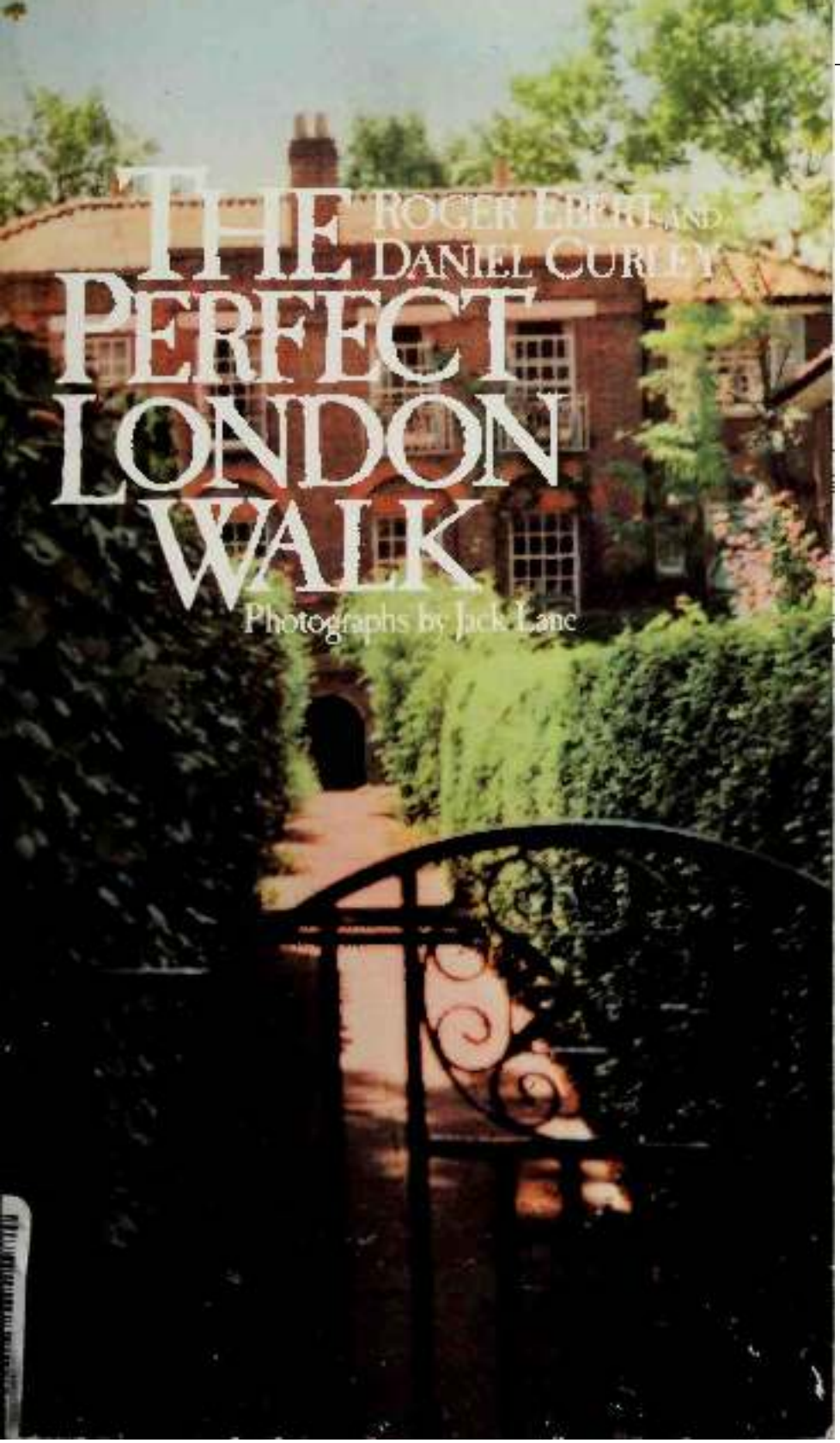


THE PERFECT LONDON WALK

ROGER EBERTLAND
DANIEL CURLEY

Photographs by Jack Lane

The Perfect London Walk

THE PERFECT LONDON WALK

by Roger Ebert and Daniel Curley

with photographs by Jack Lane

Andrews and McMeel

A Universal Press Syndicate Company

Kansas City/New York

Printed in the United States of America.

For information write Andrews and McMeel,
a Universal Press Syndicate Company,
4900 Main Street, Kansas City, Missouri 64112.

First Printing, March 1986
Third Printing, January 1990

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ebert, Roger.
The perfect London walk.

1. London (England)—Description—1981 —Tours.
2. Walking—England—London—Guide-books. I. Curley,
Daniel. II. Title.
DA679.E25 1986 914.21'204858 86-1221
ISBN 0-8362-7929-8

Cameron Poulter Design

You will have a pleasant walk today. I shall see you pass. I shall follow you with my eyes over the Heath.

—Letter from John Keats to Fanny Brawne, 1820

Introduction

Roger Ebert

For twenty years my favorite pastime has been to walk around London. I visit the great city as often as I can, and I set out from my hotel in the morning armed with maps and books and a journal to write in and a sketchbook to draw in. I always take my old copy of *Nairn's London*, by Ian Nairn, which is the most passionate and acerbic guide ever written about London. Sometimes I have a plan in mind. I will, perhaps, be following a familiar route, such as the Walk of the Three Parks (overland from St. James to Notting Hill), the Day of the Three Houses (Sir John Soane's Museum, Dr. Johnson's House and Lord Leighton's House), or Around Southwark and into the Unknown. On days when an umbrella is called for, I begin at Sicilian Avenue in the bookstore named Skoob, have a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice in a coffee bar named Onion, and walk across Red Lion Square (surveyed by Bertrand Russell's fierce bronze bust) and past the Ethical Society to Lamb's Conduit Street and Bernard Stone's irreplaceable Turret Bookshop. I am one of those people who would rather walk in the rain than in the sunshine.

However, there is one walk that is more than just familiar. It is ritual. It is one I have taken every time I have visited London. I have walked it in snow and sleet, in rain and cold, in burning hot drought, and, most often, on perfect spring or autumn days. I have walked it fifty times with a hundred friends, and I am not half through with it yet.

In its general outlines, my favorite walk is known to many Londoners who love to prowl about their city, but it is just far enough away from the beaten path that most tourists, even sophisticated ones, will not have found it. I call it Curley's Walk, and it begins about four inches above the top edge of most tourist maps of central London. It's above and a little to the left of that intriguing bit of green

called Primrose Hill, which is where the map companies think the tourist's London should end.

The walk has its name because Daniel Curley first led me across the Heath and into the gothic jungle of Old Highgate Cemetery. I met Curley on the first day of my freshman year at the University of Illinois, where he was a professor of English, and he has remained mentor and friend ever since. When I was passing through London in January 1966, on my way home after a year at the University of Cape Town, he was in London with his family, writing short stories, and he suggested one day that we go for a walk. Our first walk so impressed me that I have spent two decades proving to my satisfaction that there is no end to the mysteries and wonders of London.

The centerpiece of Curley's Walk is a bracing ramble on the Heath, including a climb to the top of Parliament Hill, the tallest place in London, and a visit to the tumulus where Queen Boadicea is said to be buried (if she is not instead, as some claim, beneath Track Five at Paddington). The approach includes a visit to the birthplace of Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, and the cottage where John Keats wrote, and wooed Fanny Brawne. The destination on the far side of the Heath is the Spaniards Inn, where Dickens tells us Mrs. Bardell was arrested on her lawyer's charge of failure to pay costs in her suit against Mr. Pickwick. The walk includes Kenwood House, with its Adam library, its Rembrandt self-portrait, and its gardens and sloping lawns.

All of these wonders are overtures to the most extraordinary Victorian memory in London, Highgate Cemetery. A good many visitors know about the "new" side of the cemetery, where Karl Marx is buried. But the old side, across the road, was closed for years because of vandalism, and was reopened only in 1984 as a result of the labors of

the Friends of Highgate Cemetery. Tours of the old cemetery are offered hourly every day of the year except Christmas Day, and no matter how much you might enjoy the earlier portions of Curley's Walk, do not tarry so long that you cannot arrive at Highgate by 3 P.M. from October through March, or 4 P.M. from April through September.

Some Words of Explanation

Daniel Curley

A workman once informed the author that he had daily crossed the Heath to his employment for many years, but he believed that he had scarcely ever found his way across it by precisely the same path.

—CAROLINE A. WHITE, *Sweet Hampstead*, 1903

This book undertakes to lead you across the Heath from one known point to another by one of these innumerable ways, any one of which would provide natural beauty, long perspectives, surprising views, and if you are particularly lucky, the soft, misty landscapes Constable loved to paint. If you manage to elude our carefully tested directions, you will still be somewhere very fine and can appreciate the wisdom of the motto of that splendid introduction to Mexico, *The People's Guide*: "Wherever you go, there you are."

There may be patches of mud to work around. There may be wet grass to cross. So wear your best walking shoes or your oldest sneakers. And never go anywhere in England without an umbrella no matter how the sky looks when you set out.

The walk is organized around two basic facts: The pubs open at 11 A.M. (noon on Sundays) and the last tour of the west side of Highgate Cemetery is at 4 P.M. (3 P.M. from October through March). We recommend starting early enough to be on the Heath before 11 A.M. From most points in central London, this probably means being on a tube train headed for Belsize Park by 9 or 9:30 A.M. That will give you time to discover and explore Keats's cottage and walk past the Freemasons before it has opened. (You can start a little later on Sundays, because on that day Keats House is open only between 2 and 5 P.M., long after we have passed it, and you will only be looking in through the

gate, not stopping.) It is important to recognize that although pubs are included on this walk, it is not a pub crawl, so you must not try to better the record of John McHugh, who in 1968 abandoned the walk at the George, scarcely 150 yards uphill from the Belsize Park tube stop. The Freemasons is the last and greatest hazard, where the faint of heart are confronted by a choice between its garden and the actual entrance to the Heath. Once you are on the Heath, there is nothing to do but persevere until you reach the Spaniards, the scheduled lunch stop.

Remember, if you get lost on the Heath, ask directions of anyone walking a dog. Dog owners almost always know the way home at the very least.

Approaches to the Walk

The usual approach, and the one we recommend, is to take the tube:

By Underground, take the Northern Line to the Belsize Park stop. If you are starting from Central London, be absolutely certain to take a train on the Edgware Branch, or you are likely to end up in Highgate, at the end of the walk instead of the beginning. Look for the illuminated signs over the tracks.

By Bus: Bus Route 24 ends at South End Green, right where we call your attention to the pizza parlor that was once a bookstore where George Orwell worked. Pick up the walk at that point.

By British Rail: For the special confusion of visitors, British Rail operates a system quite distinct from the Underground network. This, however, is recommended only to the intrepid and the lucky. If you decide to try it, the stop is called Hampstead Heath and is just a few yards farther along the recommended line of march. When you come up to street level and are facing the main road, turn right toward Keats Grove (unless you want to backtrack to the Orwellian pizza parlor or perhaps buy a pastry at the bakery).

If by any chance you do not follow through to the end of the walk and find yourself returning to central London by tube from the Hampstead or Belsize Park stops (perhaps you will have walked in a circle or have got on a bus going in the wrong direction), be sure to take the Northern Line's Charing Cross route.

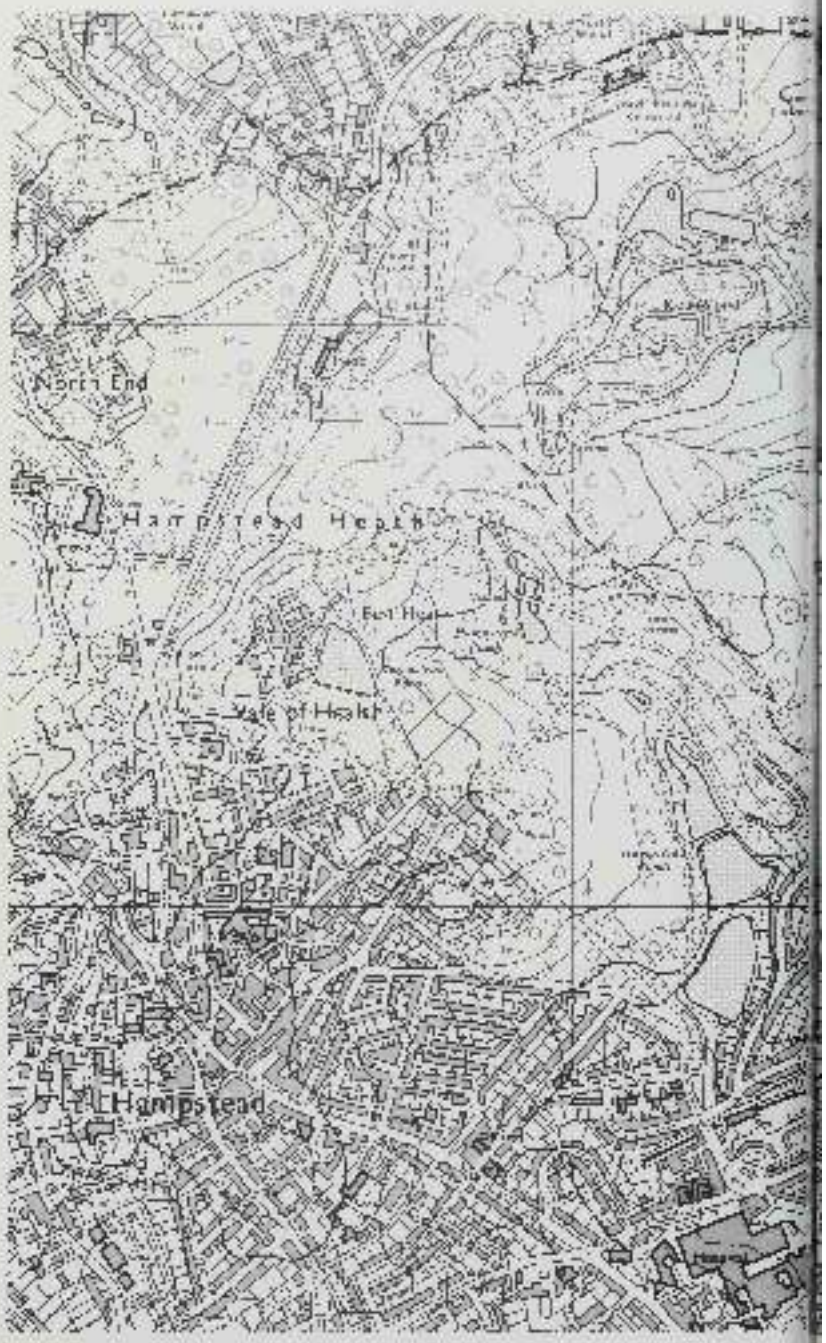
Keats House: Monday through Saturday, 10 A.M. to 1 P.M. and 2 to 6 P.M.; Sundays, 2 to 5 P.M.; Easter, spring, and late summer bank holidays, 2 to 5 P.M. Closed Christmas, Boxing Day, New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter Eve, and May Day. Admission free. (Cuts in funding by the local council may make it necessary for Keats House to curtail its opening hours; you might want to call ahead to be sure.)

Kenwood: Open daily, 10 A.M. to 7 P.M., April through September; 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. October, February, and March; 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. November, December, and January. Closed Good Friday, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day. Admission free.

Highgate Cemetery. The gates of the east side are locked closed at 4:30 P.M. Monday through Saturday, 5 P.M. Sunday. Tours are conducted on the west side by the Friends of Highgate Cemetery every day of the year except Christmas Day. Tours start every hour on the hour from 10 A.M. to 3 P.M. from October through March; 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. from April 1 through September. Tips are not expected, but a donation toward the upkeep of the cemetery is requested. To be on the safe side try to arrive at the cemeteries no later than 3 P.M. And if you must choose, forgo the east side and Karl Marx's tomb to spend more time in the shady gloom of the extraordinary west part.

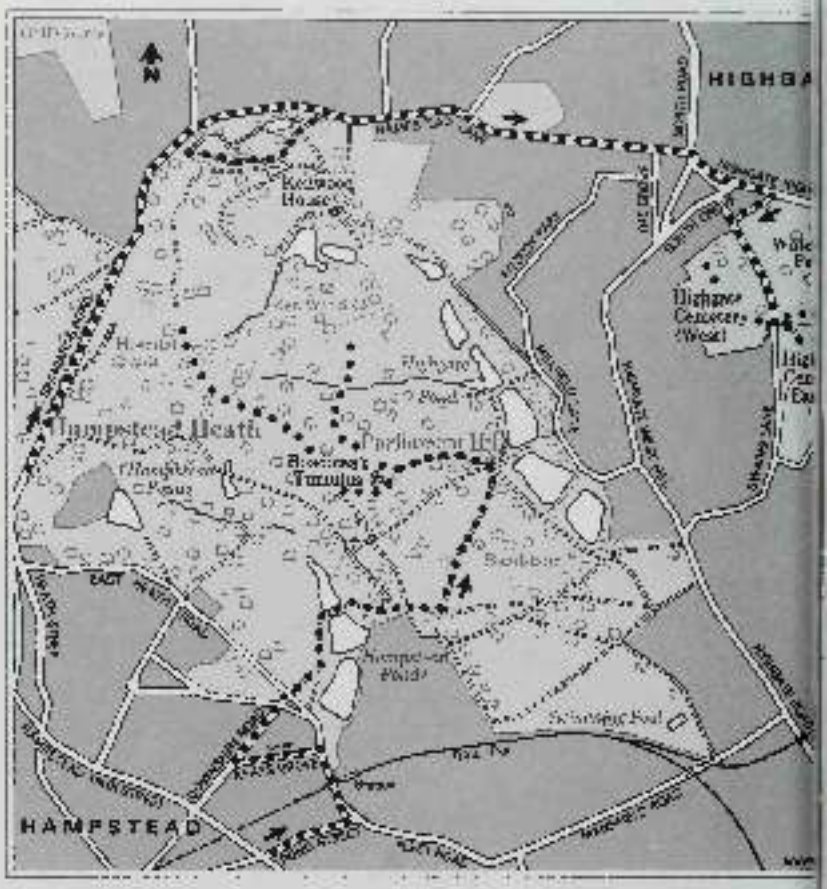
Pub opening hours: Monday through Saturday, 11 A.M. to 3 P.M., 5:30 to 11 P.M. Sunday, noon to 2 P.M., 7 to 10:30 P.M.

The Perfect London Walk



This map shows the area covered at a scale of approximately 1¼ inches to the mile. Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Crown copyright reserved.


Dartmouth
Park
Hill
Parliament Hill


N
HIGHGA
Highgate Cemetery (West)
Hampstead Heath
Parliament Hill
Bronze Age Tumulus
Bathing Pool
EAST HEATH ROAD
HAMPSTEAD

Take the Edgware Branch of the Northern Line to the Belsize Park tube stop, and exit onto Haverstock Hill.

Turn right and walk along the street.