

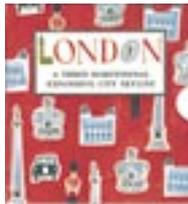


The happiness of London is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it
 Samuel Johnson

Seeing London

I've been looking at a handful of books about London for children, a modest but probably representative selection of the deluge that will no doubt soon hit bookshops in anticipation of floods of visitors to this year's Olympic Games and Paralympics. All concentrate on roughly the same area of Central London, from Hyde Park in the east to the Tower in the west; Bankside in the south to – if you're lucky – Regent's Park in the north. Apart from a few Thames-side landmarks such as the London Eye and Shakespeare's Globe most things south of the river are ignored. The focus is Tourist London. A shade disappointing, but understandable given that lines have to be drawn.

Two of what I've called books – *LONDON, A Three-Dimensional Expanding City Skyline* and *50 Things to spot in London* – strictly speaking aren't, even though they carry recognised publishing imprints. But as their scope is similar to the more regular books, their inclusion seems justified.



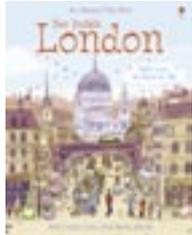
As it says on the box (which both items come in), the first is a nicely presented and crisply detailed "cut-paper souvenir" that unfolds into a double-sided frieze "featuring twelve of London's most famous sites". It begins with Harrods and proceeds to depict familiar locations like Piccadilly Circus, Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's, before overstepping the eastern boundary and finishing at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich. The second is a set of "spotter's cards" devoted to individual buildings or sites. Each card is illustrated, and includes a few pertinent facts (along the lines of "Did you know? ... In 1851, Fortnum & Mason invented Scotch eggs"), travel information (adjacent underground stations), and reminders of what else to look out for in the vicinity. Refreshingly, the objects covered are often those less familiar than the norm – the Animals in War memorial; Chinatown; Temple Church.

Of the books, two concern themselves with the capital's history, two are guides (one doubling as a storybook). The history is approached in contrasting ways, what you might call the 'classroom' and the 'showroom'. *The Story of London, From Roman River to Capital City* by Jacqui Bailey is a brief, eclectic and informative run-through of London's 2,000 years. Organised under fourteen

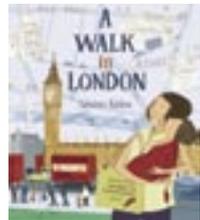


headers (A Royal Home, Crime and Punishment, The Great Stink, etc), it is stuffed with facts and figures, photographs and drawings, maps and diagrams, details of relevant websites, and has a running timeline. It is, incidentally, the only one of the publications to mention the forthcoming Olympics.

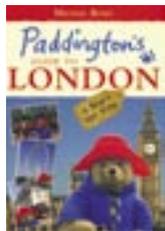
See Inside London by Rob Lloyd Jones and Barry Ablett settles for the pictorial interactive style. London's changing face from Roman times to today is set out in eight carefully detailed spreads, incorporating over 80 flaps which, at their best, add extra dimensions to the scene: lift open the merchant's house, in the Middle Ages spread, to reveal the family feasting. (Although treat the scene showing an Elizabethan theatrical performance in the depths of winter as pure artistic licence.) It's an exciting peep back through time, and – don't be misled by the thick board pages – will interest most ages.



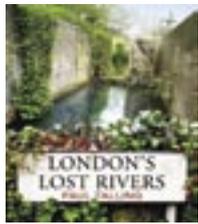
Salvatore Rubbino's *A Walk in London* comes peppered with all sorts of information, from the number of trees in St. James's Park to the height of the Monument. Its premise is a pleasantly meandering walk from the Houses of Parliament to the Tower (route shown on the decorative endpapers). The return journey by boat from Tower Pier is the excuse for a riverscene that stretches across a double spread and two unfolding panels to form a Thames panorama. A colourful, fresh and vigorous book that gives the capital an easy-going, occasionally teasing 'continental' feel (those Italianate-looking buildings in Fleet Street, for instance). It is more picture book than guide, although it does introduce readers to one of the most rewarding walks in Central London.



Paddington's Guide to London is an insider's view, written by someone (Michael Bond, not Paddington) who lives in the capital and knows his way about the place. It recognises London's diversity, acknowledging that it's made up of a network of districts – Marylebone, the Portobello Road, Shepherd's Bush, etc – each with its separate identity and characteristics. And it's a fund of useful extra information: the fact that Tuesday is half-price day at the Coronet



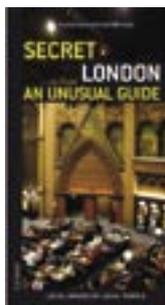
Cinema in Notting Hill, and that some of the best ice cream in London can be had from Marine Ices at the Chalk Farm end of Haverstock Hill. Just one word of warning: if you're not a fan of the duffle-coated bear, you'll somehow have to reconcile yourself to his constant presence in the dozens of photographs.



The Hyde Park chapter in Paddington's guide mentions how the Serpentine was formed by the damming of what is now one of the capital's hidden rivers, the Westbourne. Paul Talling's *London's Lost Rivers* traces the routes of these once visible waterways and reveals their often overlooked remains – the

outfall of the Westbourne, for example, which is carried by pipe above the platforms at Sloane Square station before emptying into the Thames by Chelsea Bridge. This is one of a new species of alternative guides aimed at all the family and dealing with specific, more out-of-the-way aspects of the London scene. All are liberally illustrated, and include lively, knowledgeable information, clear maps – and they really are pocket sized.

Two others, *Looking Up in London* by Jane Peyton and *Secret London: An Unusual Guide* by Rachel Howard and Bill Nash, are perhaps of more general appeal. As its title suggests, the first encourages a change of sightseeing that allows us to examine the facades of buildings and the tops of statues and discover an endless range of architectural treasures; like the carved boar's head in Eastcheap where Falstaff and Prince Hal's Boar's Head tavern once stood, or the golden galleon that sails above the roof of Liberty's in Great Marlborough Street. The book promises "Giants, gargoyles and gods" that gaze down and wait to be admired. And the second is a compendious guide to the odd, the extraordinary and the often overlooked – like the Crystal Palace Dinosaurs, or the Mummy of Jimmy Garlick, or the Hackney City Farm. A godsend for the inquisitive visitor (or native Londoner).



The best way to travel in inner London and reach its more outlying regions, those further afield than the ones covered by Paddington Bear, is by bus or Tube. (The Tube map, incidentally, is an invaluable extra guide to getting about the place, and one of the cheapest. Besides, it's a masterpiece of concision and organisation and worth having in its own right.) But when it comes to actually viewing the sights with the kind of commitment recommended in *Looking Up in London*, there's no substitute for walking, if you're able.

Walking and seeing go hand-in-hand. So it's no surprise that Charles Dickens, one of great chroniclers of London, whose bicentenary we celebrate this year, should have been an avid walker, once joking that he must have been the descendent of "some irreclaimable tramp". He would think nothing of slogging 20 miles a day through the city's streets and suburbs. But the walk I suggest is nothing like as strenuous as that, more of a family

stroll of the kind I did on Sunday mornings with my father when I was a boy living in the northern suburbs. The destination is one of our favourites: Waterloo Park on Highgate Hill, among the least known and loveliest of London's open spaces.

Dad and I would have approached the park from the direction of Hornsey Lane, pausing on the Archway to look at the traffic on the A1 below, which made my knees go wobbly because I knew we were standing on "Suicide Bridge". In this instance, however, the half-mile walk begins at Archway Underground station and wends its way up Highgate Hill, to what looks like a large iron birdcage bolted to the pavement opposite the looming Whittington Hospital. This is the Whittington Stone, commemorating the man who was, as the weather-beaten inscription proclaims, "Thrice Lord Mayor of London". Much more eye-catching is the cat crouching on top of the stone, also subject to the ravages of time but still perky as it cocks its head towards the source of those Bow Bells. Onwards for a further quarter of a mile, up to the elegant bulk of St. Joseph's Church ("Holy Joe's") with its pale green domes, then turn left, and in through the entrance of Waterloo Park.

The park was bequeathed to the public in 1889 as a "garden for the gardenless" by Sir Sydney Waterlow, whose statue, complete with rolled umbrella, keeps serene watch over the 20-acre site that includes three ponds, tree-lined walkways, herbaceous borders, ornamental flowerbeds, lawns, tennis courts, a nature area, and a children's playground. The lower, south-western, end abuts Highgate Cemetery, the magnificent Victorian necropolis where Karl Marx is buried and where the body of Rossetti's wife Lizzie Siddal was exhumed to allow her husband to retrieve the poems he'd buried with her.

Lauderdale House, a fine 16th century structure, stands in the park grounds, and boasts a very early example of a terraced garden. Nell Gwyn is reputed to have been a resident, which makes Charles II's supposed visits racing certainties. It's now an education and arts centre and has a café. Andrew Marvell, the Parliamentarian and poet, also had a house in the grounds.

Waterloo Park is the perfect spot for a morning's or afternoon's visit, a reminder that London is by no means all bricks and mortar but offers, as Auden said, *Space for strollers, / Liberty for lovers, / Room for rest, / Places for play.*

Chris Stephenson

London: A Three-dimensional Expanding City Skyline Walker £5.00 ISBN: 978-1406323481
50 Things to spot in London Usborne £5.99 ISBN: 978-1409507970
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