

Railway-yard roam



Nature, Champagne and literature are on **Emma Jackson's** itinerary in this stroll through a formerly sordid north-London enclave that is now on the up

Time **1 hour**
Start **British Library**
Finish **Argyle Square**
Miles **2.3**

1 BRITISH LIBRARY Start at the **British Library**. Take in the view from the north-west corner to see why staff members refer to it as 'the Titanic at Disneyland'.

2 ST PANCRAS AND KING'S CROSS Exit on to Euston Road, turn left and walk past **St Pancras station**, turning left through the iron gates and up the steps of **St Pancras International**. The new station, opened to much fanfare in 2007, contains Paul Day's kitsch colossus, the John Betjeman statue and Europe's longest Champagne bar. The rebranding of the station as a place of great luxury harks back to the glory days when the **Grand Midland Hotel**, built in 1876, was at the cutting edge of Victorian technology – boasting the first revolving door in London. Take the escalator down and the exit for the slightly grubbier **King's Cross station**. Known as '**Battle Bridge**' until a monument to George IV was erected in 1830, King's Cross has played host to both the grand plans and the darker side of metropolitan life. This is an urban landscape



The Grand Midland Hotel (above left), the Cross after dark (inset) and York Way (above)

in transition: the 67-acre regeneration site is still a mass of cranes and prefabs, but now is the time to have a gander at the gothic remains of 'old' King's Cross and glimpse its future.

3 CAMLEY STREET NATURAL PARK Turn right on to Pancras Road past **The Gymnasium** and you'll see **Camley Street Natural Park** (wildlondon.org.uk), created in 1984 on the site of a former coal

heap. At weekends, younger visitors can take part in art activities, go pond dipping and hunt for mini-beasts in the woodpile.

4 OLD ST PANCRAS CHURCHYARD Follow Camley Street to the right under the railway tracks. Take a left through the iron gates into **Old St Pancras churchyard**. It was here that Percy Shelley first saw his future wife, Mary, who would later pen 'Frankenstein', tending the grave of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. Notice how the railway tracks cut across the churchyard. A young Thomas Hardy had the unenviable task of supervising the removal of more than 10,000 bodies, hence the macabre '**Hardy Tree**' – a large ash encircled by resited gravestones. The nearby Soane mausoleum is credited with inspiring the telephone box.

5 REGENT'S CANAL Exit back on to Camley Street, following the road left until you cross the bridge over **Regent's Canal**. Take the steps down to the canal, turning left for another perspective on the area's industrial past before exiting at Maiden Lane bridge. Cross York Way, taking a left on to Wharfdale Road; follow the signs for the **London Canal Museum** (canalmuseum.org.uk). Situated in the former **Carlo Gatti icehouse**, this is the perfect place to learn about canal life in the **Battle Bridge Basin**.

6 ARGYLE SQUARE Head back to Wharfdale Road, turning right on to Caledonian Road, where hardware shops, cafés and the notorious strip joint the **Flying Scotsman** pub rub shoulders with new boutiques. Turn left past the **Scala** and cross over for Birkenhead Street and Argyle Square – this former soliciting spot provides an appropriate conclusion. In 1895, Charles Booth, cartographer of London poverty, struggled to classify the area's combination of middle-class residences and 'disorderly houses to supply a provincial demand arriving at King's Cross and St Pancras'. A reminder that places of mass transit, with the anonymity and possibilities they present, invariably provide a ready-made market for other services, no matter how carefully planned their 'clean-up'.



EAT AND DRINK HERE For pints overlooking the canal: **Canal 125**, 125 Caledonian Road, N1 (020 7837 1924/canal125.com). For good sandwiches and a great vantage point for King's Cross station: **Café Sorriso**, 2 York Way, N1.