

## London Peculiar

by David Long

Half a million might visit a big exhibition at Burlington House, long queues form daily outside Madame Tussauds, and the Tower of London has long been the most popular tourist attraction in the country. Yet for every Hampton Court or Westminster Abbey, London has scores of lesser known marvels which can still be enjoyed without being jostled by the crowds...

One wonders, for example, how many who throng Trafalgar Square, scrambling onto Landseer's striking lions and feeding the feral pigeons, ever notice what stands on the southeast corner of the square? There, contained inside a lamp-post is the world's smallest police station, less than five feet wide with its own direct line to Scotland Yard and room inside for one. The lamp itself incidentally, like its partner across the way, is a splendid glass orb popularly supposed to have once graced Nelson's Victory. Five miles south-east of this, almost certainly London's narrowest building, are two of the widest. Home to the Royal Regiment of Artillery, Woolwich Barracks boast a facade over 1,000 feet in length. This grand Classical parade of brickwork and colonnades was compared by the architectural historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner to the Winter Palace at St Petersburg, yet to most Londoners it is all but unknown. Across the common James Wyatt's Royal Military Academy - known as 'the Shop' to its alumni, whose numbers include Kitchener and General Gordon - is a relative shrimp at just 720 feet, but at its centre the whimsical Wyatt built a two-thirds scale replica of the Tower of London, now converted into flats.

Wyatt was far from alone and the hand of Sir John Vanbrugh can also be seen here in buildings he designed after completing Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard. Woolwich is also the final resting place for John Nash's extraordinary Rotunda, a highly original construction which began as a tent in St James's Park in 1814 as part of the celebrations following the defeat of Bonaparte. Five years on, replacing canvas and wood with copper and pale yellow brick, Nash converted it to a permanent structure and until just a few years ago it housed a museum of historical weaponry with retired Gunners on hand to show visitors around.

Another, earlier victory, the capture of Severndroog off the coast of Malabar in the East Indies, is commemorated

nearby too: a triangular folly some 60 feet high erected in 1784 by Lady James on Shooters Hill. She did it in memory of her husband, Sir William, whose 'superior Valour and able Conduct' won the day, and her monument with its three hexagonal turrets is an elegant combination of harmonious if diverse Georgian and Gothick elements.

Given the extent of the British Empire, such borrowing and blending of different styles is perhaps not unusual. At Blackheath is a three story dwelling built in the late 18th Century, its odd, horned eaves sweep up in a dramatic Chinese fashion and are set off by an immense, oval oeil-de-boeuf window, the effect pleasantly exaggerated by its surprising location squeezed between two suburban terraced houses. Accommodation of an altogether different kind can be seen at the Charterhouse, a tiny surviving relic of a mighty Carthusian monastery founded as long ago as 1370 on land originally purchased to bury the plague dead. Hidden within its peaceful walls lies Sutton's Hospital which since 1613 has been an alms house for impoverished old gentlemen. Preference is still given to 'decrepit or old Captaynes either at Sea or Land' and 'Souldiers maymed or ympotent' and in quiet surroundings more reminiscent of an Oxford or Cambridge college than the square mile these Sutton Brothers are promised 'a full library and a full stomach and the peace and quiet in which to enjoy them both'.

A short walk along the river bank from the National Theatre, the Oxo Tower is a more recent and familiar landmark. In 1928 permission to build the tower was refused on the grounds that advertisements - in this case for a famous brand of beef stock



Woolwich Barracks Pic: David Long

## London Peculiar (cont.)

cube - were not to be placed above a certain height. The architect, however, one Albert Moore, successfully argued that it was merely coincidental that his giant windows happened to be in the shape of Os and Xs...

Sir Richard Burton, the Victorian explorer and translator of the *Arabian Nights*, was equally keen on advertising his exploits. Accordingly, this ardent arabist (and, famously, the first infidel to enter Mecca) asked that his mortal remains be interred at Mortlake in an arab 'tent'. Somewhat out of sorts with its Islamic decoration, there is a crucifix above the door as well as a window at the rear through which the gloomy interior can be viewed. Like the Oxo Tower, Sir Richard's wildly extravagant concrete mausoleum would never be permitted by today's town planners with their statutes, rules and regulations – and one has to say more's the pity.

That said, by enabling the impressive 1,800 year-old cult Temple of Mithras to be resited on Queen Victoria Street near the Bank of England, it is those same planners who have given us our best glimpse yet of London's earliest origins. Most of Roman Londinium still lies 30 feet below the surface of the modern metropolis and is seen only fleetingly when its foundations are briefly uncovered during the course of building redevelopment. Otherwise only fragmentary remains are to be found on the surface: when Rome withdrew Londinium became a quarry for successive generations and the keen eye will identify her bricks and tiles in surviving portions of the much later city walls as well as in the fabric of several churches. These include All Hallows by the Tower and the 11th Century St Mary-le-Bow.

In Fleet Street there stands another rare survivor, this time of the Great Fire of 1666. Known as Prince Henry's Room it is London's last complete timber-framed Jacobean townhouse and as such a unique remnant of the medieval townscape. It doubles now as the entrance to Middle Temple, and marks the very limits of the city's famous cataclysm, standing as it does just yards from the line where the flames were finally beaten back.

There is of course plenty more besides for anyone who cares to look. In Phipps Bridge Road near Wimbledon a flint-built sham castle masquerades as a family house, in Kingsbury Ernest Troubridge



*Tomb of explorer Sir Richard Burton Pic: David Long*

built at least a dozen more, and elsewhere are ghost stations, wartime bunkers, medieval halls, even a genuine lighthouse. Most are never so much as glimpsed by visitors, but then how many Londoners know their city any better? Less than a mile from Hyde Park Corner stands the tallest folly in Britain. Built with the profits of the Great Exhibition of 1851 to celebrate the Empire, Thomas Colcutt's Queen's Tower is nearly 300 feet tall yet most passers-by never notice it and many locals don't even know it is there.

### About David Long

An award-winning ghostwriter, under his own name **David Long** has written and illustrated a number of books on London including *Spectacular Vernacular: London's 100 Most Extraordinary Buildings* and a sequel *Tunnels, Towers And Temples: London's 100 Strangest Places*. The latest, *Hidden City: The Secret Alleys, Courts and Yards of London's Square Mile*, has just been published. (<http://www.davidlong.info/>)

