

Out of the way



In darkest London

Lincoln Allison

I just walked across London. I did it twice, really; the first day from Richmond to Blackheath and the second day from Blackheath to Epping Forest.

It was an odd thing to do, certainly if judged by the comments of those friends to whom I announced the intention. It was also a very tiring thing to do. So why do it? The traditional English justification of heroic enterprise, "Because it's there," is a little misleading. "To see what's there" would capture the spirit better. "Because he's daft"—my wife's explanation—is unfair, but there are personal reasons. I had driven through London. I had been a tourist in London. I had visited friends in London. But these experiences were superficial and, anyway, had only covered a small slice of the cake, from the middle out towards the north west. They did nothing to resolve my curiosity about what the place is *really* like.

and complexity. It has—as a friend of mine said of the street he lived on in New York—all the bad girls you'd ever hope to meet.

These things explain the ability of people to put up with conditions the RSPCA would prohibit for livestock. (Rush-hour on the tube is only the most obvious.) They also explain my own fascination. I have lived the greater part of my life in agreeable places, with green fields not very far away. I wanted to know how people put up with the big city and what makes it so attractive. I wanted to get away from theories and jargon, from pre-conceived notions of "housing classes" and "inner-city decay" and "multiple deprivation" to simply see what places are like.

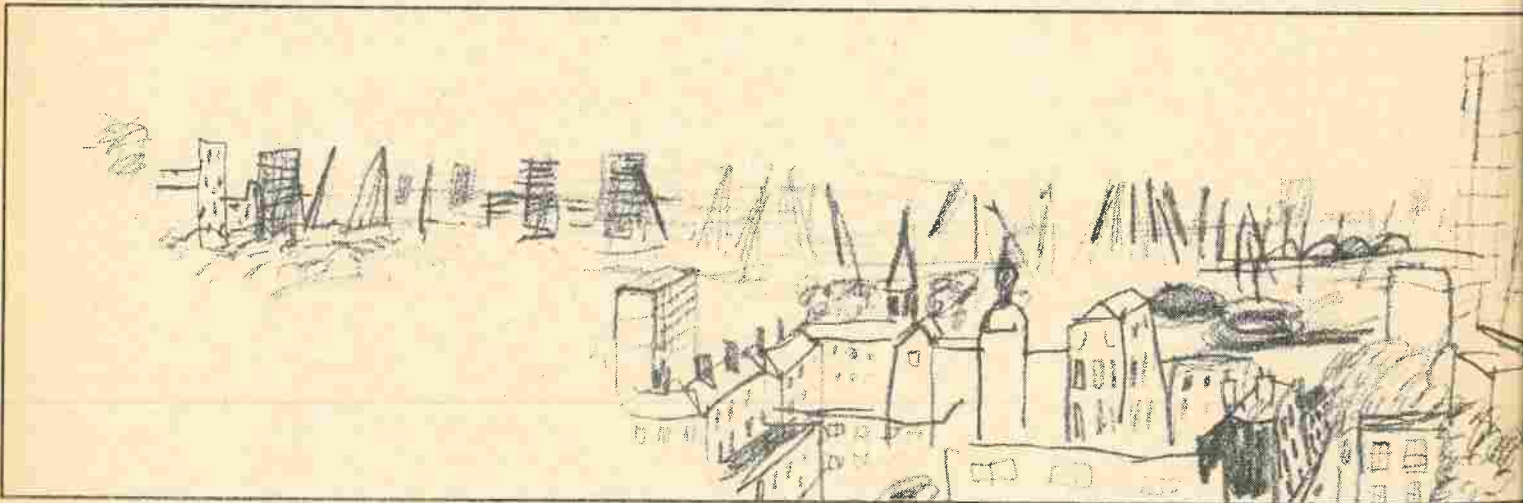
From the middle of Richmond I made my way through some suburban villas, diverted rather aimlessly into the Deer Park and out again, and then cut north across Kew Gardens, marvelling at the one-penny admission fee. "It's yer peppercorn, innit?" says the man who took the money, with that knowledgeable air which Londoners have. The gardens are fantastically beautiful. Then I go along the Mortlake Road and Kew Meadow Path, following the river as far as Barnes High Street. I am beginning to wonder if London really exists. There seem to be trees and open country on every horizon and my shoes are muddy from walking along the river. Barnes does nothing to solve the mystery. The high street has a range of small and personal shops which seem to be more suited to a medium-small market town. This is followed by, of all things, a village green complete

football. In Brixton I stop a while to look at the map and an old black man slaps me on the back and cackles, "Ah'll bet that made ya jump."

I go into a rather ill-kempt pub for some refreshment, rather fearing that I will feel out of place. To my relief, exactly half of the occupants are white and half black, while the barman has one ear-ring and a t-shirt which pre-dates Scotland's misfortunes in Argentina. An old black man is trying to explain to an old white woman about how to get a rebate on the gas bill. She contradicts him several times and says that she didn't have to take the form in last year. Without knowing anything about it, I am convinced he is right. He is also very patient and, when she won't believe him, he relieves his frustration by winking at me.

In the afternoon I make slower progress, pausing to explore some of the old council flats, the sort that are four or five storeys high, where each flat has a balcony looking into an enclosed space. For the most part they are built of dark brick and look rather grim. But inside I am pleasantly surprised by the friendly, communal atmosphere of some of them, though the atmosphere changes markedly from one block to the next. For instance, the graffitiometer records vastly different scores. Still pondering what makes the difference, I reach Blackheath station, exhausted.

Day two begins, exactly as its predecessor, did, in an atmosphere of unreality. Blackheath itself is very spacious and its panorama extends from the apparent rural fringe of Shooters Hill in the east to the



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with ponds and a large rather marshy wood called Barnes Common.

At Putney Bridge, the old church is overshadowed by an office block. I turn away from the river and soon smell the sickly sweet smell of the Young's brewery. Pausing for a rest opposite Wandsworth town hall, I realise that the last traces of rural deceit have vanished. A couple of old men sit on the bench next to me looking at the traffic, while some black lads come out of the nearby college and begin to read pamphlets on youth employment.

Clapham Common is a boring open space. I watch some Asian boys play

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south west London, are nowhere to be heard, so the silence is broken only by the occasional hooting of ships on the river and in the docks. On the eastern edge, old terrace houses are interspersed with modern flats, but much of the centre of the south of the isle is just a wilderness. Sheep, goats, and ponies graze and I walk down a cobbled street surrounded by 15 foot sycamore saplings where once there were houses. This wilderness is not completely deserted: it is patrolled by squadrons of small boys on "chopper" bikes. The boys are all white and remarkably English-looking for Londoners.

The Isle of Dogs is one of those places which, though it is ugly, at least is ugly in its own way and proud of it. The pride is apparent in the cocky, friendly way the kids come up and talk to me. The first group ask me, "Excuse me, mister, d'yer know if it's true there's a fair at Black'eaf." They are followed by a lone youth who, quite wrongly assuming me to be one of nature's mechanics, asks, "Please mister, why d'yer fink moi boike squeaks? Is it 'cos there ain't any oil?" and we discuss pedal problems for a while. The pride is obvious in the absence of any reference to the more prosperous London football clubs; Millwall Football Club really does rule, despite its problems. This pride is formally symbolised in the series of murals down the East Ferry Road, which depict the struggles of the isle against its enemies, from the Normans to the Luftwaffe and the GLC.

The north of the Isle is less eerie, though it has its own strangeness, largely because of the enormously high brick walls which

The biggest open space in the area is one gouged out where people used to live by the Greater London Council Parks Department, landscape division. Saplings versus vandals, and I'm placing no bets.

Beyond the Bow High Street, if you follow the Lea upstream, you find one of the most totally industrial zones I have ever seen—a completely mechanical, functional landscape of new roads, pylons, huge warehouses and factories. This is what William Morris called "the lovely river Lea (where old Isaac Walton used to fish, you know)." In theory it is due to merge into the Lea Valley Regional Park, though the theory seems hopelessly optimistic.

It is a relief to reach even the bleak expanse of Hackney marshes, though no sooner do I reach it than I make the worst mistake of the expedition. I fail to cross the river and I am forced to follow it round in a huge crescent.

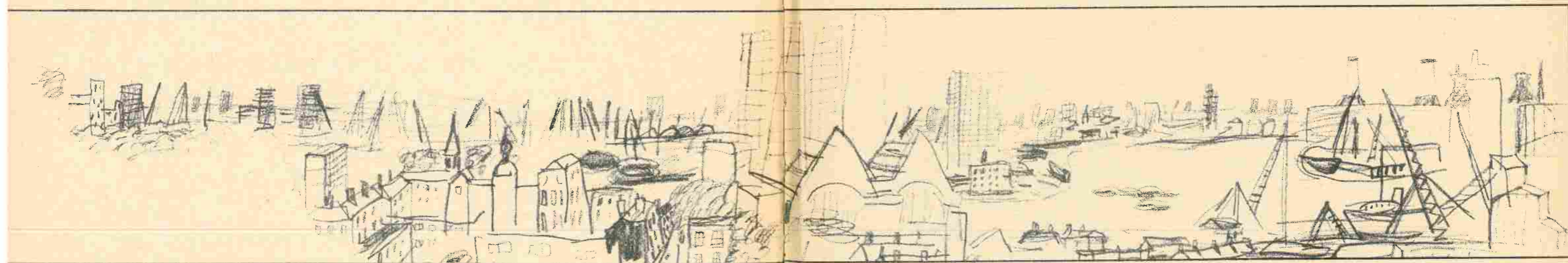
My mistake is only rectified by a long flog up the Lea Bridge Road, a classic inter-war ribbon development, with cinemas and shops in distinctively Edwardian and twenties styles backed by acres of semis. At last I reach Epping Forest, my ultimate if rather randomly chosen destination. I like the forest and I am surprised by the extent to which it is a genuine, and very English, forest with a high proportion of old oaks. But I also like those parts where the forest forms a kind of convoluted coastline with the suburban houses, gardens and cricket fields giving way to thick woods. The last part of my walk is down an avenue of villas leading away from the forest. It is just the

semis, lilacs and forsythia, which many foreigners think is the most typically English landscape of all. Often the transition between the two is dramatic: crossing Hackney marshes from south to north; or leaving the middle of Lewisham going east.

Both Londons are nicer than I imagined. Inner London has very, very few places which could be called slums by the standards of Paris, New York, Athens and San Francisco—and I have done more than my share of walking in these cities. Most relations between people are more friendly than I expected. For instance, race relations. I realise that attitudes to race are often schizophrenic, that apparent amity can hide potential hatred. But most of the race relations which you actually see appear remarkably and comparatively amicable. On the big estates, white and black children seem to play together in a random way, as if they didn't notice colour.

If I lost much of my fear of the inner city, I also lost much of my contempt for the far greater reality of outer London. Certainly, it is "suburban" if we mean by that a place which is not traditionally urban and definitely not rural. But it is unfair to equate "suburbia" in this simple descriptive sense with the connotations that the word is often given. Suburbia, in its emotive sense, means a one-class life, narrow-minded in its social views and boringly bland and repetitive in its physical presence. There exist such suburbs in England and many more of them in America. But most of the outer London I saw had more charm than these.

The view from Blackheath



Clare Jarrett

That curiosity has, I suspect, very deep cultural roots. The English have often been used, eloquently and persuasively, of suburbanism, of a failure to accept and adapt to urban life. We have produced characters like Ebenezer Howard and William Morris, who thought that cities were intolerable places and that, by reforming to Howard and by revolution according to Morris, London would have been disbanded and dispersed. But what they failed to understand is that the source of the repulsion is London's situation. It represents the centre, the time: it has all kinds of sophistication

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hide the docks from the road. I buy some chips on the West Ferry Road and endure the irony of being asked the way by a lorry driver whose accent indicates that he comes from some (northern) part not very far distant from mine.

After the Isle, I walk through Poplar, Limehouse, Mile End and Bow. These, I take it, constitute the real East End. They are overwhelmingly and appallingly ugly. The old houses are depressingly derelict, the new flats depressingly huge. Admittedly, it is raining by now. A skinny, black-haired punk with a swastika arm-band seems, though not typical, symbolic of something.

time when the commuters come home, carrying evening papers and occasional packages of food or drink. I get a curious flicker of envy.

It would be foolish to draw general conclusions from the experience of walking across London, but walking is a unique and important way of learning and left me with some clear impressions and images. In the first place, London looks like two completely different places. Inner London has those interminable four and five storey blocks of flats. The houses were usually built before 1914 and are in poor condition. Outer London is that colossal girdle of villas and

Age has lent it horticultural, architectural and social variety; time and the English talent for gardening have outdated the intellectual fashion for despising suburbia, so eloquently expressed by George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh in the thirties. London has the pleasantest suburbs in the world.

I was left pondering why the city gets such a bad press. The answer would be very long, I suspect, and would trace our intellectual history at least into Victorian times. I myself still prefer the small town to the big time. But the real gain of the expedition is that I have more affection for London than I did before I went.