

Introduction

Thank you for choosing to take a self-guided tour with Free Tours By Foot. We believe in operating quality tours that are affordable to everybody, regardless of their budget and we hope that you enjoy your tour with us today.

You have chosen to come along on our Self-Guided Tour of the River Thames, a walk that will take you through 2,000 years of London's history. This tour will feature figures from London's military, engineering, and seafaring past, the remains of a Palace, the best food market on the planet, and two of the city's most famous - if a bit confusing - bridges.

On the tour today you can expect to walk just under 3 miles, or just over 4.5 kilometres. The tour will last, on average, just around 2 hours. Although this may change depending on your walking pace or stops you wish to make along the way.

For guests with mobility issues, or those with prams or buggies, there is only one set of steps on the route and there is a lift there for your usage.

If at any point you wish to explore a location further - please do. And if at any point you wish to stop at a pub and have a pint - please do that, too! You will also finish next to Borough Market which is an ideal place for a bite (or 10) to eat!

To begin, simply step outside Westminster Underground Station, taking the EXIT for the London Eye. Cross the street to the statue of the woman on her chariot and play the first clip.

Note that if you would like information on the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben just beside you, download our Self-Guided Royal Westminster Walking Tour. We will be standing on the opposite side of the river from the east location of some of our stops to give you the best vantage points.

Statue of Boudica and Portcullis House

Boudica was queen of the Iceni tribe of Britons, who rose up against the Romans around AD60.

After abuses to her family suffered at the hands of Roman soldiers, Boudica led her tribe to successfully destroy the cities of Camulodunum (modern day Colchester) and Verulamium (modern day St. Albans).

However, after a lengthy and hard-fought battle in London, Boudica's Britons were defeated by the Romans and Boudica was killed.

She is commemorated here, along with her daughters, in a statue that was commissioned by Prince Albert in the mid 19th century and installed in 1905. It's said that the figure of Boudica depicted bears a striking resemblance to the young Queen Victoria.

BEHIND you is PORTCULLIS HOUSE – dominated by a number of black chimneys that actually serve as an outlet for all the hot air generated by Westminster Station below.

Today this building holds a number of committee rooms and is full of offices for various Members of Parliament. It tends to be best known as the location of the incident where Rupert Murdoch was attacked with a shaving foam pie.

Facing the river, turn to your LEFT and walk along the water's edge until you are directly opposite the large white building with the green roof across the water.

Old County Hall

The building across the river from you is County Hall – previously headquarters of the London County Council. Built between 1911 and 1939, it was designed by architect Ralph Knott and was originally fitted with bright orange sunshades which would automatically lower and raise depending on the angle of the sun. The controls quickly malfunctioned, raising and lowering themselves for no discernible reason and uncontrolled by the occupants. Never a popular construction to begin with, this sealed the deal, and the building was declared unfit for purpose.

The London County Council was eventually rendered defunct and the building became home to a hotel and a few tourist attractions, the most famous of which is the Sea Life London Aquarium.

Boasting over a million visitors a year and with tanks holding 2 million litres (530,000 gallons) of water, the London Aquarium focuses on conservation and education about aquatic life.

It is open to the public all year long.

Turn to your LEFT again and continue walking until you are directly opposite the London Eye.

The London Eye

Originally intended to stand here temporarily to mark the turn of the new millennium in 2000, it's hard to imagine our city now without the iconic London Eye!

Previously the world's tallest ferris wheel at 135m or 443ft tall, before being surpassed by the Star of Nanchang in 2006, the London Eye is still the tallest cantilevered observation wheel in Europe and the most popular paid tourist attraction in the United Kingdom. Until the construction of the observation deck on The Shard (which we'll see later) in 2013 the Eye offered the highest public viewing point in the city.

The wheel is made up of 32 10-tonne capsules that can hold up to 25 people each. Traveling at only 10in a second, it takes 30 minutes for a single rotation!

Facing the Eye, turn LEFT. Follow the river - underneath the white Hungerford and Embankment Bridges - until you get to the large stone obelisk and sphinx-like statues.

Cleopatra's Needle

You are now looking at the oldest monument in London – dating from around 1450BC! It is one of two Egyptian obelisks that were moved from the ruins of Alexandria in Egypt - the other having been sent to the United States and erected in central Park near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This one was placed in a temple built by Cleopatra around 12BC.

Presented to the United Kingdom in 1819 by Muhammad Ali, the one-time ruler of Egypt and Sudan, this so called “needle” was gifted as a commemoration of the victories of Admiral Lord Nelson at the Battle of the Nile in 1801.

Although a gift to the country, there were to provisions made to pay for the transport of the needle from Egypt to the U.K!

Weighing 224 tons and standing 21m or 69ft high, the government here refused to shell out any money and it was up to Sir William James Erasmus Wilson (an anatomist and dermatologist) who personally paid for it's transport.

The ship carrying the needle nearly sunk and 6 crew members on a recovery vessel died when their boat capsized near the Bay of Biscay in 1877 during the effort to bring the needle to London.

Their names are listed on a plaque attached to the bottom of the mounting stone. The Needle was finally put into this position in 1878 and contains a time capsule that was inserted to commemorate Victorian England.

The capsule itself contains items such as: A portrait of Queen Victoria, a Bible, a map of London, 10 daily newspapers, a razor and 12 photographs of the best looking English women. Just how they chose those 12 women is anybody's guess.

The sphinxes on either side were designed by English architect George John Vulliamy and are cast in bronze and incorrectly installed to be facing the needle, rather than looking away as guardians of the monument. During WWI a German bomb landed near the needle and the obelisk suffered shrapnel damage which is still visible today - look for the holes and gouges on the right hand sphinx!

Continue walking in the same direction and go underneath the huge stone Waterloo Bridge. The large white stone building - with a big arched entrance on your LEFT is the next stop. There is a courtyard open to the public that you are welcome to visit should you wish.

Somerset House

Somerset house is located on the Thames in an area that was wildly popular with bishops and aristocrats in the 16th century, being placed directly in between the City of London and the Palace of Westminster.

The first record of a building here comes from 1539 when Edward Seymour, brother in law to King Henry VIII, obtained a grant of land in this area. When his nephew, King Edward VI came to the throne, Edward Seymour became the Duke of Somerset and the elaborate home he began to build here was given the name of his title.

Edward didn't get to enjoy his new creation, however, being overthrown and executed on Tower Hill in 1552. It fell into the hands of the Crown and was a popular residence for many Queens such as Anne of Denmark, wife of King James I in the early 17th century, Henrietta Maria of France, wife of King Charles I who had a custom built chapel here allowing her to worship within her Catholic faith, and also Catherine of Braganza, wife of

King Charles II in the 1660's, who often preferred to stay here rather than at court with her husband and his bevy of mistresses and dozens of illegitimate children.

The current structure dates mostly from the 1770's, although construction has been carried out in every century since, and today is home to more than a hundred tenants including the Royal Society of Literature, King's College London, and the Courtauld Gallery.

If the building looks familiar, you may have seen it on screen as it's a very popular filming location. It's been featured in two James Bond films (GoldenEye and Tomorrow Never Dies), King Ralph, The Duchess, the 2009 Sherlock Holmes, Sleepy Hollow and the tunnels underneath were used to depict Dragon Alley in some of the Harry Potter films!

Hosting London's most popular ice skating rink in the winter, and filled with exhibitions throughout the year, Somerset House also has a museum dedicated to the history of the building which is free to visit.

With Somerset House on your LEFT, continue along the river until you see the statue of a man across the street on your left hand side.

Brunel Statue

Isambard Kingdom Brunel Brunel was an English civil engineer, primarily known for his work on the Great Western Railway and his pioneering efforts on underground tunneling – setting the stage for the London Underground.

He was responsible for the first ever propeller-driven ocean-going iron ship as well as the first accessible tunnel under a navigable river (now part of the London Overground Network as a portion of the East London Line) as well as constructing and designing Paddington Station.

His bronze statue here was erected in 1877 after a commission by the Institute of Civil Engineers.

With the statue on your LEFT, keep following the river until you see the dragon statue on the road. Cross the street to stand next to it.

Dragon Statue

The dragon statue here marks the boundary line between the City of Westminster and the City of London. To learn more about the differences between the two, consider taking our City of London public tour or downloading our City of London Audio Guide.

There are fourteen of these dragons in the city, marking the main roads into and out of what's called the Square Mile. The shield features the Coat of Arms of the City of London - the Red Cross of St. George (patron saint of England) on the white background with a red sword of St. Paul (Patron saint of London) in the corner.

This cast iron statue is one of the oldest of the dragon boundary markers, having been made in 1849. Originally standing outside the Coal Exchange, the dragon was moved here in the 1960's after the Exchange was demolished.

From here continue in the direction you've been walking and make a LEFT onto Middle Temple Lane, through the gates on your left hand side. Walk forward until you have a nice view of the buildings around you.

Middle Temple Gardens

Temple Gardens is located within a small community of buildings known as Inner Temple – one of the four Inns of Court that act as local authority, and a centre for, the English law profession.

Standing here since the 12th century, the buildings around the gardens date from any given time over the last 900 years, including fine works of Georgian and Tudor architecture.

The gardens are a rare tranquil spot in this heavily business-oriented part of London and the Temple grounds are free for the public to explore. Oftentimes used for filming, the offices, Halls, churches and gardens here are a wonderful place to try to get lost - do consider having a small look around.

Shakespeare fans take note: It is in the gardens here that William Shakespeare claims the Wars of the Roses began, as depicted in his work Henry VI Part I – which had its original stage debut at Temple Church located within the grounds.

Retrace your steps back onto the main road and make a LEFT. At the first set of traffic lights you come across, cross the street and look directly to the building opposite you on the other side of the river with the large O X O's on the tower.

OXO Tower

Originally a power station built to supply electricity to the Royal Mail post office in the 19th century, today the OXO Tower is an iconic building, containing cafe's, arts and crafts shops, an art gallery, an excellent bar and restaurant, 78 flats, and an eight floor viewing gallery - which is open to the public.

One of the few Art Deco designs to be seen in London, the building was redeveloped in the late 1920's, and much of the bottom part of the structure was redeveloped in the 1990's.

The design of the windows is what makes this building a true London treasure. The windows spell out the word OXO, the name of the company who were using this building for cold storage (Oxo is best known for manufacturing cooking stock).

Originally, Oxo wanted illuminated signs on their building to advertise their company but planning permission for the signs was rejected. To get around this, the windows were designed to "coincidentally" spell out the name of the company - thus circumnavigating the ban on advertising along the Southbank.

Continue on until you reach Blackfriars Bridge. Continue along the river path UNDERNEATH the bridge. Stay on the path until you reach the large, silver Millennium Bridge. Climb the stairs or take the lift on your LEFT to go up and onto the bridge. When you are halfway across, stop and play the next clip.

Millennium Bridge

This is the only pedestrian only bridge in the City of London and is known to most people as either the 'Harry Potter Bridge' or the 'Wobbly Bridge.'

Firstly, because it was destroyed by Death Eaters in the sixth Harry Potter film (and for more on that topic, continue taking our guided Harry Potter tour or our self-guided Harry Potter audio guide). And secondly because of problems with the Bridge when it was completed in the year 2000.

As soon as the Millennium Bridge was opened to the public on the 10th of June and people began to cross, the entire bridge started to wobble and shake! This problem should have been foreseen as another bridge in the city, the Albert Bridge, has a sign dating from 1873 warning marching ranks of soldiers to break step while crossing, owing to dangerous swaying. Pedestrians crossing a bridge with lateral sway have an unconscious tendency to match their footsteps to the movement, unintentionally exacerbating the movement of the bridge, the exact problem that happened here.

This meant the bridge was closed almost as soon as it opened and it took another 2 years and a further £2million to finally stabilise it...meaning the *Millennium* Bridge actually was only properly opened in 2002.

The design of the bridge is the creation of Arup, Foster and Partners and Sir Anthony Caro with a total length of 325m (1,066ft). Comprised of three main sections which span just 4m, or 13 feet, wide and supported by 8 awfully designed suspension cables, the bridge is intended to look like a "blade of light." Do you think they met the brief?

Cross the bridge and head to the large building with the brick chimney. This is the Tate Modern, your next stop. When you get to the end of the bridge, stop at the platform where you are facing the museum and play the next clip.

Tate Modern

One of the world's largest and most visited modern art museums, the Tate Modern is housed inside an old power-station! The Bankside Power Station was built in 1891 and was operational for nearly a century, finally shutting down in 1981.

The structure was at risk of demolition for years and in 1994 it was announced that the Tate Gallery would be the home of the, then new, Tate Modern. Opened by the late Queen on the 11th of May 2000, the museum welcomed 5.25 million visitors in its' first year.

One of London's free galleries, the gallery today is the home to the United Kingdom's official collection of international modern and contemporary art. Upon entering, guests walk into the old Turbine Hall which once housed the electricity generators of the power station. Five stories tall, it's used to display large specially commissioned works by contemporary artists between October and March each year.

The Tate is open 7 days a week – so pause for a visit if you like!

Now turn so the museum is at your. Back and take the RIGHT path off of the Millennium Bridge. At the bottom, turn RIGHT and follow the path until you get to the Globe Theatre on your RIGHT.

Globe Theatre

In the late 16th century, this side of the river was home to London's vice scene. Outside the jurisdiction and laws of the City of London north of the river, the south became home to gangs of thieves, high crime, gambling, bowling alleys, sex work... and theatres (all of which were considered to be in the same category!).

It was near this site that William Shakespeare's original Globe Theatre once stood. Lost in a fire in 1613, the theatre you see today is a reconstruction, completed in 1997. The campaign to rebuild the Globe Theatre was led by American actor Sam Wanamaker who spent nearly 3 decades to bring his idea to life and sadly, died just a few short years before it was completed.

Shakespeare's Globe is built as close to the original design as historical architects can surmise and is the only thatched-roof building in the entire capital -thatched roofs being outlawed after The Great Fire of London in 1666. The only touch of modernity you may notice are the fire sprinklers on top of the roof, part of the compromise that allowed the builders to install the thatch.

Showcasing performances throughout the spring and summer, visitors can get tickets to the Globe for as cheap as £5...if you're willing to stand during the performance!

In January 2014, next door to Shakespeare's Globe, a second theatre opened known as the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. This is an indoor theatre, built on the design of a Jacobean playhouse which shows performances throughout the winter months. Lighting is provided by beeswax candles mounted on the walls as well as on six hanging chandeliers, making a truly unique experience.

With the Globe on your RIGHT, continue walking away from the Tate Modern. Follow the path until you get to The Anchor Pub. The path then veers to the RIGHT, follow it and then make an immediate LEFT (just past Wagamama) into the. Your next stop is just up ahead and to your RIGHT next to the Flat Iron Restaurant.

The Clink

With all the vice and illegal behaviours taking place south of the river, it's no wonder there has been a prison located on this site since at least the 12th century.

Easily the oldest prison in England, the Clink was run by the Bishop of Winchester and prisoners here were kept in the worst possible conditions. It was common for prisoners to be scourged with rods, thrown into solitary confinement, and restricted to a diet of strict bread and water.

The gaolers were poorly paid so often made arrangements with prisoners - taking money to give the inmates better food, candles, or a bed. Poorer prisoners could, and would often, beg through the iron gratings on the ground (which you can see) to passersby or family and friends who could slip food, blankets, and other goods through the bars - having been given none of these things upon entering.

Although this location is accurate, the Clink Prison Museum that stands on this site is in a modern building, as the original Clink burnt to the ground in riots here in 1780. The former prison also had the dubious honour of giving rise to the slang expression "in the Clink," meaning, in prison.

Keeping the Clink on your RIGHT, continue down the cobbled path-way until you can see the ruins on your RIGHT.

Winchester Palace

These ruins are all that remain of a 12th century palace that previously stood on this site. The Bishops of Winchester were all major landowners in this area, and exerted their power over everybody living and visiting this part of town. The Bishops of Winchester were also traditionally the King's Royal Treasurer, meaning it was essential that they be able to travel to court in Westminster or at the Tower of London. A residence here on the river was a perfect spot to commute from.

It's known that the Palace that previously stood here was magnificent, featuring a stunning rose window and displaying the wealth of the Bishops. Royal visitors would've been hosted here - in fact King James I of Scotland celebrated his wedding here! Bizarrely, the Bishops also oversaw a number of brothels in the area, finding them a good source of income. The local sex workers here became known as 'Winchester Geese' owing to their relationship with the Bishops.

Redevelopment of this area in the 20th century uncovered the pieces of the structure that you can see today – part of the old Great Hall.

With the Palace on your RIGHT, look AHEAD and you will see a Ship. Walk to it, your next stop.

Golden Hind

Here you are looking at a replica of a 16th century ship captained by Sir Francis Drake, which circumnavigated the globe between 1577 and 1580, taking his crew of around 80 men all the way around the southern tip of South America. Take a minute to appreciate how small the ship is and imagine living on board for months at a time with 79 other people!

Drake's flagship was originally known as the Pelican, but was renamed the Golden Hind to honour one of his patrons, Sir Christopher Hatton, whose family crest featured a golden hind - a small female deer. You can see that crest depicted today on the back of the ship.

The Hind returned to England, docking at Portsmouth with 56 of the original crew remaining, having in its' travels seized the largest treasure captured to that date - over 360,000 pesos - or £480million today! Queen Elizabeth I was a patron and investor in Drake's voyages, and she did well out of her investment, yielding £47 back for every £1 she put in - a return of 4,700%!

It was onboard the Golden Hind that Queen Elizabeth I bestowed a knighthood onto Sir Frances Drake - despite his notorious reputation as a pirate - perhaps in gratitude for the pay day he brought home.

It is possible to buy a ticket to go on board - so consider exploring it yourself to get a taste of how voyagers lived in the 16th century.

With the Golden Hind on your LEFT, walk down the road and, when it ends, you will be facing the magnificent SOUTHWARK CATHEDRAL.

Southwark Cathedral

There has been a site of worship at this location for more than 1,000 years, but the Cathedral you see today was built between 1220 and 1420. The church has a long history with Bankside residents. In fact, the Cathedral is the burial site of William Shakespeare's brother, Edmund, and the founder of Harvard University (John Harvard) was baptised here in 1607!

Although perhaps the most famous figure associated with the Cathedral is their resident cat. The first cat was known as Doorkins - a stray who came in looking for shelter and then made the church her home. Doorkins became a local celebrity and even met the late Queen on numerous occasions during her formal visits to the church. Doorkins passed away in 2020 and a memorial service was held for her here shortly thereafter.

The current cat, as of recording in 2023, is Hodge, a black and white moggie adopted from a shelter, coincidentally on the day of Doorkins's death. You'll find his image on articles in the gift shop and you'll also find him on social media!

Speaking of the gift shop, note that the shop here has a hidden treat for visitors: a glimpse of a Roman road that was uncovered on this site during renovations to the side of the Cathedral.

It is free to visit the Church, but donations are appreciated.

Now, keep the church on your LEFT and walk straight ahead toward the railway bridge. Once you are underneath that bridge, you'll be right in the heart of Borough Market.

Borough Market

One of London's largest and oldest food markets, Borough Market is filled with countless stalls selling every kind of food, drink and ingredient imaginable. Sitting on a site that has hosted a market since at least the 12th century (although they themselves claim a 1014 starting year), the current structure was erected in the 1850's, with additions in the 1860's and in 1932.

Previously a wholesale market, Borough Market was a main supplier of produce to London's greengrocers throughout most of the 20th century. The present version, however, focuses very much on selling specialty foods to the public. The Market is also yet another filming location featuring in movies like Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Bridget Jones's Diary, and Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels.

The Market is usually open Tuesday to Saturday from 10:00am - 5:00pm and 10:00am to 4:00pm on Sundays.

Once you're done with the Market, return to the space underneath the railway bridge. With the Fish! Restaurant behind you on the left, take a LEFT through the archway which says "Green Market" on the top. Walk directly through the market through another archway almost straight ahead of you. This will bring you out onto a busy road. Cross the street and then walk LEFT. Continue on until you get to a row of stalls selling snacks on your LEFT and a large metallic spike on your RIGHT. This is the start of London Bridge.

London Bridge "Spike"

The tall, large spike sticking out of the ground at the Southern end of London Bridge is technically named the Southwark Gateway Needle (although we've never met anybody who calls it anything other than just "the spike") is an art installation traditionally said to commemorate the fact that previously, in Medieval times, there were 30 spikes placed on London Bridge, displaying the heads of traitors against the crown.

Some say this is merely an urban legend, however, and the spike is a marker, tilted 19.5 degrees down pointing to the church of St Magnus the Martyr across the river - the trajectory and location of the northern side of the original, Roman and later medieval, London Bridge.

Continue walking in the same direction until you are about half way across the bridge then play the next clip.

London Bridge Part 2

You're now standing on top of London Bridge, one of the most famous - but confusing bridges - in the entire world. When thinking of a bridge in London, the name 'London Bridge' is incredibly famous. But when thinking of a bridge you'd like to see when you visit, you're likely envisioning the next bridge along the river Thames with the two tall towers - appropriately named Tower Bridge. It's a mistake that thousands of visitors make every year.

So you are standing on the actual London Bridge - well, the most current version anyway. There's been a crossing over the River Thames here since at least the year AD43. The medieval bridge that stood near to this site was almost more like a street than a bridge, holding over 100 buildings, a church, and two pubs. It was so big and heavy that pieces of it were constantly crumbling into the water...hence, "London Bridge is Falling Down."

Somewhat notoriously, the Victorian version of the bridge was put up for sale in the mid 20th century and was bought by a man in the United States who paid for it to be shipped out to the state of Arizona where it was rebuilt on a gold course in the town of Lake Havasu, where it still stands today. Which weirdly means if you want to see the Victorian London Bridge you have to go to the United States to do it!

A couple things that you may spot from your vantage point on this bridge include the large warship, positioned between you at Tower Bridge. This is the HMS Belfast, a WWII cruiser that was present at the D-Day landings in Normandy and later served in the Korean War. It was preserved thanks to a petition and is now a naval museum, which is open to the public.

You will also have a view of the Shard, a 72 story skyscraper designed by architect Renzo Piano. Completed in 2012, the building was previously the tallest building in the European Union, although thanks to Brexit, it now holds the less illustrious title of the tallest building in the United Kingdom. It is a mix of office space, hotels, restaurants, and a viewing gallery on the 72nd floor.

From here, you will have an excellent view of Tower Bridge further along the river. When you are ready to hear about it, play the next clip.

Tower Bridge

One of London's most iconic landmarks, Tower Bridge was constructed between 1886 and 1894. Designed by Horace Jones and engineered by John Wolfe Barry and Henry Marc Brunel (son of Isambard Kingdom, who we met earlier), the bridge was built specifically to give better access to the East End of London which was a quickly expanding industrial and commercial space in the 19th century.

The bridge is 240m or 800 feet across, and features two 65m or 213ft tall towers, which are connected by two walkways at the top. Originally, the idea was for the walkways to be used for pedestrian traffic but they soon gained a reputation for thieves and were used as brothels by many and were finally closed off in 1910. They reopened as part of the Tower Bridge Exhibition, which you can still visit for an entrance fee, in 1982. It's also free to simply walk across the bottom, should you wish to do so.

Tower Bridge is a draw bridge, and opens frequently throughout the year. If you're keen to see that, you can check their website for times when the bridge will lift. That would've been helpful in December 1952 when a Number 78 double decker bus was crossing the bridge from south to north when the bridge started to raise! The bells that rang to let drivers know the bridge was open failed, so the driver, Albert Gunter, carried on. Once he realised what was happening he made a split-second decision to accelerate, learning a 1m or 3 foot gap between the bridge panels, dropping 2m or 6 feet onto the other side, which, thankfully, had not yet begun to rise. There were no injuries to the passengers and Gunter was awarded £10 by the City of London to honour his bravery.

Conclusion

And with that, we have come to the end of our Self Guided River Thames Walking Tour.

If you've enjoyed your Walking Tour with us and wish to take another self-guided tour, visit our website at www.freetoursbyfoot.com. There you will find self-guided tours of Royal Westminster, Harry Potter, the Beatles in London, Greenwich and more. You will also find information on other audio-tours that we offer and also our full tour schedule. Free Tours By Foot offers pay-what-you-like walking tours on a daily basis here in London and we'd love to have you join us - simply book online.

Thank you for touring with Free Tours By Foot today and we hope you've enjoyed every step of your journey.