

Out&About History Daytripper

Chelsea

BY JULIAN HUMPHRYS



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1. The Royal Hospital

The home of the famous scarlet coated Chelsea Pensioners, the Royal Hospital was founded in 1682 by Charles II “as a place of refuge and shelter for such land soldiers as are or shall be old, lame or infirm in the service of the Crown”. It’s a role it still performs as home to over 300 pensioners. The oldest part of the hospital – the brick buildings around Grinling Gibbons’ statue of the founder – were designed by Christopher Wren. There’s a museum and the courts are normally open to visitors before and after lunch.

2. Albert Bridge

Opened in 1873, the Royal Albert Suspension Bridge, to use its full name, has always been rather frail and wobbly. Notices on its old toll booths instruct troops to “break step” while crossing it, and it is currently closed to vehicles while repairs are carried out. In the 1950s Sir John Betjeman led a successful campaign against its demolition, describing it as “one of the beauties of the London river”. It was given its largely pink colour scheme in 1992 in a bid to make it more visible to shipping, and is illuminated at night by 4,000 light bulbs.

3. Royal Avenue

The fictional home of James Bond, this elegant but rather short avenue was laid out in the 1690s as part of a proposed carriageway linking the Royal Hospital with Kensington Palace. It got no further than the King’s Road which, as the name suggests, was originally a private road reserved for royalty. Until 1830 you needed a special token to use it.

4. Chelsea Old Church

An air raid in April 1941 ensured that most of Chelsea Old Church is in fact new. The bombs left the church in ruins, to be rebuilt after the war. However the chapel commissioned by Sir Thomas More as a place of private prayer survived the bombing. Henry VIII is reputed to have married Jane Seymour here in advance of the state ceremony.

5. Sloane Square

Sloane Square tube station and the adjacent Royal Court Theatre were originally built in the late 19th century. In

1940 they were severely damaged in an air raid that killed 79 passengers on a train in the station. Both were rebuilt in the 1950s but the station’s glass roof was never replaced. The theatre has a tradition of staging new plays by new writers; John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* premiered here in May 1956. On the other side of the square, the glass-fronted modern movement facade of the Peter Jones department store was built in the mid-1930s to designs by William Crabtree.

6. The National Army Museum

Don’t be put off by the brutal late Sixties exterior – admission is free and the extensive displays are both innovative and engaging. The museum tells the story of Britain’s armies and soldiers from Agincourt to Afghanistan and combines hands-on displays with some truly iconic objects: a huge 19th-century model of the battle of Waterloo; the order that launched the Charge of the Light Brigade; a 1918 signboard from Hellfire Corner outside Ypres and numerous Victoria Crosses.

7. Carlyle’s House, 24 Cheyne Row

The great Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle and his wife, Jane, moved into this Queen Anne house in 1834. After Jane’s death in 1866 Carlyle continued to live here and died in its drawing room in 1881. Carlyle could not abide noise (especially from the cockerels in the next-door garden) and worked in a specially-soundproofed study. Now owned by the National Trust, the house is very much as it was when the Carlyles lived here

8. Chelsea Physic Garden

The physic garden was established in 1673 by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries to train apprentices how to identify plants. After Oxford University’s botanic garden, it is Britain’s oldest. Near the statue of Dr Hans Sloane, who leased the site to the Apothecaries in perpetuity for a nominal rent, is the oldest man-made rock garden in Europe. The rocks include pieces of carved stone that were once part of the Tower of London.

Information

Royal Hospital: Tel 0207 7881 5200, www.chelsea-pensioners.co.uk

National Army Museum: Tel 0207 730 0717, www.nam.ac.uk

Chelsea Physic Garden: Tel 0207 352 5646 x228
www.chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk

Carlyle’s House: Tel 0207 352 7087, www.nationaltrust.org.uk