

Covent Garden: London's Greatest Historical Market [B1]

Con quasi quattro secoli di storia, questa attrazione londinese è stata celebrata come il miglior centro commerciale d'Europa e ha recentemente festeggiato il suo 50° anniversario nella sede attuale.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the move of England's most famous market, Covent Garden, from its 350-year-old site in Central London to its new home in Vauxhall, south of the river Thames. In autumn 1974, the market metaphorically closed its doors forever, its [traders](#) taking their fruit, flowers and vegetables to the new site, leaving the central piazza empty of life, with its future worryingly unclear.

MEDIEVAL ORIGINS

The name Covent Garden comes from the medieval market garden of the Benedictine Convent of St. Peter's, Westminster, [dating back to](#) around 1200. Henry VIII took possession of the land in 1536 and [granted](#) it to John Russell, 1st [Earl](#) of Bedford. In 1630, the 4th [Earl](#) was licensed to develop the area of Covent Garden "with howses and buildings [fit](#) for the habitacions of Gentlemen and men of ability" — England's first experiment in urban planning!

ARCHITECT INIGO JONES

The [Earl](#) also wanted a church, so he contracted the architect Inigo Jones. Built on an Etruscan model, the church is now in the heart of the West End's theatre district and is called the Actors' Church. Consecrated in 1638, the church soon had a congregation of wealthy families who had moved to the area. They were quickly joined by fruit and vegetable sellers. Unaffected by the Great Fire of London of 1666, Covent Garden quickly became London's largest market. It was established "forever" by King Charles II in 1670.

RADICAL CHANGES

Covent Garden changed radically between 1700 and 1800. Property values fell as more and more fruit, vegetable and herb sellers set up [stalls](#) in the area, and the wealthy residents started to leave. The [genteel](#) atmosphere changed into a [raffish](#) one, with the arrival of coffee shops, bookshops, taverns, [boarding houses](#), [gambling houses](#), drinking [dens](#) and [brothels](#). The coffee house Button's, in Russell Street, had numerous famous clients, including Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, James Boswell and Samuel Johnson. By 1800, Covent Garden was the largest fruit, vegetable and herb market in England.

INTRODUCING ORDER

In the 19th century, London's authorities tried to bring order to the congested market. The Central Market building opened in 1828, with a fine glass and iron roof added later. Other new buildings included the Flower Market, Floral Hall and [Charter Market](#). Covent Garden continued to expand and develop over the next century, but by the 1950s it was clear that the market had become too large for its historic home.

RENOVATING COVENT GARDEN

In 1971, a public [inquiry](#) was held on plans for the redevelopment of the area. A five-year renovation project started in 1975. The Central Market was restored and the London Transport Museum was established in the old Flower Market building. Covent Garden re-opened in 1980 as Europe's first speciality shopping centre. It quickly became one of the city's main tourist attractions, with millions every year [drawn](#) to its cafés, wine bars, pubs, restaurants, shops and non-stop street entertainment.

CENTURIES OF STREET THEATRE

An important [feature](#) of Covent Garden life, now and during the last four centuries, is street entertainment. The famous diarist Samuel Pepys wrote in

his diary in 1662 that he had watched “an Italian [puppet play](#)” in Covent Garden performed by the puppet showman Pietro Gimonde and featuring a character called Punch (Pulcinella in Italian commedia dell’arte). This evolved into the popular British show Punch and Judy. Now tourists and Londoners [alike](#) visit the area as much for the street performers as for the shops and restaurants. The entertainment comes in all varieties, including [fire-eaters](#), [high-wire walkers](#), [knife jugglers](#), [buskers](#), mime artists, contortionists and illusionists.

Glossary

- **raffish** = vistosa, appariscente
- **dens** = antri
- **brothels** = bordelli
- **inquiry** = indagine
- **feature** = caratteristica
- **puppet play** = spettacolo di marionette
- **alike** = allo stesso modo
- **high-wire walkers** = funamboli
- **traders** = venditori
- **stalls** = bancarelle
- **genteel** = elegante
- **boarding houses** = pensioni
- **Charter Market** = mercati istituiti con decreto reale
- **drawn** = attrarre
- **fire-eaters** = mangiatori di fuoco
- **knife jugglers** = giocolieri con coltelli
- **buskers** = artisti di strada
- **dating back to** = risalire a
- **granted** = concedere
- **Earl** = conte
- **fit** = adatti, idonei
- **gambling houses** = luoghi di gioco d'azzardo