



Exploring History: Medieval to Modern 1400 – 1900

Exploring imperial London

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This is the middle of London. The middle of the largest empire the world ever knew and in many ways, the place that we're standing in is a kind of heart of empire. This particular part of London has echoes that run right the way back to Imperial Rome. The styles of architecture, that we use. The way that the landscape is planned, bear the marks of a European tradition that stretches back 2000 years or more. It's a city that is designed, at least here, to look like the centre of a great empire.

And perhaps that's an important point because we're used to thinking about empire as something that takes place elsewhere as empire is something that takes place overseas. In India. In South Africa. In Australia. In other places. But it's important for us as historians of empire, to think about the ways in which the connections between places like Britain, and those far flung places worked and the ways in which Britain was shaped by empire.

This is a place that looks imperial. One of the things that's happening at the end of the 19th century, is a kind of reinvention of an architecture that looks back to classical Rome. It's there in the frontage to Buckingham Palace. You can see it in the iconography and the organisation of the monuments. We can also see it in the formal way that the landscape is laid out. Around the memorial are a series of gates and columns many of which were paid for from donations from the colonies so you've actually got the colonies looking in towards the mother of empire, towards Queen Victoria, sitting there on her monument.

As we walk along The Mall, we can see a whole series of other monuments to different aspects of empire. There are monuments to the small wars of empire. Monuments that commemorate exploration. There's a statue to Captain Cook that was put up shortly after the building of Admiralty Arch. We can see monuments that commemorate Britain's relationship with the sea. We can read that in a different way. We can read that in a more complex way which is about a kind of urban reassertion of Britain's imperial place.

And what we're getting here is a kind of restatement, or a reinvigoration of Britain's imperial role as expressed through the urban landscape.

This is Trafalgar Square, another one of London's set piece locations and another place that was sometimes known by contemporaries at the heart of empire. It's another space that commemorates British military successes. In the middle of the square is Nelson on top of his column and what we have there is a kind of commemoration of Nelson as the myth, the column not built until 35 years after the victory at Trafalgar. Arranged around the square, are a series of other statues that commemorate generals and other kinds of military leaders. The two most obvious statues are the ones down on the south side of the square, to Charles Napier and Henry Havelock, both of who have been important figures in India. Henry Havelock the one that was responsible for the suppression of the Indian mutiny.

Arranged around the square, are a number of buildings. All of which have that classical theme. The National Gallery, built in the 1830's. Canada House, which was originally built in the 1820's. There is also a longer lineage of this kind of classical or neo classical building in Trafalgar Square.

We can move forwards to the 1930's. South Africa House, designed by Sir Herbert Baker. Herbert Baker who'd learnt his trade in South Africa itself and then later moved on to be one of the architects involved in the building of New Delhi in India.

Unlike the area around The Mall. Unlike what gets done in the early years of the 20th century. Trafalgar Square is a place that changes incrementally. Trafalgar Square changes over the period from the 1830's through to the present day. It's also a problematic space. Unlike the area around Buckingham Palace, which is essentially flat, you've got the potential there to drive along ceremonial route way. Here we've got a space that slopes away down from us.

I think there are other reasons why it's rather different from what we see in The Mall. Here we have the encroachment of other parts of the city's life. One of the things that's a running theme, in the history of Trafalgar Square is the difficulty of keeping this as just a monumental space. What we see are the encroachment particularly of commercial buildings. Down on the south side of the square, there have been banks. There have been embassies. There have been offices. Other kinds of activities that in some ways detract from almost the purity, almost the central idea of this particular space.

Both the Victoria Memorial and Trafalgar Square have been described as the heart of empire. Have been thought of as centres of empire. But I think that may not be the most productive way to think about the geographies of empire and the relationship between London and the rest of the empire. In some ways, what we want to be doing is thinking about different centres of empire within London. Think about the ways in which different places represent different dimensions of London's relationship with the imperial project.