



Glasgow in Squares

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Most visitors to Glasgow encounter one vast, celebrated public square by choice and perhaps two or three more in passing. Yet the squares of central Glasgow reflect the city's history, people, and character. It's worth seeking them all out.

The showpiece that everyone heads for is, of course, **GEORGE SQUARE**, the great paved plaza with its statues, lawns, and Sir Walter Scott on a column, all under the benign gaze of the magnificent City Chambers.

The square is a spectacular beating heart for the city. It was first marked out in 1781 and named for the reigning monarch, George III (the "mad" one played by Nigel Hawthorne). Originally, it was a private garden for the homes that were subsequently built around it. Gradually, the town houses were replaced by fine public buildings: the City Chambers was completed in 1890, the Merchant's House on the western side in 1877, and the former main post office—now

offices and very exclusive apartments—on the southern side in 1878. On the northern side, Queen Street Station's curved glass roof first soared in 1880. At the center of the square, of course, is the Sir Walter Scott monument, which dates from 1838. Glasgow's cenotaph appeared at the eastern end of the square in 1924.

The City Chambers is one of the most spectacular buildings in Scotland. It's well worth booking a place on a tour. The interior takes the breath away, and no Glaswegian will need prompting to tell you that there's more marble here than in the Vatican, though I'm not sure that's true; has anyone actually weighed the marble in both locations?

image info



If you head south down Queen Street, which forms the western end of the square, you'll quickly reach the mounted statue of the [Duke of Wellington](#) (usually anointed with a traffic cone to provide the essential modern image of Glasgow and its playful attitude toward authority). You're now outside the Gallery of Modern Art. Many visit both statue and gallery without knowing they're in **ROYAL EXCHANGE SQUARE**. The gallery building was originally

a private mansion, dating from 1778 and reputedly the finest in the city. It was built for [William Cunninghame](#), one of the city's tobacco lords—hence tainted by the twin evils of slavery and smoking. Beginning in 1827, it was remodeled as the Royal Exchange, where business deals were thrashed out, and the square got its name then. I remember it as Stirling's Library, which it became in the 1950s, but the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) opened in the building in 1996.



South of Buchanan Street's junction with Argyle Street is **ST. ENOCH'S SQUARE**. It was once a busy transport hub, with the magnificent St. Enoch Station and its no less impressive hotel to the east, the dainty underground station in the center ([p. 76, lower left](#)), and buses plying throughout. The station and hotel are gone and much lamented, replaced by the St. Enoch shopping mall. You now reach the underground station by modern domed entrances, but the

original building is still there and serves as a café. The square isn't a hugely attractive space, but at least it's now traffic-free, and it comes into its own every December when it hosts one of Glasgow's Christmas markets.

(St. Enoch is said to be the mother of St. Mungo, the city's patron saint. Born Princess Theneva, her father threw her out for being pregnant with Mungo after an illicit encounter with her cousin. Read more [here](#).)



Which takes us to **CATHEDRAL SQUARE**, a public space surrounded by visitor attractions that recall Glasgow's medieval center: the soaring cathedral itself, the stunning garden cemetery of the **Necropolis**, **Provand's Lordship** (the oldest secular building in the city), the Cathedral House Hotel, and **St. Mungo's**

Museum of Religion. It's a quieter spot than the other city center squares, a place to reflect that here Glasgow was born. Close your eyes and try to picture a small church with St. Mungo presiding, the **Molendinar Burn** trickling down the glen to the east, and a wild hill (now the Necropolis) looming on the far bank.



From Cathedral Square, walk or take a bus down Castle Street and its continuation, High Street, and you can visit two lesser-known squares. **ST. ANDREW'S SQUARE** was once a fashionable residential address for the city's wealthy, dominated by **St. Andrew's in the Square**, now one of the oldest surviving churches in Glasgow. This square became a bit down at heel, but the demolished buildings have been replaced by new structures in keeping with the setting, and the square is traffic-free. After the church congregation moved to new premises in 1993,

the building was painstakingly restored and is now a restaurant and traditional music venue celebrated for the gigs it hosts during Glasgow's famous Celtic Connections music festival. Its future as a venue is in some doubt, but the Scottish Buildings Preservation Trust that owns St. Andrew's will no doubt safeguard its future.

I'd go as far as to say that if there's a building in Glasgow that deserves to be better known and more frequently visited, it's St Andrew's in the Square. Let's hope that future access to its interior can be ensured.



High Street becomes the Saltmarket and just before reaching the Clyde, you find the McLellan Arch, which guards the entrance to **GLASGOW GREEN**, the city's much-loved and oldest public park. The open space in front of the arch is pleasant, now, but it has a baleful history. Across the road is the city morgue and the High Court. There was once a prison here, too, and executions took place on this spot. The open space then was called Jail Square. In the 1920s it was renamed Jocelyn Square, after the twelfth-century Bishop of Glasgow who, among other things, inaugurated the city's legendary summer

holiday, the [Glasgow Fair](#). He also wrote the book *Life of St. Mungo*.

Glasgow soulsters Love and Money, fronted by James Grant, recorded a song for their brilliant 1988 album, *Strange Kind of Love*, entitled "Jocelyn Square." The chorus includes a refrain about how it was raining in Jocelyn Square. That perhaps should serve as a warning to all visitors to the city. In rain or sunshine or snow, once you've visited Jocelyn Square, carry on and spend time in the wonderful, historic, magical Glasgow Green. It's not a square, but you really mustn't miss it.



BLYTHSWOOD SQUARE, right in the center of Glasgow's office district, is that rare thing now—a square with a private garden. It's still a pleasant corner of the city, and in any case, the gardens are sometimes open to all. It was originally called Garden Square when laid out in 1823, not because of its gardens but because it was designed by Hamilton William Garden (thankfully he didn't call it Garden's Gardens). The square was built on the summit of Blythswood Hill. Garden had to reduce the height of the hill by around thirty feet to ensure a nice level site. Eventually the name of the hill spread to the square itself.

It's surrounded by handsome buildings, none more so than the one on the eastern side. For many years this was the home of the Royal Scottish Automobile Club, and accordingly, the square often saw the start of car rallies, including the Monte Carlo. The building is now a very luxurious hotel.

The other famous building in Blythswood Square is No 7, a fine townhouse at the northeast corner. In the 1850s it was occupied by the family of a Glasgow architect named James Smith. His daughter, Madeleine, took a lover, Pierre Emile L'Angelier, and in 1857 Madeleine was accused of his murder by poisoning. The charge was found "not proven"—rather than "not guilty"—and tongues wagged ever after. The case inspired many stories and even a 1950 film *Madeleine*, directed by David Lean. Madeleine eventually moved to the United States and died there in 1928. The building sold for £2.45 million in 2017 and there is talk of it becoming a hotel. Perhaps, as a gimmick, you'll be able to hire a food taster at mealtimes.

These, then, are some of Glasgow's squares. There are plenty of them, every one has its attractions, and each tells another chapter of the unfolding story of Glasgow and its people. ✨