

VILLIERS STREET

THEN & NOW *George Villiers may have been a sycophant but he was very good at it. Born in 1592 to a lowly ennobled family, his mother was widowed at an early age and trained the young George for life as a courtier; he was schooled in the noble pursuits of swordsmanship, etiquette, elocution and dance in the hope that he would become a pet of the Crown. When he was presented to King James I aged 21, it was clear that the education would pay dividends and Villiers was soon finding great favour at court. Extant letters from the courtier to His Majesty include the emetic lines "I desire only to live in the world for your sake" and "I naturally so love your person, and adore all your other parts, which are more than ever one man had".*

Well, thanks to his unflinching obsequiousness, George Villiers was soon knighted and the titles of Baron, Viscount, Earl and Marquess followed before he was 25. In 1623, in recognition of his brave and loyal services to the Crown, King James had great pleasure in conferring upon him the title of Duke, thus making him the highest-ranking Englishman outside the Royal Family. The new Duke of Buckingham was also granted York House, a significant mansion which occupied the space where Villiers Street is today.

The First Duke was murdered by a jealous rival in 1628 and, after the Restoration, York House passed to his son, the second Duke who sold the property to make way for the current streetscape. He received £30,000 for the land in 1672 from the opportunist developer Nicholas Barbon. A condition of the sale was that all new streets be named in his honour hence George Court, Villiers Street, Duke Street (now part of John Adam Street), Buckingham Street and even the absurd Of Alley (now York Place).

Barbon also had a famous father in PraiseGod Barebone, the eccentric parliamentarian remembered for the eponymous Barebone's Parliament. The son was a qualified surgeon but preferred art to science and turned his attentions to construction although, from the quality of his masonry, he didn't take pride in the quality of his work.

Villiers Street was begun in 1672, just a few years after the Great Fire had devastated the City. Barbon was also something of a pioneer being the first insurer to offer protection against fire. For the purchase of the York House scheme, Barbon had to borrow funds and lived precariously off his creditors' benevolence, gambling that the homes he intended for the gentry and middle classes (not just nobility as previous developers had) would become profitable, he also made allowance for taverns and coffee houses.

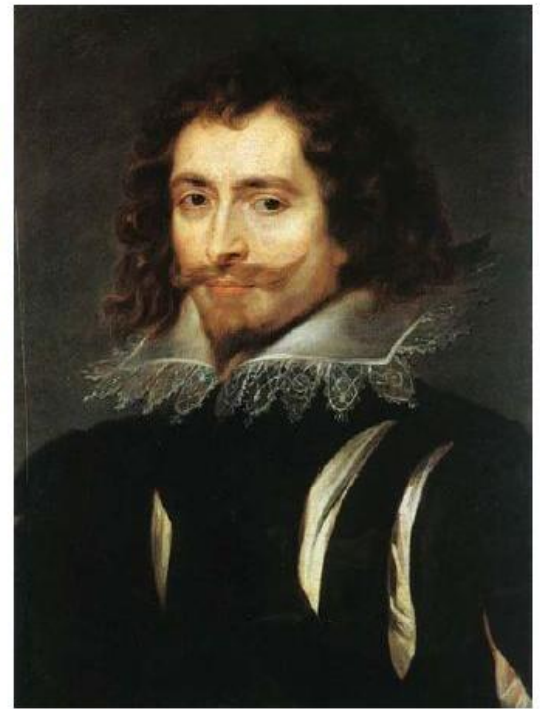
His faith was vindicated as he died in 1698 a wealthy man. One other noteworthy thing about Barbon is his name: if you think that your middle name is embarrassing, spare a thought for this man; his full name was Nicholas Unless-Jesus-Christ-Had-Died-For-Thee-Thou-Hadst-Been-Damned Barbon.



THE CHARING CROSS HOTEL DESIGNED BY E. M. BARRY

Thus Villiers Street stood for many years, with only superficial improvements to the architecture, until the 1860s when construction of the Charing Cross Station concourse meant that most of the western part of the street had to be demolished. This gave developers,

notably John Hawkshaw, a blank canvas to recreate the street with reference to its new status as an important scion of the growing transport network. The Charing Cross Hotel was built above the station by E. M. Barry in 1863. It broke the mould of contemporaneous architecture as it was one of the first London buildings to be faced with artificial masonry; at the time this was quite a taboo.



ABOVE, PORTRAIT OF THE DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM BY PETER PAUL RUBENS

LEFT, THE HOUSE WHERE RUDYARD KIPLING LODGED



The original 218 bedrooms were renowned for opulent ornaments and extravagant comfort and the grand dining room was luxurious and hosted many sophisticated banquets of grace and refinement. The original mansard roof and dormer windows have now been replaced with a less elegant but more functional horizontal double storey.

Villiers Street was never meant to be home to the great and the good of polite society, so of the famous people who have lodged here, most of them had been going through hard times or making a name for themselves. Of the latter category, Rudyard Kipling lived and worked here when he was honing his writing skills. In his memoirs he recalls his lodgings: "Meantime, I had found me quarters in Villiers Street, Strand, which forty-six years ago was primitive and passionate in its habits and population. My rooms were small, not over-clean or well-kept, but from my desk I could look out of my window through the fanlight of Gatti's Music-Hall entrance, across the street, almost on to its stage. The Charing Cross trains rumbled through my dreams on one side, the boom of the Strand on the other, while, before my windows, Father Thames under the Shot Tower walked up and down with his traffic." Going back a few years, Sir Richard Steele lived here from 1712 and founded the periodicals *Tatler*, *The Spectator* and *The Guardian*.



SIR RICHARD STEELE

So Villiers Street has been transformed from marshland to a stately mansion to a rickety home for London's middle classes as well as one or two scribes of days gone by. But the best thing about the street is the man after whom it is ultimately named: A man who rose from anonymous mediocrity to become the highest-ranked figure at court by fawning over the King and being a creep.

A STROLL DOWN VILLIERS STREET

Villiers Street is an odd collection of cafés and bars, as if everything was assembled higgledy-piggledy on one side, at odds with the vastness of the building work on the other, the edge of Charing Cross station. The road sweeps down from the Strand to the crowds milling about Embankment station, on Friday evenings commuters hurriedly buy flowers from stalls to take home to loved ones, light-headed



from afternoon drinking in one of the bars populated by suits eager for an ice-cold reward for a week hard at the grindstone. Countless cafés spread their tables on the pavement; under canopies customers can enjoy refreshment from the mostly Italian kiosks or chains of well-known eateries.



As well as the office suits, mothers with prams frequent here too; students and tourists, caffeine fanatics and smoothie drinkers all go about their prospective business or do no business at all, preferring to slump

gracefully in Embankment Gardens. In the summer any street in London is a more cheery one, Villiers Street is one that embraces the summer spirit more than most, where even bored charity collectors are willing to have a chat as well as park attendants and the nice man selling the evening paper. The London Eye twinkles in the



distance, and strange goth-like creatures mill about The Arches proudly indicating that heavy metal is clearly not dead, not in central London anyway. Suspiciously tanned shoppers sip lattes and indulge in croissant treats watching busy workers suffer in the heat, and all contribute in making Villiers Street one of the more entertaining destinations on the Strand.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GORDON'S WINE BAR © JERRY BOND STAMOS; EMBANKMENT CAFÉ BY AMY CHURCH; REMINDER BY HELEN ANDERTON; A STROLL DOWN VILLIERS STREET ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY TIPPER

VILLIERS STREET NOW

With Embankment station at one end and Charing Cross station at the other, there is little wonder that it is pretty busy on this street and the hubbub is reflected in the diversity of businesses which are resident here. Unsurprisingly, given the proximity to so many handy transport routes and world attractions, Villiers Street has two very good hotels.



The Royal Adelphi is named after the Adam brothers who are also commemorated in nearby street names, the hotel itself is most impressive with all the facilities you'd expect of a good hotel in a world city such as London. All rooms have a colour television and direct line telephones and the lobby and hotel bar are open every minute of every day should guests need anything at an inopportune hour.



Adjacent to the mainline station is the **Thistle Charing Cross** which has rooms overlooking the busy Strand. Guests staying here have the choice of 239 bedrooms including some particularly swanky suites. Although the façade is Victorian, inside you get all the creature comforts of 21st century life; wireless internet access is available throughout and the friendly staff are always on hand to help. The famous accounting and consultancy firm **PricewaterhouseCoopers** also has offices on this street. PwC has about 15,000 members of staff in this country and is the highest employer of graduates (according to the Times) many of whom can be seen,



turned out immaculately on Villiers Street at lunchtime and after work. Those of them who are in the know take their lunch at **Embankment Café**, a short walk for them and one well worth taking for any of us. In Embankment Gardens you'll find an idyll of peace and quiet and you can buy honest food to eat in the sunshine. The menu is traditional with **Fish & chips** one of the most popular choices.



When the working day is done, there are plenty of cafés and bars to unwind in on Villiers Street so you don't have to go to the station in the rush hour. One which has been here since 1890 is **Gordon's Wine Bar** which is thought to be the oldest surviving such establishment in London. Inside the bar, time seems to have stood still with wooden walls and newspaper clippings sepia with age. Here, *sherry* and *port* are served from the barrel and the menu of bar food is traditional: mature cheeses and lusty homemade pies. If you are particularly up for partying and you don't have to get up early tomorrow, a night out clubbing in **Heaven** is as hedonistic as they come. With the only liquor licence until 06.00 in the whole of Westminster, the boys are out here every night until night-time ends. The majority of clubbers here are fashionable men, but so long as you have the party spirit within you, you're in Heaven.

