

Walk the Lines

by Mark Mason

History, as Alan Bennett pointed out in *The History Boys*, is just one damned thing after another (except he didn't say 'damned'). That, though, is its beauty. It never dies. Or at least if it does, you're doing it wrong. Even the most venerable London institutions, set (literally) in stone, can keep changing, evolving, adapting to the times. And so it is with the Burlington Arcade. The most famous thing about it stopped being true in the 1980s. Not that many people are aware of that. Or that the famous thing will become true again in a few years' time.

Let me explain. You'll know the Burlington Arcade, the beautiful little shopping arcade off Piccadilly. It's been there since 1819. Lord George Cavendish, then owner of the neighbouring Burlington House (which is also still there, though you probably know it as the Royal Academy), had the arcade built to stop people throwing rubbish over the wall into his garden. Oyster shells were a big problem, apparently, clearly the 19th century equivalent of kebab wrappers. Cavendish was the younger brother of the 5th Duke of Devonshire, who owed his title (as all the other Dukes have, right down to the current one, the 12th) to a slip of the pen by James I's clerk when creating the Earldom. The family estate, Chatsworth, is actually in Derbyshire. Huge chunks of British history are just spelling mistakes.



Burlington Arcade, with its 72 individual shop units (though knocking-through has reduced that number - it's now in the region of 40) soon became a great success. So much so that copies sprang up all over Europe, including the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan. That's worth a visit too - it contains the most stylish McDonald's in the world.

So, what's the most famous thing about it? The 1964 raid in which several masked men drove a Mark II Jaguar the length of the arcade, Italian Job-style, smashed a shop window and made off with £35,000's worth of jewellery? No, though it's incredible that that isn't better-known. Maybe that part of London is just too used to criminal car shenanigans. One of the Kray's associates, a driver called Collins, once escaped the police by driving a stolen Bentley all the way down Bond Street in reverse.

No, the most famous thing about the Burlington Arcade is, of course, the whistling. You're not allowed to do it. Or indeed hurry, or carry large parcels. Those two bans make sense in a cramped, if beautiful, arcade - but what's the problem with whistling? Well, the

first floor rooms above the shops used to be inhabited by prostitutes, who as well as practising their chosen profession kept a look-out on behalf of the pickpockets working the crowds below. Any sign of the police and they'd give a whistle so the pickpockets could scarp. Whistling was therefore forbidden - a ban that remains in place to this day. It's enforced by the uniformed bealdles (whose ancestors were originally drawn from Lord George Cavendish's Army regiment, the 10th Hussars). People, knowing of the quaint old injunction, go in there and give a little trill - and promptly receive a polite, but firm, warning from the men in the top hats.

Except for one person. The only person in the world who's allowed to whistle in the Burlington Arcade: Paul McCartney. Why him? It dates back to a day in the 1980s. A male shopper was looking into one of the windows, admiring something on display. As he stood there he began to whistle, so a passing bealdle cleared his throat and proceeded to issue the standard warning. The shopper turned round, ready to apologise and go about his business whistle-free. It was none other than the Paul McCartney. 'Oh, Mr McCartney,' said the bealdle to the Beatle, 'I'm very sorry. I didn't realise it was you.'

Continued...

Burlington Arcade (cont.)

You are hereby given a lifetime exemption from the rule. You can whistle here any time you like.’

And to this day Macca likes to visit the arcade every December, as part of his Christmas shopping. He always gives a little whistle and a wink at the beadles, and they tip their hats in return. (This isn’t the first time, incidentally, that McCartney and whistling have been linked - he says he first knew the Beatles had really made it when he woke up to hear the milkman whistling *From Me To You*.)

What makes London such a great city is its constant capacity for reinvention. This is true of its buildings - London’s skyline and streetscapes are in constant flux - but also of its traditions. It’s wonderful to know that a quirky little custom like this can be tweaked and played with. When McCartney dies we’ll go back to a situation where absolutely no one is allowed to whistle in the Burlington Arcade. Or will we? Will a new beadle grant a new lifetime exemption to someone else?

Finally, and just to prove how small the world, or at least Piccadilly, is, a tale from a few weeks ago. I was leading a Piccadilly Line walk (based on my book *Walk the Lines*), and had reached the Burlington Arcade stop. There’s some spiel there about how nearby Brown’s Hotel was the venue for the first telephone call in Britain, how James Bond is possibly related to Sir Thomas Bond, founder of the famous street ... that sort of thing. And I’m a few seconds away from doing the ‘Paul McCartney is the only person allowed to whistle in the Burlington Arcade’ story when a couple of people on the walk, facing east along Piccadilly, start to nudge each other and point over my shoulder. Then everyone else follows their gaze. I turn round to see ... yep, Paul McCartney. He was with his wife, and even though the arcade was closing up for the night they let him take a shortcut through it. Turned out he’d been at the Royal Academy to meet the Queen as part of her Jubilee celebrations.

However this McCartney visit to the arcade, possibly because it was in non-shopping hours, was a whistle-free event.



About Mark Mason

Mark is a journalist, historian, author and London tour guide. His book recounting his epic overground walk of the whole Underground network - Walk the Lines - was published last year to great acclaim. His guided walks cover some of the more compelling parts of this odyssey. Find out more on Mark’s excellent web site, [The Importance of Being Trivial](#).