

Hidden London

Our December Speaker meeting was a fascinating revelation into little known places and facts surrounding our great capital city. David Nicholson shared his insights into some very popular parts of London, starting by asking how many Royal Palaces could be found in the centre of London. Surprisingly, the answer was four – Westminster, St. James, Buckingham and Somerset House. The oldest palace is Westminster, with only two original parts remaining, having been built in 1097 by William Rufus. The Great Hall is used for two reasons - firstly for the monarch to speak to MP's and for VIPs to lie in state. The tradition of Black Rod banging on the door goes back to Oliver Cromwell's time.

The Palace of St. James was built by Henry VIII on the site of a former leprosy hospital. Incidentally, the only statue of Henry VIII in London is outside St. Bart's Hospital. Somerset House on the banks of the River Thames and now an art gallery, was built in 1547 and was formerly the home of both Elizabeth 1 and the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots.

Buckingham Palace, built by the Duke of Buckingham, was bought by the Crown when he died. It was designed as three sides of a square. Before moving there, Queen Victoria originally lived in Somerset House. It had stood empty for over 20 years. Queen Victoria had the fourth side built in white stone whereas the other three sides are red brick. She also had the arch moved from the forecourt to Marble Arch. At one time over 100 carriages were stored in the stables at the back known as the Royal Mews.

At one time in central London there were three malls – The Mall, Pall Mall and Mall number two which was parallel to The Mall. Pall Mall has a connection to royalty, named after a 17th century mallet and ball game similar to croquet played by King Charles II's court. There was only one house in Pall Mall not owned by the Crown and that was where Nell Gwynne lived (formerly a humble orange seller, actress and mistress of Charles II). The top of the lamp posts in The Mall all feature ships from the Battle of Trafalgar leading down from Buckingham Palace to Trafalgar Square via Admiralty Arch, only used on ceremonial occasions. Directions to London on milestones were measured from Trafalgar Square. Charing (chere reine or dear queen) Cross was originally sited

in Trafalgar Square. It represents Queen Eleanor of Castile who died in Lincoln in 1290. It took twelve days to move her body to London and a cross was erected by King Edward I in each of the twelve overnight stopping points of the funeral cortege. Of the original twelve, only three fully survive today at Geddington, Hardingstone and Waltham Cross. A reproduction monument now stands outside Charing Cross Station.

David finished by talking about Nelson's Column. Built in 1840 to commemorate Vice- Admiral Horatio Nelson's victory and death at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. It is 169 ft high and Nelson on the top looks forward towards Portsmouth. The original idea was to have a spiral staircase inside for public access but decided against. The four bronze lions at the bottom were added later. It is said that the lion was Queen Victoria's favourite animal.

A Question and Answer session followed and we all agreed that it had been a most interesting talk.

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