

# Uncovering London's secrets on a meandering magic tour

By Emma Featherstone, 13 December 2018 • The Telegraph



*James Pritchard has a trick or two up his sleeve*

We'd arranged to meet at a well-known spot in St James's. I was late, and looking for both the man in question and for a friend who'd agreed to chaperone. I glanced around apprehensively and suddenly there he was: a red-headed gent wearing jeans and a black blazer, with a holdall in one hand. It wasn't a blind date. This was our personal magician – and historian – for the afternoon, James Pritchard.

A member of The Magic Circle and a performer since the age of 11, James regularly appears at corporate events and weddings and also offers private walking tours around London. They explore the capital's surprisingly rich history of magic, detailing the relationships and rivalries of famous magicians and revealing the locations where they performed.

Joined by my friend, we marched to an innocuous office block near Fortnum & Mason. We'd be learning about London's magical history from the mid-1800s to the early-1900s and this, we were informed, was a theatre for some of the world's best illusionists at around that time. John Nevil Maskelyne, an English magician and inventor of the pay toilet (you inserted a coin to operate it, hence the phrase "spend a penny") ran the hall and was a frequent performer.

James carried a handy flip book of old photos to complement his patter. It featured buildings frequented by illusionists, famed magicians and diagrams of classic magic tricks – Pepper’s ghost, for example, was the name of a mirror-based trick that allowed a ‘ghoul’ to appear on stage. The same premise behind that deception is sometimes used today to conjure eerie performances by long-dead musicians.

We wound our way to Leicester Square and stopped at the Hippodrome. Most know it as a casino, but just inside the door is a display featuring one of Harry Houdini’s straitjackets. In decades past the venue was a lauded theatre and in addition to hosting performances by Houdini in 1904, it welcomed the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Julie Andrews and Stevie Wonder on stage.



*Magician James Pritchard*

In advance of Houdini’s Hippodrome debut, tabloids ramped up excitement. The Mirror (known then as the Daily Illustrated Mirror) insisted it would stump him with the strongest pair of handcuffs he’d encountered.

It turned out they were no match for Houdini, and James illustrated the escape artist’s dexterity by reproducing the trick outside the Hippodrome, an act that attracted curiosity from passers by. Luckily each time James performed on the street, he was skillful at diffusing the crowds that would gather round and we could then simply continue our walking tour. James’s most memorable act defies easy explanation but involved a random Wikipedia entry chosen by us and what seemed like his knack for mind reading.

After stopping for a flat white (included in the tour), we headed to perhaps the most surprising stop: the upstairs display area of a Sherlock Holmes-themed pub near Charing Cross. Surprising because you'd expect to see at least a few Benedict Cumberbatch fans snapping selfies, but we had full rein. Here we learned of the broken friendship between Houdini and Arthur Conan Doyle.

The tour ended at London's oldest magic shop near Trafalgar Square – a place you'd be unlikely to stumble across. Our host ushered us through to the back room. It was covered in retro posters from long-gone magicians, such as the bullet-catching Chung Ling Soo, who claimed to be Chinese but was actually a New Yorker of Scottish descent, born William Ellsworth Robinson.



*Tricks of the trade at a London magic shop*

In front of a velvet-curtained stage, James wrapped things up with a 30-minute private show for the two of us. Following a half hour of card, coin and mind-reading tricks, we left – still trying to guess how he pulled off that Wikipedia stunt – with a new-found curiosity for magic and its impact on London.

**Note:** Since this article was published, Davenport's magic shop has closed and is no longer a feature of the tour.