



City of Westminster

Wellington Arch



Wellington Arch was built in 1825–7 and was originally intended as an outer entrance to Buckingham Palace. In 1846 it was given a new role as pedestal to a giant statue of the Duke of Wellington. When the arch was moved to a new site in 1883–5, the Wellington statue was taken down, and eventually the arch received a second sculptural adornment on the initiative of the sculptor Adrian Jones, whose sculpture of a four-horse chariot was erected in 1911–12. After the move, the rebuilt arch served as London's smallest police station until the 1950s.



GEORGIAN BACKGROUND



Engraving dated 1810 of Hyde Park Corner, showing the original red-brick Apsley House (left) and the Hyde Park Corner tollgate (right)

Wellington Arch now sits at Hyde Park Corner, where Kensington Road meets Piccadilly near its junction with Park Lane, and where the Kensington Turnpike Trust had its tollgate. London's westward expansion had been momentarily checked here by the two royal parks, Green Park to the south-east and Hyde Park to the north-west. As a result, Hyde Park Corner became thought of unofficially as the new entrance to London.

In the later 18th century and again after the Napoleonic Wars a number of architects produced speculative schemes for a grand gateway here; Sir John Soane, then one of the official architects attached to the Office of Works, produced a number of designs (between 1817 and 1826) envisaging Hyde Park Corner as a stage in a grand processional route to Westminster.

A spirit of metropolitan improvement was in the air, arising from the feeling that London needed to be adorned to suit its status as capital of a great empire: numerous grand schemes were being promoted, several of which came to fruition, notably Regent Street, Regent's Park, and the British Museum.

THE BUILDING OF THE ARCH



An early 19th-century lithograph of Hyde Park Corner showing the Green Park Arch, as it was then called, on the right, facing the Hyde Park Screen and Apsley House. At this stage there was no statue on top of the arch

In 1824 the Office of Woods and Forests commissioned the young Decimus Burton (1800–81) to design new railings and gateways for the royal parks as one of these schemes. Burton initially produced designs for a relatively modest gateway into Green Park and a longer screen entrance to Hyde Park facing it over the road at Hyde Park Corner.

An informal government committee, however, considered that as the ‘Green Park Arch’ would in effect form an outer entrance to Buckingham Palace, then being re-modeled by John Nash for George IV, it would be ‘respectful to His Majesty to have it upon a Scale and of a Character more ornamental than that of the Façade opposite’.

Burton therefore produced a second design, for an explicitly ‘triumphal arch’ with much richer sculptural ornament and a gilded quadriga (a chariot drawn by four horses) on top. In May 1826 his estimate for the work, excluding the sculpture, was approved.

By 1828 both arch and screen were nearing completion. But the cost of the arch had already exceeded Burton’s estimate and the Treasury declined to pay for the sculpture, partly because the rebuilding of Buckingham Palace had run hugely over budget. Burton’s arch was left structurally complete, but without most of its intended decoration, which rather undermined its intended character.

THE WELLINGTON MEMORIAL



The arch in about 1870, with the Wellington statue still in situ

In the 1830s, committees were formed to promote the idea of national memorials to the two great heroes of the age, Nelson and Wellington. The Nelson Memorial Committee achieved the construction of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square, but the Wellington Memorial Committee had a less fortunate history.

The committee numbered over 80, and was manipulated by an inner group led by the 5th Duke of Rutland, the 3rd Marquess of Londonderry, Colonel Frederick Trench and John Wilson Croker MP. It was apparently Croker who suggested that an appropriate memorial would be a giant equestrian statue of Wellington erected on top of the Green Park Arch, as it was diagonally opposite Apsley House, Wellington’s London residence.

By springing the idea on a poorly attended committee meeting in May 1838 and exploiting Rutland's government contacts, the inner clique secured approval for the project, together with their chosen sculptor, Rutland's protégé Matthew Cotes Wyatt (1777–1862).[8]

Both decisions aroused great controversy, within the committee and among the public at large, with heated debates in the press and Parliament. Rutland and his colleagues, however, refused to compromise in any way.

The furore reached its height when Wyatt's equestrian statue, the largest ever created, was erected on the arch in 1846, supposedly for a trial period. It was greeted with gales of derision as being both ugly and completely disproportionate to the arch.

The government demanded that it should be taken down, but at this point Wellington declared that he would regard the removal of the figure as a clear mark of royal disfavour, and would feel obliged to resign all his public posts, including that of commander-in-chief. Because of the duke's immense prestige the Queen and government backed down.

THE ARCH MOVED



By the 1870s Hyde Park Corner had become notorious for traffic jams. In 1880 the incoming Liberal government adopted a scheme to make a new road, cutting the corner between Piccadilly and Grosvenor Place, which involved moving the Wellington Arch to a new site a short distance to the south-east, facing down Constitution Hill. The President and Academicians of the Royal Academy urged the government to take the opportunity to remove the giant statue.



Dismantling of the arch began in February 1883. Initial proposals to melt the statue down and cast a smaller one from the metal were rejected when a number of army officers objected. Many officers had subscribed to the original memorial fund. Instead, the giant figure was re-erected on a new pedestal near the Garrison Church at Aldershot, where it remains.



1st Duke of Wellington astride Copenhagen at Aldershot

A fine new equestrian sculpture of Wellington by Joseph Boehm (1834–90) was erected directly opposite Apsley House, close to the arch's original site, in 1888.

By about 1885 the arch had been rebuilt on its present site. The southern pier was used as a park-keeper's residence and the northern pier as a police station: in 1886 a telegraph line was laid to the police station, indicating that the rebuilding was complete by then.

ADRIAN JONES AND THE QUADRIGA

After the move, there was again no statue on the arch. However, in 1891 the sculptor Adrian Jones (1845–1938), a former army veterinary captain who specialised in animal figures, exhibited a magnificent plaster group at the Royal Academy entitled 'Triumph', of a quadriga, a four-horse chariot. The Prince of Wales suggested that it would make a suitable adornment for the rebuilt Wellington Arch.

Initially no funds were available, but eventually a banker, Sir Herbert Stern, made an anonymous donation of about £20,000, and from 1908 Jones set to work on a full-size plaster version of his quadriga in his Chelsea studio, with Edward VII taking a personal interest. The final bronze version was erected on top of the arch in 1911–12.

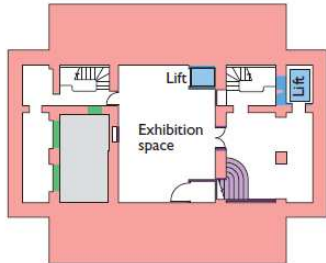


The statue shows a boy racing the horses, representing a chariot of war, as the winged statue of Peace descends from the heavens. The boy was modelled on the young son of the wealthy philanthropist and celebrated race horse owner Herbert Stern. I do not know whether it was his eldest son, Herman Alfred then a lad of 12, or his younger son, Jack Herbert who was 3 years younger, who was immortalised in bronze.

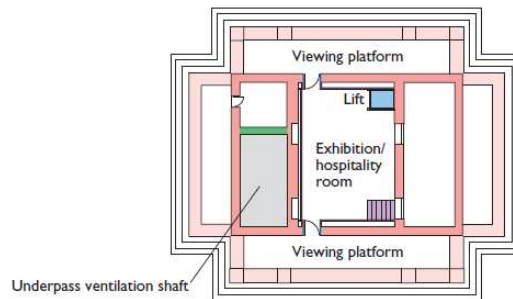


THE WELLINGTON ARCH
(rebuilt 1883)

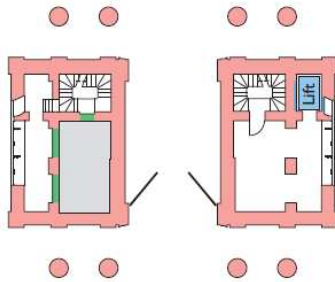
Third-floor plan



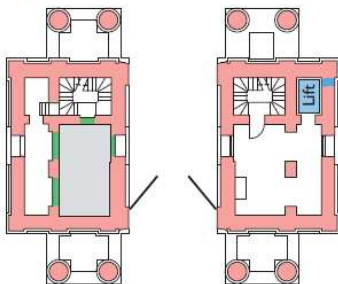
Gallery-floor plan



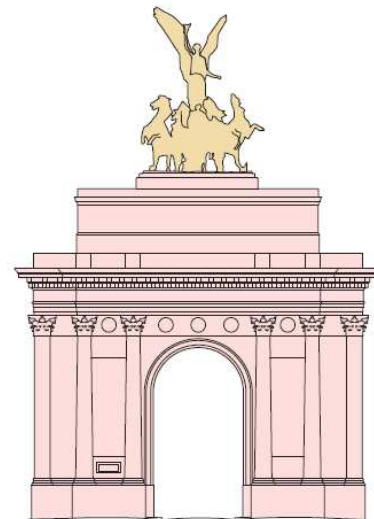
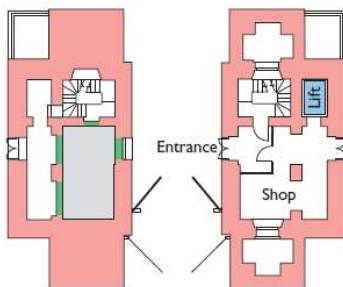
Second-floor plan



First-floor plan



Ground-floor plan



West elevation



- 1825-33
- 1910-12
- 1961
- 2000
- 2011-12

0 5 10m

RECENT HISTORY

The arch in its new position stood across a major processional route. Between 1901 and 1912 the approaches to Buckingham Palace were redesigned, to create the magnificent ceremonial landscape we see today. Constitution Hill was widened and repaved, and the Wellington Arch was framed between fine new piers and gates, tying it into this composition.

The park-keeper's residence closed in 1937, while the police station, said to be the smallest in London, survived until the late 1950s.

The arch's setting was again altered in an attempt to relieve traffic congestion with the creation of the present Hyde Park Corner roundabout in 1960–62. The Edwardian gates to either side of the arch were removed, and it was cut off from Constitution Hill on the new traffic island. The southern pier of the arch was gutted to serve as a ventilation shaft for an underpass; the rest of the arch was left empty after this date.

In 1999 the arch was transferred to the care of English Heritage. Major repairs and refurbishment were carried out, and in 2001 the arch was opened to the public.



I did not relish the prospect of climbing the three storeys to the outer balconies, with their panoramic views, on so humid an afternoon and so took the lift instead. The top storey was devoted to a history of the Wellington Arch and had various mementoes of the building on display such a copy of the wheel hub from the chariot in the shape of a lion's head. Having perused the collection I went out on to the balconies on either side.





One floor displayed copies of the head of the Goddess of Peace and the boy charioteer alongside an exhibition on Blue Plaques, which are affixed to the former homes of a chosen selection of the great and the good. On the ground floor the charioteer's arm was on display by the English Heritage shop.



From one of the windows I was able to take a picture of the elaborate gates, designed to allow the pathway to be closed to traffic. Having stopped off at each flight, the idea of walking down the stone stairs to the ground floor was less daunting a prospect than the initial climb to the top.