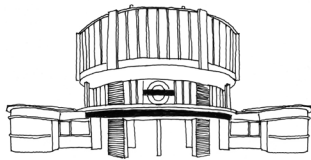


# 20 Things Around Earl's Court



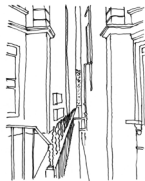
The  
Earls Court  
Development  
Company



## 1. Earl's Court Station

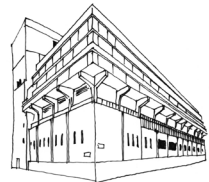
One of Earl's Court's claim to fame is that the station was first to introduce escalators in October 1911. To reassure passengers who might have been freaked out by the mechanised moving staircase, "Bumper" Harris, a one-legged engineer, repeatedly rode the escalators to demonstrate their safety.

But we're not here for that. The Warwick Road entrance is a classic of 70s British Modernism featuring a glass circular atrium perched on top of Deco curved brick plinth constructed in 1937. Historic England might describe it as being of "no merit" but for others (ie me) it has a touch of Constructivism that dramatises the station as a piece of urban infrastructure. It was built to house the operations room apparently.



## 2. Urban Gaps, between 92 and 94 Philbeach Gardens

Often there is a kind of tension in the ideals of city planning and the realities on the ground. Often, it's those accidental moments that make something strange, something that no one would have thought of. One of the key features when Earl's Court was laid out was the introduction of crescent streets, with terraced housing bent into curved form. Philbeach Gardens is one of them. And behind it is one of the largest private communal gardens in London - not that you'd know it from the street, screened by the houses forming a continuous wall around it. But there are a couple of places where the crescent cracks. Tiny wedges of space between two houses that are too small even to be alleyways, just a slither of light at the ends. When the ideal form breaks down and something else emerges.



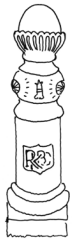
## 3. Warwick Road Estate, Warwick Road junction with Pembroke Road

More 70s expressive architecture at the Warwick Road Estate (Arup 1972 - 1975). A very strange hybrid of a building that has housing above a depot containing every garbage lorry owned by Kensington & Chelsea Council. It results in a massive brick base with tiered levels above, all supported by concrete structure that really shows you what it is doing. Though it might not look like it, there are shades of historical building types, even the Medici Palace in Florence, which also has a tough-looking ground floor level that housed services with the more refined living parts above.



#### 4. Fictional London, Junction of Logan Place / Earl's Court Road

This junction is apparently both a real and a fictional place. It's where (possibly) novelist Patrick Hamilton was run over. Its also, (possibly) the place where Netta, the selfish exploitative character, in Hamilton's *Hangover Square* (1941) lived. The novel - set in the run up to WWII - centres in the pubs around Earl's Court and is one of the most depressing novels about London, about drinking, hangovers, fascism and hopelessness. And I mean that in a good way. Maybe much of a city is as much in the imagination as it is in its built form. Books, films, paintings all contribute to how we feel about a place, how we understand it and how we live in it. Even more, sometimes, the fictional idea shapes how we make the city.



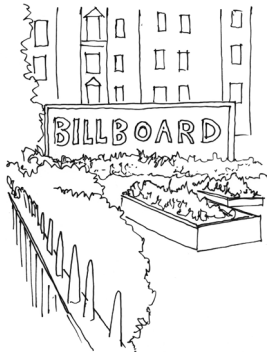
#### 10. Bollard, Farnell Mews

Perhaps it's a legacy of Modernism, or at least a handed down worn-out version of Modernism, that the decorative and the symbolic are not only different but oppositional design ideas. That of course, forgets that modernist design itself was symbolic in its use of industrial materials. The act of, say, appropriating tubular steel from the factory and reinventing it as a design element was as much an emblem of a new idea about the world as it was a way of making a new world. Design is always symbolic, even when it itself doesn't want to be. A bollard like this one, hidden in a mews, combines extreme utility with amped up decoration. Victoriana is often far stranger and more surreal than we expect and this - part machine, part plant - seems something like a vent giving birth to a giant acorn. What is this telling us? Is it that industry and pastoralism were still entwined with each other in the Victorian imagination? Or that even the moment of crash is a space for strange imagination - like JG Ballard in a rock coat.



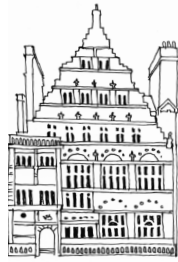
#### 5. Archways and Mewses and stage set urbanism, Colbeck Mews

This one is on Collingham Road and acts as the entrance to Colbeck Mews. A strange hybrid comprising the giant urban gesture of the arch with more cottagey gateway buildings. Something odd also about the form of the (thin, stage set type version) of a triumphal arch into the mews, which was once the service yard stables and so on for the grand houses nearby. There is a real urban 'problem' being solved here, but its one from another era, of another age's ideas of urban decorum, social stratification and so on. There is another smaller version of the same kind of arrangement at Wetherby Mews where Syd Barrett of Pink Floyd once lived.



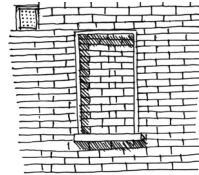
#### 11. Parkvert, Warwick Road junction with Old Brompton Road

Advertising usually just kind of exists in the city. It's there, broadcasting itself visually, but also kind of disengaged from the life around it. Take the big advert sites on the Cromwell Road that seem to be beamed in from America, on their steel stalks poking up above the flyover. But this one on the corner of Warwick Road and Old Brompton Road is different. Or at least it suggests that it could be different. The billboard is low, and it forms the backdrop to a mini park. What kinds of new relationships might be made between that big flatness of the image and the real-life community in front of it? How might communication and activity, planting and amenity be brought together in more engaged ways that can contribute to the city positively? It's not quite this, but here's a moment when the question might be asked.



#### 6. Theatrical Domesticity, 39 Harrington Gardens

Some incredible Victorian architecture at 39 Harrington Gardens, designed by Ernest George and Peto. It is a kind of fantasy version of a European cityscape, elements of Dutch and German towns all compressed into a dense composition that plays with scale and detail. It's no wonder that this is a kind of architecture that has a real theatrical imagination given the fact that it was built for William Schwenk Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame) with the money he made from their operetta *Patience*. It's a house (a very big house) that is a grand performance, like a stage set built out of brick and a backdrop to both the urban life of the street and the domestic life inside.



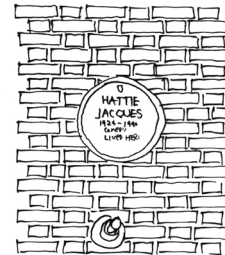
#### 12. Blind Window, Kempsford Gardens junction with Warwick Road

There's nothing quite as strangely perverse as a blind window. A window that cannot see. Something whose apparent only purpose is to be looked through but that not only doesn't do that but goes out of its way to show you that it doesn't do it. Sometimes it's because the desire for the outward composition of an elevation conflicts with the interior arrangement of rooms and the architect wanted to keep the compositional logic in spite of the conflict with the interior. Historically you sometimes find them as responses to the window tax that applied in England from 1696 to 1851. This kind of blind window was simply a bricking up of what had previously been a window to avoid tax liability. But sometimes it's just a product of the strange ad hoc way in which buildings are re-used over time. This example on Kempsford Gardens looks pretty new. It feels like a wall built behind the opening for some reason - maybe because the brick seems a different colour and size, with a different kind of mortar. Its nicely framed with a surround and sill that seem very functional - only adding to the sensation of dysfunction. Who knows what happens behind - things that cannot be seen - like nakedness perhaps? but whatever it is, it reveals the complications between the built world and the lived world.



#### 7. Making an Entrance: Land of Porticos, 24 Wetherby Gardens

There's something about the entrances to the mansion blocks of Earl's Court. There is an incredible range of porticos forming the entrances. They act like little buildings themselves, mini temples, or encrusted in elaborate cake-like decorations, like follies transported from picturesque gardens to the streetscapes of Earl's Court. Each is a threshold between the public world of the street and the private world of the apartments behind. Maybe, given the fact that these were some of the first mansion blocks in London, they had an important role in providing a clear landmark, an expression of individuality in the street. Perhaps this expression was necessary to amplify the feeling of coming home when the apartments themselves are less distinct, and merge into the larger urban block.



#### 13. Hattie Jacques Blue Plaque, 67 Eardley Crescent

For those of us that grew up watching reruns of *Carry-On* films, Hattie Jacques (along with Kenneth Williams, Sid James, Barbara Windsor et al.) was a kind of mythic character from a post war Britain whose obsession with double entendres masked a complex fear/fascination with sex and gender. Those caricature characters were also real people of course, as Kenneth Williams' diaries, for example, attest. They walked the normal streets and lived lives that didn't revolve (any more than ours do) around bad puns. Other notables in the area: Arthur Stanley Wint 1920-1992 RAF pilot, doctor & diplomat, Gold medal Olympian, Howard Carter 1874-1939 Egyptologist and discoverer of the tomb of Tutankhamun, and singer and actress Rita Ora who fled the war in Kosovo and studied here after arriving in the UK in 1991.

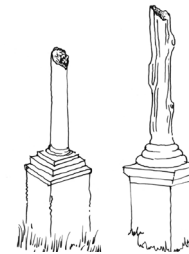


#### 8. Space Oddity, 22 Clareville Grove

In London some very unusual things happen in very average places, where extreme imagination coexists with very ordinary life. At 22 Clareville Grove was where David Bowie wrote *Space Oddity* while living at his girlfriend, and short-lived folk outfit Feathers bandmate, Hermione Farthingale's flat (of Letter to Hermione fame).

A 1969 demo recording featuring acoustic guitar and Stylophone recorded at Clareville Grove survives. There's more Bowie links nearby. He played the first rock concert at old Earl's Court. A disaster according to archives, with no raised stage, terrible sound and audience members - some apparently naked - fighting to get a view. One notable attendee was a young Sid Vicious, photographed in denim and a Bowie t-shirt on his way to the show.

There's more: The video to Bowie's 1979 hit DJ contains a section where he walks down the Earl's Court Road lip-syncing followed by a growing gang of fans hugging and kissing him.



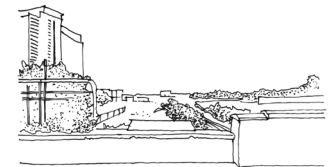
#### 14. Nature Morte in Brompton Cemetery

Death of course is always at one's elbow, and the Victorian idea of cemeteries as an integral part of the city was perhaps a healthier idea than our own separation between the living and the dead. There is a design problem in how death and memory might be articulated. Step into Brompton Cemetery and you'll see the richness of Victorian design language of death in the mausolea, memorials and gravestones. But one type of approach I always find interesting is the monuments that are carved into real things. Not just decorative, but things like tree trunks, broken columns, and maybe the strangest ones - rocks carved to look like rocks. There's something about these presentations of the world of the living in another form - columns that should



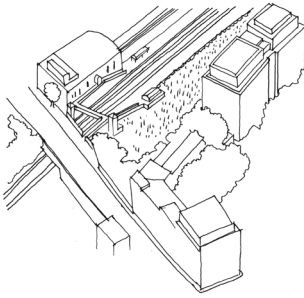
#### 9. Coal Hole, Earl's Court Square

The decorative infrastructure of domesticity. Coal holes were like trap doors that allowed coal to be tipped into a store under the pavement, an ingenious way to resolve the way fuel could be brought into the house without bringing dirt and disruption to the ordered interior. If you look down as you walk London pavements, you'll find such an incredible variety of these plates, so many different decorative designs, so many different manufacturers - this one made by Jas Bartle in Notting Hill.



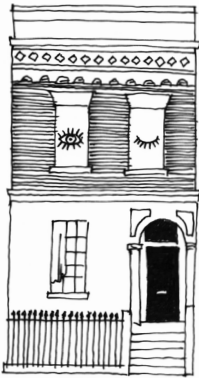
#### 15. Panorama Board, Lillie Bridge, Lillie Road

You usually find Panorama boards where there are spectacular views across significant landscapes. They usually point out the most important things. However here, looking across the cleared site of Earl's Court, since the exhibition centres have been demolished and before it is redeveloped, we get a very different kind of view. The board explores the less important, the fragments of such a vast emptiness in the fabric of London.



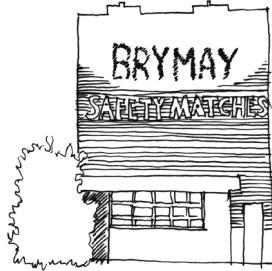
**16. Counters Creek, West Brompton Station Eastbound Platform**

Sometimes the sheer bulk and mass of London the city, obscures other kinds of London that also exist. If you peer over the edge of Lille Bridge or stand on the eastbound platform 4 of West Brompton Station, you can glimpse a vestige of this as a slither of marshy land. Counters Creek ran from Kensal Green into the Thames at Sands End, Fulham. Moments like this remind us that London isn't just a city, that it occupies a landscape that is made up of many other things that include geology, ecology, and hydrology.



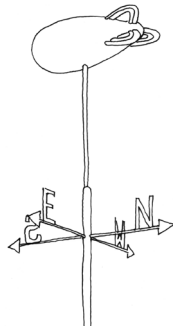
**19. Windows, 2 Empress Place**

For LDF, I've transformed a house on Empress Place. On the first floor a pair of eyes open and close as you walk past, recalling the blind windows (we've seen before on this list) but also the always present relationship between eyes, looking and windows. Just as eyes are the window to the soul, perhaps windows are also eyes. Here the house opens and closes its eyes, as if waking from a dream.



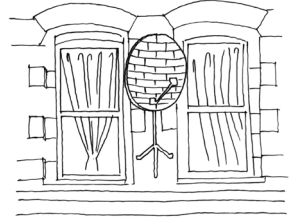
**17. Bryant and May Ghost Sign, 26 Lillie Road**

Seeing old advertisements like this one painted onto walls in the city is like a little flash of time travel. Matches are still around but maybe since smoking has declined and lighters have become cheaper to produce, they are much less central as a popular product. The ad suggests trench coated gentlemen in trilbies striking matches to light their cigarettes as they go about their Earl's Court business. It is also interesting to see, in examples like this, is the sheer scale of the commercial graphic language. It shows us that the historic city was far from the idealised image that things like modern conservation areas suggest, that they were far more raucous places with supergraphics plastered over the fabric of the buildings. Our contemporary image of history might well be one that is far more sanitised than the truth.



**20. Blimp Weathervane, 16-18 Empress Place**

In WW2, the exhibition centres at Earl's Court were used to manufacture barrage balloons. The size of the centres meant they could be inflated indoors. I've resurrected this forgotten history as a weathervane with a barrage balloon floating above. This is conceived as a modern version of the historic role of the weathervane as a symbolic as well as practical device. Their symbols and figures originating with Triton, the god of the sea in Roman times. In the 9th century every church was ordered by Pope Nicholas to have a cockerel on their spire as symbols of St Peter's betrayal of Jesus. Here though, the balloon 'flies' again and brings to light a more forgotten part of Earl's Court's civic history.



**18. Satellite Dish, 86 Lillie Road**

A classic of the form! Technology and heritage are bound together in an object that connects earthly qualities (bricks made from clay, dug from the ground) and planetary scale (the satellite in near earth orbit that it's pointing towards). It's the future and the past too - the image of Victorian heritage overlaid onto a space age object - an object that expresses the contradiction of heritage against the reality of the contemporary world. If you needed an object that expressed our collective inability to successfully resolve these contradictions, well, you could put this one in your museum! As a side note, does anyone really think that the brick camouflage actually works? More often the brick effect only makes it stand out more.

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