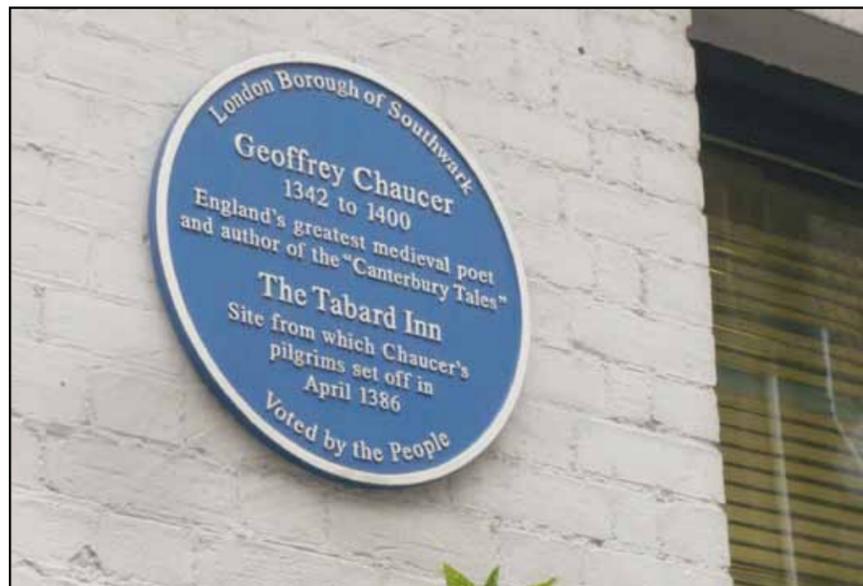


# 19. book lovers' london

London is unbeatable as a literary destination. Countless novels, poems and plays have been set here, and almost all the greats of English literature have been based in the city at some point in their lives. The capital plays a crucial role in everything from Geoffrey Chaucer's 14th-century *The Canterbury Tales* – which begins as a storytelling session around the table of a Southwark inn – to 21st-century fiction such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. And, thanks to the sheer scope of its geography and culture, it will continue to inspire. The literary landscape here is simply too vast for a four-hour bus journey to even begin to cover comprehensively, but this trip is an attempt to abridge it. Use the condensed version as a starting point for your own literary forays into the capital.



**Start point:** Westminster tube  
**End point:** Chancery Lane tube  
**Duration:** 4 hours

● Leave **Westminster tube** through Exit 3 and turn left. Turn left again when you reach Parliament Square and continue across the front of the Houses of Parliament, then turn right at the traffic lights. The nation's greatest writers have been interred at **Westminster Abbey** – to your left – since Geoffrey Chaucer was buried here in 1400. Though the tradition only really took off after Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser was given a tomb in the abbey. Nowadays Poets' Corner is one of the most famous literary locations in London. Though you'll have to pay to visit it (£16 for adults at the time of writing), your entry fee allows you to visit the graves of Aphra Behn, Charles Dickens, John Dryden, Thomas Hardy and Alfred Tennyson, among others. Many more writers – including William Shakespeare – are also commemorated in the South Transept.

● Turn left upon leaving the abbey, then cross the road and catch the northbound **24** from the **Westminster Abbey** stop. The bus goes up Whitehall and St Martin's Lane to **Charing Cross Road**. This road is well-known for its second-hand and specialist bookshops, which line its right-hand side. It was the letters exchanged between the proprietor of one of these and US author Helene Hanff that formed the basis of her 1970 book *84 Charing Cross Road*. Depressingly, the premises is now a branch of Pizza Hut.

● Get off the bus at the **Denmark Street** stop, walk back down Charing Cross Road and turn right into **Old Compton Street**. In the late 19th century, Old Compton Street was at the heart of London's French quarter, and Gallic poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud – who lived together on nearby Great College Street – would come here to drink absinthe in the Hibernia Street Arms, which was situated at number 23.

● Continue along Old Compton Street, crossing **Frith Street** – home to essayist William Hazlitt in the early 19th century – and **Dean Street**, which is where both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels lived in the 1850s. Dean Street is also the location of **The French House** pub, a favourite of writers Brendan Behan and John Mortimer. Dylan Thomas, another regular, once left the manuscript for his 1950s drama *Under Milk Wood* beneath a chair here.

● Turn right up Wardour Street then, after a few minutes, left into Broadwick Street. Poet William Blake was born on this road in 1757. **Blake House**, a Brutalist tower block on the corner of Broadwick Street and Marshall Street, now occupies the site of his former home. Continue straight on, passing the Spirit of Soho mural – which commemorates Blake and other great literary figures associated with the district – and turn right up Carnaby Street.

● At the top, turn right onto Great Marlborough Street. When you reach the junction with **Poland**

**Street**, look right to see the house in which Percy Bysshe Shelley lived in 1811. The mural on the side of the building is inspired by his poem 'Ode to the West Wind'. Turn left up Poland Street – passing number 28 on the right, which is where Blake lived between 1785 and 1791.

● Cross Oxford Street, turn left and catch the eastbound **55** from the **Great Titchfield Street** stop. This passes the southern edges of **Bloomsbury** – the district in which Virginia Woolf, EM Forster and other members of the Bloomsbury Set lived and worked in the early 20th century – before heading through **Clerkenwell**, setting for Peter Ackroyd's 2003 *The Clerkenwell Tales* and George Gissing's 1889 *The Nether World*. This is also the area in which Dickens' *Oliver Twist* first tries his hand at pickpocketing.

● Get off the bus at **Old Street Station**, continue along the road and turn right at the roundabout. Walk down City Road and you'll see **Bunhill Fields** on the right. This was London's main non-conformist graveyard between the 17th and 19th centuries, and is the resting place for those who refused to accept the established Anglican Church. William Blake's headstone stands in the central square, just across from the tomb in which lies John Bunyan – author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

● Retrace your steps to City Road, cross over and turn left. Catch the southbound **21** from the **City Road/Leonard Street** stop and take it all the way to **Southwark Street**. Walk back up Borough High Street and turn right into **Talbot Yard**, which is where The Tabard Inn – the pub in which Chaucer's pilgrims gather in *The Canterbury Tales* – was situated between 1307 and 1873. A plaque on the wall of Copyprints is all that remains. Further up Borough High Street is **The George Inn**, a galleried pub that dates back to medieval times, which was frequented by both Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare – who would drop in for a pint after performances at the Globe Theatre, just along the South Bank.

● Turn left down Southwark Street and catch the westbound **RV1** or **381** from the **Hop Exchange** stop. Get off at **Blackfriars Bridge** and walk over the bridge. Turn right onto Queen Victoria Street, left up Black Friars Lane and right into Playhouse Yard. This leads onto **Ireland Yard**, which is where Shakespeare lived from 1613 until his death in 1616. Handy for the theatres across the river, this was a very exclusive address in the Jacobean era. Poet and playwright Ben Jonson also had a house here.

● Turn left at the end of Ireland Yard and walk up St Andrew's Hill to Carter Lane. Turn left then right up Black Friars Lane; and, when you reach

Pilgrim Street, turn left then immediately right to emerge onto Ludgate Hill. Walk straight up Old Bailey to the **Old Bailey** central criminal court, which is where the three trials involving Oscar Wilde – the first the libel action he brought against the Marquis of Queensberry for calling him a 'sodomite'; the other two for charges of sodomy and gross indecency – took place in 1895. The courthouse stands on the site of the infamous Newgate Prison, which is where Daniel Defoe was imprisoned for pamphleteering in 1703. His experiences here led him to write *Moll Flanders* – the eponymous heroine of which begins her colourful life in Newgate.

● Retrace your steps to Ludgate Hill, cross the road and turn right. Catch the westbound **4, 11, 15, 23, 26, 76** or **172** from the **City Thameslink Station/Ludgate Circus** stop. Get off at the **Shoe Lane** stop, cross the road and turn left. Finish your journey with a drink in **Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese**, accessed via an alleyway on the right. Though the pub has been here since 1538, the current building dates from the late 17th century. And over the years it has served drinks to everyone from Oliver Goldsmith and Samuel Johnson to Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Conan-Doyle. The pub was also the meeting place of the Rhymers' Club, the poetry society formed by WB Yeats in 1890 that included Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas among its members.

● Once you've had enough of the pub's unique literary ambience, retrace your steps to Fleet Street and turn right. Turn right up Chancery Lane then, at the top, right again for **Chancery Lane tube**.

