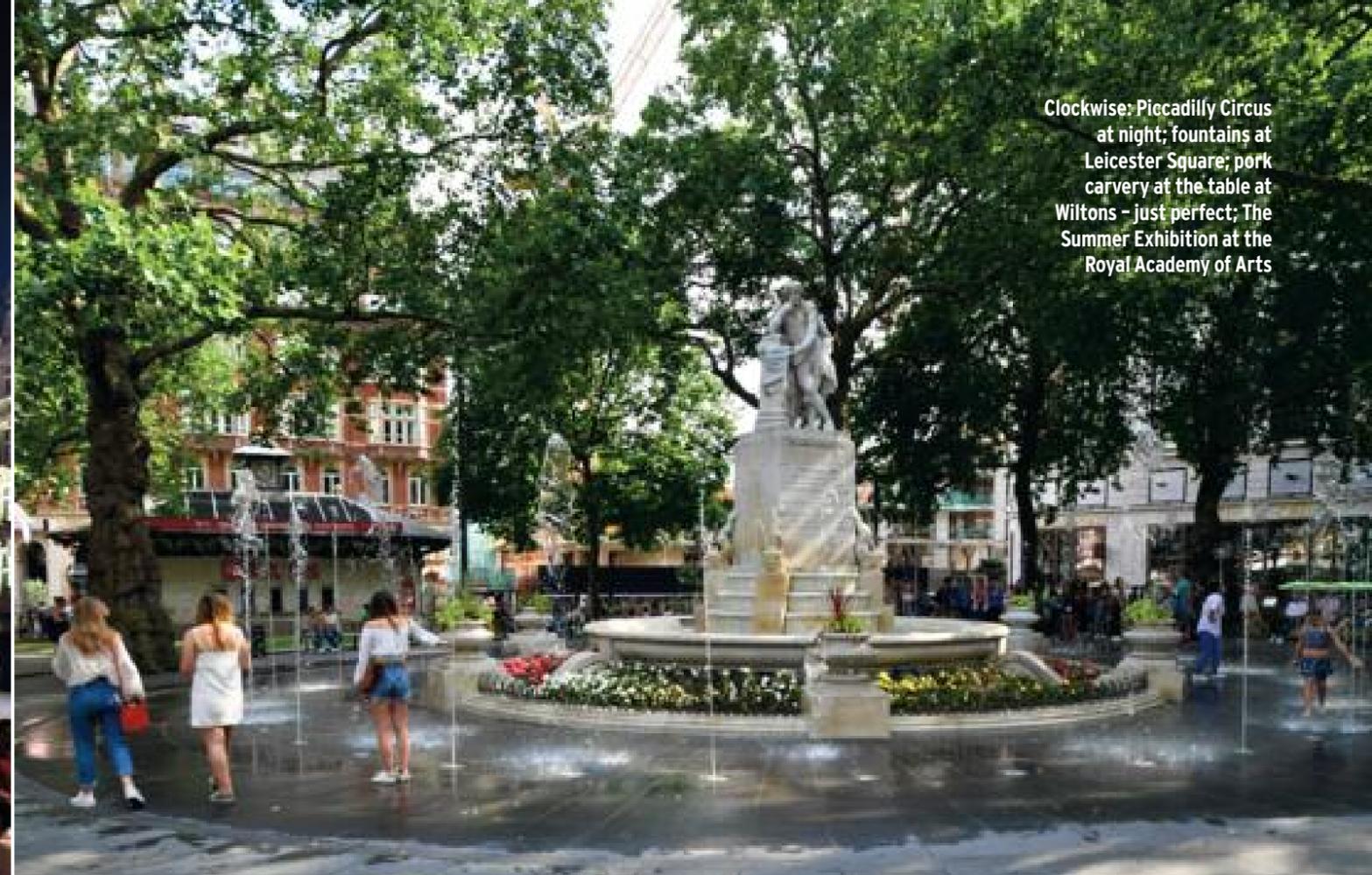


The National Portrait Gallery, home of the world's largest collection of portraits - a national treasure

A capital time in London

It's easy to take our capital for granted, but a short break reminds **Clive Nicholls** that London is one of the world's most exciting cities

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS



Clockwise: Piccadilly Circus at night; fountains at Leicester Square; pork carvery at the table at Wiltons - just perfect; The Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts



PICCADILLY CIRCUS, Leicester Square, St James's... they sound like names from a Monopoly board, not real places in the heart of London, one of the greatest cities in the world.

Steeped in history, with world-leading museums and galleries, theatres that rival the best on Broadway, and some of the finest restaurants on the planet, London

has it all. And the best thing is, it's just a train ride away – an hour and a quarter from my home in Lincolnshire.

I catch an early train and drop my bag off at the Radisson Blu Edwardian in Bloomsbury (my base for the next couple of nights) and set off on foot.

I have an Oyster card but somehow it seems a shame to take the tube when I can see so much more if I walk.

I'm heading for the National Portrait Gallery, so it's down Charing Cross Road.

I've only gone a few yards when I get sidetracked. Denmark Street (Tin Pan Alley) is on my left. I have to take a look.

The Rolling Stones recorded here at No 4, and David Bowie and the Small Faces were often seen at the Gioconda Café at No 9. Elton John and Bernie Taupin had an office here and today music still flows through Denmark Street.

Wonderful guitars hang in shop windows and basements, so beautiful, so tempting – and yes, expensive, too. I

stay focused and keep out of the shops, I just know I would come out with a Fender Hank Marvin Special – a guitar that I didn't need, couldn't play but couldn't resist.

The National Portrait Gallery (just opposite St Martin-in-the-Fields Church) is a favourite of mine. The Old Masters are truly spectacular, the modern stuff a bit quirky but I just love the portraits of the Sixties. The photographers and artists were just so brilliant and inspired a

generation – me included. There are normally special exhibitions which you have to pay for; entrance to the main gallery is free.

When I visited, the Michael Jackson 'On the Wall' exhibition was on display. Some exhibits were amazing, some just plain bonkers, but then again so was Michael Jackson.

The gallery is an oasis of calm – if you're in London don't pass by. It's right next to Trafalgar Square (the toilets are clean,

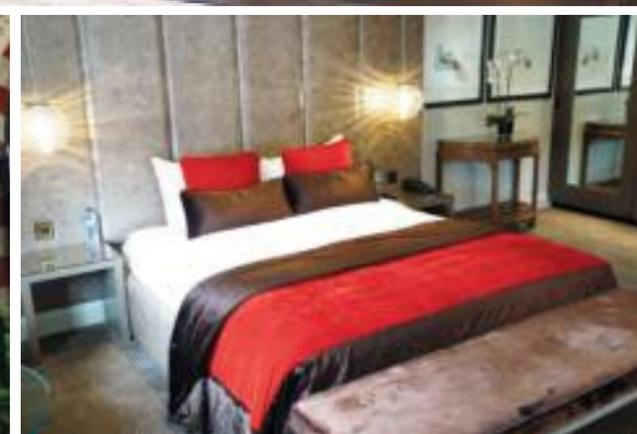
too). Leaving the gallery I walk up Pall Mall, through St James's Square to Jermyn Street and my indulgence, lunch at Wiltons.

Started by George William Wilton in Haymarket way back in 1742 as a shellfish establishment, in 1868, still in the Wilton family, it received its first Royal Warrant as Purveyor of Oysters to Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales.

During the Second World War, Bessie Leal was running the show. A bomb



Clockwise: Michael Jackson's impersonation of Ruben's portrait of King Philip II; busts in the National Portrait Gallery; The Piccadilly Theatre; style at the Radisson Blu Edwardian Bloomsbury Street; The Leicester Square Kitchen; a strawberry treat at the Radisson Blu Edwardian and signature guacamole at The Leicester Square Kitchen



landed close by and shook the foundations and the resolve of Bessie. That night she sold the business to a customer, Mr Hambro, who asked that the restaurant be added to his bill. He approached Jimmy Marks, an oysterman at Bucks Club, to run Wiltons for him. It was an inspired decision. Jimmy created an atmosphere where royalty, aristocracy and the staff mixed on equal terms.

Wiltons moved to Jermyn Street in 1984. I needed to put on a jacket and shirt (ties aren't mandatory) but as I step

through the doorway it just feels wonderful. You can take it for granted that the food is perfect, but what makes it so special is the ambience. The staff are equally at home serving royalty or making an occasion into a lifetime memory for the likes of you and me. Yes, it really is that good. It comes at a price, but you'll never forget when you dined at Wiltons.

So, totally spoilt for choice, what did I eat and drink? Starting off with a glass of Wiltons 275th Anniversary Champagne, I perused the menu. Lobster bisque as

starters with a top-up on the champers, followed by pork with all the trimmings carved at the table and a switch to St Emilion Grand Cru, the Sommelier's recommendation. Deconstructed Eton Mess, petit fours and coffee to finish. Just perfect.

Still buzzing from my lunch I step across Piccadilly to the Royal Academy of Arts and its Summer Exhibition.

Go in with an open mind. Some of the exhibits are amazingly good and an equal number test your sensory skills to the limit.

Now, I've been a magazine photographer for 45 years so I like to think I have a leaning towards the arts, but I have to admit that, looking at some of the more modern stuff, I do begin to question my faith. It's still brilliant that we have a showcase for art and I'm sure every visitor attending will have pieces that moved them and exhibits that bamboozled them, but that's the mystery of art. It's fascinating: stop on by, you'll be impressed.

Just over the road (Piccadilly) is St James's Church, designed by Sir Christopher Wren

and consecrated in 1684. I pop inside to view the splendour but also the basic functionality that Wren created. It's hard to imagine that you are in the heart of London, not to mention a highly valuable piece of real estate... tranquil, slightly understated and rather beautiful.

I've a relaxed day tomorrow with a grand finale – a West End show. Breakfast is at my hotel, the Radisson Blu Edwardian. At home, I have toast and Marmite; when I'm away, I can't resist a full English – it's one of those treats I really enjoy.

Marmalade on my toast, mustard on my sausages... a great start to the day.

The sun is shining so I stroll down to Leicester Square. There's always something going on – street performers working hard for their tips, the fountains giving kids a soaking – but for me it's just a great place to be. I find a spot in the shade and sit with my takeaway coffee and watch the world go by.

I'm eating here early evening at the Leicester Square Kitchen. Restaurants are set up for theatregoers so eating at 5pm



Clockwise: St James's Church, the work of Sir Christopher Wren; a street artist in Leicester Square and the Michael Jackson exhibition



Find out more

- Useful websites: (www.leicester-square.london) and (www.official-londontheatre.com)
- Radisson Blu Edwardian, 9 to 13 Bloomsbury Street, London WC1B 3QD, tel: 020 7636 5601, website: (www.radissonblu-edwardian.com)
- National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place, London WC2H 0HE, website: (www.npg.org.uk)
- Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly, Mayfair, London W1J 0BD, website: (www.royalacademy.org.uk)
- Leicester Square Kitchen, 31 to 36 Leicester Square, London WC2H 7LH, tel: 020 7666 0902, website: (www.leicestersquarekitchen.co.uk)
- Wiltons, 55 Jermyn Street, St James's, London SW1Y 6LX, tel: 020 7629 9955, website: (www.wiltons.co.uk).

isn't a problem. Mexican and Peruvian dishes are the order of the day. It's great fun but I do need a bit of help from the waiter before I can order. I still get a bit of a surprise when some of the plates arrive but that's all part of the experience. What I do know is the food is exceptionally good, and the restaurant is classy and good fun at the same time.

So now for the theatre. I'm so excited. I haven't been for years and there's something about live music and a West End production that fires up all your senses.

The Piccadilly Theatre is the venue, *Strictly Ballroom* is the show and Will

Young is the star. As I take my seat the excitement builds. The lights dim, a hush descends throughout the auditorium then... bang, the band strikes up and we are into the show – simply stunning. My eyes are glued to the stage; it's amazing.

At the intermission I'm surprised by the number of people hovering around my seat. It turns out that Matt Cardle, who will replace Will Young in the role of Wally Strand, is sitting in the seat directly behind me. I love the show but, more than that, I love the experience. I really must do it more often.

London is one of the most vibrant cities

in the world. I travel through it a lot but rarely take time out to enjoy it. That's going to change – I'm coming back for more.