

Star-Telegram



Kensington Palace, the royal residence of Prince William and his family, also serves as a museum. It's most popular exhibit: "Diana: Her Fashion Story." - mychadre77/iStock/Getty Images

As London gears up for royal wedding, a look at three villages that helped define it

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Like most cities, London consists of villages that gradually coalesced into towns and then reached critical mass. Unlike most cities, London's villages have cool, evocative names — Spitalfields, Knightsbridge, Shepherd's Bush and so on.

But have they kept their charm, too? I thought it might be fun, prior to the invasion for Harry and Meghan's wedding next month, to check out three villages and see what remained from centuries past of butchers, bakers and candlestick makers.

Choosing my targets with scientific precision (I liked their fancy names and reputations for the high life), I selected Bloomsbury, Marylebone and South Kensington, then saddled up to explore their distinctive contributions to London's character.

Bloomsbury: A Literary Time Machine

If Bloomsbury were a person, it'd be the slightly boozy, attic-living uncle weaving among its more proper, tut-tutting relations, the larger villages of Mayfair and Holborn. Sleepily nestled amid numerous green parks and Edwardian buildings, Bloomsbury is known as an arts, education and medicine center and is home to the University of London, the British Museum and oodles of quaint bookstores.

Located almost smack-dab in the center of London (just above a southward bend in the Thames), Bloomsbury traces its lineage back to Norman days and takes its name from an incomprehensible group of ancient consonants that gradually morphed into something pronounceable.

In the early 20th century, a loose collective of bohemian English writers, intellectuals, philosophers and artists, including Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes and E.M. Forster, lived, worked and studied together there. Known informally as the Bloomsbury Group, they “influenced literature, aesthetics, criticism and economics as well as modern attitudes towards feminism, pacifism, and sexuality.” (Thanks, Wikipedia.)

They also fooled around a lot. Just how much is evidenced by the cocktail menu at the Bloomsbury Club Bar, which features, along with creative libations, an intricate diagram of the group's wildly libidinous undertakings. By the second G&T, I was well ensconced in the mahogany-paneled bar's plush leather armchairs, speculating with new friends on how the Bloomsburies found the time, much less the vim, for their extracurriculars.

The Bloomsbury Hotel itself, a Sir Edwin Lutyens neo-Georgian building, was designed in 1928 as the YWCA Central Club for the area's recently emancipated generation of young women. The building recently underwent a massive restoration — in fact, work continues quietly in the guest rooms — and the interior layout still reflects its beginnings: wide halls, large staircases and cozy rooms.

The place to be seen? The Coral Room, a bustling, 2,100-square-foot bar re-imagined by internationally-acclaimed Martin Brudnizki Design Studio. (Somewhere, a ghostly YWCA matron surely wrings her hands at such goings-on.) Original paneling now features a high-gloss lacquer finish in vivid coral, a color Lutyens favored.

Dalloway Terrace — named after the infamous Woolf character — is the hotel's colorful indoor/outdoor restaurant. It features a delightfully elaborate English afternoon tea service, where three-tiered silver trays of deliciousness bring out the instagrammer at every table.

Around the corner awaits the vast, imposing British Museum, one of the world's greatest collections of antiquities (including the Rosetta Stone). Almost across the street, the Cartoon Museum traces the development of British caricatures, comic strips and animation from the early 18th century.

The Sir John Soane's Museum, in nearby Covent Garden, showcases the renowned Regency architect's perfectly preserved home and his idiosyncratic collection, which includes an Egyptian alabaster sarcophagus, paintings by Hogarth and Turner, and models of his noteworthy designs, including the Bank of England.

Gift shops line nearby Rugby Street, but being Bloomsbury, books are the thing. The London Review Bookshop is everything I wanted a British bookstore to be: old, atmospheric and piled high. Reseller Skoob Books looks like somebody's basement, because it is. I made a day of it and also hit Judd Books, Jarndyce Antiquarian Booksellers, Persephone Books and Treadwell's Bookshop. Amazon who?

In need of a break, I found The Lamb, built in the 1720s, where Charles Dickens and, later, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, partook of a hand-pulled pint or two. Perched behind the frosted glass "snob screen," I successfully avoided the paparazzi.

Marylebone: Retail Mavens, Unite!

West of Bloomsbury lies Marylebone ("MAR-luh-bone), which gets its name from a church dedicated to St. Mary, built by a small stream or "bourne." Think of it as the rich, hip cousin to sleepy Bloomsbury.

This historically well-to-do West End area, anchored by the world-famous Selfridge's department store, became a fashionable destination in the 1990s, when smart boutiques and upscale restaurants began dotting Marylebone High Street. The area's trendiness has grown, but fortunately, the touristy crowds tend to stay along busy Oxford Street to the south. That means I could — and did — leisurely explore the village's chic shops, distinctive pubs and cafes.

I got my grub on at always-busy Ivy Cafe. Duck curry, shepherd's pie, fish and chips, burgers, sea bass, crab linguine and other specialties emerge from the flawless kitchen in prodigious amounts. I returned frequently, always with a reservation — even at 2:30 p.m., it's packed.

The compact, austere Golden Hind offers what many Londoners think are the best fish and chips in town, which is saying something. And being somewhat of an insatiable eater, I found Paul Rothe & Son, which started as a German deli in

1900 and serves up mouthwatering soups and sandwiches in a snug space lined with rows of colorful jams and condiments.

The impossibly cute window displays of VV Rouleaux drew me in with brilliantly decorated presentations of ribbons, trimmings and tassels. How can a ribbon store survive in London's harsh retail environment? Apparently, quite well, thanks, especially when even the toughest guy — me — will go “Aww” viewing the sweetly colorful displays.

After browsing ribbon-bedecked bunnies, I restored my stiff upper lip by perusing and sampling from the terrific selection of fine single malts and blends at Cadenhead's Whisky Shop and Tasting Room. Properly fortified, I then visited Trunk Clothiers, a men's boutique where London's Beau Brummels shop for the latest fashions. Sadly, a lifetime of meals like those at Ivy Cafe and Golden Hind meant that nothing, and I mean nothing, fit me. But if you're built like a pipe cleaner, they have cool stuff.

I took solace at the nearby Wallace Collection, a stunning assortment of art, decorative items, furniture, firearms and knightly armor housed in the opulent 17th-century Hertford House. Again comparing my corn-fed Texan bulk to the intricate suits of armor, I mused, “Wow, people were tiny back then, weren't they?”

I adored Daunt Books, a narrow, two-story U-shaped Edwardian gem with superbly curated fiction, nonfiction and children's books. True to its origins as a travel bookshop, Daunt's lists guides by country in a grand backroom and along its oak mezzanine. Hours of fun can be had.

When I ran out of toothpaste, I literally stumbled into John Bell & Croyden, the Neiman's (or Fortnum & Mason) of drugstores. White lab-coated salespeople confidently guided me through an astonishing assortment of products, including wonderfully weird catarrh remedies and the irresistibly old-world, tongue-twisting toothpaste Euthymol.

When I ran out of steam, I brought my Euthymol to The Marylebone, a modern, upscale boutique hotel with effusive top-drawer personalized service, large rooms, the chic 108 Brasserie, and two swinging bars that seem to be packed all the time. I looked admiringly at the luxury Third Space gym, pool and spa, knowing full well it would be the first and last time I'd see it. Then I went in search of gin, which they make on premises and will delightedly sell to you.

I finagled a look at the largest of its penthouse suites, a sleek 1,290-square-foot seventh-floor abode with Scandinavian-style cedar woods and slate, concealed mirror TVs and gas fireplace. Its most astonishing feature? The 430-square-foot outdoor terrace featuring four conversation areas and another gas fireplace,

overlooking the Mary Poppins-ish London rooftops. Rain in the offing? No worries — just roll the retractable roof into place with the touch of a button and you're all ticketyboo. All for around \$5,000 a night!

South Kensington: Cheeky Class

Heading south and west of massive Hyde Park, South Kensington might just well be the elderberry wine-quaffing grand dame given to acidly funny observations of her inferiors, which is everybody. Bordered by the snootier Knightsbridge area — “nouveau riche,” she'd sniff — she surrounds herself with reminders of her grand and glorious past but still attends contemporary art openings and toasts life with an infectious joie de vivre and a healthy snootful of champers.

The name derives from the Domesday Book 1086, or "great survey," as "Kenesigneton," and museums are the main draw. The massive Victoria and Albert Museum is dedicated to decorative arts and design, with a permanent collection of more than 2.3 million objects ranging from ceramics, glass, textiles, costumes, silver, ironwork, jewelry, furniture and medieval objects to sculpture, prints, drawings and photographs. It's exhaustive and exhausting.

Don't miss the Leighton Museum in the former home of Victorian artist Frederic, Lord Leighton, packed with period paintings and sculptures. And Kensington Palace, the must-see grand royal residence (home to William and Kate), which also serves as a museum. It's most popular exhibit: “Diana: Her Fashion Story.”

And if there's a concert at the Victorian spaceship known as the Royal Albert Hall, go — just go.

All that museum-hopping can fill a chilly day, so I warmed my bones at the Churchill Arms. On Winston's birthday (Nov. 30), patrons dress up in WWII outfits and listen to recordings of his speeches and era-appropriate music.

The Britannia pub is a real foodie haven, as well as Diana Rigg's local watering hole. Then there's the Polish Hearth Club, where you can knock back a couple vodkas while savoring the tranquil view of the Prince's gardens.

I really enjoyed entering the double-framed doors of The Kensington, held open by a smiling, bowler-hatted hotel doorman. The high-ceilinged Victorian grandeur reflects a bygone era of civilized grace. Afternoon tea in the drawing room followed by craft cocktails in the intimate K Bar and then a dinner of sublime Dover sole (among other luscious selections) in the refined Townhouse restaurant rounded off quite a nice day.

Guest rooms are elegantly decorated, with crisp, near-instantaneous service, even when ordering ice — which the British, even now, regard with suspicion and hand over reluctantly.

Summing up

So, have these villages maintained their historic character amid the 21st-century hustle and bustle? Absolutely. Sure, there are a few Starbucks here and there, and Pret a Manger shops litter the landscape. But then I'd turn a random street corner to behold tiny, happily festooned shops and cafes that transported me right back to the 19th century.

I thought of John Lennon's "Glass Onion" — peel away one layer of London and find another equally compelling "place you can go where everything flows." Or, as British essayist Samuel Johnson opined, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life."

Well said, sirs. (Lennon said it better, I think, but that's just me.)

Where to go . . .

(Locations with full addresses appreciate reservations)

BLOOMSBURY:

- The Bloomsbury Hotel

16-22 Great Russell St.

London WC1B 3NN, UK

Phone: +44 20 7347 1000

www.doylecollection.com/hotels/the-bloomsbury-hotel

Rooms start at around \$300 per night

- British Museum: www.britishmuseum.org
- Cartoon Museum: www.cartoonmuseum.org
- Sir John Soane's Museum: www.soane.org/
- London Review Bookshop: www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk
- Skoob Books: www.skoob.com

- Judd Books: www.juddbooks.com
- Jarndyce Antiquarian Booksellers: www.jarndyce.co.uk
- Persephone Books: www.persephonebooks.co.uk
- Treadwell's Bookshop: www.treadwells-london.com
- The Lamb: www.thelamblondon.com

MARLYEBONE:

- Marylebone Hotel

47 Welbeck St, Marylebone, London W1G 8DN, UK

Phone: +44 20 7486 6600

<https://www.doylecollection.com/hotels/the-marylebone-hotel>

Rooms start at around \$360 per night

- The Ivy Cafe

96 Marylebone Ln, Marylebone, London W1U 2QA, UK

www.theivycafemarylebone.com

Phone: +44 20 3301 0400

- Selfridge's: <http://www.selfridges.com>
- Golden Hind: www.goldenhindrestaurant.com
- Paul Rothe & Sons: (No website but no reservations needed)
- VV Rouleaux: www.vvrouleaux.com
- Cadenhead's Whisky Shop and Tasting Room: www.whiskytastingroom.com
- Trunk Clothier: www.trunkclothiers.com
- Wallace Collection: www.wallacecollection.org
- Daunt Books: www.dauntbooks.co.uk
- John Bell & Croyden: <http://www.johnbellcroyden.co.uk/>

SOUTH KENSINGTON

- The Kensington

109-113 Queen's Gate

South Kensington, London, SW7 5LP, UK

Phone: +44 20 7589 6300

<https://www.doylecollection.com/hotels/the-kensington-hotel>

Rooms start at around \$325 per night

- Victoria and Albert Museum: www.vam.ac.uk
- Natural History Museum: www.nhm.ac.uk/
- Design Museum: <http://designmuseum.org/>
- Leighton House Museum:
www.rbkc.gov.uk/subsites/museums/leightonhousemuseum1.aspx
- Kensington Palace: <https://www.hrp.org.uk/kensington-palace/>
- Royal Albert Hall: www.royalalberthall.com
- Churchill Arms: www.churchillarmskensington.co.uk
- The Britannia: www.britanniakensington.co.uk
- Polish Hearth Club: ogniskopolskie.org.uk

Other Gotta Do's

All this and we've still barely scraped the surface of everything London has to offer. Don't miss these (usually jam-packed) institutions:

- National Portrait Gallery – Like the Tudors? You'll love this place.
- National Gallery – Begun in 1824, it has had plenty of time to collect true art masterpieces.
- Churchill War Rooms – See where the cigar-chomping, whiskey-swilling prime minister planned the defeat of his nonsmoking, teetotaling vegetarian nemesis, Adolf Hitler.

- Imperial War Museum – Among other hard-won trophies and military memorabilia, see Hitler’s chilling last will and testament.
- Fortnum & Mason – Quite simply the pinnacle of British retail.
- Leadenhall Market – Dating from the 1400s, this quaint, colorful multi-use retail space also played a role in the Harry Potter movies.
- Globe Theater – Glorious reproduction of Shakespeare’s famed theater.
- Courthauld Gallery – The finest impressionist art collection in the world.
- St. Martin’s in the Field – Enjoy a cuppa tea in the basement crypt, now a homey cafe.
- Tate Gallery – Like J.W.M. Turner? You’ll love it.

Getting Around

London’s much-vaunted Underground works well enough, as long as you’ve got time to burn and enjoy a lot of walking to your final destination. Cabs are more expensive but a lot faster and easier on the tootsies, too. London’s cabbies go through an extensive three-year training program — yes, you read that right — to learn London’s maze of 25,000-plus streets, navigating the hordes of walkers, drivers, scooters and bicycles with aplomb, and their vehicles are clean, modern and comfortable, too.



The exterior of the posh Kensington hotel in South Kensington. Courtesy of The Kensington



Have afternoon tea at Dalloway Terrace, named after the infamous Woolf character. It's in The Bloomsbury Hotel. Courtesy of The Bloomsbury



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