

# KING'S CROSS WALKS

by  
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Guide-lecturer David Williams can lead you through the streets of London's hidden histories. He tells Sara Dimmitt what the new King's Cross means to him.

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In the short time I've known David Williams, I've learned that he's a first-rate storyteller. It makes him compelling company. He acquired this skill through his experience in journalism, documentary scriptwriting and directing, and he puts it to good use on the historical walks he gives as a London guide. Indeed, any Bond villain would be jealous of his detailed knowledge of London's hidden back alleys and unassuming tree-lined squares. He has perfected the art of turning the city-dweller's humdrum daily commute into an exploration of the past, weaving in and out of streets and alleys, under railway arches, and through layers of history that often remain buried under London's skyline.

What Williams's walks offer are explorations of space and time. Spanning roughly two hours, they focus on particular neighbourhoods of London, ranging between Limehouse and Soho, Bethnal Green and King's Cross. His commentary serves as a narrative connecting physical detail and historical memory and is peppered with the kind of visual details that would be difficult to pick up on your own: the figure of Little Dorrit in a Southwark church's stained glass window, perhaps, or Banksy's *Yellow Lines Flower Painter* on a wall tucked away off Bethnal Green Road.

In drawing our attention to details we may have missed, he often finds he is forging a link

between a family's past and present. As he says, "An interest in genealogy makes them think 'I wonder where my dad or my granddad came from?' On historical walks you can get people to understand and realise something about the history of the place, and in many cases that affects them. They feel an affinity for it."

This sort of grassroots exploration and celebration of a neighbourhood's history balances somewhere between flânerie and purposeful searching. It generates a poignancy that is either complement or contrast to the redevelopment of King's Cross. As Williams explains, "The demands of development are nothing new to King's Cross." In fact, he suggests, the area's history is largely defined by "the conflict between the old ways, established communities, the under-privileged." In the mid-19th Century, it was the railroad companies who cleared the neighbourhoods north of what are now King's Cross and St Pancras stations, building a network of railways that became the backbone of British rail travel.

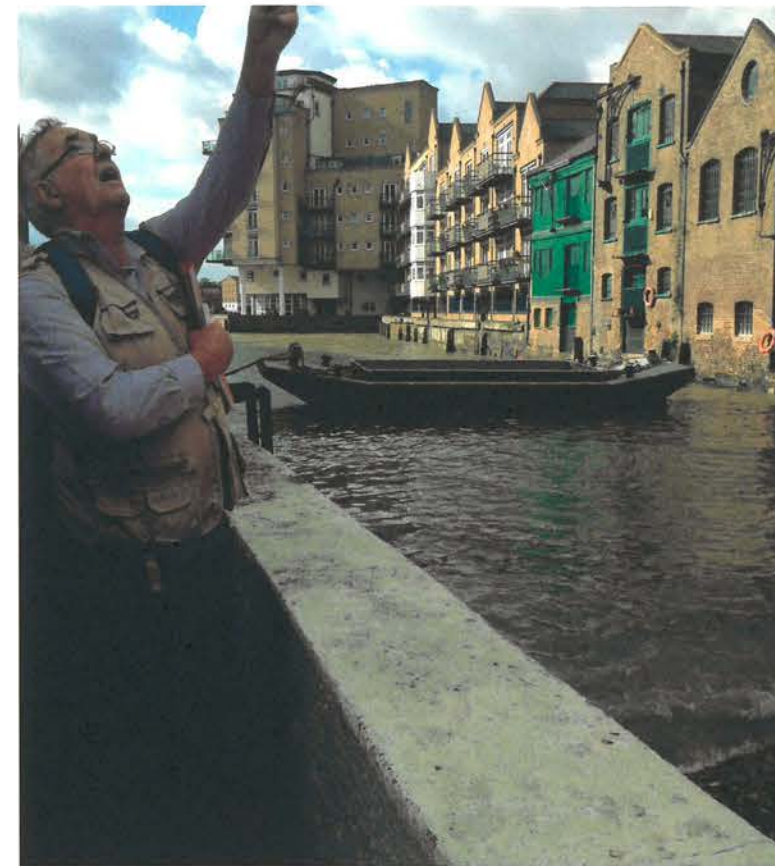
Over the past 30 years King's Cross may not have enjoyed the most salubrious reputation. Williams acknowledges that people unfamiliar with its recent redevelopment may "think it dirty or smelly. It's not too many years back when it was an area of seedy hotels and strange people in long mackintoshes with caps pulled over their eyes."

King's Cross's new identity as a travel, commercial and cultural hub is inescapably tied up with the area's industrial past. In an effort to maintain links to that identity, developers are re-imagining many of the area's architectural remnants, turning the old granary building into an art school and re-purposing the gasholders as housing. They are also encouraging arts organisations to take up residence in the neighbourhood.

The future vitality of King's Cross is hardly in doubt, but in the midst of all of this activity we sometimes require a pause, a space to shed the protective layer we have grown in response to the sensory overstimulation of living in a city. This kind of pause can be particularly difficult to achieve in a buzzing and rapidly changing area like King's Cross, where the race to finish construction muffles the stories told by quieter side streets.

At the end of our conversation, Williams explains how he sees the future of the area: "I don't view change as being a problem. Change fuels London." I do have certain suspicions that some of these buildings are not what they should be; they spoil the sight lines, but every city has to continually change. If you are going to take an area like King's Cross — or Docklands or Battersea — and turn it into what it's becoming, there are people who are going to be left behind." David Williams offers a way of locating those potentially lost histories through poetic explorations of the past that show you how to think in new ways.

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David Williams on a historical tour around Limehouse