# Tim Hunkin's Novelty Automation turns Holborn into a satirical penny arcade



When a corner of Holborn can still surprise, it is worth stepping off the tourist trail. Tucked down a quiet by‑street just off Red Lion Square is Novelty Automation, a pint‑sized arcade of hand‑built automatons that feels like a machine‑age satire come to life. According to a feature in the Mirror, visitors duck into the small unit, buy a bucket of metal coins and work their way through roughly 20 coin‑operated contraptions that are part joke, part engineering curiosity — “brilliant if not quite weird,” the piece concluded.

Play is straightforward and social: drop a few shiny coins into a chute, watch the mechanism spring into life and, in many cases, find yourself the butt of the joke. The Mirror’s account described sessions of an hour or two for most visitors and cited a bucket of 35 coins at about £28 as ample for a group of three. Other travel guides and listings suggest similar pricing and token systems, with buckets and tiered token packs intended to encourage trying a wide variety of machines rather than prolonged, high‑score play.

The machines themselves mix Victorian automata aesthetics with contemporary satire. Some are theatrical installations you sit inside — the Mirror described an “Instant Eclipse” pod that left one participant oddly reticent about what happened — while others demand simple physical input from players, such as running on the spot to power an exhausted warehouse operative in the Fulfilment Centre. Recurring favourites named in visitor reviews and listings include the chiropodist robot that massages feet, the Money Laundering coin‑climb, and the interactive “Is it Art?” booth that elevates an object to an art‑world verdict.

That satirical edge is deliberate. The arcade has become a small stage for contemporary commentary: The Guardian reported on a “Housing Ladder” machine in which players dodge caricatured buy‑to‑let landlords and developers, a tongue‑in‑cheek reflection on Britain’s housing pressures that the creator framed as social critique rather than mere pastime. Other pieces lampoon consumer culture and modern labour, and visitors frequently remark that the machines are as much cartoons in motion as they are games.

Novelty Automation is the work of Tim Hunkin — the cartoonist‑engineer who presented The Secret Life of Machines and whose earlier seaside shows married wit with workshop craft. Museum and theatre listings, and summaries of Hunkin’s projects, record that the Holborn venue opened in 2015 and draws on his long interest in marrying simple electromagnetic mechanics with occasional electronic controls. Several machines were adapted from earlier exhibitions and from Hunkin’s Under the Pier Show, reinforcing a through‑line from seaside eccentricity to central‑London curiosity.

Practical details are modest but useful: listings place the arcade close to Holborn tube and give compact opening hours, making it an easy add‑on to a central London itinerary. Independent reviews advise buying a token bucket if you plan to try many machines — several sources cite a bucket price in the high‑20s to low‑30s range, and smaller packs for one‑off plays are available — and suggest setting aside roughly an hour or two to enjoy the variety. Photographs and visitor tips on specialist sites underline that the attraction is best appreciated by groups or curious adults rather than by gamers seeking high‑score competition.

For those who have ticked off the big London sights and want something small, sharp and unmistakably British, Novelty Automation offers a concentrated dose of humour and ingenuity. It revives the penny‑arcade spirit with a contemporary, critical edge: handcrafted machines that both entertain and nudge you to laugh at the world they parody.

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## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574), [[5]](https://cabaret.co.uk/novelty-automation/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574), [[6]](https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/novelty-automation), [[7]](https://www.elitetravelblog.com/novelty-automation-review/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574), [[2]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574), [[6]](https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/novelty-automation), [[7]](https://www.elitetravelblog.com/novelty-automation-review/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/nov/17/housing-ladder-arcade-game-has-players-dodging-buy-to-let-investors), [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574), [[2]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novelty_Automation), [[5]](https://cabaret.co.uk/novelty-automation/), [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://cabaret.co.uk/novelty-automation/), [[6]](https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/novelty-automation), [[7]](https://www.elitetravelblog.com/novelty-automation-review/), [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/novelty-automation), [[2]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574), [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/uk-ireland/i-visited-uks-weirdest-arcade-35710574> - Article describes Novelty Automation, a small, tucked‑away arcade in Holborn near Red Lion Square, London, filled with Victorian‑style automatons built by Tim Hunkin. The writer recounts slotting silver coins into about twenty satirical machines, including provocations such as AirbedbugBNB, Instant Eclipse and a chiropodist robot that massages feet. Tokens are bought in buckets (the piece mentions 35 coins for £28) and visitors typically spend an hour or two playing. Machines combine absurdist humour, social satire and physical mechanics, with highlights like Money Laundering, Fulfilment Centre and Is it Art?, offering a uniquely witty, hands‑on London attraction. Great for curious adults.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novelty_Automation> - Wikipedia entry summarises Novelty Automation as a satirical amusement arcade in Holborn, London, created by cartoonist‑engineer Tim Hunkin and opened in 2015. It notes the handmade machines blend traditional electromagnetic mechanics with modern electronics and includes favourites like an expressive photo booth, an interactive divorce machine and a small hadron collider. The page explains the arcade’s roots in Hunkin’s earlier Under the Pier Show and links his background as presenter of The Secret Life of Machines and cartoonist of The Rudiments of Wisdom. References cite press coverage and Cabaret Mechanical Theatre; coordinates and opening context are provided for visitors.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/nov/17/housing-ladder-arcade-game-has-players-dodging-buy-to-let-investors> - The Guardian reports on Tim Hunkin’s satirical game The Housing Ladder, unveiled at Novelty Automation, where players ascend a treadmill ladder while dodging caricatured ‘housing villains’ such as buy‑to‑let landlords and developers. The piece explains different difficulty levels parodying sources of wealth and an age gauge signalling ‘game over’ if you do not reach the house by age eighty. Hunkin discusses his motivation, linking the machine to housing pressures and social critique, and recalls his background presenting The Secret Life of Machines. The article contextualises the arcade as a space for political humour and popular entertainment in contemporary London culture.
5. <https://cabaret.co.uk/novelty-automation/> - Cabaret Mechanical Theatre’s page introduces Novelty Automation as Tim Hunkin’s London arcade, opened in February 2015 at 1a Princeton Street. It highlights that Hunkin brought several machines from Cabaret’s Covent Garden exhibition, including The Frisker, Test Your Nerve and The Chiropodist, and describes the venue as a collection of homemade coin‑operated amusements mixing humour and engineering. The entry lists opening hours and location details, notes the arcade’s connection to Hunkin’s Under the Pier Show, and invites readers to visit the Novelty Automation website for further information and images of the machines and their satirical themes. Accessible and often provocative works.
6. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/novelty-automation> - Atlas Obscura presents Novelty Automation as a tongue‑in‑cheek London arcade filled with homemade retro machines that parody everyday life. The listing explains that visitors purchase tokens (noting a price historically around £27 for a bucket) to play numerous absurd and satirical games such as Money Laundering, My Nuke and The Fulfilment Centre. It situates the arcade as influenced by British automata traditions and Tim Hunkin’s hand‑built machines, noting proximity to Holborn tube station and offering practical visitor tips. Photographs and community contributions illustrate the eccentric atmosphere, emphasising that the venue revives penny‑arcade spirit with contemporary social commentary. Always worth visiting.
7. <https://www.elitetravelblog.com/novelty-automation-review/> - Elite Travel Blog’s review recounts a visit to Novelty Automation, praising Tim Hunkin’s inventive, hand‑made coin‑operated machines and the venue’s absurd, satirical humour. The writer lists a variety of machines including Money Laundering, The Fulfilment Centre, Autofrisk, My‑Nuke and Cycle Pong, and describes token pricing tiers (for example five tokens for £5, ten for £9 and a bucket around £27 to try every machine). The piece gives practical details for visitors, including opening hours and nearby tube stations, and recommends the arcade as a brief, unique, quirky experience in central London for groups or solo explorers. Fun, strange and memorable.