

# HIDDEN ATTRACTIONS OF LONDON

# BLUE PLAQUES



If you have ever visited London, you might have noticed blue plaques on some buildings. They mark the places where famous people from all over the world were born, lived, or worked. Although the plaques appear in other towns and cities in Britain as well, they are especially well-known in London. There are about 800 plaques in London and every year more are added in response to suggestions from the public.

## Blue or not?

The plaques are often called 'blue plaques' so you would naturally expect them all to be blue. Wrong. The earliest plaques were blue, but then the makers experimented with the design and colour: the plaques were blue, green, or brown. Today most of them are **circular** (symbolizing **eternity**) and blue (the colour of peace, **constancy** and **serenity**).

## How it all began

The oldest surviving plaque in London is in honour of Napoleon III of France, a nephew of Napoleon I (Napoleon Bonaparte). It was put up in 1867, during Napoleon III's lifetime. (This is unusual

because today the plaques are only put up 100 years after a person's birth or 20 years after their death.) This plaque was a political **tool** and demonstrated the friendship between Napoleon III and Queen Victoria, and the **mutual respect** between France and Britain after fighting on the same side in the Crimean War.

## Famous writers

Many famous writers are remembered on the plaques. Charles Dickens, the popular 19th century British novelist, is **honoured** with the biggest number of them: 10 in total. And they don't only mark the places where Dickens lived. When Charles was 12, his father **was imprisoned for debt**, and Charles had to accept a factory job, **pastng labels on pots of boot polish**, to make some money for food. Today, a blue plaque can be seen on the wall of the building, **commemorating** his work there as a child.

Jane Austen is known for spending almost her whole life in the country, which she described so well in her books. However, she lived for some time at her brother's home in London, working on her novels there. So she also gets a blue - well, in fact, green - plaque.

Perhaps one of the loveliest plaques is dedicated to William Blake. This poet and **engraver** never gained much fame during his lifetime and was even called a '**lunatic**' for his imaginative work. He lived at several

addresses in London and one of them is marked with a dark blue **rectangle** plaque with a decorative brown **frame**.

## Scientists and inventors

Even people with no interest in physics have heard about Sir Isaac Newton. He is most famous for discovering the **laws of gravity** (**allegedly** by watching an apple fall from a tree), but his discoveries were so numerous that many consider him to be the father of modern science.

In 1818, Denis Johnson, a London **coachmaker**, introduced the 'hobby-horse' into England. The hobby-horse was a **forerunner** of the bicycle. It had no pedals, instead the rider **pushed on the ground** with his feet to move the machine and **dragged his feet** to slow it.

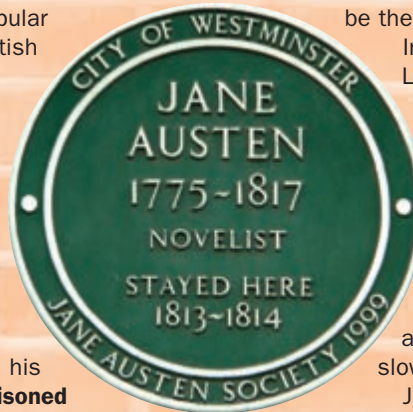
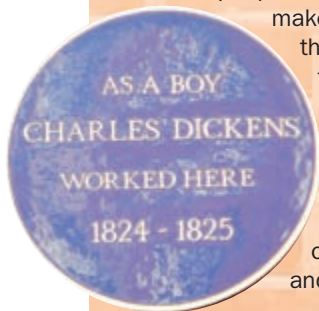
John Logie Baird, from Scotland, is remembered as the inventor of mechanical television. In 1926, he demonstrated the invention in his London laboratory. It was the first 'true' television because it showed moving people in detail.

## Unexpected encounters

When tracking the blue plaques, sometimes you encounter names you may not expect in London.

Ho Chi Minh was the communist leader of North Vietnam from the end of WWII. However, as a young man he lived in London and trained as a **pastry chef** at the Carlton Hotel in Westminster.

The Mozart family spent some time living in the Soho area. Their finances **were running low**, so Wolfgang's father invited the







public to come and pay to hear his talented nine-year-old son play. The actual building cannot be seen today as it was rebuilt, but at least a plaque reminds us of the place.

commemorating the working donkeys. Before cars appeared on the scene, donkeys were one of the main means of transport. Because of their small size and great strength, they were useful for pulling carts with fruit, vegetables, and other goods through London's narrow streets. For hundreds of years, they helped the sellers in the Covent Garden Market, and they disappeared from there only as late as in 1974.

Jane Haward (UK), Zuzana Pernicová

## Only people?

It's commonly said that the plaques commemorate famous people. Well, most of them do. But not all.

*The Mousetrap*, a classic murder mystery by Agatha Christie, is the world's **longest running play** of any kind. It was premiered in 1952, and has been performed **constantly** since then. In 2002, it celebrated its 50th season in St Martin's Theatre in London.

If you look up in Neal's Yard, a tiny picturesque site with small shops and **cosy**

restaurants, you may be lucky enough

to spot a plaque hiding behind the leaves of **ivy**. It **claims** that 'Monty Python, film maker, lived here'. In fact, it marks the setting of the studios where the famous group of British comedians produced their *Flying Circus*.

And what about

animals? In the Covent Garden Market, you can find a **cute** plaque



## Where you can find the plaques:

**Napoleon III.** 1c King Street SW1  
**Charles Dickens** 6 Chandos Place WC2  
**Jane Austen** 10 Henrietta Street WC2  
**William Blake** 17 South Molton Street W1  
**Sir Isaac Newton** 87 Jermyn Street SW1  
**Denis Johnson** 69-75 Long Acre WC2  
**John Logie Baird** 22 Frith Street W1  
**Ho Chi Minh** New Zealand House, Haymarket SW1  
**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** 20 Frith Street W1  
**Mousetrap** St. Martin's Theatre, West Street WC1  
**Monty Python** Neal's Yard WC2  
**Working Donkeys of Covent Garden** Covent Garden Market WC2

## vocabulary

**plaque** [plæk, plɑ:k] - plaketa, pamětní deska  
**to mark** - označovat  
**in response to suggestions from the public** [ri'spɒns sə'dʒestʃ(ə)nz] - na základě návrhů veřejnosti  
**circular** ['sɑ:kjələ] - kruhový  
**eternity** [i'tɜ:niti] - věčnost  
**constancy** ['kɒnst(ə)nsi] - stálost  
**serenity** [si'reniti] - vyrovnanost  
**tool** [tu:l] - nástroj  
**mutual respect** ['mju:tʃʊəl] - vzájemnou úctu  
**to honour** ['ɒnə] - poctít  
**was imprisoned for debt** [im'priz(ə)nd det] - byl uvězněn za dluhy  
**pasting labels on pots of boot polish** ['peɪstɪŋ 'leɪb(ə)lz 'pɒlɪʃ] - lepení štítků na nádobky s leštidlem na boty  
**to commemorate** [kə'meməreɪt] - připomínat  
**engraver** [ɪn'grɛvə] - rytec  
**lunatic** ['lu:nətɪk] - šílenec  
**rectangle** ['rektæŋg(ə)l] - obdélník  
**frame** [frem] - rám  
**laws of gravity** ['grævɪti] - zákony zemské přitažlivosti  
**allegedly** [ə'ledʒɪdli] - údajně  
**coachmaker** ['kəʊtʃmeɪkə] - výrobce kočárů  
**forerunner** ['fɔ:ɹʌnə] - předchůdce  
**pushed on the ground** - odrážel se od země  
**dragged his feet** [drægd] - brzdil nohama  
**encounter** [ɪn'kaʊntə] - setkání  
**pastry chef** ['peɪstri ʃef] - cukrář  
**were running low** - docházely  
**longest running play** - nejdéle uváděná divadelní hra  
**constantly** ['kɒnst(ə)nntli] - nepřetržitě  
**cosy** [kəʊzi] - útulný  
**ivy** ['aɪvi] - břečťan  
**to claim** [kleɪm] - tvrdit  
**cute** [kju:t] - roztomilý  
**for pulling carts** [kɑ:ts] - k tahání vozů  
**goods** [gʊdz] - zboží

