



The Royal Parks

Distance: 6½ km=4 miles

easy walking

Region: London

Date written: 21-may-2025

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Refreshments: park cafés

Map: London A-Z (not usually needed)

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

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Parks, water, woodland, lakes, memorials, palaces, history

In Brief

A long green hike through Central London! Well, everyone knows about the London Royal Parks, but who would believe they are four miles across? This walk takes a slight angle to pass by the Long Water and it deliberately takes some not-quite-straight routes so you don't miss the best sights and the café/restaurant. There are several kiosks serving coffee and burgers etc. but no fine dining unless you eat first in Kensington or walk to Soho at the end.

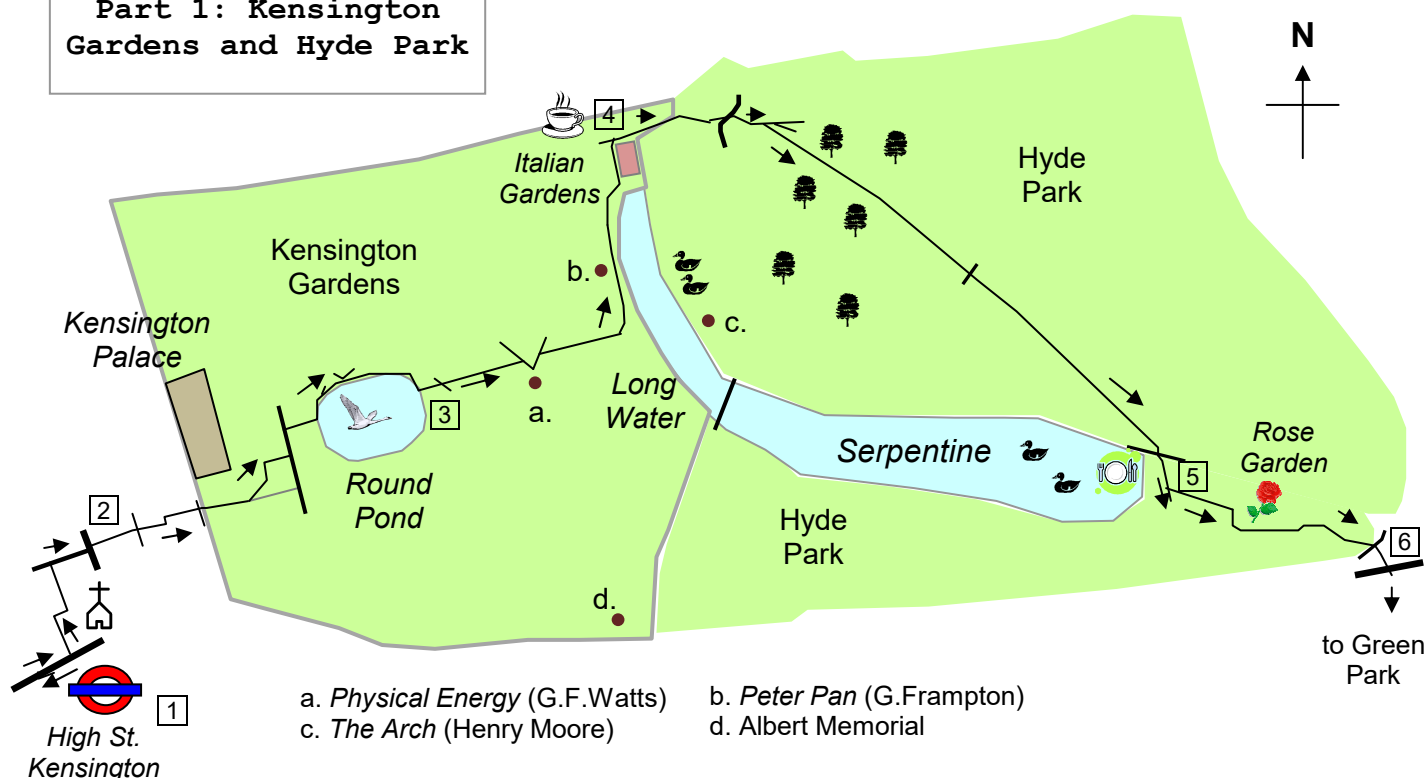
You could even extend the walk at both ends by starting in **Holland Park** and ending at **Temple Gardens**, with short sections of road walking in between. The walk itself has just one major road crossing with a host of interesting sights. This walk does not include the greatest of all the royal parks: **Regent's Park**, being on the north side. (For that park, see the other walk on this site: *Regent's Park, Camden Market, Kings Cross*.) The largest parks in Greater London, **Richmond Park** and **Epping Forest** are also explored in walks on this site.



The walk begins at **High Street Kensington** Underground Station, District Line (Edgware Road branch). It ends at Westminster Underground Station, although of course you'll want to go further exploring. You can break off anywhere along the way if the going gets tough! Enjoyed it? - then you could do it next time in *reverse direction*, and celebrate with some great food in Kensington.

The Walk

Part 1: Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park



- 1 Beginning the walk at High Street Kensington station, turn **left** out of the station to cross the road by the lights and turn **right** on the other side. In 80m (nearly 100 yds), opposite a little sign on a lamppost for *Kensington Church Walk*, turn **left** down a narrow passage. You pass a primary school, St Mary Abbots Gardens, and a memorial garden (*Alec Clifton-Taylor was a local architectural historian*). Turn **right** with the path towards the west door of St Mary Abbots church (well worth a visit). Turn first **left** on a narrow tarmac lane, Kensington Church Walk. A blue plaque in the little cul-de-sac on your left records the five year residence here of US writer Ezra Pound, a “shaper of modern literature”. You pass some other-age shops (hats, jewellery) and emerge onto the elegant white terraces of Holland Street. Turn **right** and cross the main Kensington Church Street by the lights.

- 2 Head straight down York House Place, almost directly opposite. It narrows and comes out onto Palace Green, full of embassies. Cross straight over through metal gates into Kensington Gardens, through more gates. On your left is the flamboyant statue of King William III in front of Kensington Palace.

Kensington Palace was originally a modest country house until in 1689 when William and Mary came to the throne and engaged Sir Christopher Wren to enlarge it. All subsequent monarchs lived here, until a certain Alexandrina was born here and as Queen Victoria moved into Buckingham Palace. You can visit the state rooms which are open daily.

Kensington Gardens were formed when the western end of Hyde Park was enclosed as a private garden for Kensington Palace in 1728. The gardens are linked in plays and books with fairies and magic spirits. There are two free art galleries within the gardens (though not on this route). The Albert Memorial is also sited inside the gardens.

If you find an open gate, go diagonally **left** across the grass and up into the palace garden, and turn **right** to meet the Broad Walk; otherwise just continue straight ahead to the Broad Walk, a historic wide walkway. Turn **left** on the Broad Walk (watch out for bikes!) passing a statue of Queen Victoria, and quickly **right** on a path leading to the Round Pond, a huge lake where flocks of swans mingle with the wingless visitors. Go **left** around the edge of the pond and stop when you are nearly **half-way** round, on the opposite side from the palace which you can see across the water.

- 3 Now take a solid path squarely **left** away from the Round Pond. In 50m it becomes shaded by a lovely line of lime trees. At the end of the path, veer **right** to arrive at a 5-point junction with G.F. Watts' huge bronze sculpture *Physical Energy*. *This is one of four casts made from the plaster original in the Watts Gallery, Compton, Surrey.* Turn **left** and first **right** to resume your original direction along a line of limes. You arrive close to the shore of the Long Water, as this section of the Serpentine is called.

The Serpentine lake was created in 1730 by celebrity gardener Charles Bridgeman by damming the River Westbourne which already flowed through the gardens. But nowadays the water is pumped from the Thames. The portion within the Gardens is known as the "Long Water", changing to the "Serpentine" after the Bridge.

The sculpture on the far side of the water is by Henry Moore. Keep left and turn **left** on a wide path that runs parallel to the lake. On your left soon is Sir George Frampton's statue of Peter Pan playing his pipes.

Peter Pan was the creation of playwright J M Barrie. In his novel, Peter flies out of his bedroom window to live in the gardens with the squirrels, mice, rabbits and fairies that you see in the statue. The sculpture was made in 1912 by Sir George Frampton. Many extra bronze casts were made and set up in various cities round the world.

A slanting info tablet shows the 22 species of water birds that you may see here. You arrive at the Italian Gardens, also known as the "Fountains" (there are five of them), with its ponds and statues and a 1862 statue of Edward Jenner, pioneer of vaccination.

The Italian Garden was supposedly a gift from Prince Albert to Queen Victoria. The belvedere is in fact a pump house from which the fountains were originally powered (the roof pillar is a disguised chimney). The urns are curved in five designs: swan's breast, woman's head, ram's head, dolphin, and oval.

- 4 After a possible calming rest at the gardens, turn **right** on the far side, on a path uphill, passing a café and a classic seat. Come through metal gates to exit Kensington Gardens (they are closed at night, whereas Hyde Park is always open).



Hyde Park is part of the land owned by Westminster Abbey before Henry VIII took it in 1536 as a hunting ground. (The name comes from the local medieval Manor of Hyde.) The public were allowed in (if correctly dressed) from 1637. The Great Exhibition, for which the Crystal Palace was built, was held here in 1851. Hyde Park has always been the choice for duels, demonstrations, speeches by the Suffragettes and Chartists (Speakers Corner is here), as well as for rock concerts.

Cross the busy West Carriage Drive and over a sandy horse path, passing a multiple signpost. Turn **left** beside a large green rubbish bin on a tarmac path signed *Rangers Lodge*. In 50m, there are two paths close together both leading off on your **right**. Take the **first** path. On your left shortly is

Tom Harvey's carved log showing insects and flowers. Your path leads through deep hushed woodland, passing several seats to pause and reflect. You pass an old water pump and soon the path runs between two buildings *New Lodge* and the *Old Police House*. Cross the junction and take a path dead straight on, i.e. next on your right from the drive of the Police House (as a guide, you can see a gas lamp ahead). The path gradually meets the shore of the Serpentine and arrives at a multiple junction. Turn **right** through a gap to cross the wide Serpentine Road - not a road in fact, but a lakeside highway, a favourite for strolling families and rollerbladers. Your route continues straight over on a wide downhill path. But first, just to the right is the *Bar and Kitchen* restaurant, nicely sited at the head of the lake.

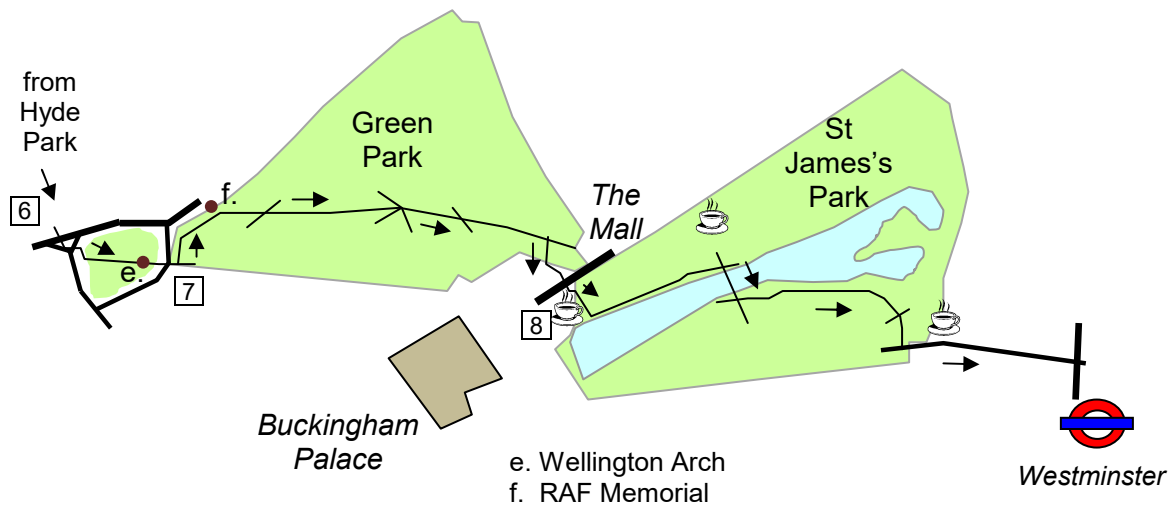


- 5 After a possible break for refreshments, take that wide path downhill to the **left** of the restaurant, avoiding the immediate right fork (which would take you round the other side of the lake). In 50m, turn **left** at the first junction. In 150m metal gates mark the entrance to the Rose Garden. People usually follow the best scents and seek out the most gorgeous blooms, depending on the time of year, so this is the place to relax and explore.

After the spacious greenery of the parks, the rose garden is the greatest little delight of this walk. It was opened in 1994. Seen from above, it is shaped like a horn sounding a person's arrival from the Grand Entrance, the flower beds shaping the flaring notes.

One excellent route is to turn **right** and follow the metal pergola all the way round. Aim for the fountain statue of *Diana the Huntress*, then, a fraction left, the *Dolphin Boy*. Eventually you will come out to the perimeter road. Leave the park by crossing over **right** and going through the rightmost of the three classic arches of the Grand Entrance; and out to busy Knights-bridge. On your left is *Apsley House*, previously home to the Duke of Wellington, known as "No. 1 London", now a public art gallery.

Part 2: Green Park and St James's Park



- 6** Cross straight over by the lights to a triangular traffic island and turn **left** over the road by more lights to the green space of Hyde Park Corner, which is full of monuments. *On the left a equestrian statue of the Duke Wellington (which originally stood on top of the triumphal arch). On your right is the Royal Artillery monument, further right the Australian war memorial, further left, looking like a bundle of metal girders, is the New Zealand war memorial. Walk under the Wellington Arch.*

The triumphal Wellington Arch supports Adrian Jones' statue of the Goddess of Victory, waving laurel and the olive leaves of peace, riding a Quadriga. For a small fee, you can climb stairs up to the viewing terrace.

Cross over the road by the lights into Green Park.

*Green Park is so called because it has no flowers, only mature trees. (Rumour has it that Queen Caroline espied King George II picking flowers for another lady and ordered the rest to be uprooted.) But in fact there **are** flowers: each March, a marvellous host of golden daffodils spring up along the St James side of the park. In medieval times you would be standing in a swampy burial ground for lepers. It was an isolated dark and gloomy place until John Nash, great regency architect of Regents Park, landscaped it in 1820.*

- 7** Immediately turn **left** in the park. Keep **right** by a line of columns to pass the RAF Bomber Command memorial.

This memorial honours the crews of the RAF Bomber Command in WW2 who undertook multiple long flights over well-defended enemy territory knowing that their average life expectancy was around eleven missions. The sculpture shows a flight crew as though just having left the aircraft. Churchill in his VE-day speech in 1945 did not mention Bomber Command despite describing them in 1940 as "the means of victory", a source of deep lasting unease in view of the impreciseness of high-altitude bombing with the inherent civilian casualties.

Immediately after the memorial, at a signpost, fork **right** as for St James's Park. (Straight ahead would take you to Green Park underground station.) After a 300m walk under trees, you arrive at a 6-point junction with a gaslamp in its centre. Take the **right** fork, i.e. the **third** path from your right. Keep straight ahead, over several crossings. To your right is Buckingham Palace,

which you could see close-up by taking any path to the right, although you will meet huge throngs of tourists. When you are only about 50m from the wall at the end of your path, look for a small info board which describes the *Royal Fireworks* which took place here in 1749. Immediately after the board, turn right on a rough grassy path to meet the balustrade that surrounds the Victoria Memorial. Keep **left**, following the balustrade round to meet the wide boulevard, **The Mall**. Cross it by the lights. Turn **left** briefly, then **right** downhill into St James's Park.

St James's Park is named after a medieval hospital which stood near here. It was originally marshland owned by Eton College until it was enclosed in the 1530s as a deer park for King Henry VIII. The lake began as a canal formed from the River Tyburn until John Nash reshaped it. It has an island at each end. The second island, which you will see later, is Duck Island which is also the home to a colony of pelicans; they were the gift of a Russian ambassador to King Charles II in 1664.

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You pass a small snack bar and reach the lake. Turn **left** on a path with the lake and its plenteous wildlife on your right. This is the most crowded section that you will see on this walk. After about 250m under trees and beside sloping lawns, turn **right** over the Blue Bridge. You have views right to Buckingham Palace and left to Duck Island, the Horse Guards, the London Eye and the Shard. Turn **left** on the other side of the lake. Soon on your left is Duck Island, now a small nature reserve for several wildfowl, including those pelicans. Near the end, at a 4-way crossing, go straight over, away from the lake, to reach a road, Birdcage Walk. Turn **left**, passing Storey's Gate coffee house and crossing Horse Guards Road. Ahead of you are the sights of Westminster, the Elizabeth Tower (housing Big Ben) and Westminster Abbey. Westminster Underground station is normally entered from the corner of Whitehall (Exit 6) but during 2025 and beyond it is being restored, so you need to cross over the Exit 5 on the other side.



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