

# Yet Another Quite Interesting Sunday London Ride

*Starts at Hyde Park Corner*

## **Sekhmet (New Bond Street)**

*Above Sotheby's*

This is a black diorite sculpture of a female with a lioness' head. Sekhmet was the goddess of healing. Sekhmet statues have their origin around 1390-1352 BC and over 600 have been found throughout Egypt.

The bust is widely recognised as being the unofficial mascot of Sotheby's. But how it came to be in Sotheby's possession is a mystery. The most common story is that it was bought by an anonymous buyer at an auction in 1880s for £40, but was never collected. Apparently the bust is valued at around £3.5 million. But that may be an urban legend seeing as there's apparently no security.

The authenticity of the bust is not in question, So is this the oldest outdoor statue in London? Well that depends on whether we class Cleopatra's Needle (thought to be dated to about 1468 BC) as a sculpture.

## **Lex Garage (Brewer Street)**

The building started life in 1929 as the Lex Garage and it bears some resemblance to the multi-storey car park of the same vintage that was converted into the 5 star Beaumont Hotel in Mayfair. The protruding wing was used to accommodate chauffeurs, and there were changing rooms for the ladies. It is in the Art Deco style and is an important example of early motoring history. It is the most intact example of an Art Deco ramped multi-storey structure in the country. The third floor is quite scenic and has a glass roof. The first multistorey car park in London was built in 1905, in nearby Wardour Street. It used lifts, rather than ramps, to raise and lower vehicles to parking spaces. The system never caught on.

## **The Seven Noses of Soho (Dean Street - behind plant pot in front of Quo Vadis (next to Crown and Two Chairmen pub))**

The story goes that to find them all brings infinite wealth. You may have come across a particularly great London urban myth, that a spare nose for the Nelson's Column statue is kept under admiralty arch. Even better that, when soldiers are riding through, each one is compelled to give the Duke of Wellington's nose a tweak for good luck.

The nose appeared in 1997 without notice or apparent meaning and this story developed around it. At the time over 30 noses were fixed onto landmarks and in public places. These included the side of the National Gallery, St Pancras Station and Nelson's Column itself. Mostly when these were spotted they were removed straight away, but there are some left.

The truth is in 2010 an artist called Rick Buckley was 'unmasked' by the Evening Standard and claimed he installed them as a snub against CCTV spying culture in London, seeing it as an infringement of liberty. Mostly though, he just wanted to see if he could get away with glueing a load of noses across London. Turns out it's pretty easy.

Buckley claimed in 2010 that the remaining 10 were scattered across London, but now there are just seven 'Soho' noses left. These are Admiralty Arch, Bateman Street (on Mimi's hotel), Meard Street, Endell Street, Great Windmill Street and D'Arbly Street and this one on Dean Street.

## **Little Compton Street**

*Junction of Old Compton Street and Charing Cross Road*

Maps from the 1790s show Little Compton Street connecting Old and New Compton Streets. But all of that came to an end in 1896 when the area was demolished for the building of the Charing Cross Road.

Little Compton was turned into a utility tunnel.

It is not a street at all, but is part of the subway network built beneath Charing Cross Road to carry the utilities for the emerging modern age of London. By containing the utilities in a network of accessible subways, disruption could be kept to a minimum, as they wouldn't have to dig up the road every time something needed repairing or relaying.

The tunnels have numerous such signs along their lengths and they served the simple purpose of letting workmen know where they were beneath the streets of London. Without them they'd have to pop to the surface every so often to figure out where they were.

The upper of the two signs (the blue and white one) may possibly have been rescued from Little Compton Street when it was demolished, it certainly looks old enough, but the wall to which it is attached is certainly not a surviving wall from the old thoroughfare that managed to dodge the redevelopment of the area in the 1880s.

## **Kirkaldy Testing Museum,**

*Southwark Street, opposite Bear Gardens*

This is David Kirkaldy's former testing works, now a museum. The building was built in 1874 specifically to house a huge testing machine. It was a place where experiments took place on materials to determine their strength. It was built here rather than in a northern city or more obviously industrial area of London because 150 years ago this area was a hive of industry. Very different to what it is now. Also

the location of the testing works is near to the headquarters of industry, the engineering institutions, Government and Parliament.

The testing machine is 14.5 m long and weighs some 118 tons. It works horizontally, the load applied by a hydraulic cylinder and ram. The working fluid is water not oil. The load is measured by a weighing system consisting of a number of levers with the final one carrying a jockey weight. The operator lets water into the hydraulic cylinder and as the pressure and hence load on the test piece increases the jockey weight is wound along to balance the hydraulic load. As it is wound it moves along a graduated scale and when the object under test fails the number on this scale is noted and multiplied by the weight to give the failure load.

The machine is kept in working order and is regularly demonstrated for visitors. Originally the London Hydraulic Power Company supplied the high-pressure water, but now the museum uses an electric pump.

## **London Stone,**

*Opposite Cannon Street station*

When London Stone was erected and what its original function was are unknown, although there has been much speculation. Especially that the stone is tightly linked to London's success - if the stone disappears, London will fall.

The Stone was originally located on the south side of medieval Candlewick Street (now Cannon Street) attached to the west end of St Swithin's Church. It was described by the London historian John Stow in 1598 as "a great stone called London stone", "pitched upright... fixed in the ground verie deep, fastned with bars of iron". Stow does not give the dimensions of this "great stone", but a French visitor to London in 1578 had recorded that the Stone was three feet high (above ground), two feet wide, and one foot thick. So, not particularly big even then.

It has a long history - Ethelstane king of the west Saxons (in effect king of England in 924) listed properties owned by Canterbury Cathedral which says that one piece of land was described as lying "neare unto London stone".

By the time of Queen Elizabeth I London Stone was not merely a landmark, shown and named on maps, but a visitor attraction in its own right. Tourists may have been told variously that it had stood there since before the city existed, or that it had been set up by order of King Lud, legendary rebuilder of London, or that it marked the centre of the city, or that it was where depots had to be paid. It appears to have been routinely used in this period as a location for the posting of a variety of bills, notices and advertisements.

By the 1960s, archaeologists concluded that, in its original location, London Stone would have been aligned on the centre of the Roman governor's palace, now known to have lain below Cannon Street station. The Stone may have formed part

of its main entrance or gate. This "praetorium gate theory", while impossible to prove, is the prevailing one among modern experts.

## TOILETS AT CANNON STREET STATION

### **Panyer Boy,**

*Panyer Alley, by St Pauls tube south exit*

A small and very weathered relief carving of a boy perched on top of what appears to be a basket. It is perhaps one of the more mysterious objects in the city of London, as no one can quite agree on its origins, or exactly what it is supposed to be depicting.

It is not known for what building the basket boy was originally commissioned, but the relief is known to have been moved from one edifice to another as each was demolished, which is how it ended up in its present location. It is also reckoned to have always been in the vicinity of what is now Panyer Alley, a street named after the boys who sold bread from pannier baskets over the road in St Martins-leGrand, or possibly a pub called The Panyer which was round the corner.

Not all historians agree Panyer Boy is sitting on a bread basket. Some suggest it's a pile of ropes or that he is offering a bunch of grapes, or is he squashing them against foot? Then there is the question of the inscription: "*When ye have sought the Citty round yet still this is the highest ground. August 27, 1688.*"

This seems to imply that the location of the carving was the highest point in the city, when at the date given, the highest point was actually some half mile away in Cornhill. Without knowing the original intentions of the stonemason who made the relief, and with the image eroded by time, it is possible that the purpose of the bread basket boy might remain elusive forever.

### **Florin Court**

*Charterhouse Square*

Built in 1936 Florin Court features an impressive curved façade with projecting wings, a roof garden, setbacks on the eighth and ninth floor and a basement swimming pool. It is probably the earliest of the residential apartment blocks in the wider Clerkenwell area. The walls were built with beige bricks, specially made in Lincolnshire, and placed over a steel frame. It is Grade II listed.

Before a late 1980s refurbishment, the ground floor included a porter's office and a flat for the head porter; the entrance hall had a marble floor inset with the arms of Charterhouse (now carpeted), and an inlaid ceiling covered the outside of the entrance door, before being plastered. In the basement, there were a public restaurant, a cocktail bar, and a clubroom. Behind the block, a single-storey

building contained two squash courts (modified in 2015 into a two floors office space renamed "Florin Court Studios").

In 1989 the building became the fictional residence of Agatha Christie's Poirot, known as Whitehaven Mansions, in the ITV Poirot series. As well as exterior filming, a number of interior shots of the building were used in the programme over the 24 years of production (1989 to 2013).

## **Boundary Estate**

### *Arnold Circus*

This estate is one of the earliest social housing schemes built by a local government authority. It was built on the site of the demolished Friars Mount rookery in an area called Old Nichol. Work began in 1893, and took 10 years to complete. Soil from the foundations was used to construct the mound in the middle of Arnold Circus at the centre of the development, surmounted by a bandstand. The estate consists of multistorey brick tenements radiating from the central circus, each of which bears the name of a town or village along the non-tidal reaches of the Thames.

In 1844 the population density of this area was 8.6 people to a (small) house, and here there were 1,400 houses in an area less than 370 m<sup>2</sup>. By 1861 the area had grown even more squalid as old houses decayed and traditional trades became masks for thieves and prostitutes. Running water was only available for 10–12 minutes each day.

The clearance of the slum houses of the Old Nichol Street rookery was the result of an energetic campaign by the local priest Osborne Jay of Holy Trinity, who arrived in the parish in December 1886. Charles Booth had already noted the extreme poverty in the area in his study of London poverty. The death rate was twice that of the rest of Bethnal Green, and four times that of London. One child in four died before his or her first birthday.

The new flats replaced the existing slums with decent accommodation for the same number of people.

But the occupiers changed.

The original inhabitants were forced further to the East, creating new overcrowding and new slums in areas such as Dalston and Bethnal Green. No help was offered to those displaced to find new accommodation, and this added to the suffering and misery of many of the former residents of the slum. The new blocks had policies to enforce sobriety and the new tenants were clerks, policemen, nurses, and he like.

The impresarios and brothers Lew Grade and Bernard Delfont (born Winogradsky) moved to the Boundary Estate in 1914, from nearby Brick Lane and attended the local school. At that time, 90% of children attending the school spoke Yiddish.

Round the corner we'll pass Leopold Buildings. They were built in 1872 by the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company as cheap housing for workers.

From the 1860s the only people building new housing specifically for the working classes were a few philanthropic organisations. Some organisations did not last the course, whilst others were very successful. All the successful ones had a requirement to make a small annual profit on rents to enable further schemes to be built and existing buildings managed. The typical profit was 5% and this became known as "5% philanthropy". The main organisations were: The East End Dwelling Company; Improved Industrial Dwelling Company; Peabody; and (from 1889) the London County Council.

## **Martello Street (NE postcode sign)**

*Junction with Martello Terrace, by London Fields*

If you've ever stopped to think about the London postcode districts, you may have noticed an anomaly or two. We've got NW, N, E, SE, SW, W, EC (East Central) and WC (West Central), but no S or NE. Why is this?

They existed when civil servant Rowland Hill designed and introduced the London Postal Districts in 1856. But 10 years later, Anthony Trollope, a Post Office surveyor better known today as an author, re-examined the districts. Trollope's findings were that the S and NE districts did not generate as much letter traffic as the others. He thought savings could be made by ceasing their operations.

The S district was abolished by 1868, its residents merged into the neighbouring SE and SW districts, despite concerns from a local MP. Renaming either the SE or SW district as simply S was considered, to keep this compass point on the map, but this never happened. There hasn't been a S postcode district in London since.

The erasure of the NE district was a lot more controversial. The Post Office closed the NE district in 1867 and the E district absorbed its residents. Fearing a backlash, the Post Office didn't actually tell the residents that their new postcode was E. People still addressed letters to NE. The only change was that NE letters were sorted along with E letters on arriving at the Post Office.

It took two years for the NE-ers to be finally told about the change, and they weren't happy. Many simply rejected it. The street signs in the area displaying NE were kept up (such as this one), and the NE initials were used for addressing letters and for street signs until 1917.

In 1897 a doctor led a group of Hackney businessmen in petitioning to bring back the NE district. Why? Simply because they objected to being identified as 'eastern'. They claimed that being associated with east London was harming their

businesses. So it's not just today that certain postcodes have social, cultural, and even financial implications.

Today NE is the postcode for Newcastle and S for Sheffield.

## TOILETS IN LONDON FIELDS

### **Greenman Street Baths**

*Tibby Place, Islington*

This small park on Greenman Street was once the location of Tibberton Baths - a local swimming pool. The baths opened in 1895. In the mid 60's the pool was known locally as the TIB. It was a mixed bathing pool with spectator gallery with individual changing cubicles down each side for males and females. Oddly, part of the structure remains as a memorial - although nobody seems to know why. The overall effect is distinctly surreal. Tibberton Square is Georgian.

### **Joseph Grimaldi grave**

*Joseph Grimaldi Park, Pentonville Road*

This is the former burial grounds for St James' church and is named after the pantomime clown Joseph Grimaldi, who is buried here.

Joseph Grimaldi was born in 1778 and was an English actor, comedian and dancer, who became the most popular English entertainer of the Regency era.

In the early 1800s, he expanded the role of clown that formed part of British pantomimes, notably at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Sadler's Wells and Covent Garden theatres. He became so dominant on the London comic stage that the role of clown became known as "Joey", and both the nickname and Grimaldi's whiteface make-up design were, and still are, used by other types of clowns. Grimaldi originated catchphrases such as "Here we are again!", which continue to feature in modern pantomimes.

He retired in 1823, appearing on stage only occasionally for a few years after. But his performances were restricted by his worsening physical disabilities. In his last years, Grimaldi lived in relative obscurity and became a depressed, impoverished alcoholic. He outlived both his wife and his actor son, Joseph Samuel Grimaldi, dying at home in Islington in 1837, aged 58.

### **The Hardy Tree**

*Churchyard of St Pancras Old Church*

An ash tree is encircled with hundreds of overlapping gravestones placed there by classic novelist Thomas Hardy.

In the mid-1860s, Britain's rail system was experiencing immense growth, and London was outgrowing its existing lines. In order to accommodate the growing population of commuters, an expansion was planned—directly affecting the graveyard at St. Pancras. In order to make way for the new train line, an architecture firm was contracted to perform the sensitive task of exhuming the remains and reburying them at another site. In the tradition of dumping rather unpleasant work on those lowest on the totem pole, the job was promptly assigned to their young employee, Thomas Hardy, who in the following decades would publish many classic novels such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

After the essential duty was completed, there remained hundreds of headstones, along with the question of what to do with them. Hardy's solution was to place them in a circular pattern around an ash tree in the churchyard in a spot that would not be disturbed by the railway. One can only speculate as to how he arrived at this decision, but over the years the tree has absorbed many of the headstones, life and death melding into one image of grotesque and gothic beauty, preserved for centuries.

The church claims to be one of Europe's oldest sites of Christian worship possibly dating back to the 4th Century. The present building has *technically* been here since the 11th/12th Century but it's only the north wall of the nave where you can see a section of exposed Norman masonry. There are also fragments of Roman building material within the building's fabric.

St. Pancras Gardens was also used as a photoshoot for The Beatles's "White Album" in 1968. Don McCullin photographed the musicians sitting on a bench that is located near The Burdett-Coutts Memorial Sundial.

The Sir John Soane memorial is the inspiration for the red telephone boxes designed by Giles Gilbert Scott.

Another key burial in the church is Mary Wallstonecraft. The writer, famous as an advocate for women's rights, and author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, was transported to Bournemouth for reburial by her daughter, Mary Shelley. Also an author, Shelley wrote the more widely famous *Frankenstein*.

The last striking monument is one of the largest in the cemetery. That of Baroness Burdett Coutts. The ornate 1879 sundial was paid for by Coutts and is a monument to a number of French Immigrants fleeing Revolution, with each of the names and professions written along the side.

## **Street Art**

### *Marchmont Street*

Lastly, we end on a poignant note. These artworks date from 2006. They're reminder of a particularly devastating period of London's history during the 18th century. They are oversized replicas of tokens, tiny items that mothers left with



their children at the Foundling Hospital, an orphanage that opened round the corner from here in 1759.

The street is named after the 2nd Earl of Marchmont, Alexander Hume-Campbell who was one of the founding governors and benefactors of the Foundling Hospital.

Parents – usually impoverished mothers – could leave their child at the Foundling Hospital for them to be looked after. During the 18th Century it was estimated around 1,000 babies a year were being abandoned and local church parishes couldn't cope. Places were limited and eventually a lottery system had to be put in place; coloured balls which indicated if the child had been successful; a white ball, they were provisionally admitted, a red one, they had to wait and see if another accepted child was sent away due to infectious illness. A black ball meant rejection.

If the mother pulled out a lucky white ball the next step was to leave the child. They were encouraged to leave a small token; a key, chain or emblem that could help identify the child as theirs in the future. In reality, very few children were ever reunited with their parents.

Among the most poignant objects in the Foundling Museum (round the corner) are the tokens left behind. One form of token was a scrap of material. This was left in the majority of cases and was pinned to the child's admission paper. These tokens now make up Britain's largest collection of everyday textiles from the 18th century, with 5,000 different pieces each representing a child.

The artworks are oversized facsimiles of these tokens.

*Ends at Russell Square.*