CHELSEA HERITAGE QUARTER

A short walk with a lot of history, stopping at the 3 main heritage sites of Chelsea Heritage Quarter: Royal Hospital Chelsea, National Army Museum and Chelsea Physic Garden.

SELF-GUIDED HIGHLIGHTS TOUR

TIME TO WALK Approx 35 minutes

DISTANCE Less than one mile **START** Sloane Square Station **FINISH** Chelsea Physic Garden

This walk gives you an overview of the three sites of the Chelsea Heritage Quarter, a collaboration among Chelsea Physic Garden, the National Army Museum, the Royal Hospital Chelsea, and Cadogan Estates. It is well under a mile, so it's worth expanding the walk by visiting one or all three of the sites. Why not make a day of it?

We begin at S Sloane Square Station, which transformed the neighbourhood when the Underground opened here in 1868. Nearly 200 years earlier, King Charles II commissioned Sir Christopher Wren to design a refuge for army veterans "broken by age and war" — and the Royal Hospital he built is still a centrepiece of Chelsea today.

To reach it, turn left into Sloane Gardens and follow the road as it curves round to Lower Sloane Street. Cross and head left, staying on Lower Sloane Street until the junction, then turn right onto Royal Hospital Road and cross at the first crossing. Stop outside the 1 Margaret Thatcher Infirmary. This classically-designed building opened in 2009 as a full-service facility for the residents of the Royal Hospital, and carries the former prime minister's name because she was instrumental in raising the money for it. She and her husband, Denis, attended services in the pensioners' All Saints Chapel in later life, and both are interred in the courtyard here.

Continue west and stop by the 2 London Gate, the entrance used every May for the Chelsea Flower Show, one of the Hospital's main fundraisers. On your left is the 3 Old Burial Ground, the Hospital's private cemetery, which opened in 1691 and closed for burials in 1854.

Keep walking along the fence with the Hospital on your left. Opposite, on the north side of the road, is 4 Burton Court, a ten-acre sports field belonging to the Hospital with tennis courts and a cricket pitch. It is the home ground of the Household Division, and cricket matches are played here between Army regiments.



OPEN THE INTERACTIVE MAP ↗

Carry on to 5 Chapel Gate. The life-size bronze behind the gate is known as the 6 In-Pensioner; the oak leaf he holds recalls King Charles II hiding from Cromwell's soldiers in an oak tree in 1651. This is the best place to take in Wren's architecture — he also designed St Paul's Cathedral. The King, troubled that wounded soldiers had come home with nowhere to live, gave them a majestic place to recover.

The 7 Wren Chapel sits directly east of the central portico. Pensioners are no longer required to attend twice a day as they were in 1692, but a service with a professional choir is held every Sunday and the public is welcome. There are concerts here throughout the year.
To the right of the portico is the 8 Great Hall, where residents eat three cooked meals a day beneath Antonio Verrio's grand mural of King Charles II. It has been an imposing setting for meals since the 1600s, and its walls hold plenty of history: the Duke of Wellington lay in state here in 1852.

A short distance on, to the left, is 9 Chelsea Gate, the main entrance to the grounds and the starting point for guided tours. Some 300 retired pensioners live here today, men and women with an average age of 80 who have served in a range of conflicts. Each has an ensuite bedroom and separate living area — a far cry from the original six-foot-square open berths with shared bathrooms. You can see an original berth on a tour hosted by resident pensioners, running every day but Monday. The tours give you an insight into daily life, personal anecdotes about the Hospital's past, and a real sense of the community spirit here. Paid tours can be booked here.

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If you can't take a tour, at least visit the 10 **Soane Stable Yard** on the right as you pass through the gates. The 11 **Chelsea Pensioners Museum** has plenty of video displays, a model with projections showing how the complex has changed over the years, and a gift shop that is a lot of fun. (Closed Mondays.) Once you've refreshed yourself at 12 **Heidi**, the bakery and café in the courtyard, head back out to the main gates and turn left.

A few feet away is the 13 **National Army Museum**, and its position next to the Hospital is no coincidence: it occupies the site of the Hospital's former infirmary and stable yard, designed by Sir John Soane and bombed in the Second World War. The museum itself was founded in 1960 at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, built around the belongings and records of soldiers returning from the former British Empire; you can still see their memorabilia and gear in the gallery Life as a Soldier. The growing collection moved into this purpose-built Brutalist building in 1971. There is a large, bright café too.

THE NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM



When you've had your fill, turn left outside the exit and walk a few streets west along Royal Hospital Road to 14 **Chelsea Physic Garden**, one of London's greatest treasures. It was founded in 1673 by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries, who were then something between primary care doctors and pharmacists. "Physic" means the practice of healing, and the Garden is still dedicated to conserving and studying useful plants.

The south-facing riverside site was chosen for its warm air currents, and because the apothecaries could moor their barge here for plant-finding expeditions further afield. A wall went up around the four acres in 1676 to create a microclimate, and the first stove-heated glasshouse followed in 1680. The glasshouses now hold some 1,200 species, many of them rare. An international seed exchange begun in the 1700s still runs between Chelsea and around 368 botanic gardens and universities in 37 countries.

In the 1700s this was regarded as the finest botanical garden in the country, possibly the world; today it grows some 4,500 edible, useful and medicinal plants. Admission includes a 45-minute guided tour, bookable here, running between 11:00am and 3:30pm daily subject to volunteer guides. The café, with its outdoor seating, is a splendid place for lunch or coffee and cake, and an ideal place to end your walk.



CHELSEA PHYSIC GARDEN, FOUNDED 1673