

# long live the king's

On the eve of a major Mary Quant retrospective at the V&A, the King's Road - once a byword for boho cool - is getting its mojo back.

**Lisa Freedman** reports

For the poet Philip Larkin, "sexual intercourse began in 1963". As far as fashion was concerned, however, the Swinging Sixties began rather earlier, exploding on the King's Road in 1955, when a sparky girl from south London set up shop with a posh boy from Chelsea at No 138A. Bazaar and its owner Mary Quant became the face of a new generation. "She created a brand that embodied social transformation," says Jenny Lister, a curator of fashion and textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum. "The surreal windows at the store - such as a lobster on a lead - fed that image." Quant's shopper-grabbing pyrotechnics helped transform the King's Road into an icon of London cool. Now, as a major retrospective of her work opens at the V&A, the launch pad of her revolution is also re-entering the spotlight. "The King's Road is changing," says Hugh Seaborn, chief executive of Cadogan, the property company that manages Earl Cadogan's £6bn Chelsea holding. "As retail faces a seismic shift with the evolution of online shopping, it's had to balance its heritage with a new openness to creativity and innovation."

The King's Road has a fashion history that long predates its 20th-century celebrity. It owes its name to Charles II, who constructed it as his own personal highway between St James's Palace and Hampton Court. In the 17th century, its exclusivity was in no doubt, as only those with

**Above: the communal garden at Wellington Square, Chelsea, where a five-bedroom house is on offer for £4.25m through Russell Simpson**



a monogrammed pass could enjoy its rural length. The road was finally opened to the public in 1830, but window-shopping remained largely confined to daily necessities until Archie McNair, Quant's business partner, sensed it "was going to take off" and established the first espresso bar outside of Soho, a restaurant (Alexander's, named after Quant's husband and co-owner, Alexander Plunket Greene) and Bazaar. In doing so he lit a fashion fuse that, over the next two decades, was fuelled by a stream of celebrated successors. Shops like Granny Takes a Trip, opened in 1966, became the

first "psychedelic" boutique, and Sex, launched in 1974 by Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, helped define the punk era and ensured the King's Road brand burned ever more brightly.

From the late 1970s, however, as radical youth was edged out by rising shop rents, it lost much of its retailing fire. More recently, a holistic intervention has reignited that spark. "The King's Road had largely relied on its reputation," says James Pace, partner and head of the Chelsea office of estate agent Knight Frank. "There's never really been the same effort to coordinate it that



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**1600s**



Charles II's private road links St James's Palace and Hampton Court

**1800s**



Chelsea becomes a bohemian stronghold. Oscar Wilde moves in

**1930s**



The present Peter Jones store is constructed on the west side of Sloane Square



there's been in Marylebone and Mayfair. Now, landlords have got together to target the right retailers and brands."

Department store and local icon Peter Jones has been successfully serving local residents since the 1930s and the retailing renaissance began with two new shopping hubs on either side of its listed façade. To the south is the Duke of York Square, a peaceful piazza sheltering a carefully orchestrated medley of stylish labels and restaurants; while to the north, the newly cobbled, artisan food and drink quarter Pavilion Road has introduced traditional village provisions in post-organic style at butcher Provenance, baker Bread Ahead and greengrocer Natoora. "Our approach is to find independent retailers and international flagships not widely represented in the UK," says Seaborn.

Recent arrivals further along the road include the US indoor-cycling sensation Peloton, sustainable clothing company The Cotton Story, and Kobox, a nightclub-style boxing gym. A revised, shorter lease structure has made it easier for the adventurous to test the waters, and Cadogan is providing a backdrop of creativity by restoring the Flood Street studios named after Gabriel Dante Rossetti as subsidised space for working artists.

For Mary Quant's generation, as Jenny Lister notes, "the coffee bar was the hub of the artistic community", and while the approach to coffee consumption has undoubtedly moved on, food and drink remain central to the 21st-century King's Road experience. Four years ago, Richard Caring took over a site formerly occupied by teenage haunt Henry J Bean. Today, The Ivy Chelsea Garden has become an ornament of the central stretch, its extravagant exterior (described by one hardened

Chelsea flower-stall holder as looking "like a Moroccan knocking shop") fronting an interior constantly packed with both locals and tourists; while forward-looking eateries, such as Sticks 'n' Sushi and "wild food" brasserie Rabbit, as well as myriad juice bars, have quickly become as much a feature of the road as 1970s favourites Ziani's or La Famiglia. This year also sees the arrival of Hôtel Costes' first London venture, One Sloane Gardens – a launch, it is hoped, that will have a similarly defining impact as Chiltern Firehouse in Marylebone.

Along with Camden's High Street and Notting Hill's Portobello Road, the King's Road is one of only three central London thoroughfares that successfully juggles a double life as a tourist attraction and the spine of a thriving residential area, serving the requirements of those doing their weekly shop at Waitrose as efficiently as those looking to pick up a souvenir selfie. Tourists began invading the King's Road in the 18th-century, when Ranelagh Gardens, with its purpose-built canal and working model of Mount Etna, became a major

Clockwise from above:  
**Draycott Place, where a one-bedroom flat is available at £1.25m through Knight Frank. A two-bedroom "studio" house on Mallord Street, £5.95m through Russell Simpson**

draw for aristocratic London ("Nobody goes anywhere else..." wrote Horace Walpole in 1744. "You can't set your foot without treading on a Prince of Wales or Duke of Cumberland.")

Then, as Chelsea became a bohemian stronghold in the 19th century – William Turner, Thomas Carlyle, Oscar Wilde and James Whistler were just a few of the famous locals in London's "Latin Quarter" – louche clubs, pubs and cafés sprang up to meet its habitués' off-duty requirements.

Only the most successful creatives remained after residential prices soared in the final decades of the 20th century, but Chelsea never lost its charm. Undiluted by the addition of tower blocks, it remains very much a place to live in a traditional English manner – a lifestyle punctuated by outings to the school-uniform department at Peter Jones or a seasonal fair at Chelsea Old Town Hall, where smoked dresses and laundry bags monogrammed with the names Edward and Sophie still dominate. "On the whole, the people who live here are domestic buyers, Americans and Europeans," says Thea Carroll, a senior consultant with property buying agent The Buying Solution. "The area's never really attracted other nationalities in the way that, say, Knightsbridge has."

Much of the housing stock laddering the King's Road is equally traditional, composed largely of picturesque cottages (such as a three-bedroom example in Smith Terrace, priced £3.75m through John D Wood, pictured overleaf), stucco-fronted terraces (like a five-bedroom house on Wellington Square, £4.25m through Russell Simpson, pictured on previous page), and red-brick mansion blocks (such as a one-bedroom flat on Draycott Place, £1.25m through Knight Frank, pictured above). Towards the western end, its artistic heritage is also still

PHOTOGRAPHS: MATTHEW DAVIS (2), MIRRORPIX, GETTY IMAGES, DAVID GRAVES/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

1950s



Mary Quant opens Bazaar. The brand captures the spirit of new youth culture

1960s



The road becomes the beating heart of Swinging Sixties cool

1960s



Granny Takes a Trip is London's first "psychedelic" boutique



Clockwise from left: a four-bedroom house on St Luke's Street, £9.85m through Knight Frank and Russell Simpson. Its sitting room. The Glebe on the King's Road, price on request. A three-bedroom cottage on Smith Terrace, £3.75m through John D Wood



helped preserve this identity, and is no doubt one of the reasons residents have powerfully resisted the proposed introduction of Crossrail 2. "They don't see the value of Crossrail," says Knight Frank's Pace.

What locals undoubtedly do prize is that the area delivers some of the most covetable assets of modern urban living: security, discretion, greenery and timelessness. Due to a rigorous local planning lobby, additions to the landscape must conform to these core values – even if these are setting world-record prices. At The Glebe (price on request, pictured right), a development of apartments and houses midway down the King's Road that completes this summer, "the houses get back to the ultimate values of life," says architect Philip Gumuchdjian. "Set in their own landscaped gardens, they provide a sense of freedom, with a connection to both the city and nature." In addition, their mansion-like proportions allow buyers to live on the grandest of scales, but in a discreet, contemporary way.

An equally green and pleasant scheme soon to complete is The Sloane Building (from £3.2m through Savills and Knight Frank), where most of the 18 large apartments carved from a 1908 school will provide double-height living space and an outlook onto greenery. "In general, people are looking for low-built and wide and there's very little available," says Becky Fatemi, director of estate agent Rokstone. Which is why new additions to the landscape modelling themselves on these specifications, such as a detached four-bedroom house on St Luke's Street (£9.85m through Knight Frank and Russell Simpson, pictured top left and right), are always welcome.

By no means everyone in Chelsea owns property and, just as in its artistic heyday, the area enjoys a thriving rental market. "Rental values are largely comparable to international rents, whereas the price of purchasing can seem prohibitive," says Tom Martin, executive chairman of Martin's Properties, one of the area's foremost landlords. "For the average family house, stamp duty alone is the equivalent of five years' rent." Family houses here let for about £5,000 a week, while those happy with apartment life in sought-after blocks such as interwar Whitelands House will pay from £550 a week.

Bohemian locals remain in short supply but there are definitely signs of a more youthful influx. "As the market has softened, we've seen the return of younger buyers," says Pace. "Prices are at the same level as parts of Shoreditch." And for those with children in tow, the area remains an idyllic place – an urban oasis of village life. ♦ "Mary Quant" at the V&A ([vam.ac.uk](http://vam.ac.uk)) opens on April 6.

#### KING'S OF THE CASTLE

**The Buying Solution**, [thebuyingsolution.co.uk](http://thebuyingsolution.co.uk). **The Glebe**, [thelebe.com](http://thelebe.com). **John D Wood**, [johndwood.co.uk](http://johndwood.co.uk). **Knight Frank**, [knightfrank.com](http://knightfrank.com). **Martin's Properties**, [martin-properties.co.uk](http://martin-properties.co.uk). **Rokstone**, [rokstone.com](http://rokstone.com). **Russell Simpson**, [russellsimpson.co.uk](http://russellsimpson.co.uk). **Savills**, [savills.co.uk](http://savills.co.uk).

evident in "studio" houses (a two-bedroom example in Mallord Street, £5.95m through Russell Simpson, is pictured on previous page), the most coveted fronting the Thames on Cheyne Walk, near The Chelsea Arts Club in Old Church Street, founded in 1891 to be "bohemian in character". "You buy in Chelsea for its identity and community. It's very much somewhere to be part of, cosmopolitan but not transient," says Carroll. "I've helped people move here from other parts of London who no longer want to live next to investment properties." The fact that the more westerly stretches of the road are not well served by Tube or train, has, if anything,

PHOTOGRAPHS: JEROME SCOTT-BLOUNT, MICROPIX (2), ALAMY

1960s



Non-conformist youth scenes add to the street's radical vibe

1970s



Westwood and McLaren's anarchic style; punk takes a swipe at the establishment

1970s



Chrissie Hynde and Sid Vicious take jobs at Westwood's Sex store