

24. the victorian city

A glorious age in many ways, the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901 saw unprecedented advances in science, technology and the arts. And London, as the centre of the British Empire, grew wealthy on the back of these. Fabulously ornate buildings went up as the capital redrew itself as the ultimate modern city, and gained its first underground railways, electric lights and a public-health system that brought an end to the epidemics that carried off huge swathes of the population. Things weren't all rosy, though. Behind the wealth and progress lay a parallel city – one of filthy slums and grinding poverty, from which the only escape was the workhouse. And, in Whitechapel, a serial murderer labelled Jack the Ripper began his killing spree, bringing the horror of the East End's medieval living conditions into the newly formed modern consciousness.



Start point: Farringdon tube

End point: Holborn tube

Duration: 5 hours

● If you've arrived at **Farringdon tube** via the line from King's Cross St Pancras, you've just experienced your first piece of London Victoriana. The city's first underground train line – the Metropolitan Railway – was opened in January 1863, and ran from Paddington Bishop's Road (now Paddington tube) to Farringdon Street, which is the station you've just disembarked at. Despite the fears of some clergy who worried that tunnelling underground might accidentally break through to Hell and unleash the Devil on the capital, work on the line was begun in 1860. The tunnels built then are still in daily use more than 150 years later.

● Come out of Farringdon tube and turn left down Cowcross Street. Walk right to the end and you'll emerge opposite **Smithfield Market**, housed in a glorious cast-iron structure designed by Sir Horace Jones in 1868. Turn right along Charterhouse Street and, at the end, turn left onto Farringdon Road. Cross the road and catch the northbound **45** from the **Snow Hill** bus stop.

● For London's greatest piece of Victorian Gothic Revival architecture, get off the bus at the **King's Cross Station/York Way** terminus and walk back down York Way. Turn right along Euston Road and you will be confronted with the soaring façade of **St Pancras Station**, Sir George Gilbert Scott's masterpiece. Built in 1865, it was earmarked for demolition in the 1960s but – mainly thanks to the efforts of poet John Betjeman – it survived, and now houses the upmarket St Pancras Renaissance Hotel as well as the national rail and Eurostar station. Its sheer beauty makes it the

perfect symbol of Victorian authorities' aesthetic approach to public services.

● Continue along Euston Road and catch the northbound **476** from the **British Library** stop. After going through Islington and Newington Green, the bus heads down Stoke Newington Church Street. Look left here for a view of **Abney Park Cemetery**. As the capital's population was rapidly expanding in the 19th century and cremation was illegal until 1885, extra burial space was desperately required. This led to the creation of the 'magnificent seven' cemeteries – Abney Park, Brompton, Highgate, Kensal Green, Nunhead, Tower Hamlets and West Norwood – which were built around the fringes of central London between 1832 and 1841. Arboretum and graveyard were combined here at Abney Park, and today the cemetery is a wonderfully overgrown Victorian delight – filled with crumbling tombs and creepy angled headstones. You could happily idle away an entire day in here. Teenage Goths often do.

● Get off the bus at **Stoke Newington Station**, cross the road and turn left to catch the southbound **243** from the identically named stop on the other side. Get off the bus at the **Hoxton Station/Geffrye Museum** stop and continue down Kingsland Road. Cross the road and turn right into Falkirk Street, then right up Hoxton Street. **Hoxton Hall**, a short walk up on the right, was built as MacDonald's Music Hall in 1863 to provide the local working-class community with a place in which they could indulge the Victorian appetite for revues of popular song, comedy and variety acts.

● Continue up Hoxton Street and you will see the unadulterated façade of the former **Shoreditch Workhouse**. Thanks to a law change in 1834, financial aid was withdrawn and the only option available to

anyone unable to economically sustain themselves became the workhouse. The Victorian era saw thousands of unemployed workers and the elderly enter these institutions, where they were subjected to a daily routine of hard work and intense religious instruction that most were unable to escape from. The system was abolished in 1930 and many workhouses – Shoreditch included – became municipal hospitals instead.

● Immediately after passing the workhouse, turn right along Nuttall Street; then cross Kingsland Road and turn right to catch the southbound **242** from the **St Leonard's Hospital** stop. Once the bus passes St Leonard's Church on the church, it is travelling along the western boundary of the notorious **Old Nichol** slum – known as a rookery in Victorian parlance. Famous for its high levels of crime and destitution, Old Nichol was an overcrowded district of decaying, barely habitable houses with terrifyingly high rates of mortality. Slum clearance was a huge priority in the late Victorian era, and Old Nichol was demolished between 1891 and 1893 to be replaced by the current Boundary Estate. The bandstand you can glimpse at the end of Calvert Avenue, immediately on the left after St Leonard's Church, was built with rubble from the old slum houses.

● Get off the bus at **City Thameslink Station**, then cross the road and bear right to catch the eastbound **25** from the identically named stop on the other side. It immediately passes the Old Bailey, built on the site of **Newgate Prison**, on the right. This is where the last public hanging in England – of Irish Fenian bomber Michael Barrett – took place in front of the prison walls. The execution was watched by a crowd of more than 2,000.

● Get off the bus at the **St Katherine Cree** stop, continue along Leadenhall Street and Aldgate, then turn left up Mitre Street. It was in **Mitre Square** – the entrance to which is on the right about halfway up here – that the mutilated body of Catherine Eddowes, the penultimate victim of Victorian serial killer Jack the Ripper, was found in November 1888. A potent symbol of late-Victorian London – who laid bare the horror behind the gilded facade of one of the world's wealthiest cities – Jack the Ripper forced upper- and middle-class Londoners to address the city's rookeries; districts in their midst where crime and prostitution were a way of life.

● Retrace your steps to Aldgate, cross the road and turn left. Catch the westbound **15** from the **Aldgate Station** stop and take the bus through the City and along Fleet Street. Once it enters the Strand, look to the left for the entrance to **The Savoy Theatre and Hotel**. Opened in 1881, the theatre was commissioned by impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte to stage the comic operas of WS Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan – *The Mikado* and *The Gondoliers* were among the productions to be premiered here. The theatre was the first public building in the world to be lit by electricity.

● Get off the bus at the **Charing Cross Station** stop, walk back and turn right down Villiers Street. Walk straight through Embankment tube and cross the road. Turn right along the **Victoria Embankment** and walk

past the monuments to WS Gilbert and pioneering civil engineer Joseph Bazalgette. Despite not being particularly well-known these days, Bazalgette's contribution to Victorian London is arguably the greatest of all. It was the revolutionary sewer system he designed and implemented for the capital between 1865 and 1875 that brought an end to the cholera epidemics that had claimed the lives of more than 20,000 Londoners over the previous 50 years. Bazalgette's foresight meant that the 1,800 kilometres of sewer pipes he installed beneath the city streets were able to cope with London's population explosion in the 20th century, and are still in use today.

● Continue along the Victoria Embankment – another of Bazalgette's creations – until it meets Westminster Bridge. Cross Bridge Street and turn right to walk alongside Big Ben and the **Houses of Parliament**. This breathtaking display of Victorian Gothic Revival design was built between 1836 and 1870 under the direction of architects Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin. The pair were awarded the commission after the original Palace of Westminster burned down in 1834.

● Turn left and walk across the facade of the Houses of Parliament then, on the far side of Parliament Square, turn right and walk across the front of **Westminster Abbey** – where Queen Victoria was crowned in June 1838 – to the **Parliament Square/ Westminster Abbey** bus stop. Take the westbound **148** from here all the way to **Queensway Station**. Just before the bus reaches Victoria Station, look left to see the Neo Byzantine **Westminster Cathedral**, which is the centre of English and Welsh Catholicism. It was built in 1885, just over 50 years after the Roman Catholic Church was officially restored to the country after an absence of more than three centuries.

● Walk back from the Queensway Station stop and enter Kensington Gardens through Black Lion Gate. Follow the Broad Walk path all the way through the park, passing the statue of Queen Victoria (sculptured by her daughter Princess Louise) outside **Kensington Palace** – where the Queen was born in 1819.

● When you emerge from the park, turn right and catch the eastbound **10** from the **Palace Gate** stop. Look left for Sir George Gilbert Scott's 1872 **Albert Memorial**, commissioned by Victoria to commemorate her beloved late husband. The bus heads along the southern edge of Hyde Park, which is where the Great Exhibition of 1851 – at which all the latest cultural and innovations were showcased – was held in the 92,000sq m Crystal Palace.

● Get off the bus at the **Tottenham Court Road Station** stop and continue along Oxford Street and New Oxford Street – the northern boundary of the notorious **St Giles** rookery (now demolished) – onto High Holborn. End your journey around Victorian London at **The Princess Louise** on the right. Not only is this pub named after Queen Victoria's sculptress daughter, but it is also one of the most authentic Victorian taverns in the capital. The tiled bar areas, frosted screens – designed to keep the social classes apart – and stucco ceiling are impressive enough, but wait until you visit the toilets. They're Grade-II listed.