



FANTASTIC BOOKS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

They were thundering along Charing Cross Road. Harry sat up and watched buildings and benches squeezing themselves out of the Knight Bus's way. The sky was getting a little lighter. He would lie low for a couple of hours, go to Gringotts the moment it opened, then set off—where, he didn't know.

Ern slammed on the brakes and the Knight Bus skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub, the Leaky Cauldron, behind which lay the entrance to Diagon Alley.

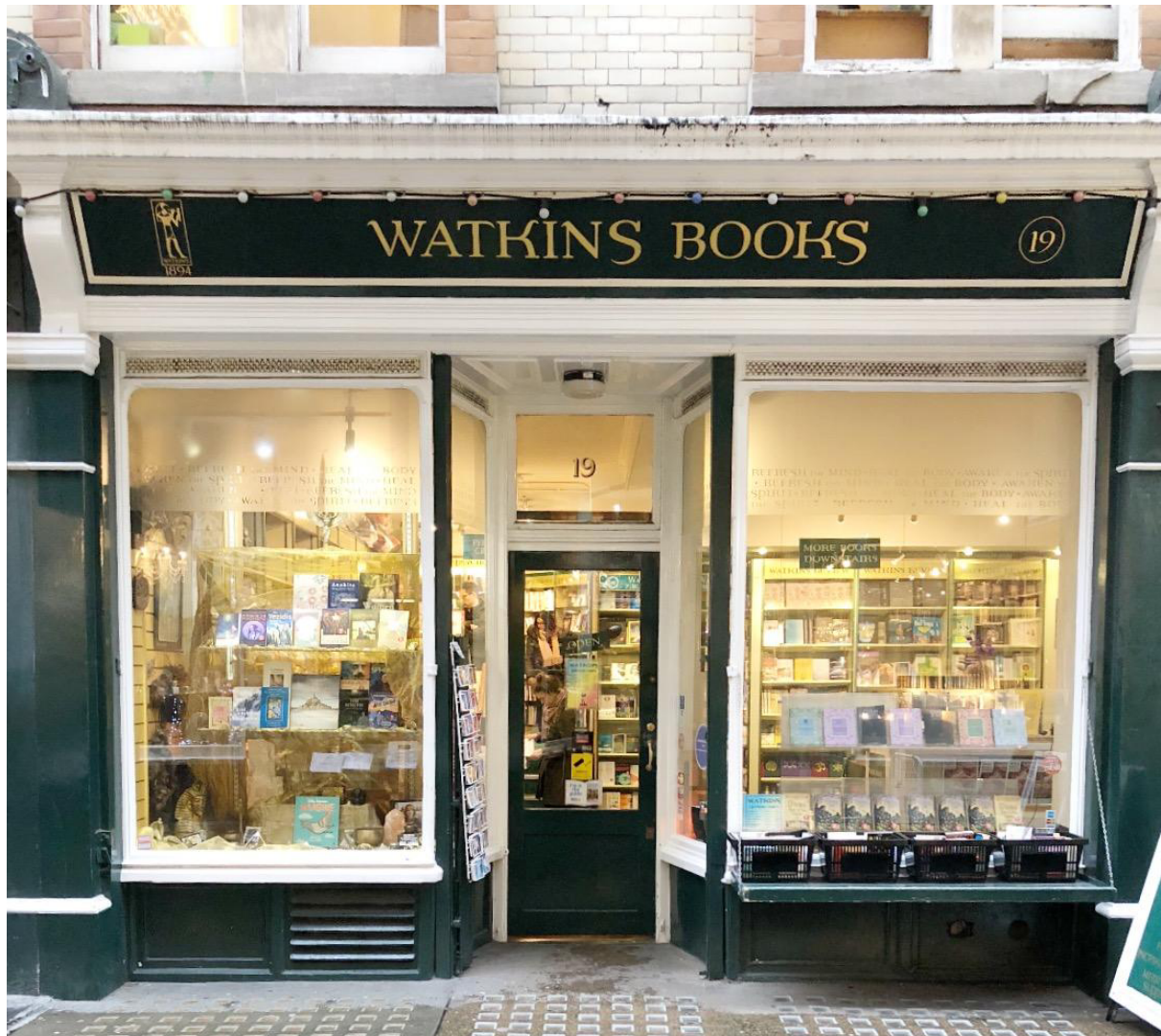
Harry Potter and the prisoner of Azkaban

Charing Cross, between Leicester Square and Tottenham Court Road underground station, is one of the most famous roads in central London. Now home to many restaurants and chain cafés, it is mostly renowned as the old official bookshop district of London. Many of them, such as Foyles, Quinto Bookshop, or Bookmarks, still make the street a must-go for books and literature lovers.

If time permits, one might even find oneself hanging around the busy and crowded road and find one's way to Cecil Court, at the very southern end of the main route. One will then enter a small pedestrian way and almost forget one is in London. With its Victorian showcases and vintage gas lights, it creates a unique, almost mystical atmosphere.

Temporary home of the young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart during his London tour in 1764, and nicknamed "Flicker Alley" in the early 20th century for being "the heart of the early British film industry," the street is still owned by the Cecil family, along with the Salisbury pub in Covent Garden. Despite many reasons to have heard of it in another context, it initially caught my attention for being considered J.K. Rowling's inspiration for her famously magical Diagon Alley. But is it really?

Many websites and tour organizers have their own version of the official street. Some claim it's in Leadenhall Market because that's where they shot the movies, others have faith only in the relic of the Warner Bros Studios. That's why I decided, armed with a pen and my never-ending curiosity, to figure out the truth.



Watkins was founded in 1893. It's the oldest bookshop of Cecil Court. Courtesy of the author.

My first stop was the oldest bookshop on the street, Watkins. Established in 1893 and specialized in esotericism, the shop initially had only one unit when it was founded. With the subject gaining popularity, it expanded to two other units and now occupies two floors between numbers 19 and 21 of Cecil Court. It's in the basement, in front of the Northern European myths department, that I meet Karsten, who has been working here for ten years. For him, the street and, moreover, his shop are both very similar to a community center, where some people come regularly and know each other by name. He points out how lucky they all are to be able to keep this island of culture in a sea of commercialism. It happens that wizards of the 19th century found themselves in the same situation:

The Leaky Cauldron faced one of its most difficult challenges in the late nineteenth century, with the creation of Charing Cross Road, which ought to have flattened it completely. The Minister for Magic of the day, the tediously long-winded Faris Spavin, gave a melancholy speech in the Wizengamot explaining why the Leaky Cauldron could not, this time, be saved. When Spavin sat down seven hours later, having finished his

speech, he was presented with a note from his secretary explaining that the wizarding community had rallied, performed a mass of Memory Charms (some say, to this day, that the Imperius Curse was used on several Muggle town planners, though this has never been proven), and that the Leaky Cauldron had been accommodated in the revised plans for the new road.

Pottermore

Karsten doesn't deny the connection of the street with the Harry Potter world, but he suggests visiting Marchpane next door, a shop hidden behind a showcase full of antiques, which apparently possesses first editions of Harry Potter. The store is much smaller and immediately gives another impression to the client. I find myself surrounded by hundreds of worn and shabby children's classics, most of them from Lewis Carroll... or J.K. Rowling. Every single book sold here is a marvel. All of them were searched and collected by the owner, Kenneth Fuller, a passionate antiquarian. He confirms the Diagon Alley rumors and even points out that the author studied classical literature and would come and stroll here often during her time in London (Ed. in 1986).

It's raining cats and dogs outside, but it doesn't stop my motivation to keep discovering what this street is all about. As I come out of Marchpane, I spot a group of people huddled under an umbrella. Not only does it catch my attention because the street would otherwise be empty, but most particularly because the man leading the group wears a Gryffindor scarf. I patiently wait until the end of their meeting and kindly ask him if he knows anything about my subject. His name is Richard Walker and, by lucky coincidence, his job includes showing around Harry Potter locations in London. For him, the use of Cecil Court as an inspiration puts no doubt at all. But more than an inspiration, he assumes that what Rowling took from here is magic. "For her, books ARE magic. That's where a whole world is created in your imagination, and that's why this street was so important for her."

My afternoon stroll in Cecil Court didn't leave me empty-handed. From all the acquaintances I made, not only did I come closer than ever to being able to confirm the rumor, but I also met many people who all have faith in the magic of literature and are ready to fight for it. However, in the end, the answer I was looking for was right under my nose from the beginning, and it came from the very person I should have gone to first... Joanne Rowling herself.

Charing Cross Road is famous for its bookshops, both modern and antiquarian. This is why I wanted it to be the place where those in the know go to enter a different world.

Pottermore

As he quits in a fury his uncle and aunt on Privet Drive, Diagon Alley next to Charing Cross Road is the first place that crosses Harry's mind to find shelter. More than shelter, he will also find magic there. That's also what J.K. Rowling found there, as she was trying to escape the many difficulties of her life. In the end, is there a better shelter than the one the magic of a

good book creates? All bookworms in the world, myself included, perfectly know the answer is no.

Watkins Books

19-21 Cecil Court

London WC2N 4EZ

www.watkinsbooks.com

Marchpane

Children's and illustrated books

16 Cecil Court

London WC2N 4HE

www.marchpane.com

For more...

The filming location of Knockturn Alley, where Harry mistakenly arrives in the Chamber of Secrets is situated opposite Cecil court after crossing St Martin's lane. Worth a visit!

Discover Charing Cross Road bookshops with the Scandinavian traveler:

<https://scandinaviantraveler.com/en/lifestyle/5-great-bookstores-on-charing-cross-road-in-london>

Join a Harry Potter themed walk with Richard:

<http://www.walks.com/popular-walks/harry-potter>