



Covent Garden Neal's Yard, Royal Opera, Somerset House, River

Distance: 4km=2½ miles

very easy walking

Region: London

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Author: Thwelder

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Map: London A-Z

Problems, changes? We depend on your feedback: feedback@fancyfreewalks.org

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narrow courtyards, shops, opera house, historic riverside house, theatres

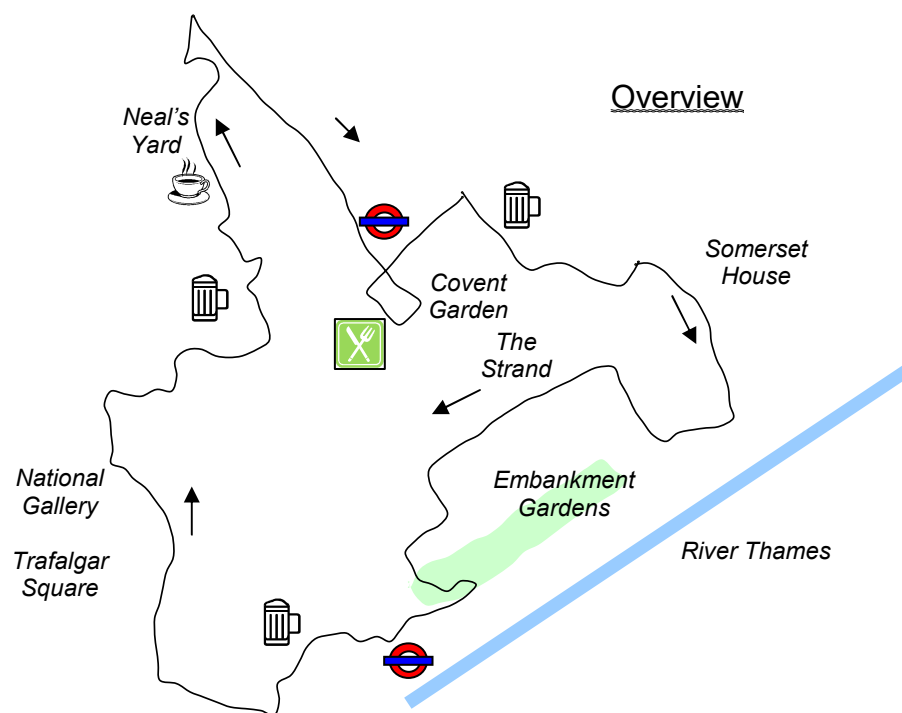
In Brief

This circular walk takes you through the theatre district, down the lanes and through the courtyards around Covent Garden, including a visit to the Opera House, then through Somerset House before returning near the River Thames.

This walk is best done in the day time when all the shops are open. If you want to visit the Opera House, don't start too late.



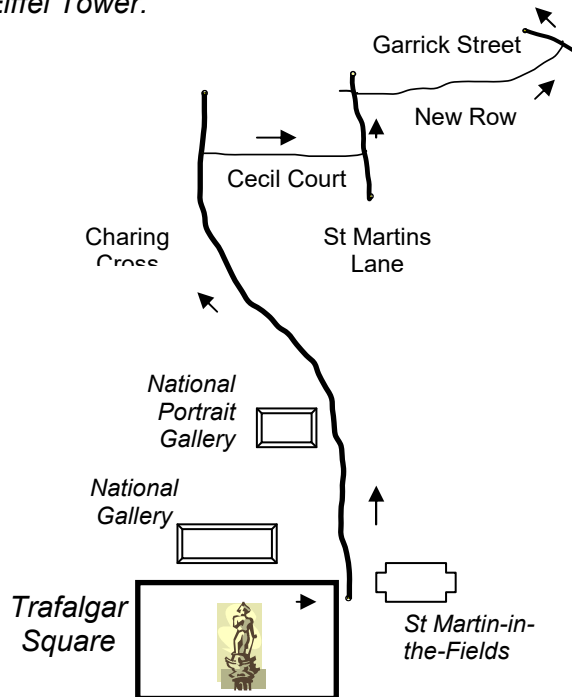
The walk begins at **Trafalgar Square** but since it is a circular you can start anywhere along the way, in particular at Embankment tube station (District, Central and Northern lines) or Covent Garden tube (Piccadilly line).



The Walk

- 1 Trafalgar Square is dominated by Nelson's Column guarded by four lions.

Nelson's Column was built in 1840 to commemorate Horatio Nelson's death at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. The four lions at the base were designed by the painter Sir Edwin Landseer. The 5½ meter statue by E.H. Baily stands on top of a 46m Dartmoor granite column. The column has been climbed several times in a TV show or as a publicity stunt. It was also "sold" in 1923 to a visiting American by the notorious con-artist Arthur Furguson who also once "sold" the Eiffel Tower.



On the north side of the square, across a pedestrianised roadway, is the wide edifice of the National Gallery (of which more at the end of this walk). Facing the National Gallery, turn **right** and **left** at the corner of the Gallery into [Charing Cross Road](#). On the other side of the road is the church of St Martins-in-the-Fields.

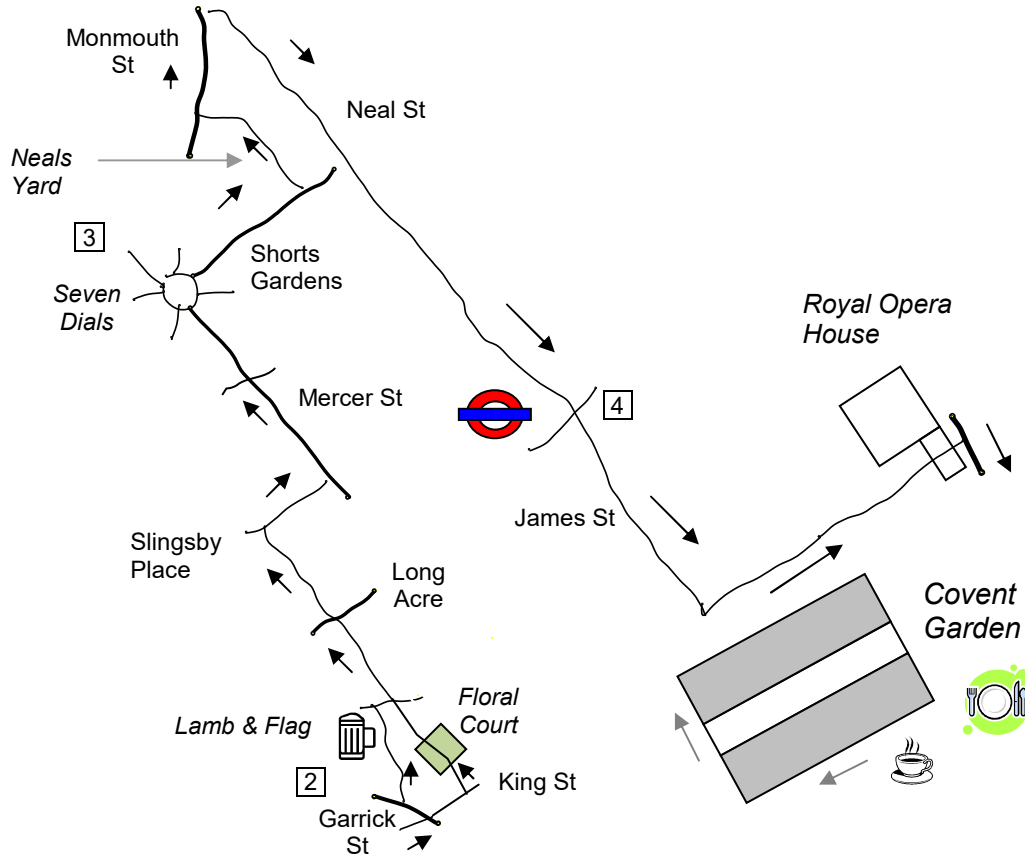
The previous St Martins-in-the-Fields was built by Henry VIII as a refuge for plague victims to keep them outside the city, literally "in the fields". The current church was designed by James Gibbs in 1721. It is famous as a refuge for the destitute and for its free lunchtime concerts. The crypt below the church has a brass rubbing centre, a gallery, shops and a good café and can be accessed by lift or stairs via the modern isolated glass structure on the left.

Note the animated man and cask on the top of the "Chandos" pub on the right. Continue along Charing Cross Road, which curves left and right, passing the National Portrait Gallery on your left.

The National Portrait Gallery is a free art gallery with four floors of portraits of famous Britons, including the Chandos Shakespeare. It has an excellent new restaurant on the top floor with views across Trafalgar Square.

*Charing Cross Road is famous for its bookshops. Pass the Garrick Theatre on your right and, shortly after, turn **right** into [Cecil Court](#), a pedestrian-only passage which has antiquarian bookshops and curio shops on each side. At the end, turn **left** into [St Martins Lane](#), another street full of theatres, and in just 50m, turn **right** into [New Row](#), another almost traffic-free narrow street with a variety of shops.*

- 2 At the end of New Row*, turn **sharp left** into **Garrick Street** and immediately **right** into **Rose Street**. (* 2019: There's a pretty alternative now: at the end of New Row, go straight over into **King Street** and shortly go **left** through a portal into **Floral Court** with its florid little square and cafés; go through and straight over Floral Street into ***Conduit Court*** where it's mentioned below.) Keep to the right, passing the *Lamb and Flag*, the oldest pub in Covent Garden and a popular spot for summer refreshment.



Pass to the **right** of the pub going through an extremely narrow passage and archway into **Floral Street**. Turn **right** on Floral Street and quickly **left** into ***Conduit Court***. Cross over Long Acre into **Slingsby Place** opposite, another restored courtyard with several shops, a gallery and eateries. Turn **right** in the centre of Slingsby Place and emerge into **Mercer Street**. Turn **left** on Mercer Street. Continue over a crossroads with Shelton Street to reach **Seven Dials**.

Seven Dials is a junction where seven roads meet. At the centre is a pillar with a chequered history (check the web or a guidebook). The location was poor and slummy in Dickens' time and in Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta "Iolanthe" you hear the lines "Hearts just as pure and fair / May beat in Belgrave Square / As in the lowly air of Seven Dials". Today the area is cool and trendy.

- 3 Take the **second** turning **right**, **Shorts Gardens**. Pass on your left the Neal's Yard cheese shop and, just after, turn **left** into **Neal's Yard**. *This colourful new-wave alley and courtyard has spawned a host of brand names feeding off its ultra trendy image, radiating from the terracotta terraces and pot-pourri that adorn it all around.* After possibly taking a bite at an open-air café, keep straight ahead past the yellow-brown building out into **Monmouth Street**, opposite the Covent Garden Hotel whose brasserie offers a fine dining experience and some of the best-cooked lamb shanks in London, or elegant tea and cakes. Turn **right** and take the next turning **sharp right**. This is **Neal Street**, a long straight narrow pedestrianised street lined with boutiques and one-off clothes shops, cited in all the guidebooks. *As you pass down Neal Street, you pass Earlham Street on the right with the logo indicating the Donmar Warehouse, a not-for-profit fringe theatre that gained many awards and a huge reputation when Sam Mendes ran it in the 1990s.* Continue along Neal Street, finally crossing Long Acre, next to Covent Garden tube.
- 4 Continue over into **James Street**, a crowded area where living statues often stand. *Just on your left is the twisty "dancing bridge" used to convey performers between the Opera House and Royal Ballet School.* At the end are the large low buildings of Covent Garden. Your route is **left** beneath the colonnade, but first you will want to spend some time amongst the shops and cafés of Covent Garden.

Covent Garden was London's big fruit and vegetable market until 1974 after which it was converted into the major site for small shops, cafés and street entertainers that you see now. Originally it was an abbey garden (in fact a "convent garden") but Henry VIII requisitioned it and it was passed to the Bedford Estate, becoming an area for the well-to-do. By the 1700s it had gone down-market and had become a red-light district. A book, "Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies" was a reference guide to the "gentlemen's pleasures", costing two shillings and sixpence and it sold over a quarter of a million copies.

Close by are the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Royal Opera (also known informally as "Covent Garden"). The film "My Fair Lady" begins outside the Opera House. On the east side is the London Transport Museum and on the west side St Pauls church, the "actors' church".

For a small tour around the site, you can go directly ahead through the opening into the North Hall and Apple Market, then cross the Central Avenue into the South Hall. On the far side, over a roadway, is the Market Hall which specialises in craftwork. Turning right, you can visit St Pauls church where many well-known actors are commemorated, including Charlie Chaplin, Noel Coward, Gracie Fields, Vivien Leigh and Ivor Novello.

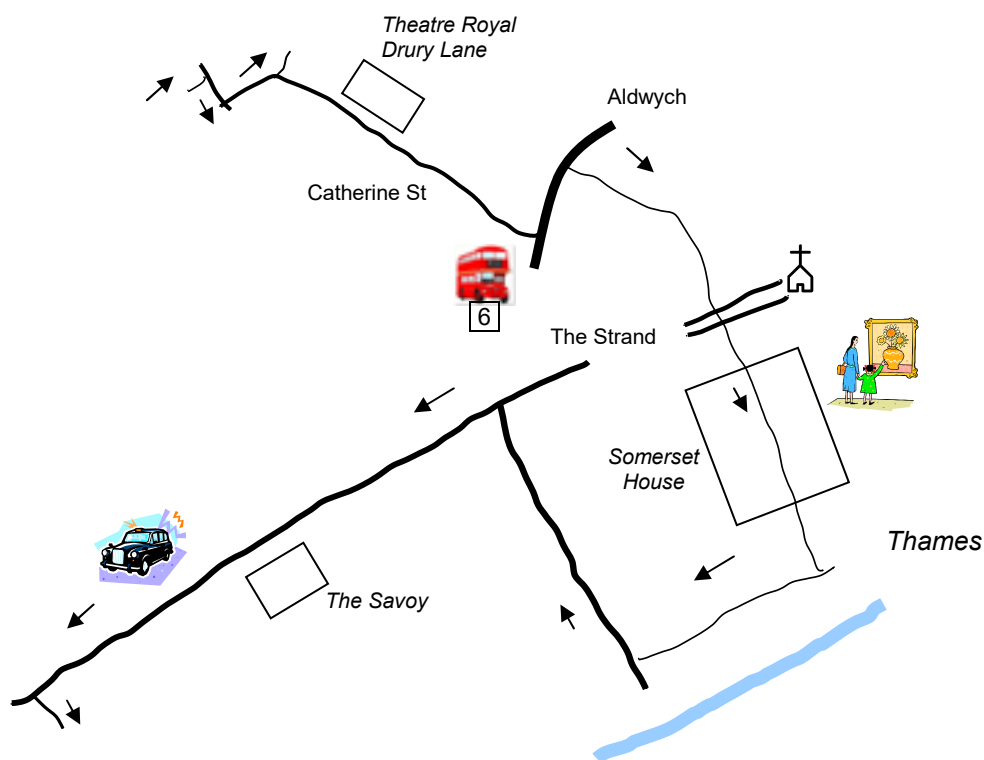
Returning to the point where you entered the market square, now continue through the colonnade that leads to the rear entrance to the Royal Opera House (ROH). If you arrive in the daytime, it is usually possible to visit the atrium of the Opera House and go up to the Amphitheatre Terrace.

The huge iron and glass atrium or "floral hall" or "Paul Hamlyn Hall" is up a flight of stairs. This is where opera-goers have their champagne in the interval. On the mezzanine level there is a restaurant and high up, in a clever illusion, is the interior window of the upper bar. To reach the terrace, take the long escalator on the left. Here there are more bars, a restaurant and an open terrace with good views down onto the market square. On the right is the costume department.

The Theatre Royal, as it then was, became an opera house when Handel became director and staged a series of his operas beginning in 1734. The opera house has been rebuilt several times and burned down twice in the 1800s. Between 1996 and 2000 a massive and hugely costly bottom-up renovation was done, resulting in a state-of-art opera complex with a studio theatre, the cathedral-like floral hall, bars and restaurants. The ROH is also the home of the Royal Ballet and the Orchestra of the ROH. The ROH has always seeded a few “risky” productions in between the “safe” operas. In February 2011 it staged “Anna Nicole” by Mark Anthony Turnage, an opera about the notorious playboy model.

After your visit, exit the Opera House on the other side, either through the glass door by the box office or, if the Opera House was open, by the grand white columned main entrance.

- 5 Turn **right** into **Bow Street**. At the first junction, by the *Marquis of Anglesey* pub, turn **left** into **Russell Street** and quickly **right** into **Catherine Street**, noted for its many restaurants and go past the entrance to the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, the oldest theatre in London.



Continue down Catherine Street to the **Aldwych**, a busy curving one-way road. Cross the Aldwych using the traffic island, with great care because the taxis tend to weave about and change lane. If in doubt, use the pedestrian lights about 50m down on the right. Turn **left** and quickly **right** onto a pavement, **India Place**, going down some steps. Cross the two lanes of the **Strand** using the pedestrian lights. In the centre of the Strand on your left is the narrow baroque church of St. Mary le Strand, designed by James Gibbs in 1714. On the other side, go through one of the three entrance arches of Somerset House, passing the Courtauld Gallery* (and its café, which does *not* require a ticket) on your right, and enter the inner court. (* 2018: the Courtauld Gallery is closed till end-2019 for a complete overhaul.)

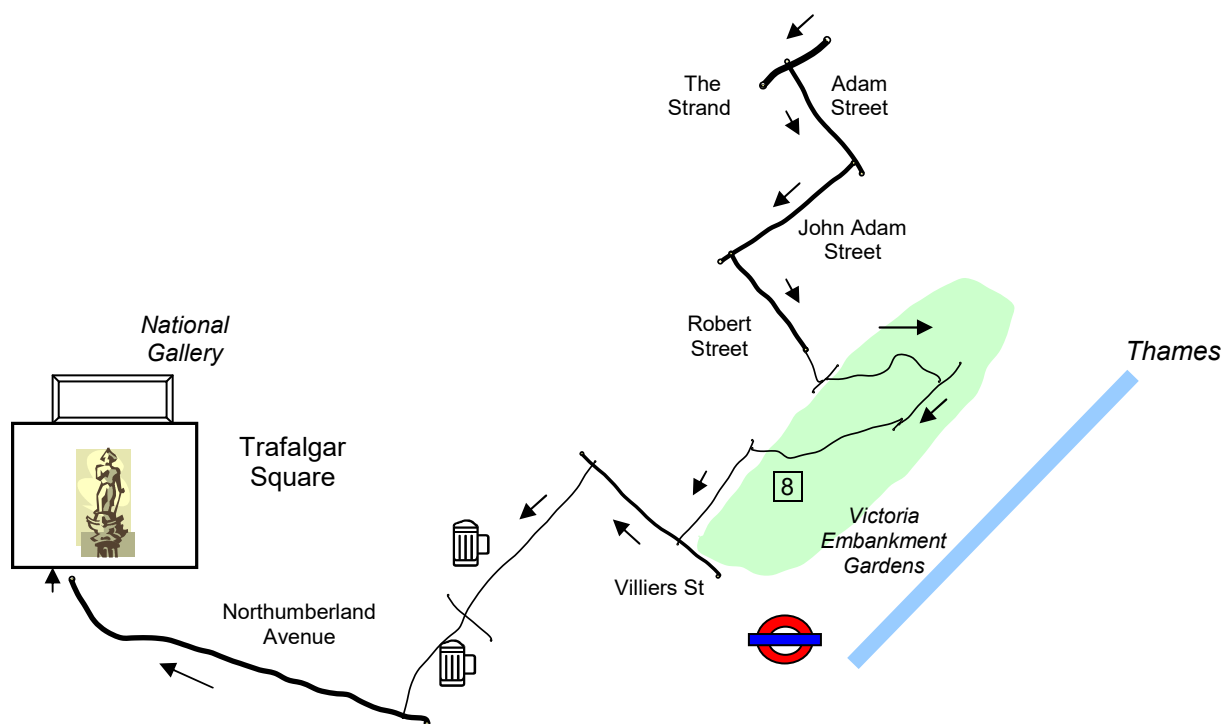
Somerset House was built by Edward Seymour, brother of Henry VIII's third wife (and hence uncle to the next king), before he (literally) lost his head. It then became a royal residence. The present building dates from 1775, the

result of a public project to build what was one of the very few grand houses on the Thames. It is now the home of several small art galleries as well as the Courtauld Institute. There are several cafés, including an open-air Thames-side café in the summer. The courtyard puts on pop concerts and hosts part of London Fashion Week and a winter ice-rink.

Go straight through the court and exit by the door on the other side. The other galleries and a café are here. On the right at the end is a deep rotunda staircase known as the Nelson Stair. Continue straight on through the door to the riverside. Turn **right** and follow the path, finally exiting on [Waterloo Bridge Road](#). (Or, if you prefer, you can go back to the Strand and turn left.) Turn **right** on the main road and **left** at the traffic lights to continue along the Strand.

6 The Strand once ran along the shore of the Thames, before the Embankment was built. Together with Fleet Street, it links the two cities of Westminster and London. As an interesting diversion, if you take the first small road **left** off the Strand, going past the Savoy Tap pub, on your right is a garden and the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy, dating from 1490, worth visiting for its interesting history. You need to backtrack to return to the Strand. As you go, you pass Simpsons-in-the-Strand, the Savoy Hotel (recently gloriously reborn), the Savoy Theatre and, on the right, the Vaudeville Theatre.

7 Almost opposite the Adelphi Theatre, turn **left** into [Adam Street](#).



On your left a plaque indicates a residence of Sir Richard Arkwright, a self-made Lancashire man, mill owner, inventor of a whole series of machines for spinning and cloth manufacture and a pillar of the Industrial Revolution. Turn right into [John Adam Street](#). This street is named after the Scottish architect John Adam, one of the three Adam brothers, who built many of the nearby buildings during the 1700s. Pass on your left the Adelphi Hotel, originally designed by the Adam brothers (and incidentally named from the Greek for “brothers”) and replaced in the 1930s by this monumental art deco building. Turn **left** beside the Adelphi into [Robert Street](#), passing a

house where many eminent artists and writers lived. *At the end of Robert Street you can view the sculptured figures that clad the Adelphi.* Go down steps ahead. (The steps may be closed after 5pm. The small gate into the Gardens may be closed at 3.30pm. In either case, go back to John Adam Street, continue a little further and turn **left** into York Buildings, then right down steps and left into the gardens.) The steps take you down to Savoy Place: cross it to a small gate into Victoria Embankment Gardens. Follow the very twisting path and turn **right** when you reach the main path.

Victoria Embankment Gardens is a pleasant little park where many people sit with their sandwiches or noodle pots at lunchtime. It has a music stage with deckchairs and, most notably, a large number of statues. There are toilets on the left.

- 8 Keep to the right in the gardens and turn **right** where you see an old gateway. This marks where the shore line used to be before the Embankment was built in the 1860s. Go past the gateway and turn **left**, going past the tables of Gordon's Bar, up steps and turn **right**. (Embankment tube station is reached by turning left instead of right.) This is [Villiers Street](#) a mainly pedestrianised road with many eateries, running alongside Charing Cross station. Opposite the *Prince of Wales* pub, turn **left** through the long arches, passing the little Players Theatre. After the arches, you pass the *Ship and Shovell*, a most unusual Victorian pub, being in two parts, either side of the passageway. You reach [Craven Street](#) where, just on the right at no. 36, is Benjamin Franklin House, where he lived for 16 years, now open to the public as a living museum. Cross Craven Street into [Craven Passage](#), passing another interesting pub, the *Sherlock Holmes*. Turn **right** into the wide Northumberland Avenue, returning to Trafalgar Square. This is the perfect time to visit the (free) National Gallery.

The National Gallery is one of the world's great art galleries with over 2300 paintings, ranging from the earliest (housed mainly in the new Sainsbury Wing on the left) up to (but not beyond) the impressionists and post-impressionists. It is home to Velázquez's Rokeby Venus, the Ambassadors by Holbein, many by Rubens and some of the best of Claude Lorrain. It was founded in 1824 as a national project. The gallery provides free tours and lectures and, in the basement, usually a special exhibition. There are three restaurants, two joined in tandem at the Charing Cross Road end and one in the Sainsbury Wing which provides pleasant savouries and teas and a special offering of English cheeses, with a fine view over Trafalgar Square.

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