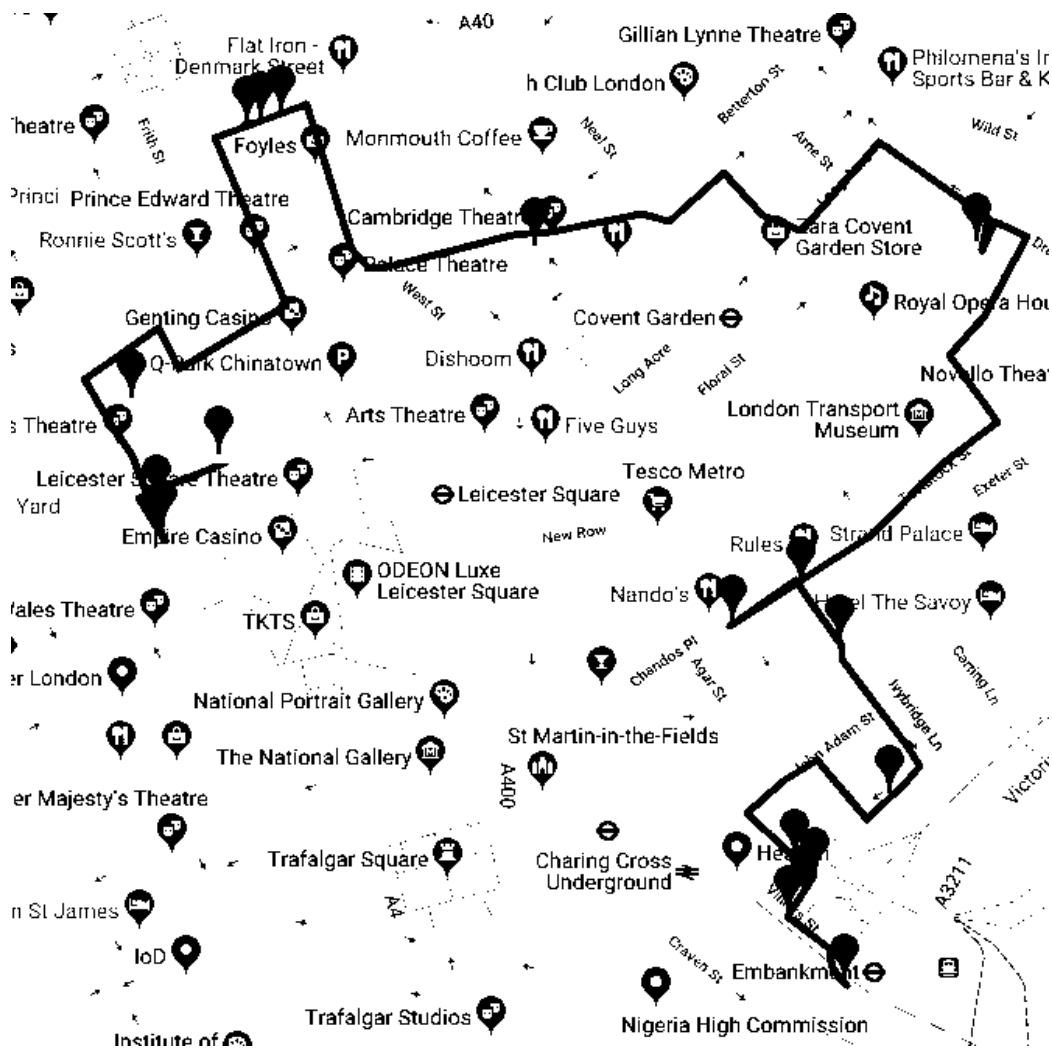


Our Mutual Friends

Dickens Walk #3: Soho & Covent Garden with Judith Flanders



*Five walks that highlighted Dickensian landmarks in London, including places that Dickens frequented and the areas that featured in his books. Compiled by Andrew Pitcairn-Hill, these walks provide a frame of reference for *Our Mutual Friends* as a whole, and were walked by five well-known writers, who each produced a record, on Tumblr and Google Maps, of what they saw on the day, and what the journey called to mind.*



Walk 3: Start

Judith Flanders is the author of several books on British history, specialising in the Victorian period. These include *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*, *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian England*, and her latest, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London*.

She writes on the arts and books for *The Spectator*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.



Villiers Street



Filled with fast-food outlets and used as a cut-through between Charing Cross and the Embankment, Villiers Street appears faceless and impersonal. But under the modern street lies the walkway that in the 1820s led down to Hungerford Stairs, where fictional and non-fictional characters jostle for recognition. Dickens worked as a child at a blacking-factory on this site. Across the way was the tumbledown inn where he lodged the feckless Micawber family in *David Copperfield*. As a young journalist Dickens was once spotted walking through what had by then become Hungerford Market, behind a coal-heaver carrying his child. The child's face peeped shyly over the man's shoulder, and so Dickens, seeming 'quite as much pleased as the child', bought a bag of cherries, posting them into the child's mouth as the coal-heaver continued on, oblivious.

Hungerford market later became the home of Gatti's music hall, buried now under the mundane goods entrance for Charing Cross Station. It was there one night that an unknown writer named Rudyard Kipling watched from his lodgings as a man slit his throat.



Binge drinkers



Water-gate



Even as Londoners have totally forgotten that ‘the silent highway’, the River Thames, was for centuries the primary means of transportation, the water-gate that once stood at the river’s edge is now becalmed at the end of Buckingham Street. Some suggest it designed by Inigo Jones (he designed Covent Garden piazza). That this freak of 17th-century design survives amid the chaos of Westminster council’s hiring out of the gardens to event-management companies is one of those serendipitous London miracles.



Mad Bull!



In 19th-century London, the shout of ‘Mad bull! Mad bull!’ was not uncommon, as animals broke away as they were being driven to Smithfield market: ‘Women were screaming and rushing into shops, children scrambling out of the road, men hiding themselves in doorways, boys in ecstasies of rapture, drovers as mad as the bull tearing after him, sheep getting under the wheels of hackney-coaches, dogs half choking themselves with worrying the wool off their backs, pigs obstinately connecting themselves with a hearse and funeral, other oxen looking into public-houses’.



Pigs and other animals



Today animals in the streets are quieter, but just as present. This door-lintel in Buckingham Street is one, accompanied by a few pigs nearby on the Adelphi building, which replaced what had, in Dickens' day, been a stylish 18th-century Adam building, over the two centuries of its existence, home to the actor David Garrick, the Gilbert and Sullivan impresario Richard d'Oyly Carte and even Peter Pan's creator, J. M. Barrie.

Alleys



A small alleyway off the Strand is the footprint of the entrance to the courtyard of the Bull Inn, a stage-coaching-yard. We think of 'alleys' as being very Victorian, but different types of alleys served different purposes. Coaching-inns were regularly flooded with passengers, but apart from a sign, and perhaps a statue, over the entranceway, there was little to indicate their size or prosperity: everything happened in the yards at the back, where the passengers debouched. These are now all overbuilt, and we've lost any sense of the vastness of these enterprises.

Alleys





Fast food



Eight-year-old David Copperfield, alone and adrift in London, buys his meals as most other working men, women and children did: on the street. He has a penny loaf and a pennyworth of milk for breakfast, with supper another penny loaf 'and a modicum of cheese'. On his way to work he passes 'the stale pastry put out for sale at half-price at the pastry-cooks' doors which he finds difficult to resist. On days when he rejects its allurements, he has enough to dine 'handsomely' on a saveloy – salami – and another penny loaf, or 'a fourpenny plate of red beef from a cook's shop; or a plate of bread and cheese and a glass of beer, from a miserable old public-house opposite our place of business'.

After his real-life counterpart, the young Charles Dickens, had worked at Hungerford Stairs for a while, the blacking-factory moved to Covent Garden and the many cheap places to eat still feed the workers passing by.



The living and the dead



The living and the dead have always existed side-by-side in London: a children's playground surrounded by offices still contains a tiny fraction of the tombstones it must have seen in its three centuries as a graveyard.



Placemark 11



By the 1840s, Dickens reported, London smelt ‘of rot, and mildew, and dead citizens’. The graveyards were so overstuffed that the recently dead were routinely dug up, tossed aside, their coffins burnt, so more and more could be briefly interred in the same tiny spaces. St Ann’s, Soho, claims to be the final resting place of the essayist Hazlitt, and also of the German adventurer Theodor Stephan Freiherr von Neuhoff, who was briefly King Theodore of Corsica. The words on his tombstone are said to have been written by Horace Walpole, but it seems unlikely that his body survived Victorian burial-methods.

“The grave, great teacher, to a level brings
Heroes and beggars, galley slaves and kings.
But Theodore this moral learned ere dead:
Fate poured its lessons on his living head,
Bestowed a kingdom, but denied him bread.”



Seven Dials



Seven Dials was the generic name for the whole northern area of Covent Garden, a vast slum district in the 19th century. At the end of the century, both Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue were driven through, in part to clear out the slum residents. The streets' layout was thus altered, but even so tiny traces remain. Seven Dials was first built in 1693 by Sir Thomas Neal, Master of the Mint (commemorated in Neal Street, nearby). By the end of the 19th century the seven points of this junction were Great and Little White Lion Streets, Great and Little Earl Streets, Great and Little St Andrew's Streets and Queen Street. The two White Lions have since mutated into Mercer Street, the two Earls into Earlham Street, but the 1920s theatre on the corner still bears faint traces of the past.



Refugees



Floods of refugees arrived in England over the centuries and many of them gravitated towards Soho. Manette Street was named after the family in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, rather than vice-versa, but it is noticeable that one of the houses in this street in which they might have lived has top-floor windows rather like the houses belonging to the Huguenot weavers in Spitalfields.



St Barnabas



The chapel of St Barnabas is only metres away, as is the French church.



Refugees in London



In 1848, when news of the revolutions spreading across Europe arrived, 'Frenchmen, Germans, Poles, Magyars, sprang to their feet, embraced, shouted, and gesticulated in the wildest enthusiasm... flags were caught from the walls, to be waved exultingly, amidst cries of 'Hoch! Eljen! Vive la Republique!' Then... the whole assemblage descended to the street, and, with linked arms and colours flying, marched to the meeting-place of the Westminster Chartists, in Dean St... great was the clinking of glasses that night in and around Soho and Leicester Square.' In the 1840s Karl Marx, already barred from Germany, was expelled from Paris, so he moved to London and became involved with the Socialist German Workers' Educational Society, in nearby Great Windmill Street.



Another Marx



This shop is almost certainly owned by a non-relation



The Chinese



In Dickens' day the (few) Chinese immigrants were found around the docks in the East End of London. In *Great Expectations* Gerrard Street was the home of Mr Jaggers, the ferocious criminal barrister.



Mr Jaggers



Mr Jaggers had ‘an air of authority not to be disputed, and a manner expressive of knowing something secret about every one of us that would effectually do for each individual if he chose to disclose it’.

Not too different perhaps from Dickens himself. At the beginning of this walk, and of his life, he fed cherries to a happy child in Hungerford Market. Not long before his death he was spotted near Gerrard Street. He was, said his observer, ‘clad in spruce frockcoat, buttoned to show his good and still youthful figure’, although by then he had a ‘deeply lined & scantily bearded face, and countenance alert and observant, scornful somewhat and sour; with a look of fretfulness, vanity’. Even then he daily paced out the endless London streets, for, said another novelist, born three years after Dickens died,

‘One may easily sail round England, or circumnavigate the globe. But not the most enthusiastic geographer...ever memorised a map of London...For England is a small island, [and] the world is infinitesimal amongst the planets. But London is illimitable.’

- Judith Flanders
2012



End of walk