

# NOT SO FAST!

With a population of 8m and 26m overnight visits made each year, London is one of the busiest cities in the world with everyone in perpetual motion, dashing about defining their status. But a new movement is reclaiming the right to dawdle. Slowing right down, **Michael Hodges** experiences the city as he's never seen it before. Illustrations by **Patrick Morgan**

The train is late, so I have to run to catch the London in Slow Motion walk. After berating the ticket barrier for taking so long to let me through – I mean, six bloody seconds – I rush round the corner from Charing Cross station, pelt down Villiers Street, home to London's oldest wine bar (but there's no time for that now), then into Victoria Embankment Gardens. Tearing across the manicured lawns I hurdle over a toddler and swerve past a huddle of Italian students before bounding across the Embankment's zebra crossing and arriving at Cleopatra's Needle and at the feet of my guide Rosie Oliver and the rest of the Slow Walkers. 'Hello,' I pant. 'I'm... Michael.'

As you can see, I'm in a rush. But then I usually am. I live in London, where everyone is in a perpetual hurry and dashing around defines your status as a successful citizen. Slow down and you're lost, but that's exactly what Rosie wants us to do. So today we will be dawdling through Trafalgar Square and Covent Garden to explore the hidden places that, as she puts it, 'resist the frenzied rhythms of metropolitan life'. Or we will be when I get my breath back.

Before we set off, Rosie asks the group to pause and look for slowness in the river scene before us. The plane trees along the Embankment are clearly in no hurry but

the Thames is in full flood and charges madly by. The only slowness I can see is man-made: on the South Bank the London Eye turns sluggishly and a double decker dawdles on Waterloo Bridge. Slowest of all is the Egyptian monolith we are standing under. Cleopatra's Needle is over 3,000 years old, its age measured in the passing of centuries rather than the minutes that Londoners live by. Which, I guess by Rosie's meaningfully arched eyebrow, is the point of starting here.

Travelling further back in time we cross back into the park I've just dashed through and stop before a Dawn Redwood, a graceful conifer with fern-like foliage known as 'the living fossil'. 'This tree,' Rosie explains, 'would have been here when dinosaurs roamed the Earth.' I let out a gasp of wonder. 'Not this actual tree,' she adds. 'It was planted in 1970, but the species would have been here.'

I may be slow on the uptake but I do know that when the Thames was a swampy lagoon, the shore was another 100 metres inland, pretty much where The Savoy hotel stands on the Strand ('strand' means shore). That point remained the water's edge, until the great Victorian civil engineer Joseph Bazalgette built the Embankment in the 1860s as part of the new sewer system that transformed the health of Londoners. They had been dying of cholera



at the rate of 10,000 a year (in public health terms, sewage is one thing you do want to travel quickly).

Climbing up the narrow steps that run along the side of the hotel, we pass the famous Coal Hole pub – something I don't usually manage even when I am moving at speed – and turn into Savoy Court. This U-shaped access road is a unique anomaly, the only street in the UK where traffic drives on the right. As we join it a Bentley pulls out with a stately lack of haste, a reminder that in London slowness can be a luxury reserved for the rich and powerful.

Even on a Sunday the Strand is a noisy and rushed thoroughfare. Which is just how I like my thoroughfares, but Rosie slips into a passageway where the noise of 2013 immediately stops. Built alongside a pub of the same name, Bull Inn Court was first recorded in 1635 and today the interior is dark and still, as if the alley is brooding over its own long history. The Bull Inn is now The Nell Gwynne tavern, renamed after the most famous of King Charles II's many mistresses. Walking on to Trafalgar Square,

marooned on a traffic island amidst the whirligig of buses and cabs, we come to the statue erected in honour of his executed father.

Charles I was beheaded yards away on Whitehall and I imagine for onlookers, those astounded moments before the axe came down on his neck in 1649 would have been among the slowest and quietest they'd known. Today the equestrian bronze figure of Charles senior is unchanged but Rosie points out that the plinth of Portland stone has been ravaged by three centuries of city air. The royal coat of arms is pitted and fading, a marker of the passing of the years.

Although Trafalgar Square is as busy as ever this spot is unruffled and motionless, and it seems appropriate when Rosie reveals that it's the exact point from where all distances from London are measured. I make more discoveries as we loop back towards Covent Garden. Did you know the famous sundial at Seven Dials only has six dials? That just off St Martin's Lane there's a secret street of Georgian shop fronts and gas-lit street lamps apparently operating in its own time zone? (Goodwin's Court, I won't tell you exactly where it is because much of the fun is in stumbling across it unexpectedly.) Or that only feet away from the manic street performances of Covent Garden there is a calm and contemplative rectangle of grass, trees and flagstones?

This sanctuary is offered by the garden graveyard of St Paul's, Covent Garden, slotted behind Inigo Jones' looming 1633 Palladian temple. But St Paul's doesn't turn its back on the noise and hurry of performances. Its nickname is the 'actors' church' and the still interior is lined with plaques marking the lives of actors, vaudeville performers and comics. Leaving Rosie for a moment I find a plaque honouring Percy Press, the 'King of Punch and Judy'. No longer plagued by the frantic hurly-burly of Mr and Mrs Punch, the policeman or the crocodile, Mr Press is finally at rest. Proof that in the end there's only one way you can be sure of slowing down in this city. ■

*Dotmaker Tours leads themed-guided walks for those who want to look at London differently and includes the Rubbish Trip. The next tour of London in Slow Motion is on 12 January (£12, [dotmakertours.co.uk](http://dotmakertours.co.uk)). Michael Hodges writes the weekly '1001 Things Not To Do in London' column for Time Out magazine. @TimeOutHodges*



## WHAT'S HOT IN LONDON RIGHT NOW?

Find out at [britishairways.com/en-gb/destinations/london/things-to-do-in-london](http://britishairways.com/en-gb/destinations/london/things-to-do-in-london). British Airways operates from three airports in London: Heathrow, Gatwick, City.

