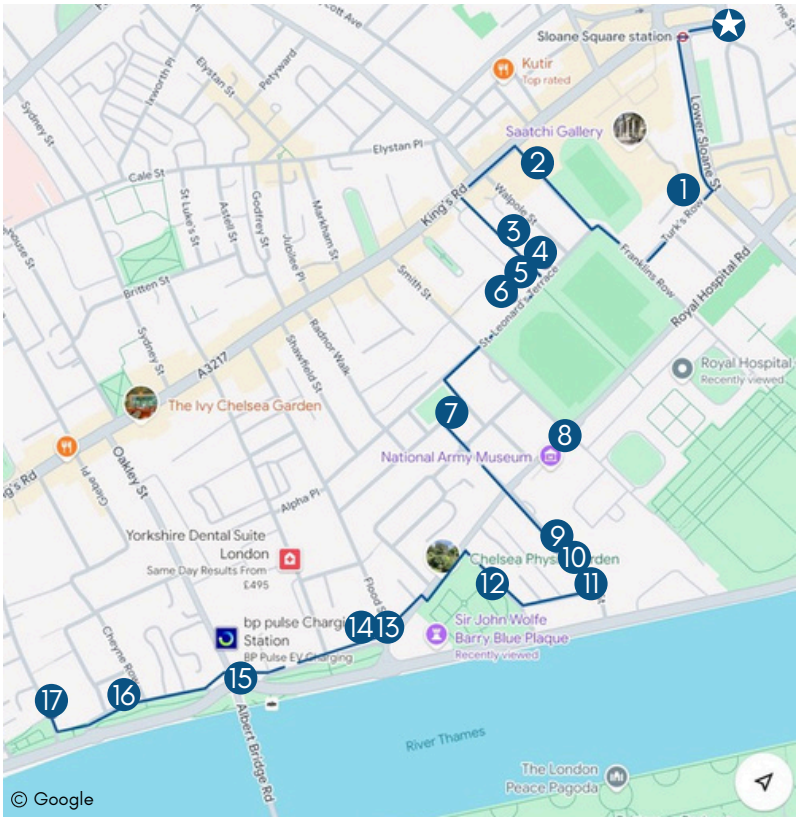
CHELSEA
HERITAGE
QUARTER

WALKING TOUR

AMERICANS IN CHELSEA

# A walk from Sloane Square Underground to Chelsea Old Church

Time to walk
**Approx 40 mins**




Americans have long been associated with Chelsea. Whether it was artists coming for the dramatic light and shadows of the River Thames, actors seeking respite from the busy West End, or writers attracted by the Bohemian atmosphere in the 19th century, many illustrious Americans have spent time here.

Their presence is not just historic. There is a large expat community in Chelsea, many of whom have made London their permanent home. This walk will explore a diverse group who have contributed to London and British life.

## 1 Turk's Row

Begin at Sloane Square Underground Station. Walk straight ahead, cross Lower Sloane Street and follow it left. Make the first right on to Turk's Row, where just beyond Cavalry Square on the right, there is a memorial plaque to 74 American military personnel and three civilians who were killed by a V-1 bomb in 1944. A lack of military housing in the capital meant that overflow personnel were housed in private accommodation on this street. V-1 bombs had been falling on London during this second "Blitz," but not in this part of town and the devastating blast caught soldiers completely unaware.

The big band conductor, Glenn Miller, who was commander of the American Army Air Force Band, lived here for a short time before the bombing but had transferred his musicians to safety in Bedford the day before the attack. Wartime censorship meant that few people knew of the largest one-day loss suffered by American personnel in London during the Second World War.

## 2 Whitelands House

Walk to the end of the street and turn right on to Franklin's Row, which leads on to Cheltenham Terrace. Just before King's Road on the left is Whitelands House, where William Saroyan, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and playwright, rented a small flat in 1966. His estranged adult children joined him, and for eight weeks, they talked their way to reconciliation.

## 3 Royal Avenue

Make a left on to King's Road and take the second left on to Royal Avenue. Wisconsin-born film director Joseph Losey relocated to number 29 in the 1950s when he was blacklisted by Hollywood for being a member of the Communist Party. He found success here with a series of films scripted by Harold Pinter. He died in this house in 1984, only one month after completing his last film.

## 4 St Leonard's Terrace

Discreetly glance up to the upper levels of the corner house by St Leonard's Terrace, originally two townhouses artfully laced together by the architect Richard Rogers in the 1980s. Rogers' wife, Ruthie, who originally hails from upstate New York, still cooks from her kitchen with soaring ceilings. She was one of the founders of the eternally popular River Café in Hammersmith.

## 5 Royal Hospital Chelsea

Cross St Leonard's Terrace and take in the spectacular view of the Royal Hospital through the gates of Burton Court. The elegant buildings were commissioned by King Charles II in 1682 to provide a home for soldiers "broken by age and war." Some 300 Chelsea pensioners live here today.

## 6 St Leonard's Terrace

Keeping the Hospital on your left, continue on St Leonard's Terrace where at number 20, the "queen of one-woman theatre," Ruth Draper, lived in the summer of 1926. The actress was a frequent visitor to London and delighted British audiences with her character-driven monologues. That summer included a command performance at Windsor Castle for
King George V and Queen Mary. More than 20 years later, King George VI awarded Ruth an honorary membership in the Order of the British Empire.

## 7 Tedworth Square

Continue until you turn left into Tedworth Square. Follow the square around to the right and stop by number 23, where one of the United States' most beloved authors resided for a short time in 1896. Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, had an eclectic career that included working as riverboat crew, a miner and then a journalist. Unfortunately, he made poor investments and when financial trouble hit in his sixties, Clemens embarked on a financially successful global lecture tour that eventually brought him to London. From this charming corner abode, Mark Twain wrote a travel memoir and had his death falsely reported, leading to the famous phrase, "The report of my death was an exaggeration."

23 Tedworth Square, home to Mark Twain

## 8 National Army Museum

Exit the square on to Tite Street, then cross Christchurch Street and cross over Royal Hospital Road. The National Army Museum is on the left; drop in to see displays on the American War of Independence and 19th-century North America.

## 9 Tite Street Studios

Continue towards the river on Tite Street, laid out in 1877 to connect the newly-constructed Embankment with King's Road. Today it is one of the wealthiest streets in Chelsea, but back then the neighbourhood had a bohemian edge, so Tite Street offered an opportunity for artists to create relatively inexpensive purpose-built studios. A fabulous example is at number 50, where in the late 1800s, American artist Anna Lea Merritt commissioned this bright studio.

Artist John Singer Sargent

## 10 John Singer Sargent's Studio

A bit further on and across the street, at 31 & 33, John Singer Sargent's studio and home attracted the notable figures of Edwardian Society as they visited to have their portraits painted by this successful artist. Sargent was born in Florence to American parents but settled permanently in London in 1886, remaining until his death in 1925.

### ⓫ Whistler's White House

Prior to Sargent's arrival, American-born James McNeill Whistler was at the centre of this street's social scene when he hosted events at his specially commissioned White House, which stood where number 35 is today.

### ⓬ Chelsea Physic Garden

Just after Whistler's former home, turn right into Dilke Street, passing the London Sketch Club on the left, and follow the road as it curves right into Swan Walk. On the left, take a peek through the side gate of the Chelsea Physic Garden, laid out here in 1673 so that trainee apothecaries and medics could study medicinal plants. Today, there is an extensive education programme and events for the public on its 3.5-acre site, which contains some 5,000 plants.

In the 1700s, the American botanist John Bartram introduced many North American plants to European gardeners. He boosted the Physic Garden's North American collection in regular shipments of seeds known as "Bartram's Boxes."

Chelsea Physic Garden

### ⓭ Cheyne Walk

Walk towards Royal Hospital Road and turn left, passing the main entrance to the Botanic Garden. Cross Royal Hospital Road and just past Flood Street, bear right into Cheyne Walk, where the elegant 18th-century mansions lining the river sweep you back in time.

The first house in this illustrious line-up is number 2, where American actor John Barrymore stayed in 1925 when he played the title role in Hamlet at the West End's Haymarket Theatre.

### ⓮ Number 4 Cheyne Walk

The elegant house at number 4 is owned by Michael Bloomberg, founder of the American news agency which has its European headquarters in the City of London. That building is located above an ancient temple dedicated to the Roman god, Mithras. Bloomberg Philanthropies restored the archaeological site, which is now open to the public.

### ⓯ Albert Bridge

Continue west on Cheyne Walk, enjoying the grand houses that line the river, most of which date from the 1700s. Don't forget to look towards the river and the splendid Albert Bridge which opened in 1873. Cross Oakley Street.

### ⓰ Carlyle Mansions

Just past the flower-adorned brasserie, Fifty Cheyne, is a large mansion block, Carlyle Mansions. The late 19th-century building is named for the British writer and philosopher, Thomas Carlyle, who lived nearby. But the building is affectionately known as Writers' Block because of the many authors who have lived here, including two Americans, Henry James and T.S. Eliot. James, who lived here near the end of his life, described his riverside home as, "this Chelsea perch, this haven of sage and seagull, has proved, even after a brief encounter, just the thing for me."

### ⓱ Chelsea Old Church

Henry James boasts a memorial plaque inside Chelsea Old Church, a bit further west. His funeral took place here in 1916, only 13 years after the funeral of the painter, James McNeill Whistler. He had a studio at 96 Cheyne Walk from 1866 until 1878, before he moved to Tite Street. The artist was captivated by the changing light of the sky and river and from here created many of his Thames nocturnes.

In 1935, the wedding of American actress Dorothy Hyson attracted hundreds of fans who hoped to catch a glimpse of the star.

From here, it's a short walk north to the King's Road.