Cunning Cover-ups: London’s Best-hidden Ventilation Shafts

Source: Vicky Wilson, London’s Oddities, metropublications ltd

1. (Corner of Lower Road and Culling Road) Designed by architect Ian Richie, this huge rectangular structure was built in 2000 to serve the Jubilee Line extension at Canada Water. Atop its green copper-panelled exterior is a large plant enclosure.
2. (Albany Road at the corner of Bagshot Street) Victorian engineers liked to dignify the ventilation shafts coming up from London’s sewers with classical detailing. This one looks like just another lamp-post but its much-eroded decorated base was meant to dignify its humble role.
3. (Behind Pimlico Tube Station) This modernistic work of art was created by Eduardo Paolozzi for London Underground in 1982.
4. (Leinster Gardens) When the Metropolitan Railway, the world’s first underground, opened in 1863, its cut-and-cover tunnels had periodic gaps to provide ventilation. One such gap lies behind numbers 23 and 24 Leinster Gardens, necessitating the demolition of these two houses in the middle of a fashionable terrace. To avoid an unsightly gap, the front wall of both houses was preserved, leaving an empty void behind…which you can view by goind round the back into Porchester Gardens.
5. (Hyde Park Corner) The most surprising of all hidden ventilation shafts is, perhaps, the Wellington Arch at Hyde Park Corner. Intended originally as an entrance gate to Buckingham Palace, it was moved to successive locations before ending up here, and serving as a memorial to the Duke of Wellington. Its Northern pier once housed a police station, and its Southern pier a park-keeper’s residence, but with the building of the present Hyde Park Corner roundabout in 1960-62, both sides were gutted and one side became a giant ventilation shaft for the underpass below.
6. (The Strand) Opposite the Royal Courts of Justice lies a grandiose lamp-post which does double duty in providing ventilation for the public toilets alongside.
7. (Paternoster Square) The magnificent central feature of the square, a tall column topped with a pineapple, provides ventilation for an underground service road.
8. (Paternoster Square) As you walk into the square from St Paul’s, look to the left. In a quiet courtyard stand a dramatic structure by Thomas Heatherwick. It serves to cool an underground electricity station.

9. (Finsbury Circus) The obelisk In Circus Place, on the Southern side of the square, commemorates George Dance the Younger, who laid out the Finsbury Estate in the 1770s, but it was in fact constructed in 1999 to provide ventilation for a London Underground gas tank.

10. (Bank of England) Outside Bank station in Cornhill stands a statue to James Henry Greathead, a London Underground engineer who invented the boring machine that cut tunnels under the Thames. The vents at its base are a clue to its function as a ventilation shaft for Bank Station.