

My Favourite Londoner

Gyles Brandreth on Oscar Wilde



Gyles Brandreth's career has ranged from being an MP and whip in John Major's Conservative government to appearing in a musical revue in the

West End. A regular on 'Just a Minute' and 'Countdown', he has been a guest host on 'Have I Got News for You' and the subject of 'This Is Your Life'. He has lived in London all his life.

My favourite Londoner is – and has been since I was a child – Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. He was an Irishman, of course, and spent his childhood in Dublin. But from the time he came down from Oxford University in the late 1870s (garlanded with honours) until the time he was carted off to Pentonville Prison in 1895 (sentenced to two years' hard labour for homosexual offences), London was his domain.

Oscar was probably the best-connected Londoner of his day. He knew everybody, from the notable to the notorious, from the Prince of Wales to the Prime Minister, and everybody wanted to know him. Before they met him they wanted to meet him simply to discover what all the fuss was about. He was a celebrity, in the tradition of Beau Brummel and Lord Byron, a dandy and a poet, the self-styled 'champion of aestheticism', and until the early 1890s, when he began writing the dazzling comedies on which his reputation rests, probably more famous for his style than his substance. Once they had met him, however, people wanted to know him because, by all accounts, he was so delightful. He had perfect manners and a winning way. Even the Marquess of Queensberry, who loathed

'He wore his scholarship lightly. He was as quick-witted as the sharpest stand-up in town'

the very sight of him, and accused him of corrupting his son, Lord Alfred Douglas, when he sat down with Oscar Wilde after lunch one day at the Café Royal, succumbed to his charm.

Oscar was a brilliant raconteur, but he was not a selfish conversationalist. He liked to listen as well as talk. His intellect was formidable, but he wore his scholarship lightly. His range of interests was immense – from Greek gods to Swiss cheese – and he was as quick-witted as the sharpest stand-up in town. Once he volunteered to speak on any subject anyone cared to suggest to him. Immediately someone asked him to talk about Queen Victoria. He replied: 'Her Majesty is not a subject.'

Oscar has been part of my life since I was quite small because I was brought up in his part of town. Until I was 12, my parents lived in different parts of



Wilde living A coloured photo of the writer on holiday, circa 1893

Kensington and Chelsea. I wasn't a train-spotter as a boy. What I 'collected' were the brown and blue plaques that marked the houses of the famous. The very first one I spotted was two streets away from where we lived, outside 34 Tite Street, Chelsea. It read 'Oscar Wilde, wit and dramatist lived here'. (From 1884 to 1895, when it was the home of the Wildes, it was number 16.)

When I was ten, I remember that my father took me to tea at the Cadogan Hotel, on the corner of Pont Street and Sloane Street. He even managed to blag his way into what is now room 118, the room where Wilde was arrested in 1895. The hotel was once the home of Oscar's friend (and the Prince of Wales' mistress), the beautiful Lillie Langtry. The Cadogan was one of Oscar's favourite haunts and, if you visit it today, I think you will sense something of his spirit in the air.

Because my father was a lawyer, he also took me to visit the Great

Marlborough Street Magistrates Court where Wilde began his ill-fated libel action against the Marquess of Queensberry and to the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey where Queensberry exacted his revenge.

Wilde died, aged only 46, in November 1900, in exile in Paris. But, a century later, much of his London – Victorian London – still stands and my hobby now, as much as it was when I was a child, is to 'walk in the steps of history', collecting places associated with my heroes, like Oscar Wilde. Recently, I paid my first visit to St James's, Sussex Gardens, the vast Gothic Revival church in Paddington, where Oscar and Constance Wilde were married in 1884. I think Oscar would have been impressed by the quantity of the incense and the quality (and look) of the choir.

When I was 12, my parents moved from Kensington to Baker Street. Their new flat was in Chiltern Court, the block above the underground station. Hughie

Green lived in the flat next door and Arnold Bennett, author of 'The Old Wives' Tale', had died in a flat on the floor below. What excited me, however, was the fact that from the kitchen window I could see into the window of what I believed to be 221B Baker Street, the address of the world's foremost consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes. For a while, during my Baker Street years, my allegiance to Oscar wavered. I have a strong sense of place. It wasn't until I got to Oxford – the other English city where Oscar felt most at home – that Wilde regained his ascendancy.

Recently, I have been able to bring together my two literary heroes: Oscar Wilde and Holmes's creator, Arthur Conan Doyle. When I discovered they had been friends I decided to write a Victorian murder mystery involving them both. I learned that they first met in 1889, over dinner at the then newly built Langham Hotel in Portland Place. I decided to start my murder mystery there. I don't mean I simply set the opening scene in the hotel. I mean that I went to the hotel and found the Palm Court where they had shared dinner and ensconced myself there, with notebook and pen, and began to write my story.

Oscar Wilde is my hero – literally. In my book, he is the detective who solves the crime. (I believe Conan Doyle based the character of Sherlock Holmes's older brother, Mycroft, on Oscar Wilde.) He is also a personal hero. He was flawed, but he was fabulous: funny, peculiar, original, engaging, generous, and intellectually, breathtakingly brilliant. One of the reasons I love living in London is that he lived here and so much of his London is living still. *'Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders'* is published by John Murray at £12.99

Edited by **John O'Connell**
johnoconnell@timeout.com

The bare facts

Oscar Wilde

- 1854 Born in Dublin on October 16.**
- 1871 Studies classics at Trinity College, Dublin.**
- 1874 Wins scholarship to Oxford to continue his studies. He graduates with a double first.**
- 1878 Moves to London.**
- 1884 Marries Constance Lloyd in Paddington. They have two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan.**
- 1891 Meets Lord Alfred Douglas for the first time.**
- 1895 Libel suit against the ninth Marquess of Queensberry is brought to trial. On May 25 Wilde is convicted of gross indecency and sentenced to two years' hard labour**
- 1900 Dies of cerebral meningitis on November 30**