

England's Kensington

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Queen Victoria's Childhood

Princess Victoria, born in 1819, was raised very strictly by her mother in what was known as the "Kensington System." It was designed to separate her from court politics.

Residing in Kensington Palace, she was never allowed to be alone, and her mother even slept in the same room with her. Her visitors were restricted; boys older than 6 were not permitted to visit her. According to her diary, her best friends were the palace's numerous "black beetles."

She only learned that she was to be queen when, at the age of 18, she was awakened from sleep to learn of the death of her uncle King William IV. Queen Victoria ruled from 1837 to 1901 and epitomized the "Victorian" age.

The Great Exhibition of 1851

Kensington became famous for the Great Exhibition of 1851, a world-scale trade fair displaying Victorian Britain's scientific, commercial, and cultural achievements. It was sponsored by Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband.

The Exhibition was housed in the Crystal Palace, the first major prefabricated building ever created, which enclosed 33 million cubic feet of space. The Crystal Palace, true to its name, was built from glass panels fastened to a cast iron framework. Over 6 million people attended the Exhibition.

The Albert Memorial

When Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Albert, died of typhoid fever in 1861, Victoria commissioned a monument in his honor, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott and erected in 1872.

The memorial is surmounted by a gilded statue of Prince Albert holding the catalogue of the Great Exhibition. The memorial is also decorated with 169 life-size figures of great poets, musicians, painters, architects, and sculptors.

The Albert Memorial's baroque Victorian decoration was admired at the time, but was disliked by many twentieth-century viewers as tastes changed. Recently refurbished, the Albert Memorial remains one of Kensington's major landmarks.

Harrods

Another major landmark of Kensington, Harrods is the most famous department store in the world. Founded by tea merchant Henry Charles Harrod in 1849, the present store was built in 1900.

Its selection (over 200 departments) and service are famous for British "posh," but every year after Christmas it is invaded by everyday Londoners in search of post-Christmas sale bargains.

The olive-green Harrods shopping bag is a favorite souvenir of visitors to London.