

## **ARCHITECTURAL TOUR OF EXHIBITION ROAD AND 'ALBERTOPOLIS'**

The area around Exhibition Road and the Albert Hall in Kensington is dominated by some of London's most striking 19th- and 20th-century public buildings. This short walking tour is intended as an introduction to them.

Originally this was an area of fields and market gardens flanking Hyde Park. In 1851, however, the Great Exhibition took place in the Crystal Palace on the edge of the park. It was a phenomenal success and in the late 1850s Exhibition Road was created in commemoration of the event. Other international exhibitions took place in 1862 and 1886 and although almost all the exhibition buildings have now vanished, the institutions that replaced them remain. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, had a vision of an area devoted to the arts and sciences. 'Albertopolis', as it was dubbed, is evident today in the unique collection of colleges and museums in South Kensington.

***Begin at Exhibition Road entrance of the V&A:***

**Spiral Building, V&A, Daniel Libeskind, 1996-**

The tour begins at the Exhibition Road entrance to the V&A, dominated now by a screen erected by Aston Webb in 1909 to mask the original boiler house yard beyond. Note the damage to the stonework, caused by a bomb during the Second World War and left as a memorial.



***Turn right to walk north up Exhibition Road, 50 yards on your right is the:***

**Henry Cole Wing, V&A**, Henry Scott with Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave, 1868-73  
Henry Cole was the first director of the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A). He was a driving force behind the Great Exhibition and the formation of many of the institutions still in the area today. The building is a truly monumental structure, with seven central bays flanked by corner pavilions and an open loggia on the top storey. It was occupied first by the School of Naval Architects, then by the Science School and finally by Imperial College. In 1978 the building was annexed by the V&A. In style it is a striking redbrick and terracotta building with an amalgam of playful Early Renaissance details, including putti in roundels and figures and foliage on the columns. The decorative techniques include moulded terracotta, mosaic and Minton majolica. Many of these were experimental, though they were based on historical precedent.



***Cross Exhibition Road at the pedestrian crossing, walk up the road and turn left into Imperial College Road (the vehicle entrance to Imperial College). Half way up this road on your left is the:***

**Queen's Tower, T. E. Colcutt, 1887-93**

The 85-metre tower is the last remaining part of the magnificent Imperial Institute that was founded as an outcome of the Colonial Exhibition of 1886. Despite the quality of Colcutt's building, the Institute was never successful and it was demolished in the 1950s and 1960s to make way for Imperial College. Originally, there were three copper-roofed Renaissance-style towers, but only this one survives, its the base and foundations reinforced to enable it to be free-standing. Although it appears relatively hidden away at street level, the Queen's Tower remains the tallest building in the district. On royal anniversaries, bells named after Queen Victoria and her children are rung from the tower.



***Return to Exhibition Road, opposite are:***

**Flats**, Adie, Button & Partners, about 1935

Opposite the entrance to Imperial College Road is a block of flats that combine the tradition of London's white stuccoed terraces with Modernist principles. The colour and treatment of the façade echoes the rusticated ground and first floors of the 19th-century houses nearby. Yet the metal-framed windows wrapping the corners, and the cantilevered balconies, are drawn from the Functionalist principles of 1930s architecture. Although the block is defiantly of its own period, its scale and proportion sit happily within the 19th-century streetscape.



***Turn left, continue north up Exhibition Road, on your left is the:***

**Tanaka Business School**, Imperial College, Foster & Partners, 2002-3

The newest addition to the architectural melange on Exhibition Road is a striking white-framed glass building by Sir Norman Foster, which envelopes an existing 1960s building. This high-tech building, containing a drum for the lecture theatres, will serve as an atrium entrance to Imperial College. Foster is the most influential and prolific British architect today, responsible for some of London's most recent landmarks including the Greater London Assembly building and the gherkin-shaped Swiss Re tower.



***Continue along Exhibition Road, cross Prince Consort Road, on your left is the:***

**Jamaican High Commission, 29 Exhibition Road, J. J. Stevenson, 1876**

This pair of 'Queen Anne' style houses, with asymmetric windows and gables, decorated with cut brickwork, represents the height of fashion in the 1870s and 1880s. The pretty style draws loosely on English and Dutch buildings of about 1700. Contrast them with the formality and stiffness of the painted stucco houses opposite. They are typical of the terraces built in the late-Georgian style by speculators throughout South Kensington during the 1860s.



***Continue to the end of Exhibition Road, turn left into Kensington Gore, the first buildings on your left are the:***

**Royal Geographical Society (Lowther Lodge), Richard Norman Shaw, 1873-5**

By the 1870s Kensington was almost fully developed, apart from the area immediately around the Albert Hall. Lowther Lodge was originally planned as a generously proportioned town house for William Lowther MP. It was conceived as a country mansion and, unusually for a central London house, it is set back behind an entrance court on the Hyde Park front. The asymmetrical façade features very tall chimneys, slim 'Queen Anne' windows and Dutch pilasters and gables, to picturesque effect. Since 1911 Lowther Lodge has been the headquarters of the Royal Geographical Society. In 1929 Kennedy & Nightingale enlarged the building westwards to create a lecture theatre on the site of the stable block. The statues of the explorers Shackleton and Livingstone, by C. Sargent Jagger, were placed on the corner of Exhibition Road and Kensington Gore in 1932.





***The next building is:***

**Albert Hall Mansions, Richard Norman Shaw, 1879**

These luxurious red-brick apartments were the first to be designed in the new 'Queen Anne' style that was based on English and Dutch architecture of the early 18th century. They were immediately copied throughout London. Since London had no tradition of apartment blocks for the middle and upper classes, Shaw took his plans from French examples. Several blocks comprise Albert Hall Mansions and together they wrap around the Albert Hall to appear like a fragment of a European city set down in London. The symmetrical planning of the façade facing the park gives the building a dignified and monumental character, in contrast to the romantic profile of Lowther Lodge, next door. In fact, the architect has paid little attention to the surrounding buildings. This block overwhelms Shaw's own Lowther Lodge and dwarfs even the massive Albert Hall.



***Across the road is the:***

**Albert Hall**, Francis Fowke and H. Y. D. Scott, 1867-71

Built as a Hall of the Arts and Sciences, the Albert Hall is still the national public hall, hosting events that are institutions in themselves. These include the Proms concerts every summer, so-named for the members of the audience who ‘promenade’, or stand without seats, in the centre of the auditorium. The building itself is an elliptical, drum-shaped auditorium with a circumference of 225 metres, topped with a vast dome. Inside, 8000 seats are arranged in three tiers around an open centre, like a circus. Its style is influenced by the German architect Gottfried Semper and recalls his Dresden Opera of 1837-41. Semper, who lived briefly in England as a political refugee, was an influential architectural theorist and a friend of Prince Albert. The hall’s architect, Francis Fowke, undertook many of the early buildings that were to become the V&A, and some of the decoration, for example the massive frieze of the Triumph of Art and Letters, relates to decoration in the Museum.



***Opposite the Albert Hall is the:***

**Albert Memorial**, Sir George Gilbert Scott, 1863-72

In many ways Prince Albert, the consort of Queen Victoria, shaped the character of this area, from his support of the Great Exhibition of 1851 to his interest in the art, science and architecture that dominate activities here. He died in 1861 and his monument is a typical High Victorian amalgamation of styles, materials, detailing and sentiment, all imbued with self-confidence and bravura. Fifty-three metres high, and with more than 175 life-size or larger sculptures, the memorial is encrusted from top to toe in decoration in every media. The gilded bronze statue of Albert, over four metres high, forms the apex of a pyramid of sculptures representing the ideals, aspirations and achievements of his age. Marble groups representing Europe, Africa, America and Asia reflect colonial expansion. The arts, including Pottery, Painting and Sculpture, are shown in the frieze. Symbolic statues of Geometry, Astronomy, Chemistry and Medicine bear witness to Prince Albert's scientific interests. There are allegorical figures of Commerce, Engineering, Manufactures and Agriculture, and in his hand Albert holds the catalogue to the Great Exhibition, his greatest achievement. The whole glittering ensemble is topped with a Gothic Revival spire decorated with angels. Yet, despite this, Albert was not buried here, but at the Mausoleum at Frogmore, near Windsor. The whole memorial was extensively restored in the 1990s by English Heritage.



***Beyond the Albert Hall, on the left, is the:***

**Royal College of Art, H. T. Cadbury-Brown, 1959-64**

The Royal College of Art was one of several educational institutions that were established in South Kensington after the 1851 exhibition. Originally housed within what became the Victoria and Albert Museum, it was primarily intended to train designers for industry. The college outgrew its accommodation at the Museum and moved here in the 1960s. The massing of the building was intended to complement Albert Hall Mansions, to the east of the Albert Hall, when seen from the park. The austere detailed, dark brick blocks of the RCA also act as a foil to the ample curves of the Albert Hall next door. It is said that the dark brick was chosen to match that of its neighbour, but when the Albert Hall was subsequently cleaned it was found to be red.



**Royal College of Organists**, H. H. Cole, 1875-6

The college was built as the National Training School for Music and later became specifically devoted to organists. It was designed by Henry Cole's son and in appearance is quite unlike any other public building of this date. The cream, pale blue and maroon sgraffito (incised plaster) decoration is by F. W. Moody, who was also responsible for interiors at the V&A. The frieze of musicians reflects the function of the building, but oddly it contains no organists.



***Turn left and walk behind the Albert Hall, walk down steps to Prince Consort Road, in front of you is the:***

**Royal College of Music**, Sir Arthur Blomfield, 1889-94

Albertopolis includes buildings in the classical, Renaissance and Dutch Revival styles, while Blomfield's College of Music introduces a French baronial element into the mix. The use of red brick echoes the Albert Hall opposite and was picked up again by R. J. Worley for Albert Court, the neighbouring tall block of apartments (1894–1900).



***Turn left, on your right is the:***

**Royal School of Mines, Aston Webb, 1909-13**

Aston Webb's effusive Classical Revival buildings, which dominate this area of London, were all built in the years immediately before the First World War. This was his last, and least successful. The building's entrance is an over-scale niche containing a huge monument to Alfred Beit and Julius Wernher, mining and diamond magnates (by P. R. Montford, 1916-20). Aston Webb was also responsible for the Cromwell Road front of the V&A and the famous façade of Buckingham Palace, which date from the same period.



***Continue to Exhibition Road and cross at the pedestrian crossing, turn right to return to the V&A's Exhibition Road entrance.***