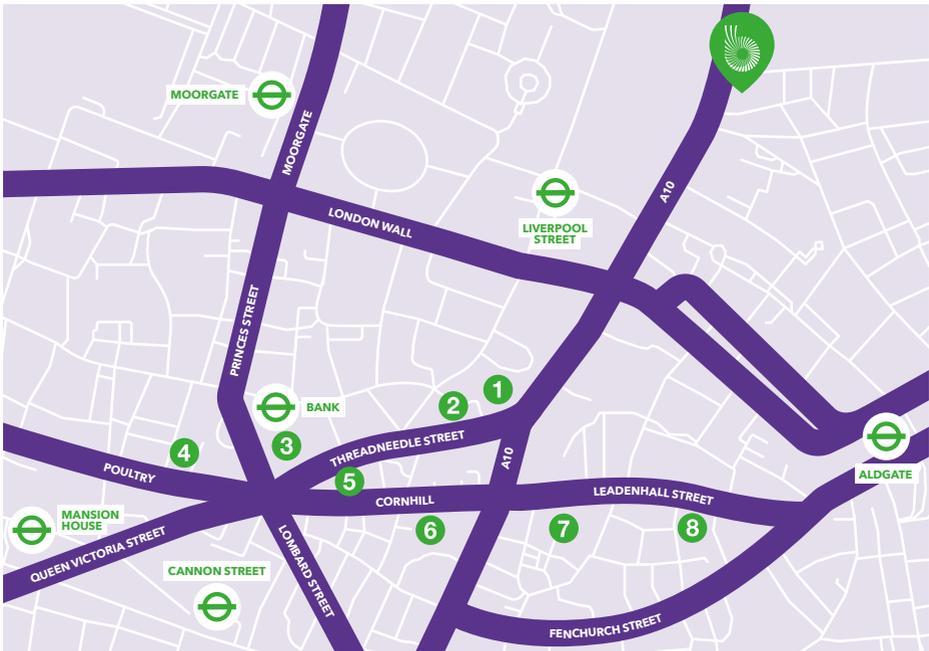


Walking Tour

Vanishing Empire in the City

This walking tour was devised by London Arts and Humanities Partnership research student Hardeep Dhindsa as part of his placement at Bishopsgate Institute



- 1 South Sea House**
Corner of Threadneedle St and Bishopsgate, London EC2R 8AY
- 2 Oriental Bank Corporation**
40 Threadneedle St, London EC2R 8AY
- 3 The Bank of England**
Bank of England, Threadneedle Street
- 4 The Ned**
(formerly the Midwest Bank HQ)
27 Poultry, London EC2R 8AJ
- 5 Duke of Wellington**
1 Cornhill, London EC3V 3ND
- 6 The Jamaica Coffee House**
(now Jamaica Wine House) St Michael's Alley, Cornhill, London EC3V 9DS
- 7 East India House**
Lloyds Building, 1 Lime St, London EC3M 7HA
- 8 Royal African Company**
approx. 40 Leadenhall St, London EC3A 2AD

This tour is not simply an attempt at reconstructing the architectural history of the City of London. It is also about the role memory plays in our contemporary identity. Many of the stops on this tour don't exist anymore, but their impact can still be felt. Some of the stops concern the physical appearance of the buildings, others focus on the people who inhabited them. All the stops explore the relationship between the City of London and the British Empire. We recognise that more work remains to be done in documenting and remembering our shared history.

1. South Sea House

This building housed the South Sea Company, a joint-stock company founded in 1711 to reduce the national debt. In 1713, the company held the Asiento de Negros, a lucrative trading contract awarded to a country by Spain. The contract stipulated that 4,800 African slaves must be annually supplied to Spain's American colonies. In total, around 34,000 slaves were sent over 96 voyages from Britain across 25 years. Also in 1713, the company arranged a deal with the Royal African Company to send slaves to Jamaica. The headquarters that stood here partly burned down in 1826, and the rest of the building was demolished later that century.

2. Oriental Bank Corporation

Until the 1890s, this building housed the Oriental Bank Corporation, an imperial bank founded in India in 1842 which quickly expanded across East Asia. In 1851, the bank became chartered in order to compete with the East India Company in the opium trade. It was liquidated in 1884 and failed in 1892. Many believed this was due to the bank stretching itself too thin over new ventures. It was an active participant in the Ceylon coffee plantations as well as sugar plantations in Mauritius. The original decorations of the building can still be seen most notably in the pediment where a horse and camel rest together, symbolising East and West.

3. The Bank of England

The Bank of England was established in 1694 and moved to its current location on Threadneedle Street in 1734. The building that stands there today was designed by Sir Herbert Baker and Charles Wheeler between 1920-45, under the governorship of Montagu Norman. Baker was one of the primary architects of empire, having worked extensively with Cecil Rhodes in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Baker also designed Rhodes House in Oxford and South Africa House in London, as well as contributing to the design of New Delhi. Montagu Norman had served in the Second Boer War, when Britain invaded Southern Africa for gold, and he also joined Brown Shipley and Co, an Atlantic trading company specialising in cotton and tobacco.

4. The Ned

The building known today as the Ned was originally built as the London headquarters for the Midland Bank, one of the 'Big Four' banking groups of the twentieth century. The architect for the building was Sir Edwin Lutyens, the namesake of the Ned, who is one of the most celebrated architects in British history. But who was Lutyens? Alongside Sir Herbert Baker, he designed New Delhi and spent a lot of his life working in the colonies, since his father-in-law was the Viceroy of India. Lutyens' views on India and its native population, however, were not positive.

In a 1912 letter to his wife, he wrote: ‘The very low intellect of the natives spoils much. I do not think it possible for Indians and whites to mix freely; mixed marriage is filthy and beastly and they ought to get the sanitary office to interfere.’

5. Duke of Wellington

This equestrian statue was completed in 1844 to commemorate both Wellington’s victory against Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo and his support for a bill to rebuild London Bridge. During his military career, Wellington was involved in the violent colonial suppression of Ireland and India. He fought in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War, acting as Governor of Mysore after Britain’s victory in 1799. He left India in 1804, having amassed a personal fortune of more than £40,000. Another equestrian statue of Wellington in Glasgow has relief panels showing brutal battle scenes in India and Ireland, and has become a focal point for grass-roots protest since the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

6. The Jamaica Coffee House

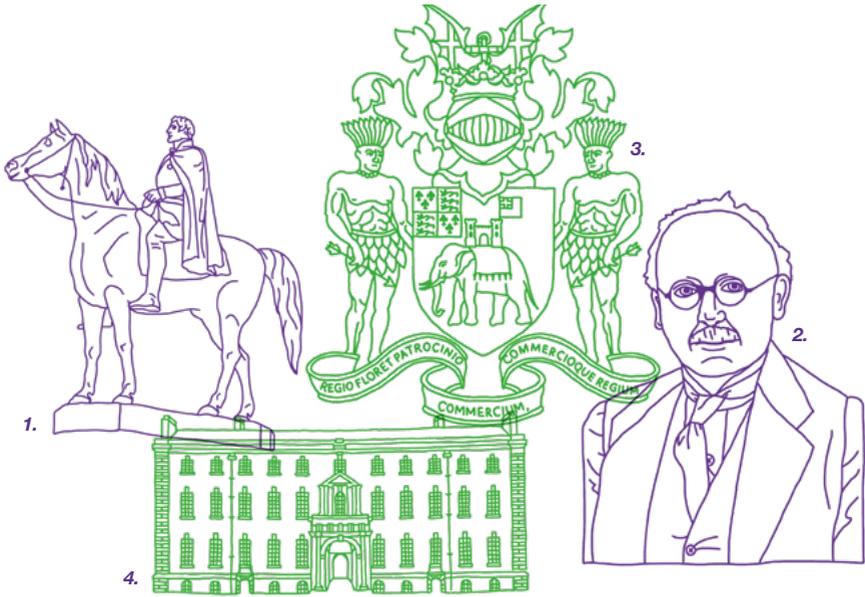
Now a wine bar, previously a pub, this spot was originally the location of one of London’s earliest coffee houses. During the eighteenth century, coffee houses were used (among other things) to advertise the sale of slaves or put up notices for the capture of fugitive slaves. For example, a notice displayed at the Jamaica Coffee House in 1728 offered a two-guinea reward for the return of a runaway Black female slave called Caelia Edlyne. The boom in London coffee houses is uncomfortably reflected in the growth of the slave population in Jamaica, from around 45,000 slaves in 1700 to around 300,000 by 1810. It is rumoured that slave-owning merchants also met at the Jamaica Coffee House in the early nineteenth century to block the move towards the abolition of slavery.

7. East India House

The East India Company was founded in 1600. It moved to this spot on Leadenhall Street in 1638. The last version of the building to stand here, before it was demolished in 1860, was constructed in 1729. While the Company was most famous for its role in the tea and spice trade, it was also involved in the slave trade. In 1684 the Company transported 250 slaves from Madagascar to St Helena. It continued transporting slaves until 1834, a year after Britain had abolished the slave trade. While the building does not remain, some of the décor was salvaged, including Spiridione Roma’s painting ‘The East Offering its Riches to Britannia’ (1778) and Michael Rysbrack’s relief sculpture ‘Britannia Receiving the Riches of the East’ (1728-30).

8. Royal African Company House

The Royal African Company was established in 1660 by the Stuarts to trade along Africa’s west coast. In 1752, the Company’s assets were transferred to the African Company of Merchants (which ceased trading in 1821). The company was originally created to exploit gold fields before sustaining itself through the Atlantic slave trade. In its first decade of slave trading, around 5,000 slaves were transported. They were branded with the initials DoY for Duke of York or RAC for Royal African Company. Across 60 years, almost 190,000 slaves were transported on over 600 voyages, meaning that the Royal African Company shipped more slaves than any other Atlantic company. Several prominent figures profited from this trade including James Stuart, Edward Colston, George Frideric Handel, and John Locke.



1. The Duke of Wellington (Source: Francis Leggatt Chantrey, Equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington, City of London, 1844). 2. Edwin Lutyens (Source: Lawrence Weaver, Photograph of Edwin Lutyens in 'Lutyens Houses and Gardens', 1921). 3. Coat of Arms of the Royal African Company, c.1672. 4. Elevation of South Sea House (Source: Thomas Bowles II, The South-Sea house in Bishops-gate Street, 1754)

Conclusion

This tour seeks to remember the fast-vanishing traces of empire in the City of London, but why are these worth remembering? The traces of imperial wealth in Britain remain visible today in a range of locations, including sprawling country mansions, Georgian new towns, and museum collections. But what we are losing in the City of London is the story of where that wealth came from; the way that the empire was built and managed, and the exploitation of people and resources which powered it. For almost 400 years Britain dominated the slave trade, and even fought hard to reinstate slavery in several Caribbean islands after it was abolished, to sustain the workings of the empire. Yet a YouGov poll from 2014 found that almost two thirds of respondents saw the British Empire as “more something to be proud of”. By exploring the histories of the individuals and organisations involved in driving the empire, we ensure the darker side of that history is not forgotten.



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