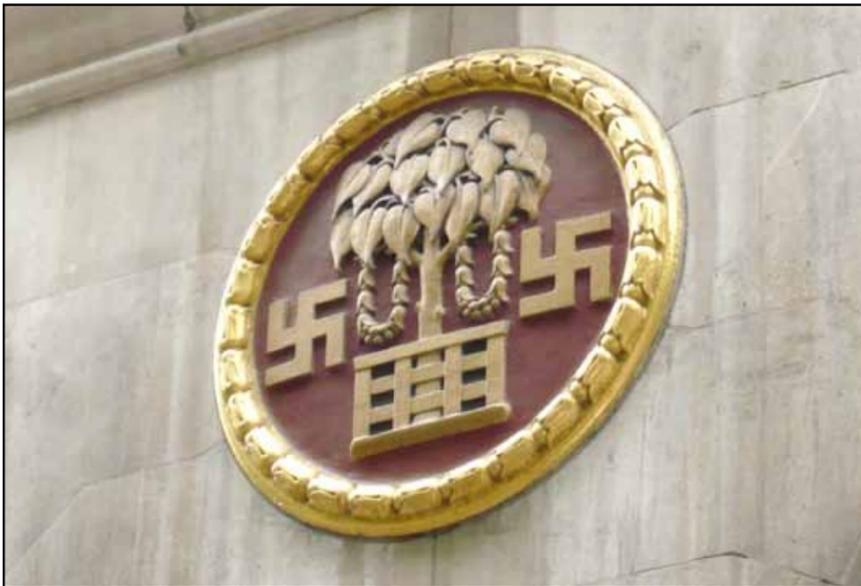


18. odyssey of oddities

It's a strange place, is London. With its millions of citizens and the liberating anonymity that brings, it's no surprise people let themselves go a little bit more inside the M25. There's a lot going on – and not all of it wholesome – behind the face the city presents to the world. Weirdness and eccentricity have always existed here, and London is the backdrop to many a subculture, sect or business that simply couldn't exist anywhere else. In which other British city could you experience a world of flamboyant aristocrats, Soviet spies, cloistered convents and circus freaks, all within the same couple of square miles? And the landscape of the capital can be equally odd – its buildings reflecting the outmoded attitudes and passing fads of a city that constantly updates and evolves. Dig a little deeper into London and you'll find nothing is quite as you'd expect.



Start point: Euston tube

End point: Edgware Road tube

Duration: 5 hours

● Come out of **Euston's** main entrance, cross the main road and catch the southbound **10, 73** or **390** from the **Euston Station** stop. Get off the bus at the **University College Hospital** stop and walk back a few metres to the main gates of University College London. Bear right, then go through the door labelled South Cloisters in the far-right corner of the courtyard. You will find yourself face to face with a man who has been dead for nearly 200 years. According to his wishes, **Jeremy Bentham**, a 19th-century philosopher and social reformer, was dissected, stuffed and mummified after his death in 1832. Dressed in period clothes and seated on a chair, his body was then placed in a cabinet that has been looked after by University College since 1850. It is not Bentham's real head you are looking at, though. The original was placed in a safe after its mummified features developed a rather chilling appearance – and a few too many students 'borrowed' it to scare girls with at parties.

● Return to the **University College Hospital** bus stop and catch the southbound **390**. This bus takes you past **James Smith & Sons** on the corner of New Oxford Street – which has survived for 180 years despite selling nothing but umbrellas – before heading along Oxford Street. Just after the bus rounds Marble Arch, look to the right for **Tyburn Convent**. This cloistered community of Catholic nuns has been carrying out a continuous prayer vigil for the souls of those martyred at Tyburn gallows – sited on what's now a traffic island between Marble Arch and Edgware Road – since 1901. The nuns never go out and their community is an almost

medieval presence within metres of Europe's busiest shopping street.

● Keep looking to the right and you will catch a glimpse of London's narrowest house at **10 Hyde Park Place**. Now part of Tyburn Convent, the house – which is the third door along from the nunnery's main entrance – is less than a metre wide, and incorporates just a downstairs corridor and tiny upstairs bedroom. It's thought it was built in the early 19th century with the specific purpose of preventing bodysnatchers from getting to the graveyard behind.

● Get off the bus at the **Victoria Gate** stop and continue walking along Bayswater Road. Sandwiched between the park railings and the lodge on the far side of the gate, you can glimpse London's only dedicated **pet graveyard**. Following the 1881 burial of Cherry – a terrier that belonged to friends of the gatekeeper – the site became *the* fashionable place for Bayswater residents to inter their pets. It now houses more than 300 graves.

● Cross the road and catch the southbound **148** from the **Victoria Gate** stop. This bus rounds Hyde Park and heads past Buckingham Palace gardens and Victoria Station before crossing Westminster Bridge. Look to the right for the arched entrance to the former **London Necropolis Railway** at number 121 Westminster Bridge Road. Between 1854 and 1941, this terminal was the starting point for trains that carried London's dead out to Surrey for burial, and the station housed several waiting rooms – divided, of course, according to social class – specifically for mourners.

● Stay on the bus till the **Larcom Street** stop, just beyond Elephant & Castle, then get off and go into the tiny **Cuming Museum** – located directly behind

the bus stop. Little more than a couple of rooms showcasing the eclectic personal collection of a wealthy local family, the museum is worth visiting for its bizarre exhibits. In the same case, you'll see a twisted elephant tusk alongside a skinned cat and a cow's heart studded with nails. There's a stuffed bear in a box on the floor and a whole area dedicated to one family member's obsession with forgeries. Thoroughly odd yet lots of fun, it is only open from Tuesday to Saturday each week. Admission is free.

● Return to the **Larcom Road** stop and catch the southbound **12, 35, 40, 45, 68, 148, 171, 176** or **468** down to **Camberwell Road/Albany Road**. Cross the road and catch the northbound **42** from the identically named stop up through Walworth and over Tower Bridge to the **Liverpool Street Station** stop. Get off the bus and bear left onto the upper level of the station concourse. Continue around the walkway until you exit the station by the junction of Liverpool Street and Old Broad Street. Walk straight down Old Broad Street and look left for one of London's most incongruous buildings – an ornate **Turkish bathhouse**, gilded with stunning Islamic-style flourishes, which is surrounded by 1970s office blocks. Built in 1895 to satisfy a fin-de-siècle penchant for steam baths, the bathhouse became a Turkish restaurant in the early 1970s. And when property developers began turning this area into the high-rise district it is today, the owners refused to sell for less than £1 million – a staggering amount at the time. As a result, the bathhouse was left alone and blocks were built around it. In recent times, it has been a cocktail bar.

● At the bottom of Old Broad Street, cross the road, bear left and catch the westbound **8** from the **Old Broad Street** stop. Take this bus to **St Paul's Station**, then continue along Newgate Street before turning right up King Edward Street. Walk up the road for a couple of minutes then turn right into **Postman's Park** – so-named because of its proximity to the former headquarters of the General Post Office. Walk through the park and you will see the **Memorial to Heroic Self-Sacrifice** on your left. This unassuming monument, installed in 1900, commemorates the deaths of those who lost their lives in saving others in a series of beautifully decorated ceramic tiles. These briefly outline the sacrifices made in a brisk yet poignant tone that is undeniably moving. Though most plaques date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one records a death as recently as 2007.

● Return to the **St Paul's Station** stop and catch the westbound **8, 25, 242** or **521**. Get off the bus at **Brownlow Street**, continue up High Holborn and turn left into the Great Turnstile alleyway. When you emerge into Lincoln's Inn Fields, walk around the park to the Royal College of Surgeons on the other side. Ask at reception to see the **Hunterian Museum**, and you will be directed to perhaps London's strangest exhibition space. Based around the personal collection of 18th-century anatomist John Hunter, the museum is an enjoyably gruesome spectacle. As well as various body parts and animals in pickling jars, it also contains the bones of some of the era's best-known 'freaks'. The 7ft 7 inch skeleton of 'Irish Giant' Charles Byrne is there, as is the skull of a man whose head grew to several times its normal size. Like the Cuming Museum,

the Hunterian Museum is free to visit, and is closed on Sundays and Mondays.

● Turn left outside the Royal College of Surgeons and walk along Sardinia Street to High Holborn. Turn left and walk the short distance down to Aldwych, then bear right past the Waldorf Hotel. Look to the left as you pass **India House** – home to the High Commission of India. This is the only place in London you'll see swastikas – Eastern decorative symbols later appropriated by the Nazis – incorporated into the fabric of a building.

● When you reach the bottom of Aldwych, cross over the Strand and turn right. **Savoy Court**, the short road on the left that leads up to The Savoy hotel, is the only road in the UK on which drivers are required to drive on the right – a remnant of the days when horsedrawn carriages would have to negotiate the tight angle into the hotel entrance. Just a little further along the Strand, next to The Coal Hole pub, you'll see London's only remaining sewer-powered streetlamp, which stands at the top of **Carting Lane**. Fuelled by gas from subterranean effluent pipes, it casts a sickly glow over the Dickensian passage at night.

● Walk back along the Strand to the **Savoy Street** bus stop, and catch the westbound **9**. Once the bus turns into St James's Street, look to the right for **Pickering Place**, a perfectly preserved 16th-century alleyway next to Berry Bros & Rudd wine merchants. Get off the bus at the **Green Park Station** stop, then cross the road and turn left along Piccadilly. Turn left into Half Moon Street then, at the top, left onto Curzon Street and right into South Audley Street. After walking for a couple of minutes up this road, you'll see **Audley Square** on the right. According to double-agent Oleg Gordievsky, a colonel in the KGB during the 1960s, the lamppost outside number two was used by Soviet agents to signal to their contacts they had secrets to pass on. Chalk marks would be made on its base so spies would know to get ready to receive information. In a strange coincidence, the screenplay for the first James Bond film, *Dr No*, was written in an office at number three in 1961 and 1962 – presumably while real agents cast shifty glances around outside.

● From Audley Square, cross the road and walk straight along Tilney Street to Park Lane. Cross the road at a convenient point and turn right to catch the northbound **436** from the **Dorchester Hotel** stop. Get off at **Burwood Place**, continue walking up Edgware Road and turn right into Crawford Place. What better place to celebrate the end of your journey around London's oddities than in London's weirdest and most wonderful pub? The landlords of **The Windsor Castle** at number 27 have many passions – royalty, the theatre and C-list celebrities among them – and all are joyously celebrated on every inch of wall space. Look out for the shrine to footballer George Best above the bar. The pub is the monthly meeting place for The Handlebar Club – a society dedicated to men with large moustaches – which seems entirely appropriate to the setting.