

## **The heart of the Empire**



A self-guided walk along the Strand

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**the stories of our landscapes  
discovered through walks**







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Cover image: Detail of South Africa House © Mike Jackson RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

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# The heart of the Empire

## Discover London's Strand and its imperial connections

At its height, Britain's Empire covered one-quarter of the Earth's land area and one-third of the world's population. It was the largest Empire in history.

If the Empire's beating heart was London, then The Strand was one of its major arteries. This mile-long street beside the River Thames was home to some of the Empire's administrative, legal and commercial functions.

The days of Empire are long gone but its legacy remains in the landscape. A walk down this modern London street is a fascinating journey through Britain's imperial history.

This walk was created in 2012 by Mike Jackson and Gary Gray, both Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). It was originally part of a series that explored how our towns and cities have been shaped for many centuries by some of the 206 participating nations in the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.



Scenes from the Strand  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



## Route map



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### Stopping points

- |                                       |                                    |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>S.</b> Temple Underground station  | <b>12.</b> India House             |
| <b>2.</b> Victoria Embankment terrace | <b>13.</b> Somerset House          |
| <b>3.</b> British American Tobacco    | <b>14.</b> Simpson's-in-the-Strand |
| <b>4.</b> Temple Bar memorial         | <b>15.</b> The Savoy Hotel         |
| <b>5.</b> Twining's tea shop          | <b>16.</b> Stanley Gibbons         |
| <b>6.</b> Royal Courts of Justice     | <b>17.</b> Royal Society of Arts   |
| <b>7.</b> Samuel Johnson statue       | <b>18.</b> Zimbabwe House          |
| <b>8.</b> St Clement Danes Church     | <b>19.</b> Coutts bank             |
| <b>9.</b> Australia House             | <b>20.</b> Charing Cross station   |
| <b>10.</b> Bush House                 | <b>21.</b> South Africa House      |
| <b>11.</b> Kingsway                   | <b>F.</b> Trafalgar Square         |

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## Practical information

<b>Location</b>	The Strand, Westminster, central London
<b>Getting there</b>	<p><b>Underground</b> - the walk starts from Temple station. Embankment, Aldwych, Leicester Square, Piccadilly Circus and Waterloo are also nearby.</p> <p><b>Train</b> - the nearest mainline station is Charing Cross, which serves Kent and Sussex routes. The Strand is also accessible from Waterloo via Waterloo Bridge.</p> <p><b>Bus</b> - many local bus routes run along the Strand or to Aldwych and Trafalgar Square at either end of the route</p> <p><b>Bicycle</b> - there are several Barclays Cycle Hire docking stations nearby</p>
<b>Start point</b>	Temple Underground station, WC2R 2PH
<b>Finish point</b>	Trafalgar Square
<b>Onward journey</b>	To return to Temple station use Directions 22 (on page 32)
<b>Distance</b>	1 ¼ miles
<b>Level</b>	Gentle - a simple city centre route, though by a busy road.
<b>Conditions</b>	The whole route is on pavements. Mostly flat bar a slope from Temple Place (Stop 3). Alternate directions given to avoid steps.

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**Suitable for**

**Families** - take care of young children when crossing busy roads

**Wheelchairs / pushchairs** - an entirely step-free route

**Refreshments**

There are plenty of places to stop for food and drink along the route, from cafes and pubs to the hotel restaurants. At the end of the route, we recommend the crypt of St Martin-in-the-Fields Church.

**Toilets**

Public toilets available at Victoria Embankment (Stop 2) and the museums in Trafalgar Square

**Other info**

The route can be very busy especially at weekends, Christmas time and in the tourist season.

**Trafalgar Square** often hosts special events, from concerts to demonstrations. Check before travelling.

**Family-friendly activities**

**St Clement Danes Church** (Stop 8) is open daily from 9am-4pm except Bank Holidays, special services & events. Please call before visiting. Tel: 020 7242 8282.

**Somerset House** (Stop 13) is open daily 10am-6pm. Entry to the Courtauld Gallery is £6. In winter the courtyard hosts an ice rink (ticketed entry). Tel: 020 7845 4600

**The National Gallery** and **National Portrait Gallery** are open daily from 10am-6pm (9pm Fridays). Free entry except to special exhibitions.

**Tourist Information**

The nearest **Piccadilly Circus Travel Information Centre** at Piccadilly Circus Underground station

# 1. Welcome to Imperial London

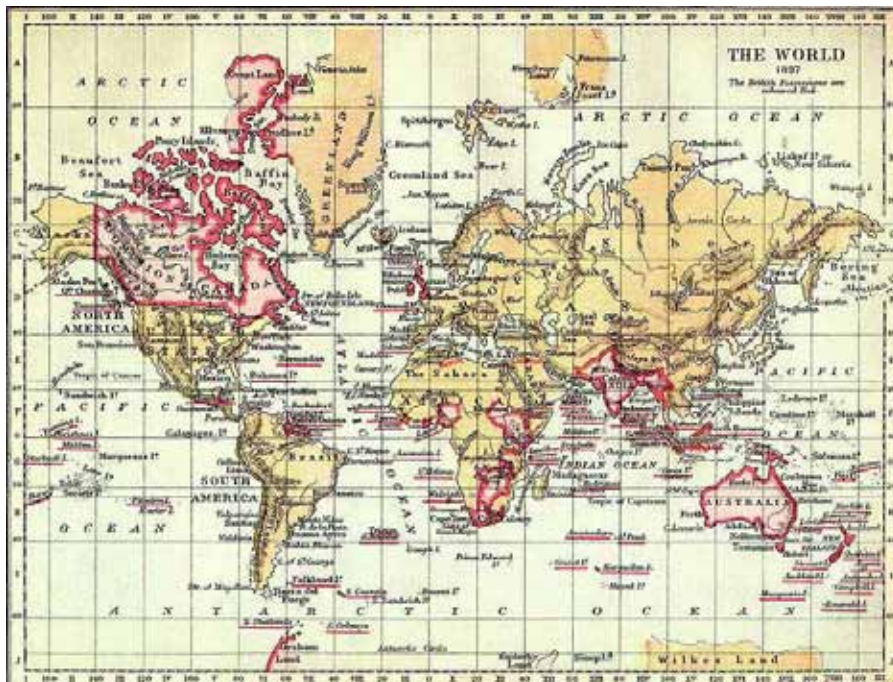
## Temple Underground station

Between the 16th and 20th centuries Britain acquired the largest overseas Empire the world has ever known. At its greatest extent, in 1939, it covered almost a quarter of the Earth's land surface and included nearly one-third of its population.

London was profoundly shaped by its relationship with the British Empire. On this walk we will discover how running an empire shaped Britain.

We will see “wealth, romance and beauty of the Empire” visible in various roads, buildings and monuments. We will visit world-famous landmarks from iconic buildings to tiny shops.

We'll also discover international stories behind everyday features of British life, from tea and tobacco to language and the law. We hope you enjoy the walk!



An 1897 world map - the British Empire territories are shown in pink including Canada, Australia and India  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

### Directions 1

Exit Temple Underground station and turn left. Go up the small flight of steps and turn left again. Go through the wrought iron gate, up the stairs and onto the terrace of Victoria Embankment Gardens. Stop when you are overlooking the Thames Embankment.

**Wheelchair / pushchair users:** Sadly there is no step-free access to the terrace but there is a reasonably good view of the Victoria Embankment from outside Temple station.



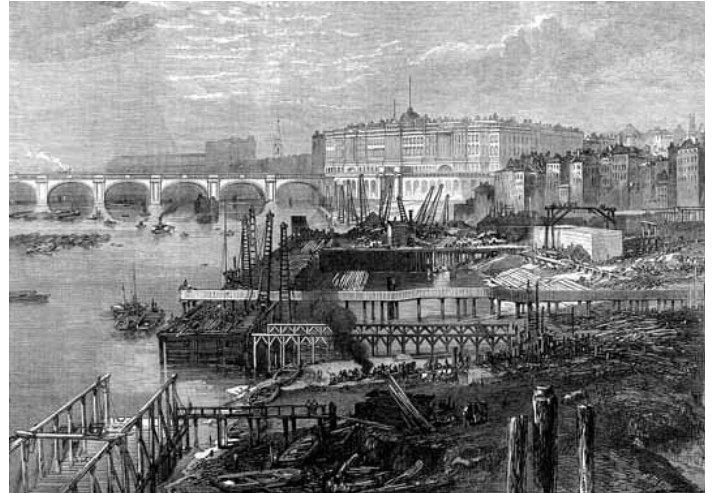
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## 2. An Imperial platform

### Victoria Embankment

We start by taking in a panorama of the Thames. At this point we are midway between Westminster and the City - the political and financial hearts of London, the United Kingdom and – once – her Empire.

During the heights of the British Empire the River Thames was important both literally and symbolically. In physical terms it enabled London to be one of the world's greatest ports. The profits from this international trade made Britain one of the wealthiest European nations and a global power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



Victoria Embankment under construction, 1865  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

The Victoria Embankment that we are standing on was constructed from 1862. In practical terms it reduced flood risk and solved an increasing sewage problem. But this grand new embankment was also ideal as a ceremonial space. We don't have to look hard to find that it is cluttered with monuments and references to British military and imperial successes.

One famous example is just a few hundred metres along the Embankment - Cleopatra's Needle. (During the summer months it is largely obscured from view here by trees). Cleopatra's Needle is an obelisk with two sphinxes at the base. It was made in Egypt during the reign of the eighteenth Dynasty Pharaoh Thutmose III, over a thousand years before Cleopatra's reign. There are similar Egyptian needles in Paris and New York but the one here is symbolic of Imperial Britain's influence in Egypt, which started with occupation in 1882 and remained until 1956.

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#### Directions 2

If you are on the terrace, go back down the steps. Turn right along Temple Place. Stop by the offices of the British American Tobacco Company at Globe House.

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### 3. Up in smoke

#### British American Tobacco, 4 Temple Place

Several products played an important role in Britain's colonial past, including cotton, sugar and tea. Tobacco was another. This is the headquarters of British American Tobacco, formed in 1902 by the merger of the British Imperial Tobacco Company and the American Tobacco Company in order to end an intense trade war.

The practice of smoking began thousands of years ago. Tobacco smoking did not come to Europe until after Christopher Columbus discovered it in Cuba on his voyages to the New World in the 1490s. Ninety years later, the explorer Sir Walter Raleigh is said to have taken up smoking and popularised it within the Elizabethan Court.



Illustration from Anthony Chute's pamphlet "Tabaco" (1595) – the oldest recorded image of a man smoking  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Early English settlers in Virginia made their fortunes when they discovered that tobacco grew well there. With a ready market in England, tobacco became their key cash crop and was the mainstay of the economy of the southern states of America.

For most of the nineteenth century smoking in England was primarily a male habit with tobacco being consumed in pipes and cigars. Cigarette smoking became popular after the Crimean War and the tobacco market was transformed in the 1880s when automated cigarette making machines appeared. The biggest growers of tobacco today are China, India, Brazil and the United States.

#### Directions 3

Continue along Temple Place. Pass the building with a ship weathervane and go into a small passageway on the left. Take the first left on to Milford Lane. Continue up to the Cheshire Cheese pub - take care as the pavement is very narrow. Turn right into Little Essex Street, then left into Essex Street. Continue up to the Strand. Turn right at the end and stop by the monument in the middle of the road with a black dragon on top.

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## 4. A dragon's den

### Temple Bar memorial

We are now at the entrance to the City of London. This point where Fleet Street becomes The Strand marks the western limit of the City. Previously a stone gateway stood here designed by Christopher Wren, but as traffic grew it became an obstacle. In 1878 it was replaced with the current memorial designed by Sir Horace Jones.



Christopher Wren's Temple Bar gateway,  
*The Illustrated London News* (1870)  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

The winged dragon on the top is the symbol of the City of London. This is derived from the figure of Saint George in conflict with the dragon. According to tradition, Saint George was a Roman soldier from the province of Syria Palaestina.

Ahead of us is Fleet Street. Fleet Street grew to prominence from the eighteenth century as a centre of publishing, especially of newspapers, journalistic magazines and periodicals. Indeed, as late as the 1980s virtually all of Britain's national daily newspapers were published from here.

Increasingly, Fleet Street became a global centre of press-related media. Newspapers and the printed word became important tools in passing news and information around the Empire. Ships and guns alone could not ensure successful Imperial rule: the circulation of knowledge and ideas were equally important. Journalistic publications also played an important role in shaping popular imaginations of Empire, in gaining support and securing a consensus for expensive Imperial ventures.

If you walked along the Embankment at the start of the walk you may have seen the monument to William T Stead, who was one of the early pioneers of investigative journalism and a controversial figure in Victorian times. He lost his life as a passenger on the *Titanic*.

#### Directions 4

Retrace your steps a short way and walk along the left hand side of the Strand. Continue up to number 216, the Twining's tea shop.

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## 5. Taste of Empire

### Twining's tea shop, 216 Strand

Twining's tea shop represents another important dimension of the British Imperial experience. It symbolises the way in which the Empire brought new commodities and tastes to London.

Tea was grown on plantations in China, India, Sri Lanka and other countries in the Far East. It was shipped to London and other parts of Europe by chartered trading companies, such as the famous East India Company.

At first tea was an expensive luxury product among the upper and middle classes. Thomas Twining, a tea merchant, opened this shop in 1706 to cater to these people.



Twining's tea shop entrance  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The Twining family were well connected and influential. Edward Francis Twining was the Governor of North Borneo (a British Protectorate at the time and now part of Malaysia) and later went on to be the Governor of Tanganyika (now part of modern day Tanzania).

The insatiable thirst for tea in Britain meant that a global economy based on this commodity quickly emerged. Ensuring that this trade remained protected and viable became a key focus of British military efforts. However it was also associated with exploitation and racial discrimination that was a feature of commerce across the Empire.

Twining's has remained in the same premises since 1706. Although no longer a family firm, it caters for specialist tea demands.

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#### Directions 5

Stay at Twining's tea shop and look across the road at the Royal Courts of Justice.



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## 6. The legal world

### Royal Courts of Justice

This elaborate Victorian building is the centrepiece of the legal system in England and Wales. The Royal Courts of Justice houses the High Court and the Court of Appeal where the most serious civil trials in the country are held. The steps here frequently attract TV cameras when high profile cases are taking place.

English Law is built on the Common Law system which is based on the idea of precedent. Great weight is placed on the decisions reached in the courts and these become part of the law for future cases.



Details of the ornate Royal Courts of Justice  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Believing it was the best approach to law, Britain exported the English legal system to its colonies. After Independence, most countries kept it as the basis for their legal system. Forms of English law can still be found across the Commonwealth and in the USA (except the state of Louisiana).

Before this huge building was completed in 1882, London's Courts were scattered around the City. A slum with around 450 houses and more than 4,000 people was cleared to make way for the new Royal Courts. George Edmund Street was the architect and he used the Neo-Gothic style that the Victorians loved.

Construction took eight years, partly because stonemasons went on strike. Foreign workmen were brought in and this aroused bitter hostility on the part of the strikers. The new workers were mostly German and had to be housed and fed inside the building for their own safety.

#### Directions 6

Use the pedestrian crossing outside the Courts to reach the central reservation. Then carefully turn left into the grounds at the back of St Clement Danes Church. Stop by the first statue, which is of Samuel Johnson.



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## 7. A common language

### Samuel Johnson statue, St Clement Danes churchyard

This is Samuel Johnson. In 1746 he was asked to produce an authoritative dictionary of the English language. He said he could complete it in three years but it actually took him nine. The work was published in April 1755.

The title page acknowledged that Oxford University had awarded Johnson a Master of Arts degree in anticipation of the work. Johnson's dictionary was not the first to be published but it became the most commonly used. It was described as "one of the greatest single achievements of scholarship".

Johnson's work in defining the English language was influential across the British Empire and further afield. English is the 'de facto' or official language in 62 countries and is used in about 100 countries worldwide.

About 380 million people use English as their mother-tongue and a similar number of people use it as their second language. It occupies a very important place in international academic and business communities.



Portrait of Samuel Johnson, 1772  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

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#### Directions 7

Walk around the Church to the front entrance. Stand between the two military statues.

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## 8. From Empire to Commonwealth

### St Clements Danes Church

This is St Clement Danes Church, which features in the children's nursery rhyme that includes many London's churches:

*"...Oranges and Lemons, say the bells of St Clement's..."*

In front is a statue of William Gladstone, who served as Prime Minister on four separate occasions. He was also Britain's oldest serving Liberal prime minister retiring aged 84 – a record not yet bettered. He and his great conservative rival, Benjamin Disraeli, served Queen Victoria when the British Empire was at its zenith.



St Clement Danes Church tower  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The other two statues relate to St Clement Danes being the Central Church of the Royal Air Force. Lord Hugh Dowding was Air Chief Marshal during the Second World War. He was largely responsible for winning the Battle of Britain and therefore securing the survival of Great Britain. Sir Arthur Travers Harris meanwhile was Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command and is controversially credited with speeding the end of the war.

After the war, Britain was preoccupied with rebuilding and this marked the start of movements for independence in the colonies. So these three figures represent the end of Empire and the beginning of Commonwealth, of which there are now 54 members. It is now considered such a successful institution that other countries are seeking to join who previously had no links with the British Empire.

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#### Directions 8

With your back to the church entrance, cross over the two pelican crossings ahead and stop outside Australia House.

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## 9. Signs of confidence

### Australia House, Aldwych

This area is called Aldwych. Look on a map and you will see it is a crescent-shaped road. Lining Aldwych are many fine buildings and we will explore several of these in the next few stops.

In 1900 work began on clearing a notorious slum which covered this area. The buildings that emerged were part of a bold new vision of a modern city. Many were directly concerned with Imperial government – and their grand architecture expresses confidence, power and authority.



Australia House entrance  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Australia House is a prime example. It was built by Scottish architects, the Mackenzies (who also designed the nearby Waldorf Hotel) and opened by King George V in 1918. The building represents the more 'bombastic' style, characteristic of some Imperial architecture. Its influences are Roman neo-Classical, combined with eighteenth-century French influences, particularly in the interior.

Australia was one of the remotest British colonies and so the confidence of the building can in part be read as a strategy for asserting authority at a distance. A country so far away from the heart of Empire nevertheless required a government building of substantial proportions in a prominent position.

Look on the façade and you will see that one of the friezes depicts sheep. These were introduced into Australia by the British then commercially exploited for their wool.

#### Directions 9

With Australia House on your left, continue onto Aldwych. Stop outside Bush House at the junction of Aldwych and Kingsway.

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## 10. London calling

### Bush House, Aldwych

This is Bush House, built by the Bush Terminal Company of New York, and opened in progressive stages from 1923 to 1935. When constructed it was the most expensive building in the world.

The original plan was for Bush House to be an international trade centre. The statues of a lion and an eagle symbolise Britain and America, with the eagle made to represent a growing global commercial power and the hopes for a prosperous trading relationship between the two countries.



Statues at the entrance of Bush House  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

In 1940 the BBC took the lease on the building and it became the headquarters of the Empire Service, later renamed the World Service. As we have heard already, the media was an important tool in the maintenance and government of the Empire. Radio provided a very effective means of spreading news around the colonies and creating a direct link to the heart of Empire.

The BBC World Service also played an important part in the propaganda war against Nazi Germany. During the Cold War of the 1950s onwards, the World Service was one of the leading international broadcasters to the Soviet Union.

The BBC no longer use this building but the World Service is still the world's largest international broadcaster, broadcasting in 27 languages to many parts of the world. The spectrum of languages includes Persian, Hindi, Urdu and Arabic.

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#### Directions 10

Remain in the same place but look across to the end of Kingsway.

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## 11. Pomp and circumstance

### Kingsway

This road is Kingsway. It was planned by London County Council in 1898 to be a road of continental proportions – like the great boulevards of Paris or Vienna.

At the time this area was a maze of small streets and slum dwellings. These were all demolished, as was the Sardinian Embassy Chapel, an important Roman Catholic Church attached to the Embassy.

The road opened in 1905 but it took almost 20 years for the buildings along the sides of the street to be developed.



Kingsway street sign  
MIke Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The street's uses were mixed and changed regularly; the streetscape included theatres and entertainment venues, government offices and many commercial buildings. As well as the 100-foot wide road, a tunnel ran beneath which carried an electric tramway!

Kingsway became one of London's most impressive boulevards, which is hard to believe today with the busy traffic and congested street furniture. Kingsway and other such grand streets became places for pageants and processions that celebrated the achievements of Empire. In later times, they also became places where people came to protest about the nature of British Imperial power.

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#### Directions 11

Continue around Aldwych and stop outside the next building, India House.



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## 12. A changing relationship

### India House, Aldwych

India was the 'jewel in the crown' of the British Empire. The British had begun trading there in the eighteenth century but it was not until 1857 that it became a colony under direct rule and Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India.

Notice that India House is rather different in style to Australia House and Bush House that we have already seen. Somehow it seems less confident, less heroic. It was completed in 1930 and reflects the changing political relationship between Britain and India in the interwar period. In 1920 a High Commissioner of India had been appointed as the first step towards Indian self-government.



One of the plaques at India House  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The building incorporates some Indian designs, both inside and out. The interior, for example, is adorned by a number of murals painted by Indian artists. Meanwhile the sculptures and friezes on the outside of the building represent the geographical diversity of India. Can you spot the ship which refers to Bombay province, the tigers of Bengal and the elephants in procession to Delhi?

The architectural style represents a more sensitive attempt at defining an Imperial relationship. It demonstrates a greater understanding of the complexities in India's historical and geographical diversity and, above all, it is a recognition of the limits to British sovereignty in that country.

#### Directions 12

Continue then turn left into India Place. At the end, cross the Strand using the pelican crossing. When you reach the other side turn right and stand in front of Somerset House.

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## 13. A full house

### Somerset House

Somerset House was built from 1776 but stands on the site of a building constructed over 200 years earlier.

When king Henry VIII died in 1547 his son, Edward VI, was considered too young to ascend the throne. So Edward Seymour, the boy's uncle, had himself created Lord Protector and Duke of Somerset. He then determined to build himself a residence suitable to his high rank – and this is where he built it.



Somerset House in 1836  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

The house was not actually finished in his lifetime. In the reign of Elizabeth I, Edward Seymour was tried for treason and executed. The house then became the property of the crown. Anne of Denmark and Norway – the wife of King James I – was given the house for her own use and named it Denmark House.

Then when King Charles I married Henrietta Maria of France, she was entitled to use of the house and engaged the famous architect Inigo Jones in some reconstruction. After the Great Fire of London in 1666, Christopher Wren supervised another redecoration but by Georgian times the house had fallen into ruin. George III agreed to have the building pulled down and the site given over to public offices.

Today the occupants of the Somerset House complex include The Royal Academy of Arts, The Royal Society, The Society of Antiquaries, The Navy Board, and the Inland Revenue. But Somerset House is best known for the General Register Office for Birth, Deaths and Marriages where parish records were eventually centralised.

#### Directions 13 -

Continue along the Strand. Cross over Lancaster Place and pass Savoy Street. Stop at the entrance to number 100, Simpson's.

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## 14. Grand masters

### Simpson's-in-the-Strand, 100 Strand

Simpson's-in-the-Strand is one of London's oldest traditional English restaurants. It originally opened in 1828 as a chess club and coffee house called the Grand Cigar Divan. It soon became known as the home of chess. Matches were played against other coffee houses with top-hatted runners carrying the news of each move.

Chess has a long history that goes back 1,500 years when the earliest form of the game originated in India. From there it spread across the Muslim world and into Europe. The game developed into its current form in the fifteenth century.



Simpson's signage  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The first ever International Chess Tournament took place in London in 1851. English chess master Howard Staunton was regarded as the world's strongest player of the time and he organised the event to coincide with the Great Exhibition. He invited sixteen of Europe's greatest players to take part and the competition was won by the German Adolf Anderssen.

Almost all of the top players of the nineteenth century played chess here at Simpson's, including Wilhelm Steinitz from Prague, who was the first undisputed world champion. Simpson's was also the venue for one of the most famous chess games of all time. Known as the 'Immortal Game', it was played between Adolf Anderssen and Lionel Kieseritzky. Anderssen won the game with startling attacks and sacrifices which were all the rage in the chess of the nineteenth century.

#### Directions 14 -

Continue a short way along the Strand until you reach Savoy Court. Stop when you have a good view of the Savoy Hotel sign.

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## 15. History and luxury

### The Savoy Hotel

The Savoy Hotel is one of the most famous and luxurious in the world. It is named after the Savoy Palace which used to stand on the site. The original palace has a fascinating past and featured in many significant points in London and England's history. Do go along both sides of Savoy Court and read the plaques on the columns.

The family of Savoy were from an area now on the borders of modern day France and Italy. The gold statue you can see on top of the hotel façade is of Count Peter II. Count Peter's niece, Eleanor of Provence, was the queen-consort of Henry III of England.

King Henry III made Peter the Earl of Richmond and, in 1246, gave him the land between the Strand and the Thames. Peter built the Savoy Palace here in 1263.

The Savoy Hotel meanwhile opened at the height of the British Empire. Just before Queen Victoria's Silver Jubilee in 1862, successful theatre impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte opened the Savoy Theatre. He had brought together Gilbert and Sullivan, the pair who wrote comic operas. In 1889, D'Oyly built the hotel to accommodate the tourists coming to see the operas.

The Savoy was the first-ever luxury hotel in Britain and became popular very quickly. This was in part down to the manager, César Ritz. Born in Switzerland, he went on to found his own world-famed The Ritz Hotel in 1906.



Count Peter II's statue at the Savoy Hotel  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

#### Directions 15

When you are ready continue along the left side of the Strand up to an arched entranceway. Look across road at the Stanley Gibbons stamp shop opposite.



## 16. Stamp duties

### Stanley Gibbons Stamps, 399 Strand

Stamps were introduced in Britain in 1840 as part of a postal reform promoted by Sir Rowland Hill. Postage stamps meant postage fees were paid by the sender and not the recipient.

Following their introduction, the number of letters sent increased dramatically. The number of chargeable letters in 1839 had been only about 76 million. But by 1850 this had risen to almost 350 million and numbers continued to grow.

Stamps were used by people sending mail across the Empire. They were also soon introduced by other countries. The Canton of Zürich in Switzerland issued stamps on 1st March 1843. Brazil followed later the same year and then the United States in 1847.



Stanley Gibbons colour guide stamps, pre-1935  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Meanwhile in Plymouth, a pharmacist's assistant called Stanley Gibbons had a keen interest in stamps. In 1856 he set up a counter in the pharmacy to sell them. His business really took off in 1863 after he purchased a sack of rare stamps from two sailors. These triangular-shaped stamps were from the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. Gibbons opened his first shop, on the Strand, in 1891. Today the Stanley Gibbons shop holds a vast collection of stamps old and new, from all corners of the world.

#### Directions 16

Continue along the Strand and cross over Adam Street. About 50 metres further stop by the set of steps on the left. They lead down to the back of the Royal Society of Arts building.



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## 17. The great exhibitors

### The Royal Society of Arts

These steps lead down to the rear of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. That's quite a mouthful - so it is more commonly known as the Royal Society of Arts or just the RSA.

Founded in 1754, the RSA was granted its Royal Charter in 1847 during the reign of Queen Victoria. The RSA was responsible for staging a number of exhibitions. These led to the Great Exhibition of 1851.



The Great Exhibition building in South Kensington  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

The Great Exhibition was the brainchild of Henry Cole, a member of the RSA. Cole and the RSA's president, Prince Albert, developed the idea to display the wonders of industry and manufacturing from around the world, including Britain's Empire.

The Great Exhibition was held in Hyde Park in South Kensington, in a huge glass building that became known as the Crystal Palace. There were over 13,000 exhibitors and over 100,000 exhibits from 50 different nations and 39 colonies or protectorates. You can explore the Great Exhibition much more in another Discovering Britain walk, called 'Albertopolis'.

Today the RSA has 27,000 Fellows. The RSA is committed to finding innovative practical solutions to today's social challenges through ideas and research.

#### Directions 17

Continue a short distance along The Strand and look across the road for a gap between the buildings. On the corner of Agar Street you will see number 429 Strand, Zimbabwe House.

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## 18. Roads to independence

### Zimbabwe House, 429 Strand

Zimbabwe House was originally called Rhodesia House. Rhodesia – covering present-day Zimbabwe and Zambia – became a British colony in 1888. It was named after Cecil Rhodes, the English-born South African businessman, mining magnate and politician.

Rhodesia was unique in being the only British colony to have a High Commission, a role this building served from 1923. In 1965 the Rhodesian Unilateral Declaration of Independence was signed. This led the British Government to issue a 'persona non grata' to Rhodesia's High Commissioner, Brigadier Andrew Skeen.



Zimbabwe House crest  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

This basically meant he was no longer welcome in Britain and was ordered to leave the country. Rhodesia House became a Representative Office with no official diplomatic status, until the colony gained independence as Zimbabwe in 1980.

Around the time of the Rhodesian Unilateral Declaration of Independence, several other British colonies were moving towards independence. Many countries had fairly peaceful transitions to independence such as Nigeria, Uganda and Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). Others had slightly more turbulent handovers, such as in the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana).

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#### Directions 18

Once again, continue a short distance down the Strand. After about 25 metres, look across the road for a dark glass fronted building. This is the head office of Coutts bank.

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## 19. Savers and sharers

### Coutts, 440 Strand

This is the head office of Coutts, one of the UK's private banking houses (though now wholly owned by the Royal Bank of Scotland). It was originally known as Campbell's Bank after it was formed in 1692 by a young Scots goldsmith-banker, John Campbell.

Campbell set up business in the Strand and the bank subsequently passed through the family line to Thomas Coutts. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Coutts' customers were closely involved with such events as the American War of Independence, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.



Angela Burdett-Coutts, circa 1840  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

The bank was also associated with British trade in India. Thomas Coutts had interests in the East India Company, which engaged in lucrative trade in the Far East. Two of the Company's ships were named after him. In the Far East meanwhile, the Chinese ambassador Earl Macartney gave Thomas Coutts some Chinese wallpaper on his return from his embassy in 1794. Thomas hung the paper in his private rooms at 59 Strand; today it hangs in the bank's Board Room.

Eventually the bank passed to Angela Burdett-Coutts, who inherited it aged just 23 under the agreement she was not allowed to marry a foreigner. With access to more money than she could ever spend, she became one of the major Victorian philanthropists. She supported and raised funds for numerous causes including help for refugees, Australian Aborigines and Irish migrants affected by the 'potato famine'. She also funded lifeboats and the first archaeological dig of Jerusalem to improve the city's sanitation. Late in life she eventually broke the terms of the trust by marrying a young American.

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#### Directions 19

Continue along the Strand and pass Villiers Street and the stairway for the Underground station. Turn left into Charing Cross Station forecourt. Stop at a safe place.

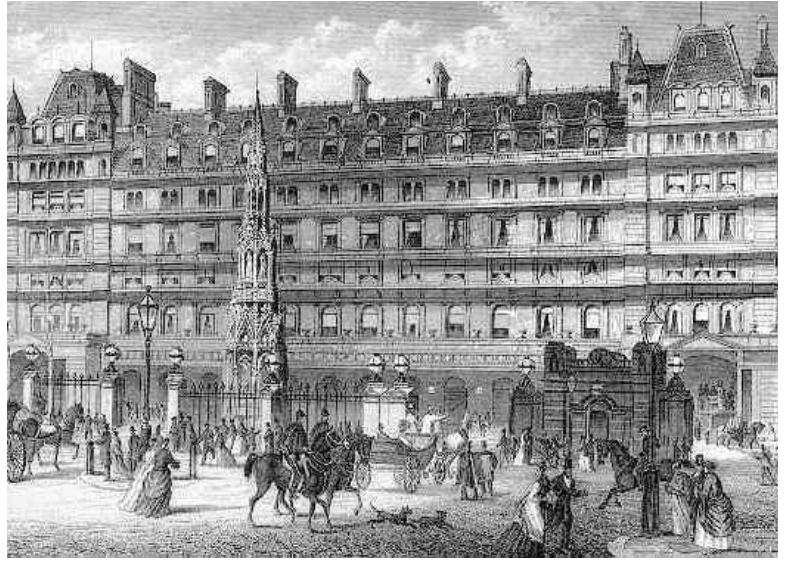
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## 20. Making tracks

### Charing Cross station

Perhaps the major achievement of the Victorian era was building the railway network. Charing Cross station was built in 1864 on the site of Hungerford Market. The following year the Charing Cross Hotel opened, complete with an Italian Renaissance-style façade.

The Victorians exported their railway expertise and built lines and stations throughout the Empire and in many other parts of the world. One example was the famous contractor Thomas Brassey, who built railways worldwide. By the time of his death in 1870 he had built about one in every twenty miles of the world's railways!



Charing Cross station in the Victorian era  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Britain didn't just construct railway lines – locomotives and rolling stock were also exported around the world. These railway building projects in the Empire opened up huge markets to British manufacturers, allowing the efficient movement of goods in and out of different countries. The effects of the Empire's railways continue today. In India, the railway network is still regarded by Indians as one of the greatest legacies of the British Empire.

#### Directions 20

Leave Charing Cross Station forecourt and turn left onto the Strand. Continue up to the traffic lights before Trafalgar Square. Cross the road at the lights and stop in front of South Africa House.



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## 21. A return to freedom

### South Africa House

This 1930s building was acquired by the government of South Africa as its main diplomatic base in the UK. During the Second World War, South Africa's Prime Minister Jan Smuts lived and conducted the country's war affairs here.

In 1961 South Africa became a Republic. It also withdrew from the Commonwealth due to its policy of racial segregation. Accordingly the building became an Embassy rather than a High Commission. During the 1980s the building was targeted by protestors from around the world campaigning against South Africa's policy of apartheid.



Springbok on South Africa House  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The first democratic elections in South Africa were held on the 27 April 1994. On 31 May of that year the country re-joined the Commonwealth, 33 years to the day after it withdrew. South Africa was re-accepted into the international community and this building once more became a diplomatic High Commission.

In 2001 Nelson Mandela appeared on the balcony to mark the seventh anniversary of Freedom Day, which recognised the end of the apartheid regime. Today South Africa House is no longer a controversial site but is rather the focal point of South African culture in the UK.

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#### Directions 21 -

From South Africa House use the pedestrian crossings to go into Trafalgar Square. Face the National Gallery then turn to the building on its left.

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## 22. A journey across the Empire

### Trafalgar Square

We have now reached the end of the walk but there are many more Imperial links within a stone's throw from here in Trafalgar Square. They include two more diplomatic buildings of the former British Empire. Ahead is Canada House - look for the flag flying on top. Just beyond it in Haymarket is New Zealand House.

In the distance of just over one mile, this walk has taken a grand tour of the British Empire and shown how the Empire created international connections of all kinds.

We have seen the grand buildings that administered the biggest colonies - such as Australia, India and South Africa - and the diplomatic connections that remain today with various independent nations.



Canada House detail  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

We learned how British inventions were copied around the world, including the postal service, the legal system and the railway network. We discovered how the Empire introduced new tastes like smoking tobacco and drinking tea. We also found out about the communications of Empire - from newspapers printed in Fleet Street to wireless programmes broadcast from Bush House. And much of the sense of unity created across the Empire was due to the use of the English language, which we honoured at Samuel Johnson's statue. We hope you enjoyed the walk!

#### Directions 22 -

From Trafalgar Square you can visit the National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery and St Martin-in-the-Fields Church. The Houses of Parliament, the South Bank, Leicester Square and the West End are also nearby. To return to Temple Underground station you can retrace your way back along the Strand or use the District & Circle Lines from Charing Cross station.

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## Credits

The RGS-IBG would like to thank the following people and organisations for their assistance in producing this walk:

- **Alastair Owens** for providing the materials that inspired this walk
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- **William Dyson** and **Christine McKenna** for assistance with compiling walk resources



Clockwise from top left: Cleopatra's Needle, Stanley Gibbons sign, India House and a Canada House maple leaf  
Mike Jackson © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain







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