

John Sykes

111 Places
in London
That You
Shouldn't Miss

Photographs by Birgit Weber



emons:

Foreword

For Helmut and Birgit



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We pounded miles of pavements, visiting well over 111 places and taking many thousands of photos, in order to arrive at the selection presented here.

Famous sights like Big Ben and Westminster Abbey are not included. Instead we went to Little Ben and the under-visited Westminster Cathedral. We looked at places that visitors might find on their second or fifth trip to London. Many of them are in inner London, but excursions beyond the city centre to all points of the compass are also included.

We aim to show the breathtaking diversity of a city where all the cultures of the world meet. Its architecture ranges from aristocratic residences to heritage-listed wooden huts, its places of leisure from gentlemen's clubs with strict admission criteria to pubs for everyone, its shops from centuries-old retailers to stores selling in-your-face young fashion. We invite readers to accompany us to a synagogue, a Hindu temple and the Dalai Lama's Tibetan garden. We visit an unconsecrated burial place and a romantically decayed cemetery. We present God's Own Junkyard, the Naked Ladies on the banks of the Thames, a bridge that rolls up, and the wine dealer that weighed its customers.

There is a deliberate gap in the list of 111 places: 110 is followed by 112. Fans of cricket will know the reason for this superstition, and everyone else can read about it in connection with Lord's Cricket Ground (see ch. 58).

We hope that readers who explore London with this book enjoy themselves as much as we did while researching, taking photographs and writing.

John Sykes & Birgit Weber

25 — East India Dock

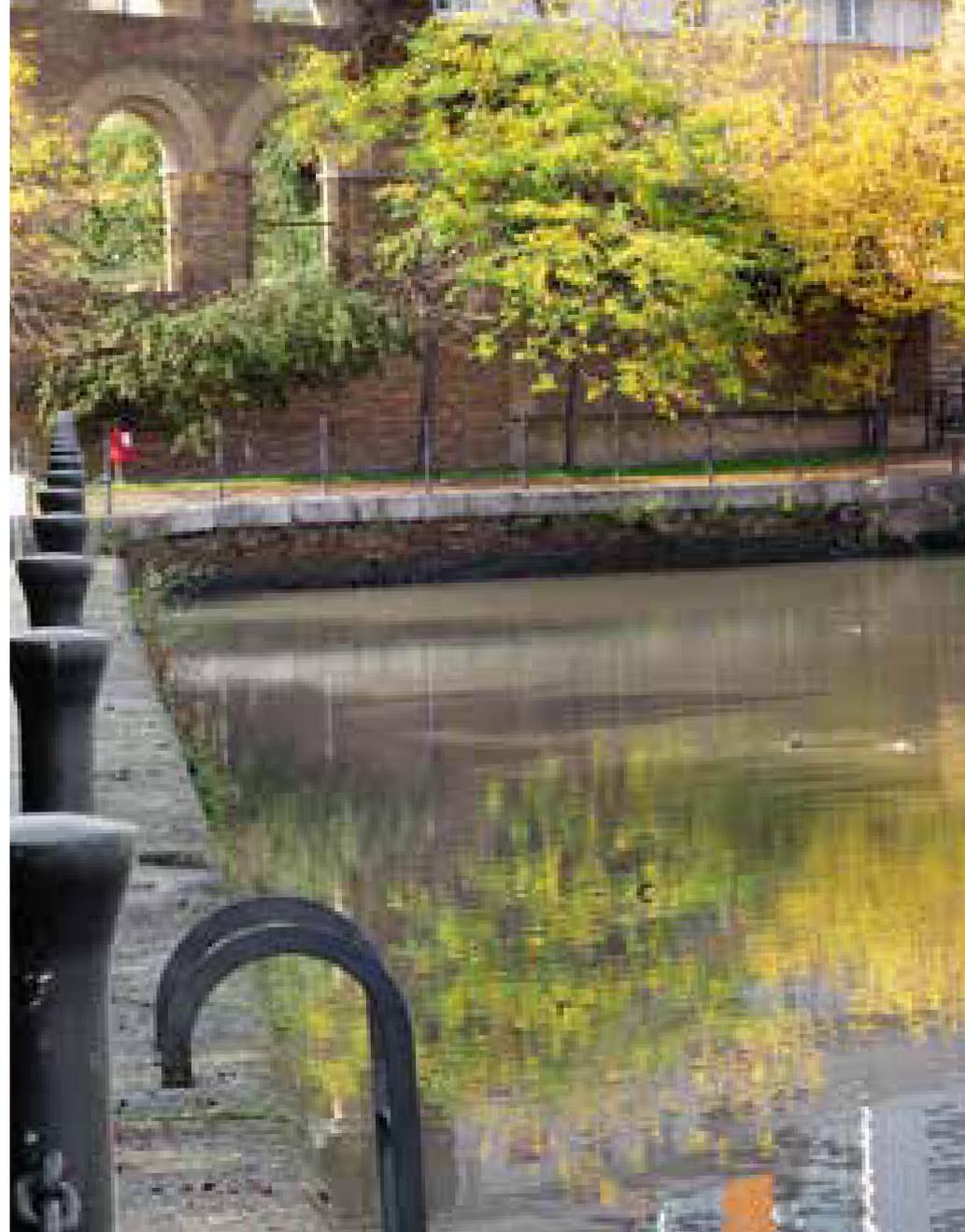
Spice and dragonflies

Popular in east London was once one of the British Empire's most important trading centres. Ships of the East India Company, founded in 1600, set out from the Thames for South Asia and China, returning with luxury goods such as tea, spices, silk and carpets. In 1803, the East India Company began constructing docks large enough for 1,400-tonne vessels over 50 metres long – an enormous undertaking, as thousands of tonnes of earth and mud had to be excavated by the muscle-power of humans and horses.

After the closure of these docks in 1967, two sections were filled in. The site of the Export Dock to the west is now occupied by housing. All that remains of the Import Dock, north of the elevated rail tracks, is an ornamental patch of open water, and street names that hark back to the old trading days: Saffron Avenue, Clove Crescent, Nutmeg Lane.

The East India Dock Basin that survives today was merely the entrance to the larger harbour beyond. It's now a nature reserve. Brackish water flows in from the Thames, bringing fish, eels and small crustaceans that serve as a larder for gulls and kingfishers. Ducks and swans feed in reed beds and patches of muddy salt marsh. Flowering plants in and around the water attract butterflies. Spring sees the arrival of common terns, which raise their young here in May and June on specially built nesting rafts, departing for Africa when summer ends. Dragonflies hunt smaller insects among the dense reeds. The black redstart, a rare bird in Britain, nests in holes and crevices.

The lock gates are impressive structures dating from 1879. Next to them, Roman numerals cut into the stone quayside mark the water level. There's also a sweeping view across the river to the O2 Dome in North Greenwich, westwards to the towers of Canary Wharf, and eastwards towards the estuary, from where the East Indiamen once sailed with their precious cargo.



Address Blackwall Way, E14 9QS | **Getting there** DLR to East India, then a five-minute walk east along Blackwall Way | **Hours** Daily 8am–7.30pm | **Tip** The eastern exit from the dock leads via Orchard Place to Trinity Buoy Wharf, with its imaginative public art, a container village for creative start-ups, and Fatboy's Diner.

46 Horse at Water

A restful sight at Marble Arch

The north-east corner of Hyde Park is a spot that has seen its share of uproar. On Sundays, any eccentric or hothead with firm opinions and a loud voice can harangue the public at Speaker's Corner. Countless criminals were hanged on Tyburn gallows. Now the name of the place derives from a triumphal arch of Carrara marble. It was designed by John Nash as an entrance to Buckingham Palace, but had to be moved when the palace was extended in 1851 – the famous balcony for royal waving marks the approximate site. In contrast to public executions and the Sunday shouting, a bronze sculpture of a horse's head now imparts a soothing mood to Marble Arch.

The sculptor Nic Fiddian-Green has loved the form of a horse's head since he was young. His first inspiration was a work in the British Museum, the horse of the moon goddess Selene from the sculptures on the pediment of the Parthenon. Today Fiddian-Green's outsized horses' heads have been installed in many different countries. *Horse at Water*, placed between a 1960s' fountain and Nash's arch in 2010, is 10 metres high and weighs 17 tons. In what appears to be a miraculous balancing act, it rises above a flat metal base that represents the surface of the water from which the horse is drinking.

Traffic thunders all around, as Marble Arch is one big roundabout for buses, but the horse's head is a perfect motif to make a transition from the surrounding bustle to Hyde Park. Horses have a close historic connection with the park: Hyde Park Barracks is the base of the Household Cavalry regiment, which rides daily to the changing of the guard on Horse Guards' Parade and has ceremonial functions at royal occasions. The park was once the place for fine ladies to show themselves in their carriages, and the broad track called Rotten Row that forms the southern boundary of the park is still used by riders.

Address North-east corner of Hyde Park, W1H 7AL | **Getting there** Tube to Marble Arch (Central Line) | **Tip** The Serpentine Gallery and Serpentine Sackler Gallery in Kensington Gardens (Tue–Sun 10am–6pm) put on changing exhibitions of contemporary art. Each year a renowned architect is invited to design a temporary Serpentine Pavilion.



77 — The Prospect of Whitby

A last drink for condemned pirates

The Prospect of Whitby is the very embodiment of the notion of a seamen's tavern: the pewter-topped bar is supported by wooden barrels, the posts that hold up the low ceiling were once ships' masts, the uneven stone slabs on the floor date from the 18th century, and the fireplace is black with soot. Diners seated in the Admiral's Cabin, which has the appearance of a salon in a battleship from Horatio Nelson's day, have a view of the river through lattice windows, while those who take their glasses into the beer garden to drink a pint beneath the willow tree look out on passing boats – and a gallows with a dangling noose.

The gallows, although not genuine, is a reminder of true stories. 500 years ago, an inn called The Pelican, later known as The Devil's Tavern, stood on this site. It is reported that the adventurer Sir Hugh Willoughby spent his last evening ashore here in 1533 before sailing round the North Cape to look for the North-East Passage to China. With his entire crew, he froze to death on the Kola Peninsula. He was not the only man destined to die who took a last drink here by the Thames. Just a little way upstream – the exact spot is not known – was Execution Dock, where pirates were hanged.

Punishing crime on the high seas, for example mutiny and piracy, was the responsibility of the Admiralty, which however had no jurisdiction on land. The gallows was therefore set up in the river, close to the bank but in a place where it stood in water even at low tide. Condemned men were taken there in a cart and given a quart of ale before they were strung up. The last to suffer this fate were two sailors who murdered their captain in 1830. Corpses were left on the gallows until the tide had covered their heads three times. In some exceptional cases such as that of the notorious pirate Captain Kidd in 1701, the body of the felon was displayed in a cage for years. The tavern was also a haunt of the “Hanging Judge” Jeffries in the 1680s.

Address 57 Wapping Wall, E1W 3SH | **Getting there** Overground to Wapping (East London Line) | **Hours** Daily noon–11pm | **Tip** The Town of Ramsgate (62 Wapping High Street), which also has a pleasant riverside beer garden, is another authentically old pub. Next to it, Wapping Old Stairs lead down to the shore of the Thames.

