

QUIRKY LONDON

A Guide to Over
300 of the City's
Strangest Sights

David Hampshire

QUIRKY LONDON

**A Guide to Over 300 of the City's
Strangest Sights & Stories**

Graeme Chesters



City Books • Bath • England

First published 2014 (as 'London's Secrets: Bizarre & Curious')
Second edition 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or
recorded by any means, without prior written
permission from the publisher.

Copyright © City Books 2019
Cover Photo: Cable Street Mural
Cover Design: Herring Bone Design

City Books, c/o Survival Books Limited
Office 169, 3 Edgar Buildings
George Street, Bath BA1 2FJ, United Kingdom
+44 (0)1305-266918, info@survivalbooks.net
citybooks.co, survivalbooks.net and londons-secrets.com

British Library Cataloging in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library.
ISBN: 978-1-909282-98-8

Printed in India
Production managed by Jellyfish Print Solutions

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the many people who helped with research and provided information for this book. Special thanks are due to Gwen Simmonds and Richard Todd for their invaluable research, Robbi Atilgan for editing; Susan Griffith for final proof checking; John Marshall for desktop publishing and photo selection; David Gillingwater for cover design; and the author's wife for the constant supply of tea and coffee. Last, but not least, a special thank you to the many photographers – the unsung heroes – whose beautiful images bring London to life.

The Author

Graeme Chesters is an experienced journalist, copywriter, non-fiction and travel writer. He knows London well, having lived in the northwest, centre and southeast of the city, and is the author or co-author of a number of London books including *London's Hidden Secrets*, *London's Secret Places*, *London's Secret Walks* and *London's Secrets: Pubs & Bars*.

Graeme is also the author of many travel guides and has written extensively on regions as diverse as Europe, North America, the Middle and Far East, and Australasia. He's also an enthusiastic wine writer (and drinker) and the author of two wine books. Graeme lives in Bexley in southeast London with his wife Louise.

The Publisher

City Books is an imprint of Survival Books, which was established in 1987 and by the mid-1990s was the leading publisher of books for expats and migrants planning to live, work, buy property and retire abroad. In 2000, we published the first of our London books, *Living and Working in London*, and since then have published over 20 additional London titles, including a series of city walking guides. We now specialise in alternative London guidebooks for both residents and visitors. See our websites for our latest titles.

Readers' Guide

- ◆ **Contact details:** These include the address, telephone number and website. You can enter the postcode to display a map of the location on Google and other map sites or, if you're driving, enter the postcode into your satnav.
- ◆ **Opening hours:** These can change at short notice, therefore you should confirm by telephone or check the website before travelling, particularly over Christmas/New Year and on bank holidays, when some places are closed. Many venues open daily, while some open only on weekdays.
- ◆ **Transport:** The nearest tube or railway station is listed, although in some cases it may involve a lengthy walk. You can also travel to most places by bus and to some by river ferry. Some venues outside central London are best reached by car, although parking can be difficult or impossible in some areas. Most venues don't provide parking, particularly in central London, and even parking nearby can be a problem (and very expensive!). If you need to travel by car, check the local parking facilities beforehand.
- ◆ **Prices:** Many venues – such as museums, galleries, parks, gardens and places of worship – offer free entry. Where a fee applies it is shown as 'fee' - you can check the latest fees online. Note that the entrance fees for major 'attractions' – such as Hampton Court Palace, St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey – are very high.

Disabled Access

Many historic public and private buildings don't provide wheelchair access or provide wheelchair access to the ground floor only. Wheelchairs are provided at some venues, although users may need assistance. Most museums, galleries and public buildings have a WC, although it may not be wheelchair accessible. Contact venues directly if you have specific requirements. The Disabled Go website (disabledgo.com) provides more in-depth access information for some destinations.

Contents

Introduction	7
 1. Central London	9
 2. City & East London	79
 3. North London	129
 4. West London.....	147
 5. Southwest London	167
 6. Southeast London.....	179
Index	203



Eleanor Cross (see page 27)

Introduction

Researching and writing this book has been a pleasure and an education. Despite having lived in northwest, central and southeast London at various times, and happily potted around the city for many years, I now realise how much I had (and still have) to learn, and how many unusual delights London has to offer. Not only had I failed to visit many of the over 300 places featured in this book, I hadn't even heard of some of them!

London is a city with a cornucopia of curious places and stories, being ancient, vast and in a constant state of flux. Newcomers have, of course, a wealth of world-renowned attractions to keep them occupied for a month of Sundays, which are more than adequately covered in a plethora of standard guidebooks. What *Quirky London* does is take you off the beaten path to seek out the more unusual sights that fail to register on the radar of both visitors and residents alike. It also highlights unusual and often overlooked aspects and attractions of some of London's most famous tourist sites.

Quirky London includes some of the city's most unusual buildings, striking public artworks, outrageous museum and gallery exhibits, hauntings (including by animals), legends and much more. The entries range from Britain's oldest door to the beginning of body-snatching, from dummy house façades to London's unluckiest spot, from a legal brothel to the capital's most haunted theatre and house, and from the original skull and crossbones to what has a strong claim to be London's campest statue.

Although this book isn't intended as a walking guide, many of the places covered are close to one another in central London – notably in the hubs of Westminster and the City – where you can easily stroll between them, while others are further out in the suburbs. However, all are close to public transport links and relatively easy to get to. And, conveniently for a city with a (largely unfounded) reputation for rain – London actually enjoys a lower annual rainfall than New York, Rome or Sydney – a number of the attractions are indoors, meaning that you can visit them whatever the weather.

I hope you enjoy discovering London's curious sights as much as we did.

Graeme Chesters
May 2019

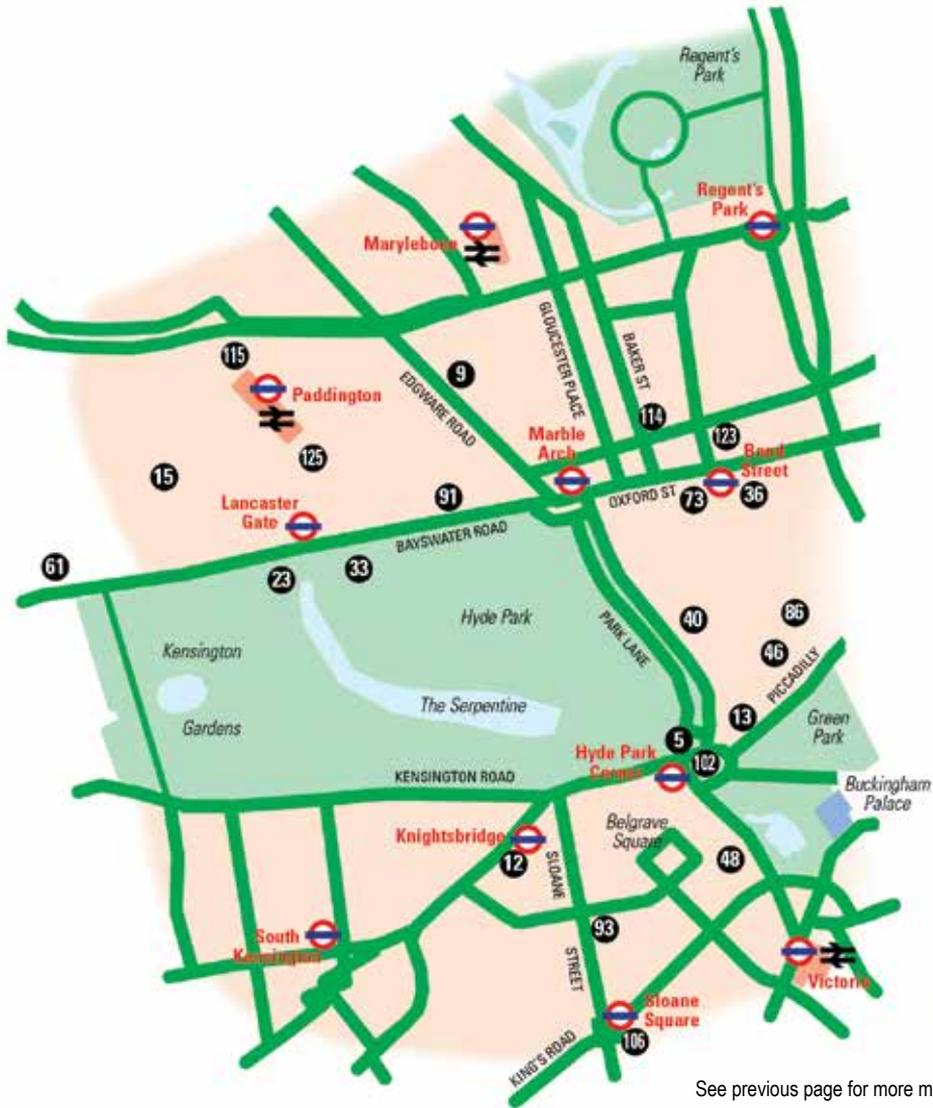


See next page for more maps

CHAPTER 1

CENTRAL LONDON

1. British Museum
2. Houses of Parliament
3. Savoy Hotel
4. Westminster Abbey
5. Achilles as Wellington
6. Beau Window
7. Beginning of Body-snatching
8. Burlington Arcade's Unusual Origin
9. Cato Street Decapitators
10. Confused Statue – Eros
11. Defaced Sculptures
12. Diana & Dodi Memorial
13. Down Street Ghost Station
14. Duke of York's Soaring Column
15. Dummy House Facades
16. Eleanor Cross
17. Falstaff's Curse & London's Unluckiest Spot
18. Fanlights and Famous Residents
19. First Person on Television
20. Governor of Duck Island
21. Grant Museum
22. Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies
23. Hugging Bears and Temperance
24. Hunterian Museum
25. Indian High Commission Swastika
26. London Beer Flood
27. London's Most Haunted House
28. London's Most Haunted Theatre
29. Millbank Prison
30. Model for the Ministry of Truth
31. National Gallery
32. Nell Gwyn's 'Royal' Residence
33. Cursed Obelisk
34. Pet Cemetery
35. Petrie Museum of Archaeology
36. Riotous Development
37. River in an Antique Shop
38. Satanic Cocktail
39. Scotland in London
40. Sir John Soane's Museum
41. Skittles
42. Statue that Shouldn't Exist
43. Strand Ley Line
44. Temple of the Occult
45. Texas Embassy in London
46. Thorney Island
47. Unlucky for Rock Stars
48. York Watergate
49. Alarming Sculptures
50. Arrest of a Dead Man
51. Athenaeum Club Kerb Stones
52. Authoritarian Percy Street
53. Baby in the Rock
54. Bar Italia's Gangland Past



See previous page for more maps

55. Birdcage Walk
56. Bishop's Mitre
57. Blue Ball Yard
58. Breathing Sculpture
59. Bucket of Blood
60. Buxton Memorial Fountain
61. Cadiz Memorial
62. Cabmen's Shelters
63. Cafe Diana
64. Caxton Hall
65. Cholera Pump
66. Citadel
67. Contrite Memorial
68. Conversation with Oscar Wilde
69. Curfew Bell
70. Drink in Prison
71. Druids' Legacy?
72. Egyptian Street Furniture
73. Fortnum & Mason Clock
74. Fossils at the Economist
75. Garden Poetry
76. Glamorous Electricity Substation
77. Golden Arm
78. Golden Insects
79. Hair-raising Burials
80. Halicarnassus in London
81. Imperial Camel Corps Statue
82. Jeté
83. Justice for the Homeless
84. Lamb's Conduit Street
85. Last Drink for the Condemned
86. Legal Brothel
87. London's Campestr Statue
88. London's First Pavements
89. London's Longest Pub Name
90. London's Most Chateau-like Hotel
91. London's Most Interesting Door
92. London's Oldest Outdoor Statue
93. London Silver Vaults
94. London's Smallest House
95. Medieval or Modern?
96. Mrs Jordan's Puthy Put-down
97. Mysteries
98. Mysterious Cowford Lodge
99. Nazi Dog Memorial
100. Not so Good for your Health
101. Number Ten's Door
102. Old Curiosity Shop
103. Paolozzi Mosaics
104. Queen Anne's Unusual Haunting
105. Queen Elizabeth Gate
106. Queen Mary's Steps
107. Real Diagon Alley
108. River in a Tube Station
109. Road to Nowhere
110. Royal Ballet School's Twisty Bridge
111. St Ermin's Hotel Spies
112. St James's Palace Chapels
113. Seven Dials Pillar
114. Soho Mural
115. Spending a Penny in Style
116. Standing Man & Walking Man
117. Statue with a Molehill
118. Terracotta Beavers
119. Thames Lions
120. Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth
121. T. S. Eliot's Troubled Marriage
122. Victorian Shopping
123. Welbeck Street Car Park

1 BRITISH MUSEUM

With a collection of over 8 million items, the British Museum has more than its fair share of 'quirky' exhibits. The following are a few of my favourites:

Lindow Man: This is the name given to the remarkably well-preserved remains of a man who met his death at Lindow Moss bog in Cheshire in the 1st century AD and was discovered by peat cutters some two millennia later in 1984. The body has been extensively studied and it's known that he met a violent death: he was struck twice on the head with a heavy object and received a hard blow to his back, which broke a rib. A thin cord tied around his neck was probably used to strangle him and break his neck; once dead, his throat was cut and he was put face down in the bog. His death is thought to have been a ritual sacrifice.



Lindow Man & reconstruction (inset)

Lindow Man

The peat bog's acidic, oxygen-free conditions meant that Lindow Man's skin, hair and many of his internal organs were well preserved, although they gave him the appearance of having been pickled in tea.

Phallic Wind Chime: Also from the 1st century AD, this Roman wind chime is made of bronze and depicts a winged penis, from which five bells hang. Such chimes were hung in gardens and porches where they would tinkle in the wind – the sound was thought to ward off evil spirits – and bell chimes were often combined with a phallus, as the latter was viewed as a charm against evil and a symbol of good fortune.

To modern eyes, the wind chime is a challenging object, shocking to some. However, sexual and naked images were common in the Greek and Roman worlds – neither of which was much influenced by the reservations and taboos of the Judaeo-Christian tradition – and it wasn't uncommon to see a phallus portrayed in paintings, jewellery and even furniture.



Phallic wind chimes

Warren Cup: This Roman silver cup originated near Jerusalem and dates from AD5-15, although it's named after a former owner, Edward Perry Warren (1860-1928). The images it carries will be even more upsetting to some people than the phallic wind chime above. One side of the cup shows two youths having sex, while the other displays a young man lowering himself onto the lap of an older, bearded man, while a slave boy looks on voyeuristically from behind a door.

Following Warren's death, the cup remained in private hands for many years and was only exhibited in public for the first time in the '80s, when social attitudes softened; it's had a permanent home at the British Museum since 1999.

British Museum



Representations of sex acts are common in Roman art, on glass, pottery, terracotta lamps and wall paintings, in both private and public buildings. The Romans had no concept of – or word for – homosexuality. And for their mentors, the Greeks, the partnering of an older man with a youth was an accepted part of education.

British Museum, Great Russell Street, WC1B 3DG (020-7323 8181; britishmuseum.org; Russell Sq or Tottenham Court Rd tube; daily 10am-5.30pm, Fri until 8.30pm; free except for special exhibitions).



Warren Cup

2 HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

The Houses of Parliament (or Palace of Westminster) are home to Britain's two Parliamentary Houses, the Lords and the Commons. They have a number of curiosities and quirks, including the following:

The flamboyant, late Conservative MP Sir Nicholas Fairbairn (1933-95) is thought to have been one of the last members to be a regular snuff user.

MPs' White Powder: A filled, communal snuffbox sits by the front door of the Commons. There's been one here since 1693, when smoking was disallowed in the Commons Chamber – a decision that was around three centuries ahead of its time – and snuff was offered to MPs instead. The current wooden snuffbox is a replacement

Snuff box



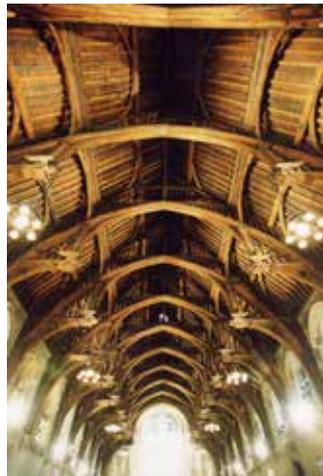
after a World War II air-raid destroyed the silver original.

Remarkable Foresight: Westminster Hall is Parliament's oldest building and almost the only part of the ancient Palace of Westminster to survive in (almost) original

form. It was built at the end of the 11th century, while its magnificent hammerbeam roof was commissioned in 1393 by Richard II. The roof measures 68 by 240ft and is the largest medieval timber roof in northern Europe.

When the roof was restored in 1913 several large timbers needed replacing. However, officials struggled to find oaks old (and thus large) enough,

as many of the country's aged trees had been cut down. A bright spark decided to check where the original timbers had come from and it turned out that when they'd been cut in the 14th century from an estate near Wadhurst in Sussex, the estate's owners had realised that more timber would be



Hammerbeam roof, Westminster Hall



needed for future repairs and planted a stand of oaks specifically for the purpose. These were ready by the early 20th century (520 years later) and were used in the restoration.

Taxi-lamp: On the top of a lamp standard outside Parliament on Parliament Square is a four-sided lamp bearing the word 'Taxi' on each of its panes of amber glass. This is the House of Commons Taxi-lamp – a light flashes on and off when an MP requires a taxi, thereby alerting passing drivers. It's clearly unacceptable for MPs to have to hail a cab on the street like the rest of us.

Taxi lamp



Toe the Line: There are two sets of benches in the Commons Chamber. The Government sits on benches to the Speaker's right, while the Opposition occupies the benches to the Speaker's left. The red lines on the green carpet in front of the two sets of benches are two sword lengths and one foot apart, a throwback to the days when Members might have been tempted to settle disputes with swords.

The Houses of Parliament, SW1A 0AA (020-7219 4114; parliament.uk/visiting; Westminster tube; see website for opening times and fees – free for UK residents).

Members still aren't allowed to cross the red lines during debates, which is the origin of the expression 'toeing the line'.



Red lines, House of Commons



Big Ben clockface

3 SAVOY HOTEL

The Savoy is probably London's most famous hotel. Built in 1889 by the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte with the profits he made from staging Gilbert and Sullivan productions, it's long been a favourite with the glamorous and wealthy, and has a couple of notable oddities:



Driving Rules: Britain drives on the left-hand side of the road, but a Special Act of Parliament from 1902 requires traffic to drive on the right when entering Savoy Court from the Strand. For over a century this has applied to all vehicles, be they horse-drawn or mechanical, and various explanations have been proposed for the anomaly.

It's said by some to be the result of the habit of the era's Hackney Carriage cab drivers to reach out of the driver's door window to open the passenger's door (which opened backwards, having a handle at the front), without having to get out of the cab himself, and/or because the hotel's front

It's often said that Savoy Court is the only place in London where you must drive on the right, but that's not the case: at Hammersmith bus station, the entrance and exit also force drivers on to the right side of the road.

doors are on the right of the street. Other people think the explanation is more prosaic: to prevent cars that are dropping people off or picking them up at the neighbouring Savoy Theatre from blocking the hotel's entrance.

Kaspar the Lucky Cat: The Savoy is the proud owner of a 3ft Art Deco black cat called Kaspar. It was specially commissioned in 1926 from Basil Ionides (1884-1950), an architect most famous for his 1929 redesign of the rebuilt Savoy Theatre. The cat is used as an extra guest when thirteen dine at the hotel, to avoid the bad luck associated with this number; he's given a full place setting, has a napkin tied around his neck and is served each course. Otherwise, the cat resides in a display case in the hotel's entrance hall.



Kaspar

This tradition dates back to 1898 when Woolf Joel, a South African diamond magnate, held a dinner at the Savoy. Due to a last-minute cancellation only thirteen people dined, which one of the guests deemed to be unlucky. He also claimed that the first person to leave the dinner would be the first to die. Woolf Joel laughed this off and, indeed, was the first to leave the table. A few weeks later he was shot dead in his Johannesburg office.

Over the years, a number of the Savoy's famous patrons have become fond of Kaspar, including Winston Churchill, who frequently took his Cabinet to lunch at the hotel.

Anxious that this wouldn't be repeated and worried about its reputation, the Savoy provided a member of staff to sit at tables of thirteen for some years afterwards. However, this proved unpopular with guests, who often didn't want a stranger in their midst listening to their business, so a new solution was found: Kaspar the cat.

The Savoy Hotel, Savoy Court, WC2R 0EU (020-7836 4343; fairmont.com/savoy-london; Embankment tube).

Savoy Hotel



Hotel foyer

4

WESTMINSTER ABBEY

Much-visited Westminster Abbey has a number of unusual attractions:

Ben Jonson's Curious Burial: The dramatist and poet (1573-1637) is the only person in the Abbey buried in an upright position.

Despite working as an actor and playwright – William Shakespeare was in the cast of Jonson's play *Every Man in his Humour* – as well as being tutor to Sir Walter Raleigh's son, becoming Poet Laureate in 1619 and receiving gifts from royalty, Jonson always seemed to be short of money.



Ben Jonson's tomb

It's said that Jonson's memorial was done at the expense of a certain Jack Young, who was passing when the grave was covered and gave the mason 18 pence to cut the inscription.

Sadly, the great writer couldn't afford a standard 6ft by 2ft burial space and was interred on his feet (in a space taking up a mere 18 inches square) in the northern aisle of the nave rather than in Poet's Corner, marked by a simple inscription: 'O Rare Ben Johnson'. Johnson's original stone was later moved to the base of the wall opposite the grave to preserve it.

Britain's Oldest Door:

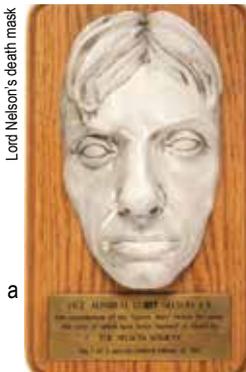
A door opening into the Abbey's Chapter House dates from the 1050s, making it Britain's only surviving Anglo-Saxon door and the country's oldest. It measures 6.5ft high by 4ft wide and is made from a single tree; analysis of its rings shows that it grew between 924 and 1030. Fragments of skin found stuck to the door weren't from the stripped corpse of a criminal, nailed there to deter others – as was once popularly believed – but are cow hide. This is slightly disappointing, we think.

Anglo-Saxon door



Death Masks: With so much to see in the Abbey, some visitors overlook the museum, which is in the vaulted undercroft. This is one of the oldest parts of the building, dating from soon after the founding of the Norman church in 1065. The museum boasts notable, curious and (to modern sensibilities) ghoulish collection of royal and other funeral effigies,

Lord Nelson's death mask



a

some of them death masks. These wooden and wax images are some of the earliest likenesses of medieval monarchs, including Edward III, Henry VII and Elizabeth I. Later examples include Charles II, William III, Mary II, Queen Anne, Lord Nelson and Prime Minister William Pitt (the Elder).

Until around 1300, London's climate sometimes approached Mediterranean-like warmth and a wide variety of plants would have been grown in the Abbey's gardens.

England's Oldest Cultivated Garden: College Garden is one of the Abbey's three original gardens (along with the Garth and the Little Cloister) and is said to be England's oldest garden under continuous cultivation. It was the infirmary garden some 1,000 years ago, used for growing herbs and produce to keep the Abbey's occupants healthy, and to add flavour and interest to a diet that was bland and stodgy.

Westminster Abbey, 20 Deans Yard, SW1P 3PA (020-7222 5152; westminster-abbey.org; Westminster or St James's Park tube; Mon-Fri 9.30am-3.30pm, Sat 9am-3pm – 1pm Sep to April; fee).



College Garden

Westminster Abbey



5

ACHILLES AS WELLINGTON

The 18ft bronze statue of Achilles near Hyde Park Corner has a number of eccentricities. It looks too large – it stands 36ft high, including the base and mound – and although depicting the Greek hero of the Trojan War, it's dedicated to the Duke of Wellington. The statue is by Sir Richard Westmacott and was unveiled in 1822 to celebrate the Duke's victories in the Peninsular and Napoleonic Wars, installed by order of George III. The entrance gates to Hyde Park were too low for it to pass through and a hole had to be knocked in the adjoining wall.

The figure of Achilles/Wellington stands on a Dartmoor granite plinth and carries a sword and shield. The bronze used for the casting came from cannons captured in the Duke's military campaigns at Salamanca, Toulouse, Vitoria and Waterloo.



The statue was actually modelled on a noted classical study of a gladiator, although it's claimed that the head was based on Wellington's. It was London's first public nude statue since Roman times and there was an outcry over the penis, which had to be

Achilles

covered with a fig leaf to protect the public morals. The fig leaf has been chipped off twice, in 1870 and 1961. Wags have wondered whether the offending organ, like the head, was based on the Duke's.

Hyde Park, near Hyde Park Corner, between the Broad Walk and Lovers' Walk, W1 (Hyde Park Corner tube; 5am-midnight).

6

BEAU WINDOW

George Bryan Brummell (1778-1840) – nicknamed Beau – was the foremost fashion icon of his age. Born in Downing Street – where his father worked as private secretary to Lord North – he later attended Eton, joined the Light Dragoons and became a member of the Prince of Wales's set. This was unusual for a commoner, but Brummell was renowned for his wit and fine dress sense.



Beau Window & Beau Brummell

When he came into his inheritance, Brummell resolved to become London's best-dressed gentleman, a splendidly shallow ambition. Gentlemen, including the Prince, would visit this iconic dandy to see how he was dressed. His style was one of understated elegance rather than the