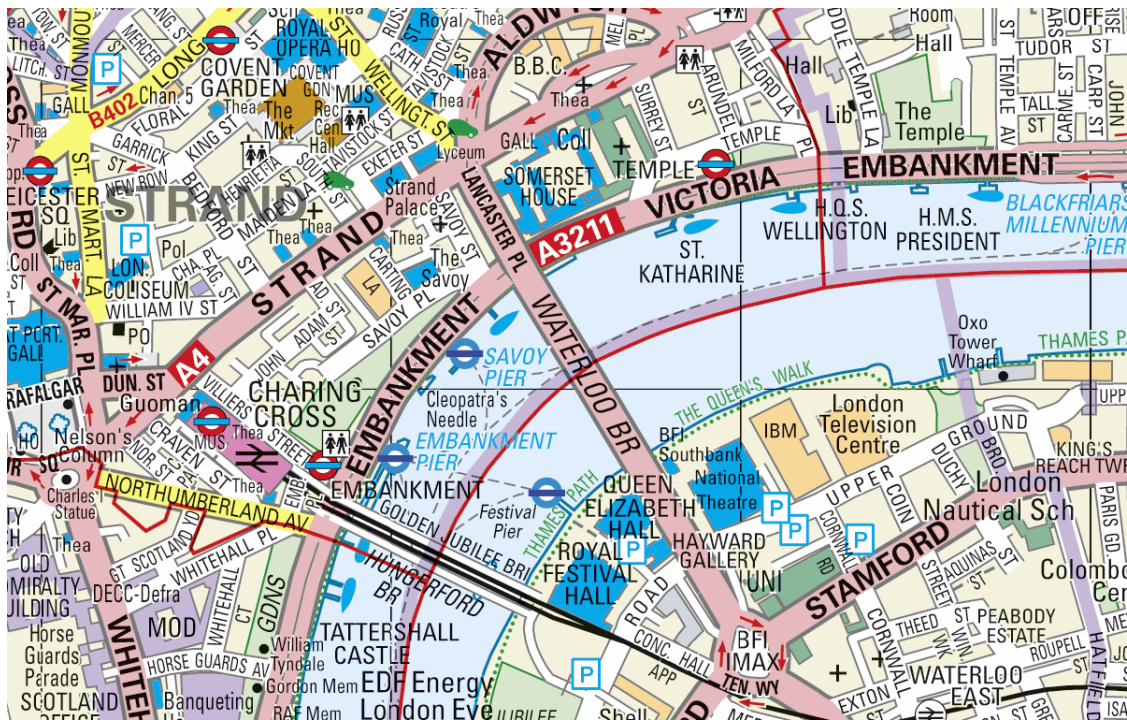




City of Westminster

Cleopatra's Needle

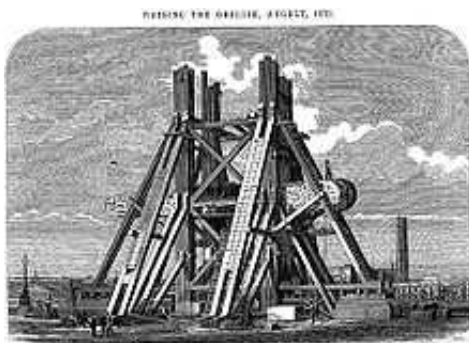


Cleopatra's Needle is the popular name for each of three Ancient Egyptian obelisks re-erected in London, Paris, and New York City during the nineteenth century. The London and New York ones are a pair, while the Paris one comes from a different original site, where its twin remains. Although the needles are genuine Ancient Egyptian obelisks, they are somewhat misnamed as they have no particular connection with Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt, and were already over a thousand years old in her lifetime. The London "needle" is one such example, as it was originally made during the reign of the 18th Dynasty Pharaoh Thutmose III but was falsely named "Cleopatra's needle". The Paris "needle" was the first to be moved and re-erected and the first to acquire the nickname.



The London needle is in the City of Westminster, on the Victoria Embankment near the Golden Jubilee Bridges. It is close to the Embankment underground station. It was presented to the United Kingdom in 1819 by the ruler of Egypt and Sudan Muhammad Ali, in commemoration of the victories of Lord Nelson at the Battle of the Nile and Sir Ralph Abercromby at the Battle of Alexandria in 1801. Although the British government welcomed the gesture, it declined to fund the expense of transporting it to London.

The obelisk remained in Alexandria until 1877 when Sir William James Erasmus Wilson, a distinguished anatomist and dermatologist, sponsored its transportation to London at a cost of some £10,000 (a very considerable sum in those days). It was dug out of the sand in which it had been buried for nearly 2,000 years and was encased in a great iron cylinder, 92 feet (28 m) long and 16 feet (4.9 m) in diameter, designed by the engineer John Dixon and dubbed *Cleopatra*, to be commanded by Captain Carter. It had a vertical stem and stern, a rudder, two bilge keels, a mast for balancing sails, and a deck house. This acted as a floating pontoon which was to be towed to London by the ship *Olga*, commanded by Captain Booth.^[2]



London's Needle being erected, August 1878.



Statue of The Sphinx at Cleopatra's Needle on Victoria Embankment

The effort met with disaster on 14 October 1877, in a storm in the Bay of Biscay, when the Cleopatra began wildly rolling, and became untenable. The Olga sent out a rescue boat with six volunteers, but the boat capsized and all six crew were lost - named today on a bronze plaque attached to the foot of the needle's mounting stone. Captain Booth on the Olga eventually managed to get his ship next to the Cleopatra, to rescue Captain Carter and the five crew members aboard Cleopatra. Captain Booth reported the Cleopatra "abandoned and sinking," but instead she drifted in the Bay until found four days later by Spanish trawler boats, then rescued by the Glasgow steamer Fitzmaurice and taken to Ferrol in Spain for repairs. The Master of the Fitzmaurice lodged a salvage claim of £5,000 which had to be settled before departure from Ferrol, which was negotiated down and settled for £2,000.[2] The William Watkins Ltd paddle tug Anglia under the command of Captain David Glue was then commissioned to tow the Cleopatra back to the Thames. On their arrival in the estuary, the school children of Gravesend were given the day off when she arrived on 21 January 1878. After a wooden model of the obelisk had been placed outside the Houses of Parliament but the location had been rejected, it was finally erected on the Victoria Embankment on 12 September 1878.