

A walk around Soho

Updated: 15 November 2023

Length: About 2¼ miles

Duration: Around 3 – 3½ hours

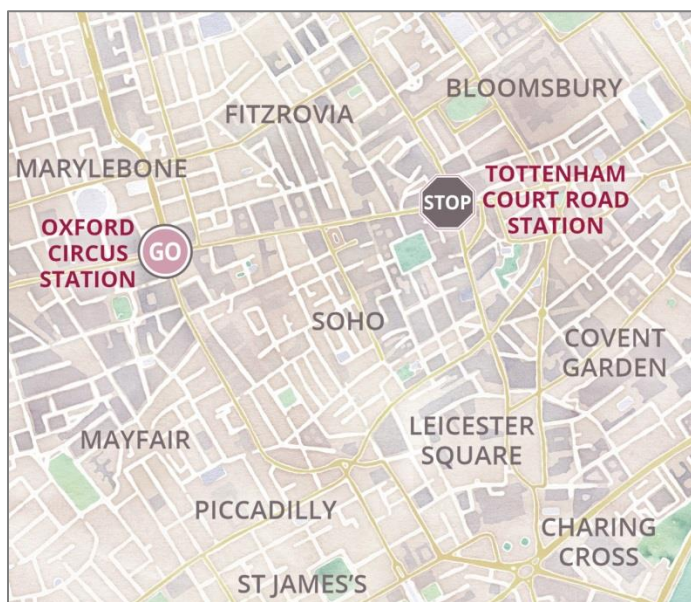
INTRODUCTION

Soho is central London's most cosmopolitan and diverse area. It's got a fascinating history – and it also happens to be one of my favourite areas of the city.

With so much of interest packed into such a relatively small area, it's been the most challenging and time-consuming of my walks to research and write so far. There is something of historical or distinctive interest every few steps.

It's a neatly defined area, bordered by Oxford Street to the north, Regent Street to the west, Charing Cross Road to the east and Coventry Street, which runs from Piccadilly Circus to Leicester Square.

Highlights of the walk include Liberty's, Carnaby Street, Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square, Chinatown, Wardour Street, Ronnie Scott's jazz club and Soho Square. There are Grade I listed structures in Piccadilly Circus (Eros), Dean Street (Nos. 26–28) and Greek Street (No. 1).



GETTING HERE

Oxford Circus is served by the Bakerloo, Central and Victoria tube lines. It is also on a number of bus routes, including the 12, 22, 88, 94, 139, 159.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOHO

In the Middle Ages this was just farmland, later becoming Henry VIII's hunting grounds (the name 'Soho' is an old hunting cry, like 'Tally Ho'). It began to be developed in the mid-17th century, and initially the houses were quite grand and inhabited by the wealthy and influential.

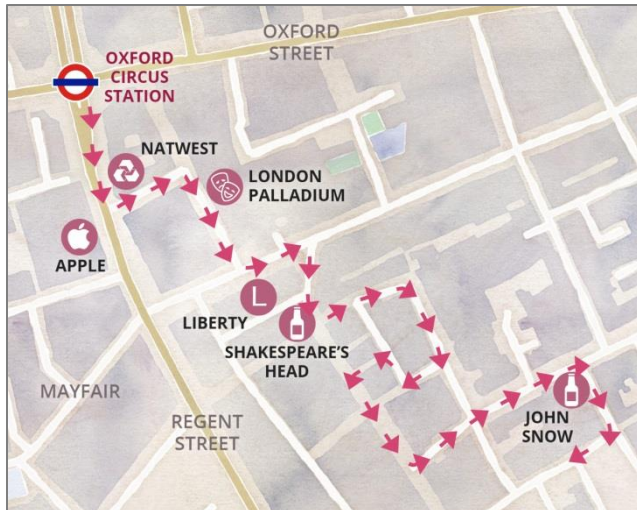
Then came influxes of refugees, mainly Huguenots from France, but others from Russia, Germany and Italy fleeing both poverty and religious and political persecution. This resulted in the 'gentry' moving into posher areas such as Mayfair. Indeed, by the early 18th century between a quarter and a half of the population of Soho were French, and in 1740 a commentator wrote, "Many parts of this parish so greatly abound with French that it is an easy matter for a stranger to imagine himself in France."

One of the results of the huge mix of people who lived in Soho over the years is its cosmopolitan atmosphere. This has attracted a diverse population, particularly from the worlds of the arts, literature, cinema and music. Just a few examples are the Hungarian composer Frank Liszt, the painters Canaletto and Constable and the 'romantic' Italian writer and adventurer Casanova. William Blake, Percy Shelley and Karl Marx also lived here.

Fast-forward to the 20th century and Soho has been at the centre of Britain's – and at times the world's – music and fashion trends. This was where nearly all the top bands of the 50s, 60s and 70s played their first major gigs. And when it comes to fashion – well, teenage fashion was virtually invented here. Who hasn't heard of Carnaby Street, which we visit on the walk?

Soho has always been the centre of London's entertainment, but that brought with it the 'sleazy' clubs and prostitution, for which the area became known. However, action by the local authority and the police in the 1980s saw a major clean-up operation. Now, Soho is one of London's most popular areas for theatres, bars and restaurants. It has also become the heart of London's LGBTQ+ scene, offering many gay and bi-friendly bars and clubs.

On this walk you will hear and see more about the many periods, people and events that have made Soho so famous.



Route map 1

STARTING THE WALK

The walk begins at Oxford Circus, one of London's best-known locations.

We start at the south-east corner – see the map below for more details, and if you arrive at **Oxford Street tube station, then leave via Exit 5.**

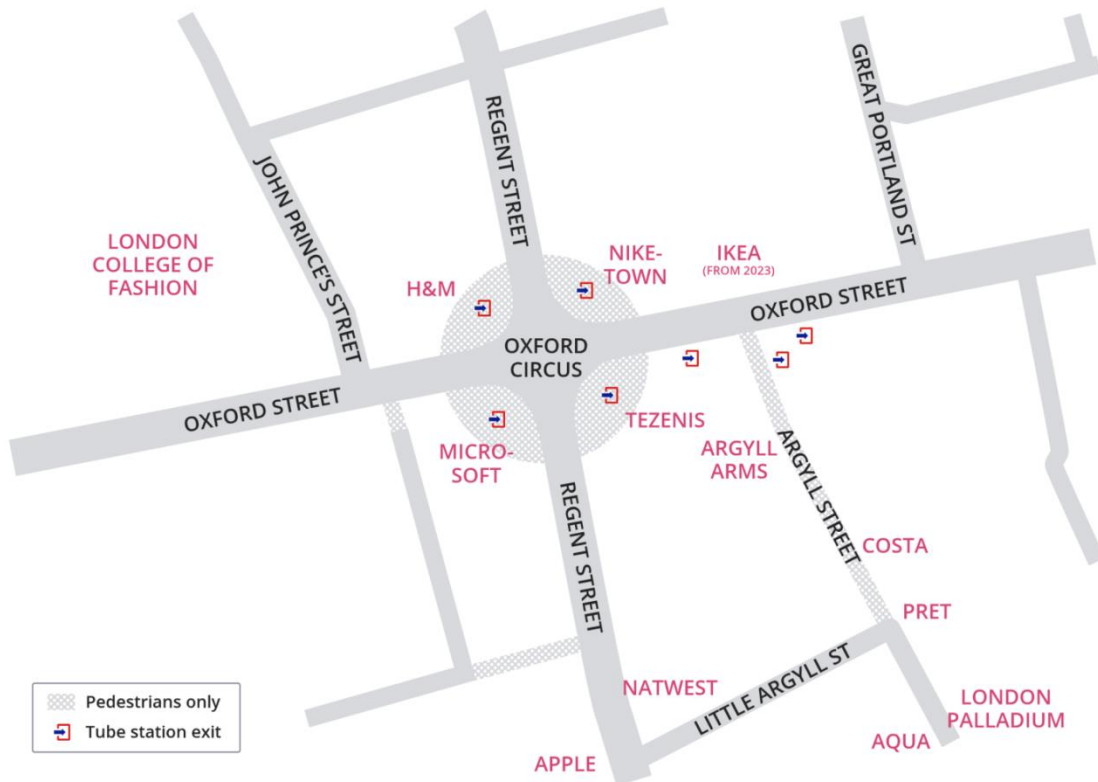
As you emerge from the station turn left and walk 15 yards and you find yourself standing at the crossroads of two of the world's most famous shopping streets – Oxford Street and Regent Street. The first runs from west to east, whilst Regent Street from north to south.

I particularly like the architectural design of the buildings on each of the four corners, as they 'fit together' to help create a circular effect. This is particularly the case with their roof lines.

For many years the northeast corner building was occupied by the famous department store 'Peter Robinson', but when it closed it became the UK's biggest branch of Top Shop. However, since the demise of Top Shop it's been empty, but it will soon be a branch of IKEA, who have been reported to have purchased the site, together with the adjacent Nike store for an estimated £385 million. When open, the new IKEA store is said to cover the equivalent of three and a half football pitches.

Looking up Regent Street to the north you can see All Souls Church and behind it the famous BBC building, Broadcasting House.

On the south-west corner of Oxford Street (west) and Regent Street (south) is the Microsoft store.



We start by **turning left down Regent Street** (south) but keeping to the left-hand side of the road.

A few words about Regent Street, which divides Mayfair from Soho. It was commissioned by the Prince Regent (who later became King George IV) who wanted to build a 'ceremonial route' from Carlton House (which was then his home) to connect with his plan for a park, to be known as Regent's Park. He employed the architect John Nash to achieve it, which he did.

However, it did not quite go to plan – the Prince had wanted Regent Street to be straight, but because much of the land was privately owned, that couldn't be achieved, hence its curve. Initially much of the street had colonnades on each side and whilst this protected shoppers from the rain, it wasn't popular with the shop owners. They complained that it reduced the light and, in the evenings, encouraged prostitution. As a result, the colonnade was demolished, and the street today looks surprisingly similar to how it must have looked back then.

I'll just mention here that there are some magnificent buildings along the length of Regent Street – we see a couple at the very beginning of the walk, particularly the Apple store, which I highlight shortly.

After just fifty yards notice on the wall of the NatWest bank a plaque which explains that this was once the site of the Argyll Rooms, one of London's finest concert halls until it burnt down in 1830. It was here in 1824 that the 12-year-old Franz Liszt made his London debut and the following year that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (also known as the Choral Symphony) was first performed in Britain. And just five years later, it was where Mendelssohn gave his first London concert.

We're going to take the next left alongside the NatWest into **Little Argyll Street**.

However, before you do, I suggest you look across to the other side of Regent Street. Most of the buildings in Regent Street are impressive, with some amazing architecture. A good example is the **Apple store**, which is directly opposite you – just notice its large, arched windows and rather beautiful domed roof. (There's no sign saying 'Apple' – just their large 'apple-with-a-bite-taken-out' flag hanging over the front).

It's one of the oldest shops in Regent Street, having been built in 1898 by Salviati & Jesurum of Venice to display the glass and fabrics they made in Murano. An example of their mosaics can still be seen today on the front of the building, which feature the heraldic shields of the islands of Burano, Murano and Venice. In a red and gold mosaic band are the names of the other cities where the company also had shops – 'Paris, New York, St Petersburg and Berlin'. (Other examples of the company's wonderful mosaics can also be found in St Paul's Cathedral.)

The new Apple store was redesigned by Foster+Partners, whose amazing architectural works elsewhere in London, and indeed across the world, are too numerous to list here.

At the end of **Little Argyll Street** turn right into **Argyll Street**, where you immediately see the impressive frontage of the London Palladium. Look up at the building to the left of the Palladium and you'll see a plaque explaining that the American writer Washington Irving lived there in the 1780s.

The **London Palladium** began its existence in 1867 as the Corinthian Bazaar and Exhibition rooms and was used as a circus for about forty years. (I've read that it was built with huge wine cellars beneath, but I'm not certain why). It was converted by the famous theatre designer and architect Frank Matcham into a musical hall and variety theatre, which opened in 1910. It then had a three-level auditorium with seating for 3,400, though today that's been reduced to 2,286. It's said to be the fifth largest theatre in London, though such rankings depend on one's definition of a 'theatre'.

Whilst it's renowned for hosting forty-three of the Royal Variety Performances, older people will probably best remember it for the 'Sunday Night at the London Palladium' variety shows, which were broadcast from here from 1955 to 1969. They were revived in the 1970s and again in 2014. Hosted by Bruce Forsyth, the shows were one of ITV's most popular programmes. Indeed, audience figures once reached over 20 million when in 1960 Cliff Richard topped the bill. But it wasn't just Cliff that night; you certainly got your 'money's worth' as also on the bill were Bob Hope, Judy Garland, Liberace, Petula Clark, the Seekers – oh, and a band called the Rolling Stones.

And we mustn't forget the other big band of the time – the Beatles. They played here in 1963, their biggest live show at the time. Unfortunately, their fans – both inside and outside the theatre – screamed so much and so loudly that their No. 1 hits, including 'Twist and Shout', 'From Me to You' and 'She Loves You' literally couldn't be heard. John Lennon even tried shouting, "Shut up", but to no avail. The next day the Daily Mail called it 'Beatlemania' – a name that stuck for many years.

And whilst mentioning top artists, in 1968 Johnny Cash recorded an entire album in the theatre, but for some unknown reason it was never released.

The Palladium is also noted for its pantomimes, and many of Britain's top stars have taken part in this annual event.

Finally, a rather strange fact is that at one time each of the 'boxes' had a phone, so if you recognised somebody you knew in another box, you could pick up the receiver and speak to them.

Opposite the Palladium is **Aqua Kyoto** – one of my favourite bar/restaurants in London. Situated five floors above what was once the Dickens & Jones department store, it has two restaurants, a cocktail bar and a stunning roof terrace overlooking Regent Street where you can enjoy an al fresco drink. (Access is via a lift in the lobby.)

Facing you at the bottom of Argyll Street is **Liberty's**, the distinguished department store. **Before we turn left** along **Great Marlborough Street** walk 50 yards to the right to take a look at three-storey archway adjacent to Liberty's that spans Kingly Street. I assumed it must have at one time linked with the adjoining building, but it doesn't and the room above the arch simply provides more retail space, as the photo here shows.

I love the recently restored Liberty's clock, with its message that I'm sure is good advice to us all – *'No minute gone comes ever back again – take heed and see ye do nothing in vain'*.

After being 'out of action for some years', Liberty's historic timepiece has been fully restored to its magnificent former glory. Look up at the clock and you can see the opening where St George will appear on his white horse, wearing gold armour, and carrying a lance. To the right of St George is a green winged dragon with its head turned to face you, with fire coming from its mouth.

As the hour chimes, brave St George once more slays the dragon from his valiant steed. At each quarter of the hour George chases the dragon in rotation around the clock, and upon the hour raises his sword to smite the beast with each chime.

George and his mythical nemesis are made from hand-beaten fabricated copper which has been highlighted in 24 carat gold leaf. The track unit has been fitted with brand new electronics and a radio signal monitoring system to ensure the accuracy of time keeping. (However, as there is no second hand – and not even a minute hand – I'm not sure of the point of such accuracy).

In each corner are four-winged heads, representing the angels of the Four Winds – Gabriel, Michael, Uriel and Raphael. Morning is symbolised by a crowing cock and rising sun, night by an owl and moon.

It's worth taking a brief look inside the store as its interior is still as magnificent today as it must have been when it opened. The main entrance is at the front of the store, through the florists and between the two lions.

Liberty's is something rare these days – a department store whose traditions and quirkiness have hardly changed over the years. It was opened by Arthur Liberty in 1874 in Regent Street, selling fabrics and ornaments from Japan, the Far East and India, but became so successful that in 1924 he moved to the much larger and more prestigious building that we see today in Great Marlborough Street.

The new store was built in the Tudor-revival style that was popular at the time, using the timber from two ancient battleships. Indeed, the deck planks from the ships created the well-worn but beautiful wooden flooring that's still in use today. Built over six floors, with three atriums surrounded by smaller rooms, it was an immediate success with customers. Always at the

forefront of fashion, Arthur Liberty used to say, "I was determined not to follow existing fashion, but to create new ones."

In 1874, after spending more than a decade working for Messrs Farmer and Rogers, who had a shop selling shawls and cloaks in Regent Street, Arthur Lasenby Liberty decided to open his own. He persuaded his fiancée's father to lend him £2,000 and with it opened a shop, that was also in Regent Street. The business grew so rapidly that not only did he repay the loan less than two years later, but later went on to buy some adjacent land and in 1924 opened the store we see today in Great Marlborough Street.

Arthur began by selling silk and cashmere shawls from the East (not Essex, but India and China). So popular were they that the store soon moved on to sell all kinds of oriental goods. From the very beginning Arthur was certainly innovative as besides simply importing fabrics he also brought forty skilled craftsmen from a village in India to work in his store to enable customers to watch them creating their unique products.

His innovation extended to the new store itself – he had it built in the striking Tudor Revival style, which was popular in the 1920s and considered to be the most crafted and 'English' architecture. The style was carried on throughout the store, which still adds to its unique character today. That innovation continued with the materials used to build the store. The oak timber beams which support the floors were taken from two 19th Century ships, the HMS Impregnable and the HMS Hindustan; the latter was said to have measured the length of the Liberty building. And those oaks, which were from the New Forest, were already over 100-years old when the store was built.

Roof tiles were hand-made, as were the leaded lights and linen-fold panelled lift doors. Arthur Liberty took much inspiration from features of the grand Parisian stores that were popular at the time, such as the atriums with glass roofs to allow light in. His store was built with three such atriums, each with central open 'wells' illuminated by roof lights and 'galleries' set around them. To make the store feel more 'homely', it was designed to feel like a domestic environment, with each atrium being surrounded by smaller rooms, complete with fireplaces and furnishings.

Continuing his innovative ideas, Liberty's worked with Thomas Wardle, a firm of printers and dyers known for their skills in silk dyeing and printing. They later produced the iconic Liberty art fabrics for which the store is still renowned today. Later, Arthur Liberty employed popular artists, including Whistler and William Morris, to create unique Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Arts and Crafts designs for his fabrics. Indeed, it is said that during the Art Nouveau period, which was at the beginning of the 20th century, Italians actually called it the 'Style Liberty'.

Liberty's popularity was boosted in America when in the 1880s Oscar Wilde, already an enthusiastic customer, took a collection of their clothes with him on a tour of America, announcing that 'Liberty is the chosen resort of the artistic shopper'. To this day, Liberty's is still popular with, shall we say, 'wealthy and discerning' Americans.

When the store began selling crafts and furniture, to achieve the standard that Arthur demanded and his 'fantasy of ensuring every ornament was a one-off', he set up their own furniture and craft workshops in north London. Skilled craftsmen began making the unique Arts & Crafts designs for which Liberty's quickly became celebrated.

From its earliest times Liberty's was known for its 'quirkiness' – for years the staff weren't allowed to approach a customer or speak to them unless spoken to first – and they were expected to

know the names and background of all the regular customers. None of the “How are you today?” and “Can I help you?” we have to put up with these days!

Arthur died seven years before the new building was completed and so never saw his dream realised. His statue once stood near this entrance but has since been moved.

After Liberty's, turn back to continue along Great Marlborough Street, passing on the left the stage door of the London Palladium, where thousands of pop fans have gathered in the past to see their heroes.

Before we take the next right into the wide entrance that leads into **Carnaby Street**, notice also on the left what was once the **Marlborough Street Magistrates' Court**. Many hundreds of well-known people, including Oscar Wilde, John Lennon, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards have been tried here. It's also where in 1835 Charles Dickens once worked as a court reporter for the Morning Chronicle. The original court opened here in the early 1800s, the second oldest of the seven police stations and magistrates' courts in England (the first being the Bow Street Court in Covent Garden). However, it was rebuilt in 1913, which is the building we see today. It's now been converted into the expensive, five-star Courthouse Hotel.

The full list of famous people who've been in the court – either having been charged with a crime or as a witness – is too long to impart here. One of the latter was Napoleon Bonaparte, (later Napoleon III) who appeared as a witness in a fraud case between attempts to establish a Second Empire in France. Oscar Wilde's case for libel against the Marquess of Queensberry took place here, after which Wilde himself was then convicted of gross indecency.

In the 1960s and 70s numerous celebrities appeared before the court. They included Christine Keeler (of the Profumo affair), Marianne Faithful, and Rolling Stones members Mick Jagger, Brian Jones and Keith Richards. John Lennon and Yoko Ono appeared here, not for possession of drugs, but for exhibiting pictures deemed too sexually explicit. Others included Francis Bacon, Sex Pistols singer Johnny Rotten, Lionel Bart and Bob Monkhouse, who was on a charge of conspiracy to defraud.

The court closed in 1998 and in 2004 was converted into a luxury five-star hotel. The principle No 1 court, with its oak panelled walls and a large glass domed ceiling, has become The Silk restaurant, whilst the cells have become VIP rooms in the hotel's bar. The Judges' Chambers are now the Magistrates' Suites. In total there are 116 bedrooms, a swimming pool, health club, roof terrace and private cinema.

Turn right down to Carnaby Street, and you will soon pass the Shakespeare's Head pub, established in 1735 and originally owned by Thomas and John Shakespeare, who were supposedly distant relatives of William Shakespeare. The pub's sign is a reproduction of a portrait of Shakespeare, painted when the Bard was at the height of his popularity. Look up at the 'window' on the front corner of the building and you can see Shakespeare himself gazing down on the street. But notice his right hand is missing; it is said to have been blown off by a bomb in the Second World War. However, one sceptical commentator suggests that almost every claim made about this pub's history is untrue. Either way, its premises were certainly rebuilt in 1927 and no trace of any earlier structure remains.

Turn left into **Foubert's Place** – pass Newburgh Street on the right (where shortly we see the site of the men's shop that kicked off the Carnaby Street fashion scene in the 1950s.)

In 1679 France banned Protestants from running military academies and Solomon Foubert promptly moved his famed academy from Paris to London. With the help of his supporters, he set up again, explaining that English gentlemen and noblemen could now avoid the expense of sending their sons to Paris for tuition. He rented premises at the corner of Brewer Street and Sherwood Street (which we visit later in the walk) and his wealthy pupils practised their military drills in adjoining fields.

The drawing below (1801) shows the livery stables that had been part of the riding school at the original location of Foubert's Academy.

On Solomon Foubert's death in 1696, his son Henry, who served as a major in the English army, took over the academy and relocated to what is now Foubert's Place. Here aspiring army officers learned swordsmanship, dancing, modern languages and drawing.

At the end of Foubert's Place notice the large brick building that was once the Craven School and Lecture Hall, now used by a film production company.

Facing you as you turn into **Marshall Street** is a block of well-restored 'City of Westminster Dwellings'.

Next to them you certainly can't miss the imposing **Marshall Street Leisure Centre**. Opened in 1931 and now Grade II listed, it contains the original magnificent 100ft long swimming pool with its barrel-vaulted ceiling and marble floors. It's now owned by Everyone Active, part of the Sports and Leisure Management Company that runs facilities such as this on behalf of local authorities. It now offers a spa, exercise studios, gym, etc. Curiously, the high-ceilinged baths were used by the American forces in the Second World War for training parachutists.

The original public baths on the site were built here in 1850 and included 64 first- and second-class baths, 60 washing compartments, 60 separate drying chambers, 16 ironing compartments and 2 large plunge baths.

Prices were 6d (old pence) for first class warm bath, 2d for second class warm bath (half these prices for a cold bath) and with charges of 1d/hour for washing, drying and ironing apparatus.

It was rebuilt in 1931, with the 100 ft swimming pool we see today, together with another smaller one, public washing facilities, a laundry and a children's welfare centre.

It closed in 1997 and, following a campaign by the 'Friends of Marshall Street Baths', underwent a major refurbishment and is now run as a charitable social enterprise with Michel Palin as one of its patrons.

Take the first right into **Ganton Street** then turn right into **Newburgh Street**. On your left is the **White Horse pub**. There has been a pub on this site since the early 1700s, when Soho was being developed. The pub we see today was built in the 1930s, with an art deco exterior and panelled interior.

We're going to turn left alongside the pub into **Marlborough Court** – but I'll mention first that on the right at No 5 Newburgh Street was the site of the men's fashion shop called 'Vince' which, in the early 1950s, was the beginning of neighbouring Carnaby Street becoming world-famous for 'trendy men's fashion'. Many of Vince's customers were gay, as indeed he was, and would meet at the Marshall Street baths we've just passed, then a popular meeting place for gay men.

However, the person really responsible for Carnaby Street's worldwide fame for fashion was a young man by the name of John Stephen. He had only worked for Vince for a short time before leaving to open up his own boutique on nearby Beak Street. It was called 'His Clothes' and then shortly after he opened a second at 5 Carnaby Street. Although his merchandise targeted teenagers, it attracted high profile pop stars including Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Kinks. John Stephen went on to open a further 5 shops on Carnaby Street.

Besides adding more information in the next section, I've also written more about Bill Green and John Stephen and the growth of Carnaby Street in the **appendix**.

Those over the age of sixty will certainly remember Carnaby Street as being the heart of London's men's (and later women's) fashion scene in the 'swinging sixties'.

However, before the 1950s there wasn't much going on in Carnaby Street. It was the cheaper side of Soho, with a few restaurants and workshops.

Back at the time of the Great Plague part of this area was used as a mass burial ground and was also home to one of the first 'pest houses', built to nurse those who had succumbed to the disease.

It's believed that Carnaby Street is so named because of Karnaby House which was built in 1683. The street itself was probably laid out around 1685.

Its fame as a place for young men to shop for the latest affordable fashions began in 1958 when John Stephen opened his first boutique here, called His Clothes. John was later known as 'the King of Carnaby Street' and the 'million-pound mod' and there's a plaque in his honour on the wall of No. 1 Carnaby Street. His story is fascinating, and I've written a separate section about him in the appendix.

The whole story of Carnaby Street's influence on fashion is remarkable, with many of the leading pop artists and bands – from Cliff Richard to the Rolling Stones, The Who, Jimi Hendrix and the Kinks – the latter's 'Dedicated Follower of Fashion' featured the line – "Everywhere the Carnabetian Army marches on, each one a Dedicated Follower of Fashion".

Throughout the 60s it wasn't just pop stars who were regular visitors and shoppers to the street, but even the likes of Elizabeth Taylor and Brigitte Bardot, which all helped to raise its popularity.

The singer Tom Jones and actress Christine Spooner once walked down Carnaby Street with a live cheetah on a leash, to publicise the opening of a shop called Tom Cat, whilst the opening of Lady Jane boutique 1966 involved live models dressing and undressing in the window. The owner, Henry Moss, was subsequently arrested and fined £2 for obstructing the highway, due to the large crowd of men who had gathered to watch the spectacle. But the world-wide publicity must have definitely been worth the £2.

Time Out magazine said "Carnaby Street was a place where you could as easily bump into the biggest pop stars of the time – such as the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, and the Beatles as you could a group of lads from Southend or girls on a weekend down in the capital from Newcastle." It was said that no matter what teenage fashion craze you were into – mods, then skinheads, and later punks and new romantics – you'd find the latest clothes and like-minded others in Carnaby Street.

U2's music video which accompanied their hit 'Even Better Than the Real Thing' includes a look-a-like version of the band singing in a Carnaby shop window. Even the Simpsons included it in an episode.

Today its shops, together with countless bars and cafes, have spread to surrounding streets, though sadly few are now independent and the multinational chains have taken over. Having said that, it is still an exceedingly popular place for both British and overseas tourists to visit and shop.

At the end of the very short **Marlborough Court** turn left into **Carnaby Street** and carry on down until you reach **Broadwick Street**.

We're going to turn left into Broadwick Street, but two things to look out for before you do. Firstly, notice on the right-hand side of Carnaby Street a small 'art deco' sign over a discreet entrance passage into **Kingley Court**. It's a covered courtyard with three floors of bars and restaurants – worth taking a look even if you're not planning on eating. (Kingley Court was at one time home to Tatty Bogle, one of London's earliest out-of-hours drinking clubs, which had originally been opened by a group of Scottish officers in nearby Frith Street before moving here.)

Then as you **turn left into Broadwick Street** you can't miss the huge, colourful mural. Called 'The Spirit of Soho', this 1,600 square foot (approximately – I haven't been able to determine the exact size) mural was erected here in 1991 and constructed of colourful mosaics and produced by a collective of Soho based artists who wanted to give a visual background to the area's vibrant and colourful past, highlighting some of the places and people that had made it so unique.

The colourful mural shows a towering representation of St Anne, known by some as the patron saint of Soho (though bearing in mind the area's infamous past, could it possibly ever warrant a saint!?) We see a church dedicated to her later in the walk.

Her outstretched skirt contains a map showing selected streets of Soho with some of its best-known landmarks. At the bottom are pictures of some of the famous past residents and clients of Soho, including Karl Marx, William Blake, Dylan Thomas and jazz musicians George Melly and Ronnie Scott.

Other aspects of Soho are shown, including the Tudor-style timber frame of Liberty's department store, the stage of the London Palladium, an artist working in a studio, Carnaby Street and Ronnie Scott's jazz club and fashion shops and restaurants. There are even drawings of some of the occupations that that were carried out in Soho over the years – gunmaking, furniture and woodworking, goldsmiths, etc.

There's a painting of Groucho Marx, said to be a reference to the private members' Groucho Club on Dean Street, and you can even see dogs and hares, harking back to Soho's hunting ground origins.

The clock, which was restored in 2006, is equally fascinating. Try and be there when it strikes the hour, and you may be able to see Karl Marx sipping a can of Coca-Cola (a symbol of the capitalist west if ever there was one), with 18th century opera singer Teresa Cornelys, (who lived and performed in nearby Carlisle House), winking at her former lover Casanova (with whom she had a daughter). And in return he blows her a kiss.

Cross Marshall Street, continue along **Broadwick Street** (which used to be just called Broad Street), passing a well-restored row of terraced houses, until you reach **Lexington Street**.

On the corner is the **John Snow pub** (c.1870), named after a most remarkable doctor who, thanks to his painstaking research into how cholera spread and then his persistence in trying to persuade the authorities to believe him, eventually saved countless lives. Outside the pub is a replica of the pump that he identified as the source of the cholera. Notice, it's without the handle that would have once pumped the water up. It was by persuading the authorities to remove the handle of the pump – and quickly seeing the number of cases of cholera dropping – that he proved it was a waterborne disease.

From the plaque at the base of the replica pump: “Dr John Snow (1813–1858), a noted anaesthetist and physician, lived near the focus of the 1854 Soho cholera epidemic, which started in August 1854 in Broad Street, as Broadwick Street was then called. In September of that year, more than 500 people died in Soho from the disease. Snow had studied cholera in the 1848–9 epidemic in south London and developed a novel theory that polluted drinking water caused the disease. He recognised that cholera cases were clustered around the water pump located here and showed it was the cause of the epidemic. His theory initially met with some disbelief, but he convinced the parish council to remove the pump's handle on September 1854 to prevent its further use ...”

Cholera had arrived in London in 1831 and over the following 30 or so years was estimated to have killed around 37,000 people, with the worst outbreak occurring in 1854.

In the 19th century it was believed that cholera was transmitted and spread by 'bad air' from rotting organic matter. This 'miasmatic theory' ('miasma' was the Ancient Greek word for pollution or defilement) had been around since the 4th century BC and had been advanced by Hippocrates.

It was still accepted to be the case by the medical and government authorities in the 19th century when the cholera outbreaks occurred in London.

In many ways it is understandable that people continued to believe that cholera was an airborne disease. The lack of sanitation and low summer rainfall used to create terrible putrid smells from the filth-choked Thames, into which all of London's sewage and waste was emptied, encouraged the belief that bad smells were responsible for the disease. (The misconception is perhaps pardonable when you consider some of the more outlandish theories surrounding the 21st century Covid pandemic).

However, a physician by the name of John Snow had a different theory. He believed that cholera wasn't airborne but waterborne. He came up with this idea when he observed that the outbreaks were not spread evenly across the city but concentrated in specific areas. He studied maps that showed where the outbreaks were, and by a process of elimination concluded that it was linked to the water the people in those areas were drinking.

Soho was the worst affected area in London, and one of the worst outbreaks was centred on Broad Street. From this he deduced that it might be linked to the water pump there. He badgered the local authorities to test the theory by removing the handle of the pump so it couldn't be used. It didn't take long before the number of cases dropped dramatically, and investigation showed that the Broad Street well people were drinking from was contaminated by the nearby cesspit.

However, the miasmatic theory wasn't fully abandoned by scientists and physicians until the late 1880s. Indeed, theory extended to all manner of disease and illness and for some time after people even believed that obesity could be caused by exposure to the odour of food.

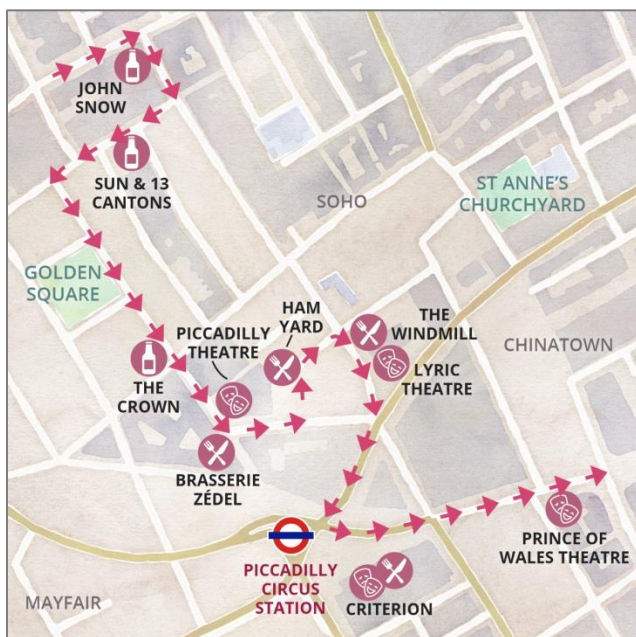
Snow's study eventually had a huge impact not only on the importance of clean water supplies but also how future epidemics and public health were investigated, and his collection and examination of detailed statistics, as well as linking these to maps, has become standard procedure across the world.

Sadly, he didn't live long enough to see the full benefits of his discovery, as he died of a stroke in 1858 at the age of 45, just four years after his discovery.

However, that wasn't the end to Snow's impact on public health. He was also regarded as being the 'father of anaesthesia', having been one of the first surgeons to experiment, firstly with ether and later chloroform. He also published numerous works highlighting the importance of how it was administered. He must be further respected for the fact that he never attempted to take out a patent on any of his work with anaesthetics.

John Snow was a fascinating man in many other ways. He had become a vegetarian at the age of 17, supplementing his vegetables with dairy products and eggs. He later became a vegan and teetotaler, though when his health began to suffer several years later, he started eating meat again and drinking wine, the latter because he believed it aided his digestion.

Wikipedia has excellent articles on [John Snow](#) and the [Broad Street cholera outbreak](#) for anyone interested in knowing more about this remarkable man.



Route map 2

Turn right down the side of the pub into **Lexington Street** – then take the next right into **Beak Street**.

Beak Street was laid out around 1680 and is named after its developer Thomas Beake, who later became a servant of Queen Anne.

As you walk along Beak Street you see on the corner of **Great Pulteney Street** another famous Soho drinking establishment – The **Sun and Thirteen Cantons**. A pub has existed on this site since 1756; the previous one called The Sun burnt down in the late 1870s. It was replaced by the one you see today, which opened in 1882 and is Grade II listed. When it reopened the Thirteen

Cantons' was added to the name in acknowledgment of the Swiss watch makers and woollen merchants who lived and worked nearby. (The Thirteen Cantons were the sovereign territories of early modern Switzerland.) The pub has always been a major hangout for film and stage celebrities, including the likes of Peter O'Toole, Jude Law, Oliver Reed, Ewan McGregor and Russell Crowe, amongst many others.

In 1791 Joseph Haydn, known as the 'father of the symphony', lived in a house just a few doors down in Great Pulteney Street. He became particularly popular in the city after composing his twelve London Symphonies.

Continue along **Beak Street**, crossing Bridle Lane and take the next left into **Upper James Street**. It's not a particularly interesting street, but a little way down it runs into the left-hand side of **Golden Square**. It's had a very mixed history, as I explain next, but today it hosts the offices of a number of media companies.

Golden Square was one of the first areas of Soho to be developed. The houses were large and solidly built of brick and stone with substantial pavements and sewers (something then new to this area).

It had previously been known as Gelding Close, as it was where horses once grazed, but the name changed to the posher sounding Golden Square when the first residents moved in. These included a number of dukes and duchesses and other aristocratic gentry, but as Soho became more cosmopolitan, with foreign immigrants and the 'lower classes' moving in, they began moving west into Mayfair.

The garden in the centre of the square was enclosed, with those living around it paying for its upkeep. There's a statue in the centre which was erected in 1753 and is said to represent Charles II in Roman costume, though there is some doubt as to whether the statue is of him, or of George II or perhaps some entirely abstract figure. (And I like the story which says that the statue was won at an auction by someone who had simply raised his hand to greet a friend and, not wanting it, gave it as a gift to the residents of the square).

For a time, the square became popular with peers, army officers and foreign embassies. For example, Numbers 23 & 24 housed the diplomatic envoy of Bavaria, and a Bavarian Roman Catholic chapel was built to the rear of these houses, which was attacked during the anti-Catholic Gordon riots in 1780. Later, 23 & 24 housed the Portuguese Embassy, as a blue plaque on the wall explains. The Bavarian chapel is now the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption and Saint Gregory and is part of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, which was established in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI to "allow Anglicans to enter into the full communion of the Catholic Church ..."

Charles Dickens chose Golden Square as the setting for Ralph Nickleby's gloomy house in 'Nicholas Nickleby' in 1839, describing the square as "a little wilderness of shrubs watched over by a mournful statue." He added that the square "was not exactly in anyone's way to or from anywhere," which could be said to be the same today. By Dickens's time, the square contained many cheap boarding houses and small hotels and was a place of residence of instrument makers, architects, engineers, doctors, and solicitors.

"Although a few members of the graver professions live about Golden Square, it is not exactly in anybody's way to or from anywhere. It is one of the squares that have been; a quarter of the town that has gone down in the world and taken to letting lodgings. Many of its first and second floors are let, furnished, to single gentlemen; and it takes boarders besides. It is a great resort of

foreigners. ... Its boarding-houses are musical, and the notes of pianos and harps float in the evening time round the head of the mournful statue, the guardian genius of a little wilderness of shrubs, in the centre of the square. ... Street bands are on their mettle in Golden Square; and itinerant glee-singers quaver involuntarily as they raise their voices within its boundaries."

Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*

By 1900 the square had completely changed again, and it became a centre for London's woollen and worsted trade, supplying the city's many tailors. Many of the square's original houses were demolished to accommodate the offices and warehouses of at least seventy companies connected with this trade.

Today the only original 18th century houses left are at Numbers 11, 21, 23 and 24. Number 22, which is strikingly different in architectural style from the others in the square, is now the offices of the Film and TV Charity.

Continue down through **Golden Square** (Upper James Street becomes **Lower James Street**) and at the bottom, you'll see the **Crown**, a pleasing 19th-century pub. There's a plaque on its wall claiming that this was the site of Hickford's Room, once a well-known music venue, but the room was actually on the south side of Brewer Street, roughly where the Colmar fashion shop now stands, at No. 63. (Perhaps the pub's landlord was confused by historical documents saying the site of Hickford's Room belonged to the Crown – but this would have been a reference to the Crown Estate, custodian of the monarch's landholdings.)

Hickford's Room had previously been in Panton Street, but in the 1730s it relocated to Brewer Street, and for a few years was the most important concert hall in London's West End. Handel performed here on a number of occasions, whilst in 1756 the nine-year-old Mozart and his elder sister gave a concert that included pieces of his own composition. (At nine years old!)

The room was said to have been "large and finely proportioned," though it wasn't really big – being around 50 feet long, 27 feet wide and 22 feet high. Within a few years, other larger and more prestigious concert halls were built in London, particularly Mrs Cornelys' Rooms in Soho Square (we see the site of it later in the walk). Hickford's then became used for less important events, including performances by schools and even dancing academies. In 1934 it was demolished for the construction of an annex of the Regent Hotel.

Cross over **Brewer Street** and continue down **Sherwood Street**, passing under the bridge that once linked the Regent Palace Hotel with its staff quarters and laundry. The hotel, claimed to have been Europe's largest when it opened in 1912, had considerable influence on this area and I'll say more about it shortly.

On the left is the 1,232 seat **Piccadilly Theatre**, one of the most important in London. When it was built in 1928, its brochure boasted that if all the bricks used in the building were laid in a straight line, they would stretch from London to Paris.

For a short while the theatre became a cinema and premiered the first talking picture in Great Britain (which starred Al Jolson in 'The Singing Fool').

More recently, the theatre had an unfortunate mishap when during a performance of Arthur Miller's play 'Death of a Salesman' in 2019, the audience could hear dripping sounds as water began coming through the ceiling. It then partly collapsed, and 1,000 people were evacuated, but fortunately there were no serious casualties.

On your right is something rare these days – a shop specialising in gentlemen’s hats. Whilst it might look like a long-established company, it didn’t start until 2009.

Next to it you can see a window into a corner of the American-owned **Whole Foods Market**. If you’re a bit of a foodie and haven’t been in a Whole Foods store before then you might care to take a look inside. The entrance is in the street behind, which you reach via the newly constructed Wilder Walk passageway, which is next to it.

In any case it’s worth taking a look into **Wilder Walk** – you’ll immediately notice the ‘mirrored ceiling’ in the entrance. It’s actually an art installation called ‘Timelines’; lights have been installed within layered glass panels along the sides of the alley, whilst mirrors on the ceiling are great for posing and taking a selfie. Wilder Walk was constructed as part of the redevelopment following the demolition of most of the Regent Palace Hotel, and originally ran through what would have been the hotel’s lobby.

Immediately next to Wilder Passage is the **Brasserie Zédel** – all that’s visible on street level is a small French-styled pavement café/bar with a few tables outside and even fewer inside. But the big surprise is what you can’t see from the street, for on its lower level there’s a large, reasonably-priced French restaurant, an American cocktail bar and a small and intimate theatre. As I explain below in the information on the Regent Palace, the Brasserie Zédel was created from part of the hotel.

When it was opened by the J Lyons Company in 1912 the Regent Palace was said to be Europe’s largest hotel. Built in the Beaux Arts style, and with a staggering 1,028 bedrooms it had “the opulence and scale of a transatlantic liner.” At its opening the company said it planned “to make the luxuries usually available only to the very rich, open to the less well-off.” Maids served tea, ran baths for guests and cleaned rooms by plugging tubes into a vacuum system built inside the walls. There was a grand entrance vestibule, a Winter Garden decorated with palms and rattan chairs and a large Rotunda Court for afternoon tea.

In the early 1930s, Oliver Percy Bernard, an industrial designer and architect who specialised in the art deco style, was commissioned to redesign some of the Beaux Arts features of the hotel.

The interiors he designed in the basement of the hotel were quite astonishing and were described in the Building magazine in 1935 as “just a trifle dissipated and naughty, but not sufficiently so to be vulgar.” The “incredibly mannered” Chez Cup Bar under the entrance rotunda was created in 1934 out of the former billiard room and is now the Crazy Coqs Cabaret & Bar. This has been immaculately recreated from the original architectural drawings and its tobacco-coloured travertine marble hall has been retained in today’s foyer. Most impressive of all back then was Dick’s Bar (now the Bar Américain), which still has its broad, horizontal stripes of stained birch veneers and jazz age columns.

After the Second World War the hotel began to fall on hard times, and things gradually got worse as its shortage of rooms with private facilities meant that by the 1970s it struggled to attract other than those looking for a bargain, and its reputation plummeted. It finally closed in 2004.

The Crown Estate, who own and lease the land the hotel was built on, incorporated the buildings redevelopment into its long-term strategy to upgrade Regent Street.

The architects chosen to design the new buildings had previous experience of adapting historic buildings and whilst the entire interior was gutted, they managed to retain two sides of the exterior fascia.

They were able to restore the buildings' significant 1930s art deco bars and restaurants, (which I've mentioned above) and according to *Architecture Today* magazine, the interiors of Brasserie Zédel are "probably the best and most authentic series of 1930s interiors in this country."

Don't continue down Sherwood Street but instead **take the left fork into Denman Street**. Immediately adjacent to the theatre is the Queen's Head pub (notice the sign on the wall explaining it's been an independent pub since 1738).

The triangular shaped pub/restaurant that sits between Sherwood Street and Denman Street was once the Devonshire Arms. After it closed, it was converted into a Jamie Oliver's restaurant, but with the chain's collapse it became the Coqbull Bar and Restaurant, but this may now have changed again.

Carry on down **Denman Street** for another 50 yards then turn left into the not too obvious entrance to **Ham Yard Village**.

Ham Yard has had an interesting history. Its name comes from the Ham tavern (later the Ham and Windmill), which dates back to at least 1739, and probably earlier. It was renamed the Lyric in the early 1890s and rebuilt in its present form in 1906. We'll pass it as we leave the yard.

Back in the 1920s and 30s Ham Yard was a popular spot for all-night club and music venues but the area was badly damaged by bombing raids during the Second World War and left virtually derelict until the **Ham Yard Hotel** was built. It opened in 2019.

Since its recent redevelopment, the yard is now surrounded on two sides by the new hotel, with an open area in the middle for drinking and dining al fresco. The newly-planted trees help to give shade and make the open space more pleasant than it would otherwise be. In the centre is an unmissable large gold covered art sculpture by Tony Cragg called 'Group' (though personally I can't see the connection).

The Ham Yard Hotel has 91 bedrooms and suites (costing from around £600 a night to over £2,500). There are 24 residential apartments, a roof top terrace, sunken orangery, four-lane bowling alley, 187-seat theatre, library ... so hardly surprising that the place is so expensive.

And something to think about if you stop for an al fresco 'bite to eat' ... in 1852, the French chef Alexis Soyer, said by some to have been the first ever 'celebrity chef', cooked a Christmas dinner here in Ham Yard for around 22,000 (yes, you read that correctly) poor Londoners.

Few people are likely to have heard about Alexis Soyer, though besides cooking for some of London's elite, and as a result being in constant demand, he did astonishing work helping the poor and undernourished. He took time off to travel to Ireland during the potato famine, where he served the thousands of starving people his special 'famine soup' and later travelled to Crimea where he invented a lightweight portable travelling stove so hot food could more easily be prepared for the soldiers. He also worked with Florence Nightingale and helped devise more appropriate menus for soldiers in the hospitals. A truly fascinating, yet nowadays little-known man, and if you'd like to know more about him then take a look here: <https://alexis-soyer.com>.

Carry on through Ham Yard – notice the little 'back entrance' yard at the rear of it – now just a couple of backdoor emergency exits and refuse bins, but back in the 1960s a doorway here led down a flight of steps into a basement club. It was one of London's early venues for bands such as the Rolling Stones, The Animals, Chris Farlowe, (remembered for his hit 'Out of Time'), The Who and many others. Called the Scene Club, it was originally a jazz club but by 1963 it had

become one of the top venues for 'Mods' (though you have to be of a certain age to recall the Mods and Rockers era).

Turn right now into **Great Windmill Street** and as you do, notice **The Windmill**, on the opposite corner, which for many years was famous for its 'nude review shows'. It has closed and reopened several times over the years and following a £10 million refit in 2021 it has opened again. The 350-seat venue now offers nightly cabaret acts, with meals and drinks served at your table. As well as the main auditorium and balcony bar, there's a basement 'speakeasy' called Henderson's. Laura Henderson was the eccentric pioneer of striptease who ran the Windmill in the 1930s and 40s. She was immortalised by Judi Dench in the 2005 film, 'Mrs Henderson Presents', which was later adapted as a stage musical.

The Windmill Theatre was a reconstruction of an earlier cinema that opened on the same site in 1909 and was called the Palais De Luxe, which was one of the first purpose-built cinemas in London's West End, designed to show the early silent films. However, as film-going became more popular, with newer and bigger cinemas opening, the Palais De Luxe became unprofitable and it was sold and redeveloped as a playhouse theatre, reopening in 1931 as the Windmill Theatre.

It began to introduce the idea of what they termed 'The Revueville', a programme of continuous variety acts incorporating singers, dancers and showgirls. Its popularity rapidly increased when the theatre began to incorporate glamorous nude females on stage, inspired by the Folies Bergère and Moulin Rouge in Paris. The theatre had managed to persuade the Lord Chamberlain, who was responsible for censoring all theatrical performances in London, that the display of nudity in theatres was not obscene. They pointed out that if 'nude statues' in public places were not considered morally objectionable, then nor could its girls on stage, provided that acted like statues and did not move. The ruling was 'if you move, its rude'. As a result, the legendary Windmill Girls, in motionless poses as living statues or tableaux vivants, became an extraordinary success, particularly during the Second World War, when it was very popular with American soldiers stationed in Britain.

The Windmill's famous boast that 'we never close' was almost true. Indeed, it was the only London theatre that didn't, except for twelve days at the very start of the Second World War. After that, the shows continued daily, though because of the nightly bombing raids on London, they had to close in the early evening.

The Windmill was finally forced to shut in 1964, no longer able to compete with the competition from the many strip shows that were far 'sexier' than those at the Windmill and had become common in London at that time. It did reopen sometime later as a strip club but lost its licence in 2018 as the girls were said to be breaking the 'no touching' rules.

It reopened again in September 2021, this time as The Windmill Soho, offering nightly cabaret, with drinks and dinner served at your table.

The rather dilapidated brick building next to the theatre was once where the 18th century physician and anatomist, William Hunter, built a large house which, besides his living accommodation, included a museum, library and even a theatre where he could give lectures and demonstrations on anatomy. It became known as the Windmill Street School of Anatomy and was used for some years by King's College for lectures. The building is now part of the stage and dressing rooms of the adjacent Lyric Theatre.

The street's name (and obviously the theatre's) was because of a windmill that was situated here, a reminder that this was once farmland. Although it was erected back in the 16th century, much

of it remained in place until the late 18th century. As a result of 'shoddy' developments in the 17th century a royal proclamation was issued, decreeing that any new building had to be supervised by Sir Christopher Wren, who was at that time the Surveyor of the King's Works.

Walk to the bottom of **Great Windmill Street** and on the corner is the **St James Tavern**, which opened here in 1733 and was rebuilt in 1897. Inside there is a set of four tiled paintings by Doulton's of Lambeth representing Shakespearean scenes. This was said to have been a stopping point for the gentry arriving into London by horse and carriage, and was patronised by Charles Dickens. He apparently had a favourite chair, where he would "sup the odd glass of port and strong ale." An infamous character of the past who also enjoyed drinking here was the highwayman Dick Turpin – at least so it's claimed, but he is alleged to have drunk in all sorts of places, with little evidence to prove it.

You've now reached Shaftesbury Avenue, which is famous for its theatres and if you look to the left you can see three in a row – the Lyric, Apollo and Gielgud.

Opposite, on the other side of **Shaftesbury Avenue**, is what was once the grand **Trocadero** – you can still see the name. It was the home of the Rainforest Café, and then the Jungle Cave, but that part will soon be reopening as Albert's Schloss London. It will be offering a bier palace, as well as a 'cook haus, and bakery with seven days of showtime'. (And its name 'Albert' is said to be 'in honour of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband). Another part of the Trocadero building is now the Zedwell Hotel. It has seven hundred rooms and bearing in mind its position, the prices are often quite reasonable. However, many of the rooms (which they call 'cocoon') are very small and without windows, which no doubt affects the price. One of the hotel's attractions is its enormous rooftop 'sky garden', with views across the surrounding area.

Yet another part of the Trocadero building – the basement, which formerly housed a Metro cinema but had been vacant since 2006 – is soon to become an Islamic prayer space and community centre. It's being funded by the Aziz Foundation, a charitable organisation established by the billionaire entrepreneur Asif Aziz, who has been nicknamed 'Mr West End' as he owns an extensive range of properties in central London.

The Baroque-styled Trocadero opened in 1896 and built as one of the J. Lyons chain of restaurants. They were very popular in London for many years, and besides offering refreshments and meals that the mass market could afford, the Trocadero later featured concerts and cabaret. However, changing consumer habits saw it close in 1965.

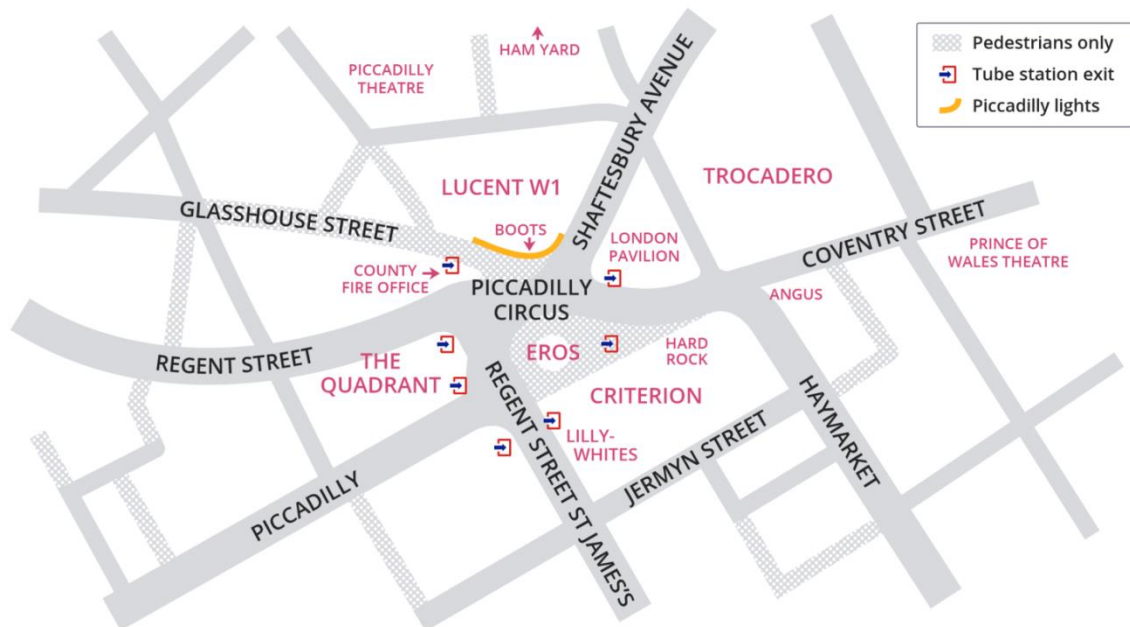
In 1984, the interior was gutted, (though the exterior was retained), with an enormous tourist entertainment centre, shopping centre and exhibition space being created. At 450,000 square feet it was then the largest indoor leisure space in Britain. Initially it hosted the Guinness Book of World Records Exhibition, followed by the Pepsi-sponsored 'Nickelodeon', with the Pepsi Max Drop and the first IMAX cinema in Britain.

Sega then opened 'SEGA World', a large entertainment arcade, with emphasis on the Sonic the Hedgehog game, with a supersized statue of the Hedgehog over the front entrance.

Turn right into Shaftesbury Avenue. On your left is the London Pavilion, built in 1861 as a music hall – and an odd bit of (useless) information, it is said that this was where the word 'jingoism' came from (which the dictionary describes as 'extreme patriotism, especially in the form of war-like aggression'). It was an anti-Russian song, sung here during the Russo-Turkish war in 1878, that contained the words "We don't want to fight, but by jingo if we do, we've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too."

The Pavilion was rebuilt in 1885 as a theatre, but its uses have changed many times over the years, though its name has remained.

Part of the building is presently the **Piccadilly Institute**, an enormous nightclub. The building's owners have expressed an intention to convert most of the Pavilion into a hostel for students, backpackers, and 'budget explorers'. The conversion is planned for completion in 2025, assuming there are no hitches.



When you reach **Piccadilly Circus**, walk around to the right for just a few yards. Behind you will be the long-established **Boots pharmacy** (it opened here in 1925), which used to be open 24 hours a day but now closes at midnight. And high above that are the brightly lit advertising signs for which Piccadilly Circus is famous.

On your right is the curved lower end of **Regent Street**, with more amazing buildings similar to those we saw at the beginning of the walk. The building closest to you on the right of Regent Street with large windows and iron 'balcony' railings, was the headquarters of the **County Fire Office**, a company founded in 1807, which moved to newly-built premises on this site in 1819. The Alliance Assurance Company acquired the business in 1906 but it kept its separate identity – and its home here, which was rebuilt in 1924–7. The new building was very similar to the original, complete with the covered arcade, which had been a feature of Regent Street when it was built.

Then, looking anti-clockwise, the building on the opposite corner of Regent Street was originally Swan & Edgar. This was once another of London's premier stores but, like so many, it is long gone. The store had opened here in 1812 and for many years was highly successful. The building was redeveloped in the 1920s, though Swan & Edgar was taken over a few years later by Debenhams, though the name carried on. However, they eventually closed the store in 1982.

The store had opened here in 1812 and for many years was highly successful. An advert in the 1880s said the store was "wholesale and retail silk mercers, drapers, furriers/ mantle and costume makers and seal skin merchants/ novelty and economy in dress/ All articles of fashion of the latest styles and reliable quality."

I like the fact that in 1901 the store's managing director was in trouble with the police due to the shop's window displays. People had been complaining that his moving window displays were causing congestion on the pavement, with sometimes hundreds of people blocking the pavement to look at the action. He ignored several police summons, saying he had spent over £100 on designing the windows to attract customers!

The opening of the adjacent Piccadilly Circus tube station in 1906 added another boost to the store's popularity. In the 1920s, the building was redeveloped and then just a few years later Swan & Edgar was taken over by Debenhams, though the original name carried on. However, the store eventually closed in 1982.

It was empty for a few years until it became the flagship for Tower Records before being taken over by the Virgin Group and then the Zavvi Company. Sadly, the decline of CDs and records (although the latter are popular again but definitely not a mass market product) saw it close. In 2010 it once again became a department store, owned by the Dutch fashion company 'The Sting'. They too struggled to make it work, and it closed in 2018 and I'm unsure whether it is currently occupied.

Left of the former Swan & Edgar is the start of the world-famous street **Piccadilly**, which leads through to Hyde Park and Knightsbridge, whilst the road to the left of Piccadilly is Regent Street St James's (formerly Lower Regent Street).

Across from you, in the middle of Piccadilly Circus is the statue of **Eros**. The installation was formally called the Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain when it was unveiled in 1893 to commemorate the philanthropist, Lord Shaftesbury. Mounted on a bronze, octagonal base, Eros was the first aluminium statue and is Grade I listed.

The memorial was commissioned in the late 1880s to honour Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, who was known for his philanthropy and charitable works. The sculpture was the work of Sir Alfred Gilbert and it was first aluminium statue in the world.

There has never been an official name for the winged figure specifically. The entire installation was originally called the Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain, and later became known simply as the Shaftesbury Memorial when the fountain (which had never worked properly) was decommissioned.

It's hard for the modern mind to comprehend the outrage the Eros statue caused at the time, at least among a vocal minority. Victorian prudes were up in arms about the use of such a naughty figure to commemorate the virtuous Earl. To deflect the criticism, Alfred Gilbert later tried claiming that the statue represented 'the angel of Christian charity' but the public weren't convinced. Ten years after the statue's unveiling, when the fuss still hadn't died down, Gilbert changed his tune and abruptly declared that the statue really depicted Anteros, Eros's squeaky-clean brother, but once again he was generally ignored or disbelieved and everyone carried on calling it 'Eros'.

Behind Eros is the enormous white stone **Criterion building**, which contains the Lillywhites store, the Criterion Theatre and the Criterion Restaurant which opened here in 1874. There is also now a Hard Rock café.

The history of the Criterion is fascinating. Built in the French Renaissance style, it opened here in 1874 on the site of an old coaching inn, and as you can see, is enormous – 120,000 square feet to be precise. It contained an exclusive hotel and several restaurants, including the extravagant

(and expensive) Criterion. In addition, there were various other dining rooms, a banqueting room, a smoking room, a bar, cigar shop and Masonic room. There was also a Grand Hall that was originally planned to be a ballroom and you can see its enormous dome on the roof. This once contained staff accommodation, which was laid out over two floors, with separate dormitories for barmaids and managers.

You can't fully appreciate the size of the Criterion building without walking down the side of it, and most of it appears to be empty at the moment. The Criterion's owners have stated that they will be creating a flagship hotel within the building, with bars, restaurants and nearly 500 rooms. However, though work was expected to have started in 2021, there's no sign that the redevelopment has yet begun.

In the 19th century several members of the Lillywhite family were leading cricketers and Fred Lillywhite organised the first overseas cricket tour by an England team to North America. They began producing footballs, which were subsequently chosen by the Football Association for the early FA Cup matches, and their specifications are used for the balls used by today's International FA. In 1886 the Ivy League chose a Lillywhite's ball for the standard for American college footballs.

They opened their enormous 67,000 square foot sports store within the Criterion building in 1925. Once known as the 'Harrods of Sport', Wimbledon players were obliged to buy their shorts here. For many years it held a Royal Warrant as suppliers of sportswear and equipment to royalty, which dates back to 1937 when King George VI bought his coronation slippers here, though what the connection is with his slippers and sportswear I've yet to work out.

Their 1930 catalogue included the 'Lillisport Aviation Suit for Ladies', which was worn by Amy Johnson when she successfully became the first woman pilot to fly solo from England to Australia.

Its success was helped by its policy of providing top quality products, albeit at premium prices. However, increased competition from other companies selling sporting goods at lower prices meant it eventually ran into financial difficulties, and in 2002 the company was sold to the Mike Ashley's Sports World chain (subsequently Sports Direct, and then Frasers Group) for what was said to have been a 'knockdown' price.

For several years it has been reported there has been a 'battle' between the landlords of the Criterion building and Frasers Group over the future rent and the last I heard Frasers Group said they were prepared to close the store and walk away.

The 588-seat **Criterion Theatre** is unusual in that, with the exception of its box office, it is entirely underground. So much so that when it was built in 1873, fresh air had to be pumped in to prevent the audience being asphyxiated by the toxic fumes from the gas lights that illuminated the theatre.

Next to it is the **Criterion Restaurant**. Sadly, the original restaurant closed many years ago and the space has since been occupied by a succession of operators of varying quality. Since 2023 it has been a branch of Masala Zone, a mid-market Indian restaurant group. Its predecessor was an Italian restaurant called Granaio and I have left my original photos of the interior at that time below.

Walk back for just a few yards and **cross over the bottom of Shaftesbury Avenue and continue ahead into Coventry Street.**

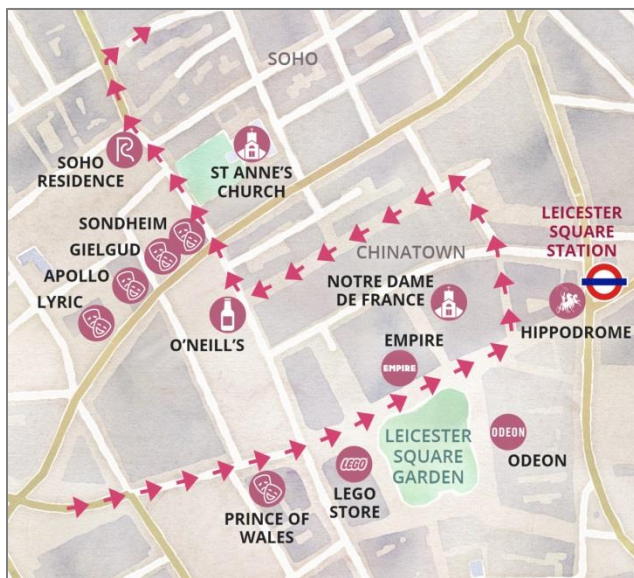
The building on your left contained the London Pavilion Theatre. It was originally a music hall and then a cinema, but is now a shopping arcade. Sadly, the ground floor frontage simply contains a number of tourist shops.

On the right, just a few yards further and on the corner of the **Haymarket** and the Criterion building, is an amazing bronze sculpture called the 'Four Horses of Helios'. Helios was the Greek god of the sun and the horses were said to have pulled his chariot around the sky. They were installed here in 1992 when the Criterion Theatre was refurbished.

The Four Horses of Helios, the Greek god of the sun, were sculpted by Rudy Weller. They consist of a pair of horses, one and a half times the size of a real horse, weighing around four tons, and two individual ones which were sculpted to appear as though they are leaping out of the water of a fountain.

These horses were half of a commission given to Weller, the other half being the Daughters of Helios, or 'Three Graces' sculptures. These you can see on the roof of the building, directly above the horses, looking as though they are jumping off. They are said to depict the three charities – Aglaea, Euphrosyne and Thalia and are constructed from aluminium covered with gold-leaf.

Continue along **Coventry Street** – on your right is one of London's longest-standing steak restaurants, the **Angus Steakhouse**, which opened in the 1950s. Modelled on the popular American steak houses at the time, it offered a menu most English people had not seen before. Nearly seventy years later, little has changed – except the price. Although they generally seem to have had a poor reputation with locals, for many years they were popular with tourists, and I think still are. However, I understand that the 8,000 sq ft three-storey premises are now being offered to rent at a cost of almost £1½ million a year.



Route map 3

Cross over **Great Windmill Street**, passing a line of touristy shops that form the ground floor of this side of the Trocadero. Cross **Rupert Street**, which was built in 1676 and named after Prince Rupert of the Rhine, a nephew of Charles I and one of the Royalist commanders during the Civil War.

On the opposite side of the street is the Grade II heritage listed **Prince of Wales Theatre**, where 'The Book of Mormon' has been playing for several years. The theatre opened in 1884, was rebuilt in 1937, and after a further major refurbishment costing £7 million in 2004 opened with Abba's musical hit 'Mama Mia', after it transferred here from the Prince Edward theatre.

Just a few yards further on is **Wardour Street**, one of Soho's best-known roads, which we walk through later. But before you continue ahead, pause a moment, first to take in what to me is the ghastliest building to have been erected in this area for many years ... the monolithic and exceedingly ugly glass hotel called W London.

Take a look up Wardour Street to see the '**Chinatown Gate**', This was opened in 2015 by Prince Andrew, and marks the entrance into London's Chinatown.

The arch is in the style of the Qing dynasty and was made in Beijing and reassembled here. There are three tiers and two pillars with the plaques on either side, which are made from white jade. The decorative panels are embellished with '999 gold foil', (the highest grade available). One of the Chinese texts on the top of the gate translates to read, 'Peace and Prosperity to Chinatown'.

We explore more of Chinatown shortly, but I'll just mention that it didn't really exist here until the 1970s and the area was just a run-down part of Soho.

As soon as you **cross Wardour Street** notice the Wappenbaum, nicknamed by Londoners the 'Swiss totem pole'. It has the shields of the coat of arms of each of the 26 Swiss Cantons that make up the Federation of Switzerland. (A canton is their mini-equivalent of a state in the USA). It was a gift from the Swiss people as a token of friendship to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee in May 1977.

Immediately after is the magnificent 30-foot high '**glockenspiel**'. It is a giant musical animation clock with 27 bells and a procession of herdsmen and their animals that 'ascend the alpine meadows' (actually around the curved wall) at set times during the day. The bells normally chime on weekdays at 1200, 1700, 1800, 2000 and at weekends at 1200, then hourly until 2000.

The original glockenspiel had been positioned outside the Swiss Centre in 1985 as a gift of friendship from the people of the Confederation of Switzerland and the Principality of Liechtenstein to the City of Westminster to celebrate the Confederation's 400th anniversary. It was refurbished by a firm of clockmakers in Derby with help from various Swiss artists and returned, close to where it was originally situated, in 2011. The music it plays is composed by the Royal Academy and the University of Music and Art in Switzerland. The Glockenspiel is controlled by the Derby clockmakers.

And if you are wondering about these Swiss connections, it is because until 2008 the site on your left was the 14-storey Swiss Centre. This was a complex built in 1968 to showcase Swiss culture and promote tourism to the country. Within it were a number of Swiss-based companies and organisations, including the tourist board, banks and a Swiss-themed restaurant. However, it never really took off and was demolished in 2008 to be replaced by the W London hotel and the M&M's store.

The short pedestrianised stretch between Wardour Street and Leicester Square was named Swiss Court in 1991, on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation.

On your left you certainly can't miss **M&M's World** – which I'd describe as an emporium of sickly, sticky sweets, bright flashing lights and hordes of mainly pre-pubescent kids. Come here at weekends or in school holidays and the queues outside are just mind-blowing. Opposite is another children's (and many adults') favourite – the **Lego store**.

Cross Leicester Street, but as you do look up to the top of the street where you'll see an unusual 'Franco-Flemish Renaissance' building, with a stepped gabled roof. It's No. 5 Lisle Street, built in 1897 and designed by Frank Verity, celebrated for his theatre and early cinema architecture. From 1935 until 1989 this was St John's Hospital for Diseases of the Skin, which when it closed was transferred to St Thomas' Hospital. The ground floor became a pub – for many years a branch of the Slug & Lettuce chain but more recently the Clubhouse 5 sports bar.

The hospital had been founded nearby in 1863, but only moved to 5 Lisle Street in 1935. The building, which dates from 1897, had previously been occupied by the film company Pathé of France and originally by the French Club.

It cost the hospital £25,000 and a further £10,000 was spent on making it suitable for patients. It was described then as "bright, airy and cheerful, and allowing over a thousand patients a week to be seen." Within just a couple of years the number of outpatients a year had risen to almost 66,000 and several additional premises in nearby Gerrard Street (which we walk through shortly) were obtained. It closed in 1989 and relocated to St Thomas's Hospital.

When searching for information about the hospital before it moved to Lisle Street, I found that it opened daily at 2pm and there was also a weekly evening clinic, which enabled the 'artisan classes' to attend "without it being known that they are afflicted with a skin disease and thus to avoid the risk of dismissal from their employment."

You are now in **Leicester Square**, with the famous gardens in its centre. Today, the square is the centre of London's cinema activity, with over 6,000 seats and the UK's widest screen. Around fifty film premieres take place a year in Leicester Square and on your left, on the northside of the square, is the **Empire**, which hosts many of these events. The crowds behind crush barriers, stars walking the red carpet and the flashing of hundreds of cameras have been a regular sight for many years.

The Empire started off in 1884 as a variety theatre, one of the largest in London and seating over 2,000.

It was bought by MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer) in 1927 and converted into an American-style cinema, which then seated 3,000. After the Second World War it also began offering elaborate live performances on the lines of the New York Radio City Musicals.

Its next major change came when it installed the very latest 70mm projectors and a larger screen in order to show the epic film Ben Hur. When that finished its 16-month run the cinema was sold to the British Mecca group and the building underwent major renovation, becoming both a cinema and dance hall.

Since then, it has undergone numerous incarnations, with part of the building remaining as cinemas – including having one of the largest IMAX screens in the country – whilst the dance hall became a disco, then nightclub and more recently a casino, which it still is today.

Leicester Square underwent a huge £15 million renovation as part of the London 2012 Olympic refurbishment.

The **gardens in the centre of the square** were formed as far back as the 17th century, though for many years it was just common land and often very neglected. However, in the 1870s it was purchased by Albert Grant, a businessman and Member of Parliament, who laid it out, created fountains and statues including the one of Shakespeare in the centre, modelled on his statue in Poets Corner in Westminster Abbey. Grant gave it to the council, to be used 'hereafter as a public space for the free use and enjoyment of the public'.

Beside the entrance there is a statue of Mary Poppins, 'floating down from the sky with her umbrella', whilst inside and around the gardens are a number of illustrious characters from the world of cinema carved in bronze. They include Charlie Chaplin, Gene Kelly swinging from a lamp post, Bugs Bunny munching a carrot, Mr Bean, Laurel & Hardy and Harry Potter.

There are entrance gates at each corner, where there used to be busts of notable figures who had lived nearby – Sir Isaac Newton, the scientist; Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy; John Hunter, an early surgeon and the artist William Hogarth. The busts were removed in the 2011–12 revamp of the square, and put into storage by Westminster Council, where they've remained ever since, despite being Grade II listed. Apparently, they'd been so badly damaged by the use of corrosive cleaning chemicals in the early 1990s that they would have become "meaningless lumps of rock" if they'd been left outside for much longer.

The name 'Leicester' was a result of the Earl of Leicester who, having been granted a portion of what was then known as Soho Fields, created Leicester Fields in 1635 and built a large house for himself on the north side of what is now the Square, which he named Leicester House. During the 1700s the house was inhabited by George, Prince of Wales, when he had been evicted from St James's Palace after an argument with his father.

For a number of years this was a posh area, with inhabitants such as the Prince of Wales and the artist William Hogarth. However, by the end of the 18th century that changed – in 1774 Leicester House was sold to a naturalist Ashton Lever, who turned it into a museum of natural history objects, many of which had been collected by Captain Cook during his expeditions. This began the Square's move to become a place of popular entertainments. Leicester House was eventually partly demolished and then in 1865 converted into a church. (It is now the site of the Prince Charles Cinema). Over time, hotels, shops and theatres began to open, and several of the latter, such as The Alhambra Palace, a favourite place of Queen Victoria, was demolished in 1936 and became the Odeon cinema. I've put more about the Alhambra in the **appendix**.

On the east side of the square is the art deco Odeon Luxe Cinema which opened here in 1937. With a 120-foot-tall tower that displays its name, and black polished granite exterior, it's certainly impressive. Well-known for its film premieres, it has the largest single screen in Britain and was the first cinema to have the Dolby sound system installed.

We will leave the square from the north side, just along from where we entered, and walk up Leicester Place, (it's just past the Empire Cinema) but before we do, I suggest you walk a few yards further on to get a better view of the imposing Hippodrome.

The Hippodrome is certainly a spectacular building (now Grade II listed) built using red sandstone, red brick and terracotta. The roof is particularly interesting – an iron skeleton dome supports a group of horse drawn chariots with statues of Roman centurions on either side.

It opened here in 1900 as both a variety theatre and circus, complete with performing animals including elephants and even had an enormous 100,000-gallon water tank for 'aquatic displays'

including high-diving performances by Annette Kellerman, who was described as 'The Million Dollar Mermaid'.

Since then, it's been many things – theatre, night club, disco ... After a £40 million renovation and restoration in 2012 it is now primarily an enormous casino, with a number of restaurants and bars. Many of the original quirky features have been retained, and although I'm not a fan of casinos it is quite spectacular inside and worth a visit – particularly the rooftop bar.

Just nine years after it opened the Hippodrome was redesigned to become a more conventional music hall and theatre; orchestra stalls replaced the previous circus ring and the seats were reconfigured to accommodate audiences of around 1,300.

The first UK performance of Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' was performed here by the Russian Ballet, with Anna Pavlova dancing the 'dying swan'. Her act caused such a huge sensation that she became an international star, as well as giving her name to the dessert.

The theatre also became popular for variety shows, with many of Britain's and America's top stars performing here.

In the 1950s the theatre was bought by theatre impresario Bernard Delfont and Charles Forte, who removed much of the previous interior, turning it into a 'theatre-restaurant' accommodating 800 guests. It became known as the 'Talk of the Town', and its first show included a three-course dinner and featured Eartha Kitt rising up from beneath the stage in a vintage Rolls Royce.

The Talk of the Town went on to become a very popular regular television show featuring some of the biggest names in showbusiness, including Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Tony Bennett, Tom Jones, Matt Munro along with 60s pop idols including Cliff Richard, Neil Sedaka, Herman's Hermits and The Seekers.

In 1983 it was taken over by nightclub owner Peter Stringfellow who converted it into a discotheque, simply called the Hippodrome Nightclub & Disco. However, due to problems with alcohol and drugs as well as gang violence, the premises lost their licence and were subsequently closed.

The new owners undertook major restoration work, both externally and internally, that was said to have cost over £40 million. Fortunately, many original features were restored, and it now operates as the Hippodrome Casino. It was reopened by London Mayor (at the time) Boris Johnson, with six floors, four of which are for gaming, six bars, a restaurant and a cabaret theatre. The fifth and sixth floors have an outdoor smoking area, rooftop bar and dining area.

Finally, I must mention that the 'world's most famous clown', Charlie Chaplin, began his career at the Hippodrome, dressed as a penguin in the chorus line. That experience led him to develop his distinctive 'waddle walk'.

Walk back a few yards and turn right up Leicester Place – it's alongside the Bosphorus restaurant – and pass the entrance to the Premier Inn and Ruby Blue bar and club. On the right is the Church of Notre Dame de France, which is quite spectacular inside and well worth a visit if it's open. It's a Roman Catholic church that's particularly popular with French-speaking people, as many of its services are in the French language. (We come to London's French Protestant church later in the walk.)

Before I discuss the church, I'll point out that Leicester Place, where you are now standing, was once the marble-floored hall of Leicester House. At the bottom you'd walk out of the front door, and across the forecourt into what was then Leicester Fields – now Leicester Square.

The building that is now the church was built in the early 1800s as Burford's Panorama, an enormous rotunda which displayed equally enormous 360° panoramic paintings and is the reason for the church's circular shape. 'Panoramas' were enormous paintings depicting scenes of cities, at first of London, but later of other cities in Europe. In those days even people living in London would have little overall idea of what their city looked like, let alone what other cities across Europe such as Venice or Paris looked like. They were a sort of 'Georgian era IMAX'.

The one in Leicester Square, the first in the world, had two viewing chambers, one above the other, whilst above these was an enormous metal-supported glass roof which allowed the maximum amount of light to flow down on to the two galleries below. It was created by Robert Barker in 1793 to display his enormous panoramic painting, 'A View of the Cities of London and Westminster, Comprehending the Three Bridges'. Such was its success that Burford and his son went on to paint more panoramas, many of which were of cities in other countries, such as New York, Jerusalem and Bombay, whilst others were of famous battles. Their success resulted in many other panoramas being built in major European cities.

An 1804 handbook of London said, "The exhibitions at the Panorama are always among the most pleasing novelties of the London season. The paintings are changed every year." In another similar handbook it described it as "an exhibition of ancient reputation. Paintings of the best description of scenic art are to be seen in the building by the payment of one shilling, each being made to either the upper or lower circle, with separate views in each."

I found a description of one of the scenes they painted, which was of the Battle of Sebastopol, in Punch magazine in 1855, which I've put in the **appendix** as I found it interesting to read what people thought then about these panoramas.

When the Panorama's lease expired in 1865 it was purchased by a French priest who converted it into a church to serve the needs of the many French people who were living at that time in this area of London. The original entrance was actually in Leicester Square, (where the Bella Italia restaurant now is) but the priest was able to purchase the building in Leicester Place and make the entrance we see today.

Over the entrance is a sculpture of the Virgin Mary, with detailed reliefs showing scenes from the Bible on the doorways. As you enter you are immediately struck by its light and airy interior and its unusual circular shape. It is laid out with rooms and spaces on the side creating a cross-like interior.

The building was converted from the rotunda-shaped Panorama into a church by French architect Louis- Auguste Boileau who used the circular space but added four equal sized arms, so creating a 'cross'.

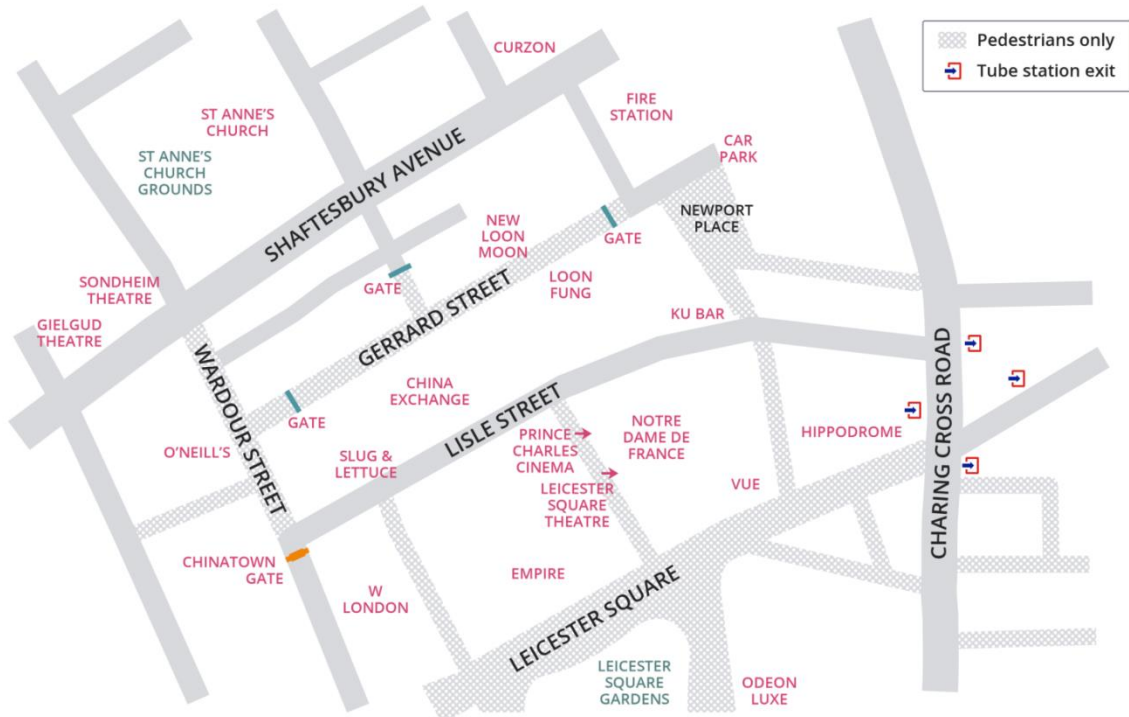
The church suffered bomb damage in the early part of the Second World War but following major repairs it was able to reopen a year later. However, further repairs were eventually needed, so with the support of the French Ambassador and the British Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, 'a sacred space was created that would honour France'. This was completed in 1948. In the mid-1950s several eminent artists of the time were asked to help with the redecoration of the church, and some of their works can still be seen today.

There are a number of renowned pieces of art within the church. Above the high altar is a large tapestry, designed by a former monk that depicts a scene from paradise, with the young girl surrounded by fauna and flora. On the right is a painting called The Flight into Egypt. The best-known, however, are the set of murals in the Lady Chapel painted in 1959 by the French artist (and poet, writer and later film maker) Jean Cocteau that depict the Annunciation, Crucifixion and Assumption. Whilst he was creating them he arrived in the church early every morning and talked to each painting as he worked on it.

Next to the Notre Dame church is the **Leicester Square Theatre**, one of London's smallest with just 400 seats. The original theatre was destroyed in the Second World War and rebuilt in 1953, becoming known as the 'Notre Dame Hall'. Later renamed the Cavern in the Town, 60s pop group the Small Faces were regular performers. Renamed back to the Notre Dame Hall in the 1970s, it hosted bands including the Rolling Stones and The Who. In the 80s it became a punk music venue, with the Sex Pistols and the Clash performing here. In 2001 it was renamed 'The Venue', hosting productions such as the world premiere of the Boy George musical 'Taboo'. Then in 2008 it went through another 'transformation' and reopened in 2008 as The Leicester Square Theatre, with American comedienne Joan Rivers making her acting debut with her play 'Joan Rivers: A Work in Progress by a Life in Progress'. Since then the theatre has regularly featured top comedians – Al Murray, Ruby Wax, Ricky Gervais, Bill Bailey and Frank Skinner, to name but a few.

Next to the theatre is the **Prince Charles Cinema**, which opened in 1962 as a theatre, with a new office building above. The playhouse proved unprofitable and it became a cinema in 1969. For many years the Prince Charles showed porn movies but it was later successfully reinvented as revival house / repertory cinema. In 2008 it was divided into two smaller cinemas, with the lower screen seating 300 and the upper, housed in what was previously the balcony, just 104. The cinema is popular due to its low prices and distinctive selection of films.

Turn right into Lisle Street. The long row of oriental restaurants leaves you in no doubt that you are now entering Chinatown.



Take the next left alongside the **Ku Bar into Newport Place**. Ku is one of London's longest established and still very popular gay bars, attracting big crowds of both locals and tourists. Pass yet more restaurants, some with intriguing hanging displays of ducks (at least I presume they are) in their windows.

Continue through the square and around to the left, passing through the Chinese gateway into the colourful and, no matter what time of day, bustling **Gerrard Street**. This is the **centre of Chinatown**.

London's first area to be known loosely as 'Chinatown' was in Limehouse, on the Thames in the East End. Chinese sailors had begun settling here, and some opened businesses catering for the many Chinese sailors who would spend their 'shore leave' here, whilst waiting for work on another ship. As I explain in my Tower Bridge to Wapping walk ... or Wapping to Canary Wharf ... the area was known to be one of definite 'ill-repute', with opium dens and considerably high levels of crime.

However, Limehouse, together with the rest of the docklands and East End were very badly damaged by bombing in the Second World War, and subsequently many of the Chinese residents moved to the West End, some settling around the area we now know as Chinatown and eventually began opening restaurants that catered for the growing Chinese population, which by then was being boosted by immigrants from Hong Kong. But it was not until the 1970s that Chinatown as we know it today began to be established. Previously it was just a partially run-down extension of Soho.

Gerrard Street was originally spelt Gerard Street, after the military leader Charles Gerard, 1st Earl of Macclesfield, who owned the land and used it for training troops. It was laid out between 1677 and 1685 and later developed into private housing by the physician Nicholas Barbon.

About 30 yards or so on the left is the Loon Fung Supermarket where a plaque on the wall above explains that the poet, literary critic, translator and playwright John Dryden lived in a house that stood on this site during the 17th century. England's first ever Poet Laureate, he was appointed to the post in 1668.

On the right-hand side is the New Loon Moon Supermarket, occupying what was originally a terraced house built in 1759 on the site of the Turks Head Tavern, founded by Dr Samuel Johnson and Joshua Reynolds in 1704.

Nearly opposite at Leong's Legend, there are two plaques; one explains that this was the Westminster office of the Penny Post (and later the 'Two Penny Post' – they had inflation even in those days), the other that in the basement was Ronnie Scott's original jazz club – it's now situated in Frith Street, which we pass shortly.

As you pass the bottom of **Macclesfield Street** there's a sculpture on your left called the Two Lions, a gift from the Chinese government that was unveiled by HRH Duke of Gloucester in 1985.

Behind the lions, the incongruously large building is the **China Exchange**, which looks rather derelict. In 1907 a telephone exchange was built here, which was then rebuilt around 1930 as a post office and telephone exchange. If you ever see 'GER' at the beginning of an old London phone number, it was short for 'Gerrard' and this was the exchange through which its calls were routed. The building is now a Chinese cultural centre that was established in 2015.

At the end of the street, we turn right into **Wardour Street**. As you do, notice the **O'Neill's** pub that faces you. Its basement (now home to a bookmaker) was previously the **Flamingo Club**, well known in the 1950s & 60s for jazz and later rhythm & blues acts. Some of the many who performed here back then were Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, John Lee Hooker, John Mayall, Bill Haley, Stevie Wonder, Otis Redding, the Animals, Wilson Pickett – it's probably easier to list the artists who didn't play here! The resident house band for several years in the 60s was Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames, and they made a live recording of their hit record 'Night Train' in the club. And I must point out that this is where, in 1963, the Rolling Stones first performed with the full line-up of Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Bill Wyman, Charlie Watts and Brian Jones.

The club closed in 1967, though a successor called the the Pink Flamingo carried on the tradition for two more years, after which the venue spent several years as the Temple, which was primarily a progressive rock club. Meanwhile, the joint was also jumping at the Whisky a'Gogo upstairs.

Upstairs in the same building was the Whisky a'Gogo, which also had top UK and American bands performing.

The Whisky a'Gogo was renamed the Wag Club in 1982. Described when it opened as a nightclub for 'non-conformist mavericks', it became extremely popular and again attracted many already famous and many other 'soon to be famous' bands. Regular visitors – sometimes to perform but more often just to 'hang-out' included David Bowie (who filmed his Blue Jean MTV video here), George Michael, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger, Madonna, Prince and fashion designers, artists and film stars including Robert de Niro, Brad Pitt, Karl Lagerfeld, Jean Paul Gaultier – to name but

a few. And this was despite (or perhaps because of) it being the complete opposite of 'posh and sophisticated' and without even a VIP area, so the top stars had to slum it with everyone else.

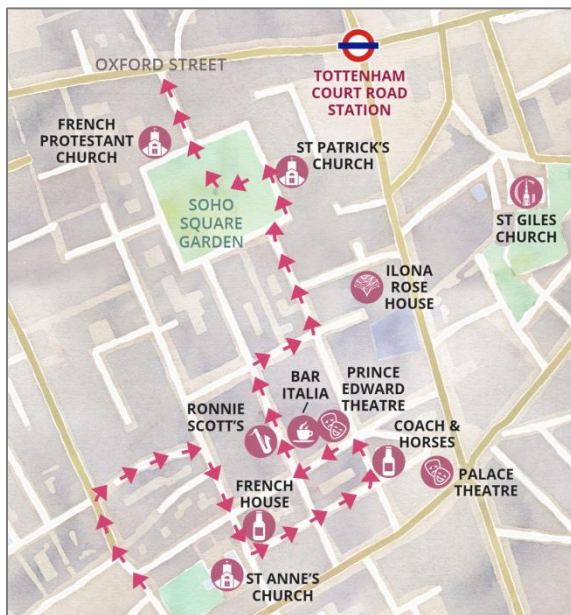
The Wag Club closed in 2001. The building is now a branch of the Irish-themed (but Birmingham-based) pub chain O'Neill's.

Walk to the top and cross the busy **Shaftesbury Avenue** and continue up on the right-hand side of **Wardour Street**.

Wardour Street runs north to south through all of Soho, and as a result is one of its busiest streets. It was originally a lane that connected the area around Charing Cross to the 'way from Uxbridge to London', which is now Oxford Street.

On the corner is the Sondheim Theatre, which opened in 1907 and was originally called the Queen's Theatre. The name was changed in recognition of the composer Stephen Sondheim in 2019, following a £13 million refurbishment. It's currently showing *Les Misérables*, the world's longest running musical which, with a break whilst the refurbishment took place, has been playing here since 2004.

We are now in what I call the 'real' Soho. The area is packed with interesting streets and sights, and I've tried to include as many as possible, without making the walk too long. However, I hope it will give you a good flavour of this distinctive area of London.



Route map 4

Behind the unusual railings on the right is St Anne's public park. It was originally the churchyard of **St Anne's**, which you can see behind it, though access to the church is now via the adjacent Dean Street. The reason for the churchyard being raised is because it was used for many years as a burial ground – around 60,000 bodies are said to be buried here.

The church was founded here in 1687 and, except for the tower, was virtually destroyed in the Second World War. Left for many years as a bombsite and then car park, it was eventually rebuilt in 1991.

The church, which was originally accessed via Shaftesbury Avenue, was founded here in 1687 and, as the area was developed, became the parish church. It was designed by William Talman, who was a pupil of Sir Christopher Wren and later Comptroller of the King's Works.

By 1800 the church's original tower had become unstable and it was subsequently demolished, with a new tower being built shortly after, (though its 1691 one-ton church bell was saved and is still in use today).

The main body of the church was destroyed during a bombing raid in 1940, with just the tower left standing. The rest of the church was demolished in 1953, with just part of the east wall remaining. However, it was eventually rebuilt in 1991.

Probably because of its location the church has many interesting facets. It's always been active in philanthropic work, opening a free parish school for boys in 1699 and five years later for girls as well. The church is still active in helping the poor and homeless and in 1969 the Centrepont charity was founded in the basement of the church by one of its priests.

It's also had a remarkable history for its music and choir, the latter having sung at Royal Command Performances in front of both Queen Victoria and Queen Alexandra. In addition, Britain's first church service with music was broadcast from the church in the 1920s.

In the 1940s and 50s the church's Society of St Anne's was well-known for encouraging links between the literary world and the Church. Its members included the novelists Dorothy L Sayers (whose ashes are buried in the Tower), and Rose Macaulay, both of whom were churchwardens. Meetings were attended by writers including TS Eliot, CS Lewis, Agatha Christie, John Betjeman and Iris Murdoch.

Pass the start of **Old Compton Street** – which we see more of shortly – and on the next corner on the left is the **Round House**. Built in 1892, it became the London Skiffle Centre in the 1950s and in 1958 the Blues and Barrel House Club. It later became a blues and skiffle club, and in 2019 it underwent a £1 million restoration and is now the Soho Residence, billed as the West End's 'premier bar, club and lounge space'.

A few yards further on, the building on the left displays the words '**Cinema House**'. From 1909 onwards Wardour Street was the centre of the film industry in London and nearly all of the big movie companies had their offices and did much of the post-production work here, some of which continues today. You can still see the evidence with the names of the buildings along this stretch of Wardour Street, such as The Pathé Building, Hammer House, Moving Picture House and Screen House.

We're going to take the next right into **Meard Street**. However, if you are interested in (or should I say old enough to remember) 1960s pop music I'll mention that a hundred yards ahead, at **100 Wardour Street** (the building juts out with a very prominent '100' on it), was once the site of the **Marquee Club**. Well, I say Number 100 ... it's slightly confusing as the actual basement club was next door at number 90, but it extended on the first-floor level to next door at 100 Wardour Street.

It closed in 1988 and was taken over and redeveloped by Sir Terence Conran (of Habitat and goodness only knows what else). Apparently, and I can't vouch for the truth of this, the effects of the nightly over-amplified bands who played here over the years caused so much damage to the building that its facade eventually had to be demolished and rebuilt. After several reincarnations it is now a bar/restaurant with live music.

The original Marquee was a jazz club that opened in Oxford Street in 1958 and which later also showcased rhythm and blues artists.

The club opened here in Wardour Street in 1964 and became what was said to have been “the most important venue in the history of European pop music.” Although the venue was surprisingly small and admission was inexpensive, it launched the careers of many of the big-name pop and rock artists of the 60s and 70s and even through to the 80s. Indeed, the list of those who performed here in their early days reads like a who’s who of rock: the Rolling Stones, John Mayall, the Yardbirds, the Animals, David Bowie (who used to do lunchtime gigs), Led Zeppelin, Moody Blues, Yes, Manfred Mann, Cream, Jimi Hendrix, Genesis, Queen, The Who and many more.

Later the Marquee hosted artists of different genres, including punk and new wave, with bands such as the Sex Pistols, Clash, Pretenders, Police, Cure, Ultravox ... the list is endless!

The club moved to Charing Cross Road in 1988 and the Wardour Street site was taken over by Sir Terence Conran, who turned it into the enormous 700-seat Mezzo (later Meza) restaurant with a basement bar and an entrance into the Soho Lofts residential apartments above. Since then it’s been several different ‘nightlife’ venues but is now a large (and surprisingly quite decent) bar and restaurant that’s spread over two floors.

Turn into Meard Street – one of my favourite little passages, and one that allows a delightful escape from the hustle and bustle of Soho.

On the right is a row of gorgeous Georgian town houses that are said to be among the best surviving example of original Georgian architecture in London. They were built in the 1720s by John Meard the Younger, who started life as a carpenter and was eventually made the Master of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters.

Early occupants included a harpsichord maker, a vicar (who later became the Bishop of London), an architect, writer, painter, violinist and musical composer – oh, and a woman who was rudely described as “generally a slut, drunkard and occasionally whore and thief.”

Remarkably most are still private homes, though sadly, one has already been turned into a retail shop – quite why planning permission was given for this I fail to understand – I hope no more go this way.

The building on the left is **Royalty Mansions**, built in 1908 as flats with workrooms for tailors. It was sold in 1978 to the Soho Housing Association and after extensive renovations reopened by the Duke of Edinburgh. There are apparently three apartments per floor, and they each have access to a communal terrace that spans the entire roof of the building. It would appear that their lease expires in 2026, so it will be interesting to see what happens then – no doubt it will be sold to speculators for more apartments for the rich!

At the end of Meard Street we’re going to turn right down Dean Street. However, there are several interesting things to see if you look to the left.

First is the delightful pair of Georgian townhouses on the left-hand corner of Meard Street, actually numbers 69 and 70 Dean Street, which were also built by John Meard. The upper floors of these houses were owned by David Tennant, (not the actor, but an aristocrat and socialite) who founded the **Gargoyle Club** here in 1925. It became an institution, popular with politicians, intellectuals and artists, with members including well-known names such as Noel Coward, Fred Astaire, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, Francis Bacon and countless others.

Socialite David Tennant took a 50-year lease on the upper three floors (the ground floor housed a printing press that had been established by the Novello music publishing family), where he created his apartment. It included a ballroom that accommodated up to 140 people and had a fountain, as well as a drawing room with gold leaf ceiling, Tudor room and a large garden on the flat roof which he used for dining and dancing. He'd even installed what was described as a very rickety external lift 'enclosed in shining metal like an art-nouveau cabin trunk'. It was said to have been modelled on the Alhambra in Granada – though quite how I can't imagine.

The club's decline began in the early 1950s when it was said to be one of the few places in London serving alcoholic drinks at affordable prices after midnight and was popular with artists such as Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. It was sold in 1955, becoming a strip club by day called the Nell Gwynne (though it was called a theatre or review club as opposed to a strip club) and the Gargoyle Club at night. In 1979 the club was taken over by the Comedy Store, whilst the basement bar became known as Gossips. From 1995 it was a Pitcher & Piano pub. The ever-growing Soho House company took over the site in 2008, and opened the Dean Street Townhouse the following year.

And in case any 'ageing goths' are reading this, I'll mention that after the Gargoyle closed it was used for weekly club-nights of the **Batcave**, considered to be the 'birthplace of the Southern English goth subculture'. Regulars at the Batcave included musicians and singers such as Robert Smith of the Cure, Siouxsie Sioux (of the Banshees) and Nick Cave.

Further up the street, on the opposite side, you can see distinctive signs for the **Crown and Two Chairmen** pub on the corner of Bateman Street and for **Quo Vadis**, two doors beyond. Until 1736 the pub was simply called the Crown. It is said to have had the 'Two Chairmen' added to the name in honour of two sedan chair men who stopped by for a drink after they had dropped off (not literally, I'm sure) Queen Anne, who was having her portrait painted in Sir James Thornhill's studio opposite. (This must have been an old story by the time of the name change because Anne died in 1714.) The pub was popular with the novelist and illustrator William Makepeace Thackeray and sometime later with two other writers, Graham Greene and George Orwell. The Crown and Two Chairmen was rebuilt in 1929.

The 'Quo Vadis' name comes from the Latin, meaning 'whither goest thou?' or 'where are you going?' It's a famous restaurant and member's club, founded in 1926 and known as the 'Great Dame of Dean Street'. It was originally a brothel and later home to Karl Marx when he lived in central London.

Karl and Jenny Marx had moved to 64 Dean Street (since demolished) in 1850. Jenny later wrote: "In the house of a Jewish lace-dealer we found two rooms where we spent a miserable summer with our four children." At the end of that year, "we left our small dwelling-place and rented another apartment in the same street ... [with] three small rooms." This was the top-floor flat at 28 Dean Street, above what is now Quo Vadis. Most of the time Marx was here he was struggling

financially and it was only with the help of his supporters, including Engels, that the family could survive at all. Sadly, three of their children died whilst they were living in Dean Street. When his wife received an inheritance in 1856 they moved to better accommodation in Kentish Town in northern London.

I've only been fortunate enough to eat once in the Quo Vadis, and I have to say it was a delightful meal, with excellent service.

Turn right and head down Dean Street. A short way down on the left, the white stone building at No 43 is another famous club, **The Groucho**. It was founded in 1985 as a club for those in the publishing world who, tired of 'stuffy gentleman's clubs' wanted somewhere more relaxed to meet. It soon became popular with those in the film, music, arts and media worlds. Wayne Sleep once took Princess Diana here for lunch – and apparently gave her the bill to pay, whilst artist Damien Hirst was said to have put his £20,000 Turner prize money behind the downstairs bar!

The Groucho Club was known for its 'idiosyncratic ambience' and said to have become an 'infamous haunt of celebrities'. Its snooker room, where apparently members would occasionally take drugs, was the scene of a furious showdown between actress Patsy Kensit and her then boyfriend, Liam Gallagher. Snooker balls as well as glasses were thrown, and Gallagher allegedly trashed not just the table but the room itself.

Past or present members are said to include Stephen Fry, Melvyn Bragg, Matt LeBlanc, Lily Allen and Bono (who once brought President Clinton here as a guest). Other visitors have included Freddie Mercury and Liza Minnelli.

Besides its celebrity membership, the club has a unique collection of art, some donated by famous artists in return for membership, such as Tracey Emin, and Damien Hirst. Membership is said to cost £695 a year, but before you get too interested, there's currently a waiting list of 4,000 – and the criteria for membership are still said to be 'elusive'.

And its unusual name? Apparently, it was a result of Groucho Marx saying that he wouldn't join any club that would have him as a member.

At the bottom of Dean Street is Old Compton Street, which we are going to cross over to continue down Dean Street, but before you do, turn to the right for just a few yards to see two more Soho institutions. First is the amazing **Algerian Coffee Stores**, which dates back to 1887 (and still looks like it). According to a blog post on the shop's website, the business was established by "an Algerian gentleman called Mr Hassan ... then sold in 1928 to a Belgian man called Mr Boerman." It's been run by an Anglo-Italian family since 1946.

Although you can purchase a simple latte to take away, the shop specialises in coffees and teas that you'll brew at home, as well as a wide variety of equipment and accessories. They offer over 80 different coffees and 120 teas.

Next door is the **Admiral Duncan**, for many years one of Soho's premier gay pubs. It was here that on 30th April 1999 a nail bomb, planted by a neo-Nazi, exploded and killed three people and injured seventy-nine.

Andrea Dykes, who was 27 and pregnant, was visiting the pub with husband Julian, friend Nicholas Moore and her husband's best man John Light. Andrea, Nik and John were killed in the attack. Julian suffered severe burns and had to undergo surgery because nails were lodged in his lungs.

The attack on the Admiral Duncan was the third bombing in a two-week period targeting minority communities in London. A fortnight before, another nail bomb, this time aimed at the city's black community had exploded in Brixton, whilst a week or so later another exploded in Brick Lane in East London, aimed at the Bangladeshi community. All three bombs were the work of a 22-year-old self-confessed racist and homophobe David Copeland, who at his trial was said to have been a neo-Nazi and obsessed with Hitler and bombs. He was diagnosed by doctors as having paranoid schizophrenia, found guilty and given six concurrent life sentences, which he is still serving in Broadmoor Hospital.

A little further along the street, No. 50 was once the 2i's Coffee Bar but there's nothing now to see other than a plaque on the wall. The café opened in 1950 and was said to have played a major role in the development of British skiffle and later rock 'n' roll. In 1957 the BBC's 'Six-Five Special' was broadcast from here, compered by Tommy Steele; it launched the career of Adam Faith. Other artists to have performed here include Wee Willie Harris, Joe Brown, Screaming Lord Sutch, Jet Harris and Hank Marvin. It closed in 1970.

The street was built between 1677 and 1683, one of the earliest to be developed in this part of Soho. Named after Henry Compton, later the Bishop of London, it was originally just Compton Street, with the 'Old' being added in the 1820s.

Many of the houses were built with shops or workshops on the ground floor and living accommodation above. The street, together with several of those that lead off it, was very popular with immigrants, or as they were often described, 'exiles', escaping both religious and political suppression, often from France.

It became the home of many radicals, artists, composers and philosophers and as a result it soon had a 'bohemian' atmosphere. That remained the case for many years, with the area later becoming popular with an assortment of communists, existentialists and members of the 'beat generation' (later better known as 'beatniks'). Soho also became the centre of the rapidly growing jazz movement, which later led to it becoming the centre of the rhythm and blues, rock, pop and other later music genres.

I'd go so far as to say that for some years the area has attracted a more diverse community than anywhere else in London. It became a centre of London's night life – and also its 'red light' district. After regulations were brought in during the 1980s to regulate this, Soho then began to become the 'gay centre' of London, with Old Compton Street being a focal point for London's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Most weekends this area of Soho is usually packed with people of all ages, nationalities and sexualities enjoying its many bars and restaurants.

Cross Old Compton Street and carry down Dean Street.

On your left is the **French House**, an establishment that has been in existence since at least 1828 and was originally called the York Minster. It is said that there's been some kind of drinking den on this site since the 16th century. One of its 'claims to fame' is that it allegedly sells more Ricard than anywhere else in Britain – and until recently only served beer in half pints. (That changed with Covid, when pints began to be sold, to reduce the number of trips to the bar.) After the fall of France in the Second World War, General de Gaulle, who became the leader of the Free French Forces, moved to London and spent some time in the pub. Here he held meetings with other members, and it is said to be where he also wrote his famous speech 'À tous les Français', aimed at rallying the French people 'not to give up'.

From 1891 the York Minster had a German landlord called Christian Schmitt. He left just before the outbreak of the First World War (or was deported shortly after, or had already died, depending on which story you believe), and from 1914 the pub was run by Victor and then Gaston Berlemont, father and son, for the next 75 years. The Berlemonts (who were Belgian) endowed the pub with a Gallic style that appealed to the significant number of French émigrés living nearby. The York Minster was rebuilt in rebuilt in 1936–7.

There's a story that the name was formally changed to The French House after the Minster in York was badly damaged by fire in 1984 but in fact the renaming took place in 1981. (Some versions of the story even suggest it was this pub that burned down and was then rebuilt and renamed, which just goes to show how far the truth can get twisted.) A few cantankerous regulars who had always referred to the pub as 'the French' started calling it 'the York Minster' after what they deemed the "absurd" change.

It was for years a popular place for writers. This is where the Irish author and poet Brendan Behan, wrote large sections of 'The Quare Fellow'. Dylan Thomas supposedly once left the manuscript of 'Under Milk Wood', the radio play he was working on, under a chair. A BBC producer later retrieved it.

And I must add that after the fire that badly damaged the York Minster, donations towards its restoration fund began to be received by the pub from people who were clearly confused. After forwarding them on, the pub discovered that deliveries of wine, intended for the pub, were being sent to the cathedral!

Take the first left into **Romilly Street**, continue across Frith Street, then on the left you'll pass the **Kettner's Townhouse**. It was opened here in 1867 by Auguste Kettner, was was chef to Napoleon III.

Kettner's had an all-day brasserie, cocktail and champagne bar, seven private dining rooms and thirty-three bedrooms and suites. One of the reasons for its past popularity was its fixed price menu and part of Kettner's appeal was that the food wasn't expensive. In 2016 the Grade II listed building was bought by the ever-growing Soho House group and became 'members only' except for the champagne bar. In 2023 the restaurant reopened to the public. It is apparently no longer a French brasserie, but now offers seasonal British food 'with a Mediterranean accent'.

Originally a series of four Georgian townhouses, Kettner's opened as a restaurant in 1867. It was renowned for hosting risqué parties and was popular with colourful characters of the late 19th century and a little later (though I'm sure not for risqué parties) Sir Winston Churchill, Agatha Christie, Bing Crosby and, even later, Margaret Thatcher.

Kettner's was also a hotel with thirty-three bedrooms and suites, one of which was used by Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) to have his 'liaisons' with Lillie Langtry when she was performing in a nearby theatre. It is also claimed that Oscar Wilde went there 'for illicit assignations'.

I like the quote alleged to have been made by the broadcaster Kirsty Young whilst being shown around by her partner Nick Jones, owner of the Soho House, when they bought it – "This is definitely the sort of place you'll take people you want to sleep with rather than people you work

with." Elsewhere I've read that, "its interior, with its champagne bar's mosaic floors and its buff-grey leather stool upholstery and upstairs boudoirs, certainly makes it resemble the right sort of place for affairs: extramarital affairs, affairs of the heart, affairs to remember, the settling of big-business financial affairs, et cetera".

Take the next left up **Greek Street** (the **appendix** has a brief history of the street), where we immediately see two more Soho institutions. The first is on the corner, the Grade II listed **Coach & Horses** pub. There's been a pub here since the early 1700s but the building we see today dates back to 1889, when it became the Coach & Horses. It became a 'watering hole' of many artists, writers and Soho personalities including the Beatles, George Melly, Keith Waterhouse, Jeffrey Bernard, Francis Bacon to name a few. Regular readers of the satirical magazine Private Eye might remember this was where its journalists, together with various contributors, would meet every Friday lunchtime for, as they described it, 'an always very boozy editorial board meeting'. There's even a Private Eye dining room.

The pub was 'infamous' for its host – Norman Balon – who was said to have been the 'rudest landlord in London'. He had started working here in 1943 and continued for just over sixty years, until his retirement in 2006.

Next door is **Maison Bertaux**, which was founded here in 1871 by a former Communard¹ who had fled from Paris during those troubled times and brought with him a collection of recipes. Maison Bertaux was later run by the Vignaud family for several generations until present proprietress Michele Wade bought the shop in 1988. Past customers have included Virginia Woolf, Alexander McQueen and even Karl Marx. It has its own bakery on the upper floors where each day fresh artisan croissants and patisseries are baked.

Immediately beyond Maison Bertaux is a relatively new addition to the street – **The Wands & Wizard Exploratorium** – selling ... well, I'll leave that to your imagination, but its narrow shopfront belies the fact that it stretches over five floors and if you have children, then you may want to look at its excellent website.

And finally on the corner is yet another pub – **The Three Greyhounds**. The building is around a century old but its mock-Tudor frontage makes it appear much older. There has been a 'beer house' here since at least the 1840s, and probably longer. It's named after the dogs that hunted hares here when Soho was open fields.

Just before you **turn left into Old Compton Street** and immediately before the **Café Bohème**, which wraps around the corner, is a rather ordinary looking door. However, ordinary it is not, as this is the entrance to the astonishingly successful private members' club for top media types and other celebrities – **Soho House**. There are now over thirty Soho Houses across the world, besides a number of other 'Soho venues', including nine Soho Works, catering for those who don't necessarily have a permanent office or studio, and the Soho Farm that's set in 100 acres of Cotswold countryside.

But even if you can afford the membership fee, becoming a member is certainly not easy – the current waiting list (though not just for this particular venue) is said to exceed 50,000. Membership criteria are said to prize "creativity above net worth and job titles and moral values above financial success."

¹ A Communard was someone who took part in the revolutionary Commune of Paris around the time of the Franco-Prussian War.

A few years ago when I was working, I was entertained for lunch at the original Soho House here in Greek Street by two BBC commissioning editors, and whilst it actually seemed rather cramped and certainly informal, it was interesting to see several 'household media personalities' sitting quietly at the bar enjoying a drink without being bothered by anyone.

Having started his career as a management trainee with Trust House Forte, Nick Jones launched the Soho House group in 1995. He already owned the Café Bohème on the corner of Greek Street and Old Compton Street and, when he was offered the three floors above, which ran across what had been three town houses, he decided to open it into a members' club for local artists and actors who'd become the café's regulars.

Three years later he took over Babington House, a Grade I listed Georgian manor house set in 18 acres in Somerset, as a home away from home in the countryside.

There are now around thirty Soho Houses across ten countries with over 120,000 members.

He's also opened nine 'Soho Works' across London, New York and Los Angeles that provide places for members to work and hold meetings. The 'empire' also includes the Soho Farmhouse, which is spread across 100 acres of Cotswold countryside, as well as public restaurants, cinemas and spas. The group is valued at over £2 billion, though having now sold around 80% of the shares, Nick is no longer the majority shareholder.

Nick is dyslexic and clearly a good role model for children who also are, for whilst being asked about it in an interview he said, "I didn't get very good exams. I think I retook my English O Level about 12 times. I think they only ended up giving it to me because they couldn't bear the thought of reading one more of my appalling essays. The issue was, if you can't spell, and you end up trying to only use words that you can spell, then it doesn't make a very good essay. I left school at 17 as a result, because my Careers Master said, "It doesn't look like you've got much hope anywhere apart from catering. And 35 years ago... catering wasn't in a very good state. That said, I loved food, I loved making people have a good time, and you don't need to know how to spell when you're serving tables and cleaning bedrooms."

When he was asked whether being dyslexic was an issue when setting up Soho House, he said, "Actually it was a help, because I was looking at things differently and creating things differently. I can walk into a building and figure out how it works best. And also, I was more determined, since I was issued, at an early age, with a bit of a handicap. So you fight harder."

Turn left back into **Old Compton Street**, passing on the right the **Prince Edward Theatre**, where for a number of years the musical Mamma Mia, based on the songs of Abba, was based. The theatre opened in 1930 – one of four West End theatres that opened that year. Its name has changed several times and, in its time, it has been a cinema as well as a theatre.

Take the next right up Frith Street, (named after Richard Frith, who was described as a 'bricklayer' and who developed Soho Square, which we see shortly). At one time it was said that nearly half the houses in Frith Street – and in some adjoining streets – were lodging houses, where the owners took in paying guests to help pay the rent and cover other costs.

You immediately see two more Soho institutions which almost face each other.

The first, **Bar Italia**, is on the right and has been here since 1949. It is open from 7am until 3am – so closing for just four hours a day. Not surprisingly, it has always attracted the 'night owls' –

people leaving the late-night clubs in the area, neighbourhood workers coming off late shifts, and there's often a couple of police or ambulance workers inside taking a coffee break.

Bar Italia was opened in 1949 by Lou and Caterina Polledri from Italy. Their first café in London opened a few years earlier in Covent Garden, but then they saw the opportunity in Soho and opened there. In those days Soho had a sizeable Italian community. Lou wanted somewhere that would not only make good coffee (something very hard to find in London in those days) but also act as a sort of 'social centre' for fellow Italians, particularly those working as waiters in Soho restaurants, where they could meet between shifts. It was even a place where Italian waiters who were looking for work would come to get help from others. After the Second World War it was also a place where Italians who had lost family members would come to find out what had happened to them.

The bar even has a song dedicated to it ... Pulp's 'Bar Italia' on the Different Class album – "... that's what you get from clubbing it / You can't go home and go to bed because it hasn't worn off yet / And now its morning there's only one place we can go / It's around the corner in Soho, where the other broken people go."

As you'll see from the blue plaque, No. 22 is also notable as the place where Scottish inventor John Logie Baird gave what is widely regarded as the world's first public demonstration of television. I've written more about this in the **appendix**, and added some extracts from a newspaper account published two days after the historic event took place.

Opposite on the left is the world-famous **Ronnie Scott's club**.

Ronnie Scott was a promising tenor saxophonist who in 1947 'blew his savings' on trip to New York to see for himself what the jazz scene there was all about. He was so impressed by what he saw, heard and experienced there that he eventually opened his own club, at first in Gerrard Street (which we saw earlier in the walk) and later here in Frith Street.

Today it's one of the best-known jazz clubs in the world and offers a packed schedule – there's something happening every night at Ronnie Scott's, which also has an upstairs bar in the style of a 1950s speakeasy. The club draws a mixed crowd, attracting everyone from older jazz fans to tourists looking to enjoy something 'typically Soho'.

Because of union restrictions in the mid-20th century, it was very difficult for American musicians to play in Britain, so jazz enthusiasts had to make do with listening to the top artists on imported records, which in those days were very expensive.

Ronnie Scott took a fortnight's holiday in America and visited as many jazz venues as he could. He was massively impressed by what he saw and fell in love with American jazz music, later visiting several more times. Together with his friend Pete King, also a saxophonist, they decided to open something similar in London, and their first venue was in Gerrard Street (which we passed earlier in the walk), a small basement where local musicians could come together and 'jam'.

A blue plaque now marks the site of Ronnie's original club at 39 Gerrard Street, now the home of Leong's Legend, a Taiwanese restaurant.

Eventually the ban on American musicians performing in Britain began to be lifted and some of their top jazz artistes began to come and play at Ronnie Scott's. It wasn't long before the premises in Gerrard Street became too small, and in 1965 the new club opened in Frith Street.

The move led to the club becoming an international success, and the club still attracts the top jazz artists, many of whom shun the larger venues in London, preferring the more intimate environment of Ronnie Scott's. Some of the most iconic performers of the 20th century have played here, such as Count Basie, Sarah Vaughan, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Amy Winehouse, Tubby Hayes, Chet Baker, and Prince. And it was at Ronnie Scott's that Jimi Hendrix played the final performance of his life. It was also where The Who first performed their rock opera, 'Tommy'.

Ronnie was awarded an OBE for his services to music and, after several years of ill health, died in 1996. However, his memory more than lives on his legendary club.

A few doors along on the left is one of my favourite late-night haunts – **The Arts Club**. It's nothing special, just a bar and seating/dance area, but the prices are sensible and you normally don't need to be a member to get in.

Opposite, on the right-hand side, **No. 20 Frith Street** is of particular importance, though it doesn't look it today. The first house on this site would probably have been built in the 17th century and it was replaced around 1725. The house was modified in the mid-19th century and it was entirely rebuilt in 1929–30 as the rear wing of what's now the Prince Edward Theatre, with dressing rooms and a stage door (as the sign above the door indicates, it was then called the 'Casino Theatre').

Prior to its theatrical reconstruction the house had an interesting history, and its occupants included the Soho Club for Working Girls, which was established here in 1880 to improve the lives of young women workers. It was home to a cinema in the early 1910s and a nightclub in the late 1920. I've written a little more about the building's past in the **appendix**.

No. 20's greatest claim to fame is that **Wolfgang Mozart** lodged with his father and sister in the house that stood on this site in 1764–5, whilst on a grand tour of Europe. The house was at that time owned by Thomas Williamson, a maker of corsets and stays. Wolfgang celebrated his ninth birthday while he was there (and it was the year he wrote his first symphony, though he had been composing since the age of five).

In 1764, when he was just eight years old, Wolfgang Mozart lodged in Frith Street with his father Leopold Mozart and his elder sister Maria Anna, whilst undertaking a musical tour of Europe. Prior to their arrival here, the Mozarts had been staying in what was then semi-rural Belgravia, while Leopold recovered from a minor illness.

The Mozart family were having financial difficulties throughout much of this period, so Leopold encouraged people to come along and hear his gifted children play the piano (and of course pay for the privilege). In particular, he promoted the young Wolfgang Mozart's ability to play anything at sight. Wolfgang gave daily public recitals, and it was here that he published one of his early violin sonatas.

The site of the Frith Street house is marked with a blue plaque – but it's not an official English Heritage plaque, though it looks like one at first glance. It was installed here in 1991 by the Royal Musical Association. Mozart's official London plaque (which is sepia brown) is on the house in Belgravia.

And a piece of useless information: Wolfgang was baptised as Joannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart – I bet you didn't know that either (nor did I until I just looked it up).

Dating from the 1730s, **No. 15** is one of the oldest houses in Frith Street, with a rare 'Gothick-style' shop front that was inserted in 1816. This Grade II* listed building is now occupied by Negroni's. I love this little bar/restaurant. It's narrow, but extends back a fair way. They have an excellent menu that includes some of Italy's best dishes – I can personally recommend their grilled octopus. (It's one of those menus where I know I could choose and enjoy any dish.)

Halfway up **Frith Street** we're going to take the next right into the short **Bateman Street**. However, before we do, notice the **Dog and Duck** pub on the left-hand corner. It was built in 1897 and replaced an earlier pub that had opened here in 1734. The landscape painter John Constable was a regular here (he lived in Frith Street). It was a favourite haunt of George Orwell's in the 1940s and this was where he celebrated 'Animal Farm' being chosen as 'Book of the Month' in an American literary magazine. More recently, Madonna has been seen enjoying a drink here. The Dog and Duck is on the Campaign for Real Ale's national inventory of historic pub interiors.

At the end of **Bateman Street** we're going to turn left into Greek Street. But before you do, I'll first draw your attention to **L'Escargot Restaurant**, which is just a few yards down to the right at No. 48 and which has been here since 1927. The townhouse it occupies was built in 1741 and was originally the private residence of the Duke of Portland. The restaurant has maintained its elegant style and has paintings on the walls by Andy Warhol, Picasso and Joan Miró.

In 1896 Georges Gaudin established a restaurant at 19 Greek Street called Le Bienvenu. He became famous for his snails – it was said to be the first restaurant in England to serve them.

In 1927 he moved to larger premises at 48 Greek Street, and his customers implored him to rename his restaurant after his most popular dish. He agreed and the new restaurant was called L'Escargot Bienvenu. He had a small snail farm in the basement, which not surprisingly became quite a talking point.

Outside the restaurant there is still an original plaster bust of Monsieur Gaudin 'riding a snail', with the motto 'slow and sure'.

After his retirement his son Alex ran the restaurant. Subsequent owners have included husband-and-wife Nick Lander and Jancis Robinson (who shortened the name from L'Escargot Bienvenu to L'Escargot), and then Jimmy Lahoud with the chef Marco Pierre White.

In February 2014 L'Escargot was acquired by Brian Clivaz (of the Arts Club and other noted establishments) and Laurence Isaacson (co-founder of Chez Gérard) and a group of their friends.

The restaurant describes the food as being – and I quote – "typical French cooking in the Parisian grand brasserie style. It features the finest French delicacies, including lobster bisque, steak tartare, steak frites and duck confit – not forgetting the world-famous escargots, with iconic garlic butter. The tournedos Rossini is legendary, as is the pistachio soufflé."

And another little mention – close by L'Escargot, at number 47, stood the home of Giacomo Casanova, author and adventurer, but best known for his romantic endeavours.

Directly opposite you on the other side of Greek Street there are three interesting houses at 12–14. You can still see their original names – Portland House, Wedgwood Mews and the St James's and Soho Club, together with a new name that's been added: Ilona Rose House. The

buildings have recently been renovated as part of a massive 300,000 square foot redevelopment that's been taking place behind them. It extends back as far back as Charing Cross Road and occupies the site of the iconic Foyles Bookshop on Charing Cross Road. (Foyles had been on the site since the 1920s, but fortunately hasn't closed – just moved to a new site nearby). The redevelopment is being undertaken by Soho Estates, once the property empire of Paul Raymond (see the **appendix** for some background on him), and subsequently inherited by his granddaughters, India Rose James and Fawn Ilona James – hence the name on the building, which incorporates their middle names.

Raymond's granddaughters are only in their 30s at the time of writing. (Perhaps it's hardly surprisingly they've now been nicknamed the 'Queens of Soho'). Their company owns several hundred prime site properties in Soho and this is one of their biggest redevelopments so far.

I understand the doorway in Ilona Rose House will be an additional entrance, not only to the main building, but also to a 2,200 square foot 'house party venue' within the building, called the Little Scarlet Door. The company behind the venture already have several "clubhouses with different coloured doors" elsewhere in London.

The design and scale of the enormous Ilona Rose House development have been controversial. Many people opposed its construction, and there were hopes that the Mayor of London would heed demands for an investigation into why planning permission was granted by Westminster Council. However, the mayor chose not to intervene.

It has certainly attracted a degree of criticism. An article in the Guardian (15 November 2020) said: "The new building's inelegance is partly a matter of scale, for as with almost every new commercial building its volume has been ramped up to maximise valuable floorspace. It is also a matter of detail – those rose patterns look mechanical and dead, and conspicuous joints between the panels give it an unsubstantial, just-bolted-together feel."

The developers of course describe the scheme more favourably, as "office led with 8 floors of prime Soho working space with large garden terraces dedicated to every floor. A large portion of the site comprises new public realm space with a new café and restaurant lined mews linking Manette Street to Greek Street. This mews, known as James Court, will provide both al fresco dining and a focal point for visitors to dwell on this busy route into Soho. It will also provide an entrance to 3 levels of extensive subterranean creative office and post-production space, 30,000 square feet of which have been reserved by Warner Bros for their London post-production facility."

Portland House, which occupied both 12 and 13, was the largest house in the street. It was so named because in 1698 the first Earl of Portland had been granted the freehold of most of what was then countryside and known as the Soho Fields by the King.

Over the years the building has been occupied by a variety of distinguished individuals and businesses, the most prominent being Josiah Wedgwood, of pottery fame. He used the premises for twenty years from 1774 as his firm's London warehouses and showrooms, which extended through to Manette Street. This was where he displayed the company's grandest dinner service, which was made for the Empress Catherine of Russia and which was shown to members of the 'world's high fashion'. It was displayed over five rooms on two floors of the house. The house's late 17th-century carcass remains – but the interior has been entirely altered.

The **St James's and Soho Club** was established in 1864 and was one of the earliest working men's clubs in London. Until recently it was a graphic design and animation studio.

At No. 7 you'll see an impressive hanging sign for the Pillars of Hercules. The original pub opened here in 1714 (though it was then called 'The Hercules Pillars'). Like a few buildings around here, the pub is mentioned in Charles Dickens's 'A Tale of Two Cities' and it has had many literary connections, being popular with writers as diverse as Casanova, Thomas de Quincey, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Martin Amis and Clive James. Indeed, Clive James named his book of literary criticism 'At the Pillars of Hercules', saying it was because most of the pieces it contained were either commissioned, written or delivered here. There is also a connection with the poet Francis Thompson, which I've put in the **appendix**.

The Pillars of Hercules closed in 2018. It subsequently reopened as Bar Hercules, then became Jimi Loves Gloria and since June 2022 it's been a Simmons Bar.

Alongside the Pillars of Hercules is Manette Street, named after a character in 'A Tale of Two Cities', which I refer to shortly. It was called Rose Street until 1895. The street has recently been the scene of intensive and messy activity related to the construction of Ilona Rose House.

Number 2, almost at the top of Greek Street, was for many years a very well-known Hungarian Restaurant called the **Gay Hussar** (though, despite being in Soho, gay it was not). The Hussars were an elite part of the Hungarian army. It became the favoured haunt of many literary figures, such as TS Eliot, as well as with left-wing politicians – Aneurin Bevan, Barbara Castle, Michael Foot, Ian Mikado, Neil Kinnock, Gordon Brown all dined at the restaurant. After 65 years here the restaurant closed in 2018 and was replaced by one called 'Noble Rot' (a wine reference).

The last building on the right-hand side is the **House of St Barnabas**. Now Grade I listed and said to be one of the best-preserved mid-18th century houses in London, it was originally simply called No. 1 Greek Street. Built in the 1740s for Richard Beckford, a wealthy sugar plantation owner, it has since had a varied history – as a private home until 1811, then as the offices of the Westminster Commissioners of Sewers, and from 1862 as the 'House of Charity'. However, the house has now become a private members' club, although it is run as a social enterprise and is non-profit making.

The house provided the inspiration for the imagined lodgings of Dr Manette and his daughter Lucy in Charles Dickens's 'A Tale of Two Cities'.

It was described by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner as one of the "best preserved mid-18th century houses in London, and a fine example of a Georgian interior." There were concerns about the effects on the house of the massive Crossrail development that's recently been built beneath London (and is now known as the Elizabeth line). Its construction involved extensive tunnelling very close to the house, and to ensure no damage was done, special monitoring devices were installed both inside and outside of the house.

The house was built in 1746 as a home for James Beckford, whose vast wealth came from his Jamaica sugar plantations. It remained a residential property until 1811, when it was let to the Westminster Commissioners of Sewers, later the Metropolitan Board of Works. This was then the office of Sir Joseph Bazalgette, who created the amazing network of sewers beneath the streets of London.

After they moved out, the house was purchased by the House of Charity, which had been formed in 1846 with the aim of offering practical Christianity. (One of its early members was the Liberal

politician William Gladstone, who later became Prime Minister). Here the charity gave shelter to families crippled by debt and poverty. In return they were expected to attend church services and a chapel was built at the rear of the building, which is still there.

The House of Charity described itself as one of the few institutions in London where men, women and children of all walks of life, were able to “apply for aid without a loss of self-respect.” This included “all who found themselves in a condition of friendlessness and destitution that is not the manifest result of idleness or vice.”

Over time the charity broadened its functions and helped the homeless in many different ways: people who were emigrating to Australia and were awaiting the long sea journey, those who had to come to London for surgery in hospitals, servants who had lost their jobs, teachers between positions and émigrés from Russia and the Balkans.

At the outbreak of the Second World War the nuns moved out of London and the Air Training Corps moved in. The building subsequently suffered bomb damage. After the war the building was renamed House of St Barnabas and opened as a women’s hostel, originally helping ex-servicewomen. The hostel had many supporters and friends, among them Joyce Grenfell, the comic actress, who was a constant visitor and fundraiser. The house closed as a women’s hostel in 2006 and all the residents were rehoused.

Another major change took place in 2013 when the House of St Barnabas became a ‘not for profit’ members’ club, complete with a swish bar, a changing art collection and several ornately decorated rooms for the use of members. However, it describes itself as a member’s club with a difference, as its key aim is to help people to break the cycle of homelessness and get back into employment.

It offers a three-month employment preparation programme, where people can learn hospitality, catering and office skills within the club. Along with work experience, participants benefit from personal development support, such as one-on-one coaching. Graduates from the programme are then offered structured support for a further 12 months and are paired with a member for mentorship and guidance.

I thought I’d include a quote from someone who has benefited from the charity, which is on their website: “When I first got here, I had nothing. When you’re homeless, it’s hard to scabble around and you’re always hungry, living off a couple of pounds to buy food that just about keeps you alive. Spending time at the Academy helped me re-establish some structure and build my self-worth. Now I feel like I’m able to contribute. It was thanks to the people here that I found my job. The work of the Employment Academy is invaluable – there’s nowhere else quite like this.”

In keeping with its charitable status, a ‘penny chute’ was attached to the house’s railings many years ago to enable passers-by to make a contribution. You can see it as you walk past the corner. However, I’m sure they’d more than appreciate a pound coin in the chute today rather than a penny!

At the top, Greek Street leads into **Soho Square**.

The square was developed around 1680. Initially it was a very fashionable place to live, and a description written in 1720 said the square “hath very good buildings on all sides, especially the East and South, which are well inhabited by Nobility and Gentry”. Fashionable squares such as this were built with piped water, sewerage and paved streets, all of which added to their attraction in a city in which these things were exceedingly rare. Soho’s cosmopolitan character is

reflected in the square's two churches. The French Protestant Church is a reminder of the time when nearly half of Soho's population was Huguenot, while St Patrick's has served the area's Irish and Italian Catholic communities.

Soho Square was originally called Frith Square, after the bricklayer who was responsible for much of the early building, but was soon renamed King Square in honour of the reigning monarch, Charles II (whose statue is in the square's gardens).

Much of the south side of the square was taken up by Monmouth House, which had been intended for Charles II's illegitimate son the Duke of Monmouth but because he was executed shortly afterwards he wasn't in residence for very long.

On the east side, the Countess of Carlisle had a large residence built, not surprisingly named Carlisle House. In 1760 her house was occupied by Theresa Cornelys, one of Soho's most colourful characters. Born in Venice and a highly acclaimed Venetian opera singer, she was also a mistress of Casanova, (with whom she had a child). Here she entertained London's 'high society' with extravagant concerts, parties and promenades for nearly twenty years. She ended up running a music hall and eventually became bankrupt. St Patrick's Church was later built on the site.

By the 1770s the wealthier and more fashionable were moving west to newly developed Mayfair and these grand houses began to be used by diplomats and envoys from places including Venice, Naples, Spain, Sweden, France and Russia.

Then professionals such as lawyers, architects and doctors began moving in. The character of the square changed further in 1840 when the food company Crosse & Blackwell opened their head office there. Around the same time, several small hospitals opened, with the Frith Street Hospital for Women not closing until 1989 – you can still see the sign on the side of the building facing the square. However, today most of the buildings around the square are occupied by businesses, including Number 1, which is the UK headquarters of MPL Communications, owned by Paul McCartney.

Soho Square's garden offers a welcome break from the hustle and bustle of the surrounding streets. It was created when the square was first developed, and early residents paid ten shillings a year towards its upkeep. The unusual timbered structure in the centre was built in 1925 to hide the electricity sub-station installed beneath. It is now used as a store for the gardeners' tools. Behind it is a statue of Charles II, which had been put into the square when it was first developed (the square was known then as King – or King's – Square). At that time it stood atop a high pedestal in the basin of a fountain, which eventually fell into such a poor state that it was sold and ended up WS Gilbert's (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame) lush back garden in far north-west London. Following his widow's death in 1936, the statue was returned to Soho Square in accordance with the terms of her will.

In the 1790s, a number of new trees and shrubs were planted in the garden, which are believed to have been chosen by the botanist Sir Joseph Banks; he had resided at number 32 Soho Square from 1777 until his death in 1820.

The quaint wooden structure in the centre of the square, styled like an octagonal market cross building, was built in 1925 to disguise the entrance to the below-ground Charing Cross Electricity Company's sub-station. The sub-station is no longer there, and its space under the square, together with a network of tunnels which were dug during the Second World War, were

used as underground air raid shelters. Presumably the tunnels are still there, though the wooden building is now simply a tool shed.

As you walk into the square from Greek Street keep to the right-hand side where you see **St Patrick's Church**, built in 1893 for the many Irish and other Catholics who lived nearby. It was built in the Italianate style on the site of a smaller church that was one of the first Roman Catholic churches to be built after the Catholic Relief Acts of the 1790s. The inscription above the entrance to the church reads, 'UT CHRISTIANI ITA ET ROMANI SITIS', which means 'Be ye Christians as those of the Roman Church', which is a quotation from the writings of St Patrick. The church was refurbished in 2010–11, and there's an excellent article in The Guardian about it.

From the church cross over and enter the garden through the gate in the railings. Walk to the middle, where you'll see quaint gardener's hut mentioned above.

If you turn around and look to the buildings on the south of the square, you'll see high up on one of the building a sign for the Frith Street Women's Hospital that opened here in 1842.

Turn right, pass the statue of Charles II, and leave by the gate at the top of the garden – and over on your left is the **French Protestant Church**, which was built in 1893 – the same year as St Patrick's. Services are still conducted here in the French language.

As I have explained earlier in the walk, Calvinist Protestants (known as Huguenots) had fled religious persecution by Catholics in France from the mid-16th century onwards. Many escaped to England, often settling in London. Their first church was established in Austin Friars, in the City of London, but they soon moved to the chapel of St Anthony's Hospital in nearby Threadneedle Street. This burnt down in the Great Fire and was afterwards rebuilt. However, that building was demolished in 1841 to make way for the approaches to the new Royal Exchange, and (after three interim relocations) a new church was built here in 1891–3.

It was designed by Sir Aston Webb, who is well known for the principal façade of Buckingham Palace and the main building of the Victorian & Albert Museum in South Kensington. I will just point out the sculpture over the doorway. It was erected here in 1950 to mark the 400th anniversary of the Royal Charter, which was granted by King Edward VI and gave freedom of worship in England to Protestants who had fled France. The carving shows Huguenots at work, spinning and weaving, which was one of the great skills they brought to England.

We leave the square at the top, walking through the short Soho Street, where English devotees of the Lord Krishna established a Radha Krishna Temple in 1977. Located on the left side, at No.10, it's been described as a "spiritual oasis for Londoners and visitors from all over the world." In addition, there's a cultural centre, theatre and a vegetarian restaurant. The interior of the building has been remodelled into a replica of an ancient Vedic temple and I quote here from the back2godhead.com website, which says that "a leading architect commented, 'This is the first time I've seen an interior recreate with such a degree of authenticity one of the great art forms of the ancient world.'"

The top of Soho Street leads brings you out into **Oxford Street**.

For **Tottenham Court Road tube station**, turn to the right – it's less than five minutes' walk. The station is on the Central and Northern lines and the Elizabeth line.

Oxford Circus, where we started, is a 15-minute walk to the left. There are also a number of bus routes close by.

APPENDIX TO THE SOHO WALK

SOHO'S HISTORY

In the Middle Ages this was just open countryside and farmland, owned, for some strange historical reason, by the Abbot and Convent of Abingdon and the Hospital of Burton St Lazar in Leicestershire. The Dissolution of the Monasteries meant this land was taken by King Henry VIII to be used as hunting grounds for his Palace in Whitehall. Indeed, the name 'Soho' was an old hunting cry. The name must have passed into common usage by the 17th century as a survey carried out in 1650 mentions a 'highway leading from Charing Cross towards So Hoe'. Parts of the land were later sold, leased or granted to various Earls, including those of Salisbury, Newport, Portland and Leicester.

The area began to be developed by the wealthy landowners in the mid-17th century, not long after the Great Fire of London which had destroyed two-thirds of the city and left almost 100,000 people homeless. Indeed, much of Soho was built in the years between 1666 and 1740. There are still a number of early 18th century houses, as well as some that were built in the mid to late 18th century in Soho today.

The first residents were the wealthy aristocratic gentry who built their rather grand houses in Golden Square and Soho Square. Around the same time, less expensive houses were being built elsewhere in Soho for the 'lower classes', particularly for tradesmen, artisans and shopkeepers, some with their workshops, storerooms or shops on the ground floor with living accommodation above. Many were built by different property speculators and builders, often with sub-standard workmanship and materials. Within a few decades they were in poor condition.

However, the wealthy and aristocratic didn't stay long; unhappy with the sort of 'common people' coming into the area. They began moving slightly west into the posher Mayfair, just across Regent Street, which was built in 1823, dividing it from Soho. Some of the houses they left were demolished with smaller ones built in their place, whilst others were sub-divided into smaller houses and apartments. This was already happening as early as the late 1700s, but the last straw would have been the major outbreaks of cholera in Soho in 1850. At the same time, many more immigrants, needing cheap accommodation that the area offered, began moving in.

Soho and immigration

The biggest change in Soho was as a result of immigration. London has always been a safe haven for immigrants fleeing political, religious and economic turmoil and there was certainly plenty of that going on in Europe around this time. Initially in countries such as Greece, where many came following the Ottoman invasion of their homeland in the 1670s.

Soon after, large numbers of Huguenots began arriving from France, Holland and what we term today the 'Low Countries'. They were fleeing religious persecution by Catholics who were suppressing the Protestant religion. They settled in many parts of London, such as Spitalfields and Islington, but Soho became particularly popular. Most were skilled artists and artisans who set up businesses such as lacemaking, making gloves, jewellery, shoes and bookbinding, etc. They were attracted to Soho because of the type of accommodation that was available, moving into the houses in the eastern area of Soho, such as Dean, Frith, Wardour and Greek streets, where as I've said, many were built with workshops as well as living accommodation. By 1711 the population of the parish of St. Anne's, which covered the Soho area, was slightly over eight thousand, of which between a quarter and a half were French. Indeed, there were so many

French people living in Soho at the time, that a commentator in 1720 wrote, “the abundance of French people, many whereof are voluntary exiles for the religion, live in these streets and lanes, following honest trades; and some Gentry of the same nation”. In 1740, another commentator wrote, “Many parts of this parish so greatly abound with French that it is an easy matter for a stranger to imagine himself in France”.

A few years later, due to political upheavals, failed revolutions and poverty in Europe, many more immigrants began arriving, this time from countries including Russia, Poland, Hungary and Germany, as well as many Italians, particularly from the north of that country. Again, some ended up living in Soho, attracted by the cheap rents and cosmopolitan atmosphere that it offered. However, it was hardly surprising that this led to overcrowding, one of the reasons the 1850 cholera epidemic affected so many people.

In John Galsworthy’s book ‘The Forsyte Saga’, set in the late 19th century, he described Soho as ... “untidy, full of Greeks, Ishmaelites, cats, Italians, tomatoes, restaurants, organs, colour stuffs, queer names ... it dwells remote from the British Body Politic”. This mix of different nationalities and cultures and its resulting colourful and cosmopolitan atmosphere resulted in it also becoming popular with writers and artists of all kinds, and on the walk we pass some of the pubs where many of them seemed to spend much of their time!

During the early to mid-20th century some of these immigrants began opening cafes and restaurants specialising in the cuisine of their homeland, which further emphasised Soho’s cosmopolitan and somewhat ‘bohemian’ atmosphere.

A research project called ‘Life and Labour in London’, which was undertaken by the social reformer Charles Booth in the late 1890s revealed that much of Soho was ‘populated by many foreigners, French chefs and jewellery men’. He went on to say that in the northern part of Soho (above Shaftesbury Avenue), houses were mixed – some comfortable, some poor. The census, carried out just twenty years later, revealed Wardour Street being home to many immigrants, mentioning in particular those from Russia, Italy and Switzerland. (I have to say I found the latter rather surprising).

Soho in the 20th century

As people moved away from Soho many of its buildings are now used by businesses. A typical example of this is Wardour Street. Soho has for a long time been known for being artistic, creative and with a very diverse population. That led to it becoming known for its entertainment (which I cover shortly). By the 1930s Wardour Street had a reputation for the number of music publishing companies based there, and it soon also became known for being the centre of Britain’s film industry, something we see, and I explain more about in the walk. More recently, Soho has also become the centre for the advertising industry, with many agencies making it their base.

Soho and the arts

Soho has long attracted the artistic community – many famous writers, poets, artists, composers and musicians have lived here over the years. The young 9-year-old Mozart lived here with his father and sister for several years. Hungarian composer Frank Liszt, the painters Canaletto, Constable and the ‘romantic’ Italian painter and adventurer Casanova. Poets and writers William Blake and Percy Shelley have lived here, along with revolutionaries such as Karl Marx.

Cinema

For many years Britain's film industry has been centred on Soho, particularly around Wardour Street, where many of the major cinema companies have had offices and post-production facilities. (Those of you who can remember the British Board of Film Classification certificate that used to be put up on screen before each and every film was shown in a cinema, may remember it showed its address as being 'Soho Square, London').

Music

Soho has been the centre of 'modern music' in the UK. From the 1950s onwards, this was the birthplace of British skiffle, jazz and blues. Indeed, Ronnie Scott's is still one of the country's premier jazz clubs, with live music virtually every night of the week.

Top bands were recording in local studios and performing in the local clubs. The Rolling Stones, Genesis, David Bowie all recorded some of their best-known albums in Soho.

Soho in the 1960s and 70s certainly was where it all 'happened'.

Fashion

Soho was where, in the 1950s and 60s, the teenage fashion scene for men kicked off. Carnaby Street in particular became the world centre of young men's – and shortly after – women's fashion. It was thanks to one man in particular, John Stephen, and his early mentor Bill Green, that in just five or so years, a very ordinary back street became famous, having major influences on the biggest stars of the day – everyone from Cliff Richard and Billy Fury through to the Rolling Stones, The Who and The Kinks (whose top ten hit 'Dedicated Follower of Fashion' was all about Carnaby Street and its young male clientele. I find it so fascinating that I've written a separate section below about it.)

Soho's nightlife

As far back as the early 18th century, Soho had started to become known for its cosmopolitan atmosphere and as a centre for entertainment. This began in the area around Leicester Square, but soon spread to other parts of Soho, leading to music halls, theatres, restaurants and numerous drinking establishments being opened.

As immigrants from various countries began opening restaurants in Soho, so more people were attracted to the area to eat. Sadly, many of the famous and colourful eating places have closed, but the area is still known for its great variety of places to dine. The same applies to its pubs and clubs. Whilst many have closed, there are still a number of pubs – some colourful, some seedy, some just eclectic – that date back to the 18th or 19th centuries and which have fascinating histories. Some have been patronised over the years by some of London's more famous and eccentric citizens. We see several of these (both famous pubs and I'm sure a few eccentric citizens) on the walk.

Soho and sex

As Soho became better known for its popular entertainment, some areas started to become, shall we say, more risqué. This led to the area also becoming known for sex, particularly prostitution. There were a number of areas known for this – Covent Garden was another – but unlike the others, Soho's relaxed attitude to such things led to it becoming known as London's

red-light district and a centre for 'all things sex'. Not only were there prostitutes 'on every corner', but there were a multitude of brothels and various other places of ill-repute.

This had grown after the end of the Second World War and became such a problem that in 1959 the Street Offences Act was passed, which made it illegal to 'loiter or solicit for purposes of prostitution'. However, all this did was to 'push the problem underground' and instead of being on street corners, the girls rented rooms by the hour, worked in what were loosely called 'massage parlours' or in the many clubs that quickly sprung up. 'Clip joints' advertising 'topless shows' were everywhere and with the criminal element soon becoming involved (including the Kray brothers along with many other gangs), customers were invariably 'ripped off'. Equally the girls were exploited and ripped off by their 'minders'. It became so bad that it was difficult to walk along some streets, particularly at night, without being accosted by the lines of 'touts' who'd stand outside the clubs trying to lure customers in.

By the 1970s the local authorities could no longer 'look the other way', so they and the police stepped in, and clamped down hard, with regular raids on the many sex venues.

Today, the sex business is now confined to clubs in just one or two back streets and even those are now far more strictly controlled than ever before. However, Soho has continued to be one of London's premier nightlife areas.

Soho and the LGBTQ+ community

Soho's diverse, artistic and cosmopolitan population has meant Soho has long been popular with the gay community. Oscar Wilde was certainly a regular visitor to bars and restaurants here, particularly Kettner's, which we pass on the walk.

It was after the local authorities had clamped down on the illegal sex activities in the 80s that Soho rapidly became more popular with the gay community, helped of course by the decriminalising of homosexual activity and the fast-changing public attitudes. Soho became the centre of what is called 'the pink pound', and now many famous gay bars can be found here, particularly in and around Old Compton Street, which has been at the heart of London's LGBTQ scene for decades.

THE STORY OF CARNABY STREET AND MEN'S FASHION

Part 1

The story of how Carnaby Street became inextricably linked with men's fashion (and later women's as well) began with a shop called 'Vince', and later one of his employees, John Stephen.

Vince was the brainchild of Bill Green, a photographer who specialised in homo-erotic portraits of the male physique. He worked under the name of Vince, at a time when homosexuality was still illegal. Green developed tiny pairs of bikini-style briefs for his models to wear, which he then began to sell to other gay men by mail order. They became so popular that he opened his shop in Newburgh Street. Besides selling other clothes from wholesalers, Green also continued to design them himself, which were produced by the many tailors in the surrounding streets. The clothes were described as 'leisure wear', with more than a hint of Italian and Continental style, far removed from the boring post-war suits that most men wore then. One of his inspirations came after a holiday in France in 1952 where he noticed the 'existentialist' look of clothes worn by young Parisian men - black sweaters and black jeans.

He was the first to introduce this look to British men, which he sold in his new shop. Besides the clothes inside the shop, his window displays were also regarded as quite shocking at the time, with mannequins dressed in briefs, or pink hipster trousers.

His choice of location for the shop was not accidental – in the 1950s, this part of Soho was the centre of the ‘gay world’. Marshall Street Public Baths – a popular place for gay men – was just around the corner. However, Vince’s clientele quickly expanded beyond the gay community. For the first time it was acceptable for heterosexual men to wear a style of clothing that had previously only been worn by homosexuals. It was also when leisure wear became chic – jeans and sweaters could be worn for an evening out.

His unconventional designs and unusual fabrics such as velvet and pre-faded denims, appealed to artists, actors and ‘bohemians’. People such as Peter Sellers, young model-soon-to-turn-actor Sean Connery, Pablo Picasso – even the king of Denmark – were customers. As was jazz musician George Melly (who joked: “I went into Vince’s to buy a new tie and they measured my inside leg.”)

Part 2 – John Stephen, the ‘£1 million mod’

The story now moves on to John Stephen, a young man from Glasgow, who opened the first men’s wear shop in Carnaby Street. He rapidly followed this by opening many others and became responsible for making Carnaby Street the centre of the ‘60s Swinging London. He was actually as revolutionary in men’s fashion as Mary Quant was in women’s but is now a rather forgotten name.

He had come to London at the age of 18 and, being interested in fashion, accepted a job at Moss Bros in Covent Garden. It was there he learned the art of tailoring and, as a salesman on the shop floor, earned a salary of £6 a week. Not being comfortable with the formal atmosphere of Moss Bros, he then realised the lack of shops selling modern clothes for the youth in London. He’d seen the huge growth in ‘Teddy Boy’ fashion and realised that it was the beginning of a new era, one where teenagers would search for their own identity which they could express through clothing.

In order to earn enough money to open his own shop, he worked double shifts and as well as his ‘day job’ at Moss Bros, he worked as a waiter in the evenings. Then in 1956 he started working for Bill Green in his shop ‘Vince’ – the ‘cutting edge boutique’ in Newburgh Street that I mentioned above.

Bill Green hired him as he felt that Stephen’s enthusiasm, good looks and style would make him popular with customers. However, Stephen saw the job as merely the first stage on the ladder to running his own business, and just a year later, in 1957, opened his own shop at 19 Beak Street.

Initially John simply copied many of Bill Green’s designs – hipster trousers, multi-coloured denim and rather exotic colours, certainly for men. Before his shop had begun making a profit, he opened a second – this time at 5 Carnaby Street. In 1959, he opened a third in Carnaby Street and by 1966 he owned fourteen in the street, besides branches elsewhere.

Part of his success was his ability to anticipate the latest fashions before they even happened! He’d spotted the rise in the ‘mod’ culture and was constantly bringing in new styles, almost on a weekly basis. He introduced collar-less suit jackets before the Beatles were pictured wearing them and sold paisley ties and polka-dot shirts before they became fashionable. He also made sure that his clothes could be afforded by the average young working man, which played a huge part in his success.

Another part of the success was that his customers began to include the leading pop stars of the day. By 1960, Cliff Richard and Billy Fury were already wearing his clothes and they were soon followed by top bands such as The Who, the Kinks and the Rolling Stones.

Towards the end of the 60s, Stephen's designs moved on with the fashion once again – in 1967 he started incorporating Indian aspects and colourful kaftans and tunics in his clothes, rapidly becoming part of the hippie fashion. Then the 'Regency' foppish dandy outfits inspired by Regency fashions.

Thus began the unbelievable and unstoppable success of Carnaby Street, which continues to this day. It was all the more astonishing if you bear in mind that at the time the street was simply a Soho back street, with just a few shops selling essentials such as tobacco, as well as hosting an electricity sub-station. And as a result it took just six years for Carnaby Street to become the world-wide centre of men's fashion!

However, as with fashion itself, Stephen's reputation as a 'cutting edge' designer began to fade in the late sixties. In 1975 he sold his company, which, by then was struggling with financial problems. It finally ceased to exist in 1986, Stephen disappeared from the public eye, and he died in 2004.

I have taken much of this from an excellent blog/website called A Dandy in Aspice, written 10+ years ago by 'Peter' about so much of life, music, fashion, etc. in the 1960s.

Decorative tympanum at the French Protestant Church, Soho Square, with an inscription reading: To the glory of God & in grateful memory of HM King Edward VI who by his charter of 1550 granted asylum to the Huguenots from France.

FRENCH HUGUENOTS

From the second half of the 16th century onwards, religious persecution in France and neighbouring countries against Protestants, who had broken away from the established Catholic church, resulted in large numbers of immigrants coming to London. Many were Calvinist Protestants, who were known as 'Huguenots', and were from the cities rather than peasants from the countryside. They tended to be well-educated and skilled artisans, merchants and professionals. Some settled in Kent, near to the channel ports where they would land, but most travelled to London.

They established a church in the City of London, but it was demolished in 1841 to make way for the approaches to the new Royal Exchange and the church eventually moved to Soho Square.

To the glory of God & in grateful memory of HM King Edward VI who by his charter of 1550 granted asylum to the Huguenots from France

BURFORD'S PANORAMA

I have mentioned Burford's Panorama in the walk. It opened in what later became the church of Notre Dame de France in Leicester Place in the early 1800s.

Burford's Panorama was an enormous rotunda which displayed equally enormous 360° panoramic paintings. The Panorama was an 'early form of visual entertainment for tourists'.

They were enormous panoramic paintings that depicted scenes of cities, at first of London, but later of other cities in Europe. In those days even people living in London would have little overall

idea of what their city looked like, let alone what other cities across Europe such as Venice or Paris looked like. They were a sort of Georgian-era IMAX.

Whilst over the years they displayed a number of what must have been fascinating scenes, I've found an interesting description of one of them – the Battle of Sebastopol, which was published in Punch magazine in 1855. I've copied it in its entirety here, as I think it gives an excellent idea of what people thought about these panoramas.

“To see Sebastopol it is not necessary to go abroad; it is enough to travel to the foreign quarter of London only. This journey has been performed by ourselves. We have been to see Mr. Burford's Panorama of Sebastopol in Leicester Square and recommend all our readers who are within reach of it to do themselves the same pleasure. The London “season” being now over, there are few places either of instruction or entertainment remaining open, and this is a place of both. Moreover, as Rank and Fashion have for the most part left Town, the possibility of seeing all that is to be seen in the Panorama – to wit; very much – is likely to be increased by some diminution of the hitherto attendant crowd of the nobility, gentry, and clergy. There will be less danger than there has been heretofore of having one's corns crushed by a duke, of being hustled by an earl, or elbowed about and squeezed by peeresses and maids-of-honour, the bulk of a bishop being, in the meanwhile, interposed between one's eye and the canvas. However, to secure a good view of the exhibition, it may be advisable to go early in the morning, while Rank and Fashion are at breakfast, or late in the afternoon when Rank and Fashion are at dinner.

“Sebastopol is depicted as firing and under fire, and the first impression derived from the view of the beleaguered city, presented by Mr Burford, is that of astonishment at the preternatural stillness, comparatively speaking, of the scene. Comparatively speaking, because a considerable noise is being made by Mrs Major M'Gab or some other military lady, who is sure to be present, and to be explaining the positions of the Allies with commanding gestures, in a loud voice. Astonishment, because the picture has such an air of reality, and the smoke of the bombardment looks so particularly natural, as to make you wonder at not hearing the artillery's roar and the crack of the rifles.

“The visitor finds himself situated, with reference to the Crimea, precisely as, with allowance for change of circumstances, he would be with regard to London if he were on the top of St. Paul's: except that the objects below him do not seem so distant, and that the smoke of the ordnance does not obscure the prospect like the smoke of the chimneys. He sees the bays and harbours that surround the Crimean coast, the Allied Fleets, the enemy's vessels, as many as have not been sunk, and the mast-heads of those; and all the forts and batteries – the Mamelon, Malakhoff, Redan, Flagstaff, Quarantine, Constantine, Nicholas, Alexander, Star, and so forth: also the encampments of the Allies and the head-quarters of the Generals, together with a number of other objects which, recalled to his mind's eye, will enable him to read the Times every morning with the advantage of illustrations.

“There is somebody present (besides Mrs M'Gab) who will oblige the company with any information they may desire in reference to the particulars of the Panorama.

“It is not too much to say, that those who visit Mr. Burford's Sebastopol will see more of that City than they would if they were stationed before the Czar's: for the Panorama was painted some little time ago, since when a great many of the buildings represented in it have been demolished: and we hope the time will very soon come when the only correct picture of Sebastopol will be the accurate likeness of certain heaps of rubbish.”

LEICESTER SQUARE & THE ALHAMBRA THEATRE

Leicester Square is well-known for being a centre of London's entertainment, particularly its cinemas, which over the years have hosted numerous film premieres and award evenings. It also has several casinos, particularly the enormous Hippodrome, as well as many pubs and restaurants, though they are generally more popular with tourists than locals.

However, the area has been popular for entertainment since Victorian times. Back then, Leicester Square boasted numerous attractions for Londoners. Among them were Wyld's Great Globe, the Savile House Museum, Burford's Panorama and the Alhambra, with a Moorish façade, dome and minaret-styled towers.

The Alhambra was by far the most successful. It opened in 1854 with the official name of the Royal Panopticon of Science Arts, featuring art exhibitions and scientific demonstrations. It was built on the site of today's Odeon Luxe cinema but despite its initial success, it closed just three years later.

It was sold to E.T. Smith, who already owned theatres and saw its potential for more general entertainment, reopening it the following year as the Alhambra Circus. It then had a circus ring and was licensed for music and dance, offering both variety and ballet performances. It was later sold to William Wilde Jnr, who continued with both the music hall and circus shows, calling it the Alhambra Music Hall. It continued to feature musicals and ballets, and with improved staging and quality of acts its popularity increased. It was said to have been the first theatre to bring the latest Parisian Can-Can style of dancing to London. However, this most risqué of dances resulted in the Alhambra soon losing its license for dancing.

At the same time its new Promenade bar had become infamous for allowing unaccompanied women, something distinctly frowned upon in those days, and its already tarnished reputation became ever sleazier. As a result it became popular with prostitutes, whilst female performers would drink, eat and flirt with male guests in between scenes. Some dancers were also said to be moonlighting in the sex trade alongside their stage careers. An American writer wrote of his shock at what he witnessed at the Alhambra, saying it was "the greatest place of infamy in all London." He went further, suggesting the men didn't come to watch the performances, but "the chief attraction is the women."

I rather like the following, which I have taken from Michael Sadleir's 1940 book 'Fanny by Gaslight' ...

"You must please imagine yourself a man about town, with money in your pocket and a fancy for a night of pleasure. It is early in the year 1870. You find a congenial companion with similar inclination, and after a leisurely dinner at the club you find yourself looking at the Alhambra. You are purposely too late for the strident 'variety' with which the programme opens, but in easy time for the Ballet which concludes the first half and is followed by a long – a very long – interval. The interval is one of the main features of the show, for the huge basement canteen is open to any of the audience who think a visit worthwhile ... You wander down after the ballet, pick up a couple of dancers and buy them champagne. They are cheerful young women still wearing their scanty ballet costumes and with plenty to say for themselves. Nearly an hour passes in telling stories and gossiping about the crowd of swells and chorines who skirmish and lounge and laugh in the long, bare but well lighted room. It is now nearly time for the notorious Can-Can, and you prepare to return to your seats. The ladies wish to say thank you for their wine, and each, with an arm round your neck or his, puts unmistakable provocation into her kiss. She probably ventures other familiarities, and certainly asks softly if you will be near the stage-door when the show is over."

The Alhambra was destroyed by fire in 1882 and subsequently rebuilt and just four years later it began the occasional screening of the very earliest films, though still with its music hall entertainment. Indeed, in 1923, actress Dame Gracie Fields starred at the Alhambra in 'Mr Tower of London' and then a couple of years later it hosted the Royal Variety Performance, which was broadcast by BBC radio. However, during the 1930s the increasing demand for cinema films saw the theatre being sold in 1936 and demolished, with the Odeon Luxe that we see today being built on the site.

THE CONDITION OF LEICESTER SQUARE IN THE 1870s

I have reprinted here an excerpt from Walter Thornbury's 'Old and New London' (1878), as I feel it explains in excellent detail how Leicester Square looked in the latter part of the 19th century, and before the garden/park in its centre was laid out.

"On the removal of Wyld's Great Globe [shown in the illustration], after occupying the square for about ten years, the enclosure became exposed once more in all its hideous nakedness. From that time down to the middle of the year 1874, its condition was simply a disgrace to the metropolis.

"Overgrown with rank and fetid vegetation, it was a public nuisance, both in an æsthetic and in a sanitary point of view; covered with the débris of tin pots and kettles, cast-off shoes, old clothes, and dead cats and dogs, it was an eye-sore to every one forced to pass by it. As for the "golden horse and its rider," the effigy of George I, which had been set up in the centre of the enclosure when Leicester House was the "pouting place of princes," besides having suffered all the inclemency's of the weather for years, it had become the subject of every species of practical joke by almost every gamin in London. The horse is said to have been modelled after that of Le Sœur at Charing Cross; whilst the statue of George I. was considered a great work of art in its day, and was one of the sights of London, until after a quarter of a century of humiliations, after being the standing butt of ribald caricaturists, and the easy mark of witlings, it gradually fell to pieces.

"The effigy of his Majesty was the first to be assailed. His arms were first cut off; then his legs followed suit, and afterwards his head; when the iconoclasts, who had doomed him to destruction, at last dismounted him, propping up the mutilated torso against the remains of the once caracoling charger on which the statue had been mounted, and which was in nearly quite as dilapidated a plight. It would be almost impossible to tell all the pranks that were played upon this ill-starred monument, and how Punch and his comic contemporaries made fun of it, whilst the more serious organs waxed indignant as they dilated on the unmerited insults to which it was subjected. One night a party of jovial spirits actually whitewashed it all over and daubed it ignominiously with large black spots.

"The disgraceful state of Leicester Square became such that it attracted the attention of Parliament, and innumerable were the discussions that took place upon it, with, however, little amelioration in its actual condition. In the year 1869 it was reported that the enterprising proprietors were about to sell the land for building purposes, but upon a communication being sent to the Board of Works, informing them of the fact, it was resolved that the Board would "do all in its power" to prevent the open space from being swallowed up by bricks and mortar. The owners of the fee-simple in the land had all along, in a sort of dog-in-the manger spirit, not only refused to reclaim the square themselves, but had resisted every effort, or refused every offer of other more beneficent persons, who were willing and eager to undertake a work which it should have been their first duty to accomplish. At length, after an immense amount of litigation, it was finally settled by a decision of the Master of the Rolls, in December, 1873, "that the vacant space

in Leicester Square is not to be built over, but will be retained as open ground, for the purposes of ornament and recreation.”

“A ‘defence committee’ was established and owing to their initiative Mr. Albert Grant was led to make an offer of purchasing the square. Early in 1874 that gentleman set measures on foot which finally resulted in his obtaining possession of the square, on the payment of a large sum for purchase-money to the proprietors. He had determined to present it, as a people’s garden, to the citizens of the metropolis; and the purchase having been effected, steps were immediately taken to carry out the intentions of the donor.

“In laying out the ground, nothing pretentious was attempted. The central space was converted into an ornamental garden, and adorned with statuary, &c. The principal ornament of the new square is a white marble fountain, surmounted by a statue of Shakespeare, also in white marble, the figure being an exact reproduction by Signor Fontana of the statue designed by Kent, and executed by Shumacher, on the Westminster Abbey cenotaph. The water spouts from jets round the pedestal, and from the beaks of dolphins at each of its corners, into a marble basin. Flower-beds surround this central mass, and the enclosure—so long a squalid and unsightly waste—is now a gay and pleasant garden of flowering shrubs, green plots, inlaid with bright flower-beds and broad gravelled paths. In each angle of the garden is a bust of white marble on a granite pedestal. To the southeast stands Hogarth, by Durham; to the southwest, Newton, by Weekes; to the north-east, John Hunter, by Woolner; and to the north-west, Reynolds, by Marshall.

“The ceremony of transferring the ground to the Metropolitan Board of Works for the enjoyment of the public, took place on the 9th of July 1874. The sum expended by Mr. Albert Grant in purchasing the property and laying out the grounds, &c., amounted to about £30,000.”

GREEK STREET

Greek Street was created around 1680. A number of Greek immigrants arrived in London in the 17th century when the revived power of the Ottoman Turks caused many Greek Christians to seek refuge in London as well as other cities in Europe.

By 1691 the street was almost fully developed. Back then the street was more prestigious than it was later, with records showing there were four knights living there, while in 1714 there were two earls, a lady and a baronet. As elsewhere in Soho, it probably became less attractive to the ‘titled’, as the influx of Huguenot immigrants meant nearly a quarter of the residents were French by the early part of the 18th century.

I have reprinted here another excerpt from Walter Thornbury’s ‘Old and New London’, as it gives a little background to the area around Greek Street, Crown Street (formerly Hog Lane and since replaced by Charing Cross Road) and Rose Street (now Manette Street):

“The narrow, winding lane running southwards from the corner of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road, now known as Crown Street, but in former times as Hog Lane, forms the boundary between the parishes of St Giles and St Anne, Soho. Its narrowness and its windings alike serve to show its antiquity; and, no doubt, it derived its first name from the pigs that fed along its sides when it had green hedges and deep ditches on either side. In 1762 it came to be dignified by its more recent appellation from the ‘Rose and Crown’ tavern. Rose Street runs out of Crown Street, on the west connecting it with Greek Street. In it was a Greek church, built for the use of “merchants from the Levant,” dating from the time of Charles II. This edifice helped to give its name to Greek Street adjoining. It does not appear, however, to have remained long in the hands of these oriental Christians, but to have been given up to the use of the French

Protestants who settled in this neighbourhood in large force. As such it is immortalised by Hogarth. The Greek inscription still remaining over the door, however, points plainly to its original destination.”

Today there is little evidence of Greeks having lived here, and whilst there are a number of restaurants in Greek Street, to my knowledge none are Greek. One that was here for many years and now sadly disappeared was Jimmy’s, described as a bargain-priced basement Greek restaurant. I’ve read it described as “musty and dark, with terrible wine, but with food that was a thing of wonder; cheap and plentiful enough to feed a Trojan army.” It was a favourite haunt at the time of a young Russ Willey, who went on to write two books on London, as well as creating the Hidden London website. He is also the designer of this website, an enthusiastic supporter of my project, and in the process has become a good friend!

JOHN LOGIE BAIRD

The building has a special history because in 1929 it was where John Logie Baird gave his first demonstration of the wonders of his new invention – television. He also undertook early experiments with stereoscopic (3D) and colour television.

Baird, who had previously been living in Hastings, moved to Frith Street following a minor accident in which one of his experiments went wrong and his landlord asked him to move.

He was building what was to become the world’s first working television set, using items that included a tea chest, old hatbox, bicycle light lenses, scissors, darning needles – all held together with sealing wax and glue. Baird went downstairs and fetched a young office worker as he wanted to see what a human face would look like, and he became the first person to ‘appear on television’.

I’ve read somewhere that the proceedings were interrupted by prostitutes banging on his door – they’d seen the odd contraption in the window and had convinced themselves that he was spying on them.

And whilst it is possibly irrelevant, I do like the story of how when he was looking for publicity for his new invention, he visited the Daily Express offices in Fleet Street. The editor was said to have been terrified by him and was quoted as saying to a member of staff: “For God’s sake, go down to reception and get rid of the lunatic who’s down there. He says he’s got a machine for seeing by wireless! Watch him — he may have a razor on him.”

THE TELEVISOR

Extracts from The Times, 28th January 1926

“Members of the Royal Institution and other visitors to a laboratory in an upper room in Frith Street on Tuesday saw a demonstration of apparatus invented by Mr JL Baird, who claims to have solved the problem of television.

“They were shown a transmitting machine, consisting of a large wooden revolving disc containing lenses, behind which was a revolving shutter and a light sensitive cell. It was explained that by means of the shutter and lens disc, an image of articles or persons standing in front of the machine could be made to pass over the light sensitive cell at a high speed.

“The current in the cell varies in proportion to the light falling on it, and this varying current is transmitted to a receiver where it controls a light behind an optical arrangement, similar to that

at the sending end. By this means a point of light is caused to traverse a ground glass screen. The light is dim at the shadows and bright at the high lights and crosses the screen so rapidly that the whole image appears simultaneously to the eye.

"For the purposes of the demonstration the head of a ventriloquist's doll [apparently named 'Stooky Bill'] was manipulated as the image to be transmitted, though the human face was also reproduced.

"The visitors were shown recognizable reception of the movements of the dummy head and of a person speaking.

"It has yet to be seen to what further developments will carry Mr Baird's system towards practical use. He has overcome apparently earlier failures

"Application has been made to the Postmaster-General for an experimental broadcasting licence, and trials may shortly be made from a building in St Martin's Lane."

NUMBER 20 FRITH STREET

From various sources I found a surprising amount of information about No. 20. Some of the dates slightly overlap, and it is a little confusing, particularly in later years, as the premises seemed to be in 'multiple-occupation'.

However, back in the 1820s the house was occupied by a bookseller, followed then by a house decorator, plumber and glazier. Then in the early 1880s the house was used by the miniaturist Jean-Baptiste Troye to exhibit his dioramas, which were scale models of landscapes. They were said to be "the most beautiful models and reliefs of countries, cities, mountains, etc., celebrated either for natural beauty or historical occurrences associated with them."

The Soho Club for Working Girls met in a workshop at the rear of 20 Frith Street between 1880 and 1884. The club was established by the Honourable Maude Stanley to improve the lives of young women workers in London and provincial towns. However, the premises proved to be too small, and in 1884 Miss Stanley purchased, with the aid of many benevolent friends, a 'commodious and beautiful building' at No. 59 in the adjacent Greek Street. The club eventually developed into the Federation of London Youth Clubs.

From the late 1890s until 1911, Wells & Co, wholesale tea dealers, had their offices here, and it may have also been occupied during part of this period by Osborne, Garratt & Co who sold razors and hair curling tongs.

From 1911 the ground floor of the building housed the National Bioscope Electric Theatre. Remarkably, it appears from London County Council records, it had seats for 100 people, with a further 50 standing. The projection box was positioned in the yard at the rear, with films being projected onto the back of the screen. It appeared to be extremely popular, particularly with children, and a council inspector making a visit in 1913 found that children made up the majority of the audience and the numbers of them were double the number of patrons that their licence allowed.

According to the 1911 census, also based at No. 20 was an employment agency, one of a number in the area which helped foreign-born workers to find employment, particularly in the restaurant and hotel industry. The census also showed that on the upper floors were three Polish families, who were working as tailors.

Seemingly around the same time the premises were the offices of the Menchen Film Company, who also had offices and studios in France. In addition, equipment for other cinemas was offered for sale on the premises. Brandon Menchen was an American inventor and theatrical lighting designer who also had an electrical equipment business. He had come to London in 1911 and became involved in filmmaking in Austria and France. He had been planning on remaining in France, but as the German Army neared Paris in the First World War, he escaped back to London, bringing with him many cans of films.

By 1915 there were two businesses registered as being at No. 20; the Cinema Auction Mart and Exchange, who were 'agents for theatre property' and the American Export Company. The latter was opened by a friend of Menchen's and imported trucks from the USA. Menchen himself designed an experimental flame thrower for the British Army, and the address for the patent for a later model is shown as being 20 Frith Street.

PAUL RAYMOND

Paul Raymond was a controversial character, and one of his early ventures was to open the Raymond Revuebar (shown in the photo in 1997). In 1978 he bought the Windmill Theatre, which we saw earlier in the walk. He went on to buy more theatres and open more 'sex-themed' shows, including the Whitehall Theatre where he opened the 'sex comedy' Pyjama Tops which ran for several years with a number of sequels. He also diversified into 'men's magazines', such as Mayfair and Men Only.

As a result of his investment in property he later became one of Britain's wealthiest men. When the police clamped down on the many illegal 'sex clubs' in Soho and the value of their properties fell, he swooped in, and at one time was said to be buying a new freehold every week. In 1992 he was said to be the richest man in Britain and worth £1½ billion. He eventually owned an estimated four hundred properties in Soho alone.

After his death in 2008, his fortune was left to two of his grandchildren – India Rose James and Fawn Ilona James.

THE POET, THE PILLARS AND THE RIPPER

I like the story about Francis Thompson, the poet and Catholic mystic, who, having given up medical school to concentrate on his writing, lived rough in Soho. He became addicted to opium, but continued to write, eventually sending a parcel of his scruffily written poems to the editor of a Catholic literary magazine. I have put a copy of his letter in the next section, but I'll just say here that the only address Francis gave for himself was 'care of the Charing Cross Post Office'. However, the editor was so impressed with the poems that he undertook a search of Soho to find him – which he did, lying 'stoned' on opium in the entrance to the Pillars of Hercules. I've also included a reference to the possibility of him being Jack the Ripper.

Dear Sir,

In enclosing the accompanying article for your inspection, I must ask pardon for the soiled state of the manuscript. It is due, not to slovenliness, but to the strange places and circumstances under which it has been written ... I enclose a stamped envelope for a reply ... regarding your judgement of its worthlessness as quite final.

Apologising very sincerely for my intrusion on your valuable time,

I remain, Francis Thompson

I have taken the following from one of the many Jack the Ripper websites:

Richard Patterson has spent 20 years investigating Jack the Ripper. Richard, an Australian teacher, has come to the conclusion Francis Thompson is Jack the Ripper.

Thompson's work wasn't published until five years after the 1888 murders took place. Patterson is convinced the poet took to murder after a relationship with a prostitute ended. Thompson had surgery experience and was said to keep a dissecting knife in his possession. Thompson was also believed to have been taught a rare surgical procedure that appears to mimic the mutilations found in more than one victim. Patterson said, "Soon before and soon after the murders, he wrote about killing female prostitutes with knives."

After college, Thompson moved to London and is alleged to have become addicted to opium. His first book, 'Poems', was published in 1893.

Thompson is said to have resided in Spitalfields at the time of the Whitechapel murders. Thompson lived at No. 50 Crispin Street, in the Providence Row night refuge. It has been claimed victim Mary Jane Kelly and Thompson stayed at the same address.

Patterson's research has been published in his book, 'Francis Thompson - A Ripper Suspect'. It should be noted that few Ripperologists have given Patterson's verdict much credence.