

RACHEL HOWARD AND BILL NASH



# SECRET LONDON

AN UNUSUAL GUIDE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

## FITZROVIA CHAPEL

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### *Pocket-sized luxury*

Fitzroy Place, 2 Pearson Square, W1T 3BF

[www.fitzroviachapel.org](http://www.fitzroviachapel.org)

Wed 11am–6pm

Admission free

Transport: Goodge Street tube

**T**ucked away in the heart of a new residential development north of Soho, Fitzrovia Chapel is a little golden jewel box of a building which is all that remains of the Middlesex Hospital.

*Opened in the 1740s, the hospital evolved from a 15-bed operation to a leading teaching hospital, with the first dedicated AIDS wards in the UK. It finally closed in 2005 and was consolidated with University College Hospital round the corner on Euston Road.*

Officially opened by the Bishop of London in 1892, the chapel was designed by John Loughborough Pearson, who was well known as an ecclesiastical architect at the end of the 19th century. Typically, he appears to have worked on a massive scale, designing Bristol and Truro Cathedrals, as well as St Augustine's, Kilburn, an overwrought barn of a church sometimes called the Cathedral of North London and worth a visit.

For the Fitzrovia Chapel, Pearson was forced to work in miniature on a cramped site at the north-western corner of the main hospital



building. Limitations of space don't appear to have dampened his enthusiasm for the ornate, however: although the exterior is plain red brick and dressed Portland stone, he seems to have managed to squeeze a whole cathedral's worth of gold and marble into the interior.

This took time – the mosaic ceiling was still being worked on in 1936 for the lying-in-state of Rudyard Kipling – but eventually, Pearson's “expensive” design was finished, just in time for the Second World War and the Blitz, during which the hospital was bombed.

The chapel has been fully restored as part of the conditions of sale of the hospital site to the current developers, and is open to the public one day a week. It also hosts events: check the website for details.

### *Gothic revivalist*

Pearson was a prominent Gothic Revivalist. This style of architecture, which originated in the UK, sought to recreate medieval Gothic architecture. Pugin's Palace of Westminster is the best-known example in London, but the capital is full of it. Strawberry Hill House in Richmond is the earliest example of the style in the UK – frankly, it's bananas and well worth a trip. Tower Bridge and St Pancras station are good examples of how the Victorians sought to romanticise the most functional of buildings, using the style. Bear in mind that these two were built at around the same time as the Eiffel Tower and the Brooklyn Bridge, both of which still feel modern by comparison.



## AMERICAN BAR AT THE STAFFORD HOTEL

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### *An American friend*

16-18 St James's Place, SW1A 1NJ  
020 7493 0111  
www.thestaffordlondon.com  
reservations@thestaffordlondon.com  
Daily 8am-12am  
Transport: Green Park tube



### *A shrine to a secret agent*

Hiding among the offerings is a bust of former hotel resident Nancy Wake, a secret agent whose undercover work in the Second World War saved thousands of lives. Code-named “the White Mouse” by the Gestapo because she kept escaping them, she showed exceptional bravery in her work for the French Resistance and was the Allied forces’ most decorated woman. New Zealand born Wake had been introduced to her first “bloody good drink” at the American Bar by the hotel’s manager and fellow Resistance fighter, Louis Berdet. It was here that she celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and lived out her days until she could no longer lift a cocktail glass. Now there is one named in her honour: the White Mouse cocktail. Bloody good it is too.

The Stafford Hotel is very discreetly situated within the heart of regal St James, the area surrounding Henry VII’s Tudor palace – residence of the British royal family right up until the time of Queen Victoria. Approach on a well-heeled foot either via a pathway skirting the north-east side of Green Park or through a double archway between 64 and 68 St James’s Street. This leads you into Blue Ball Yard, a cobbled ex-stable yard which has seen the clatter of many a royal filly. Now it is the garden for the Stafford Hotel’s bar, perfect for a summer evening drink and a cigar. But it’s when you pop inside for a top-up that you encounter the hotel’s right royal peculiarity.

“American Bar” was the name given to many hotel bars during the 1930s to lure in wealthy transatlantic clientele with the promise of friendly service and proper cocktails. Guests at the Stafford felt so welcome that they started giving small tokens of their appreciation to the bar manager, Charles Guano. Starting with a little wooden Native American totem pole carving, the guests’ generosity rapidly spun out of control and soon every inch of the bar’s walls and ceilings were festooned with baseball caps, model aeroplanes, banner flags and celebrity signed photos. Dolly Parton, Bill Nighy and Gore Vidal wish you well. A large framed metal screwdriver commemorates a rookie error by a busboy who was still to learn his cocktail names.

A recent redesign has organised the chaos, brought more light and space into the bar and also introduced a new Mediterranean tapas style menu of delicious treats like spring pea croquettes with truffle aioli. But you can still find little hints of the old American romance: mini doughnuts with a crab & chilli stuffing, anyone?

*Texts by Hannah Robinson*

### *A labyrinthine wine cellar for underground dining*

Beneath the hotel is an even deeper secret: a vast wine cellar, built in the 1700s by Lord Francis Godolphin and thought to be London’s oldest. Its long, dank, narrow corridors snake down past over 8,000 bottles of the world’s finest wines, now carefully picked and guarded by Master Sommelier Gino Nardella. Reputedly one spur leads directly to the old palace, but my exploration eventually hit a cul-de-sac filled with propaganda posters, newspaper headlines, sandbags and helmets, commemorating its use as a wartime bomb shelter. At one point it widens out into a room where 17<sup>th</sup>-century wine barrels were once stored, now a private dining room which can seat up to 44 ... ideal for a post-apocalyptic dinner party.

## FREEMASONS' HALL

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*Yes, the Freemasons' Hall is open to the public*

60 Great Queen Street, Holborn, WC2B 5AZ

020 7831 9811

Mon-Sat 10am-5pm

Closed: Bank Holiday weekends, Christmas and New Year

No booking required for the museum or library, but book online for tour to include the Grand Temple: <https://museumfreemasonry.org.uk/tours> - tours begin at 11am, 12pm, 2pm, 3pm and 4pm

Admission free

Transport: Holborn tube



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Time was when everyone thought there was nothing more secretive than a Freemason. But since the 1980s, the holiest of holies, the Freemasons' Hall near Covent Garden, has been open to the public, with a dedicated museum, an exhibition space in its library, and free hour-long tours of the building including the Grand Temple.

Opened in 1933 when freemasonry was flourishing, the hall is an art deco beast of a building that dominates the street. It is often used as a film location and has doubled as Saddam Hussein's palace. There is something melancholic about the place; membership numbers are in decline, which undoubtedly lies behind the decision to modernise and open up. The museum does a good job of explaining the history of freemasonry in the UK, and how the medieval stonemasons' guilds, with their secret words and symbols, were adapted to become the guiding model for the organisation.

Highlights include a display of Masonic regalia, including ornate aprons and gauntlet cuffs, items belonging to famous Freemasons including King Edward VII and Winston Churchill, and best of all, the colossal Grand Master's Throne. Built in 1791, its first occupant was the Prince Regent, later George IV. George was notoriously fat – in his later years, he had to sleep sitting up in order to breathe – and the chair looks as if it was designed with his elephantine backside in mind.

The glory of the hall, however, is the Grand Temple. Enter it through bronze doors that each weigh over a ton, and gaze up at its 18-metre mosaic ceiling. The grand days of the brotherhood may be behind them, but they're still well housed.



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## THE LULLABY FACTORY

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### *Industrial soothing and sleep system*

Great Ormond Street Hospital, Great Ormond Street, WC1N 3JH

Daily 9am-5pm

Transport: Russell Square tube



The Lullaby Factory is hard to explain. There's an awkward space between two buildings at Great Ormond Street, London's world-renowned children's hospital. One of the buildings is due to be pulled down in 2028. Into this gap, architects Studio Weave have installed the Lullaby Factory, a flourish of pipes, horns and petals that climbs like a berserk plant up the side of the 1930s Southwood Building. These pipes echo the structure of the hospital, but in fact, this is a beautiful machine that broadcasts calming and soothing lullabies for the hospital's young patients. Put your ear to the huge drooping pods at ground level and you hear the music created by sound artist Jessica Curry, or tune into it via a special radio station.

The design incorporates old taps and gauges reclaimed from a hospital boiler house that was being decommissioned. As a result, the visual tone is like something from a Heath Robinson drawing – copper piping, repurposed gramophone horns and musical instruments all feature in the Factory. The only regret is that there isn't more of it. It would be great to see it crawling all over the building and into the next street. To reach the Lullaby Factory, go through the main entrance and look for



the Lagoon café, then through sliding doors onto a wooden deck, which also contains London's only marimba/bench hybrid.

The hospital specialises in heart treatment for children, and developed the first children's heart and lung bypass machine in 1962. It also devised an improved shunt valve for children with water on the brain with the help of children's author Roald Dahl. His Big Friendly Giant would have thoroughly approved of the hospital's lullaby delivery system.

### *A replica skeleton of Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man*

Snooping round London hospitals for a bit of sightseeing might seem ghoulish, but there's all sorts of places worth seeking out. Check out the Royal London Hospital Museum (Free entry – open Tues–Fri 10am–12.30pm and 1pm–4pm, closed Christmas, New Year, Easter and public holidays) in the former crypt of St Philip's Church. This little museum houses a replica skeleton of Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man (the original is now too delicate), who lived and died in the hospital, as well as a display of gruesome medical instruments and material relating to the local Jack the Ripper murders.