



Viewpoint

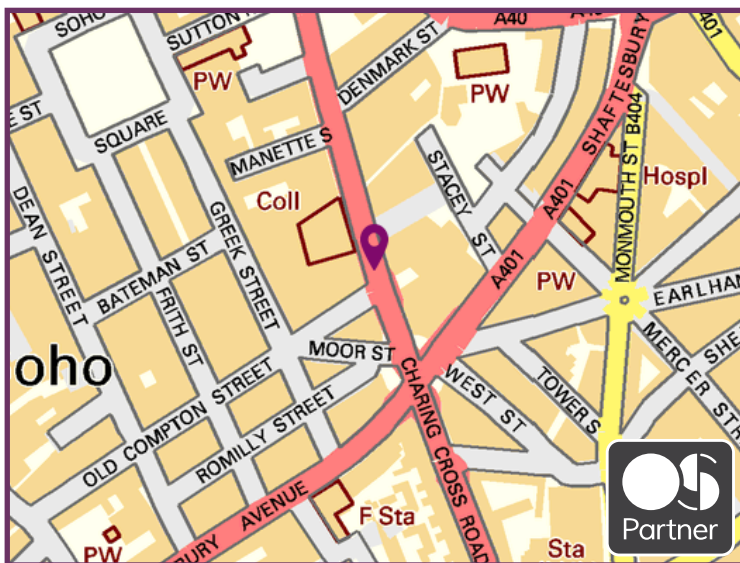
Secret street



Time: 15 mins

Region: Greater London

Landscape: urban



Location:

Traffic island, junction of Old Compton Street / Charing Cross Road, WC2H 0DP

Grid reference:

TQ 29891 81102

Directions:

The island is in a busy road on several bus routes - take great care of traffic

Keep an eye out for:

Similar grilles nearby around Cambridge Circus

Charing Cross Road is one of London's busiest thoroughfares, linking Trafalgar Square, Soho and 'theatreland' with the shopping mecca of Oxford Street. Lined with bookshops and surrounded by all kinds of other entertainment, millions of people travel along it every year. Few though notice this window into another world.

Carefully look through the large grille in the traffic island for two signs on a brick wall below. They both read 'Little Compton Street'. But search a modern map or wander Soho now and this road doesn't exist.

What happened to Little Compton Street?



To find out, let's trace where Little Compton Street used to be. Look on an old map and you will see it linked Old and New Compton Streets, via a junction with Crown Street. Charing Cross Road replaced Crown Street after an 1877 Act of Parliament to improve London's traffic flow. The road was widened and smaller ones either side were altered.

While New Compton Street was shortened, Little Compton Street vanished from maps. But look around and we can still find it. With your back to the Molly Moggs pub, face the modern buildings. New Compton Street once ran right through the middle of them. Little Compton Street would have been over our right shoulder.

It still is. When Charing Cross Road was completed, Little Compton Street became even littler. So in 1896 it became part of Old Compton Street. It wasn't buried, it was renamed.

Tunnel vision

But why are the signs for Little Compton Street hidden under Charing Cross Road? If you've been stuck in traffic while roads are dug up for gas, water or electricity repairs you can probably guess.

Underneath our cities are countless networks - water mains, gas pipes, electricity cables, heating and air conditioning shafts, telephone and Internet lines. These all need maintenance and, to reduce disruption, some are laid in tunnels built deep enough for engineers to walk through.

For safety and navigation, underground maintenance crews need to know where they are. So the tunnels have street signs in them indicating what's overhead. The oldest date from 1861 and include names no longer used above ground.

When Little Compton Street was renamed, an old street sign was perhaps put in the tunnel rather than thrown away - hence the two signs we can see here today. Over 2,000 years London has changed beyond recognition. But look carefully and small rips in the capital's fabric let older layers show through.