

# *Footloose in Marylebone*

If there was an award for the most "secret" village in London, Marylebone would surely be in the running. This relatively undefined and endlessly surprising space of elegantly grand Georgian town-houses and green garden squares between London's two most tourist sites - Oxford Street and Baker Street tube station - has remained one of London's best kept secrets. Indeed, this quiet, quaintly preserved area has been neglected by the public and the media for so long that that parts of it are almost 'mythological'; try seeking out 221B Baker Street (home of the fictitious detective Sherlock Holmes) and you'll be directed to 239 Baker Street, where an entire industry has built up around his legend, while 27 Wimpole Street - mentioned as the residence of a one "Henry Higgins" in the film *My Fair Lady*, is still a Doctor's surgery but you won't find an Eliza Doolittle living there.

But it is not just films in which Marylebone has been immortalised; Charles Dickens penned some of his best work at 1 Devonshire Place, including popular classics *David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. You can still seek out modern-day versions of "The Old Curiosity Shop" in areas around Marylebone High Street, which contain a vast array of delightfully unpredictable stores, including *Spy Master* (3 Portman Square, tel.020 7486 3885) - the quintessential shop for wannabe spies and those with an interest in secret surveillance.

The 'secret' theme continues with the charming and secluded St Christopher's Place, an enclave of Parisian-style cafes and elegant shops which is reached by entering a tiny passageway, no bigger than a person, off Oxford Street (opposite Bond Street Tube). Dart through this gap and you feel a little like Alice through the Looking Glass, when you are suddenly confronted by stylish shops and al fresco pavement cafes you never realised existed.

If like Holmes or his many followers, you're looking for a few more 'clues' to the area, you can start with Wigmore Street. Here in the 18th century, parties of well-to-do Londoners would gather at an alehouse before venturing nervously across a particularly notorious stretch of land known as Marylebone Fields, frequented by robbers and highwaymen, in order to reach the tempting concerts and parties held at the so-called "Pleasure Gardens" a short distance away. What they didn't know, of course, as they organised for guards with muskets to escort them, was that Dick Trupin himself and others of his like were already at the parties, enjoying themselves immensely.

Soon after, the Prince Regent chose the area to establish the park that bears his name. The 'village' quickly grew into one of London's most aristocratic quarters, brimming with life and energy. Today, the smart stucco terraces and villas around Regent's Park remain some of London's most expensive real estate while Robert Adam's Portland Place remains arguably London's grandest 18th century street.

Modern-day developers such as Sir Terence Conran have realised the potential of this peaceful part of London and have gentrified the area, opening increasingly chic stores here which cater to the continuous influx of young professionals.

The Conran Shop (55 Marylebone High Street, tel. 020 7723 2223) is the sister of the fashionable South Kensington design store in the Michelin Building, while Daunt Books (83 Marylebone High Street, tel.020 7224 2295) remains one of the city's most beautiful travel bookstore.

Two doors down, The Mysterious Bookshop (tel. 020 7486 8975) caters to the Sherlock Holmes and crime/thriller market in general with hundreds of titles including out-of print and signed US first editions.

For cuisine choices, you can't beat Terence Conran's new venture, The Orrey (55 Marylebone High Street, tel.020 7616 8000), which is quickly grabbing some of the market share from gastronomic neighbours such as Langan's Bistro, owned by the actor Michael Caine (26 Devonshire Street, tel. 020 7935 4531). Meanwhile, the very Parisian-looking Patisserie Valerie at Maison Sagne (105 Marylebone High Street, tel. 020 7395 6240) remains one of the best French patisseries in London (as in many Continental customers will attest to), and the interior, full of photos, mirrors and murals, is as close to Paris as you can get without leaving Waterloo.

The tropical atrium of the Winter Garden restaurant in the Landmark Hotel London (222 Marylebone Road, tel. 020 7631 8000) has the highest ceiling in London (around six floors high), and is filled with palm trees almost as big. A great place to impress someone if you're on a budget (snacks are available) or to simply indulge yourself in luxurious surroundings.

If there is one reason to visit Marylebone, however, it is for the Swedish restaurant Garbo's (42 Crawford Street, tel.020 7262 6582). This delightful place, which is named after the famous actress, is a bit of an institution, particularly in the eyes of the Swedish Embassy staff who are in the most devoted patrons.