

# The Victorian Kensington Walk

By Kevin Flude October 2003

## INTRODUCTION

Kensington gained its sobriquet Royal because Queen Victoria was born in Kensington Palace. The whole area is also a testament to the energy of the Victorians. In 1851 Prince Albert and his right hand man, Henry Cole, presented the original world's fair. The Great Exhibition, as it was called, of 1851 was a tremendous success and made a huge profit that was used to buy up land in the area. The Commission of the Great Exhibition (which is still in existence) was tasked with providing land for cultural institutions. The institutions were encouraged to provide exhibitions for education ordinary people and the area became one of the world's great cultural quarters. It was originally known as Albertopolis.

The tour provides an insight into Victorian Britain.

## HIGH STREET KENSINGTON TUBE STATION

*Turn Right (east) out of High Street Kensington Tube down Kensington High Street, cross over the road to Church Street where you will see the church.*

## ST MARY ABBOTS

This is a typical Victorian Gothic Revival Church which was rebuilt (1869 - 72) by the great Sir George Gilbert Scott. The Church was founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century by the Abbot of Abingdon. The Abbey had been given land by the local aristocratic landlord Godfrey de Vere, Earl of Oxford. King William and Queen Mary used to worship here.

*Walk north up Church Street to Holland Street, cross the road into York House Place and walk into:*

## KENSINGTON GARDENS

The gardens were originally laid out as part of Nottingham House but they were substantially remodelled by Queen Mary who did not like formal gardens. It was opened to 'respectable people' by George II and has since effectively become part of Hyde Park. A memorial to Princess Diana has recently been created here.

*Walk to the red brick:*

## KENSINGTON PALACE

William and Mary bought 'Nottingham House' in Kensington in order to escape their old palace in Whitehall. The King suffered from asthma and Kensington was reputed for its

healthy air. The Queen hated WESTMINSTER, which she thought was 'nothing but water or wall'. The house was modified by Sir Christopher Wren and his clerk of works Nicholas Hawksmoor. Queen Anne turned the Dutch Garden into a less formal English Garden and employed Hawksmoor and Vanbrugh to build the Orangery. William Kent designed some of London's most stunning interiors in the Palace. George III preferred Buckingham House and so left the Palace to his relatives.

Princess Victoria was born and brought up here (under the cruel 'Kensington System'). The scheme was devised by Captain John Conroy - the Comptroller of the household of Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent. It was calculated to isolate the future Queen from outside influence, and to make the willful young princess utterly dependent on Conroy and her mother. It was hoped that Victoria would gain the throne before her eighteenth birthday and that Conroy would be appointed Regent. The dictatorial system allowed the Princess no privacy and strictly selected her friends and contacts. Conroy's system had one virtue however as he did succeed, by careful manipulation of her public appearances, to make Victoria popular despite the almost universal contempt for the rest of the Royal family.

The Princess loathed the ruthless Conroy. Luckily she had come of age by the time William IV's health began to fail. Conroy and Duchess desperately sought to force Victoria to place Conroy in charge of all her affairs when she took the throne. Conroy stated 'If Princess Victoria will not listen to reason, she must be coerced'. On her accession to the throne, however, she wasted no time in freeing herself from Conroy's influence. In the first few days of her reign she revelled in her ability to be alone, and left for Buckingham Palace where the Queen of England slept in a room on her own for the very first time. Kensington Palace was the home of Charles and Diana and the area in front of the Gates was bedecked with an incredible array of flowers after her death.

The Palace houses the Court Dress Collection, among which can be seen some of Queen Victoria's toys. Victoria's bedroom is on display.

***Walk through Kensington Gardens into:***

## **HYDE PARK**

London's largest park, but originally farmland owned by **WESTMINSTER ABBEY**, which at the **REFORMATION** was taken over by King Henry VIII for hunting. Deer were hunted here until 1768. In the 17th Century it was opened to the public and 'privatised' by the puritans. One of the new landowners, a 'sordid fellow' charged for entry (1 shilling per coach, 6d for each horse). On May Day 1654 during Cromwell's reign, 'Great resort came to Hyde Park, many hundreds of rich coaches and gallants in attire but most shameful powdered hair, men painted and spotted women'. After the **RESTORATION** the land reverted to royalty. Since then, it and the other royal parks, Green Park, St James Park, Hyde Park and Regents Park, have been the royal gift to Londoners.

The East-West route through the park is the 'Route Du Roi', which was used by Royalty journeying from their **WESTMINSTER** Palaces to the new Palace at **KENSINGTON**. It was London first street to be lit and 300 lamps illuminated it during the reign of William III. It was however still plagued by highwaymen. Londoners wickedly corrupted the name to Rotten Row. Hyde Park was a favourite spot for early morning duelling and in 1779 Charles James Fox, the radical politician, and William Adam fought 'the most perfect of all duels ... So much good temper, good sense, propriety, easy good humour, and natural good nature'. Fox refused to present the normal sideways stance to the oncoming bullet, as he was 'as thick one way as another', and escaped with but a slight wound.

In 1814 the Battle of Trafalgar was reenacted on the Serpentine and the huge number of visitors turned the park into 'a dry crumbling sand, not a vestige or hint of grass...'

*Walk parallel to Kensington High Street to the:*

### **ALBERT MEMORIAL**

This Gothic fantasy is the memorial to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg Gotha, Prince Consort to Queen Victoria and a potent symbol of Victorian values. It was built by Sir Gilbert Scott, and cost a stupendous £120,000. Albert is shown seated, holding a catalogue of the Great Exhibition, he is surrounded by statues and reliefs celebrating the Empire, the Arts and Sciences and the Christian Virtues. The 4 continents are shown at the top of the stairs, and there are 178 reliefs of the great artists and men of letters around the world on the base of the memorial. At the angles of the monument are representations of Agriculture, Manufacture, Commerce and Engineering. On pillars above are Astronomy, Chemistry, Geology and Geometry. In niches are Rhetoric, Medicine, Philosophy and Physiology. Pointing to Heaven around the Spire are Faith, Hope, Charity and Humility, and Fortitude, Prudence, Justice and Temperance. The decorations are mosaics of enamel, and polished stone and includes Agate, onyx, jasper, cornelian, crystal, marble, granite and other rich building materials. The Memorial has recently been restored.

### **CRYSTAL PALACE**

This was the site of the Great Exhibition of 1851, held at a time when the British Empire was at its height. The profits from the Exhibition were used to purchase the land between Exhibition Road and Queen's Gate, which Albert planned to become a 'city', dedicated to the improvement of mankind. 'Albertopolis' was to become one of the world's greatest centres for the arts and sciences, and is an awesome reminder of the power and self-belief of the Victorians.

On this site stood Joseph Paxton's revolutionary Crystal Palace - a magnificent three tiered glass structure which housed the world's exhibits. It was 563 metres long by 124 metres wide, made of 400 tons of glass, and 4000 tons of iron, covered a floor area of 74,320 square metres with over 8 miles of tables displaying over 100,000 objects. The building incorporated an avenue of trees, which the public wished to save. The cost of building was

remarkably low at £80,000 and it took less than a year to erect. 6 million visitors admired one of the world's best architectural sights in five months and Queen Victoria herself visited it on no less than 29 occasions! After the exhibition it was dismantled and re-erected on top of a hill in Sydenham (Crystal Palace) until it was burnt down on 30th November 1936.

***Leave the Park and cross the Road to the Albert Hall - to the right (west) of the Hall you will see an extraordinary building which is highly decorated. This is the:***

### **ROYAL COLLEGE OF ORGANISTS**

Built by Royal Engineer Lieutenant H.H. Cole, son of Albert's right hand man - Henry Cole, as the National Training School of Music. The design brief was to be 'as different to the Royal Albert Hall as to provoke no comparison'. It is in 'the old English style of the fifteenth century' with a definite Venetian influence, and covered in two-tone plaster sgraffito-work by F.W. Moody. The frieze shows youths playing musical instruments.

### **ALBERT HALL**

The Hall is a more fitting memorial to Albert than the Albert Memorial (see above) because it fulfills a useful function. This is something Albert spent his married life striving to be. The Hall is built in the so-called 'South Kensington' style which is Italianate architecture (strictly Lombardic Early Renaissance) carried out in Brick and Terra cotta. It is an oval amphitheatre based on Roman originals as transmitted via Dresden Opera House, designed by Royal Engineers Francis Fowke and Henry Scott. It was opened in 1870. It now seats 5500 people and is used for everything from concerts to boxing matches and fashion shows to shareholders meetings. A 10 seat box can be purchased today for over £120,000. It used to have abominable acoustics until modern acoustic 'mushrooms' were hung in the hall to eliminate the echo. It was said to be the only place a British Composer could be guaranteed to hear his work twice! The frieze around the top illustrates the 'Triumphs of the Arts and Sciences'

***Continue along the road (now called Kensington Gore) to the large red brick block of apartments. These are the:***

### **ALBERT HALL MANSIONS**

Designed by Norman Shaw in 1879 these are one of London's earliest blocks of flats - the first to be built in the Dutch style. The British were slow to adopt flats because the style was associated with charity housing for the poor, and there was something not quite English about having bedrooms on the same floor as living rooms, nor sharing floors with servants. Innovations included flats with wine cellars, bathrooms, lifts and separate entrances for servants.

***Continue along Kensington Gore to the Red Brick mansion next door:***

## **LOWTHER LODGE**

Built by Norman Shaw in 1873 for William Lowther, a rich M.P. this is one of London's finest private houses. It was the first to have a passenger lift, and illustrates the reaction against stuccoed Victorian Italianate architecture. In 1911 it was taken over by the Royal Geographical Society. Around the corner are found statues of some of the great explorers.

***Turn Right (south) down Exhibition Road - past the typical expensive housing of Kensington - white stucco buildings of the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the red brick of the later 19<sup>th</sup> Century. After these walk past the 1960's architecture of the Imperial College. Turn right down Imperial College Road until you see a huge white tower:***

## **CAMPANILE OF THE IMPERIAL INSTITUTE**

Built by T. E. Collcutt in 1887-1893. The white Tower, with red brick bands, is the only surviving part of the Imperial Institute. It stands amid a horrible collection of 1960's architecture, and one can only wonder at the architects who tore down the old Institute and ignored the old South Kensington Axis which gave architectural unity to the area. This axis runs from the Albert Memorial, through the Centre of the Albert Hall, to the Campanile, and to the entrance of the Natural History Museum.

***Retrace your steps to Exhibition Road and continue down (south) to the entrance of:***

## **SCIENCE MUSEUM**

Originally part of the Victoria and Albert Museum the Science Museum became a separate Institution in a much-regretted decision in 1913. The divide of Exhibition Road destroyed the original aim of the museum to apply art and good design to manufactures, and is a symbol of decades of bad British design. The museum was designed by Sir Richard Allison in a modified classical style with references to Greek Temples. The building resembles Allison's Selfridges in Oxford Street. The museum contains a wonderful collection of machines and apparatus, and details the progress of science from earliest times to the present day. Here can be found examples of the steam engines that powered the Industrial Revolution, trams that help create suburbia, and, in the Wellcome Collection displays on medical advances. The Wellcome wing has recently been added and contains an IMEX cinema and the futuristic displays of digitopolis.

***Suggested Route:***

***Turn left as you have to as you go in the front door; past the entrance desks turn right. Enjoy on the left the first Newcomen Steam engines, go past Stephenson's Rocket, Puffy Billy, above your head enjoy the world's first airliner. Go into the Space Gallery past several Apollo capsules and into the futuristic Wellcome wing and enjoy the digital Future.***

*On leaving the Museum cross the road and continue down Exhibition Road until you see a terracotta building which is:*

### **HENRY COLE WING VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM**

Designed by Henry Scott and J. W. Wild in 1874 as the School of Naval Architecture, and soon became part of the Science Schools. Thomas Huxley worked here. The loggia at the top was designed to allow access for Chemistry students. The splendid brick and terracotta building is part of the Victoria and Albert Museum and named after the founding father and first museum director. Inside can be found the watercolour works of John Constable and the Frank Lloyd Wright room among other wonders.

*Continue down Exhibition Road to the:*

### **EXHIBITION ROAD ENTRANCE, VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM**

Just passed the side entrance of the Victoria and Albert Museum note the shrapnel damage to the walls caused by bombing in World War Two. During the war most of the collection was taken out of London, and some was stored in mines in Wales.

*You can either go in the Museum here or walk to the end of Exhibition Road and turn left into Cromwell Road to the:*

### **VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM MAIN ENTRANCE CROMWELL ROAD**

This frontage of the Victoria and Albert Museum is part of Sir Aston Webb's enlargement of the museum. The foundation stone of this part of the museum was laid down by Queen Victoria on her last major state appearance in 1899 when she directed that the museum should henceforth be known as the Victoria and Albert Museum. The Crown above the main entrance is an interesting symbol of Monarchy.

The museum itself dates back to the Great Exhibition of 1851 when Prince Albert set up a Museum of Manufactures to house the best objects purchased from the Exhibition. The idea of the museum was entirely practical - its theme was the 'application of Fine Art to Manufactures'. The first director was Henry Cole, a small ball of energy, who was followed around the Museum by his yapping dog (The dog was buried in what is now the Pirelli Garden in the centre of the Museum). The original buildings were the 'Brompton Boilers' an immense structure of corrugated iron and steel, which Prince Albert suggested, should be painted with Green and White stripes in order to lighten up the oppressive buildings. The 'boilers' are alive and well and form the Bethnal Green But the link between art and science weakened over the years, the museum became known as the Museum of Ornamental Art, the South Kensington Museum, and then the Victoria and Albert Museum. Recently, the flamboyant director, Sir Roy Strong, added a sub-title 'The National Museum of Decorative Art and Design', to try to establish its purpose to the public and to restore the link between art and science. The displays are truly wonderful.

*For this tour the visitor should first go to the Pirelli Gardens (room 23) and look at the buildings around the square which show the original South Kensington style. The four sides of the square were built at different times by Fowke and Scott. The original entrance is through the beautiful door at the far side whose panels symbolise the link between the arts and sciences. Note the inscription above the door 'Better it is to get wisdom than Gold'. The designs on the walls are by Sykes, Gamble and Townroe. Look at the columns above this door where there are three horizontal divisions represent the Ages of Man. On the pediment is Queen Victoria distributing Laurel crowns in front of the Crystal Palace - the names of the participating countries are listed. The Pirelli Garden is an Italian Garden sponsored by the tyre Company.*

*Next find your way to the Cast Courts Rooms. Room 46A has been restored to the sumptuous Victorian interior decoration, and its plaster casts of such huge monuments as Trajan's Column, and the porch of the Cathedral of Santiago del Compostello must be seen to be believed. These casts illustrate the amazing energy of the Victorians. Next, find the Ceramic Staircase (room 11) where you will find more original Victorian designs, and a portrait of Sir Henry Cole. Back down the stairs, through the Italian renaissance gallery (looking at a few Donatello's as you go) (rooms 13 and 15) enter the Morris, Gamble and Poynter Rooms. This was at the old front entrance and shows how the first Director commissioned architecture worthy of the contents of the Museum. The Green Dining Room is by Morris with paintings by Burne-Jones. The central refreshment room is now known as the Gamble Room, after its designer. The eclectic mix of Arabian, classical, renaissance and modern features was abhorred until recently, but now we can appreciate a truly stunning interior. Note the quotation around the top of the walls, and the mouth-watering quotations on the window. The Poynter room or Dutch Kitchen includes the grill, in which chops and steaks were cooked, note the attractive representations of the seasons around the walls.*

*Finally, walk via Rooms 11, 12, and Tippoo's Tiger (an Indian view of Empire) to the Restaurant and admire its bare-walled simplicity.*

*Leave the Museum by the Exhibition Road Exit which is near the Restaurant and cross Exhibition Road to the Earth Galleries of the:*

#### **NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM (old Geology museum)**

The Geology Wing was built by the same architect as the Science museum. Opened in 1935 It has since been amalgamated with the Natural History Museum.. The mineral collection is beautiful and the escalator is spectacular.

*Walk through the Earth Galleries through the link to the original Natural history Museum:*

#### **SUGGESTED ROUTE:**

***Go up the Escalator. Quickly go through the exhibition on earthquakes and volcanoes. At the end of experience the Kobe Earthquake in a recreated shop in Japan.***

***Go down the stairs one flight and go into the gallery with the gemstones and crystals.***

***Go down to the Ground Floor, have a cup of tea in Café.***

***Go back and follow signs to Life Galleries and you will soon find yourself in the wonderful Alfred Waterhouse building with its fantastic terracotta decoration. Enjoy the Dinosaurs in the:***

## **NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM**

The Natural History Museum is a Cathedral to education. Its architecture is a stunning statement of the power of the Victorian people and a monument to the belief in the powers of education. It is one of the greatest buildings in London now that it has been cleaned of its polluted black covering.

In 1860 the British Museum decided to transfer its natural history collection from the main building in Bloomsbury. Land was granted for the project by from the Commissioners of the Great Exhibition, and Captain Francis Fowke won the competition for the new building. Unfortunately, he died shortly after and was replaced by Alfred Waterhouse. Waterhouse tended towards the historicist Gothic style of architecture, but compromised to fit with the prevailing South Kensington Style by basing the building on the Romanesque and using terra-cotta tiles for the walls. Behind the facade the building was ultra-modern with its large halls built of iron, steel and glass, and its cleverly disguised water towers. The glory of the building is the immense number of carvings of the flora and fauna of the world in imitation of medieval cathedrals.

***Exit via the main entry and turn right (west) along Cromwell Road and turn right (north) up:***

## **QUEEN'S GATE**

A beautiful Victorian road with two styles of architecture. The stuccoed Italianate terraces, with their 'piano Nobile', are interspersed with Norman Shaw style Dutch red brick. Shaw had the ear of the Commissioners for the Great Exhibition who owned the land, and was able to convince them that the stuccoed style was old-fashioned and a dishonest disguise of brick buildings. Shaw built Nos. 196, 185 and 170. The tremendous influence of Shaw's style can also be seen in Chelsea and Hampstead, where large areas were developed following Shaw's lead.

Despite the intellectuals misgivings these houses were very popular with the middle classes. In 1871 13% were titled, 6% M.P's, 9% officers, 1% Home Civil Service, 4% India



Civil Service, 13% lawyers, 4% from other professions, 4% industrialists and 10% were merchants. On average there were 11 people per house of whom 6 were servants. The servants lived in the top floor above the parapet, or in the Mews at the rear. The Mews behind Queen's Gate still exists although the stables have been converted to fashionable town houses. The Victorian grooms would have been amused to see that their humble quarters now housed a vintage car salesroom. The servants worked from 6.30 am until after dinner had been cleared away after 9pm. Although it was badly paid it offered a clean and healthy environment.

### 170 QUEENS' GATE

A very unusual Shaw building built in 1887-8 for Anthony White. It is a symmetrical classical style more straightforward than Shaw's normal work.

***Walk to the north end of Queen's Gate and turn left (west) walking either through the park or along the Road back to Kensington High Street.***

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# The Kensington Walk

By Kevin Flude October 2003

## INTRODUCTION

Kensington is first recorded in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Domesday Book when it was called Chenesit. Kensington was dominated by the great houses of its leading aristocrats. In the medieval period the leading landowners were the de Vere's (Earls of Oxford) and the Abbot of Abingdon who built Kensington's parish church in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Following the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> many of the lands were taken over by Sir Walter Cope. His mansion was bought by the Holland family and part of it survives in Holland Park. Lord Camden was also attracted to the area by its clean air and closeness to London his mansion Camden House has been demolished. The Earl of Nottingham acquired his house from Sir George Coppin and it was this house which was purchased by King William and Queen Mary. The borough gained its sobriquet Royal because Queen Victoria was born in Kensington Palace.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the area became a fashionable area for the middle and upper classes and the home of many writers. It has an excellent shopping area.

## HIGH STREET KENSINGTON UNDERGROUND

*Enjoy the shopping along the High Street and walk westwards. Cross the road and turn right (north) into Argyle Street, turn left into Stafford Terrace and walk to No. 18 which is the Victorian Home of:*

## LINLEY SAMBOURNE'S HOUSE

An attractive interior cluttered with Victoriana and an authentic 'lived in' feel - the Bohemian home of Linley Sambourne - chief cartoonist for Punch. Open to the general public at the weekends only.

*Continue along Stafford Terrace to the Phillimore Gardens and turn left (south) back to Kensington High Street, and continue west along this road to:*

## COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE

The successor to the Imperial Institute and the British centre of the Commonwealth.

*Cross the road to the South side and continue along the road until:*

## EDWARDES SQUARE

This is one of the oldest squares in Kensington and dates to 1811 - 1819.

***Walk back to the High Street, cross the road and retrace your steps along the High Street East) and turn left into Melbury Road, turn right into Holland Park road, and walk 100 yards westwards until you reach:***

### **LEIGHTON HOUSE**

Built by Royal Academician Lord Leighton with help from his artistic friends. This is a truly stunning Victorian interior tiled with fantastic Islamic tiles and decorated into the 'House Beautiful'. It has a good collection of 19<sup>th</sup> Century art. Closed on Tuesdays.

***Retrace your steps to Melbury Road and turn left (north)***

### **MELBURY ROAD**

Melbury Road was one of Victorian London's main artists colonies, plaques on the wall identify some of them - 6 Royal Academicians lived here including G F Watts and Sir Luke Fildes. Other residents include the architect William Burges and actor Richard Harris.

***Turn right into Ilchester Place and continue to:***

### **HOLLAND PARK**

***Walk across the park to:***

### **HOLLAND PARK HOUSE**

Built, originally by Sir Walter Cope, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the House came into the possession of the Holland family in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century where it became the nerve centre of the Whig political party. The Whigs were an aristocratic party of radicals many of whom originally supported the French Revolution - one of their most important leaders was Charles James Fox, who entertained his political allies here.

The House was bombed in the Blitz and never properly rebuilt.

***Walk across the Park and exit into the Duchess of Bedford's Walk and into Holland Street - you are now in the Phillimore Estate one of the richest in London. At the end of Holland Street turn right into Church Street and visit:***

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### **ST MARY ABBOTS**

This is a typical Victorian Gothic Revival Church which was rebuilt (1869 - 72) by the great Sir George Gilbert Scott. The Church was founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century by the Abbot

of Abingdon. The Abbey had been given land by the local aristocratic landlord Godfrey de Vere, Earl of Oxford. King William and Queen Mary used to worship here.

***Turn Right along Kensington High Street, or cross the road to the Park to continue the walk to Kensington Palace.***