



A TASTE FOR THE CURIOUS

Some of Southwark's lesser-known attractions range from the historically fascinating to the more unusual. Suruchi Sharma embarks on a trip around the borough to seek out its quirkiest attractions and speaks to those behind the ventures

FOR A LONDON BOROUGH packed with some of the UK's most famous galleries, theatres and museums, Southwark also hosts an array of smaller, more niche venues, which attract hobbyists, locals and those with a taste for the curious. Southwark Council has made its enthusiasm for culture to form part of its development strategy clear, with an aim of "securing the cultural landscape for generations to come". How do the smaller venues add up to be greater than the sum of their parts and contribute to an already culturally rich community?

KIRKALDY TESTING MUSEUM

There is a motto inscribed above the door of 99 Southwark Street that states "Facts not Opinions"; words Scottish engineer David Kirkaldy believed in. Inside this Grade II*-listed building is a unique museum dedicated to his work, where the huge hydraulic-



powered Universal Testing Machine he built is preserved.

This pioneering machine was historically used for testing the suitability of building materials for major infrastructure projects that include Hammersmith Bridge and Wembley Stadium.

Museum trustee Sarah Jarvis says: "What David was doing was very controversial at the time, as he was going against the way people were working. He was saying the only way to ensure building and construction materials are safe is to test them rigorously and objectively, and to basically build on fact – not opinion."

The volunteer-run museum opens on the first Sunday and the third Wednesday of every month, and regularly features as part of events such as Open House, London History Day and the Thames festival.

Jarvis says Kirkaldy Testing Museum is different to other cultural attractions as the public gets to "experience the authentic place". Visitors are intrigued by the history of the venue, she says: "You go in and just fall in love

with the place. It's astonishing that it's still here, and it's so important that it survives. It's a crucial part of the legacy of why buildings and bridges stand up, and underpins the world's standard of engineering established in this building in Southwark Street."

OLD OPERATING THEATRE

When visitors head up the narrow 52-step staircase in the Old Operating Theatre, they will be rewarded with a unique chance to learn about the history of medicine.

The oldest surviving surgical theatre in Europe is tucked away next to the iconic Shard building, and is housed in the attic of the old St Thomas Hospital's 18th century church.

Sarah Corn is a year into her role as director of this popular venue that opens seven days a week and annually has around 40,000 visitors. She says: "We talk about the Victorian surgery that would have taken place here and teach key points in medical history.

"Many people say they're so glad to live today [so as] to not have to go through the



PICTURED: The Old Operating Theatre (left and below) and The Kirkaldy Testing Museum (right) give insights into the fields of medicine and engineering respectively.





horrible surgeries of that time. They are grateful for medical advancement.”

School groups make up about a third of the audience that head to the museum, with history pupils who are studying the “medicine through time” module gaining an understanding of past surgical techniques. Corn says the museum wants to co-curate with the community to share stories about the history of the area.

She adds: “No matter what time period you’re living in, there are people who always have herbal remedies for an ailment or an old wives’ tale or some kind of headache cure handed down through families. It’s those personal stories that are anecdotal, as well as folklore, which could open up a whole other angle we haven’t thought about before. Those are the type of stories we want to hear from the community, to create a bigger story on medical history.”

BRUNEL MUSEUM

In Rotherhithe, a tribute to the Brunel dynasty of engineers sits at the site of the oldest part of the tube network and arguably the famous family’s greatest achievement: the Thames Tunnel. This was Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s first project in his celebrated career working alongside his father and fellow engineer, Sir Marc.

The museum features the preserved Engine House, which held steam-powered pumps used to extract water as the tunnel was constructed.

Museum director Robert Hulse says: “It’s an unusual and inspiring museum that despite being small, has a very big story to tell. Brunel, our most well-known engineer, is certainly one of Southwark’s most famous sons. He was a showman and so the museum is in that tradition.”

Hulse points out that Sir Marc Isambard Brunel was a political refugee when he fled the French revolution and later, after some time in the US, found his home in London.

He adds: “This is another reminder of the debt that London owes to new arrivals. People who arrive in this country often come with inspiring ideas, and it’s a French émigré who gave us the London tube system.”

The museum hosts around 40,000 visitors annually and also celebrates Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s final project of ships that laid communication cables across the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. Hulse adds: “He’s a man whose ship heralded the world we live in today of instant communication, and of messages flashed around the world in a heartbeat.” Hulse says social media is “invaluable” to the museum and adds: “I’m sure if Brunel were alive today he would be a total Twitter fiend.”

PICTURED:
The Thames Tunnel at the Brunel Museum (left); Surrey Docks Farm (below) and The Four Quarters arcade bar (below right).



SURREY DOCKS FARM

The business hub of the Canary Wharf area of the capital is located opposite Surrey Docks Farm in Rotherhithe. Free to the public, this venue is the only working city farm on the River Thames.

Farm manager Gemma Hooper says opening seven days a week “certainly keeps the team busy” – but is keen to stress it’s “a labour of love” to accommodate the 50,000 visitors that head there annually.

The community farm has animals including sheep, goats, pigs, ducks and rabbits, as well as bees. A vital aim for Hooper is to engage young people and the venue offers clubs for toddlers and older children, as well as hosting school visits. She says: “While we aim to educate the whole community, it’s important to get young people interested.”



If we want to talk about sustainability, where food comes from and caring for the environment, then doing so at an early age is crucial. When our young farmers put seeds in the ground and see plants grow this is really motivating for us, as they’re excited and want to try the vegetables.”

The farm works with many other organisations in the borough, and has links with groups for asylum seekers and older people. Hooper adds: “Given the nature of the place it changes with the seasons so there’s often something new to connect with. Many visitors often talk about the therapeutic side of the farm that offers a calmer, slower pace of life than the city around it.”

THE FOUR QUARTERS

Nostalgia plays a crucial part in the success of London’s first arcade bar; The Four Quarters in Peckham’s Rye Lane.

Housed in what used to be a butcher’s shop, the venue was opened in 2014 by friends Joe Dowling and Tom Humphrey, who used to run a retro games shop in Streatham.

Complemented by a selection of craft beers and vegan food on offer, visitors can try out classic games such as *Pac Man* and *Street Fighter 2*, and enjoy special events including film screenings. Dowling says: “We wanted to open a gaming bar for a long time and I guess Retro Games Base opened doors and gave us business lessons that made Four Quarters possible.

“I think when we opened people thought we were some kind of chain, perhaps a flag bearer for gentrification, but they realised we’re passionate about what we do and it’s very much for everyone.”

Dowling says he realises how vital it is to have good relationships with the public. He adds: “It’s important to make connections



THIS PAGE:
Punters in Peckham enjoy "old school" video games at Four Quarters; a prisoner's shackles at The Clink Prison Museum (below).

with the community on a broader level and to feel part of it rather than ancillary to it. I don't think we knew what a big thing it was for a bar to open on Rye Lane at the time we did. In the early days we relied on the trade of folk who were just happy to have a new option, or make a stop on their way to or from somewhere else. We quickly became a valued part of Peckham nightlife."

THE CLINK PRISON MUSEUM

Stepping back in time gets to feel very real when visitors head to the famous medieval Clink Prison Museum, found on the River Thames, adjacent to Winchester Palace.

There are many displays of art history and documents here chronicling the prison's past, with referencing to major events such as plots against the crown, including during Queen Mary I's reign.

Museum director Miranda Furneaux says the aim is to provide an educational experience for the public and for people to learn about its heritage from when it first operated in the 12th century.

Thought to be one of the oldest prisons in England, it is believed its name was inspired the sound of the blacksmith's hammer closing irons around the wrists or ankles of a prisoner.

Furneaux adds: "We have solid links with schools, as we're part of the national curriculum covering crime and punishment for primary school children, and most schools return year after year.

"We are in a great location on the original site of the Clink Prison. Our visitors come because we promote real history, and offer hands-on experience where guests can handle some of our torture equipment."

Furneaux says visitor numbers reached around 40,000 last year. With an eye on the future success of the attraction, she wants to promote the area's heritage to ensure "local history is not forgotten".

The museum is currently working on an exhibit to promote its link with the pilgrims who boarded the Mayflower, for the historic ship's 400-year anniversary that will be celebrated in 2020.

