

THE TIMES SHOPPER

Following a Paper Trail to London's Cecil Court

By MARC LIBRESCU

LONDON—For me, a trip to London isn't complete without a visit to the bookshops on Charing Cross Road. I can easily spend an entire afternoon browsing and shopping at Collets, Foyles and the many other booksellers on the street.

Not as well known is Cecil Court, a narrow pedestrian-only alley near Leicester Square that stretches between Charing Cross Road and St. Martin's Lane. Cecil Court contains one of the highest concentrations of antiquarian book and print shops in the world.

"It's funny because it's so hidden," says Ronnie Scott Simpson, of the Zelda Cheatle Gallery. "It's a hidden part of London in a really traditional part of London."

Mozart lived above the barber shop that would eventually become Alan Brett's bookshop, and where it is said Mozart went to get his hair cut.

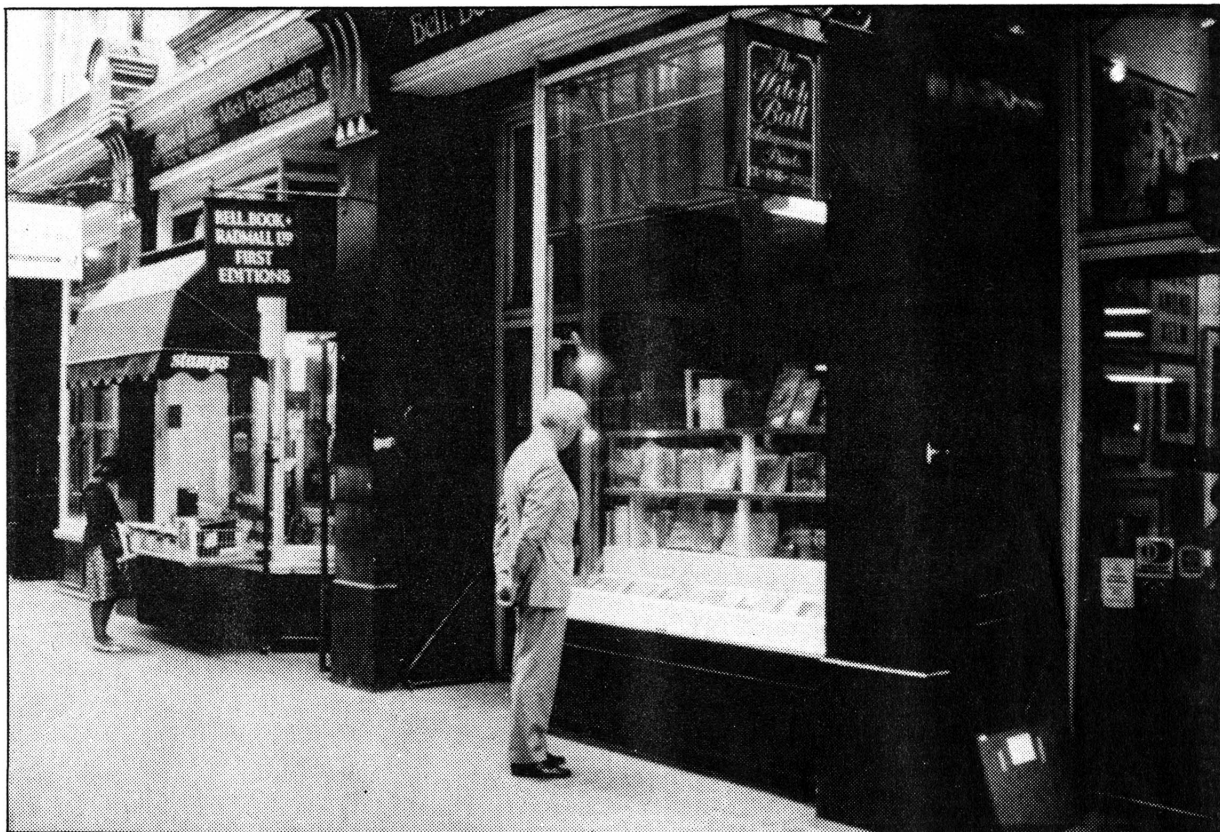
Watkins Books, which specializes in the occult and opened in the late 1890s, was the first bookshop on Cecil Court. Gaslights still run along the street, which probably looks much the same as it did then.

The interiors probably haven't changed much, either. When I was there in August, the shops were lined with high wooden shelves and glass cases, most of which looked as if they might date back to when the shops first opened, nearly 100 years ago. The scene brought to mind an old library that had been waiting years for a dust-er.

Cecil Court offers something for everyone, from rare books for the serious collector to more moderately priced books on a variety of subjects, including children's literature, the occult, the performing arts and travel. It's a great place to find a special gift or a book that you won't find back home, or you can just enjoy poking around. There's also a gallery, Zelda Cheatle at 8 Cecil Court, that exhibits contemporary photography.

Sadly, many of Cecil Court's shops are now under threat of closure because of increasing rents. "That would kill Cecil Court as a booksellers' [area]," says William Fletcher, owner of H.M. Fletcher. "As my son says, 'If you plow a meadow, you can't get the meadow back.' This is a meadow and if you plow it up, you'll never get it back again."

But for now, Cecil Court is a small, easily walked area with an engaging assortment of rare and



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Window shoppers pause in the pedestrian lane at Cecil Court, whose first bookshop opened in the 1890s.

antiquarian bookstores and other print- and film-related shops. Here is a selection of some of the area's many businesses:

William Fletcher, owner of **Fletcher**, at 27 Cecil Court, is 83, and his son, Keith, has now taken over much of the running of the

son came into the business and here we are ever since."

Fletcher explains that Cecil Court was the first "flicker alley," and his shop was a storage space for silent films in the early 1900s. The film store still exists behind a heavy fireproof steel door in the

Specializing in children's and illustrated books, **Marchpane**, at 16 Cecil Court, has been on that pedestrian alley for two years. The shop also specializes in Lewis Carroll, thus many early editions of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass" line the shelves.

"We have more copies of Lewis Carroll's books than anyone in Great Britain, ranging from the very early first editions to much later editions," says proprietor Kenneth Fuller. "There are a number of different illustrated editions of 'Alice in Wonderland.' I've had most of those at one time or another."

Prices start at about \$20 and can go up to about \$3,700. "A first London edition of 'Alice in Wonderland' in cloth might sell for about £3,000 [\$5,550]," says Fuller. Prints by British children's illustrators such as Arthur Rackham, William Nicholson, Edmund Dulac and John Tenniel (illustrator of the original "Alice" books) are for sale in the shop's basement.

Fuller says his customers include a variety of people. "You get firemen, university lecturers, laborers and industrialists. There's no typical picture. Most people start off buying books that they

Cecil Court—an alley between Charing Cross Road and St. Martin's Lane—contains one of the highest concentrations of antiquarian book and print shops in the world.

shop, which specializes in books printed before the year 1500.

Prices range from £1 (currently about \$1.85) for some contemporary books to about \$37,000 for editions of classical authors, such as a copy of works by Homer published in 1488.

"I came to this shop in 1936," says William Fletcher. "The war broke out in '39, so we closed up in '40 because my brother went into the army and business wasn't good. I went into the air force. I came back to the same shop in 1946 with my father and my wife. My father died some years later on and my

basement, although the shelves that once held films have been converted for book storage and now hold rare volumes. The rest of the basement is overflowing with reference books and bibliographies.

Behind a locked cabinet is a 1521 volume in the original calfskin binding, by Wynkynde Worde, successor to William Caxton, the first English printer (\$9,250); a hand-bound Nuremberg Chronicle, a journal of events printed in 1493 (\$14,800); a 1480 volume by Thomas Aquinas printed in Venice (\$9,250), and other rare volumes.

liked as a child and build a collection from there."

Pleasures of Past Times, at 11 Cecil Court, also has a selection of children's books, but specializes in books and ephemera relating to the performing arts. It has been at Cecil Court for 24 years.

"I'm particularly keen on things relating to conjuring [magic], circus and the music hall, or as you know it in the States, vaudeville," says owner David Drummond, whose background includes an acting career and work as a clown. "I also have the ephemera that relates to this, such as playbills. The earliest playbill that I have would be from the 1770s, of David Garrick."

Also for sale are Victorian valentines for those who "want to give something a bit more than an ordinary valentine," antique postcards and books on films and television.

Prices range from about \$15 to \$50, although prices for some books run higher.

Specializing in voyage and travel books, **Remington** bookshop started in 1951 and has been in its present location at 18 Cecil Court for 10 years.

This collection is centered around the main explorers of the world, such as Cook, Dampier, Bougainville, Durrell and Marco Polo.

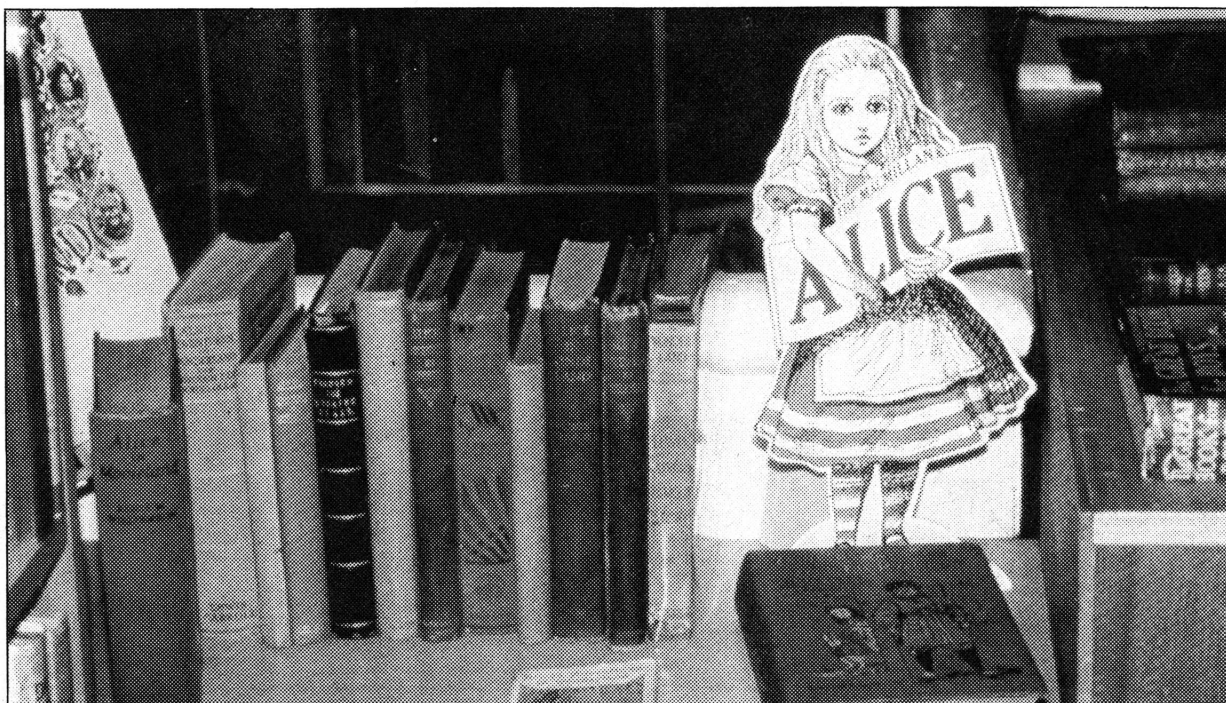
"People still want to read about these explorers," says Reg Remington, who runs the shop with his son, Philip. "Also Livingston and Stanley in Africa, they're all our best sellers at the moment."

Prices for most books range from about \$5 to \$1,800. Their catalogue also includes rare books that command even higher prices. "A good copy of a first edition of Cook's voyages in a good binding would go for at least £11,000 [\$20,350]. Most of our books don't even get to the catalogue stage because we sell them before that. There's a constant battle trying to get sufficient material together to issue a catalogue."

Located at Cecil Court for 10 years, **Stage Door Prints**, at 1 Cecil Court, specializes in photographs, prints and autographs from the world of film, theater, opera and ballet.

Entering this shop is like entering a delightfully cluttered time machine—photos of Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Judy Garland, Edward G. Robinson, Bette Davis, Tyrone Power, Peter Lorre and other Hollywood stars adorn the walls.

Prices start at \$1.85 for a Victorian Christmas card. An autographed photo of Abbott and Costello sells for about \$300, and one of Audrey Hepburn sells for about



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Window case at Marchpane bookstore exhibits early editions of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."

GUIDEBOOK

London's Cecil Court

Getting there: Cecil Court is easy to reach by subway. Take the Piccadilly or Northern line to Leicester Square station. Walk south along Charing Cross Road for two blocks and turn left on Cecil Court.

Shops:

H.M. Fletcher, 27 Cecil Court, London WC2, telephone locally 071 836 2865; open Monday through Friday, 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m.

Marchpane, 16 Cecil Court, London WC2, 071 836 8661; Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Pleasures of Past Times, 16 Cecil Court, London WC2, 071 836 1142; Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m., 3:30-5:45 p.m., also open the first Saturday of each month, other hours by appointment.

Remington, 18 Cecil Court, London WC2, 071 836 9771; Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

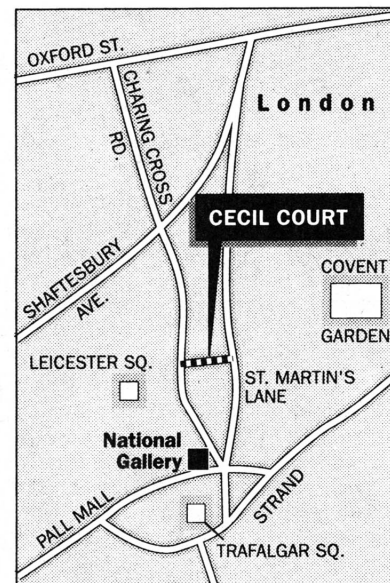
Stage Door Prints, 1 Cecil Court, London WC2, 071 240 1683; Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m., Saturday, 11:30 a.m.-6 p.m.

Watkins Books, 19 Cecil Court, London WC2, 071 836 2182; Monday, Tuesday, Thursday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Wednesday, 10:30 a.m.-6 p.m.

Zelda Cheatle Gallery, 8 Cecil Court, London WC2, 071 836 0506; Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Where to eat: If you're hungry after exploring the shops, you can grab a bite to eat at Piazza, a self-service cafe at the corner of Cecil Court and St. Martin's Lane. Their predominantly Italian menu features a variety of pasta dishes as well as sandwiches and salads, all at reasonable prices. You can eat inside or alfresco at one of the tables on Cecil Court. They offer an impressive selection of cakes and pastries for dessert. Open Monday-Thursday, 8 a.m.-midnight, Friday, 8 a.m.-1 a.m., and Saturday, 8 a.m.-2 a.m.

—M.L.



VICTOR KOTOWITZ / Los Angeles Times

stone. Watkins claims to have the largest collection of occult books in England.

The main floor houses contemporary titles in areas such as witchcraft, divination, astrology, health and personal development, in addition to magazines and New Age tapes. Antiquarian and secondhand books are on the lower floor, where the prices range from about \$40 to \$3,000 or \$4,000. Some books are priced higher.

Zelda Cheatle Gallery has been exhibiting contemporary photography at 8 Cecil Court for two years. It's the first photo gallery on the street.

Librescu is a Boston-based freelance writer.

\$100. "Recently, we had a Puccini music quote [bars of music written and signed by the composer] for £1,200 [\$2,220]," says manager Louise Sturrock.

Watkins Books, the oldest shop on the street, was established in

1894 and relocated to 19 Cecil Court a few years later. "We specialize in books on mysticism, occultism, comparative religions, Eastern religion, psychology, alternative medicine and so on and so forth," says manager David Red-