

An Art Deco Society Self-Guided Walking Tour

London's West End



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#2

"EVERYTHING YOU COULD EVER WANT
FROM AN ALIEN MOVIE"

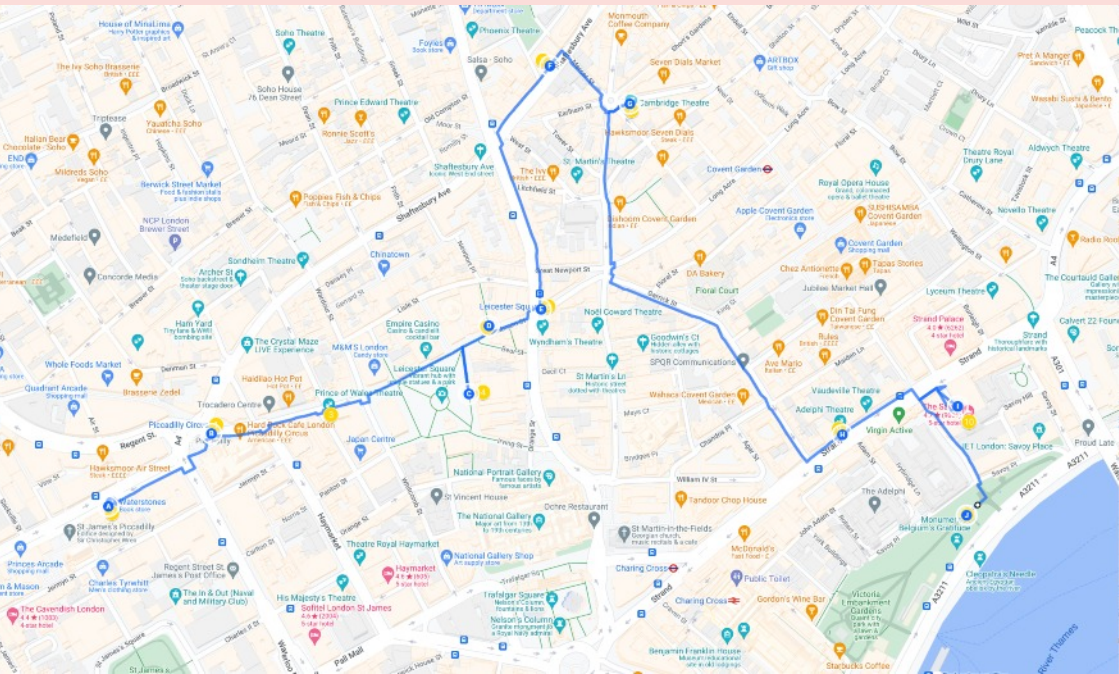
★★★★★ THE INDEPENDENT ★★★★★

London's West End

Welcome to the second self-guided walking tour from the Art Deco Society UK. This walk is approximately 2 miles long, and will take you on a route through some of London's most iconic areas; from Piccadilly, via Leicester Square and Covent Garden to The Strand, stopping at eleven Art Deco gems on the way. These are:

1. Piccadilly Circus Station
2. Simpson's Department Store (now Waterstones)
3. The Prince of Wales Theatre
4. Odeon Cinema, Leicester Square
5. Warner Brothers Theatre (now Vue)
6. Leicester Square Station
7. The Saville Theatre (now Odeon, Covent Garden)
8. The Cambridge Theatre
9. The Adelphi Theatre
10. The Savoy Hotel & Theatre
11. Shell Mex House

Clicking on the below map will take you to GoogleMaps where you can see the route more closely.



We start our tour at Piccadilly Circus Underground Station in the heart of London's West End. This can be reached on either the Bakerloo Line, or the Piccadilly Line.

1) Piccadilly Circus Station

Piccadilly Circus is a completely subterranean station with an elliptical ticket hall, and six points of access from street level. By the mid-nineteen twenties, the original 1906 Piccadilly Circus Station (designed by Leslie Green) was overcrowded and in need of enlargement. The design of the replacement was down to Charles Holden. The ticket hall was built as large as the foundations of neighbouring buildings would allow. To carry the weight of roads and traffic (9 feet or 2.74m above) a steel reinforced concrete roof, supported by seven columns in the centre, and a further fifty arranged as a colonnade around the perimeter, was installed. The ceiling was made from fibrous plaster secured to a separate frame and the walls were lined with travertine marble.

Within the ticket hall there are shop "showcases", telephone booths, and ticket machines along with retail zones and a world time clock. Construction work took four years, and the station opened on 10th December 1928. The booking hall was restored in 1989. The columns and light fittings are not original

Within the ticket hall is a memorial to London Transport's first chief executive Frank Pick, unveiled in 2016 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Pick's death in 1941.



Exit the station via the Piccadilly exit, although any of the exits will do if you'd like to admire this iconic part of London before proceeding. Walk south-west down Piccadilly about 150 meters to our next stop; Waterstones.

2) Former Simpson's Department Store

Waterstones Piccadilly was formerly Alexander Simpson and Company's department store, and when it opened in April 1936 was the largest menswear store in Britain. It was designed by Joseph Emberton, whilst many of its interior displays were designed by Laszlo Moholy-Nagi, a former Bauhaus man. Simpson and Moholy-Nagi were joined by Ashley Havingden who designed the logo, and produced advertising material for Simpson's DAKS trouser range. The building engineer was Felix Samuely, who used the same electrically welded steel framed technique he used on the Bexhill De La Warr Pavilion in 1935.



The ground floor concave windows were the first in the country. Inside, there is a Travertine marble staircase with a 90' chromium light fitting which was also designed by Emberton (it's well worth going in for a look!).



In the 1950's, scriptwriter Jeremy Lloyd was employed as an assistant, and later used his experience there as inspiration for the TV sit-com "Are You Being Served?".

In 1999 the building was sold to Waterstones Booksellers, who made it their flagship store. Today this is still a building that can be enjoyed inside and out. Look out for Joseph Emberton's name on the front of the building!

Head back to Piccadilly Circus, going straight across to Coventry Street. Walk up the street for about 150 meters to our next stop, The Prince of Wales Theatre.

3) The Prince of Wales Theatre

The first Theatre on this site opened in January 1884. Called The Prince's Theatre, it seated 960 people. It was renamed The Prince of Wales Theatre in October 1886, and was well known for its comic operas and musicals. In 1932 Charles Clore took control of the Theatre and he began staging lavish revues which became London's version of the 'Folies Bergere'. Although risqué for the time, they featured lavish costumes, dancers, singers, magicians, acrobats and elaborate sets. In 1935 Alfred Esdaile took over the theatre, and continued with these shows, which ran four times a day. Their success would provide the money to replace the aging building, which was demolished after a farewell gala performance in January 1937. The new theatre, designed by Robert Cromie seated 1,500, with bars convenient to all parts of the theatre, including an especially large one with shops and side shows attached to the stalls. Dressing rooms were provided with a barber's shop and manicurists. A revolving stage was fitted, but has since been removed. Gracie Fields laid the foundation stone on the 17th June 1937, and the new theatre opened on 27th October 1937.

The programme of 'Folie Bergere' revues continued, although Charlie Chaplin's film 'The Great Dictator' was shown in 1940.

In 2003 the Prince of Wales Theatre underwent a major restoration by the Delfont Mackintosh Group bringing it into the 21st Century with much improved facilities.



Continue along Coventry Street until you reach Leicester Square. You'll see our next location towering above the opposite side of the park as you approach. Walk through or around the square for a closer look.

4) ODEON Cinema, Leicester Square

This is the Odeon's flagship cinema, often used for red carpet film premiers. Completed in 1937, the design sprung from a unique arrangement between two architect practices. Harry Weedon's office worked in collaboration with Andrew Mather's to ensure that the design was truly a jewel in the company's crown. The structure took seven months to build and cost four times that of other Odeon cinemas built that year.

Dressed in polished black granite and outlined in neon, it is a Modernist building. A 120ft tower bears the ODEON name both vertically and horizontally overlapping at the letter O. The entrance originally featured etched glass doors depicting dancing figures and animals. The auditorium featured leopard skin print seats and giant stylised mouldings of flying ladies leaping in front of a sun.



In 1967 the cinema was updated and this included the removal of the entrance doors and the gutting of the interior, including the flying ladies, but in 1998 the building was renovated and the ladies reinstated.

The cinema was closed for much of 2018 for a multi-million pound modernisation of facilities, sound and audio equipment. Easier access to the smaller screens through the foyer made space for Oscar's Bar and Cafe. Odeon went to great lengths to reintroduce an Art-Deco theme, even fitting leopard print carpet in a nod to the original auditorium seating fabric.

Your next stop is very close, walk to the northern corner of Leicester Square and take a right on to Cranbourn Street. You'll see the VUE cinema just pasted the corner.

5. Former Warner Theatre facade

This site was originally home to Daily's Theatre which opened in 1893. It closed in 1937 and was purchased by Warner Brothers for demolition. The 1,789 seat Warner Theatre opened on 12th October 1938. The architects were Edward Albert Stone and Thomas R. Somerford. The frontage was faced with reconstructed marble, with a relief panel by sculptor Bainbridge Copnall depicting spirits of sight and sound. There is a large central tower bearing the Warner name. Many premiere's were held at this cinema throughout the 1960's.

The cinema closed on the 12th September 1991 and was demolished, leaving only the original 1937 facade. Nine new auditoriums were built with a seating capacity for 2,482 when it re-opened on 23rd September 1993. On 6th December 1996 it was renamed Warner Village Cinemas and in March 2004 it was taken over by Vue. It was refurbished during 2017.



Continue down Cranbourn Street to the junction with Charing Cross Road. Your next stop is on the corner to your right, but is perhaps best viewed across the junction from the opposite corner.



6. Leicester Square Station

The enlargement of Leicester Square Underground Station had been planned in 1923, however that had to wait until the success of other subterranean reconstructions on the Piccadilly Line in the early 1930's. Designed by Charles Holden, work commenced in May 1932, and it fully reopened on 4th May 1935. The 1906 station designed by Leslie Green was enlarged to serve the theatre district and new cinemas around Leicester Square itself. New entrances were built on the corner of Little Newport Street and Cranbourn Street and St. Martin's Court, set in front of a public house called the Scotch Stores, which was the first public house designed by Adams, Holden and Pearson. Built in Portland Stone it has a three-sided structure due to its location on a street corner. Large ceramic slabs lined the circular ticket hall, which was interspersed by shop kiosks for a chemist, fruiterer, two tobacconists, a confectioner and product showcases. The colour of the facade was described as 'new biscuit cream'. As part of modernization in 1985, the platforms were redecorated, and the Little Newport Street entrance closed in the late 1980's.

Head north up Charing Cross Road, away from Leicester Square Station, until you reach the junction with Shaftsbury Avenue. Turn right up the Avenue, your next stop is a short walk up on the left, at the junction of Stacey Street.

7. The Saville Theatre

Opened on 8th October 1931 as the Saville Theatre, it was designed by T.P. Bennett & Son with Bertie Crewe as the consulting architect. It had a seating capacity of 1,185 and had an orchestra stalls section below street level. The exterior has a bas-relief frieze by sculptor Gilbert Bayes, depicting 'Drama Through the Ages' with representations of 'St. Joan', 'Imperial Roman Triumphal Procession', 'Harlequinade' and 'War Plays'. At the time of opening it was very much a theatre, staging plays and musicals. In 1965 the theatre was leased to Brian Epstein (manager of The Beatles). Productions of plays continued weekdays, but Sunday concerts were introduced featuring the major rock artists of the day. The last production ended in 1970.

Associated British Cinemas purchased it as a West End showcase house for their films, reopening as the ABC Shaftesbury Avenue on 22nd December 1970. Despite its luxury it was never a success as it was just too far off Leicester Square.

It was later taken over by the Cannon Group, and then MGM, before being bought back by ABC in 1996, and finally sold to Odeon in 2000. Plans in 2019 were announced to convert the building into a hotel, which were dismissed. There is hope to return it to live theatre use.



Continuing up Shaftsbury Avenue, take the next right down Mercer Street. Walk down the street to the Historic Seven Dials junction. Our next location is directly opposite, on the corner of Mercer & Erham Streets.

8. The Cambridge Theatre

The Cambridge Theatre opened on 4th September 1930 with a seating capacity of 1,275. It was designed by Wimperis, Simpson and Guthrie, with interior design partly by Serge Chermayeff with bronze friezes by sculptor Anthony Gibbons Grinling. Amongst a number of notable shows during its history was the Bernard Shaw Rep Season in 1935, before showing films for a short time. *Billy Liar* opened in 1960, and *Tommy Steele's Half a Sixpence* in 1962. In 1967 The Cambridge became a cinema again for a short time.

In 1984 the theatre underwent a major conversion, reopening as London's first Magic Theatre, known as The Magic Castle. This enterprise closed a year later, and the theatre stood empty until 1986 when it was bought by Stoll Moss Theatres. It was once again refurbished and the interior restored to its 1930's splendour. Andrew Lloyd Weber acquired The Cambridge in 2000.



We have a half a mile walk to our next stop, on The Strand. Head off south down Monmouth Street (to your right when facing the Cambridge Theatre corner). Take the third left down Garrick Street. Continue along, Garrick Street will turn into Bedford Street, which will then intersect The Strand. Take a left to your next stop, The Adelphi (you may want to cross to view from the opposite side of the road).

9) The Adelphi Theatre

The Adelphi Theatre you see, is the fourth building of that name that has occupied the site since 1806. The current building was opened on 3rd December 1930 and was designed by Ernest Schaufelberg in full Art-Deco style. It has clean geometric lines with a complete absence of curves, both externally and internally. The Bioscope magazine reported under the heading "The Bizarre Adelphi - Unique Interior Treatment" that it strikes an entirely new and original note in London theatre construction. It also incorporated a "commodious projection room", and an electrically driven revolving stage. The Architects Journal made note of the absence of curves in its review with the title "Trigonometry in the Theatre". In order to keep the proposed opening date of the 24th November on schedule, the builders had to pay a penalty of £450.00 for every day they were late in handing over the theatre!



The front elevation is in contrasting shades of grey and black marble with cappings of copper. It re-opened as The Royal Adelphi, hosting comedy and musicals, a name which would last until 1940, when Royal was dropped. The Adelphi, along with several other nearby theatres, survived a proposed redevelopment of Covent Garden by the GLC in 1968. It was purchased and refurbished by Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group in 1993.



Continue walking north-east along The Strand, crossing to the opposite side to the Aedphi, if you haven't already. Enter Savoy Court on your right.

10) The Savoy Hotel & Theatre

The Savoy Hotel was the first purpose built deluxe hotel built in Britain when it opened on 6th August 1889. The Savoy's Art Deco style was introduced, when the iconic stainless steel sign over Savoy Court was erected in 1929, part of a remodelling by Easton and Robertson. The Jazz Age and the Savoy were made for each other, and they even published their own (now famous) Savoy Cocktail Book in 1930.

The Savoy Theatre is to the right of Savoy Court. This 'state of the art' theatre opened in 1881, and was the first public building to be lit entirely by electricity. After various changes of management, and several closures and re-openings, Rupert D'Oyly Carte (son of Richard) took over the management of the theatre in 1915, where he began seasons of Gilbert and Sullivan productions as well as a production of Treasure Island. It closed on in June 1929 when the interior was completely rebuilt, including a larger stage and increased seating capacity, reopening later the same year.

In February 1990 a fire gutted the building whilst it was being renovated. A proposal to build a new theatre was overruled by the insurers and by English Heritage, and it was decided to restore the building to its 1929 designs. It re-opened in July 1993.

For our final stop, we're going to head out of Savoy Court, briefly heading left, taking the first turning to your left - steps onto Carting Lane. As you head down the lane, the building to your right is the one we're interested in, but it's best viewed from a distance. Continue to the end, into Victoria Embankment Gardens. From here you should be able to see the giant clock of Shell Mex, through the trees. However, we'll head over the river next to admire from a distance.



11. Shell Mex House

In 1932 Royal Dutch Shell and British Petroleum merged to become Shell Mex and BP, and this was the chosen location of their new headquarters. The site chosen had been the Hotel Cecil, built in 1890-96 and had been a hugely popular location renowned for banqueting and was a great dancing hotspot. The hotel closed in February 1930 and was mostly demolished in sixteen weeks, although the facade in the Stand still exists today. The land was acquired by Shell Mex and architects Messers Joseph were contracted to design the building, with architect and artist Francis Milton Cashmore responsible for the ultimate design.

It was a Modernist eleven to fifteen storey building clad in Portland Stone, crowned with a clock tower (the largest in London in fact, bigger than 'Big Ben'!). The tower allowed the architect to overcome the City's height restrictions on such buildings, because the tower was for decorative purposes and not office space. The building is 58 metres high. It opened on 25th January 1933.

The clock was manufactured by Gillett & Johnson of Croydon, and was 7.62 metres in diameter. Either side of the clock is a pair of marble figures by sculptor William Charles Holland King. Shell Mex and BP separated in 1976, with Shell Mex retaining ownership of the building until the 1990's. Since then it has changed hands several times and is currently in the ownership of the German Conley family.

Walk down through the gardens to the southern exit by Embankment Station. This is the end of the tour, but we would highly recommend crossing the Thames along the Golden Jubilee Bridge to the South Bank. Here you can not only get a better look at Shell Mex across the river, but also explore the Festival Theatre, one of London's most celebrated early post-war buildings from 1951. The South Bank also has much to enjoy including the BFI, Hayward Gallery and National Theatre.



We hope you have enjoyed this little tour around London's West End.

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Regarding the use of mobile phones in London whilst on the tour, please be aware to the potential of phone thefts, and to be vigilant at all times.

The words for this guide were written by Paul Smith, and formatted for the Art Deco Society UK by Philip Butler. The images were largely taken by Philip's, but it also features a few by others under a creative commons licence.

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