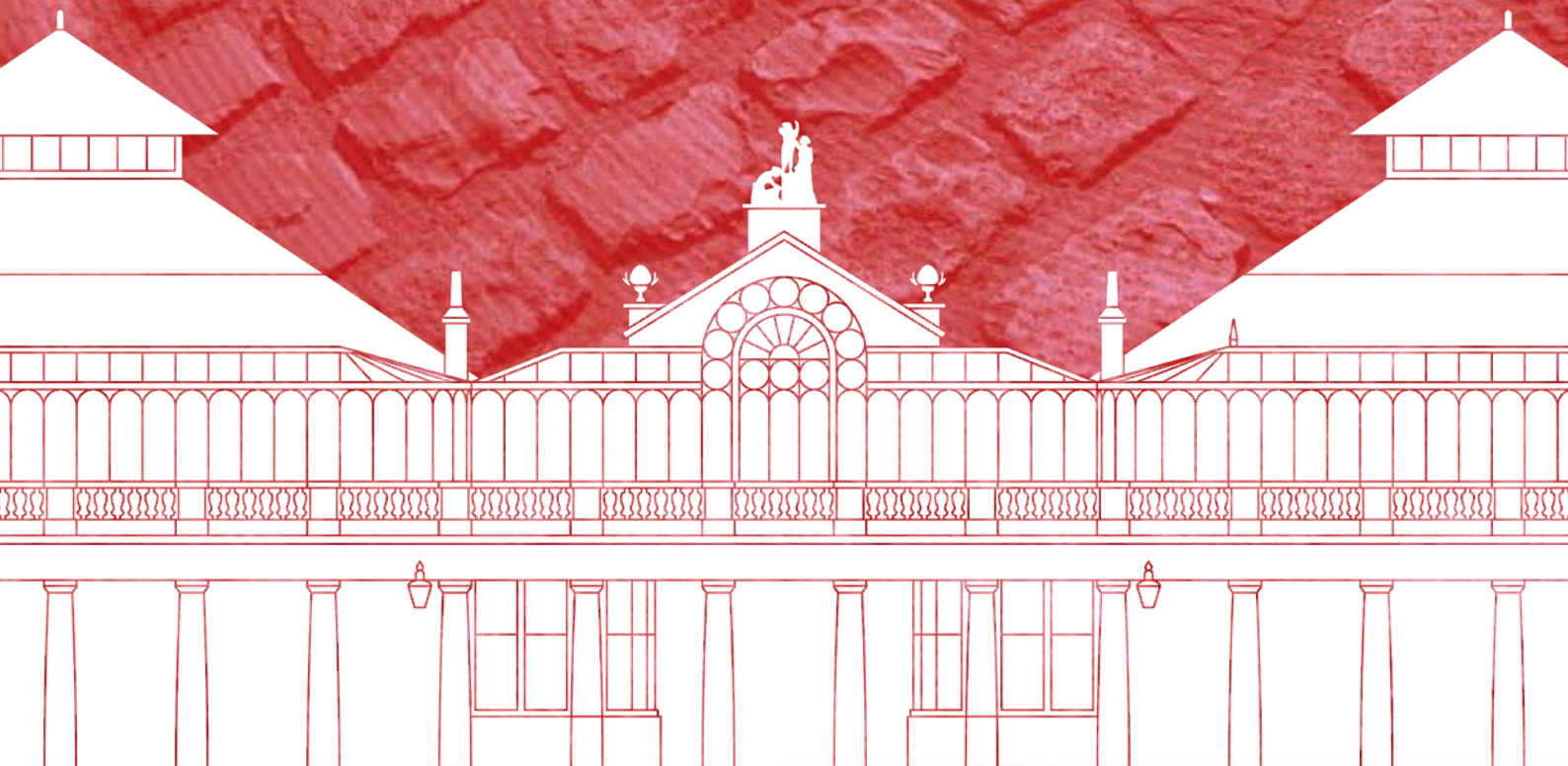


Peter
Ackroyd's

Walking Tour

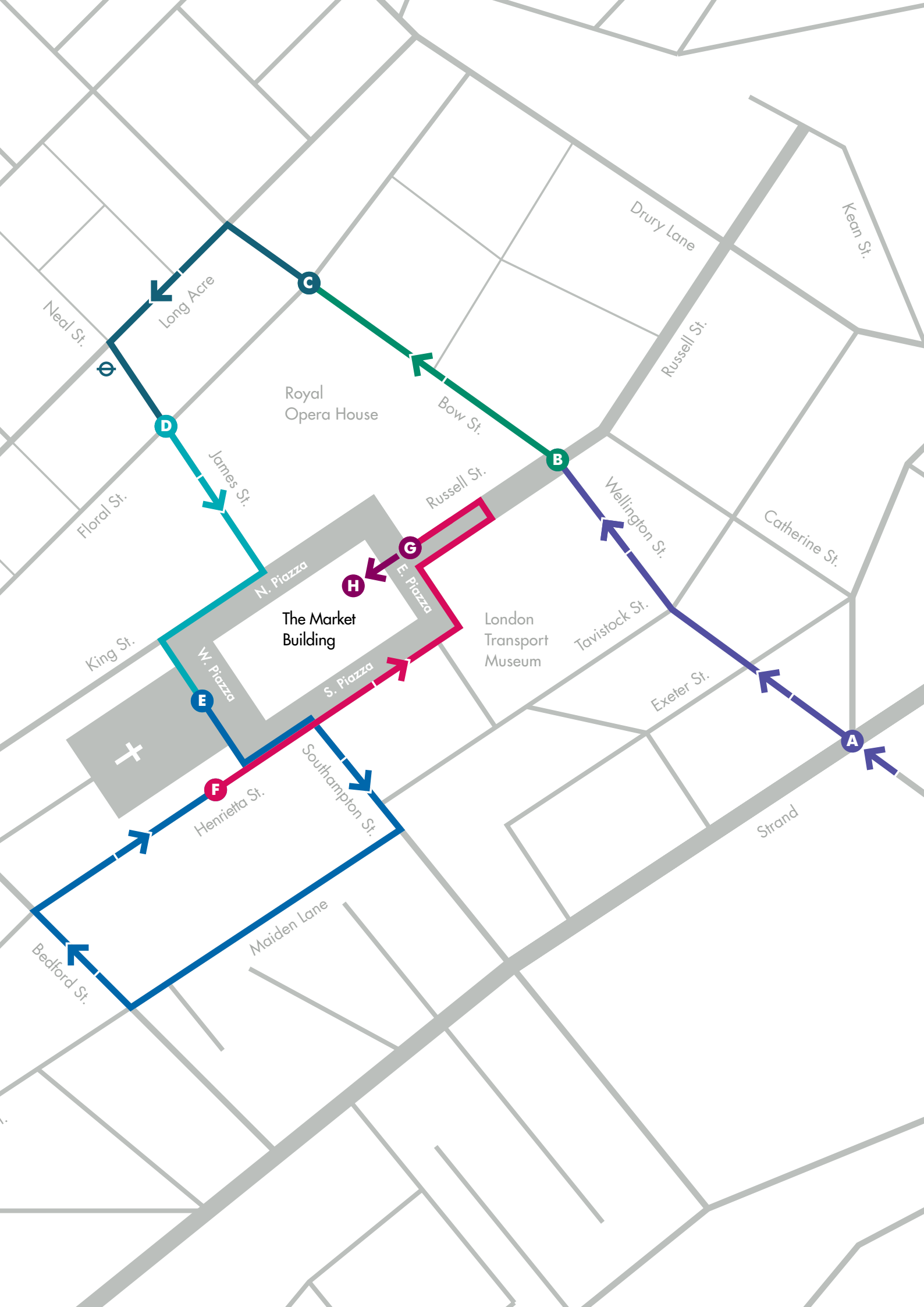
Revealing the
fascinating history
of Covent Garden



The Covent Garden Walking Tour

Covent Garden has always been one of the fiery territories of London. It has always been a centre of trade, and noise, and conflict, and pleasure, with its rapacious history and presence still to be sensed in the streets of the neighbourhood. There has never been, and never will be, a place equal to Covent Garden as a market and emporium. It is generally believed that it emerged as a market place when the Piazza was first erected in 1630. But it is of much greater age. The area was used as a place of trade and barter by the Saxons in the sixth century, and was known as Lundenwic or London market. But there have always been people here, and the evidence of prehistory is still beneath your feet. That is what makes the neighbourhood so welcoming.

But you must first begin to trace the ground. The tour begins at the bottom of Wellington Street, just above the Strand. [A](#)



Kean St.

Drury Lane

Russell St.

Neal St.

Long Acree

Royal Opera House

Bow St.

D

James St.

B

Floral St.

Russell St.

Wellington St.

Catherine St.

N. Piazza

E. Piazza

The Market Building

London Transport Museum

W. Piazza

S. Piazza

Tavistock St.

King St.

Henrietta St.

Southampton St.

Exeter St.

Strand

Maiden Lane

Bedford St.

Waxworks and Dickens

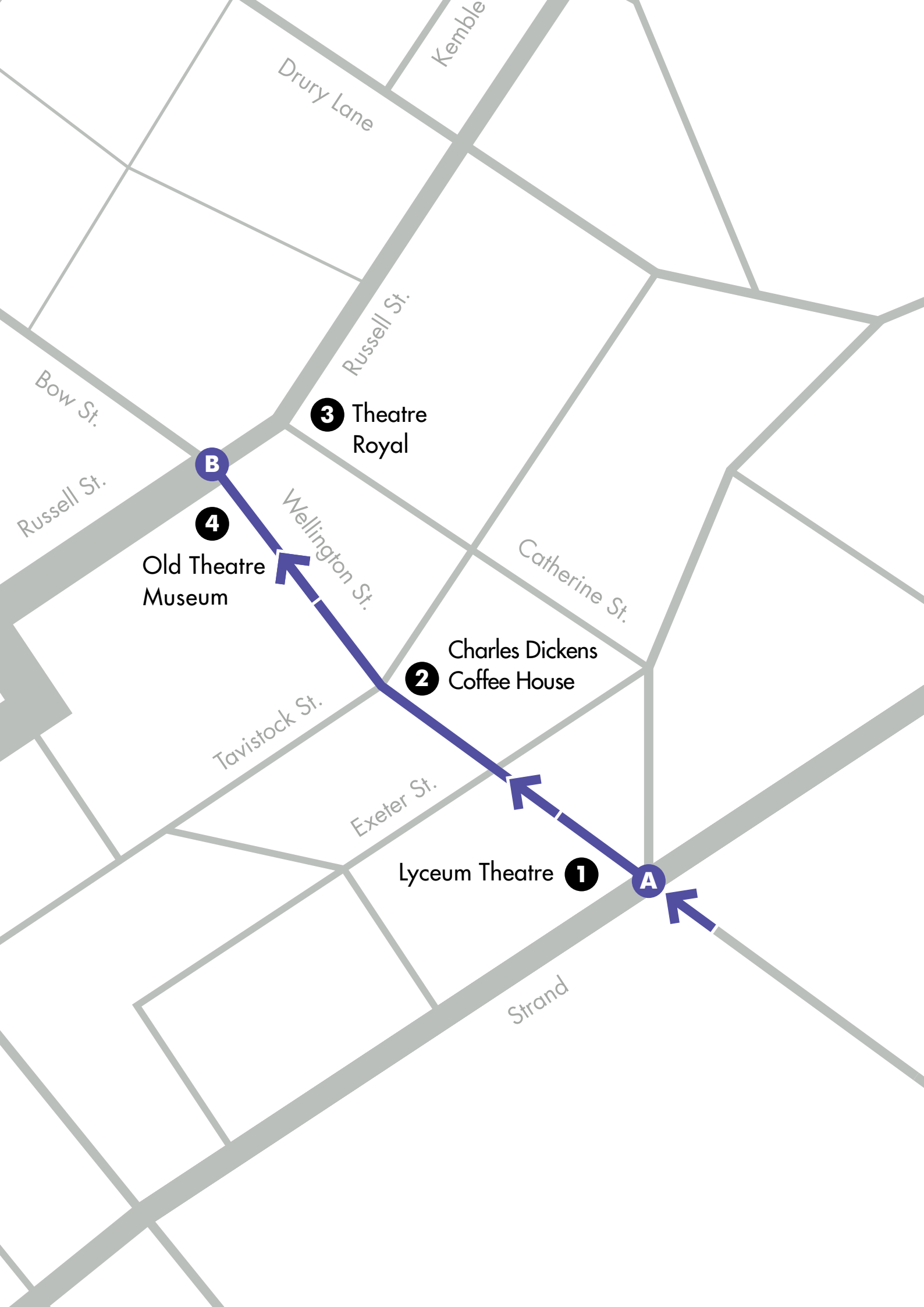
A — **B** Wellington Street

Facing uphill, you will see the Lyceum Theatre ❶ on your left hand side. It began life as a dance hall and concert room, on its inception in 1772, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century it held the first exhibition of Madame Tussaud's waxworks. Like many theatrical structures in London it has been burned, reconstructed, and burned again. The portico remains from its spectacular past.

Take a walk up Wellington Street, and pause at the corner of Tavistock Street; glance upward at the window of number 26, now the Charles Dickens Coffee House ❷. If you are fortunate, you may see Charles Dickens staring down at you. These were the offices of his weekly magazine, *All The Year Round*, where Dickens lived and worked for long periods. In his letters he remarks on the fact that he often looked out of the windows, into Wellington Street; it was often raining, and the cabs in the street were like dark hearses with the life of the people milling around them.

Walk up Wellington Street a little further to the corner of Russell Street; if you look right down Russell Street you will see the back side of the Theatre Royal ❸. There has been a theatre on this site since 1663. Underneath the arches there were often to be found, in the nineteenth century, prostitutes and orange-sellers and assorted street traders. The life of Russell Street was arguably noisier and more populated than it is at the beginning of the twenty first century. In certain respects London has grown quieter.

On the south-west corner of the junction of Wellington Street and Russell Street, you'll see the Old Theatre Museum ❹; popular in its day, the Theatre Museum closed in 2007 and now stands empty but there are plans afoot to bring it back to life as an exciting restaurant and cultural space.



Lyceum Theatre **1**

Charles Dickens
Coffee House **2**

Theatre
Royal **3**

Old Theatre
Museum **4**

B

A

Strand

Exeter St.

Tavistock St.

Wellington St.

Catherine St.

Russell St.

Drury Lane

Kemble

Bow St.

Russell St.

From coffee to murder

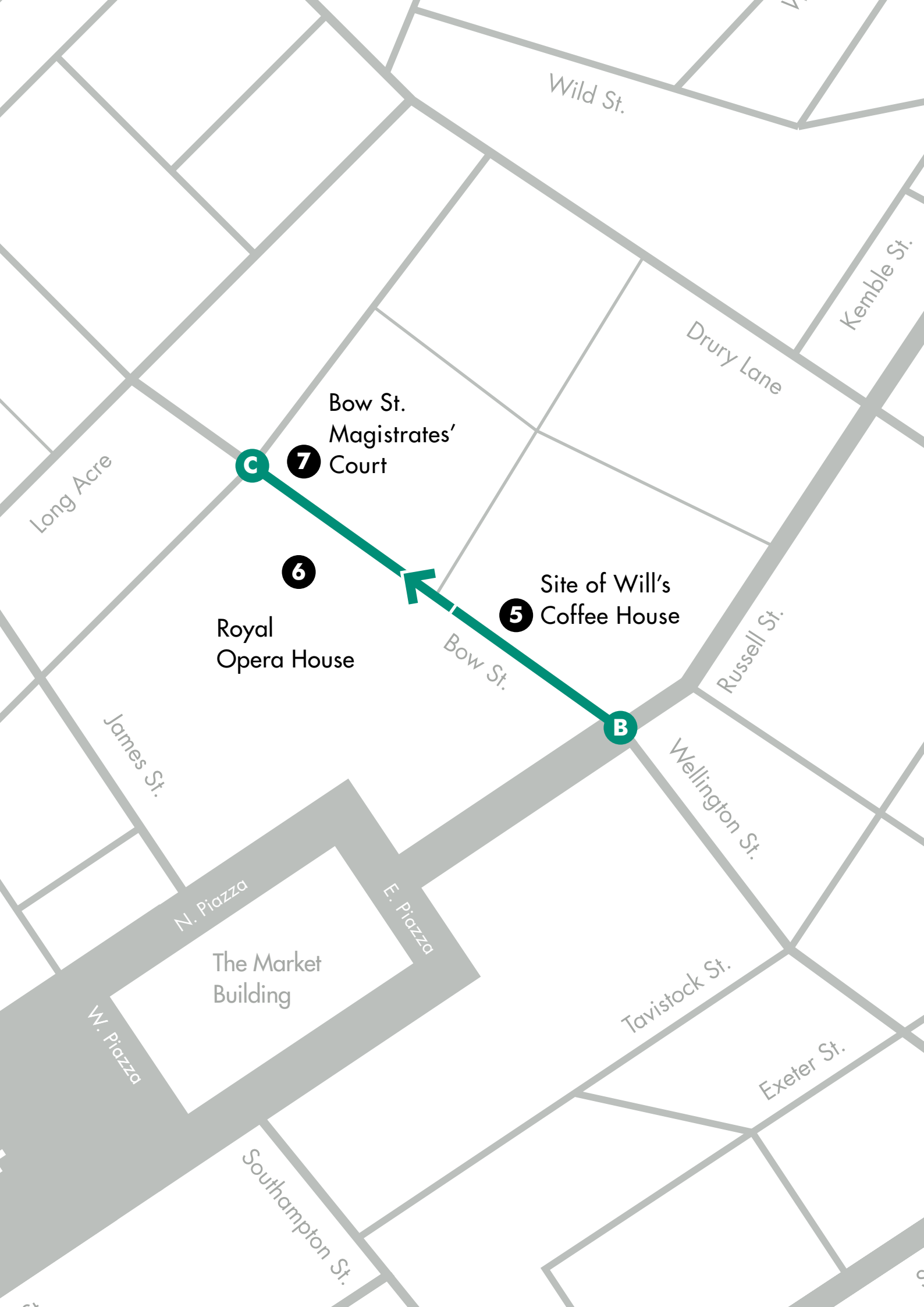
B — **C** Bow Street

Continue up Wellington Street, and you will suddenly find yourself transported into

Bow Street. It was so named because, in its original incarnation as a short street, it took the shape of a bow. Here was situated Will's Coffee House, **5** the most famous or at least the most literary coffee house in London among the members of which can be named Samuel Pepys, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson; these were the pre-eminent poets and writers of seventeenth and eighteenth century England, who convened in Covent Garden as the natural home of conviviality and companionship. As you proceed up the street you will find on your left the Royal Opera House **6**.

There has been a theatre here since 1732, and it has since experienced three reincarnations. It began life as the Covent Garden Theatre, where the first productions of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Vanbrugh's *The Rivals* were held. It was burned down in 1807 and then again in 1858, but by this time it had acquired the name of the Royal Opera House. Here were given the first performances in England of Mozart's operas, of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, of Tosca's *Madame Butterfly* and Wagner's *The Ring*. It is a remarkable history, enlivened by various riots provoked by the rise in ticket prices. On one occasion pigs and pigeons were released into the auditorium, and on others the members of the audience confined themselves to ripping out seats and hurling them at the actors on the stage. It is now much more respectable, and in the early 1980s the opera house was extended along the line of Floral Street so that it now can be entered from the Covent Garden Piazza itself.

A little further up, on the right hand side of Bow Street, you will encounter the empty shell of Bow Street Magistrates' Court **7**. It was once the site of dramas as great as any at the Theatre Royal. The police court was once on the opposite side of the street; from here, in the middle of the eighteenth century, issued the Bow Street Runners, the first intimations of a London police force. In this building Casanova was bound over to keep the peace. The new police court was built in the 1870s, and one of its most famous clients (if that is the word) was Oscar Wilde whose sensational trial on charges of homosexuality ensured that the street was filled to overflowing. Among others charged and convicted here are murderer Dr Crippen and East End gangsters the Kray brothers. This old building, filled with echoes, is to be turned into a hotel.



Wild St.

Kemble St.

Drury Lane

Bow St.
Magistrates'
Court

Long Acre

6

Royal
Opera House

5

Site of Will's
Coffee House

Bow St.

Russell St.

B

Wellington St.

James St.

N. Piazza

E. Piazza

The Market
Building

W. Piazza

Tavistock St.

Exeter St.

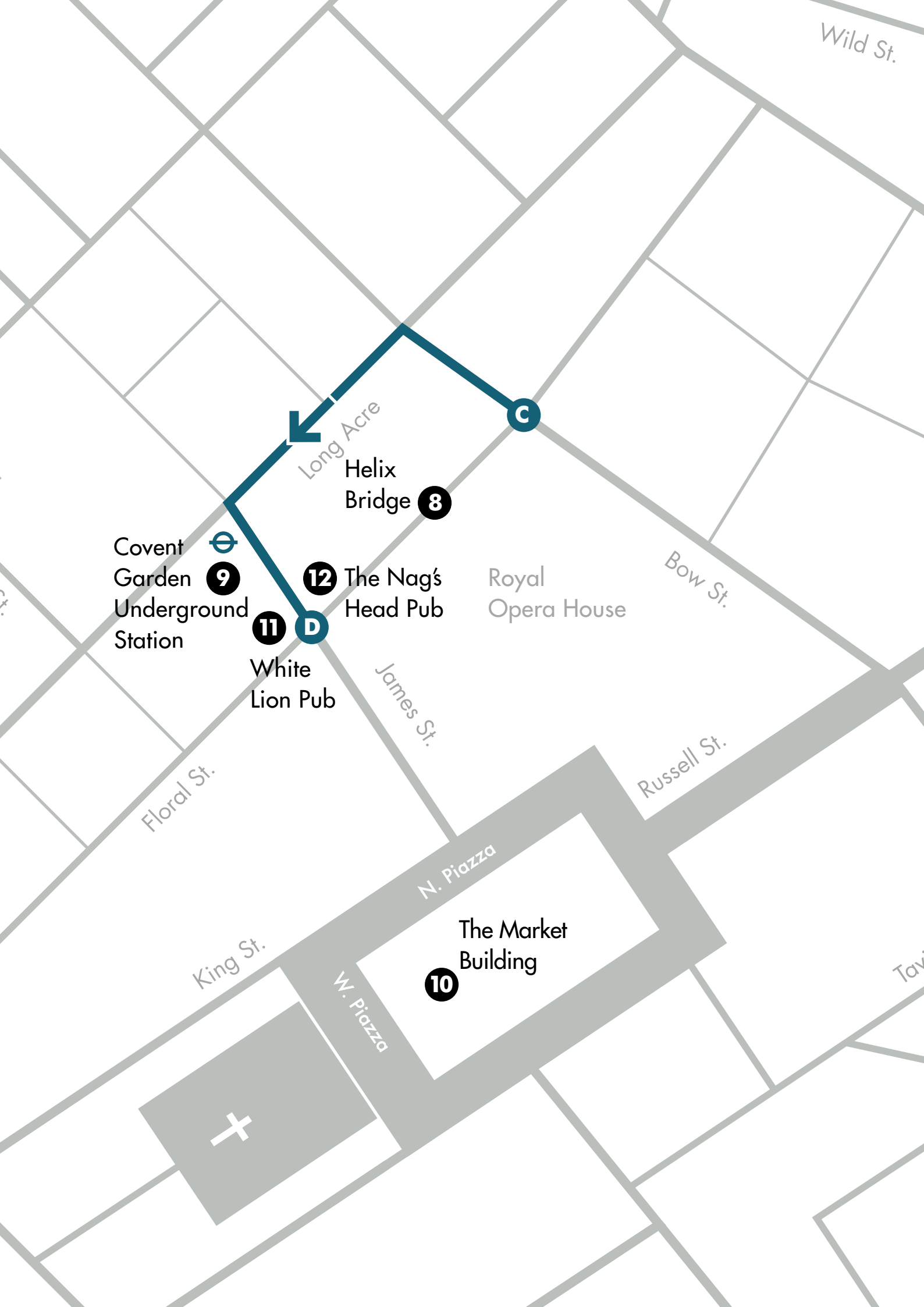
Southampton St.

The most expensive journey in the world

Bow Street to James Street

Keep walking up Bow Street, and if you have not been seduced into Floral Street by the sight of the walk-way shaped like a helix **8** (it connects the Royal Ballet school with the opera building itself) you should by now be at the corner of Bow Street and Long Acre; turn left onto Long Acre. The name of the street derives from the fact that it was laid out on an acre strip of market garden that was once owned by the monks of Westminster Abbey; that same strip of land existed at the time of the Saxons, and the evidence of their labour has been found here. For a while it was a fashionable address, but in the seventeenth century it became a centre for the trade of coach-making. Samuel Pepys came here to watch a vehicle being prepared for him; he watched “the painter varnish which is pretty to see how every doing it over do make it more and more yellow. Here I did make the workmen drink, and saw my coach cleaned and oyled; and, staying among poor people there in the alley, did hear them call their fat child Punch”. Continue along Long Acre and you’ll see the alleys, once the home of the poor, that are still to be found running off Long Acre. In the early twentieth century the street became a centre for the manufacture of the early automobiles. The large size of the present shop-fronts is an indication of the intense activity that took place here. It is now primarily the home of clothes shops and shoe shops.

Keep walking along Long Acre and stop by the underground station **9** of Covent Garden. The station itself, with its shining brown tiles, was erected in 1907, and has been in operation ever since; the journey from Leicester Square underground to Covent Garden underground, at a distance of 0.161 miles, is the most expensive in the world. Now turn left into James Street, once known as the ‘Unnamed Way’. But this bridle way became a grand thoroughfare by the middle of the seventeenth century, marked for the freshness of its air and the salubriousness of its position. The parsonage of the priest of nearby St. Paul’s Church stood on this street. But the Market Building **10** in the distance ahead of you grew and grew until the flowers, fruit and vegetables invaded the grand spaces. The two pubs you can see on opposite corners of James Street and Floral Street, The White Lion **11**, and The Nag’s Head **12**, were there for the early morning market workers; there has been a Nag’s Head on the same site since 1673. There was also a bird-market in the lower part of James Street on Sundays. James Street was by then part of the market itself, which is essentially how it has remained.



Wild St.

Long Acre

Helix Bridge **8**

Covent Garden Underground Station **9**

12 The Nag's Head Pub

Royal Opera House

11 White Lion Pub

Bow St.

James St.

Floral St.

Russell St.

N. Piazza

The Market Building **10**

King St.

W. Piazza



Tav...

A Frenzy of activity

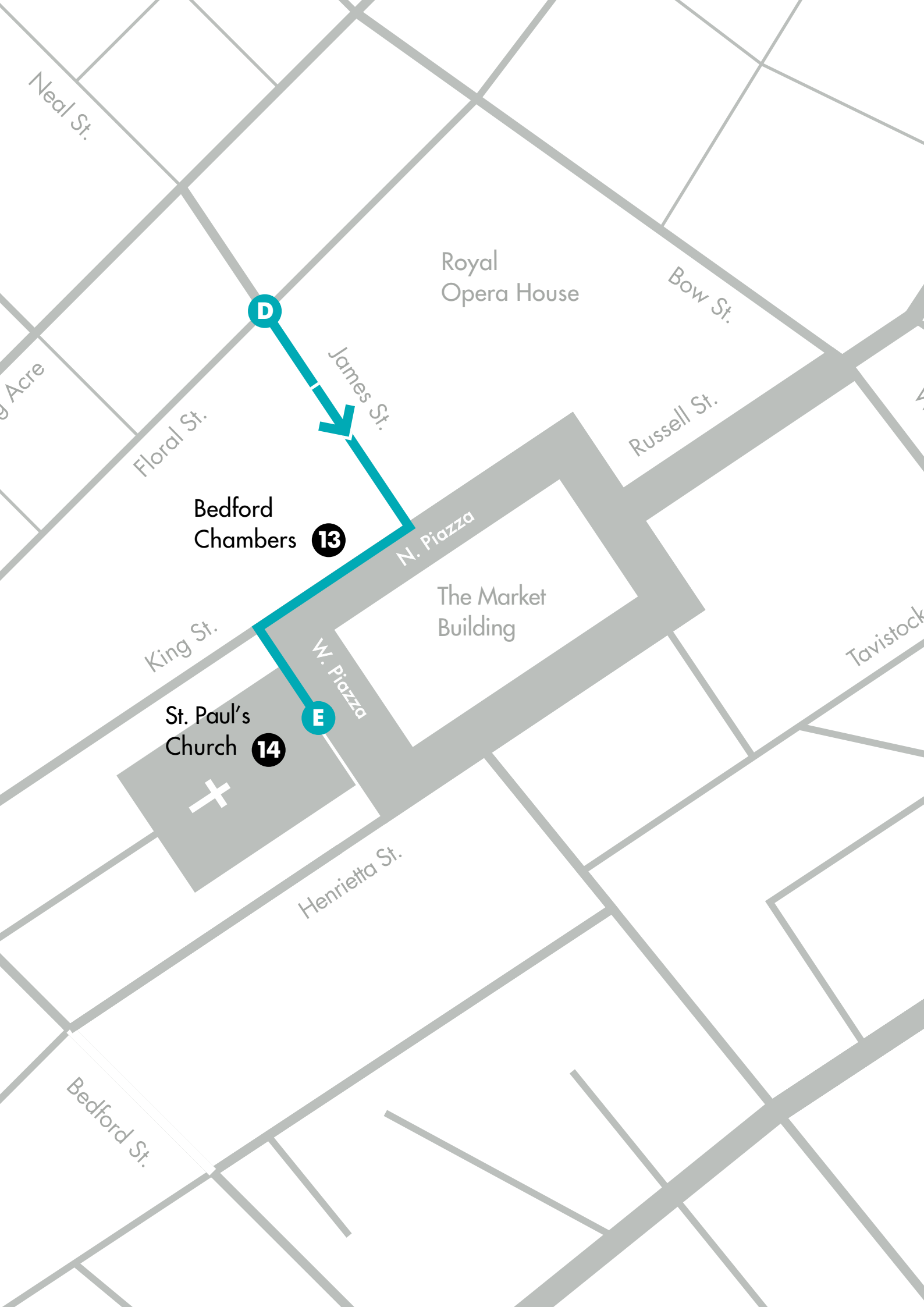
D — **E** James Street to St. Paul's Church

Keep walking down James Street; now you are ready to enter the haunted ground of the Piazza itself and its magnificent Market Building.

To your right, running along from the corner of James Street and the Piazza, is a row of buildings stretching into King Street, now called Bedford Chambers 13. The Chambers were rebuilt in the nineteenth century, but they bear some resemblance to the original arcades. In the eighteenth century some of these were still the houses of gentlemen but there were also tenements teeming with prostitutes or, as it says in a map of that century, “many women of bad repute live in these houses”. There was a publication, in the same period, entitled *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies*, which described their special services. It was considered to be the “essential guide and accessory for any serious gentleman of pleasure”.

Continue the short walk along the North Piazza and turn left on to the West Piazza where you'll see St. Paul's Church 14, known now as the “Actors' Church” because of its proximity to the Royal Opera House and the Theatre Royal. The ashes of Ellen Terry and Edith Evan, two of the most famous of all English actresses, are consequently preserved here. In the late nineteenth century, Ellen Terry became famous for her Shakespearian roles, many of them at the Lyceum Theatre around the corner from the church; Edith Evans was a star of both stage and screen in the twentieth century.

The church itself is back to front, so to speak. The door beneath the portico was meant to be the entrance, but that meant the congregation being obliged to face in the western or wrong direction. So the back door became the front entrance. The church was built by Inigo Jones in 1633, but after a fire in 1795 it was restored in the original style of a classical Roman temple. Beneath the portico itself diarist Samuel Pepys records the first known rendition of an Italian puppet play, the ancestor of “Punch and Judy”. There is a service every year for the puppeteers of London. The portico is now used as the stage set for the various street entertainers who perform for the congregating crowds. Continue your journey past the Church and around the Piazza and you will glimpse Henrietta Street to your right. This was the setting for Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy*, an everyday tale of a Covent Garden serial killer. He lived at number three.



Neal St.

Royal
Opera House

Bow St.

D

James St.

Floral St.

Russell St.

Bedford
Chambers **13**

N. Piazza

The Market
Building

King St.

W. Piazza

St. Paul's
Church **14**

E

Henrietta St.

Tavistock

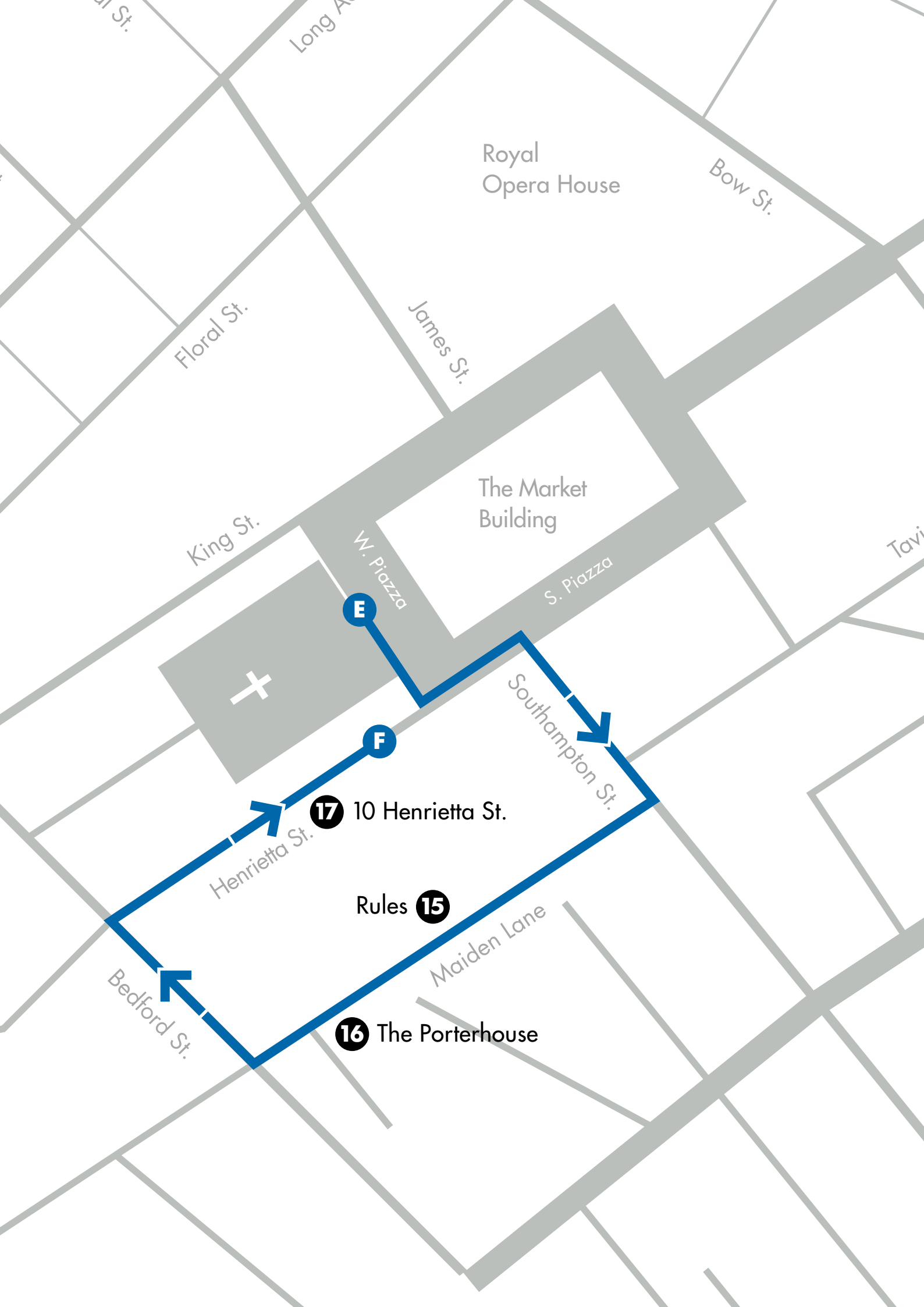
Bedford St.

'All dirt and confusion'

E — **F** **St. Paul's Church to Henrietta Street**

Here you may make a slight diversion. Walk down Southampton Street, a little to your left, and take the right into Maiden Lane. It may be named after a statue of the Virgin Mary that was once placed on the corner here, or it may be a derivation from Midden Street or street full of dung. It was once a cul-de-sac. Along the street, on the northern side, is Rule's 15 restaurant that is reputed to be the oldest restaurant in London. Further along, on the south side, at number 21, is The Porterhouse 16 public house which stands on the site of the birthplace of the artist Turner. He lived above his father's barber-shop here. If he came back, he would still be able to recognize the street by its narrowness and inconvenience. He would be astonished, however, by the fact that it now opens into Bedford Street.

Continue along Maiden Lane and turn right onto Bedford Street, a broad street of eminent houses built in the early years of the seventeenth century, and then right again onto Henrietta Street, named after the wife of Charles I, and back towards the Piazza. At number 10 Henrietta Street 17 (now the Rohan shop), the novelist Jane Austen lodged during her visits to London; she remarked that the area was "all dirt and confusion, but in an interesting way".



Royal Opera House

Bow St.

Floral St.

James St.

The Market Building

King St.

W. Piazza

S. Piazza

Tavi

E

F

17 10 Henrietta St.

Rules 15

16 The Porterhouse

Henrietta St.

Southamption St.

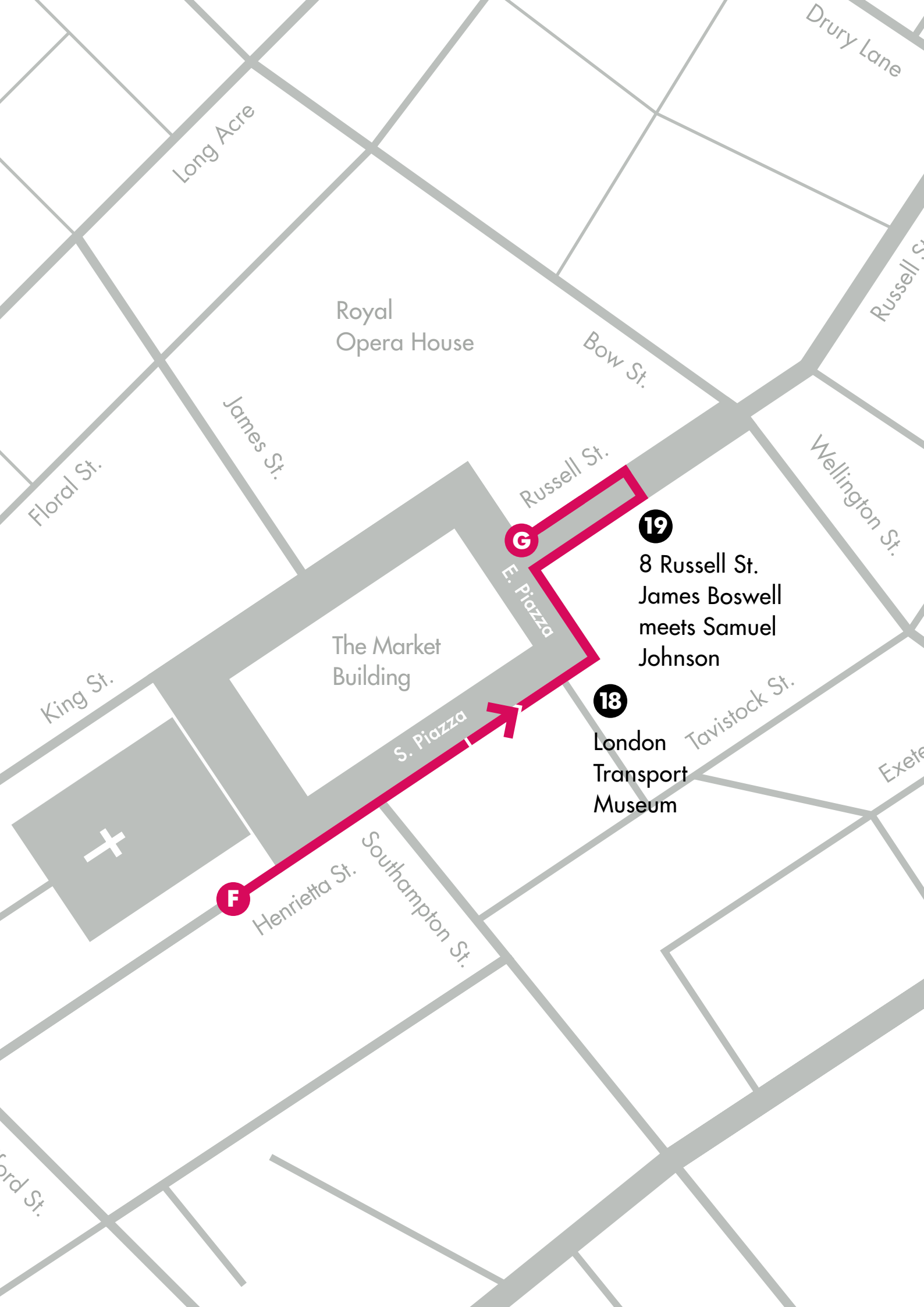
Maiden Lane

Bedford St.

A significant literary spot

F — **G** **Henrietta Street to Russell Street**

Walk along the South Piazza. On the south-east corner of the Piazza itself was once a flower market, but the building now houses the London Transport Museum **18**. Walk round the Piazza to the far side of the Market Building and on to Russell Street. At number eight Russell Street **19** you will find the site of the bookshop where James Boswell first met the great lexicographer and biographer, Samuel Johnson in 1763, thus beginning a significant literary friendship. Thirty years after this first meeting, Boswell wrote *The Life of Samuel Johnson* which is generally considered to be one of the greatest of all biographies. Charles Lamb, the essayist and humourist, lodged in the street in the early years of the nineteenth century, when it was full of taverns and coffee-houses; he described it as “the individual spot” he most treasured in the whole of the city. Turn around now, and walk back towards the East Piazza and the Market Building itself.



F

Henrietta St.
Southampton St.

S. Piazza

G

E. Piazza

19

8 Russell St.
James Boswell
meets Samuel
Johnson

18

London
Transport
Museum

Long Acre

Royal
Opera House

James St.

Bow St.

Russell St.

Wellington St.

Drury Lane

Russell St.

Floral St.

King St.

Tavistock St.

Exeter St.

St. Paul's Churchyard

The centre, the source

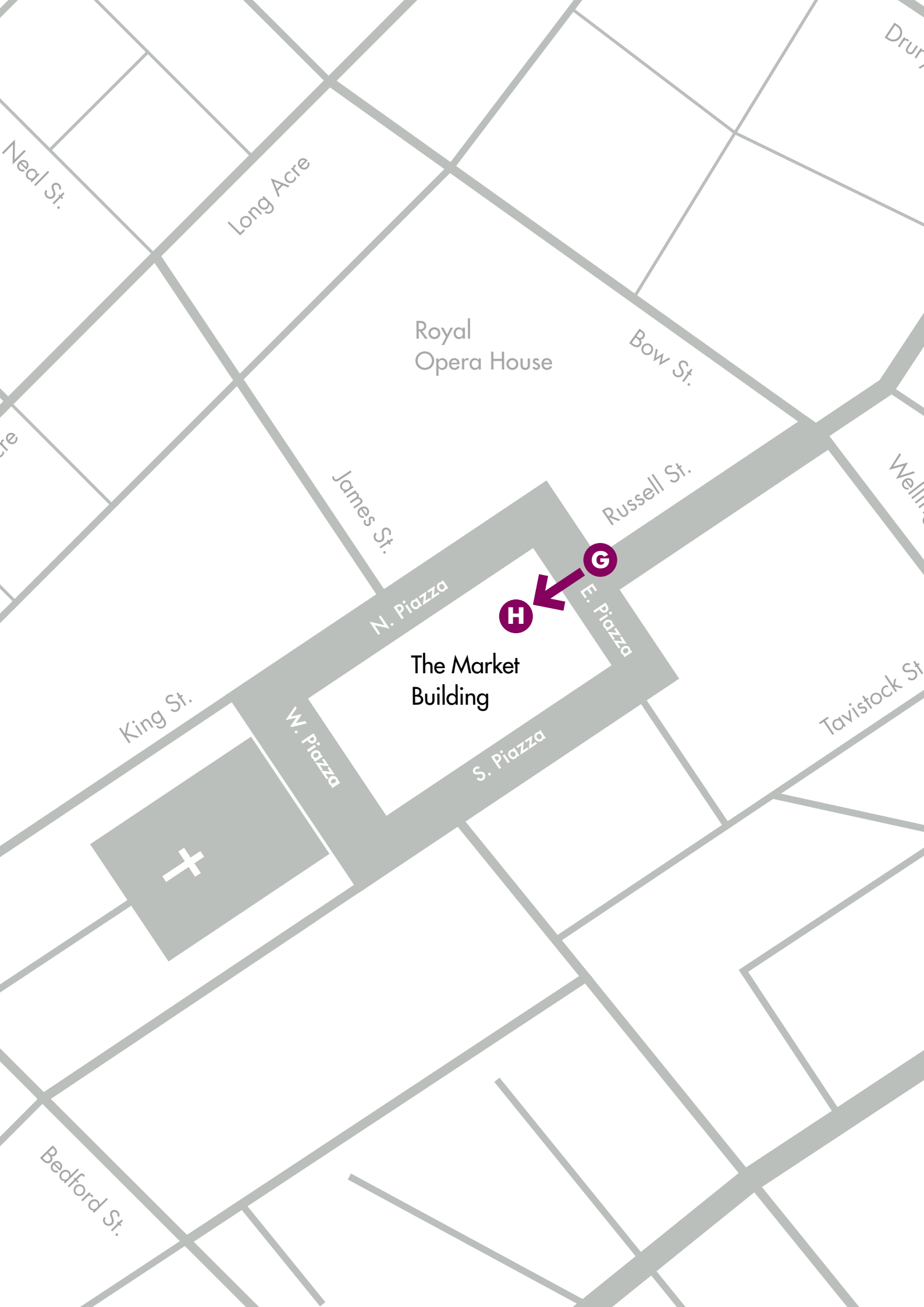
G—**H** The Piazza and the Market Building

This is the centre, the source. A brief history is in order at this point. Although the area had been a trading post since Saxon times (and perhaps before) it had become by the sixteenth century an area of fruitful ground owned by a Benedictine convent. Hence its name. Covent Garden was then sold to the Bedford family, who decided to indulge in a little property speculation. Under their instruction Inigo Jones designed a square, with the church of St. Paul's dominating the west side. The other three sides, completed in 1639, were lined with grand houses. But the tides of fashion change, and in the latter part of the seventeenth century the grandes were moving further westward.

The fruit and vegetable market gradually took their place until it covered the entire area. It became the most famous market in England, and its image was reproduced in a thousand drawings and paintings. It was seen to be a colourful and chaotic place, but a true symbol of thriving trade. The flourishing life of the district attracted taverns and coffee-shops, gambling houses and brothels. Turkish baths also became a feature of the neighbourhood. There were pick-pockets, and street musicians, among the jostling costermongers.

The Market Building in front of you was first erected in the 1830s, and there have been various additions and improvements ever since. Covent Garden continued to sell fruit and flowers, vegetables and herbs, for more than three hundred years until in 1974 it was moved to new premises at Nine Elms in Vauxhall. The spirit of the place has changed since the departure of the market, of course, but it is still a centre of hustle and bustle; the street traders are still here but the sounds of the basket-sellers and flower girls have turned into those of traveling musicians; the agile feats of the costermongers, piling crates of their wares upon their heads, have turned into the contortions of the acrobats and mime artists. The atmosphere of the place lingers in the air, and will never finally be removed. It can now be said that you have explored Covent Garden.

Peter Ackroyd



Neal St.

Long Acre

Royal Opera House

Bow St.

James St.

Russell St.

N. Piazza

G

H

The Market Building

E. Piazza

King St.

W. Piazza

S. Piazza

Tavistock St.



Bedford St.

Peter Ackroyd C.B.E.

Prize-winning author and historian Peter Ackroyd is one of the UK's most respected and celebrated writers, whose historical novels such as *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and *Chatterton*, bring to life the sights and smells of 17th, 18th and 19th Century London with skill and realism. He is an authoritative biographer and has also published four books of poetry. He was born and brought up in London, is passionate about it, and still lives in London today.

Peter Ackroyd is the winner of the prestigious South Bank Show Award for Literature, the Whitbread Book Award, the Guardian Fiction Prize, and the Somerset Maugham Award.

'Our most exciting and original writer, one of the few English writers of his generation who will be read in a hundred years time.'

The Sunday Times

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