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Editor's Find: The Secrets of St. James's, London

by Mark Orwell



Sandwiched between Piccadilly and The Mall in London's West End, St. James's may be the most-traveled-through but least-known neighborhood in London. At least, that's my take-away after spending a recent Tuesday morning walking through its historic streets, courtyards, and mews in the company of Frank Laino, executive concierge of the [Stafford London](#) in the heart of St. James's. After 16 years of catering to the wishes of clients at the discreet, upscale Stafford hotel,

Laino knows St. James's like few others, and recently began squiring hotel guests on foot tours. Here are some of the most intriguing stops on his itinerary.

St. James's Palace: Built by Henry VIII on the site of a leper hospital, the [brick Tudor palace](#) that gives name to the district is no longer a royal residence but the traditional place where newly arrived diplomats present their bona fides and are accredited to the Court of St. James's (you always wondered why they used that phrase, didn't you?). The palace complex also includes Clarence House, now home to Prince Charles and Duchess Camilla and formerly home to the Queen Mum (Elizabeth II's mother), who in her day was occasionally spotted in the cozy American Bar of the nearby Stafford. "She loved to come over for a G&T," says Laino.

Spencer House: Where narrow St. James's Place makes a 90-degree turn is this private residence of the Spencer family, from which Princess Diana descended. It's one of the [finest examples of a private London palace](#) from the mid-1700s. Long in disrepair, the home has been leased for 100 years to Lord Jacob Rothschild, who has already spent millions renovating the noble Georgian structure. The state rooms are magnificent, with marble fireplaces, grand oil paintings, ornate chandeliers, and enormous Palladian windows overlooking adjacent Green Park. Although generally closed to the public, Spencer House opens for tours on most Sundays.

Red Lion Pub: Crown Passage, which links Pall Mall with King Street, looks every bit like the inspiration for Diagon Alley in the Harry Potter films. Stop for a pint at the warm, welcoming, uber-authentic Red Lion Pub, which reputedly holds the second-oldest beer license in London.

No. 28 St. James's Place: The former home of William Huskisson, a Member of Parliament in the early 19th century and described on the house's historic marker as a "statesman," is less remarkable than the man's demise. As Laino enjoys telling people, Huskisson's most memorable achievement was in being the first recorded railway fatality, thanks to being run over by the locomotive *Rocket* in 1830 while attempting to shake hands with the Duke of Wellington.

Clubland: St. James's is home to more private clubs than anywhere else in the capital. When Henry VIII built St. James's Palace in 1536, coffee-houses sprang up to serve people waiting to do business with the court. Those shops ultimately morphed into private clubs. On St. James's Street you'll pass by any number of them, including the highly aristocratic and ultra-exclusive White's (No. 37), [Boodles](#) (No. 28), and the arch-conservative [Carlton](#) (No. 69). The clubs on nearby Pall Mall are distinguished by a somewhat less patrician atmosphere—the [Oxford and Cambridge Club](#) (No. 71-77), the [Army and Navy Club](#) (No. 36), and, with its blue flag flying above the entrance, the [Reform Club](#) (No. 104), from which Phileas Fogg set out around the world in 80 days.

Lock & Co. Hatters: At No. 6 St. James's Street is the [oldest hat shop in the world](#), in business since 1676. I'm sorry, did you not hear me say the oldest hat shop *in the world*?! Lock & Co. has served everyone from royalty (including Elizabeth II, for whom the shop resized the monarch's crown) to celebrities to commoners. But one thing all those customers had in common was being measured by a strange metallic hatlike device, the Conformatteur, designed to measure all aspects of one's skull. The odd contraption is still on display—and in use—and looks every inch like a torture device devised by Torquemada the Milliner.

Pickering Place: The smallest square in London is found off busy St. James's Street via a narrow, wood-paneled passageway (look for "No. 3" painted above the entrance). For a square no larger than a typical courtyard, a lot of history was made here. In 1837, according to Laino, two young bucks from White's, down the street, fought the last duel in London. In the 19th century the tiny square became popular with scoundrels, prostitutes, bear-baiters, and Texans, the last of whom established the Republic of Texas embassy here from 1842 to 1845, until joining the Union.

Berry Bros. & Rudd: As the neighborhood became popular for aristocratic residences in the 17th and 18th centuries, so too was it all the rage for shopkeepers and small manufacturers to establish themselves here and serve "the quality." Some of those shops were so favored by royalty that they received what are called royal warrants—a sort of noble blessing—and are still in

business today. One of them is [Berry Bros. & Rudd](#) (dating to 1698), which received its warrant as a coffee merchant but which today sells wine and spirits. Its massive scales on display, used originally to weigh coffee, were also popular among the neighborhood aristos in the 18th century to weigh themselves. If you take a tour with Laino, the manager will pull out a massive antique ledger showing the names and weights of those who came in to monitor their avoirdupois, including Lord Byron and Beau Brummel.

Mason's Yard: This completely enclosed square is home to the modernist [White Cube Gallery](#), champion of the Young British Artists and where Damien Hirst showed "For the Love of God," a diamond-encrusted skull that sold for \$100 million. Also in Mason's Yard is the members' entrance to the little-known [London Library](#), a subscription organization begun in 1841 by Thomas Carlyle, and of which Charles Dickens and George Eliot were members. Near the northeast corner of the yard is a nightclub called the [Scotch of St. James](#), where a then-unknown guitarist named Jimi Hendrix played his first London gig on the night of his arrival in 1966.

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