



LONDON'S SECRETS: BIZARRE & CURIOUS

A Guide to Over 300
of the City's
Strangest Sights

Graeme Chesters

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Arab Hall, Leighton House



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Last, but not least, a special thank you to the many photographers – the unsung heroes – whose beautiful images add colour and bring London to life.

NOTE

Before visiting anywhere without unrestricted access it's advisable to check the opening times, which are liable to change without notice.

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Murals from the tomb of Nebamun, British Museum

Readers' Guide

The notes below refer to the general information provided (in a panel after the header) for each entry:

- **Address:** Includes the telephone number and website (where applicable). You can enter the postcode to display a map of the location on Google and other map sites. If you're driving you can enter the postcode into your satnav.
- **Opening hours (where applicable):** These can change at short notice, so confirm by telephone or check the website before travelling. Note that the last entry to attractions is usually at least 30 minutes before the closing time. Some venues close periodically for private or official events.
- **Cost:** Liable to change. Many attractions – such as national museums and galleries – offer free entry. Ask about concessions and family rates if not indicated. Many museums have lower fees for groups, either per head or a fixed rate. Major attractions allow you to buy tickets online, thus circumventing queues, and prices may also be slightly lower.
- **Transport:** The nearest tube or rail station(s) is listed, although in some cases it may involve a lengthy walk. You can also travel to most venues by bus and to some by river ferry. Some places are best reached by car, although parking can be difficult or impossible in many areas. Most venues don't provide parking, particularly in central London, and even parking nearby can be a problem (and very expensive). If you need to travel by car, check the parking facilities in advance.
- **Allow:** The time required to see attractions varies considerably, from less than an hour for a small gallery to a number of days for national museums. If your time is limited it's advisable to check the website and decide what you most want to see. Don't forget to allow time for travelling, coffee/tea breaks and lunch.

Disabled Access

Many historic public and private buildings don't provide wheelchair access or provide wheelchair access to the ground floor only. Wheelchairs are provided at some venues, although users may need assistance. Most museums, galleries and public buildings have a WC, although it may not be wheelchair accessible. Contact venues directly if you have specific requirements. The Disabled Go website (disabledgo.com) provides more in-depth access information for many destinations.



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Introduction

Researching and writing this book has been a pleasure and an education. Despite having lived in northwest, central and southeast London at various times, and happily potted around the city for many years, I now realise how much I had (and still have) to learn, and how many unusual delights London has to offer. Not only had I failed to visit many of the over 300 places included in this book, I hadn't even heard of some of them.

London is a city with a cornucopia of bizarre and curious places and stories, being ancient, vast and in a constant state of flux. Newcomers have, of course, a wealth of world-famous attractions to keep them occupied for a month of Sundays, which are more than adequately covered in a plethora of standard guidebooks. What *London's Secrets: Bizarre & Curious* does is take you off the beaten path to seek out the more unusual places that often fail to register on the radar of both visitors and residents alike. It also highlights unexpected and often overlooked aspects and attractions of some of London's more famous tourist sites.

London's Secrets: Bizarre & Curious includes some of the city's most unusual buildings, striking public artworks, outrageous museum and gallery exhibits, hauntings (including by animals), legends and much more. The entries range from Britain's oldest door to the beginning of body-snatching, from dummy house façades to London's unluckiest spot, from a legal brothel to the capital's most haunted theatre, and from the original skull and crossbones to what has a strong claim to be London's campest statue.

Although this book isn't intended as a walking guide, many of the places covered are close to each other in central London – notably in the hubs of Westminster and the City – where you can easily stroll between them, while others are further out in the suburbs. However, all are close to public transport links and relatively easy to get to. And, conveniently for a city with a (largely unfounded) reputation for rain – London actually enjoys a lower annual rainfall than New York, Rome or Sydney – many of the attractions are indoors, meaning you can visit them whatever the weather.

So there's no excuse for not getting out and exploring. I hope you enjoy discovering the bizarre and curious secrets of London as much as I did.

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CENTRAL LONDON



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THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Address: Great Russell Street, WC1B 3DG (020-7323 8181, britishmuseum.org).

Opening hours: Daily, 10am-5.30pm, but Fri, to 8.30pm.

Transport: Russell Sq or Tottenham Court Rd tube.

With a collection of over 8m items, the British Museum has more than its fair share of 'bizarre and curious' exhibits. The following are a few of my favourites:



Lindow Man: This is the name given to the remarkably well-preserved remains of a man who met his death at Lindow Moss bog in Cheshire in the 1st century AD and was discovered by peat cutters some two millennia later in 1984.

The body has been extensively studied and it's known that he met a violent, unpleasant death: he was struck twice on the head with a heavy object and received a hard blow to his back, which broke a rib. A thin cord tied around his neck was probably used to strangle him and break his neck; once dead, his throat was cut and he was put face down in the bog. His death is thought to have been a ritual sacrifice.

The peat bog's acidic, oxygen-free conditions meant that Lindow Man's skin, hair and many of his internal organs were well preserved, although they gave him the appearance of having been pickled in tea.

Phallic Wind Chime: Also from the 1st century AD, this Roman wind chime is made of bronze and depicts a winged penis, from which five bells hang. Such chimes were hung in gardens and porches where they would tinkle in the wind – the sound was thought to ward off evil spirits – and bell chimes were often combined with a phallus, as the latter was viewed as a charm against evil and a symbol of good fortune.

To modern eyes, the wind chime is a challenging object, shocking and offensive to some. However, sexual and naked images were common in the



Greek and Roman worlds – neither of which was much influenced by the reservations and taboos of the Judaeo-Christian tradition – and it wasn't uncommon to see a phallus portrayed in paintings, jewellery and even furniture.

Warren Cup: This Roman silver cup originated near Jerusalem and dates from AD5-15, although it's named after a former owner, Edward Perry Warren (1860-1928). The images it carries will be even more upsetting to some people than the phallic wind chime above. One side of the cup shows two youths having sex, while the other displays a young man lowering himself onto the lap of an older, bearded man, while a slave boy looks on voyeuristically from behind a door.

Representations of sex acts are common in Roman art, on glass, pottery, terracotta lamps and wall paintings, in both private and public



Following Warren's death, the cup remained in private hands for many years and was only exhibited in public for the first time in the '80s, when social attitudes softened; it's had a permanent home at the British Museum since 1999.

buildings. The Romans had no concept of – or word for – homosexuality. And for their mentors, the Greeks, the partnering of an older man with a youth was an accepted part of education.



2 THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

Address: SW1A 0AA (020-7219 4272, parliament.uk).

Opening hours: Tours (75mins) for UK residents can be arranged through your MP and take place on Mon-Wed and Fri; the exact days and hours vary, so check the website. For all residents – UK and foreign – tours also take place on Saturday throughout much of the year, and Tue-Sat during the summer. Book by telephone (0844-847 1672) or you can buy tickets from the office near the Jewel Tower.

Cost: Free for UK residents if arranged through their MP or a Member of the Lords. Saturday and summer tours: adult, £16.50; concession, £14; children 5-15, £7; under-5s, free.

Transport: Westminster tube.

The Houses of Parliament – or Palace of Westminster – are home to Britain's two Parliamentary Houses, the Lords and the Commons. They have a number of curiosities and quirks, including the following:

MPs' White Powder: A filled, communal snuffbox sits by the front door of the Commons. There's been one here since 1693, when smoking was disallowed in the Commons Chamber – a decision that was around three centuries ahead of its time – and snuff was offered to MPs instead. The current wooden snuffbox is a replacement after a World War II air-raid destroyed the silver original.

Remarkable Foresight:

Westminster Hall is Parliament's oldest building and almost the only part of the ancient Palace of Westminster to survive in (almost) original form. It was built at the end of the 11th century,

The flamboyant, late Conservative MP Sir Nicholas Fairbairn is thought to have been one of the last Members to be a regular snuff user.



while its magnificent hammerbeam roof was commissioned in 1393 by Richard II. The roof measures 68 by 240ft and is the largest medieval timber roof in northern Europe.

When the roof was restored in 1913, several large timbers needed renewing. However, officials struggled to find oaks old and thus large enough, as many of the country's aged trees had been cut down. A bright spark decided to check where the original timbers had come from and it turned out that when they'd been cut in the 14th century from an estate near Wadhurst in Sussex, the estate's owners had realised that more timber would be needed for future repairs and planted a stand of oaks specifically for the purpose. These were ready by the early 20th century (520 years later) and were used in the restoration.

Taxi-lamp: On the top of a lamp standard outside Parliament on Parliament Square is a four-sided lamp bearing the word 'Taxi' on each of its panes of amber glass. This is the House of Commons Taxi-lamp – a light

flashes on and off when an MP wants a taxi, thereby alerting passing drivers. It's clearly unacceptable for MPs to have to hail a cab on the street like the rest of us.

Toe the Line:

There are two sets of benches in the Commons Chamber. The Government sits on benches to the Speaker's right, while the Opposition occupies the benches to the Speaker's left. The red lines on the green carpet in front of the two sets of benches are two sword-lengths and one foot apart, a throwback to the days when Members might have been tempted to settle disputes with swords.

Members still aren't allowed to cross the red lines during debates, and this is the origin of the expression 'toeing the line'.



3 THE SAVOY HOTEL

Address: Savoy Court, WC2R 0EU (020-7836 4343, fairmont.com/savoy-london).

Transport: Embankment tube.



It's often said that Savoy Court is the only place in London where you must drive on the right, but that's not the case: at Hammersmith bus station, the entrance and exit also force drivers on to the right side of the road.

cab drivers to reach out of the driver's door window to open the passenger's door (which opened backwards, having a handle at the front), without having to get out of the cab himself, and/or because the hotel's front doors are on the right of the street. Other people think the explanation is more prosaic: to prevent cars that are dropping people off or picking them up at the neighbouring Savoy Theatre from blocking the hotel's entrance.

Kaspar the Lucky Cat: The Savoy is the proud owner of a 3ft Art Deco black cat called Kaspar. It was specially

The Savoy is probably London's most famous hotel. It was built in 1889 by the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte with the profits he made from staging Gilbert and Sullivan productions. It's long been a favourite with the glamorous and wealthy, and has a couple of notable oddities:

Driving Rules: Britain drives on the left-hand side of the road, but a Special Act of Parliament from 1902 requires traffic to drive on the right when entering Savoy Court from the Strand. For over a century, this has applied to all vehicles, be they horse-drawn or mechanical, and various explanations have been proposed for the anomaly.

It's said by some to be the result of the habit of the era's Hackney Carriage



commissioned in 1926 from Basil Ionides (1884–1950), an architect most famous for his 1929 redesign of the rebuilt Savoy Theatre. The cat is used as an extra guest when 13 dine at the hotel, to avoid the bad luck associated with that number; he's given a full place setting, has a napkin tied around his neck and is served each course. Otherwise, the cat sits in his own display case in the hotel's entrance hall.

This tradition dates back to 1898 when Woolf Joel, a South African diamond magnate, held a dinner at the Savoy. Due to a last-minute cancellation, only 13 people dined, which one of the guests deemed to be unlucky. He also claimed that the first person to leave the dinner would be the first to die. Woolf Joel laughed this off and, indeed, was the first to leave the table. A few weeks later, he was shot dead in his Johannesburg office.

Anxious that this wouldn't be repeated and worried about its reputation, the Savoy provided a member of staff to sit at tables of 13



Kaspar

for some years afterwards. However, this proved unpopular with guests, who often didn't want a stranger in their midst listening to their business, so a new solution was found: Kaspar the cat.

Over the years, a number of the Savoy's famous patrons have become fond of Kaspar, including Winston Churchill, who frequently took his Cabinet to lunch at the hotel.

