



Viewpoint

Mind the gap



Time: 15 mins

Region: Greater London

Landscape: urban



Location:
23-24 Leinster Gardens,
Bayswater, London W2 3TS

Grid reference:
TQ 26140 80868

Keep an eye out for:
Nearby embassy buildings with flags outside –
which countries can you spot?

Hyde Park is surrounded by grand Georgian terraces. Seen from the air, these rows of elegant white facades look like ribs in a giant skeleton. At first glance Leinster Gardens is a typical example. But the two houses behind the pair of tall trees are not what they seem.

Look carefully and compare them to the buildings on either side. You'll soon spot some things missing.

The windows are painted - there's no glass, curtains or rooms behind. The doors have no letterboxes, handles or numbers. The whole building fronts are false.

Why does this London terrace include two fake houses?



Look along the terrace and at the surrounding streets. Notice the two false buildings preserve the area's appearance. Without them there would be an ugly gap in the middle of the row.

If houses were burnt down or bomb damaged, the gap would probably be filled by new buildings. These fake fronts suggest that they hide something. The answer is - literally - underground. Listen carefully and you may be able to hear it.

Below our feet is part of the London Underground. Today this stretch is where the District and Circle lines run between Paddington and Bayswater. Built in 1868 it's one of the oldest parts of the Tube network. To make way for the tracks, two houses in this terrace were demolished.

Locals agreed to the development on condition that the landscape wasn't spoilt. So what we can see is a 5-foot thick concrete wall, moulded and painted to match the rest of the terrace and hide the Tube line. A pair of trees - which would block out any light if you lived upstairs - aids the disguise.

Smoke and mirrors

Though the false buildings are decorative, the space behind them had a practical use. If you go around the block, you will reach a high brick wall on Porchester Terrace. If you can see over the top, all is revealed.

The view is a bit like being behind the scenes of a film set. The concrete façade stands above the railway tracks, while girders brace the real buildings from falling onto the trains below.

This small bit of railway was left uncovered because before the 1900s, the Underground used steam engines. To reduce smoke building up in the carriages, open-air gaps in the tunnels allowed engines to let off steam. If you spot gaps like this next time you're on the Tube, you're travelling on an older line.

Rock bottom

The first Tube lines were built using a rolling 'cut and cover' system. Workers dug a trench, placed the tracks in the bottom and then covered them up in sections. This method was fast and reduced disruption. It also made the most of London's soil.

North of the Thames, the dominant soil is clay. London Clay is soft and holds water, making it easy to tunnel through. South London meanwhile has large amounts of chalk and gravel.



These soils are tougher, with greater risk of collapse and leaks. This is why of the 270 Tube stations in use today, less than 10 per cent are south of the river.