



## A city within a city

Discover how South Kensington became the cultural heart of London

Time: 60 mins

Distance: 1 mile

Landscape: urban

Shining monuments, grand museums and curious corners - South Kensington boasts some of Britain's most famous landmarks and visitor attractions. Recent statistics suggest more people visit this area each year than Venice!

But just over just 150 years ago this unique part of London was made up of fields and market gardens.

This trail explores the hidden stories of a seemingly well-trodden path. Uncover how one of London's most iconic neighbourhoods has grown and how it gained the nickname 'Albertopolis'...

### Location:

South Kensington, London

### Start:

The Albert Memorial,  
Kensington Gardens, SW7 2AP

### Finish:

The Royal Albert Hall,  
Kensington Gore, SW7 2AP

### Grid reference:

TQ 26588 79694

### Keep an eye out for:

The slope of Exhibition Road - the street lies upon a terrace of the River Thames

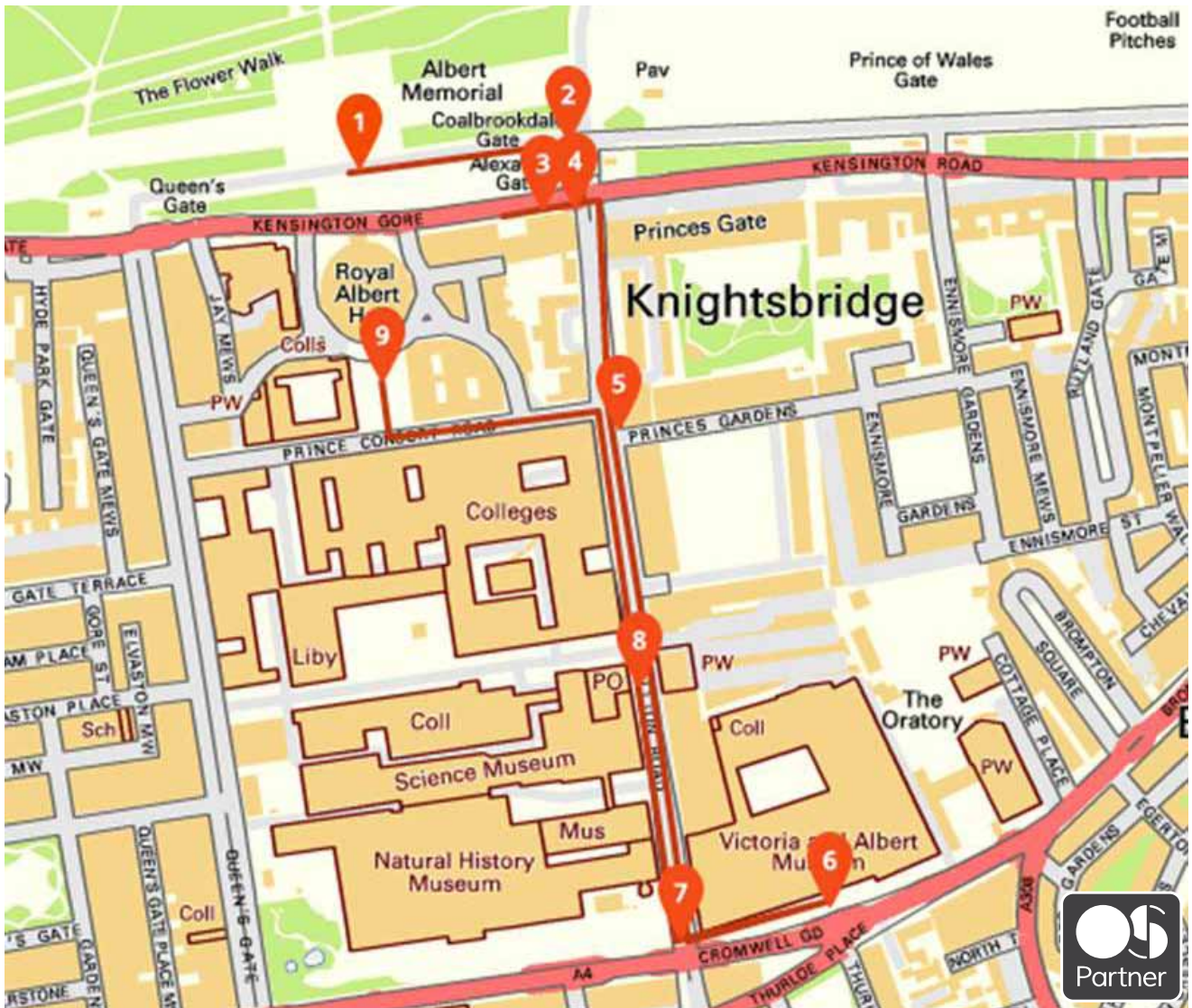
## Thank you!



This short trail is based upon a longer walk created by **Mike Jackson** and **Gary Gray**. Both Gary and Mike are Fellows of The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). If you enjoy this trail, try the longer walk - also on the Discovering Britain website



## Route and stopping points



- 01 Albert Memorial, Kensington Gardens
- 02 Coalbrookdale Gate, Kensington Gardens
- 03 Lowther Lodge, 1 Kensington Gore
- 04 RGS statues, Kensington Gore and Exhibition Road
- 05 Imperial College, Exhibition Road
- 06 Victoria & Albert Museum, Cromwell Road
- 07 Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road
- 08 Science Museum, Exhibition Road
- 09 Royal Albert Hall, Kensington Gore

## 01 Albert Memorial, Kensington Gardens

This magnificent memorial is to Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria. His ideas gave birth to a whole new area of the city - and this is where this area's nickname 'Albertopolis' comes from.

Unlike the Queen, Prince Albert didn't have any official powers but he was actively involved in issues of the day; education reform, abolition of slavery, and promoting the arts and sciences. One of his public roles was President of The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (or RSA for short!). In this role, Albert aimed to create a new cultural area of London.

When Albert died in 1861, aged just 42, Queen Victoria commissioned this enormous memorial to him. It was designed by one of the most influential architects of the day, George Gilbert Scott. The Memorial took over 10 years to complete. Start to look closely you can see why!

The memorial is full of details that celebrate Prince Albert as a patron of the Arts and Sciences. He's surrounded by statues that represent Victorian industries, including agriculture, commerce, engineering and manufacturing.

Immediately below the gold statue of Albert himself is a procession of people. Called the 'Frieze of Parnassus', it features 169 composers, architects, poets, painters and sculptors. The frieze is named after a mountain in Greece said to be where the Muses lived. The Muses inspired creativity and are the origin of the word 'museum'.

Take time to explore the statues. As well as the frieze, the four large sculptures at the corner railings represent the four corners of the British Empire. Look for an elephant for Asia, a bull for Europe, a camel for Africa, and a bison for the Americas.

### Directions

With the Memorial on your left, continue along the wide path to the large metal gates beside the road. Take care here as cyclists use this gate to enter / exit the park. Stop in front of the gates.

## 02 Coalbrookdale Gate, Kensington Gardens

Crouch down and look carefully at the bottom of the main pillars. A small plaque on them tells us these gates were made by the Coalbrookdale Company for the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Great Exhibition, or 'The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations', was Albert's brainchild. It was a world fair staged to display the wonders of industry and manufacturing.

The Exhibition took place beyond these gates and across the road in Hyde Park. It was held in a magnificent building designed by Sir Joseph Paxton. Made from a cast-iron frame and large pieces of glass, it was rather like a giant conservatory. Punch magazine called the building 'the Crystal Palace' and the name stuck. When the Great Exhibition closed, the building was taken down and rebuilt on Sydenham Hill in south-east London. That area has been known as Crystal Palace ever since.

If the outside was spectacular, the inside was incredible too. There were over 100,000 exhibits from 50 different nations and 39 colonies. Displays included steam engines, diamonds, furniture made from coal, a voting machine and a barometer that ran on leeches! Novelist Charlotte Brontë summed up the wonder many visitors felt: "it seems as if only magic could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the earth".

The exhibition ran for six months and an incredible six million people saw it. In a new concept for the time, visitors paid an entrance fee. For the first three weeks this was five shillings (approximately 45p in today's money) reduced to one shilling thereafter. The organisers made a large profit and used the



money to buy 86 acres of semi-rural land south of Hyde Park. Centred on Exhibition Road, this area was developed for the educational and cultural institutions we can see today.

#### Directions

Go through the gates and turn right to the junction. This junction is very busy so take care and wait for the pedestrian lights to cross. With the park behind you, cross over then turn right along Kensington Gore. Stop by a set of railings outside a red-brick building set back from the road.

### 03 Lowther Lodge, 1 Kensington Gore

Since 1913 this building has been home to the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers). The building itself, Lowther Lodge, is slightly older. It is named after Lord (William) and Lady (Charlotte Alice) Lowther, who bought the site in 1870. Look up above the top windows and you can see their initials in the brickwork.

William Lowther was an MP and diplomat. He and Charlotte Alice were a wealthy couple. They used this plot of land to create what was then a country house perched on the edge of London. Imagine having such a grand home overlooking Hyde Park!

The Lowthers commissioned the most outstanding domestic architect of the time to build it - Norman Shaw. Lowther Lodge is one of London's finest examples of 'Queen Anne' style architecture. Look for characteristic red brick, towering chimney stacks and a sunflower motif.

The RGS-IBG moved in after William Lowther died. The Society's roots date back to 1830, when the Geographical Society of London was founded to promote the advancement of geographical science. Today the RGS-IBG is a learned society that promotes research, education, fieldwork and expeditions. It aims to bring geography alive through a wide range of programmes, including Discovering Britain.

#### Directions

Retrace your steps back to the top of Exhibition Road. Stay on the same side of the junction and stop by the corner building with two statues on the walls.

### 04 Royal Geographical Society statues, Exhibition Road and Kensington Gore

We are now beside the RGS-IBG theatre, added to Lowther Lodge in 1929. Look up and you'll see two statues on different sides of the building.

On the right, facing the park, is David Livingstone. A Scottish missionary who mapped much of Africa, he was the first European to record the Victoria Falls in Zambia and Zimbabwe. But Livingstone is perhaps most famous for disappearing. At one point he lost contact with the outside world for six years. In 1871 a newspaper sent a journalist, Henry Morton Stanley, to find him as a publicity stunt. Against the odds, Stanley succeeded. He tracked Livingstone down in Tanzania, greeting him with the now famous question "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?"

Around the corner, on Exhibition Road, is a statue of the Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton. Between 1901 and 1909 Shackleton travelled on three expeditions to the South Pole. He then tried to cross the Antarctic continent. During the journey his ship, the Endurance, became trapped in ice and eventually sank. The men slept on the freezing ice for two months. In a dramatic fight for survival, Shackleton and a few of his crew managed to find help by rowing a lifeboat across the Atlantic Ocean to South Georgia - a journey of almost 800 miles. This feat of personal endurance meant all the men survived.

Because of these two statues and the places these men explored – tropical Africa and the chilly South Pole – this junction has a unique nickname. Ask a Black Cab driver and you may hear them call it ‘Hot and Cold Corner’!

#### Directions

Use the traffic lights to cross over to the other side of Exhibition Road. Turn right and follow Exhibition Road past the modern entrance of the RGS. Stop when you reach a roundabout.

### 05 Imperial College, Exhibition Road

From the roundabout, look to the right. Across the road we can see two very different buildings. On the right is the grandiose, grey columned Royal School of Mines, built in 1913. Beyond it to the left is the shimmering glass front of Imperial College Business School, completed almost a century later in 2009.

Though contrasting in style, both buildings are owned by Imperial College London, one of the largest landowners in Albertopolis. Imperial College has its origins in 1851, the same year as the Great Exhibition. This is no coincidence. After the Exhibition, the government founded its first ever technical higher education establishment here – the Museum of Practical Geology.

Imperial was founded after this Museum merged with a series of others. The College’s long heritage and varied buildings still shape the area. The College now has about 13,500 full-time students and 3,330 academic and research staff based throughout Albertopolis.

#### Directions

Continue all the way down Exhibition Road. At the end turn left then stop when you are outside the grand entrance to the Victoria & Albert Museum.

### 06 Victoria & Albert Museum, Cromwell Road

The Victoria & Albert Museum reveals what happened to the Great Exhibition’s profits. The Exhibition organisers used their newly-bought 86 acres of land to a brand new permanent museum. So although the ‘Crystal Palace’ was packed up and moved, many of the exhibits stayed here in South Kensington.

Looking up at the grand entrance, it is hard to believe that this museum ever looked any different. But when ‘the South Kensington Museum’ was first constructed, part of it was a shed clad in sheets of corrugated iron. The ugly structure was soon mockingly called the ‘Brompton Boilers’.

In 1899 Queen Victoria laid the foundation stone for a range of new buildings to replace the boilers and decreed the site be renamed the Victoria & Albert Museum. Look closely and you can find statues of both Queen Victoria and Prince Albert above the doorway here.

The museum is still evolving. On Exhibition Road the large square with tall columns is the Museum’s new entrance, opened in 2017. The columns were originally built to hide the boilers from the road!

#### Directions

With the V&A on your right, walk back to the bottom of Exhibition Road. Use the pedestrian crossing to cross over then turn right. After a short distance, stand by the railings overlooking the Natural History Museum.

## 07 Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road

The origins of the Natural History Museum go back to 1753. This was when Sir Hans Sloane left his large collection of 'natural curiosities' to the nation. Sloane was a local landowner and many streets around here are still named after him, including Sloane Square, Sloane Street and Hans Crescent.

As the nation's natural history collection grew (including specimens from Captain James Cook's voyages to Australia and New Zealand in the late eighteenth century) a new home was needed for them. The Natural History Museum opened its doors to the public on Easter Monday 1881.

Look carefully at the rounded windows on the second floor. They are decorated with sculptures of plants and animals. Extinct species are placed to the east (nearest to Exhibition Road) and the living to the west. Since it opened there have no doubt been some unfortunate changes in how many still fall into the 'living' category.

On our way to the next stop, look carefully at the building fronts on both sides of the street. Can you spot various holes and marks in the stone? These were caused during the Second World War when a double bomb exploded in Exhibition Road. The V&A's windows and glass roof were knocked out, leaving exhibits exposed to the elements for several days. On this side, the Geological Survey Museum (now part of the Natural History Museum) shows similar shrapnel damage.

### Directions

With the Natural History Museum on your left, head back up Exhibition Road. Stop when you reach the entrance to the Science Museum.

## 08 Science Museum, Exhibition Road

After the Victoria & Albert Museum was built, its collection kept expanding. So it was decided to separate the arts and science collections. Arts exhibits would stay in the V&A while a new museum would be made for the science exhibits. In 1913 work began and the Science Museum opened in 1928.

By this time many of the Victorian innovations of the Industrial Revolution had become outdated. Many famous examples fell into neglect, including early boilers, water pumps, mining equipment and steam engines. Some were carefully rescued and added to the Science Museum collection.

The Science Museum gives visitors a unique glimpse into our technological past but it also keeps up to date with developments in science, technology and industry.

The Museum also completes the trio of world-renowned museums alongside this one street. Their presence and the other organisations nearby highlight why this is one of the richest cultural areas in the world!

### Directions

Continue up Exhibition Road until you pass the Imperial College Business School. At the roundabout, turn left into Prince Consort Road. Cross over at the zebra crossing outside the steps to the Royal Albert Hall and go up the first sets of steps. Stop facing the statue of Prince Albert.

## 09 Royal Albert Hall, Kensington Gore

What better place to finish our trail than at the Royal Albert Hall? This building at the heart of Albertopolis was fundamental to Prince Albert's vision for this area.

Opened in 1871, a decade after Albert's death, Queen Victoria named it the Royal Albert Hall of Arts and Sciences in his honour. Look up towards the roof for a band of writing. It begins: 'This hall was erected for the advancement of the arts and sciences and works of industry of all nations in fulfilment of the intention of Albert Prince Consort'.

Below this is a frieze called 'The Triumph of Arts and Sciences'. It shows different industries of the time, including Astronomy and Navigation, Music, Sculpture and Agriculture. See which ones you can spot.

Today the Hall is probably best known as a music venue. But its fame came despite acoustic problems in its early years. The building's curved walls and domed roof created a serious echo. A popular joke claimed that the Royal Albert Hall was the only place where a composer could be sure of hearing their work twice! The echo was eventually fixed by fitting mushroom-shaped deflectors inside the roof.

We hope you've enjoyed this short trail around Albertopolis. Along the way we explored how the vision of Prince Albert transformed this area south of Hyde Park from a rural backwater to the centre of London's cultural quarter. Over 150 years later his legacy is still alive and well.

But there are even more stories to tell about 'Albertopolis' - including ambassadors, artists, US Presidents, Christmas cards, a giant egg, and lost cases of wine! You can discover more about the area by trying out the longer Albertopolis walk on the Discovering Britain website.

 **Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**