

King's Cross and St Pancras walk

Updated: 5 May 2024

Length: Maximum 1¾ miles

Duration: About 2 hours

INTRODUCTION

"Why King's Cross?" is a question I was asked when I said this would be my next London Walk.

It's a good question, as some areas of it wouldn't have been a pleasant and safe place to walk around until at least the late 1980s, (unless of course you were catching a train, looking for drugs, prostitutes or to commit a mugging!) Indeed, what was once described as being 'the beating heart of Victorian commerce' had become one of the largest disused and abandoned industrial sites in Britain.

However, since the extensive modernisation of St Pancras Station to accommodate the Channel Tunnel rail link, the reopening of its famous hotel and the equally extensive modernisation of the adjacent King's Cross Station, so much has changed.

At its heart is the redevelopment of King's Cross's 67-acre area of disused railway yards and derelict industrial buildings behind the station, which has been one of Europe's most prestigious regeneration schemes.

Almost £3 billion has been spent on the redevelopment, resulting in it becoming London's newest and most exciting business, educational, residential, retail and nightlife area.

Twenty formerly 'at risk' old industrial buildings have been saved and cleverly restored, one of which is now home to the world-famous Central Saint Martins Art and Design College, accommodating five thousand students and staff.

The newly developed Pancras Square, London's latest 'tech quarter' is now the UK home of some of the world's leading tech companies, including Google and Meta (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.), as well other enormous corporations such as Sony Music, AstraZeneca, Universal Music, Nike and many others.

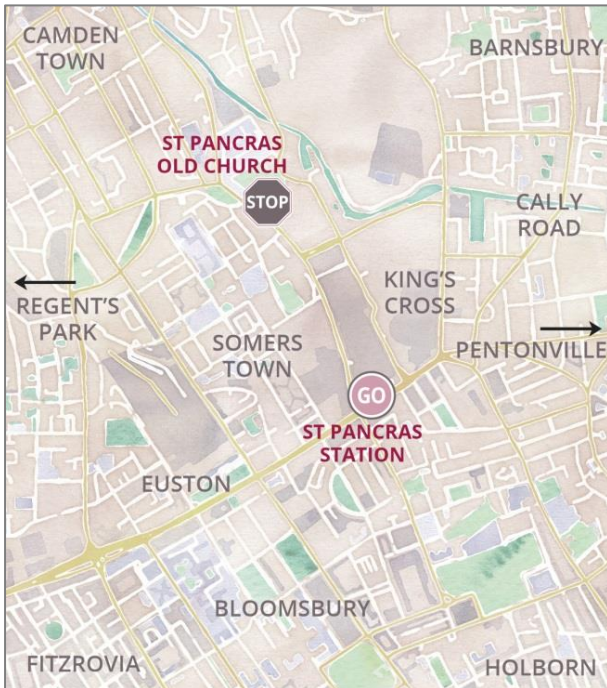
There's an array of excellent new, innovative and fashionable shops, cafes, bars and restaurants.

And we mustn't overlook that over 40% of the site is designated for public use, including the restored Regent's Canal and Camley Street Natural Park.

The redevelopment has led to:

- Twenty new streets
- Ten new public parks
- Twenty restored heritage buildings
- Two thousand new homes
- Two new schools
- Innovative office buildings

- Countless bars, restaurants and cinemas
- Unique shopping opportunities
- The world-famous Central Saint Martins arts and design college (now part of the University of the Arts)



GETTING HERE

By bus

Many buses stop close to St Pancras or King's Cross stations – too many to list!

By rail

St Pancras (and King's Cross, which is immediately adjacent) are connected to hundreds of cities and towns.

By tube

Six tube lines – the Hammersmith & City, Circle, Metropolitan, Victoria, Northern and Piccadilly all connect with King's Cross/St Pancras. The two stations are only a few hundred yards apart and connected via an underpass.

From the **Victoria, Northern and Piccadilly lines**, pass through the exit barriers, turn left into the underpass and follow the signs for **St Pancras Station and Visitor Centre**. At the end of the long passage, go up the steps, **turn left in front of the information bureau** and the exit into Euston Road is just a few yards further on.

Turn right and then up the inclined roadway that leads to the front of the hotel and station building.

However, the **Hammersmith & City, Circle and Metropolitan lines** platforms are a little closer to St Pancras, so after passing through the exit barrier turn left into the main passageway and follow the route above.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AREA

In the space of just 150 years, the area around King's Cross and St Pancras was transformed from open fields and hamlets into a heavily industrialised and densely populated district of London.

This rapid change began in 1820 with the opening of the Regent's Canal. This attracted industries, such as the Imperial Gas, Light and Coke Company, who saw the benefit of the cheaper transportation of coal, and built gasworks close to the canal.

The canal was soon followed by the railway, with the line to King's Cross opening in 1852 and St Pancras in 1868. This meant even cheaper and faster deliveries of coal, encouraging more industry to open here. Just as important was the ability to bring to London bulk quantities of grain, potatoes and other vegetables, fish, etc from areas the line passed through.

This rapid growth meant thousands of workers were needed, along with houses to accommodate them. Many were hurriedly (and poorly) built, and as with the existing houses in the area, they soon became overcrowded, with whole families living in just one room.

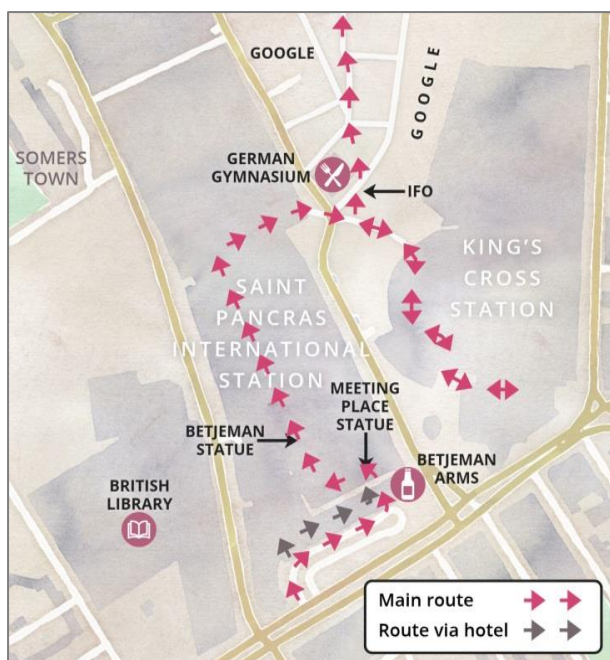
This boom continued until the industrial scene began to change. Demand for coal was dropping, goods increasingly being moved by road more than by rail, etc. With gasworks, factories and railway yards closing, this previously thriving industrial area gradually become abandoned until by the mid-1960s it was virtually derelict.

Change happened, and probably the decision to relocate the Eurostar services from Waterloo to St Pancras was the catalyst for the regeneration of the entire area. With the help of government, local authorities and private enterprise, several years of studies and public consultation took place, culminating in a masterplan being created and in 2008. The King's Cross Central Partnership was then created between the developer Argent, London and Continental Railways and DHL.

The regenerated area has been designated the 'Knowledge Quarter' by people in the science and tech businesses. It is now home to a quarter of London's life science enterprises and a third of its AI companies.

The drugs giant GSK has opened an Artificial Intelligence hub just yards from the Google building, which is also the base for its own 'Deep Mind' AI company, and within walking distance to the Alan Turing Institute, the UK's national centre for data science. In addition, Astra Zeneca have also opened offices here. Another major organisation to have opened recently, indeed next door St Pancras station is the enormous Francis Crick Institute building, which specialises in biomedical research.

These companies say they value the proximity to each other to enable them to share ideas and data as well as being close to Imperial College and the University College of London, both with advanced science laboratories and other research facilities. And as another major plus for companies opening here, it is only a 45-minute train ride from King's Cross station to Cambridge, whose university is a world leader in science research.



Route map 1

STARTING THE WALK

The walk begins outside the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel, which fronts the station.

To appreciate the hotel's sweeping frontage, I suggest you start the walk at the front of the hotel building on the busy **Euston Road**.

The Midland Railway was formed in 1844 and combined three existing companies – Midland County, North Midland and the Birmingham & Derby. Whilst they had the monopoly of rail traffic in the Midlands, they had no direct route of their own to London. Instead, they had to transfer freight and passengers onto the Great Northern Line from Hitchin in Hertfordshire (the southern most part of their network) to King's Cross. Hence the importance of building the line through to London and a new station at St Pancras.

The company wanted a very prestigious appearance for their new station and a hotel to go with it. They appointed the eminent architect, Sir George Gilbert Scott, and he built it in the magnificent Gothic-revival style that we see today, with its 300ft high clock tower.

Everything appeared to conspire against George Gilbert Scott designing the Midland Grand Hotel. Firstly, he declined entering the competition for it and, when eventually persuaded by Josiah Lewis, a director of the Midland Railway Company, the number of entries had to be extended from 10 to 13 to accommodate him and two other architects.

Gilbert Scott also had to design his submission whilst staying at a hotel in Hayling, Hampshire, with his very ill son Alwyne.

Nonetheless, he won and was very pleased with the result: "This work has been spoken of by one of the revilers of my profession with abject contempt," he wrote in 1872, when the project was nearing completion. "I have to set off against this, the too-excessive praise of it which I receive from other quarters. It is often spoken of to me as the finest building in London; my own belief is

that it is too good for its purpose. But having been disappointed, through Lord Palmerston, of my ardent hope of carrying out my style in the Government offices, I was glad to be able to erect one building in that style in London.”

Unfortunately, aspects such as bedrooms without private toilets or bathrooms meant that within forty years or so the Midland Grand was no longer so popular and it subsequently became unprofitable. It closed in 1935 and was used as offices for many years. In the mid-1960s there were serious plans by British Rail, who by then owned it, to demolish both the hotel and the station, which had become much less-used, partly due to the increase in rail traffic at the nearby Euston station.

Thanks to a campaign led by the poet and conservationist Sir John Betjeman, together with the Victorian Society and former Bletchley Park codebreaker Jane Fawcett (who earned the nickname of the ‘furious Mrs Fawcett’ for her passionate defence of the building), it was saved, just days before the demolition was due to have taken place, as both hotel and station were given Grade I heritage listings.

However, their condition continued to deteriorate but the decision to relocate the Eurostar terminus from Waterloo to St Pancras in 1996 saw a massive redevelopment take place, both within the station, the hotel and subsequently the entire area that we will be visiting today.

The Midland Railway Company wanted a prestigious and very grand hotel for their new railway station at St Pancras. They appointed one of the period’s most eminent architects, Sir George Gilbert Scott, who had a reputation for designing grand buildings, such as the very impressive Foreign Office in Westminster. He designed the front of the station and hotel in a Gothic-revival style of architecture, with significant French and Italian influences. The mighty 300 feet clock tower is regarded as one of the triumphs of Victorian architecture. The Midland Grand Hotel, as it was then called, opened in 1874.

In an indication of the dedication and commitment of the Derby-based railway company to promoting the Midlands, the building used products from that region, such as the red bricks from Nottingham, golden limestone from Lincolnshire and roof slates from Leicestershire.

However, ‘Grand’ as the hotel was when it was built, it eventually became outdated and too expensive to maintain. For example, one disadvantage was that the bedrooms didn’t have toilets and relied on ‘chamber pots’.

After closing in 1935, the hotel became known as Saint Pancras Chambers and simply used as offices, firstly for the Midland Railway, and later by British Rail. The building’s condition worsened, as did the station behind it and it was eventually decided to demolish them both.

Conservationists had been horrified by the demolition several years before of many architectural features of the nearby Euston Station, particularly its famous Arch, and when word spread of the plans for St Pancras, widespread protests began. These were significantly boosted by the support of Sir John Betjeman, Britain’s Poet Laureate and already a leading conservationist. As a result of the campaign, in 1967 the hotel and station were given a Grade I listing, just days before its demolition was due to have taken place. However, although the building was saved, it continued to deteriorate and the hotel building, and offices were completely closed in 1985. Meanwhile, with more rail services operating from the partly redeveloped and enlarged Euston terminus, St Pancras station was also suffering badly from disrepair, with its amazing roof said to be in danger of collapse if nothing was done.

However, its saving grace was the decision in 1996 to relocate the terminus of the Eurostar from Waterloo to St Pancras. It involved a massive redevelopment of the station. The original Midland Railway platforms and the already enormous roof had to be more than doubled in length and redesigned to accommodate Eurostar's 18-carriage trains. New sections at the rear of the station were created to accommodate both the previous Midland services as well as the new Southeastern trains to Kent. The enormous storage vaults beneath the station were redeveloped and are now the check in areas for Eurostar and the many shops, restaurants and food halls you see today.

St Pancras station reopened after this redevelopment in 2007. [Here's a link to an excellent article](#), which I thoroughly agree with, written by Simon Jenkins in *The Guardian* a few days after the reopening ceremony. He is bitterly critical of those who condemn saving heritage buildings such as St Pancras but then, when their views are fortunately ignored, are happy to celebrate their reopening!

However, Eurostar nearly wasn't here ... an enormous controversy followed the decision to relocate the Eurostar service from Waterloo, as the original plan was to build an entirely new station beneath the space between King's Cross and St Pancras, with a new tunnel under London to connect it with the existing lines at Waterloo. The eminent architect Sir Norman Foster produced the provisional plans and whilst much of it would have been underground, many surrounding buildings needed to be demolished, several of which had heritage listings. There was enormous local opposition but, after weeks of Parliamentary debates, the plan was dropped – despite around £40 million having been spent – and St Pancras station was chosen instead.

On the left of the building you will see the sign 'St Pancras Renaissance Hotel' above the entrance to the hotel with the original date of 1873. Surprisingly, this was once the taxi entrance to the station and hotel.

Optional route: entering the station via the hotel

Ideally, I suggest you walk in here; however, the hotel's doormen or security staff are usually either outside or just inside the door to welcome guests, ask if they can help ... and deter any 'undesirables!' They are very helpful and whilst researching this walk, I asked one of the hotel's duty managers whether they would allow people doing this walk to have a quick look inside. His advice was that if staff ask whether they could help, politely enquire whether you could have a quick look inside. He said that provided there are only two or three of you then they would normally agree. However, if there are more of you then you should split up.

Once inside, notice the first door on the right with the sign above still saying 'Booking Office' – it's just before the line of check-in desks so after having a look around, leave through this door.

You can see that the architects have created a delightful 'lobby' area, which combines the hotel reception with a relaxed seating area where guests can enjoy drinks and light snacks. As I said before, it's hard to imagine that this is where taxis would once have dropped off passengers and then continued straight ahead; however, as you can see this exit is now cleverly enclosed. I think it's amazing how well the architects have preserved the original roof and walls.

One of the beautiful features of the original hotel has been retained, which is its grand staircase. It is to the left of this new lobby, and accessible to those staying in the hotel or living in the apartments. The Spice Girls' famous video for their song 'Wannabe' was filmed on and around this impressive staircase. Regarded as a 'dance-pop song, with influences of hip hop and rap', it is said to have been the world's biggest-selling single by any girl group.

The 1996 video was originally planned to be filmed in a building in Barcelona, but permission to use it was refused, so it was decided to use the Midland Grand Hotel, which then wasn't open.

The video features the Spice Girls running, singing, dancing, and creating mischief at an eccentric bohemian party. Because the video was intended to be filmed in one shot, the group rehearsed the routine several times through the night, while cameraman followed them. The final video was cut together from two takes. Gerry Halliwell, one of the singers, wrote: "The video I remember as being very chaotic and cold. It wasn't very controlled—we didn't want it to be. We wanted the camera to capture the madness of the Spice Girls."

Apparently, the record company's executives were horrified; one recalled that "the girls were freezing cold, which showed itself in various different ways". The video was banned in some parts of Asia because of Mel Brown's erect nipples. The lighting was considered too dark; the best takes showed the girls bumping with the furniture and looking behind them. Record company Virgin was concerned that old people appeared in the video, and worried that the scenes of the Spice Girls jumping on a table and Halliwell's showgirl outfit might be considered threatening by music channels. Virgin began discussions about a re-shoot or creating an alternate one for the US, but the Spice Girls refused. The video was sent for trial airing in its original form in January 1997 and it became one of pop music's most successful ever videos.

Movies with scenes that have been filmed here include *Batman Begins*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

Please remember this is a five-star luxury hotel, so don't wander around taking photos or stay too long.

Besides being a hotel, there are a number of residential apartments within the building, as well as a private members' club, a gym and spa. An apartment in what was once the hotel's water tower has three-bedrooms, spans over 6,000 square feet and comes with a private lift. When it was put on the market in 2021 the asking price was £11.5 million.

Leave through the doorway I just mentioned marked 'Booking Office' – now a delightful bar area – and continue through along the side of the tastefully designed restaurant and pass through the next door and ... well, back to the real world ... you are now in the actual station.

If you came through the hotel, then you are standing on what is now the upper level or 'Grand Terrace' of the station. Slightly to the left are the Eurostar platforms, which were previously used by the original Midland Railway platforms. The lower level, previously used for storage, is now shops, cafes and the check in for the Eurostar.

It's hard to appreciate just how much work had to take place here to accommodate the Eurostar. Its 18-carriage trains are considerably longer than the previous Midland Railway's, so the station and its wonderful roof had to be nearly doubled in length – an incredible job on its own! And beyond the station 19 miles of twin-bore tunnels had to be dug.

Walk past the exterior eating area of the cafe and Carluccio's Restaurant and on your right, you can't miss the statue of two lovers called 'The Meeting Place'.

For those who didn't enter via the hotel

Continue walking towards the clock tower side of the hotel until you reach the large archway public entrance leading directly onto the Grand Terrace of the station.

It is another spectacular way to enter as directly in front of you are the new arrival and departure platforms of the Eurostar trains to the continent. On your right you will see The Betjeman Arms, a tribute to the poet and conservationist Sir John Betjeman (I say more about him shortly).

Whichever entrance you've used, pick up the walk at the 'Meeting Place' statue.

This 30-foot-high, 20-ton bronze statue is sometimes known as the 'The Lovers' and I've also heard it called 'Saying Goodbye'. It's meant to evoke the romance of rail travel, which I think it does. It was created by British sculptor Paul Day, whose work is known for its unusual approach to perspective. The brief was for it to be romantic, democratic and iconic. However, it wasn't popular with many other artists, which I explain further below.

Besides the romantic couple, take a closer look at the frieze that runs around the bottom of the statue which depicts scenes of a rich assortment of train passengers, including soldiers returning from war as well as the rail track maintenance workers. I've seen it described as a 'Hogarth of the 21st century', which I think is a good description.

Paul Day's sculpture has attracted considerable criticism. It was said by fellow sculptor Anthony Gormley (he of the Angel of the North) "as a very good example of the crap out there". "Terrible, schmaltzy, a sentimental piece of kitsch" was the comment from Artistic Director of the Royal Academy and another critic described it as "fatuous ... idiotic in scale, devoid of artistic life" and called for it to be "melted down by order of parliament."

Well, I love it – and seemingly many people who perhaps aren't pompous art critics also do. I think it conjures up a scene of lovers saying hello after a long absence or saying goodbye before one. Indeed, the travel guide Lonely Planet said that St Pancras Station was "one of the most romantic meeting places in the world," adding that the statue was a key reason for saying this.

I think the final word should go to Paul Day himself. "A lot of people will no doubt detest it because it is not violent or controversial, but I'm sure those who feel touched by it will outweigh them. It is not in a gallery, but in a very public place, and therefore must be accessible for people who may not regularly experience art." Well said, Paul.

The platforms behind the glass screen are for Eurostar services, however, they were previously for the original Midland Railway services; these have now been moved to a new area at the rear of the station. You will recall that the front of the hotel and station is considerably above the level of its surroundings, as are these platforms. The reason is that immediately behind the station is the Regent's Canal. Whereas when they built the adjacent King's Cross Station, they took the decision to run the lines under the canal, the Midland Railway engineer decided to build over. This avoided trains having to climb a steep gradient as they left the station to cross a bridge, which in the early days when steam engines were not so powerful, would have meant the trains having fewer carriages. And having the hotel and station raised made it look far more impressive than its neighbour, King's Cross.

This 'upper level' is supported by 850 cast iron columns – interestingly the space between them is exactly the width of a beer barrel, to make easier storage of one of the station's most lucrative of all its goods traffic, the beer coming from Burton-on-Trent in the Midlands. (I explain more about this shortly.)

If you started the walk from inside the hotel, then turn back towards the exit you used – however, if you came in via the public entrance then continue on past the lift, turn right up the

left-hand side of the station, passing the doorways marked 'Booking Office' (which lead into the St Pancras Hotel).

Ahead you can already see the beginning of the 'longest champagne bar' in Europe. Looking down through the glass screens on your right you can see the lower level, which as I've just said was previously used for storage, but now shops and cafes.

I've already explained why the platforms are much higher than the street outside; the benefit was also that this provided the station with enormous storage vaults, now of course the shops and Eurostar check-in area. However, this below level storage area was invaluable to the profitability of the Midland Railway, as one of their biggest customers were the breweries at Burton-on-Trent, which the line passed through. Every day numerous trains would arrive at St Pancras from Burton carrying barrels of beer. These were then stored down in these 'vaults' until they were delivered around London and the surrounding areas.

Back in the 19th century and for much of the 20th, beer was the drink of choice for many men. With its ever-growing working population, London needed enormous quantities and much of it was brought into by the Midland Railway from England's major brewing centre, Burton-on-Trent.

Beer brewed in Burton-in-Trent was so popular (and still is) because of the quality of the water used in the process – containing a naturally high level of gypsum, a soft sulphate mineral which is found in the sandstone subsurface.

With [a branch of their railway line extending to Burton](#), beer soon became one of the Midland Railway's biggest freight traffic. Recognising this potential from the very beginning, the company used the enormous space beneath its platforms in the new St Pancras station to store the huge quantities of barrels whilst they waited to be delivered to customers. Different sections of this 'under vault' were allocated to separate breweries, with Bass and Thomas Salt being the largest. The barrels would be unloaded on the station's freight platforms and lowered into the vast storage area by hydraulic lift, close to where the J D Wetherspoon pub, the aptly named Barrel Vault, is today.

Burton-on-Trent's high-quality pale ales were an attractive alternative to the darker porter beers that had traditionally been drunk in London, though before the railway they had to be transported to London by horse-drawn wagon or canal – both very costly and time-consuming. Being able to transport them to London by rail led to a massive increase in their demand and Bass, one of the major breweries in Burton, increased their annual output from 30,800 barrels in 1839 to around 850,000 in 1879.

The barrels were then transported from the underground storage vaults at St Pancras to the various pubs and other customers by wagons pulled by two horses with two men to do the loading and unloading.

At the beginning, Bass had 36 horses stabled at St Pancras to do these deliveries, but by 1904, this had increased to around 100.

Bass and then other breweries began to start bottling their beers, rather than it just being sold on draught from a barrel in pubs, enabling people to take a bottle home with them. The brewery sent barrels to St Pancras, with the bottling being carried out in London by local companies, the biggest of which was Read Brothers, who were based in the warehouse under the station.

Another of the well-known breweries sending beer to St Pancras was Thomas Salt, who had a sampling room on the east side of the station, where wholesalers could taste the beers. Thomas Salt was subsequently taken over by Bass.

From around 1910 onwards breweries were beginning to use motorised vehicles rather than horses. As this accelerated, so breweries began to realise that they could transport beer directly from Burton to customers in London and by the 1950s rail traffic was only a quarter of what it had been. By 1964 the 'beer by rail' business had stopped completely, and the Midland Railway had lost one of their most profitable income streams.

If you'd like more information as to why beer from Burton-on-Trent has always been so popular, there's an [excellent article here](#).

After just 50 yards on your right, don't miss the wonderful **statue of Sir John Betjeman**. He was a conservationist and Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom from 1972 until his death in 1984. He is acknowledged as having played the leading role in saving this beautiful building.

I just love the statue! Created by sculptor Martin Jennings and placed here when the station reopened in 2007, it is a public monument to a poet and conservationist who gave so much pleasure to so many. In the years since, the statue has become a celebrated London landmark and regularly a site for poetry readings, weddings and other celebratory events. It depicts Sir Betjeman walking into the new station for the first time. His coat tails are billowing as if buffeted by the wind of a passing express train – although this is of course a terminus! In his hand he holds what is said to be a hemp basket from Billingsgate fish market containing a collection of his favourite books.

He is leaning back, holding onto his hat and looking up in awe at the great architectural spans of the station shed's roof above him. It is said this was something he often did as it always took his breath away. In the frieze around the bottom of the statue and in the surrounding discs are titles and excerpts from his poetry.

Sir John Betjeman is regarded as being one of the principal people involved in saving the station from demolition – and I'm also a fan of his poetry.

It was Betjeman's son-in-law, Rupert Lycett Green, who advised the sculptor Martin Jennings on all the 'tailoring quirks', which he then skilfully incorporated, including his shabby appearance. Notice how Benjamin's shoelace and scruffy collar are undone – he has knotted string for one shoelace and his right trouser leg is lower at the back.

The statue stands on a disc of Cumbrian slate inscribed with Betjeman's name and dates. Round the rim you can see the words Jennings chose from Betjeman's poem 'Cornish Cliffs' that could almost be referring to the sunlight streaming through the blue-painted ribs of the station roof and down onto trains emerging from tunnelled darkness:

"And in the shadowless, unclouded glare
Deep blue above us fades to whiteness where
A misty sea-line meets the wash of air."

Surrounding the statue and base is a series of satellite discs of various sizes set into the floor and hand-inscribed by Jennings with quotations from Betjeman's poetry, but without their titles. Jennings said: "I wanted texts that have a particular meaning but also point to something bigger, so some hint at the joy of trains and travel and stations and architecture, some the seascapes at

the other ends of the lines, and one or two the feelings of yearning associated with stations and life.”

Martin Jennings has created statues of other literary celebrities too, including George Orwell, Charles Dickens and Philip Larkin.

The station hosts the Betjeman Poetry Prize each year. The event aims to foster creativity in young people and is held in conjunction with local schools. It attracts around 3,000 entries from young poets across the country. Past events have included poetry buskers, a poetry workshop and the actual Betjeman Poetry Prize ceremony.

Unless you wish to enjoy a glass of ‘bubbly’ at **Searcy’s Champagne Bar**, which I mentioned a moment ago, continue on towards the end of the elevated walkway, until the East Midland Railway platform entrances are in front of you, then take the escalator down.

Turn back on yourself and walk towards the entrances to the **Thameslink** trains. These run from Luton and Bedford beneath London and onwards to Gatwick and Brighton,

Turn right, passing the National Rail **ticket and enquiry office** on your left and after more cafes and shops, ahead of you is the exit.

Just before the exit on the left are the escalators and lifts that take you up to the new part of the station which has the **Southeastern** platforms, offering high-speed services to destinations in Kent.

Useless fact

St Pancras is said to be one of only seven stations in England to have multilingual signs, actually only in English and French, like Ashford in Kent, the other main station on the route to the continent. And in case you are interested, which I’m sure you aren’t really, the others with bilingual signs are Southall in west London, where there are signs in Punjabi; Wallsend Metro, which has a sign in Latin, (apparently because of its proximity to the end of the Roman-built Hadrian’s Wall); Hereford with signs in Welsh, whilst Moreton-in-Marsh has signs in Japanese, due to the popularity of the Cotswolds with Japanese tourists.

LEAVING THE STATION

As you leave the station the stock-brick frontage facing you across **Pancras Road** is part of the **German Gymnasium**, which I’ll explain about shortly. Cross over to the **‘giant birdcage structure’** – (if you look back at the station you can see the sheer size of the original building, including to the rear the extension built for the Southeastern railway terminus).

You are now in **Battle Bridge Place**, so named because near here was a bridge over the River Fleet (now buried underground) where it is dubiously said Queen Boadicea (nowadays called Boudica) fought her last battle with the Romans – and lost. Even less credibly, she is alleged to have been buried under platform 9 or 10 in King’s Cross station, which we pass shortly.

But first, the **giant birdcage**. This 29-foot-high structure is called the ‘IFO’ – The **Identified Flying Object** (note the lack of ‘Un’ in front!). It was designed in 2011 by Jacques Rival, a French artist and architect and was only meant to be here for two years. However, such was its popularity it has become a semi-permanent exhibit, with the swing that hangs in the middle regularly used – and by all ages!

A rough translation of Jacque Rival's website explains that he 'designs objects with or without explicit uses, including for urban installations, architecture and interior design'.

The publicity for the IFO says that at night it's 'dressed by a luminous rainbow, evoking a cage that floats in the winds, letting the birds pass freely, when it was suspended between heaven and earth, to come and capture the convivial moments and the passer-by, enjoying the urban kiosk'. (These words aren't mine! They come from the Jacques Rival website).

The explanation adds that it took its inspiration from the German Gymnasium opposite, (which I explain next), where 'training ropes were thrown into the sky of the sports hall'.

Technically, it is a work of sculptural art by Jacques Rival, called "IFO (Identified Flying Object)", but it's simply "the birdcage swing" to many. The swing is particularly attractive at night, when it's illuminated, with the bars lit up in the colours of the rainbow.

Before we move on, I'll say a little more about the **German Gymnasium**. It's certainly had a distinctive history.

It was built as a gymnasium in the early 1860s by the German community living in London. And in 1865 it was one of the venues for a series of indoor athletic contests, which were a forerunner to the modern Olympic Games. It was one of the first purpose-built gyms and one of the first athletic clubs in Britain to hold classes for women – and that was back in 1866!

The building has been Grade II listed though part of it had to be demolished for the widening of Pancras Road, as part of the construction of the new St Pancras rail terminal. Not used as a gymnasium since the 1930s, it has since been offices, arts and exhibition space and now a very popular restaurant.

The German Gymnasium was constructed between 1864 and 1865 as the first purpose-built gym in England and cost £6,000. It was the idea of the German Gymnastic Society, founded by the German-born cartographer and geographer Ernst Ravenstein in 1861. He was a member of the triumvirate behind the creation of the National Olympian Games in 1866.

The indoor games continued here until 1908, after which they were moved to the White City venue. Some of the sports that took place here included the long forgotten Indian club swinging and broadsword practice.

The club must have been forward looking, as when it opened the Patent Gas Economiser Company installed 600 gas lights, something quite revolutionary at the time. The main exercise hall was a grand and elegant space with a floor to ceiling height of 57ft, and the vast laminated timber roof trusses with their original cast iron hooks from which budding Olympian athletes once swung from ropes, are still in place today.

Next we pay a quick visit to **King's Cross station**. The station itself is quite simple and built of brick without any facing – nothing like as grand as St Pancras next door – they simply didn't have the money. In 2005 the huge renovation started, to refurbish the station and add more platforms.

We enter through the doorway on the far left (to the left of the wide stepped entrance that leads down to the Underground lines). This left-hand entrance leads you into the rear of the new part of the station. Pass the new platforms 9 and 10 (beneath which Queen Boadicea is improbably said to have been buried).

Immediately ahead of you (usually hidden behind a waiting crowd) is Platform 9¾ – made famous of course by the Harry Potter books. There's nearly always a queue of people waiting to have their photo taken pushing the luggage trolley through the wall and onto the fictitious platform. (There is a Harry Potter gift shop here as well).

Ahead you can see what an amazing job the architects have done in creating this new spacious extension on the outside of what was the original exterior wall of the station. The new spectacular glass and steel 'half semi-circular roof' opened in 2012. The designers described it as a 'striking new 'diagrid' shell structure ... supported by perimeter tree columns and a central funnel structure.' This means it is structurally independent of the Grade I listed building and is the largest single-span structure in Europe. In total, around £500 million was said to have been spent on the renovations.

And if you'd like to see the original King's Cross station, which has also been renovated, then continue almost to the far end, and just before the exit, turn left. You can walk along the passageway to the far side of the station to the original platforms 1 and 2. From here you can see the wonderful arched roof, which when the station opened was said to be the biggest such arch in the world and modelled on the riding stables of the Czars of Moscow.

The legendary Flying Scotsman train used to depart from here every morning at 10am. One of the responsibilities of the station master was to be there in person to see it off, wearing his formal suit and top hat to do so.

On a more serious note, sadly the station has had two tragic events in recent years – an IRA bomb in 1973 and then the terrible fire in the tube station beneath that was started by a cigarette being dropped under one of the escalators. Many people died and many more seriously injured.

(You can step outside the station if you'd like to see the renovated exterior and the attractive area outside that's often used for markets, etc.)

The idea of a railway line from London to York was first proposed in 1827. Besides the advantage to people who previously would have had to travel by stagecoach, coal from the mines in the north-east was already highly valuable and indispensable. By the early 19th century, it was being brought to London by sea, then put on to barges at Limehouse on the River Thames, where it would be brought along the Regent's Canal to King's Cross. It has been calculated that by the 1820s over two million tons were being transported this way each year, rising to three million by the 1840s. The journey would often take two or more weeks.

The attraction of being able to bring it to London far more cheaply and quickly by rail was a major attraction to businessmen, and by 1846 the London & York Bill had received its royal assent.¹ However, there was great opposition from wealthy landowners within London to the idea of any railway coming into the city. As a result, a statute was passed saying that no railway could come any further into London than what was then called the New Road, the city's northern boundary. Today 'New Road' is the Euston Road, and this is the reason why four of the major railway termini are situated on or close to this road – King's Cross, St Pancras, Euston and Marylebone.

¹ 1846 was the year of 'railway mania', with 272 Acts of Parliament permitting railway companies to build new lines. This resulted in such frenzied financial speculation that later that year the market for railway shares collapsed, resulting in thousands of people losing vast sums of money.

With the GNR selecting King's Cross for its terminus, the passing of the Bill enabled the company to demolish various buildings to enable the station to be built.

When the GNR reached London in 1850 only a temporary wooden station was open to the north of the current site. The King's Cross station we see today was designed by Lewis Cubitt to be simple and functional. It was built on the site of a smallpox and fever hospital and opened in 1852 and was then the largest railway station in Britain. There were two train sheds, both 800 feet long, 105 feet wide and 71 feet high. There were just two platforms – one on the west side for departures, and one on the east for arrivals. In the middle there were additional platforms for the storage and movement of the locomotives and carriages. On the east side (nearest to St Pancras station) were the waiting and refreshment rooms, ticket offices and the company's offices and boardroom.

Trains reached the station via a tunnel under the Regent's Canal, but as demand increased, so a new tunnel and additional railway lines were constructed. As passenger traffic continued to grow, so the station continued to struggle to cope, and since 2000 many millions of pounds have been spent on renovations and extensions, some of which I have already explained.

Leave the station the same way you came in and walk back to the **Identified Flying Object** and walk to the right of the **German Gymnasium**.

You'll see the paths split here – whilst the right-hand fork (King's Boulevard) goes up past Platform G, the huge new Google building on your right, **we take the narrower left path**, passing the lovely oak tree that was grown in a nursery in Hamburg and brought here by lorry and ferry.

The tree is currently around 50 feet tall but will continue to grow and, for those who are interested in trees, it is a *Quercus palustris* – otherwise known as a pin oak. When it arrived, it weighed over 11 tons and it took a 55-ton crane and six men to put it in position. It is said to be one of over 400 mature trees to be planted within the new King's Cross development.

Although we don't walk past the Google building, a few words about it: This enormous new office building is over 1,000 feet long (if the Shard was laid alongside, the Google building would be slightly longer) and known by the design team as a 'landscaper', as it gets most of its size by stretching horizontally, rather than vertically.

Costing over a billion pounds, with eleven storeys providing over a million square feet of space, it has a possible capacity of up to 7,000 staff. However, despite its size, this is actually just one of three Google offices in London. Google say they currently employ over 6,000 staff in the UK, and this is expected to grow to 10,000 in the future.

The building's roof features a panoramic landscaped garden, and 40,000 tons of soil were lifted on to the roof before 250 trees were planted.

This garden is just one of the many benefits for staff, particularly those health-conscious, as there's also a rooftop exercise walking track, a 25-metre swimming pool on the ninth floor and a multi-use games area where five-a-side football, basketball or tennis can be played. Oh, and just in case that rather wears staff out, there are 'nap-pods' as well for having a little sleep.

Hopefully, these staff will manage to find some time in the day to work!

Local residents are not forgotten, as they will have a 'community space' and, in case anyone is concerned that there aren't enough shops in the area, there are retail outlets on the ground floor.

It's all been designed by the Thomas Heatherwick studios and the BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group), who've also been responsible for Google's new campus in 'Silicon Valley' in California.

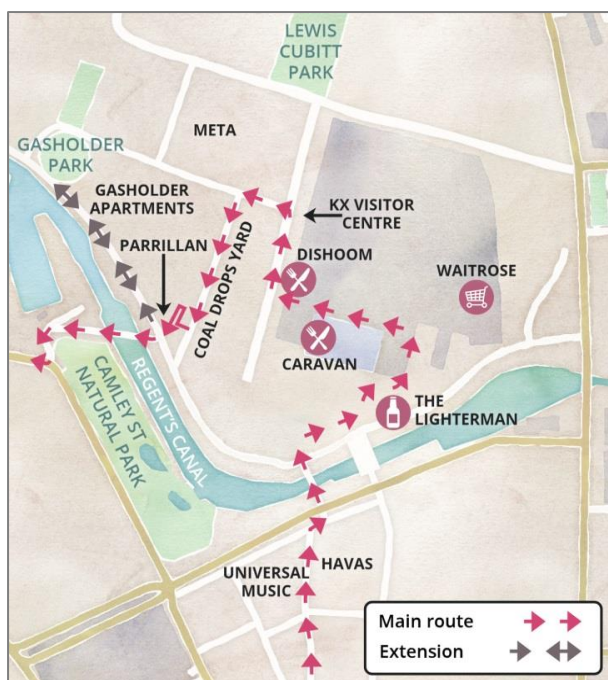
And for those interested in the technical stuff, four-fifths of the building is hung from its steel frame, with the result that there are no internal weight-bearing columns or pillars inside. This allows for a much more open-plan layout than would otherwise be the case. The building has the world's biggest timber and glass façade, which was produced in Germany.

We continue to the left of the tall building fronted by eight latticed iron pillars with the Vinoteca bar and restaurant at ground level.

To the left of Granger & Co. is the **Stanley Buildings**. This is all that is left of the five buildings that once accommodated over a hundred of the families of men and women who were working here. They were built in the 1860s by the Industrial Dwelling Company and were some of the earliest examples of concrete being used in building construction.

You are now in Pancras Square, though to me it's not really a square – more of a triangle – and carry on walking ahead. One of the delights of Pancras Square are the flowers, plants and mini hedges. The water features are particularly attractive; a series of stepped terraces using Caithness stone that are particularly attractive at night when illuminated with white lights.

With two major rail stations on the doorstep, offering excellent transport links around the country, as well as into Europe, and with a vast array of leisure and entertainment facilities on their doorstep, a number of companies have chosen to build new offices here. Besides the enormous Google building we've just seen, there's another, smaller one on the left. As you walk up, between the cafes, you will see its entrance.



Route map 2

Continue walking up the right-hand side, passing the new offices of **Universal Music**. A ten-storey block, it was built on the site of the largest gasholder of the 23 that were once at King's Cross. As a result, the architects have used exposed weathering steel, giving it a passing nod to the gasholder. As part of the redevelopment of the area, the gasholder was taken down and erected on a new site, which we see later in the walk.

The building has spectacular roof gardens and ponds, with two restaurants and a large reception area on the ground floor. On the right, is the **Havas** building (one of the world's largest communication groups).

At the top, cross over the road known as **Goods Yard** and carry on over the recently constructed bridge. It was named the **Espérance Bridge** by the children of the nearby King's Cross Academy primary school, who had learnt that it was close to what was once the 'Esperance Club' and the 'Maison Espérance'.

Espérance means 'Hope' in French, which is what the children – both then and I'm sure now – still want. It was a 'pioneering social project that had been set up in the 1890s to help relieve poverty in the area by providing education for girls and to teach them skills to assist their employment opportunities'. It was also a dressmaking co-operative that helped the extremely poor women who were working in the clothing industry in the area.

The Espérance had been set up by two ladies, Sister Mary Neal and her lifelong friend Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. They had become disenchanted with the Church of England's religious restrictions, and became involved in the West London Mission, which was founded in 1887 as a Methodist response to the appalling state of British slums. They formed the 'Espérance Club' and the 'Maison Espérance', one of the aims being to help relieve the poverty in the area by providing an education for the many young girls from poor families in the area and teaching them skills.

I will also mention something that I'm sure won't be of interest to many, but as a result of the dance activities in the club, Mary Neal became fascinated by the old English folk songs and dances which at the time were being collected by Cecil Sharp. She invited traditional dancers to teach Morris dancing to the young women of the club, which evolved into a women's organisation called the New Esperance Morris.

Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence later became very involved in the women's movement and became a leading suffragette activist.

The Espérance footbridge spans 25m over the Regent's Canal, from the Goods Way pavement to an elevated corner of Granary Square. Clearance requirements dictated an 'above deck' structure and the desire for openness favoured a truss form. This could have resulted in a very basic appearance but it was instead given a sculptured style 'with an emphasis on craft and the expression of structural forces'.

There's been a bridge here across the **Regent's Canal** since the canal was constructed in the 1820s. That bridge was replaced by a stronger bridge to allow trains to bring coal from the mainline through to coal works closer to King's Cross station. This second bridge was taken down in the 1920s when rail freight began to decline and the one you see today has only recently replaced it.

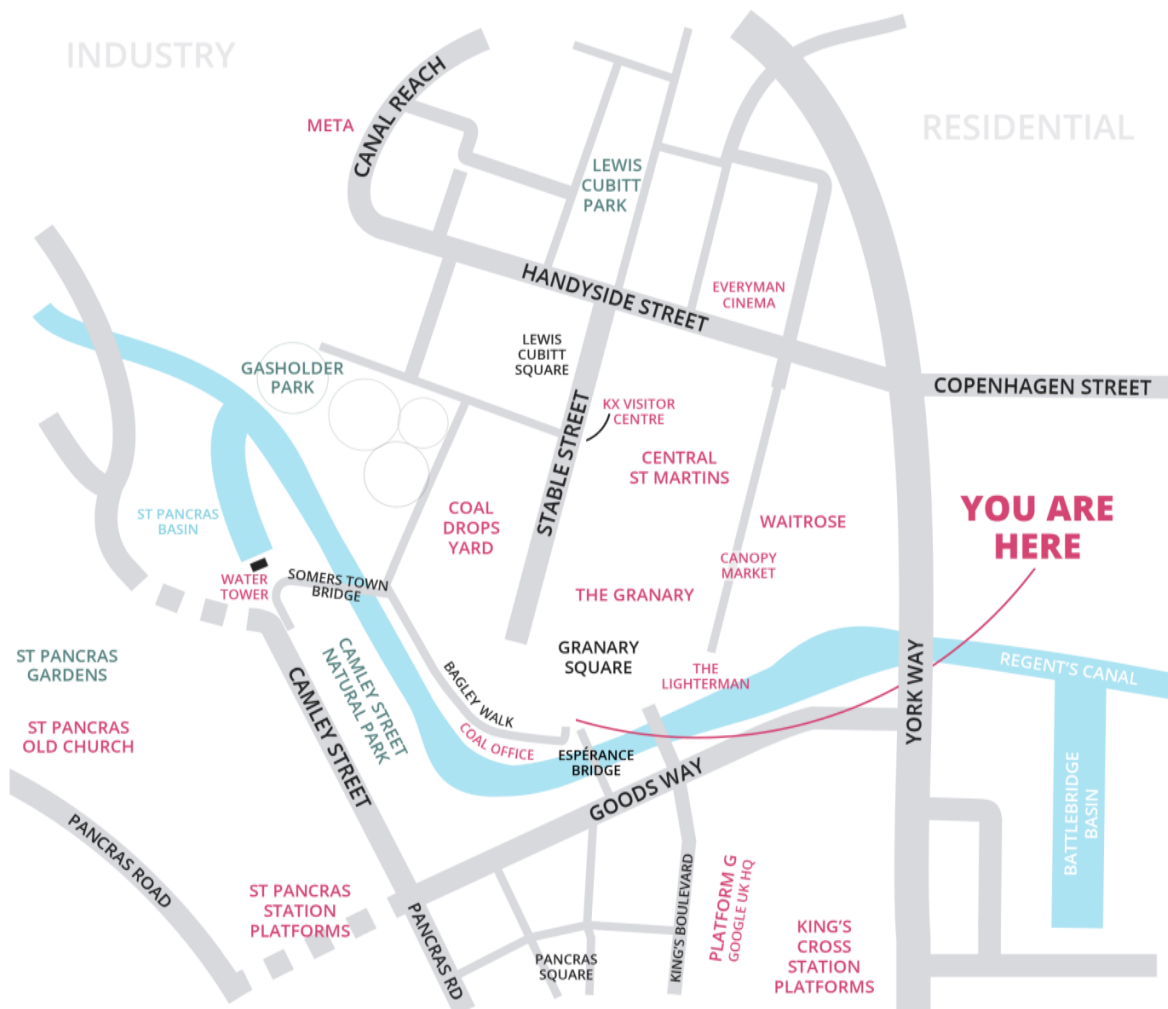
The Regent's Canal runs for nine miles from Paddington in west London, where it has links to the Grand Union Canal, and ends in the east at Limehouse, on the River Thames. It enabled freight,

such as coal, to be brought by ship up the Thames, offloaded at Limehouse and transferred onto barges, and brought along the canal to King's Cross.

As you cross over the canal on your left you can see what were the brick-built **Fish and Coal Buildings**, which have now been restored. These were the offices of the clerks responsible for keeping tally of the goods arriving here. (On the other side of the building you can just make out the wording 'Coal office'). The building was seriously damaged by fire and rebuilt and is now the head office of Tom Dixon, the designer, known for his innovative lighting and furniture. You get a better view of it once you've crossed the bridge.

On your right are a series of canal-side steps which, in the summer at least, are covered with artificial grass making it an attractive and popular place to sit, particularly on warm summer afternoons and evenings. Various outdoor music and other performances take place here, and a large screen is erected for regular cinema events. These include the showing of major sporting events, such as the Wimbledon tennis championships. Drinks are often served here as well. I will just say that it is sometimes humorously known by locals as the King's Cross Riviera!

Before you go any further, I suggest you pause for a moment to get your bearings.



On your left the inclined road leads down to the newly redeveloped **Coal Drops Yard** – you can see the building from here and the gasholders, both of which we visit shortly.

Ahead is **Granary Square**, so named because the large brick building on the opposite side was built as a granary in 1852. Here trains from Lincolnshire and East Anglia would bring wheat from farms to be stored before being sold to London's bakers. More on this in a moment. Another major crop brought here was potatoes, which had their own storage warehouses.

- Among the more unusual food items brought by train to King's Cross were quails.
- Quails were a highly popular delicacy, and demand regularly outstripped supply. However, stocks were plentiful in Africa and each summer enormous flocks of quails would head north to Europe and Russia.
- Before they crossed the Mediterranean, they would often rest in Egypt. Here they were caught in enormous nets in their thousands and placed in coops, each accommodating around a hundred birds.
- After being fed and watered they were loaded onto fast steamships, each carrying around 100,000 birds, and taken to Manchester.
- At Manchester they were put onto trains, where experienced staff would look after them en route. On arrival at King's Cross, they were fattened on millet for a day or so, collectively eating about a ton a day.

The square was originally a water-filled canal basin. Barges would enter from the canal and pass into the Granary building where they would be directly loaded with goods from trains. (Two lines came into the rear of the building) – an excellent example of how efficient the distribution of goods here had become).

We're going to head across to the Granary, which has the popular **Caravan restaurant** on the left-hand side of the front, passing the lovely fountains, a popular highlight of the square. There are four banks of fountains, containing over 1,000 jets, all with individual pumps and coloured lights. It can be great fun to watch children running in and out of the jets, not knowing which ones would suddenly spring into life, whilst others would almost disappear.

Apparently, the fountains were also linked to an 'app' called the 'Granary Squirt' which allowed those who downloaded on to their smartphone to play a real-time version of the computer game 'Snake'. However, the app is not currently in use.

Walk to the right of the Granary, passing the **The Lighterman** bar and restaurant – extremely popular in the summer, especially as it overlooks the canal. (A lighterman was somebody who would unload ships or barges – thus making it lighter – and transferring it to a small barge or onto the quayside. Many were employed at this very busy canal interchange.)

As you walk between the Granary and the Lighterman notice the railway track still set in the ground and the 'turntable' that allowed individual railway wagons to be rotated.

Walk down the side of the Granary and on your left is the wide entrance into the building, which we turn into next.

But first I'll just mention the building on the right. This was called **Regeneration House** and was once the offices of the Goods Yard and responsible for the moving of freight across the yards. Badly damaged by bombing in the Second World War, it was rebuilt by the London Regeneration Consortium and is now the home of the **Art Fund**, the charity responsible for fundraising to help museums and galleries to purchase works of art. It is also the home of Queer Britain's national LGBTQ museum.

The area ahead under the restored steel and glass canopy was the **Eastern Transit Shed** (the Western Shed was on the other side). In addition, whilst King's Cross station was still being built, it was turned into a temporary station to enable Queen Victoria to travel by train to Scotland. After the main station had opened, it was where fish, potatoes and other perishable foodstuff would arrive by train and be unloaded. Until the canopy roof was installed the amount of vegetables that could be handled was limited, and it helped protect both the food and the men who were unloading. Perishable produce such as vegetables had to reach Covent Garden in the early hours, and the hours before dawn were always very busy here. (To give you an idea of the size of the vegetable trade, around 100,000 tons of potatoes would arrive at King's Cross each year!)

Special fish trains also ran here as early as 1852 from as far north as Sunderland and Edinburgh. A major staple were herrings, either fresh, salted or smoked. Later, express goods trains, which ran at passenger train speeds, came from Aberdeen, Hull and Grimsby, which were then the major east coast fishing ports. These would arrive at King's Cross throughout the night and be transported as quickly as possible to the Billingsgate Fish Market. (Fish was sold here on Sundays when Billingsgate was closed).

Milk also became an important commodity. Before the railways, most of London's fresh milk came from farms on the capital's immediate outskirts or from local dairy shops that kept cows in back yards or indoors, or even in cellars.

However, by 1890 the railways were bringing in 84 per cent of the liquid milk consumed, rising to 96 per cent in 1910. Milk consumption had increased from about 6 gallons per head per year in 1850 to 21 gallons in 1910, each Londoner consuming nearly half a pint a day.

As a result, milk increasingly became important for the Great Northern Railway. In 1884 King's Cross dealt with 44,273 churns (a churn held 10 gallons). Special sidings were built at King's Cross in 1893 for the milk trade, and by 1910 about 250,000 milk churns were being delivered each year – four or five special milk trains ran every day with many other wagons attached to ordinary trains. The milk platform was formed with a low area so that trucks could be backed directly alongside rail wagons for the transfer of milk churns.

The area is now used for markets, particularly the **Canopy Market** on Sundays, when a wide range of stalls are set up here, several selling excellent and interesting food.

The building across on the right inside the covered area was the Midlands Goods Shed and now a **Waitrose** supermarket. I like the way in which they have managed to retain just a little of the evidence of the building's previous use, such as the few faded painted signs on the walls. Waitrose has an excellent café area and toilets, should you be in need of either.

Turn now into the Granary through the entrance on the side and into the long 'corridor'.

The Granary was built by Lewis Cubitt in 1852, who also built King's Cross station, to enable grain, primarily from Lincolnshire and East Anglia, to be stored. It would be brought here by train and the sacks would either be stored on the floors above or put into the waiting adjacent canal barges or horse-drawn wagons.

If it was stored here, then it would be raised up by hydraulic power, then when it was needed, a system of chutes enabled it to be moved down through the floors and into the waiting delivery carts below. Around 60,000 sacks, holding 5,000 tons of grain which would make some nine million loaves of bread, could be stored here, to be sold to London's bakers.

The building has been cleverly renovated and restructured to be the home of the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.

Walk through this long indoor passageway that runs from one end of the building to the other. The conversion from grain store to college has been cleverly carried out, with several restored original features – notice the faded painted numbers on the walls beside what would have been the canals or roads that ran into and through the building from the basin outside.

Part way along on the left there's an exhibition space where students' work is sometimes on display, whilst on the right you can see the student's entrance into the university. You need a pass to enter, but you can see a central 'street', with overhead walkways. The lecture theatres, workshops and student communal areas are on either side. This clever design allows a freedom of movement that makes it easier for students of the various departments to mix and share ideas.

The original Saint Martin's School of Art was founded in 1854, under the responsibility of St Martin-in-the-Fields, in central London. In 1989 it merged with the Central School of Art and Design, to become the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.

Now part of the University of the Arts London, it moved to its King's Cross location in 2011, with around 5,000 students and staff. It is considered one of the most prestigious of its kind in the world and boasts a glittering roster of alumni, including fashion designers Stella McCartney, Alexander McQueen and John Galiano, singers Jarvis Cocker and Paloma Faith, composer Lionel Bart, painter Lucian Freud and sculptor Antony Gormley.

And in case there are any punk fans reading this, I'll just mention that the Sex Pistols' first live show took place in the the top-floor Common Room of the old Saint Martin's building on 6th November 1975. Around thirty people were in attendance. The gig was arranged by the band's bassist, Glen Matlock, who studied at the college.

Leave the building through the exit at the far end – in front of you is the newly renovated **Coal Drops Yard**, which we visit shortly. Turn right along **Stable Street**. Until the era of motorised lorries, huge numbers of horses were used to move goods around on carts, and the street is named after one of the places where the stables were built. At one time the Great Northern Railway was one of the largest owners of horses in Britain and by the beginning of the 20th century they were said to have over 1,500. The company had a reputation for both the quality and well-being of the horses, which even had their own infirmary to deal with injuries or illnesses.

A few doors along is the **Dishoom** Indian restaurant where, as with their other restaurants in London, there is invariably a queue to get in. The restaurant was originally one of the stables.

Next is the **KX Visitor Centre and Recruitment Office** – they have an amazing model of the entire King's Cross development site, which you can look in to see. They also have information leaflets on the area, as well as postcards and posters like the ones below.

When you reach the end, or front, of the **Coal Drops building** turn left. There are two separate flights of steps. The first, a narrow flight takes you down to where there were more stables, which now house several little shops and cafes.

We're going to walk down the second, wide flight of steps into the Coal Drops Yard.

Before you do though, I'll just mention that the wide-open space to your right is **Lewis Cubitt Square**, leading into **Lewis Cubitt Park**. Cubitt was the builder of King's Cross station and much of the original industrial area you are in. From here you also get another idea of the size of this brownfield redevelopment area.

The office building on the left side of **Lewis Cubitt Square** is the second, and smaller, of the two new Meta buildings within the King's Cross development. (For those who are not familiar with the name 'Meta', it is the holding company of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and other divisions.) With nine floors and a wraparound terrace on the fifth floor, it provides just under 200,000 square feet of office space.

Also, you can see the enormous, redeveloped gasholders, which I'll explain more about shortly.

The section in front of you, which links the two sides of the long brick and cast-iron sheds, is known as the '**kissing roofs**'. They are called that as they only just seem to touch. They were designed by Thomas Heatherwick, the architect appointed for the three-year £100 million redevelopment of the yard. He brought in 80,000 slate tiles from the same Welsh quarry as used on the 1850 original covered roof. Indeed, as you'll see when you walk through the yard, wherever possible use has been made of the original brick and iron work to try and keep as much of the original heritage as possible. Within the bridge space is a 20,000 square foot **Samsung 'experience space'**, displaying products such as mobile phones, watches, etc.

When the King's Cross redevelopment plan was being put together, it was decided not to demolish but to renovate this yard and convert it into the design-led retail and nightlife area we see today. (There were other similar Coal Drops Yards – for example one was on the site of Camley Street Natural Park, which we pass shortly, but this is the only one that has been kept).

Among the shops within the yard are a couple that enable students from the adjacent Saint Martins Art and Design College to have affordable retail outlets to test whether their work has commercial potential. There are also several commendable bars and restaurants, as well as excellent toilets.

In the 19th century, coal was increasingly in great demand by factories and to heat homes. It soon began to be used to produce gas, for street lighting and later for lighting in homes. Factories began using gas rather than coal. Then it wasn't long before electricity was introduced, with generating stations also needing vast quantities of coal to power them.

Much of the coal used in London came from the coalfields in north-east England, and before the railway era it was brought down to London by ship and unloaded on quaysides along the River Thames. When the Regent's Canal opened, linking Limehouse on the Thames through to Paddington, the coal would be transferred to barges to be brought through to the growing industrial areas such as King's Cross. From here it would be distributed across London by horse drawn cart and later by lorries as well.

As railway lines were opened through and from the mining areas in Yorkshire, County Durham and Northumberland, coal could be brought directly to King's Cross, which was far quicker and cheaper than by ship and canal. (Interestingly, in those early days, freight was considerably more profitable and therefore more important to the railway company than passengers.)

Millions of tons of coal were arriving at King's Cross and so in the 1850s, a clever system was devised of a raised railway track, with gaps between the rails, which enabled coal to be literally 'dropped' into the waiting carts and trucks below. Hence the name 'Coal Drops Yard'.

The yard was an enormous construction of two huge slate roofed buildings with long, thin 'sheds' on either side that diverged, to become over a hundred feet apart at the far end. Each side, or arm, was made up of a 'viaduct' designed so railway wagons full of coal would arrive and the floor of each would tilt to open, enabling the coal to drop down into the waiting horse-drawn carts below. (Originally the wagons were lifted and tipped, but they were later fitted with trapdoors in their floors.)

These carts would then deliver the coal to the growing number of gasworks, factories and later the electricity generating stations that were being built at King's Cross because of the availability of coal arriving here. Coal merchants would also come here to collect supplies to be delivered to homes across London.

As the use of coal declined during the 20th century the Coal Drops and many of the related industrial buildings were no longer needed for their original purpose. The disused yard became a storage warehouse for a north-country glass manufacturer called Bagley's and when they moved out there was no further use for them and they rapidly became derelict.

However, when the era of 'raves' arrived in the 1980s, what better place to hold such loud, raucous events than in these buildings, well away from any residential dwellings?

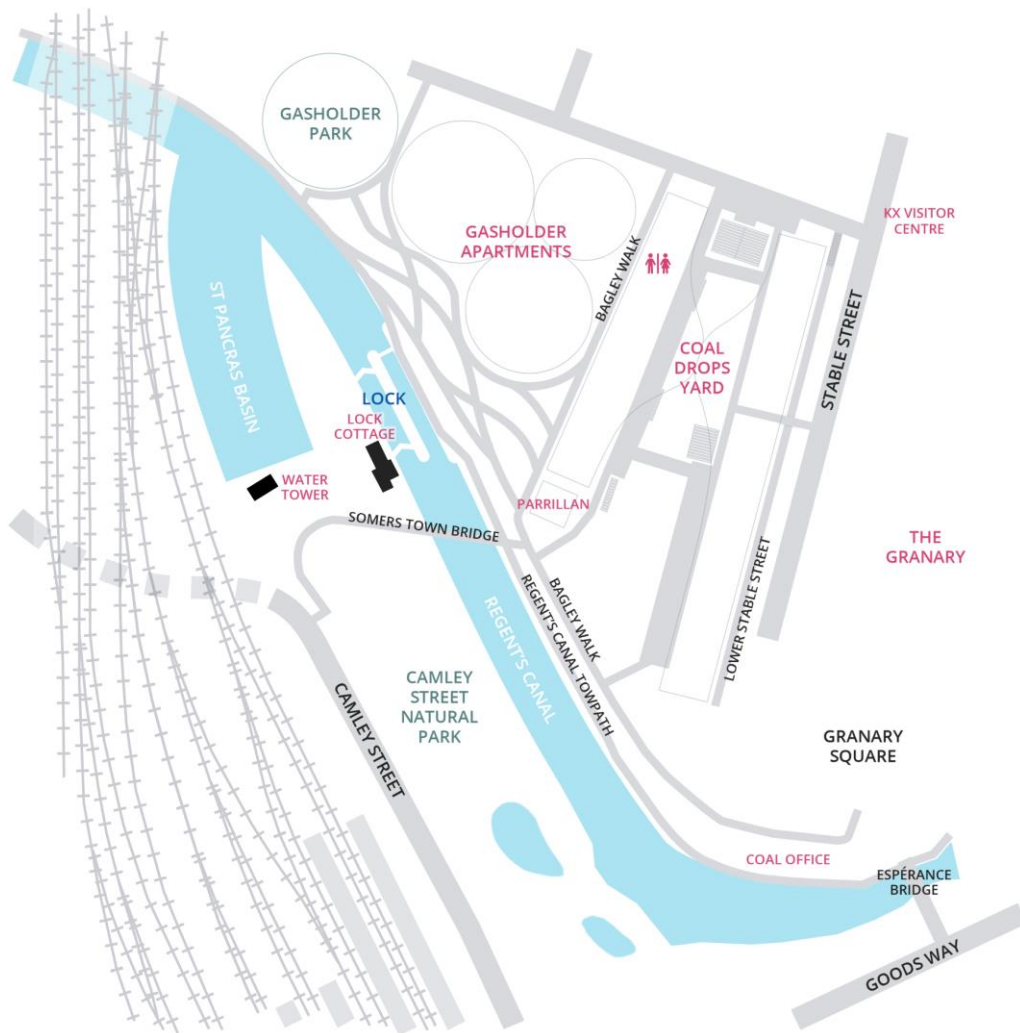
Attracting up to 10,000 people at weekends, they became an institution, although an illegal one, for many of London's young people. Indeed, they hosted what were said to have been the world's biggest rave parties. Such was the popularity of Bagley's that 'secret bashes' were held here by stars such as Prince, Massive Attack, Depeche Mode, the Rolling Stones, Grace Jones and many more. Even the famous fashion designer Alexander McQueen held his 1995 spring fashion show here.

An article for *The Spectator* said, "In 1988-9, British youth culture underwent the biggest revolution since the 1960s. The music was acid house, the drug was ecstasy."

These wild parties weren't just held in Bagley's. Another very popular club here was The Cross, whilst others were held in a disused bus depot, an old school building and other abandoned warehouses.

In 2008, and after 25 years of wild and sometimes hedonistic nights, the redevelopment of the area began and they finally closed down. *Time Out* commented on Bagley's that it had offered "some of the best nightlife in London."

On the right side at the far end where the yard widens, you'll see a double-arched opening between two shops. Go through here and you're on the bank of the Regent's Canal. (In this, and the other archways that are now shops, was The Cross nightclub, which I've mentioned above). On the other side of the canal you can see Camley Street Natural Park, which we see again shortly. Within the double-arches there are time-line history plaques.



Walk back just a few yards into the yard and take the iron steps on the left to the upper level. Then turn back on yourself, walk past the attractive alfresco **Parrillan** Spanish restaurant. (Parrilla means 'grill' in Spanish and you can grill your order of meat, seafood and vegetables on mini charcoal grills with white-hot charcoal coals that are brought to your table. I've walked past so many times, but still never at a time when I'm ready to eat, but it's high on my to-do list.)

The walk will continue ahead over the bridge that crosses the **Regent's Canal** – but first I suggest you turn to the right and walk down the path to take a closer look at **Gasholder Park**.

Today we can light and heat our homes, take a hot bath and cook our food all at the flick of a switch. But it wasn't always so easy. Before the 1800s, light came from candles or oil lamps, food was cooked on fires or ranges fuelled by wood and coal, and for those lucky enough to enjoy a hot bath, this was laboriously filled by pots and kettles of water heated on the stove.

In 1792 the Scottish engineer and inventor William Murdoch made an extraordinary discovery which would transform not only lighting, heating and cooking, but all sorts of other activity and industry. Experimenting in his back garden in Cornwall, he found a way to produce gas by

heating coal in a closed container and collecting and cleaning the smoke. He stored the gas in a large container and piped it into his house to make the first gas lights.

Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th gas became ever more widely used: lighting streets, factories and homes, fuelling cookers, gas fires, boilers, and more unusual items such as irons, fridges – even radios.

The first works to make gas commercially was the Imperial Gas Light and Coke Company, which had been formed in 1812. The company produced town gas, used for street lighting and later for use in homes in much of London. By the mid-19th century, attracted by the ready supply of coal, initially by barge, but later by rail, others soon joined them.

Once made, the gas needed to be stored before being supplied to customers, so the enormous 'gasholders' or 'gasometers' as they are sometimes called, were built. Constructed of a cast iron framework, with an 'envelope' inside that would rise or fall depending on the amount of gas stored within.

For a while the gasworks at King's Cross were the biggest in the world, with twenty-three of these gasholders dominating the landscape.

The by-products of making gas included ash, coke, sulphur, tar and ammonia, and this meant that companies using these by-products also began opening here. The adjacent canal and railway made it easier for finished goods to be transported elsewhere.

All this activity was a major part of the reason for King's Cross becoming such a huge industrial site, with enormous railway yards, factories, warehouses, etc. However, the final nail in the coffin for the gasworks and gasholders was the discovery of natural gas under the North Sea in 1965.

Gasholder Park is another of the amazing architectural and engineering feats that have made the renovation of King's Cross so successful.

There were originally 23 gasholders at King's Cross, with all but four being demolished over time. The four that were 'saved' were Number 8, which was the largest of all the gasholders at King's Cross, along with Numbers 10, 11 and 12. The regeneration projects' architects and developers decided to make a feature of them and in 2011 they were carefully dismantled and taken to the specialist Shepley engineering company in Yorkshire for restoration.

They were returned here two years later and, cleverly, three were put back as the 'Siamese triplets' as they share a common spine. They are now home to 145 attractive apartments, surrounded by 123 iron columns. And notice the different heights of each of the buildings. This was done to emphasise how the gas 'envelopes' would rise and fall with the amount of gas being stored. I would love to stay in one of these apartments, especially one with a south-facing view.

Next to them is the original iron guide frame of **Gasholder No. 8**, which previously stood where Pancras Square has been built today, which we walked through earlier – hard to imagine today! Before it was decommissioned in 2000, Number 8 was able to hold just over one million cubic feet of gas. It now encloses the **Gasholder Park**, a public space where music and other events take place. A particular feature is the mirrored pergola surrounding the central garden. Attached to each of the iron columns are the guide rails for the 'roller carriages' (which are still in place) upon which the canopy would rise or fall, depending on the amount of gas being stored.

And I will just add that when the gasholders were dismantled, they discovered that each column was bolted together from the inside – and as an adult could never have managed to have fitted inside, it was clear that small children had been sent up inside them to tighten the bolts.

If you visit after dark, then you are supposed to be able to watch a ‘solar eclipse’ every 20 minutes. (I say ‘supposed’, as I personally have never seen it). It was described in the Architect Magazine as a ‘lighting sleight-of-hand’. LED uplights along the canopy’s perimeter dim sequentially, simulating the moon moving across the face of the sun, creating a dynamic spectacle for both the residents of the surrounding King’s Cross redevelopment and children from a nearby school’. So now you know!

Just a little further on from Gasholder Park, on the north-west edge of the King’s Cross development, is the bigger of the two new Meta office buildings and the conglomerate’s largest tech hub outside of the US.

It cost around £200 million (though it apparently also cost Meta £149 million to break its clause to leave their previous building near Euston – even though they had never actually moved in) and was opened in 2022 by Their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall, now of course the King and Queen Consort. With 620,000 square feet of workspace, it provides 5,000 workstations. As with the new Google building, it has huge roof gardens for staff to relax.

Turn back and cross over the canal on the new Somers Town Bridge. On your right is St Pancras Lock, which was built with two locks side by side due to the amount of barge traffic that used it. However, only one is now working.

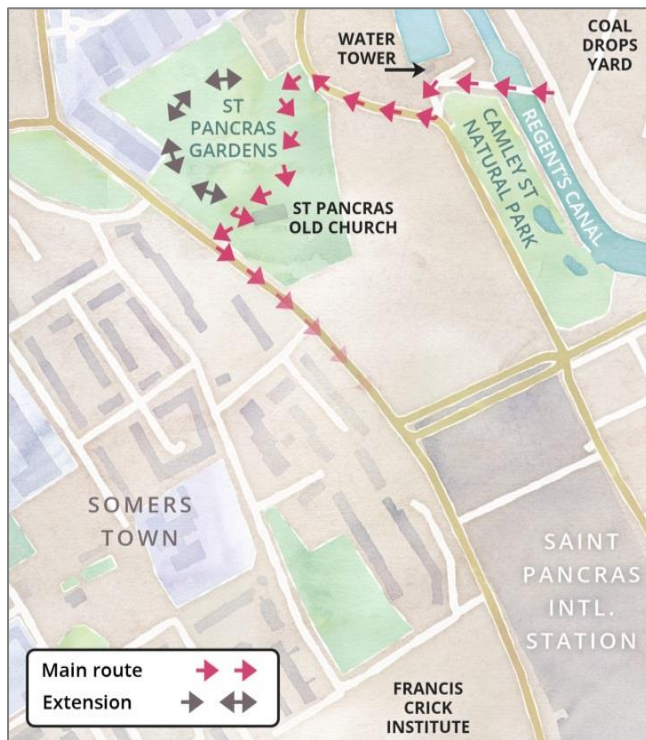
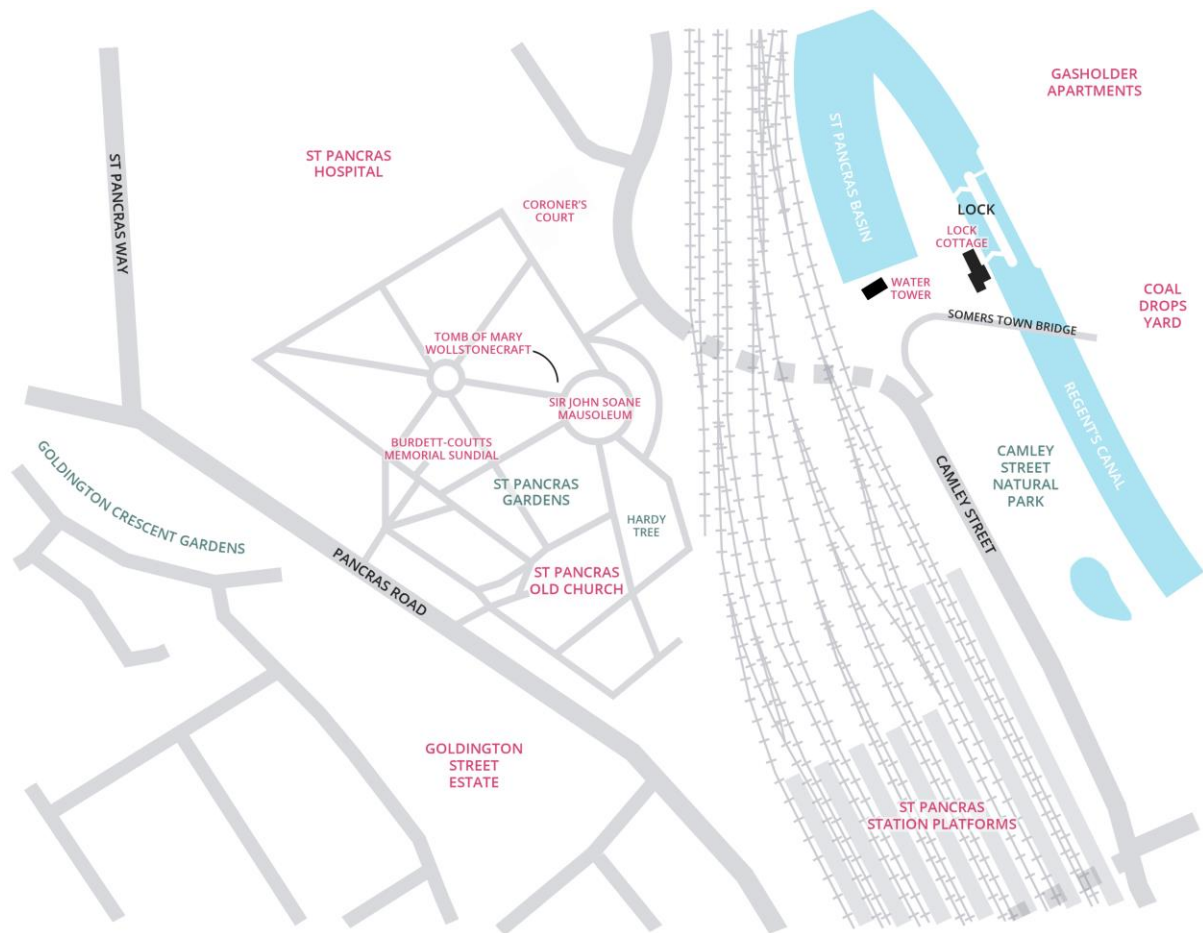
The lock-keeper’s cottage has been preserved and is Grade II listed. It was originally a ‘pumping house’ which helped maintain the levels of water in the canal but was converted into living accommodation for the lockkeeper in 1926. More recently, it was sold at auction for £800,000 and is now rented living accommodation. I recently saw a double room advertised at £1,100 a month – what a lovely place to live!

As the path curves around, you’ll see the distinctive brick-built ‘tower’ above you on the right. This is the **St Pancras Waterpoint**, where the ever-thirsty steam locomotives filled with water from a cast-iron tank inside that held 2,400 cubic feet of water. The ornate design was the work of the team of Sir George Gilbert Scott, the architect responsible for the hotel and frontage of St Pancras station.

The tower was used to fill steam engines with water until diesel and electric trains took over in the 1960s, after which it gradually fell into a very poor state. Even though it was given a Grade II preservation listing in 1974, its condition continued to worsen.

The water tower was in the way of the new Eurostar line from St Pancras so it was decided to move it just 750 yards to this new location. It was too risky to take apart and rebuild, so it was separated into sections, hoisted on to a road transporter and moved to this new location and reassembled. It’s open to the public on several days a year, giving an unusual view from the top of the viewing gallery over the surrounding area.

On your left is the two-acre **Camley Street Natural Park**. It was set up in 1985 by the London Wildlife Trust and Camden Council and is on the site of another of the Coal Drops. It has an excellent, partly-covered outdoor cafe that has sandwiches, cakes, etc. And there are well-maintained toilets. The entrance is on the left at the end of the path. For more information, see [their website](#).



Route map 3

Cross over Camley Street, walk through the tunnel under the railway and, after 100 yards or so, you'll see the entrance into the **gardens and burial ground of St Pancras Old Church**.

As you enter the gardens the old building immediately on your right is the Coroner's Office, which opened in 1886 and was the first to be custom built. It is now a Grade II listed building. And I'll just mention that beneath was a large pit that was dug to hold the bodies of 7,000 people formerly buried in the church yard.

Behind it is the Coroner's Court and the Public Mortuary.

It is interesting to walk around the garden, which until 1854 had been the burial place of thousands of people. However, to build the Midland Railway's St Pancras station they needed some of the land occupied by the churchyard. I explain more about this when we reach the Hardy Tree.

Take the main pathway to the left. The gardens have plenty of old tombs, but one that is rather special is the large mausoleum behind the railings on your right. This is the grave of **John Soane**, the great architect who was responsible for the Bank of England's building in the City. He initially designed this mausoleum for his wife but, when he died some twenty years later in 1837, he joined her here. It incorporates Soane's favourite emblems of Creativity and Eternity – the pineapple and the serpent swallowing its own tail. It is one of only two Grade I listed monuments in London. (The other is the tomb of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery).

And if you think it reminds you of a telephone box then you're correct. The mausoleum gave Sir Giles Scott, (the grandson of Sir Gilbert Scott, who built the St Pancras Hotel), the idea for his design in 1922 of what is now the iconic GPO telephone box, a hundred years later.

Continue following the main path around to the left towards the church, and you'll see where the **Hardy Tree** once stood. Sadly, it collapsed in a storm on Boxing Day in 2022. And although the tree is no longer standing (at the time of writing it is lying close by), the gravestones that surrounded it are still in their original place. However, when I last visited, bushes around the gravestones were making it difficult to see them.

With no other land available for the railway lines into St Pancras station, the only choice the railway company had was to purchase and then use part of the churchyard.

This was highly controversial as it meant thousands of graves having to be dug up and the contents moved, and permission to do so could only be given by parliament. However, despite the protests from the Bishop of London, who hardly surprisingly was appalled at the thought of this desecration, permission to do so was somewhat reluctantly agreed.

To try and ensure the work was carried out responsibly, the task was given to a firm of architects who had already carried out work on a number of church buildings in London.

The architect put in charge was Arthur Blomfield, a decision no doubt influenced by the fact he was the son of the Bishop of London. Blomfield delegated the gruesome task of supervising the dismantling of tombs and removal of the many hundreds of coffins and the subsequent exhumation of human remains to one of his young architectural apprentices. His name was Thomas Hardy, who later became a famous novelist.

However, much of the work had already taken place, albeit illicitly at night to prevent local people from seeing what was happening. By the time Hardy got involved, countless numbers of

graves had already been dug up and unfortunately, rather than the skeletal remains being carefully placed elsewhere, bits were often found scattered around.

As a result, Hardy began visiting the churchyard each evening to ensure the exhumations were being correctly carried out. With the railway company now taking so much of the land, there was obviously a problem as to where to put the hundreds of gravestones, so many were stacked around one of the graveyard's ash trees. This tree became known as the Hardy Tree and became a monument to those buried here.

As you may have guessed, this was the same Thomas Hardy who later became the famous and successful author, writing books such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Some years later in 1882, Hardy recalled his experiences, which he definitely didn't enjoy, when writing his poem *The Levelled Churchyard*.

Oh passenger, pray list and catch
Our sighs and piteous groans,
Half stifled in this jumbled patch
Of wrenched memorial stones!

We late-lamented, resting here ...

I will add that whilst some remains were reinterred elsewhere in the graveyard, more than nine thousand skeletons were moved out to the new cemeteries that were being built on the further outskirts of London, such as Highgate, Finchley and Kensal Green.

And bringing this right up to date, the proposed last leg of the HS2 line from Birmingham to Euston is planned to go right through another nearby churchyard – that of St James, where 30,000 graves will need to be exhumed.

A final footnote – the Hardy Tree and the gravestones are clearly well known: one of the first newspapers to contact the vicar of St Pancras Church for more information after the Hardy Tree was reported to have fallen was *The New York Times*.

Turn right immediately opposite the Hardy Tree site and walk down the side of the church. However, you may wish to have a walk around the garden, so if you do, I'll explain a little more about what you can see here.

Firstly, in the middle is a blue water fountain with five pillars. It no longer functions, but it was presented by a former churchwarden, William Thornton, in 1877.

The most prominent of all the memorials in the churchyard, just behind the fountain, is the **Angela Burdett-Coutts Memorial to Lost Graves** that was erected in 1877,

It isn't a memorial to her; instead, she paid for this ornate gothic sundial to commemorate the many graves and gravestones that were lost when part of the churchyard was cleared for the Midland Railway. The sides of the memorial contain the names of many notable figures and their professions, including immigrants fleeing France at the time of the Revolution. (Angela herself is buried in Westminster Abbey).

An amazingly generous and thoughtful lady, and friend of Charles Dickens, I first heard about her when I was writing my East End Sunday markets walk and read about the profound influence she had on the lives of many of the poorest people in the area.

She was the daughter of Thomas Coutts, the Queen's banker, and she was known as the richest heiress in England. She became a major philanthropist and, because of her friendship with Charles Dickens, spent a considerable amount of her money on projects to help London's poor, particularly for education and housing. She had a profound influence on the lives of many overlooked people, particularly in the East End. For much of her life she lived in Highgate, in north London, where she designed a model estate called 'Holly Village', for her workers. It was an early example of a 'gated' village. Built using the finest of materials, (no money was spared in its construction) it is known as being a Victorian Gothic fantasy and can be seen close to Highgate Cemetery.

Despite Henry VIII's Reformation, Elizabeth I allowed the Catholic Latin Mass to continue here in St Pancras Church, and no doubt as a result, several of London's well-known Roman Catholics as well as French and German immigrants were buried in the graveyard. They include Johann Christian Bach, the youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach and known as the 'English Bach'. He became the music master to Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, and was buried here in 1787. His name is on the Burdett-Coutts Memorial.

Two other prominent Catholics buried here include William Franklin (the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin), and the writer and founding feminist philosopher **Mary Wollstonecraft**. In 1792 Mary wrote 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' as well as novels, a history of the French Revolution and a children's book.

Also buried here, but as with Mary Wollstonecraft his grave was destroyed during the building of the new railway line, was the **Chevalier d'Eon**, at the time a well-known French diplomat and spy. He had become 'famous' because whilst working as a spy he dressed in women's clothes but became reluctant to relinquish them afterwards.

The Chevalier boasted that kings flirted with him whilst he was working as a spy and in disguise and that when he came to London in the 18th century, the famous Italian womaniser Casanova took a 'fancy' to him.

As he got older though it seems his 'act' wasn't quite as convincing as before, and James Boswell, the biographer to Dr Samuel Johnson, wrote that "she appears to me to be a man in woman's clothes." There were many arguments within London's society about the Chevalier's sex and even the London Stock Exchange took bets on the subject. They had presumed that the answer would be uncovered after his death.

Whilst his grave had been obliterated by the new railway lines, there had been a post-mortem after he died which confirmed he was indeed born a man and possessed the 'relevant organs'.

Finally, Charles Dickens had a number of connections with the churchyard.

Dickens knew the area well as he spent much of his childhood living nearby whilst his parents were in the debtor's prison. So, if you have read A Tale of Two Cities then this is the graveyard where Jerry Cruncher brought his son, Jerry Junior to undertake some 'fishing', The word 'fishing' was a euphemism for body snatching; the body snatchers would come and dig up recently buried bodies and sell them to the early medical schools for students to dissect.

This is also the area where Dickens's school master, Mr ML Williams Jones, lived and was buried, who was his inspiration for Mr Creakle in 'David Copperfield'. Living in a nearby street, and apparently attending his school, he said of him, "... he is by far the most ignorant man I have ever had the pleasure to know ... one of the worst tempered men perhaps that ever lived." Dickens said of his time at the school, which was the Wellington House Academy, "I had no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no assistance, no support of any kind from anyone."

However, the inscription on his gravestone is slightly kinder, simply saying: 'The inflexible integrity of his character and the social and domestic virtues which adorned his private life will long be cherished in the recollection of all those who knew him'. As Queen Elizabeth II was reputed to have said on one occasion, "Recollections may vary ..."

If **St Pancras Old Church** is open, then I recommend taking a look inside. It is like walking into an old, rustic English church. Whilst it is 'Church of England', it subscribes to the Anglo-Catholic tradition, which means it emphasises the 'Catholic rather than Protestant heritage of the Anglican Communion'.

And if you'd like to make a donation towards the upkeep of this special church then because of the many burglaries, they now have credit card reading machines in the entrance porch, rather than accepting cash.

The church is considered to be one of the oldest Christian sites of worship in Britain, and is said to have been founded in AD313 or 314. It is dedicated to Pancratius, a young boy who was martyred in Rome in 304 for refusing to give up his Christian faith. I've written more about him in the appendix.

The first written reference to it is in the Domesday book in 1086. It later became a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I, who allowed Latin mass to continue here throughout her reign. The church was rebuilt and renovated several times over the years, and whilst much of what we see today only dates back to the 1840s, it retains an 11th-century core.

I explain a little more of the church's remarkable history:

St Pancras Old Church is dedicated to the Roman boy Pancratius, who had been martyred by the Emperor Diocletian in AD304. It is thought to be on one of Britain's earliest sites of Christian worship, possibly dating back to the early 4th Century, with the first recorded reference to it being in the Domesday Book of 1086. This records Walter, a Canon of St Paul's, as holding a hide at St Pancras. The first known vicar was Fulcherius in 1181, who earned a pension of 2 shillings.

A 13th Century survey of the church recorded a mass book with musical notes, a calendar, psalters, vestments, candlesticks and a white silver chalice. At that time, the church served 36 houses in the area, including that of Adam de Basing, who became Mayor of London in 1252.

A survey in 1297 noted that "animals befoul the churchyard" and that the building's roof urgently needed repair. Despite this, the church remained in use throughout the next 350 years, surviving the reformation under Henry VIII, and was noted to have been a favourite site of Elizabeth I, who continued to allow Catholic Latin mass to be held in the church throughout her reign.

John Norden, a topographer, noted in 1593 that “Pancras Church standeth all alone, as utterly forsaken, old and weather-beaten.” A later survey taken in 1650 remarks that the church is standing “in the fields remote from any houses in the said parish.”

In November 1642, Parliament ordered that the deserted Church of St Pancras be used as lodging for 50 soldiers in Cromwell’s army. Before this, the varying treasures of the church were buried beneath the tower, where they would remain until being discovered during rebuilding work more than 200 years later.

Legend has it that the vicar and parishioners regularly abandoned worship in the church to escape the rising waters of the adjacent River Fleet (which is now underground).

As time passed, the church’s primary use was as a burial ground and for ‘speedy weddings’, but by 1840, it was effectively little more than a ruin, having been usurped by St Pancras’s new church on Euston Road. With the industrial expansion of London, the church underwent a major restoration in 1847–8.

Architect A.D. Gough sought to renovate the church in line with its original 12th-century foundations, adding a new tower on the south wall. During excavations, workers found the treasure trove of valuables dating back to the Elizabethan age and before. Further renovations took place in 1888 and 1925 to restore the plaster ceiling and remove the side galleries, while 1948 saw additional repairs following bomb damage from the Second World War. In June 1954, St Pancras Old Church was designated a grade II listed building.

Whilst this church is now known as St Pancras Old Church and still used as the parish church for this part of London, St Pancras New Church was built on the Euston Road in 1819. Its design is based on the Erechtheum, an iconic temple on the Acropolis in Athens. The octagonal tower is copied from the Tower of the Winds, also in Athens. Extensive renovations and restorations took place in the early 1950s and today it is Grade I listed as the earliest Greek Revival church in London and one of the most important 19th-century churches in England.

When you are ready to leave, the exit is just past the church. Go down the steps and turn left down **Pancras Road**.

This is where the walk ends.

It is about a ten-minute walk back to St Pancras and King’s Cross stations and the Euston Road. If you now have weary legs, then bus numbers 46 and 214 stop a few yards along from the church garden exit. Both will take you down to the Euston Road, and around to the front of King’s Cross station.

However, if you continue to walk down the Pancras Road, you’ll pass on the right a long, low building with a faded sign saying ‘Hope’. The sign looks old, but according to the proprietor of the antiques business inside, who’d been there since the 1970s, somebody, no one knows who, painted the word ‘Hope’ some ten years ago, and they still don’t know why! He was very helpful and explained that it used to be the offices of a coal company – there was a ‘coal drops yard’ almost opposite – and when he started his business, everything was covered in black coal dust.

Opposite the entrance to St Pancras station is the **Francis Crick Institute**, which opened here in 2016. This is a biomedical research centre and is a partnership between Cancer Research UK, Imperial College London, King’s College London, the Medical Research Council, University College London and the Wellcome Trust. They have regular exhibitions and you can find details here.

If you still have time, there are several other places of interest nearby, the nearest being the **British Library**. If you continue to the bottom of the street and turn right, you'll find the library entrance. Admission is free, and you can find out more information in the **appendix** and on their website.

Another interesting place to visit is the **London Canal Museum** – at 12 Wharf Road, N1 9RT, less than 15 minutes' walk away.

APPENDIX TO THE SOHO WALK

ST PANCRAS HOTEL AND STATION

The journalist Simon Jenkins wrote an article that was published in The Guardian on 7th November 2007, criticising those who condemn saving heritage buildings such as St Pancras, but then when their views are fortunately ignored, are happy to celebrate their reopening! Whilst not everyone may agree with his sentiments, and the article is over fifteen years old, I felt it worth pasting an extract here, as it's something that continues to happen in London – Liverpool Street Station is the latest to be under the spotlight.

Not since the 1890s and the Midland Railway's Johnson 4-2-2 "Spinners" class had St Pancras had an engine (and a reception) worthy of its majesty. Tim West, re-enacting the station's creator, William Barlow, pointed out that the original opening in 1868 had seen "no bands, no bunting", just the demure arrival of a first train. He had been waiting for someone to say hurrah. London and Continental Railways obliged.

Champagne duly flowed. Sides of beef marched through the undercroft. Oyster and crab were piled high. French cheese was everywhere. Britain may be poor at grand projects, but it knows how to do all-singing all-dancing, no-holds-barred, bank-busting celebration. The only let down was a dreadful Blairite movie about legacy, regeneration and Olympics, political correctness a decade out of date.

But how much blood has flowed over these old stones? On Tuesday one thousand of the great and good congratulated themselves at the marvel of Barlow's shed and the detailing of Gilbert Scott's great hotel, at his gargoyles of drivers and engineers, his majestic brick arches, his great ticket hall like a cathedral confessional, his towers, gables, dormers, fireplaces, swirling staircase and celestial ceiling. They marvelled today, but once they condemned as "heritage freaks" those without whom all this would have vanished.

As usual on these occasions those who should have been thanked were ignored. In the terrible 1960s, the station's elegist, John Betjeman, bleakly wrote that it was simply "too beautiful and too romantic to survive". He added: "No one except you and me, dear reader, believes there can be anything beautiful about a railway station." Betjeman was not mentioned on Tuesday, though his statue graces the concourse.

Nor was there mention of the true saviour of St Pancras, the Victorian Society, which single-handedly fought not just ministers and railwaymen but self-styled aesthetes such as John Summerson, who declared the place "nauseating". Credit also goes to the then minister, Lord Kennet, who fought the transport lobby and listed the building Grade I in 1967.

[Read the full article here.](#)

THE AMAZING SECRETS OF EUROSTAR

I can also recommend [another excellent article](#) from the Guardian's Sunday sister, The Observer, written in the same year, which describes the Eurostar journey from St Pancras to the Kent coast, giving lots of information about some of the challenges faced by the engineers.

SANCTUS PANCRATIUS (ST PANCRAS)

Obviously, I make a number of references to St Pancras during the walk.

For those interested in this saint, I have added more about him here. There is debate amongst historians about some of the known information about him, so I make no apology for errors in what I have written here, which has come from several different sources.

Pancras was born around the year 290AD, in an area that is today in Turkey. The accounts of his early life vary – some say his mother died in childbirth, whilst others when he was nine years old. After her death, his father decided to take him to Rome to improve his education. Once again though, accounts differ, as some record his father dying when Pancras was nine, and that it was his uncle took him to Rome.

Whichever, he became a Christian believer but when he was fourteen years old he was told to offer incense and perform a sacrifice to those gods the Romans were worshipping. However, despite the offers of ‘wealth and power’ by the Roman authorities if he did so, he refused and was decapitated by order of the Emperor Diocletian.

Ironically, it is understood that just a few years later, Emperor Diocletian himself became a Christian, and decreed that this was now the religion of the Roman empire. Whether the bravery of Pancras had anything to do with his decision is not known.

However, Pancras’s body and separated head were later recovered, and he was buried in Rome in what became known as the Basilica of Saint Pancras.

It is believed that in AD597, Romans of the Christian faith arrived in Essex carrying the remains of Saint Pancras and erected a church on the banks of the River Fleet (which is now underground at this point) where they also built a military encampment.

As a result, it is said to be one of the oldest sites of Christian worship in Britain.

St Pancras is now acknowledged to be the patron saint of children, health and work.

However, it wasn’t his youth or martyrdom that caused him to be canonised, but the many miracles associated with his tomb and relics.

THE KING’S CROSS OBELISK & STATUE ... the reason for the area’s name

Legend has it that the last battle between the Celts, led by Queen Boadicea (Boudica), against the Romans took place near the Fleet River in the area we today call King’s Cross. Boadicea lost and the area eventually became known as Battle Bridge.

By the early 19th century the area had gained a bad reputation, and wealthier residents wanted to rename it. In 1830 an announcement was made that “the inhabitants of Battle-bridge intend erecting, by subscription, a splendid obelisk where the old tollhouse stood, to be called St George’s Cross, for the purpose of improving the neighbourhood and removing the danger which the public are exposed to in crossing the seven roads that unite at this spot”.

However, this caused an argument because some residents wanted to call it Boadicea’s Cross. The problem was solved when the area’s biggest landowner, William Forester Bray, instead decided it would instead be a monument to King George IV.

The subsequent eleven-foot high statue, mounted on eight 60-foot high Doric columns, was erected at the crossroads of the New Road (later renamed the Euston Road) and Maiden Lane (later renamed York Way) was not liked.

The king, who for some years was the prince regent, was deeply unpopular with many people. It was said he was best known for his "dedication to frivolous pastimes, strong liquor, rich cuisine and very little else." Following his death, The Times newspaper said, "there never was an individual less regretted by his fellow-creatures than this deceased King. What eye has wept for him? What heart has heaved one throb of unmercenary sorrow?"

The monument was said to have been cheaply made of brick, mortar with just a stone-like coating and his statue was quickly carved on site in just a couple of days.

Disparaging comments soon followed. For example, the Morning Post newspaper called it a "frightful staring effigy ... in a style of grotesque vulgarity" ... adding: "It is not worthy to be called a statue." Even the novelist and historian Walter Thornbury joined in, describing it as: "A ridiculous octagonal structure, crowned by an absurd statue."

People passing the statue were said to have jeered and laughed at it, so it wasn't surprising that the statue remained there for just seven years before being pulled down in 1842. Even the actual obelisk on which it had been mounted was destroyed just two years later.

Despite its unpopularity, the name remained, and to this day the area has been known as King's Cross – and just a few years later it became the site of the London terminus of the Great Northern Railway: King's Cross station.

THE KING'S CROSS LIGHTHOUSE

One of the oddest buildings close to King's Cross station is the 'Lighthouse'.

Mention of a 'lighthouse' on this busy road junction is bound to result in some smiles, and those who can remember listening to Terry Wogan's Radio 2 breakfast show may recall something similar when he used to talk about the 'Northampton Lighthouse', (which is actually a tall thin building erected to test lifts).

However, the King's Cross Lighthouse, which was built around 1885, actually did have a light at the top.

The building was erected to promote the highly popular Netten's Oyster Bar, which was on the ground floor, and it was said that the light at the top would be illuminated when fresh oysters arrived. After the oyster bar closed, the shop on the ground floor has been used for a variety of purposes including a record shop. However, over the years the building deteriorated and became covered graffiti and torn posters. For nearly thirty years it was on the English Heritage 'buildings at risk' register, but it has now been refurbished as office space. It must be an attractive place to work, as there's a top floor bar and roof terrace around the 'lighthouse'.

Once again, the ground floor is used for eating, as it's a Five Guys burger restaurant.

And a final interesting piece of information is that the basement is said to be just over a foot above the underground tunnel that runs from King's Cross, which must have made undertaking the recent renovations a tricky job!

BRITISH LIBRARY

Whilst the library isn't actually a part of the walk, I have made mention of it at the end, so I thought I'd give a little more information here.

The British Library opened here in 1997. Its red-brick exterior was designed to fit in with some of its neighbouring buildings, especially St Pancras and King's Cross stations.

You enter into the 'Great Court', with its soaring glass roof letting in plenty of light and from here stairs take you to numerous reading rooms and exhibition areas.

There are approximately 150 million books and manuscripts – and there is even an impressive collection of postage stamps.

In the impressive 22 metres high glass and steel King's Library Tower you'll find the British Library's most valuable and rarest books and manuscripts.

The library's history dates back to the mid-18th century and for many years it was in the British Museum, but due to lack of space it had to move. Thanks to the 1911 Copyright Act, a copy of every book published in Britain must be sent to the library to be stored for both research and posterity. However, most of these books are stored at the library's repository in Boston Spa, Yorkshire.

The British Library is open daily, generally from 10am to 8pm. There is an excellent café, together with a shop selling a wide range of books, reading accessories and gift items.

For more information, go to: www.bl.uk/visit.