

London



With almost 20 million tourists a year, London is among the most visited cities in the world. Founded by the Romans, it grew slowly over the centuries until the industrial revolution when it quickly became the largest, most populous metropolis in the world. Nineteenth century London was a centre of commerce, science and innovation. But it was also a brutal, crime-ridden city where millions lived in abject poverty.

This contradictory metropolis inspired artists and writers. British literature, and later cinema, populated London with a multitude of memorable fictional characters. For example, London is home to the greatest detective of all time, the most famous secret agent ever, and the most recognisable young wizard in the world. Let's discover the films that have made these characters – and others – even more memorable!

Let's go!

I arrive in London at King's Cross Station. I'm here because I'm interested in a brick wall bearing a strange plaque that reads 'Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ '. Beneath it, a luggage trolley carrying two suitcases and a birdcage appears half-way embedded into the wall itself.

This is the entry point to the magical world of Harry Potter, the young wizard created by J. K. Rowling. In her stories, aspiring witches and wizards need to run through the wall that separates platforms 9 and 10 to reach Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, where they can board the Hogwarts Express, the train that will take them to their school of magic.

In the real world, there is no wall between platforms 9 and 10. What we see in the Harry Potter films, are actually platforms 4 and 5. And the plaque and the trolley now in front of me are located somewhere else entirely – in the station concourse.

I love how the imaginary has influenced the real: rather than just disappearing into a wall, this half-trolley seems to emerge into the material world from the fictional one. If this is Harry Potter's gateway to the wizarding world of Hogwarts, it's my entry point into the magical world of films set in London!

I reach King's Cross underground station. It was part of the city's first railway line, which began service in 1863. It had only 7 stations. Today, the London Underground has more than 270.

I get off at Lambeth North and walk to Westminster Bridge. Across the Thames is my next stop: the seat of the British Parliament, the Palace of Westminster. The bridge is the ideal place to take in the full splendor of this landmark.

It was constructed in the Gothic Revival style, inspired by the architecture of the late Middle Ages. It's a relatively modern building that harkens back to an ancient, idealised, pre-industrial vision of England. A series of ornamental patterns and tall, thin windows line the length of the facade. Towers rise at each of the two extremes. The one right in front of me is the Clock Tower. Its largest bell is known as Big Ben, a name now synonymous with the tower itself.

Big Ben is London's most famous symbol. It conjures up a certain Britishness that is traditional, rigorous, sensible and punctual. Big Ben has frequently been featured in films, both to depict and to subvert this British way of being. In the opening credits of the classic *Mary Poppins*, the protagonist glides through the air past it while holding onto her umbrella: this magical woman is coming to town to disrupt the stiff ways of an English family!

We see Big Ben again in the animated film *Peter Pan*, based on the novels by J. M. Barrie. Peter and his friends stop off on top of the giant clock on their way to Neverland. When they land on the minute hand, they push it forward ten minutes, an irreverent and symbolic act: Peter Pan the impudent rebel, the child who refuses to grow up, mocks the symbol of English punctuality!

Big Ben is the victim of another, more dangerous rebel: the protagonist of the film *V for Vendetta*, based on Alan Moore's eponymous masterpiece. In this story set in the future, a mysterious vigilante known as V fights against the fascist regime that has taken over Britain. He wears a mask with the features of Guy Fawkes, a man who, in 1605, attempted to blow up Parliament when King James I was inside. Fawkes wanted to take revenge for the king's persecution of Catholics like himself. The plan failed and Fawkes was executed.

In the film, V has more success. He incites an uprising against the fascist regime. In the climax, a multitude of people, converted to the revolution, march towards the Palace of Westminster all dressed in Guy Fawkes masks. V has planned a show for them: when Big Ben strikes midnight, the Clock Tower and the entire Parliament explode.

As the emblem of tyranny crumbles, people take off their Guy Fawkes masks: everybody is once again free to be who they truly are without fear of repression or punishment.

Under Big Ben I hail one of London's iconic black cabs.

"To Millbank Millennium Pier, please!"

I've decided to take a cruise on the Thames. From the pier, I can see across the river a very peculiar building. It's a brash, unashamed postmodern thing, built in 1994. It's a weird, symmetrical construct of beige stone and emerald glass inspired by industrial architecture and pre-Columbian temples.

It's the MI6 building, the headquarters of the British Secret Intelligence Service. It has been featured in many films as the workplace of a very famous fictional spy, Agent 007 – James Bond.

Created by writer Ian Fleming, Bond is a controversial character: he's both a hero who saves the world in one suspenseful adventure after another, as well as the personification of a sort of crude, outmoded manliness. Regardless of one's moral judgement, Bond is one of the most popular and enduring fictional British characters, and the MI6 building in front of me emits a thrilling aura of secrecy and intrigue.

Today, the Thames is one of London's main thoroughfares. A variety of recreational boats travel up and down the river. But it wasn't always like this. Up until the late 19th century, sewers and industries dumped waste and rubbish in the river. The Thames' pollution caused cholera outbreaks that killed thousands of people. Even the Palace of Westminster had to be abandoned during the so-called "Great Stink of 1858" because of the stench emanating from the river.

One of the weirdest things to have floated down the Thames was seen more recently, in 1972. It was a lifelike dummy of England's greatest film director: Alfred Hitchcock. Known as the Master of Suspense, he began his career right here in London, where he directed more than 20 films before moving to Hollywood. In America he produced some of his 53rd film, *Frenzy*, the story of a serial killer. *Frenzy* opens with a panoramic view of the Thames. On one of its banks, a politician is holding a rally, pompously promising that the government will once and for all free the river from pollution. Ironically, he's interrupted when somebody spots the corpse of a woman floating downstream.

With his morbid sense of humour, Hitchcock arranged for a dummy of himself to do likewise – an ingenious publicity stunt to promote his film.

As the boat travels down the river, I pass by the enormous observation wheel on the south bank known as London Eye. Further downstream is the Tate Modern art gallery, and then Shakespeare's Globe theatre. On the north bank, is the Tower of London, the city's ancient seat of power and, finally, in front of me, my final destination: Tower Bridge.

I disembark and walk up to the bridge.

Like Westminster, Tower Bridge was built in the 19th century in the Gothic Revival style. It's a modern hydraulic bridge disguised as a drawbridge guarded by two medieval towers. After Big Ben, this is London's most celebrated landmark.

I take the tour of the Towers and reach the suspended walkways that connect them 40 metres above ground. I'm reminded of how many times I've seen this bridge in films, from *Mission Impossible* to *Paddington*, from *An American Werewolf in London* to *Peppa Pig*.

My favourite is the 2009 film *Sherlock Holmes*. It revamps the story of the famed detective created in 1887 by Arthur Conan Doyle. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, Holmes is the most portrayed literary human character in film and TV history, having appeared in 254 productions.

The climax of the 2009 film takes place on the suspended walkway on which I'm standing right now. Here, Holmes fights and defeats his antagonist. But the Tower Bridge in the film is not the one we see today: it's still under construction, with the metal skeleton not completely covered by its neo-Gothic casing. The scene depicts two legends in the making: the greatest detective of all time solving his hardest case yet and one of the world's most famous bridges coming into existence.

It's the ideal place to end my tour of London, dedicated to the many films that have exalted this already incredible city.

Until next time!