EXCHANGE
COMMERCIAL & RETAIL SYDNEY
Historical Walking Tour
From imposing banks to opulent shops and old warehouses, much of Sydney’s commercial history can be seen in its buildings.

Sydney's shops demonstrate the evolution of retailing from elaborate Victorian shopping arcades to multi-storey department stores.

This walk will take you through the heart of the City's financial and retail district — Martin Place, George Street and Pitt Street — pointing out landmarks, their architectural features and the history behind them.

Please allow 1–2 Hours for this tour.

Start at St James Station (1) (1926) on Elizabeth Street, opposite Market Street.

Sydney’s history is all around us. Our walking tours will lead you on a journey of discovery from early Aboriginal life through to contemporary Sydney.

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In the 1920s, the railway was extended from Central Station into the city, shifting the retail focus from Haymarket back towards the city centre. St James Station brought shoppers to the edge of Sydney’s retail district, and from there they wandered off to Gowing’s, Farmer’s (now Myer), and David Jones.

Opposite the station are the David Jones Department Stores on Elizabeth Street (2) and Market Street (3).

From its humble beginnings in 1838, David Jones Limited became Sydney’s most elegant department store. The store on the corner of Elizabeth, Market and Castlereagh Streets (2) was opened in 1927. The glamorous ground floor interior is ablaze with mirrors, marble and lights. Located diagonally opposite, the second David Jones building (3) was completed in May 1938 to mark David Jones’ trading centenary.

Walk down Elizabeth Street until you reach Martin Place. On the way you will see the Old Supreme Court (4). 102 Elizabeth Street, on the corner of King Street, and the former Sun Building (5), 60–70 Elizabeth Street.

The Sun newspaper was an afternoon daily, which ran from 1910 until the 1980s. This building was the last of the great newspaper buildings to be built in the city, and the spectacular Skyscraper Gothic style confidently portrayed the commercial power of the media. Built in 1929, the Sun Building is one of only three in the city to be designed in this architectural style. The other two are The Grace Hotel and the State Theatre which you will also see on this tour.

The city council designed and planned this long thoroughfare as “the financial and insurance centre” of Sydney. The widening and extension through to Macquarie Street began in 1923 but was not finished until 1935, after an expensive legal battle with landowners seeking compensation. The area was closed to cars in the 1960s and 1970s. Martin Place is lined with imposing banks and insurance buildings that aim to impress. The grand designs and lavish materials convey prestige as well as wealth, strength and security.

This imposing building was built as the headquarters for the Government Savings Bank of NSW and opened in 1928. Go inside and have a look at the banking chamber—originally one of the largest in the world—which incorporates both Australian and imported marble and a plaster and pressed metal ceiling.
As you walk down Martin Place you will see the Mutual Life and Citizens’ Assurance building (07) corner Castlereagh Street, with its logo on the tower, and the Commonwealth Trading Bank and Headquarters (08), corner Pitt Street. Cross Pitt Street and continue down to George Street. Running along the block between Pitt and George Streets on your left is the GPO (09) No. 1 Martin Place.

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GENERAL POST OFFICE

The General Post Office (GPO) was constructed in stages from 1866–91. It is the most notable work in the city by Colonial Architect James Barnet. The realistic carvings facing Pitt Street and Martin Place by Italian-born sculptor Tommaso Sani, caused a public scandal. They were viciously attacked by the press and Parliament as being “hideous in form and expression” and attempts were made to force Barnet to remove them.

In the late 1990s, the site was redeveloped into a hotel and major conservation works were undertaken. Down in the basement, parts of Sydney’s first water supply, the Tank Stream, were uncovered and some historical interpretation of this watercourse has been provided.

09

10

11

12

Turn right into George Street and then right again into the narrow lane, Angel Place. This series of laneways was preserved as part of the Angel Place office development. Discover the City Recital Hall (10) and the former Palings Warehouse (11) in Ash Street before walking up Palings Lane to George Street. On your left is Société Générale House (12) 350 George Street.

SOCIÉTÉ GÉNÉRALE HOUSE

This insurance house was built in 1895 for the Equitable Life Assurance Society of America, under the supervision of their visiting architect Edward Raht. You may view the grand interior from the entrance foyer only. Please follow any direction issued by the Concierge. No photography allowed.

On George Street directly opposite Martin Place are two more bank buildings: Westpac Bank (13) 341 George Street and the (former) National Australia Bank (14) 343 George Street.
Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) Ltd (AWA) was a household name from the 1930s to the 1950s as both a broadcaster and a manufacturer of radios, record players and other electrical equipment. Wireless House, its headquarters on York Street, became a Sydney landmark when it was built in 1939, the steel tower being the highest structure in the city until the 1960s.

The Grace Building was constructed in 1930 for Grace Brothers as a department store and offices. The Gothic skyscraper design, particularly the spectacular corner tower, was modelled on the Chicago Tribune Building (1922). The Grace Building was requisitioned by the Australian Government during World War 2 and used by the US Army Services of Supply and the Royal Navy as a service base for Pacific operations. The building was extensively refurbished in 1995 and opened as The Grace Hotel in 1997.

Cross over George Street and wander up the pedestrian section of Barrack Street to York Street and turn right. Lift your eyes and look for the miniature Eiffel Tower on the AWA building (15) 45–47 York Street.

At this point you may wish to take a detour to see the warehouses along Clarence and Kent streets.
DETOUR: STOCKPILING IN THE CITY
The streets of York, Clarence and Kent between Erskine and Druitt Streets are peppered with late 19th and early 20th century warehouses. These buildings serviced the busy wharves of Darling Harbour and the expanding retail businesses along George and Pitt Streets. Today many of them have been converted into offices and residential units. If you have time, you might like to wander around the block bounded by King, Clarence, Market and Kent Streets. Keep your eyes open for the arches of old carriageways which led to courtyards behind the warehouses. Highlights include the “twin” warehouses at 197–199 Clarence and 340 Kent Streets (18) and at 201–207 Clarence and 346–348 Kent Streets (19)—both groups of warehouses back onto shared central courtyards. Also of interest is Broughton House (20) an imposing former warehouse of the ironmonger John Keep & Sons dating from 1900.

DARRELL LEA SHOP
This exuberant building was constructed in 1863–64 for Ashdown & Co, wholesale and furnishing ironmongers. It later became the Royal Exchange Hotel in the 1930s and most recently the flagship store for Darrell Lea chocolates.

STRAND ARCADE
Named after The Strand in London, a smart and fashionable shopping street, Sydney’s Strand Arcade opened in April 1892. Today it still retains the small elite boutiques that defined the Sydney shopping experience of the 1890s.

DYMOCKS BUILDING (THE BLOCK)
The Block was built by the Dymock’s firm in 1926–32 following the demolition of the Royal Hotel and shopping arcade. The enclosed shopping promenade above Dymocks retains terrazzo floors, silky oak shopfronts, and leadlights in the shop windows. It is a hidden gem of Sydney retailing.

MYER
The former retail emporium of Farmer and Company (established in 1840) was built between 1928 and 1957. The store included an art gallery, roof garden and restaurant. In 1960 Farmer & Co was taken over by the Melbourne retail giant Myer. The store traded as Grace Bros from 1983 to 2004.

FORMER GOWINGS BUILDING
Since 1868, Sydneysiders have “Gone to Gowings”. The firm became a public company in 1920 and the Gowings Department Store was purpose built for the company in 1929. Gowings closed its doors in 2006.

STATE THEATRE
The State Theatre opened on 7 June 1929 in a blaze of colour and light. It is the third building on our tour designed in the Gothic skyscraper style. Above the theatre is an 11-storey office tower. The interiors of the State Theatre are lavish and it is worthwhile going on a guided tour.

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DETOUR: PITT STREET MALL

Pitt Street Mall, created in 1988, contains many layers of Sydney’s commercial and retail history. There is the old Liverpool Arms Hotel (28); the former Australian Mutual Fire Insurance Society Building (29); the Strand Arcade (33); the façades of the City Bank Hotel (1903) (30) and an old Bank of NSW (31); and the landmark Sydney Tower (32) which opened in 1982. Have a look up at the parapet on the Soul Pattinson Chemist building (33). Can you see the phoenix rising from the ashes? W H Pattinson rebuilt his pharmacy in 1886 after a fire and named the new building Resurgam.

THE ARTHOUSE HOTEL

Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Arts were central civic buildings in many 19th century towns. Founded for the educational improvement of skilled working class men, they quickly became popular with clerks, schoolteachers and professional men. The former School of Arts in Pitt Street was refurbished as a hotel in 2002 and the restored interior decoration is impressive.

DETOUR: PITT STREET MALL

Turn right into Pitt Street. As you walk look out for the City Tattersall’s Club (34), 202–204 Pitt Street, with its prancing horse on the parapet, and The Arthouse Hotel (former School of Arts) (35), 275 Pitt Street.

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DETOUR: PITT STREET MALL

Turn right and walk down Park Street to the Queen Victoria Building (QVB) (36) George Street between Market and Druitt Streets.

QUEEN VICTORIA BUILDING (QVB)

There have been markets on this site since 1810. The Queen Victoria Markets replaced the old George Street markets in 1898. They were designed for the Council by the City Architect, George McRae, and aspired to be the grand shopping arcade of Sydney rather than produce markets. The imposing Romanesque building was never successful as markets. The QVB was refurbished in 1986.

DETOUR: PITT STREET MALL

You can finish your walk here, or wander down George Street to discover the sites of two of Sydney’s largest and grandest department stores: World Square (37) on the site the once vast Hordern’s Palace Emporium, and the Former Mark Foys Department Store (38) between Elizabeth and Castlereagh Streets.

DETOUR: PITT STREET MALL

Former Mark Foys Department Store

Mark Foys started out on Oxford Street, but moved to this site in 1908. The purpose-built store grew from three to six storeys over the years. It closed in 1983. Notice the distinctive white glazed bricks and deep yellow terracotta trim announcing Hosiery, Shoes, Corsets and other items for sale.
Discover more of historic Sydney with the other walking tour brochures in this series.

More information can be found at the City’s website: www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/history
or call the City of Sydney on 9265 9333
We welcome your feedback: history@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au

This story is one of many layers
www.dictionaryofsydney.org

Think before you bin this guide
After reading, pass it on to someone else who might find it useful or recycle it.

STOP!
ON THE FOOTPATH

LOOK!
RIGHT, LEFT AND RIGHT AGAIN

LISTEN!
FOR ANY OTHER TRAFFIC INCLUDING PUSH BIKES

THINK!
IS IT SAFE FOR ME TO CROSS?

CROSS!
WITH CARE AND KEEP ON LOOKING FOR OTHER VEHICLES