

# My first London house: Charles Saumarez Smith

*The Royal Academy supremo is nostalgic about the time he spent living in “one of the most beautiful squares in London” – even if the smell of Sarson’s Vinegar factory lingers in the memory*

## **Where was your first London home?**

The first place I lived in was 34 Trinity Church Square, a first-floor flat in one of the most beautiful squares in London, a grand civic space, built in the 1820s just south of Southwark. We looked out over a statue of King Alfred and one of the Commissioners’ churches.

## **Can you remember how much it cost?**

I’ve completely forgotten how much the rent was. I was studying for a doctorate at the Warburg Institute and living on a postgraduate student grant from the Department of Education and Science in Honeypot Lane, Stanmore, so it can’t have been much.

## **How did you end up there? Did you live there with anyone?**

I moved in with Romilly, my then girlfriend, now wife, who was studying bookbinding at Camberwell College of Art. Her mother deeply disapproved of the arrangement, so my future brother-in-law lived in a room at the back to give it a semblance of respectability.

## **Why did you go to that area? Was it because of the price or was it close to where you worked?**

We found out about the flat by answering an advertisement in the Evening Standard so it was pure chance that we found ourselves in this fascinating and then totally unfashionable area of London, between the Elephant and Castle and Southwark.

## **What was the area like then? And has it changed since?**

There was no garden, no parks, only the local tennis courts and the Coronet cinema at the Elephant. But I loved the area for the fact that it was slightly nondescript, but highly atmospheric. There was the smell of the Sarson’s Vinegar factory when we played tennis. I can’t remember any of the local stores except for an old paint shop just north of the Elephant and another place that made die stamps. We had one made up with our address. And we loved eating at the Pizzeria Castello.

## **Once you moved in, how did you design it?**

One of the existing tenants from whom we were subletting had gone to be an Ombudsman in the north of England and left his furniture in the flat, so we inherited that and couldn’t fit much more in. The one thing we did do was paint the bathroom a beautiful, gloss, sky-blue.

## **What was the first thing that you bought for the property?**

Because it was a furnished flat, we weren’t able to add much, except for some 18th century architectural prints. And my rich cousin gave us a tin kettle from Woolworths as a wedding present.

## **Did any memorable events in your life take place while you were living there?**

I will always remember the occasion that the historian Sir Steven Runciman came to dinner. I’m not sure if it was a success or not. As he left, he said, rather drunkenly, “Will I ever see you again?” He didn’t.

## **Would you go back?**

I sometimes cycle through Trinity Church Square and think that we were completely mad to have ever moved.