynne Theatre.)

Great Queen Street was named in honour of Elizabeth I. At one time it was one of the wealthiest and most fashionable streets in all of London. Fourteen very grand houses were built along here, occupied by several lords and other 'gentry'. Unfortunately, none of these original houses have survived.

However, the highlight of the street is undoubtedly the magnificent **Freemasons' Hall**, headquarters of the United Grand Lodge of England, the governing body of Freemasonry in England and Wales.

Approaching it from where we turn off Drury Lane, it certainly looks impressive, with its tower above and the enormous doors at ground level. Due to the awkward shape of the two-acre site, the building has an unusual triangular shape. A description of it that I read said, "with its multiple recessions of plane and crowning aedicule, the tower — technically a 'pylon' because it dignifies an entrance — resembles a peace memorial." Which is actually what it was. When it opened in 1933, it was known as the Masonic Peace Memorial, in memory of the 3,225 Masons who died in the First World War. However, the name was changed to Freemasons' Hall at the start of the Second World War. The hall still has a shrine to those who died.

Those spectacular doors on the 'prow' of the building form the main entrance and are only used for ceremonial events (the everyday entrance is further along the street). When, on ceremonial occasions only, they are opened, "the building is revealed in its true splendour, and you enter into a dramatic series of spaces designed for masonic ceremonial." (Whilst I've visited several times, I've never yet seen them opened).

When it was built in 1933 it was regarded as being one of the finest Art Deco buildings in London – and it still is. (What I do find amazing is that none of the building was damaged during the

intensive bombing raids on London during the Second World War). Constructed of Portland Stone on a massive steel framework, its design is said to 'draw inspiration from a bewildering variety of Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, Greek and other sources, a conscious reference to the deep history attached to the mysteries of the 'Craft'.

This is the third masonic hall on the site. As Freemasonry began to grow in the 18th century, it was realised that a large meeting hall had to be found. A site was acquired in Great Queen Street, consisting of a tavern house fronting the street, with a garden behind that led to a second house. The hall was built over this garden and linked the two houses and opened in 1776. In addition to holding Masonic events, it became an important venue in London social life for concerts, balls, literary evenings and meetings of learned and charitable societies. Indeed, the tavern was the site of three very important events, which I'll refer to when we walk further along Great Queen Street and approach the building next door.

In the mid-19th century, much of the hall was rebuilt and extended – part of the classically styled façade of this extension now fronts the Grand Connaught Rooms next door which you can see as you walk further down Great Queen Street.

Growth of the Freemasons

By the beginning of the 20th century, the numbers of Freemasons had grown significantly. Between 1910 and 1928, the number had doubled to about 4,400,000 globally, the vast majority being in Britain and the United States of America. By the start of the First World War in 1914 plans were already under way for a new and much larger building.

After the war had ended the project gained momentum, particularly as it was felt there needed to be a permanent memorial to the many freemasons who had lost their lives in the conflict. A fundraising campaign began to raise the £1.3 million needed to build the new hall. Contributions were asked for from the many lodges across the country and included a banquet in 1927 for 7,000 freemasons at Kensington Olympia. At the end of the banquet, it was announced that £825,000 had been raised towards the million-pound estimated cost of the building. (That lunch is still said to hold the record of being the largest ever in Europe.)

Just two years later, on July 14, 1929, more than 6,000 Freemasons were at the Royal Albert Hall to watch the Grand Master lay a 'dummy foundation stone' for the new building. Whilst this was being done, the real stone was lowered into place on the Great Queen Street site.

The new building, which had seen the demolition of the previous hall, was completed and opened in 1933.

One of the highlights of the building are the magnificent bronze doors that lead into the principal meeting room; each door is 12ft high and 4ft wide and weighs over a ton. (You do have to feel for the carpenter who had to hang them as each is so perfectly hung that they can be opened by the push of a single finger. And if you take a guided tour of the building you get to see them but mind your fingers as you close them!)

And I must just explain that these doors open into the centre piece of the building, the Grand Temple. It's an enormous room, measuring 123ft long, 93ft wide and 62ft high, seating 1,700 people. For many years the Grand Temple was exclusively used for meetings of Masonic Lodges in the Greater London region, but these days it's also used for concerts and performances.

Within the Hall are 24 temples; chambers used by various Masonic lodges and chapters as meeting rooms and each temple is unique. They are all are richly decorated in Art Deco style.

You may feel you have seen both the exterior and interior before, as the hall has appeared in numerous films and television series, such as Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, the James Bond film *Spectre*, Marvel's *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, the BBC's *Spooks* series and on a number of occasions in Agatha Christie's long-running ITV series *Poirot*.

The regular entrance is further along Great Queen Street and the building is open to the public. Over the past few years there has been a conscious effort on the part of the Masons to do away with some of the mystery and prejudice that had developed against Freemasonry. Indeed, they are keen to point out that the Grand Lodge has boasted, among its many members, a wide range of eminent people, including Sir Winston Churchill, Rudyard Kipling, Sir Walter Scott, Sir Alexander Fleming and Peter Sellers.

There's a museum and café and excellent toilets. Tours, both conducted and self-guided, are normally available each day.

Opposite the entrance to Freemasons' Hall, at 30 & 31 Great Queen Street, is the **Royal Masonic Trust for Girls and Boys**. It is a charity funded by Freemasons that aims to relieve poverty and advance education for children and young people. They also support those with exceptional talents and those who need financial assistance in order to embrace life-changing opportunities.

A little further and on the same side is the **Hercules Pillars** pub. It opened in 1802, and for some years was where the Freemasons 'Lodge of Morality' used to meet. The pub was rebuilt in the more modern style we see today in 1961. They still offer a special 3-course 'Freemasons' menu', in addition to their regular menu.

And until fairly recently there were also a couple of shops here that specialised in selling gentlemen's freemasonry regalia, etc.

Back on the right-hand side, and just as you approach the **Grand Connaught Rooms** – notice the two plaques on the wall that commemorate significant events that took place at the Freemasons' Tavern, something I briefly mentioned earlier.

In 1807 the world's first **Geographical Society** was formed. It went on to become the Royal Geographical Society.

In 1863 Ebenezer Cobb Morley, a renowned English sportsman, proposed the setting up of the Football Association at a meeting in the tavern. From this, the modern game of association football began. In addition to his interest in football, Ebenezer was a keen oarsman, and the founder of one of the River Thames important regattas. If you would like to know more about this interesting gentleman, then there's excellent information here.

Another important event (though sadly there isn't a plaque to commemorate it) was in 1840 when the first meeting of the **Anti-Slavery Society** was held here. Delegates, including many leading abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson, were from Britain, but there were some from the USA as well. (A picture of the meeting hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery.)

And, perhaps not quite as important as those events, it was here in 1856 that the Philoperisteron Society (pigeon fanciers, in case you wondered) held a meeting attended by Charles Darwin, who

became a member later that year. And for anyone interested in knowing more (I'm sure somebody somewhere might) here's a link.

As you will have read just now, the original building on the site dated back to 1776 and was built by the Freemasons as a tavern and meeting place, not only for them but for many other organisations. Much of it was demolished when the Freemasons built their much larger meeting hall and, as part of the project, built the Connaught Rooms.

They named the rooms after the Lodge's Grand Master, Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught and Strathearn. Some years later, and after further renovations, it became a hotel and conference centre and was renamed the New Connaught Rooms. More recently, it was taken over by the owners of the De Vere conference group and it is now used for functions such as conferences, exhibitions, meetings, wedding receptions, etc. Like the Freemasons' Hall next door, it is Grade II listed, with magnificent art deco interiors.

This is where the walk ends.

At the end of Great Queen Street, just a few yards ahead, it joins Kingsway.

I'll make two further comments though ... another major slum clearance took place here between the 1870s and 1890s in order to facilitate the widening of Kingsway to improve traffic flow – as you can see, it is a 'significant' north-south through route. In addition, an underpass for trams was constructed. Six hundred historic buildings, including some from Tudor times, were said to have been demolished and over three thousand people had to be relocated. A final point ... at one time Great Queen Street used to continue across Kingsway, and into Lincoln's Inn Fields (which are included in my Holborn walk).

Depending on what you are planning to do next, there are several options from here.

To reach **Holborn tube station** (on the Central and Piccadilly lines) continue on along Great Queen Street and turn left up Kingsway.

For **Covent Garden tube station** (Piccadilly line) walk back along Great Queen Street and into Long Acre. The tube station will be on your left.

Also, if you wish to go back to area around the Covent Garden piazza and market buildings then do the same, and turn left down the short James Street, alongside the tube station. (Continuing on Long Acre will bring you to Charing Cross Road – continue on across for Leicester Square, Piccadilly Circus and Soho – or turn left for Trafalgar Square).

APPENDIX TO THE COVENT GARDEN WALK

OUTERNET

I've already written about the 'Outernet', in particular quoting from The Guardian newspaper, which also added: "Outernet CEO Philip O'Ferrall calls his project 'the world's largest, most advanced atrium of content ... a disruptive, atomised brand engagement platform,' by which he means that companies will pay handsomely to put their brands on the big videos, and to hold spectacular events in the screen-lined rooms. The idea is to entice the public in and then get them to linger, with the imagery on the screens, with the music, with bars and restaurants, such that they can be exposed to more selling. 'If you spend an extra 30 seconds in my area I can serve more advertising on you,' he says. The revenues, O'Ferrall also explains, will help fund the less profitable music businesses on the other side of the block."

I make no comment!

THE COLISEUM

The Coliseum was the idea of theatre producer Sir Oswald Stoll, who had great aspirations of building the "largest people's palace of entertainment in the West End."

It was designed by the theatrical architect Frank Matcham in an Italian Renaissance style and opened in 1904.

It wasn't just its imposing size but when it was built it had a roof garden, which was removed in 1951. The square tower on the roof has four pilasters and carved figures representing Art, Music, Science and Architecture. Other decoration includes at the pinnacle eight Cupids that support a large, illuminated globe, which when it was built used to revolve.

The theatre had electric lighting, and a massive revolving stage (the first in Britain) which was actually made up of three smaller ones, each of which could revolve independently and in different directions. This enabled much faster set changes to take place.

Another first were the lifts to take customers to the upper-level seats (including a private one to take the king to the Royal Box).

In addition, it had several restaurants and tea rooms and even its own post office in the lobby to enable both performers and the public to send and receive telegrams.

Despite all of that, it wasn't a commercial success, and closed just two years after opening.

After it reopened in December 1907, a cricket match was held between Middlesex and Surrey, and then featured the last work by W.S. Sullivan (of Gilbert & Sullivan fame).

In the 1930s they successfully began featuring pantomimes, with *Cinderella* always being the most popular.

Whilst this run of success lasted for some thirty years, falling ticket sales resulted in it becoming a cinema in the 1960s, showing films using the latest wide Cinerama format. It had been used sporadically for films previously – *King Kong* was shown in 1933, with a run of many months and up to 10,000 people a day seeing it. Another great cinema success was a revival of *Gone with the Wind*.

Another major change occurred in 1968 when the Sadler's Wells Opera Company began using the theatre, later changing their name to the English National Opera Company and, in 1992, purchasing the freehold of the theatre for just over £12 million. It also became the home of the English National Ballet.

It wasn't all highbrow entertainment, as the rock band The Who performed at the Coliseum in December 1969. The concert was recorded – and is still available on DVD.

With 2,359 seats, the Coliseum is still the largest theatre in London, unless you include certain venues that only occasionally stage theatrical or ballet productions, like the Royal Festival or Albert Halls. For comparison purposes, as of May 2023, the Apollo Victoria runs it a close second with a capacity of 2,328, the Palladium seats 2,286, the Lyceum 2,167, the Theatre Royal Drury Lane 2,154 and the Dominion in Tottenham Court Road 2,069.

COVENT GARDEN MARKET

Its early years

The fruit, vegetable and flower market began in 1656 with a few 'temporary' stalls erected alongside the walled garden of Bedford House, home of the Earl (later Duke) of Bedford. Controversy soon began, with concern over the amount of rubbish being left at the end of each working day.

By 1667 the commissioners for highways and sewers were discussing what to do about the "great ffylth" generated by the traders. Three years later, in 1670, the 5th Earl of Bedford and his heirs were granted a licence by Charles II to hold a market for 'fruit, flowers, roots and herbs' and to collect tolls and fees from the dealers every day of the year, with the exception of Sundays and Christmas Day. As a result, permanent shops were erected against the garden wall of his home at Bedford House.

Then just eight years later, a lease was granted to Adam Piggot, giving him the right to erect twenty-two permanent shops, with cellars against the garden wall of Bedford House, to buy and sell fruit, flowers, roots and herbs. After the house was later demolished, a row of forty-eight shops was built nearer to the centre of the piazza, which I do find surprising as, whilst all of this was taking place, this was still a fashionable residential area in which to live.

However, there were complaints, and the Vestry of St Paul's church presented a petition to the duke complaining of the nuisance of the market, though seemingly nothing actually changed. On the contrary, the market became larger. The closure of another major market several miles away in the City of London saw a further significant increase in Covent Garden's trade.

During the late 18th and early 19th century the character of both the market and the neighbourhood continued to change. The market became busier, but rather than just selling fruit, vegetables and flowers, these new traders began selling various other goods.

The original stall holders protested and refused to pay their rent until this was stopped. The Duke of Bedford, (now the 6th, who still owned both the land and the freehold of the market buildings), went to parliament to ask them to define his authority. The result included permission to erect new buildings where market holders could carry on their business in defined areas.

This meant building on what had hitherto been Inigo Jones' magnificent open piazza and the new building opened in 1836. Designed by Charles Fowler, it was described by the Gardener's Magazine as "a structure at once perfectly fitted for its various uses; of great architectural beauty

and elegance; and so expressive of the purposes for which it is erected, that it cannot by any possibility be mistaken for anything else other than what it is." Quite some praise.

However, the market was still growing – so much so that within twenty-five years its buildings had to be extended again. In 1860 the Floral Hall opened. It had been designed by E.M. Barry, the son of Sir Charles Barry, who had rebuilt the Palace of Westminster following the disastrous fire.

These were followed by the building of the Flower Market in 1871 and later the Jubilee Market.

The popularity of the market was now such that it had become what was described as a "colourful, lively and popular place where fashionable Londoners like to mingle with farmers, costermongers and flower-girls." Charles Dickens lived nearby and wrote that he liked to go and gaze at the pineapples when he had no money.

The market in the 20th century

By the start of the 20th century, the market employed nearly a thousand porters and they were paid between 30 and 45 shillings a week. Initially many had been women, but gradually men, particularly Irishmen, were taking over these roles. The market's activities were supervised by twelve managers of the Bedford Estates Company, together with seven policemen, who were hired from the Metropolitan Police. Despite this, the market continued to be an 'unruly and ill-organised' place and the Bedford family decided to give up ownership. It was offered to the City Corporation and the Metropolitan Board of Works, but neither was interested, so in 1918 it was sold to a newly created Covent Garden Estate Company. Just two years later they in turn tried to sell the market to the London County Council, but without success.

There had been plans to move the market since the end of the First World War, but those had been fiercely opposed by locals and most of those people who depended on it for a living. An official report by the Ministry of Food in 1921, described the market as condemned and 'unfit for purpose' ... 'a confused and unorganised anachronism' and that it was inadequate and uneconomic, in 'that supplies were brought into the Market at heavy expense, and then sent out again'. However, even despite this, it continued operating on the site until eventually being sold in 1962 to the Covent Garden Market Authority. They paid almost £4 million for it, together with some of the adjoining properties. Finally, in 1974, the market closed and was relocated to a purpose-built complex at Nine Elms, south of the river.

Many of the empty market buildings were taken over by the Greater London Council, who announced a plan for 60% of the area to be demolished, including over 80% of all the housing. In its place would be a new conference centre, offices, hotels and housing estates, as well as new, wider roads.

Fortunately, in 1971, the Covent Garden Community Association was formed, and they campaigned to have these proposals scrapped. Eventually, as public opinion also turned against the scheme, the plans were dropped, and fortunately we still have much of the original market buildings intact for us to enjoy today.

QUEEN OF COVENT GARDEN

I made mention of Christina Smith in the walk and thought I'd add more about this remarkable woman here. Christina was what we'd today call a 'legend' and is credited with doing as much as or more than anyone to help save Covent Garden from the council and developers who wanted to demolish most of it and build modern office blocks, an enormous conference centre, hotels and much more.

Following her death in 2022, such was her reputation that The Times published an extensive and revealing obituary, from which I've reproduced a handful of informative extracts:

Christina Smith was walking through Covent Garden in the early 1960s when she spotted a 'to let' sign on a former potato warehouse. Excited by its potential and enthralled by the 'seedy atmosphere and the seedy people' of the bustling fruit and vegetable market, she borrowed £1,500 from her father and opened Goods and Chattels, importing and wholesaling colourful trinkets from South America.

It was the start of a multimillion-pound property and retail empire, with the former propping up the latter to create the quirky, colourful shops for which Covent Garden became famous. Her philosophy was an eclectic combination of business and philanthropy.

Known as the 'Queen of Covent Garden', Smith was also a restaurateur, philanthropist, conservationist, mentor, art collector and theatre angel.

She was a tall woman with scraped-back hair, loud clothing and huge tinted glasses that matched her ego. She was, however, a terrible delegator, leaving many of her managers feeling underemployed and undermined. There was always a sense of drama. On one occasion she met a friend at the Tea House, another of her enterprises, entertaining him and the customers by chastising the manager because the mugs and teapot were cracked. Some days later the manager revealed to her friend his increasingly plaintive memos requesting new crockery, all of which had gone unanswered.

After the fruit and veg market moved from Covent Garden to Nine Elms, in Vauxhall, in 1974, she was involved in saving the area from developers' proposals for a conference centre, a large hotel, offices and a new road layout. The market hall survived, as did another 250 buildings that were declared to be of historic and architectural interest. As a member of the Covent Garden Community Association, the Seven Dials Trust and the Covent Garden Forum, her eagle eye meticulously scrutinised every planning application. "I wanted to preserve the buildings and protect the residents," she said.

THE HISTORY OF THE IVY

I've written a little about the Ivy restaurant in the walk, but I find its history very interesting, so I've taken various bits from a fascinating book called *The Ivy Now*, by Fernando Peire and Gary Lee, and published by Quadrille. If you're interested in knowing more about the history of the restaurant, then I suggest you read a copy.

Mario Gallati was less than impressed when he first walked into The Ivy after arriving in London from Italy. Opened in 1917 by Abel Giandolini, it had lino on the floor, paper napkins on the tables and no alcohol licence.

Gallati already had the offer of a job as head waiter at Romano's, an established Italian restaurant in Soho. It was the epitome of glamour, where the capital's great and good dined alongside London Bohemia. Now he found himself presented with a new opportunity by a young entrepreneur. Giandolini aspired to create one of the city's finest restaurants and, after several meetings with him, Gallati finally agreed to join him as maître d'. Soon the tables were covered with linen, the floors carpeted, and a French chef installed in the kitchen.

Key to The Ivy's initial success was its location, surrounded by many of London's top commercial theatres. Ivy waiters were soon delivering meals of cold chicken and salad to the dressing rooms of hungry actors.

A licence to sell alcohol was essential if they were to become a successful restaurant, and when they applied to get one, Winston Churchill was among those who signed a petition in support. Once they

had it, then Gallati devoted himself to buying up private wine cellars at auction and, before long, the wine list rivalled that of the great hotels. Location, food and wine combined to draw London's theatre crowd through the doors. It was a non-stop party – attended by politicians, entrepreneurs, intellectuals and names from the worlds of theatre and film. Later, looking back on his time at The Ivy, Gallati found it impossible to list exactly who had eaten there during his 28 years. 'It would probably be easier to say that everyone who was anybody in London between the wars dined at the restaurant,' he wrote.

But Gallati realised that he could not hide away at The Ivy forever. He found investors among his old Ivy clientele and took a chance on a restaurant at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac behind The Ritz. A rivalry between Giandolini and Gallati started and continued until Giandolini sold The Ivy in 1953 to the Wheelers Group of fish and seafood restaurants. The first golden era of The Ivy had come to an end, and it would be almost 40 years before it would dominate the society columns again.

The celebrity era begins

By the late 1980s, the 'grande old dame' of Theatreland had traded continuously for almost 70 years but had lost much of her lustre. It took two ambitious restaurateurs, Christopher Corbin and Jeremy King, who bought it in 1989, to bring about her transformation, and underwent the most radical change since Gallati and Giandolini had expanded the dining room in 1929. It creaked with nostalgia, but Corbin and King did not want it to lose its character in favour of a modern interior; instead they chose to acknowledge its past.

In the 1990s the likes of the band Oasis, the Spice Girls and The Verve all became regular customers of The Ivy. It had now become a haven for both the establishment and the anti-establishment. Cool new artists like Damien Hirst, Marc Quinn and Tracey Emin embraced it, as did the new breed of young theatre producers who were busy shaping the future, not only of theatre, but of film – people like Sam Mendes at the Donmar Warehouse theatre, Stephen Daldry at the Royal Court and Nicholas Hytner at the National Theatre.

The Ivy held up a mirror to the capital – showing it in the most flattering light possible and magnifying its glamour many times over. Sometimes it seemed as if the whole of the London artistic scene was in the dining room. However well known the restaurant became, they made sure that it remained a private world. Every flash of the paparazzi's cameras and every front-page photo of a star leaving, only added a little more to its special allure. It was a unique moment for a London restaurant.

And the final word goes to Fernando Peire who joined The Ivy in 1990 as senior maître d', and who is now director of the restaurant and club:

Every day and every night, The Ivy is a stage on which a play is performed. The actors are the regulars drawn from the worlds of the arts and business who have more than a passing interest in who's eating with whom and sneaking glances to see how X is looking, after Y sued or seduced them; they are famous people who want to be seen, sheltered or something in between; they are characters in a personal story of a couple on a first date, a family celebration or one friend gossiping with another.

Some of these players sit in the wings, others take centre stage, but all have their part to play. The Ivy is theatre. There is just one golden rule: there are no stars of the show. The Ivy might be good at letting people perform, but it isn't a restaurant for show-offs. We like to think of it as a meritocracy. Some people may be able to get a reservation more easily than others, but once in The Ivy, everyone is equal. So, welcome.

MORE ON MONMOUTH STREET

The following is taken from Charles Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* – 'Scenes: Meditations in Monmouth Street':

We have always entertained a particular attachment towards Monmouth Street, as the only true and real emporium for second-hand wearing apparel. Monmouth Street is venerable from its antiquity, and respectable from its usefulness. Holywell Street we despise; the red-headed and red-whiskered Jews who forcibly haul you into their squalid houses, and thrust you into a suit of clothes, whether you will or not, we detest.

The inhabitants of Monmouth Street are a distinct class; a peaceable and retiring race, who immure themselves for the most part in deep cellars, or small back parlours, and who seldom come forth into the world, except in the dusk and coolness of the evening, when they may be seen seated, in chairs on the pavement, smoking their pipes, or watching the gambols of their engaging children as they revel in the gutter, a happy troop of infantine scavengers. Their countenances bear a thoughtful and a dirty cast, certain indications of their love of traffic; and their habitations are distinguished by that disregard of outward appearance and neglect of personal comfort, so common among people who are constantly immersed in profound speculations, and deeply engaged in sedentary pursuits.

We have hinted at the antiquity of our favourite spot. A 'Monmouth-street laced coat' was a by-word a century ago; and still we find Monmouth-street the same. Pilot great-coats with wooden buttons, have usurped the place of the ponderous laced coats with full skirts; embroidered waistcoats with large flaps, have yielded to double-breasted checks with roll-collars; and three-cornered hats of quaint appearance, have given place to the low crowns and broad brims of the coachman school; but it is the times that have changed, not Monmouth-street. Through every alteration and every change, Monmouth Street has still remained the burial-place of the fashions; and such, to judge from all present appearances, it will remain until there are no more fashions to bury.

VISITING COVENT GARDEN'S MARKET IN THE 19th CENTURY

I liked this account of visiting the market, written by William Blanchard Jerrold and published in *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872), with illustrations by Gustave Doré.

Covent Garden Market, however, is the most famous place of barter in England: – it has been said, by people who forget the historical Halle of Paris – in the world. A stroll through it, and around it, when the market is opening on a summer morning, between four and five, affords the visitor a score of points of interest, and some matter for reflection. As at Billingsgate and in the Borough, the surrounding streets are choked with waggons and barrows. The street vendors are of all kinds – and of the poorest of each kind – if the coffee stall keepers be excepted.

The porters amble in all directions under loads of prodigious bulk. Lifted upon stalwart shoulders, towers of baskets travel about. From the tails of carts producers or 'higglers' are selling off mountainous loads of cabbages. The air is fragrant with fruit to the north, and redolent of stale vegetables to the south. The piazzas, of pleasant memory and where a few noteworthy social clubs still linger, are alive with stalls, scattered sieves, market-gardeners, greengrocers, poor women and children in troops (these are everywhere on our way), and hawkers old and young eagerly on the lookout for an advantageous transaction with a higgler, or direct from the producer. Within the market enclosure the stacks of vegetables, and the piles of fruit baskets and boxes, are of startling extent.

The scene is not so brilliant as that we used to see about the old fountain at the Paris Halle, where the water seemed to spring from a monster horn of plenty; but these Irish women, these fresh-coloured

Saxon girls, these brawny Scotch lasses, in their untidy clothes and tilted bonnets, who shell the peas, and carry the purchaser's loads, and are ready for any of the hundred-and-one jobs of a great market; fall into groups wonderfully tempting to the artist's pencil.

We lingered long one morning, watching a group of women shelling peas. They were a picture perfect in all its details, with the majestic old woman, who commanded the company, for central figure.

"It would be nothing without colour – and more space than any page affords," was my fellow pilgrim's remark. "It's a pity, but so it is."

It was in the poor markets, it need hardly be said, that we found our most striking subjects; and ever as we neared the poorest, we saw the buyer at a fresh disadvantage. In Covent Garden, there is the higgler, or middle-man, who buys from the producer to sell to the retailer, who will, in his turn, sell to the humble customer. The rich man buys first-hand; the poor man, fifth-hand.

PUNCH & JUDY

Whilst Punch & Judy has been a staple of seaside entertainment for children as far back as Victorian times, over recent years it began to lose much of its appeal. Public opinion has changed, with many people saying that it trivialises domestic violence and abuse.

Rightly or wrongly, when I was a child I used to love it, and it never occurred to me that it had 'sinister overtones'.

Whilst researching this I found a few pieces of information that I found interesting, and thought I'd share here ...

- Punch & Judy puppeteers are called Professors, having apparently once been given this title by the King.
- The phrase 'pleased as Punch' was said to have come about as a result of Mr Punch invariably being very immensely pleased and satisfied with everything he does. As was the phrase, "That's the way to do it!"
- Punch & Judy shows used to have a 'Bottler' – this was someone who would go around gathering up people to come and watch the show, and then collect money for the puppeteer in a bottle. He would often play music on a guitar or drum to accompany the show and create sound effects.
- In early Punch and Judy shows, Punch regularly got into fights with the Devil. In contemporary Punch and Judy performances, the Devil has transformed into a crocodile, his new biggest adversary.

DAVID GARRICK

David Garrick had a huge impact on British theatre, and indeed on the Covent Garden area. I read a biographical summary in Brief Lives: Sitters and Artists in the Garrick Club Collection (London: Garrick Club, 2003), written by the late Professor Kalman A Burnim, and I've reproduced some extracts here:

David Garrick, the second son and third child of Peter and Arabella Garrick, was born at the Angel Inn, Hereford, on 19 February 1717. David's grandfather, David de la Garrique, was a Huguenot who fled France in 1685, and David's father Peter was brought to England in 1687. Our David was for a while one of Samuel Johnson's pupils at the little school at Edial, near Lichfield.

Later, in 1737, Garrick and Johnson made their way to London together, with little money in their pockets, but each destined for fame. Garrick was to serve as a wine salesman for the family business, but he soon pushed that trade out of his mind and turned playwright and actor. He made his debut as Richard III at the Goodman's Fields Theatre in east London on 19 October 1741.

He was an overnight sensation. His revolutionary and exciting acting style 'threw new light on elocution and action,' banished ranting and bombast, and 'restored nature, ease, simplicity, and genuine humour.'

In the autumn of 1747, with his new partner James Lacy, Garrick took over the management of Drury Lane Theatre, and for 29 years he directed the finest repertory theatre in all Europe. As a pivotal figure in the development of the art of the theatre he instituted new rehearsal techniques and discipline.

The techniques of the theatre arts – scenery, costumes, lighting and other stage practices – significantly matured. Garrick maintained a strong company and demanded their adherence to his instructions and regulations.

In 1749 Garrick married the Viennese dancer Eva Maria Veigel. She outlived him by 43 years. They had no children. During their marriage they enjoyed the company of crowned heads, nobility, and the leading figures of London literary and social circles. They owned residences at No. 27, Southampton Street in Covent Garden, in the Adelphi and on the river at Hampton. The Shakespeare Temple that Garrick had erected at the Hampton villa has recently been restored and opened to the public.

Garrick gave up Drury Lane and made his farewell from the stage in a round of emotional performances in June 1776. He died at his home in the Adelphi on 20 January 1779 and was buried in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey. The splendid funeral procession, one of the greatest ever seen in London, stretched from the Strand to the Abbey. His old schoolmaster Johnson wrote, 'I am disappointed by that stroke of death which has eclipsed the gaiety of nations and impoverished the public stock of harmless pleasure.'

BOW STREET MAGISTRATES COURT

Bow Street Magistrates Court had a long and interesting history dating back to 1740. This was when Thomas de Veil established a private residence and magistrate's office at number 4 Bow Street, opposite where the court moved to in 1881. As an aside, he must have been quite a character and was said to have had four wives and twenty-five children.

He lived in the house whilst practising his magisterial duties from the ground floor. It later became London's first police station and over time the most important of the capital's magistrates' courts. Following his death in 1746, the house at No.4 Bow Street was taken over two years later by another magistrate, Henry Fielding, who had previously been a lawyer.

He is regarded as being the founder of the traditional English novel. His most famous book was Tom Jones, which was published in 1749, and no doubt his earthy humour and satire helped in his challenging role of a magistrate. He also became a playwright, but his political satire was considered so vicious a law was passed banning his plays from the London stage.

Back then, magistrates were not funded by the government but by the people who came before them in court. Fielding wanted to change the corrupt system, so he started letting the public in to see the court cases, and he published a newspaper called *The Covent Garden Journal*, which featured accounts from the court.

In the summer of 1749, crime within the area had rocketed to unprecedented levels, much of it caused by the problems of gin consumption: Fielding recorded that at the time every fourth house in Covent Garden was a gin shop and in Bow Street alone there were said to be twelve pubs or gin dens, as well as numerous brothels. His response was to create the Bow Street Runners (due to their scarlet waistcoats they were originally nicknamed the 'Robin Redbreasts' but soon became known as the 'Bow Street Runners'). They were the forebears of the modern police service that came about a century later.

He brought together eight constables of an honest and reliable nature, whose role was to try to deal with the astonishing levels of crime that was occurring in London by this time. (They may well have started off being 'honest and reliable' but, by all accounts, they soon became as corrupt as the criminals they were trying to arrest.) When Henry Fielding's health deteriorated (gout and cirrhosis), he went to Lisbon, where he died.

He was succeeded as magistrate in 1754 by his blind half-brother Sir John Fielding. Known as the 'Blind Beak of Bow Street', Sir John can be credited with refining Henry's patrol into the first full-time, salaried and effective police force; by 1800 there were 68 trained Bow Street Runners. And even though he was blind, he was said to be able to identify the voices of over 3,000 criminals.

He was certainly a busy man, for at the same time as serving as magistrates and setting up the Runners, he worked to reform the corrupt and ineffectual magistracy system.

A description of Sir John's time as magistrate appears in the memoirs of Giacomo Casanova, the famous Italian lover, who had been accused of intending 'grievous bodily harm to the person of a pretty girl'. Casanova wrote, "I went into the hall of justice and all eyes were at once attracted towards me; my silks and satins appeared to them the height of impertinence. At the end of the room I saw a gentleman sitting in an armchair and concluded him to be my judge. I was right, and the judge was blind. He wore a broad band round his head, passing over his eyes. He spoke to me in excellent Italian, saying 'Signor Casanova, be kind enough to step forward, I want to speak to you'."

Blind Jack then released Casanova on the surety of two householders that he would not commit such a crime again.

In his early days Charles Dickens was a crime reporter and a regular visitor to the Bow Street courts. He wrote of it, "There were other prisoners, boys of 10, as hardened in vice as men of 50; a household vagrant going joyfully to prison as a place of food and shelter, handcuffed to a man whose prospects were ruined, character lost and family rendered destitute by his first offence."

Most of the cases heard by the magistrates in the court were of a petty nature, committed by the "sad, ill and unfortunate."

One of the more famous cases was in 1895, when Oscar Wilde was tried in Bow Street for gross indecency. Upon his arrest, he was "thrown into a cell where he was allowed the luxury of a rug, and the following morning he ordered a breakfast of tea, toast and eggs from the Tavistock Hotel, which were brought across to him on a tray."

An amusing appearance was that of Tommy Earp, who later became a well-known art critic. He appeared before the court for being drunk and disorderly, having spent the night in an enormous basket of strawberries in the nearby Covent Garden. When asked by the magistrate why he'd climbed into the basket, Earp replied, in a rather exaggerated upper-class accent, "For valetudinarian reasons, purely valetudinarian reasons." (For those like me who have to look the word up, it means 'showing undue concern about one's health'.) The astonished magistrate

exclaimed, "Don't address me as if you were the President of the Oxford Union". To which Earp replied, "I am!" And he was!

Several cases against authors have taken place here. One was in 1915, when the Bow Street magistrates found *The Rainbow*, a book by DH Lawrence, to be obscene. Another book that was found to contain 'acts of the most horrible, unnatural and disgusting obscenity' was Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. It was eventually published some twenty years later.

It was hardly surprising that Charles Dickens used the Bow Street court in two of his books. One in particular was *Oliver Twist*, which he wrote in 1839, where Oliver appears before the magistrates accused of stealing a handkerchief from a gentleman's pocket. And then a little later the Artful Dodger is there accused of the theft of a jewellery box.

The courts close ...

Tim Workman, the last serving Chief Magistrate when Bow Street courts closed, said, "It was the enormous variety that made Bow Street Court so interesting. From drunks in Covent Garden to mass murderers wanted by their home country appearing before you in court, you never knew what to expect."

He added that whilst he accepted that Bow Street was no longer suitable for the 21st Century, he, like his staff, were sad to have said goodbye to the old court.

It certainly must have been quite remarkable inside. The chief magistrate's room was 'imposingly large', with two dark marble fireplaces standing sentinel at either end of the room. Above one, with a print of Blind Jack Fielding in the centre, a board lists the 32 chief magistrates before Senior District Judge Workman.

And a comment from a former police officer, who added during an interview with the BBC, "The court was always busy and had a special atmosphere and commanded respect with officers turning out in their smartest uniform and even defendants making the effort."

Last word though to Frederick, a 76 year-old self-confessed burglar, who added he had first seen the inside of the courts in the late 1940s. He described it as being like a railway station, with the bustle of police, lawyers, vagrants and prostitutes.

Other 'defenders of the peace and law'

These weren't the only men trying to keep the peace and reduce crime in London. By 1822 in the City of London, the other inner districts and suburbs, there were around 3,680 'Parish peace officers of one kind or another'. Some 133 were beadle, paid parish officers with administrative functions, as well as 400 constables, elected or selected by rote from the rate list to serve for a year at a time and act free of charge. Finally, there were also some 2,800 watchmen, called 'Charlies', armed with staves and rattles.

Later, Robert Peel would bring all this together – the beginning of the modern police force we know today.

ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

The building you see today is the third theatre on this site. The original, known as the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, opened in 1732.

It was one of only two theatres in London licensed by Charles II to present both spoken word and music performances, the latter being what it became most famous for. One licence was given to the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, whilst the other was given to Sir William Davenant to build a theatre in Covent Garden.

However, although Davenant had received the royal patent in 1662 for theatre, he didn't do anything about building it, and it wasn't until actor and manager John Rich (known for introducing pantomime to the British stage) bought the patent that construction began.

To do so, he had used some of the enormous profit he had made staging John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*¹ at Lincoln's Inn Theatre in 1728. He had been given a three-quarter share of the theatre by his father – and it was said that the opera 'made Rich gay, and Gay rich'. I will also mention that Rich was famous at the time for staging what were regarded as new theatrical styles of entertainment, particularly those based on an Italian theme, known now as pantomimes. He often played the part of Harlequin and was famous for his miming ability.

Rich was keen to upstage the nearby Theatre Royal Drury Lane and commissioned prominent architect Edward Shepherd to build the new theatre, which he did in fine Georgian style. And when the Theatre Royal Covent Garden opened in 1732, it was said to be the most luxurious in London, though I doubt whether it had much competition for this title.

Ballet and opera have played a predominant role in the theatre's success since it opened. In 1734 the French dancer Marie Sallé, performed a new dance called *Pygmalion*, said to have been the first ballet d'action ever presented on the stage in England.

The first director of music was George Frideric Handel, and the first ever performance of the *Messiah* took place in 1743. Handel then wrote several other operas specifically for Covent Garden. These included *Samson*, *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Theodora*. He continued to give regular performances until his death in 1759.

Destroyed by fire in 1808

The first theatre burnt down in 1808 in a blaze which killed over twenty firemen, and destroyed most of Handel's original manuscripts, as well as the organ he had bequeathed. The new theatre opened in 1809 (how come it takes us so long to build anything these days?) and was modelled on the Temple of Minerva in Athens, with a frieze of literary figures under the portico.

The first ever performance in England of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* took place here in 1817, followed by Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* in 1818 and Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1819.

¹ Gay wrote *The Beggar's Opera* to needle complacent high-end consumers. His work inverted, and perverted, the giddy 1720s fashion for Italian opera. Opera seria is the foil to Gay's work, which like its target features warring divas, simile arias, an overture, three acts, a prison scene and a happy ending. But Gay thrust the action of *The Beggar's Opera* deep into London's underworld. Instead of kings and queens, his dramatis personae are notorious grifters: instead of virtue, they celebrate vice. Most importantly, song exists in *The Beggar's Opera* not to climax affectively but to school listeners in social breakdown. Gay drew his characters from real-life criminals. His antihero Macheath was based on the thief and bigamist Jack Sheppard, whose multiple partners and four prison escapes fascinated the public. Crime boss Peachum represented the underworld kingpin Jonathan Wild, who publicly sold goods his gangs had stolen, sometimes back to their original owners. Gay took the name of Jenny Diver, who betrays Macheath, from London's most infamous pickpocket. Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit, rivals for Macheath's love, were proxies for the Italian opera stars Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, who were popularly (but incorrectly) believed to hate each other. Thanks to Classical-music.com for this information.

As an aside, the theatrical expression 'in the limelight' came as a result of new 'calcium oxide' lighting being installed in the Covent Garden Opera House in 1837. (An intense illumination is created when a flame fed by oxygen and hydrogen is directed at a cylinder of quicklime).

The theatre became known as the 'Royal Italian Opera' in 1847 when the Italian composer Giuseppe Persiani bought the lease after the Her Majesty's Theatre had refused to stage one of his works. He also brought with him many of the singers, and after carrying out various renovations to the theatre, he staged the first English performances of Verdi's *Rigoletto* and *Il trovatore*. However, Persiani's productions weren't a success, and 'Italian' was dropped from the name, though the repertoire continued to be mainly Italian opera.

A second fire in 1856

Another major fire destroyed the building in 1856, and a new building in the neo-Palladian style was opened in 1858. Shown in the engraving above, taken from the Illustrated London News, it was designed by the 26-year-old Edward M. Barry, the son of Sir Charles Barry, who had designed the new Palace of Westminster after its predecessor had also been destroyed by fire.

The theatre closed down during the First World War and was requisitioned as a furniture repository, reopening in 1919. During the period 1933, up until its closure again at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Sir Thomas Beecham² became the artistic director and conductor. Unfortunately, whilst his artistic ability was highly praised, it wasn't financially successful.

During the Second World War the theatre was used as a dance hall, and when it reopened, and thanks to a post-war decision to allow public subsidy of the arts, it became not only the year-round home of the opera company, but the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company was invited to form the Covent Garden Ballet Company. Later both were able to add the word 'Royal' to their titles, so are now known as the Royal Opera Company and the Royal Ballet Company.

At the reopening after the Second World War, the ballet company gave a performance of *The Sleeping Beauty*, followed by a combined performance with the opera company of *The Fairy Queen*. Shortly after, the Opera Company's first individual performance took place, which was Bizet's *Carmen*.

A major reconstruction in 1995

In 1995 a £213 million reconstruction project took place, which helped stabilise the fabric of the building and extended it as far as the corner of James Street and Floral Street.

The amazing glass ceiling and barrelled roof of the Floral Hall was restored (it's worth going inside the main Drury Lane entrance to see it) ... and from here an escalator leads to the Amphitheatre bar – the biggest of its kind in London, seating 250. New seating, lighting and air conditioning were installed, together with new dressing rooms, ballet studios, offices and

² Thomas Beecham is the man we particularly thank today for London's top-class symphony orchestras. He was the grandson of the founder of the 'Beecham's pills' business, which provided him with the funds he so lavishly spent on his passion for music. He had arrived in London around 1900 to study music but by the end of the decade, and still in his twenties, he had formed two high-quality orchestras, the New Symphony and the Bournemouth Symphony and later the Royal Philharmonic. Beecham introduced English audiences to composers such as Frederick Delius and Richard Strauss. In 1932 he also became artistic director at Covent Garden and was thus reunited with the Beecham Opera Company, which had become the British National Opera Company in 1923 and had been absorbed by Covent Garden in 1929. He founded the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London in 1946 and continued to conduct until 1960.

workshops. The enlarged 'behind the scenes' space now enables six production sets to be built and moved about on automatic 'stage wagons'.

A further project took place in 2014 when the foyer and entrances were made more attractive and accessible.

The theatre currently seats just over 2,200 people. I can fully recommend the guided tours that are available. You see so much 'behind the scenes' of the theatre and learn more of its remarkable history. There's an excellent gift shop, café, bar and restaurant.

Oh, and something to be aware of if you visit – the theatre is said to be haunted. During the building works in 1999, workers reported being struck by unexplained flying debris!

THE THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE

The theatre we see today is the fourth to have been built on the site, with the earliest dating back to 1663, making it the oldest in London. That first theatre was a three-tiered wooden structure which could accommodate 700 people. To let daylight in there was no roof and performances usually began at 3 pm to take advantage of whatever light there was. A glazed dome was later built over the opening, but according to entries in the diaries of Samuel Pepys, who was a regular visitor, it was not entirely effective at keeping out the elements: he describes how he and his wife were forced to leave the theatre to take refuge from a hailstorm.

In one of his diary entries he wrote, "The house is made with extraordinary good contrivance, and yet hath some faults, as the narrowness of the passages in and out of the pit, and the distance from the stage to the boxes, which I am confident cannot hear; but for all other things it is well, only, above all, the musique being below, and most of it sounding under the very stage, there is no hearing of the basses at all, nor very well of the trebles, which sure must be mended."

It was around this time that the famous actress Nell Gwynne performed here. She was among the first of the actresses to play on the stage and was praised by Samuel Pepys for her comic performances (he called her 'pretty, witty Nellie'). She caught the eye of Charles II, who used to visit often, and of course she later became his mistress and had two sons by him.

Though it escaped the Great Fire of London (which never reached this far west), it burned down in 1672, and two years later a new, larger theatre was built on the site by Christopher Wren.

This building lasted for nearly 120 years, during which time the first ever ballet to be performed in England took place. (In case you might be interested, it was called the *The Loves of Mars and Venus* and was staged in 1717.) And another point of interest: in the year before an assassination attempt was made in the theatre on George II. A few years later, the then musical director composed a song in honour of George's successor, George III. Called 'God Bless Our Noble King', the audience stood at very first performance, a tradition that of course continues to this day.

As a result of the illustrious actor David Garrick purchasing the theatre in 1747, it became a great success. He served as both lead actor and manager for some twenty years. Garrick was said to have been one of the finest ever stage actors, especially remembered for his role in promoting Shakespeare on the English stage as well as introducing a "realistic, naturalistic style of acting, abandoning the artificial bombast typical of dramatic roles previously." Some twenty-four Shakespeare plays were performed here during his time. This was probably helped by the shortage of new plays, which arose because an Act of Parliament of 1737 required the government to authorise and licence any new play before it could be staged. Garrick continued as manager for some years after he retired from the stage.

By the end of the 18th century, it needed refurbishing and was demolished in 1791, with a new, much larger theatre accommodating 3,600 people opening in 1794. It was said to have then been the largest theatre in Europe and except for the churches, one of the tallest buildings in England. However, it was so large it made it difficult for people to hear the actors' voices, so productions began to feature 'spectacles' with less spoken word. Such spectacles included water features – a stream flowing over rocks and tumbling down into a 'lake' on which a life-size boat was rowed across the stage. Real water was used, which was kept in huge tanks above.

And I will just add that another royal assassination attempt was made in 1800, when George III was shot at by a lone gunman – during the singing of the new national anthem – but fortunately the gunman missed.

Sadly, this new theatre lasted just 15 years and in 1809 was destroyed again by fire. The blaze was watched by Richard Sheridan, who had managed the theatre and invested a considerable sum of money in it, whilst he sat in the nearby Great Piazza Coffee House. When a fellow customer commented on Sheridan's calmness at watching such a disastrous event, Sheridan apparently replied, "Can't a fellow enjoy a drink by his own fireside?"

Another theatre was built on the site, opening in 1812; it is shown in the engraving above. Although the number of seats was reduced by around 500, it still accommodated 3,000. Much of this theatre is the one we see today. Though it reopened with a performance of *Hamlet*, the idea of 'theatrical spectacles' did continue. A major breakthrough took place in 1817, when it was one of the earliest theatres in Britain to be gaslit throughout. In 1820 the portico, which still stands at the front entrance to the theatre, was built, and several years later the colonnade that runs down the Russell Street side was added, making it more pleasant for those queuing for admittance.

The theatre's popularity increased significantly in 1879 when Augustus Harris took over (we saw his memorial outside). He was responsible for introducing one of the theatre's major draws which were the Christmas pantomimes. These played to packed houses and would often run until the end of March. He also continued with the idea of the theatrical spectacles – one of which was a play called *The Whip*, which included a train crash and a live recreation of a horse race, with twelve horses racing on stage (thanks to a treadmill).

A major renovation took place in 1922, after which one of its big draws was the composer and performer Ivor Novello. Since the Second World War, the theatre has primarily put on long running musicals, which have included *Oklahoma!*, *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, *42nd Street* and *Miss Saigon*.

In 2000 the theatre was purchased by Andrew Lloyd-Webber who, to mark its 350th anniversary in 2013, began a £4 million restoration. This returned some of the original features of the theatre to their Regency style.

For those particularly interested in this wonderful theatre, I can thoroughly recommend their backstage tours, which need to be booked in advance.

Its present seating capacity is 2,154 according to the theatre's own website but several others, including Wikipedia, say 2,196 – while SeatPlan.com reckons it's not quite two thousand.