

Ripping up Jack's London

Trying to navigate my way down the stairs into Paddington tube station is impossible. Surging crowds hurriedly exiting the underground push me back onto the street. A prerecorded public-school posh voice announces over loud speakers, "Emergency. All passengers please exit the station *immediately*. Emergency. All passengers please exit the station *immediately*."

"Uh, excuse me, what's going on?" I query a young station attendant who is heaving huge iron gates closed at the tube entrance. "Can't tell you, but we'll let everyone know as soon as we know," he says.

Imagination piqued, I'm positing what I've only read about in the news: a bomb scare. Hence, with no hesitation, I've now willingly joined the masses of peak-hour foot traffic running for Lancaster Gate, the next tube station. I'm desperately hoping I'll make it in time to catch the train to Tower Hill in the East End where I intend picking up a walking tour titled, *On the Trail of Jack the Ripper*.

It's about 6.30 p.m. and the walk starts at 7 p.m. It takes an average of 3 minutes between underground stations in central London and there are ten stations between Lancaster Gate and Tower Hill. Despite the possible bomb-scare crisis it appears I will be on time due to London's terrifically efficient transport system. Now on the train, I'm studying the colorful underground tube map above the seats opposite me and note an equally colorful

nearby advertisement for, "Spymaster: London's most Intriguing Stores for Listening Devices, Covert CCTV, Night Vision, Bullet Proof Clothing, and so much more." I conclude that Londoners are into sleuthing.

Ripping Yarns Ltd. is the Tour Company and Richard, a chubby 50-something super sleuth wearing a Sherlock Holmes cap, is the guide. I'm guessing Richard spins plenty of ripping good yarns at the pub; he has that telling whiskey-red facial glow. He probably shops at Spymaster too.

We're a group of about twenty-five shivering at the exit to Tower Hill station on this damp, dark night. "Right! And where would we all be from?" Richard encourages a little group bonding before we head off into the eerie night streets of the East End. I'm feeling slightly distracted at this point due to a dramatic scene behind us. London's Tower Bridge is looming above the Thames floodlit and pulsating through pea-soup fog. Directly below is the Tower of London—euphemism for blood and gore—portending the theme of the evening.

"It is 1888 and London is being subjected to a reign of terror almost beyond belief. A mysterious lunatic is leaving women so badly mutilated that people fear to walk the streets." Our Spymaster conjures up appropriate horror. The group huddles closer. And stepping forth as one, we follow our leader in the manner of bloodhounds on the scent.

"We've just crossed over from the oldest part of London, also known as the City, into Charles Dicken's Victorian East End. In the 19th century it was an area of low income,

unemployment, homelessness, destitution and prostitution." Richard informs us that this is "Jack's killing field."

I try to get my bearings in case of an anxiety-driven need to dash back to the comfort zone of the train station but we've crossed too many streets and gone down just as many alleys. I'm beginning to feel tense. The streets are poorly lit and one could easily get separated from the group and be lost, very much lost.

Richard has come to an abrupt halt down yet another dimly lit alley. He spins about on one foot and faces the group. "The first murder of six, commonly attributed to Jack the Ripper, occurred in the early hours of Tuesday August 7, 1888. The place, George Yard Buildings, the tenement block just opposite." Our super sleuth points, prompting a group stare in the direction of his outstretched arm.

Young upwardly-mobiles have renovated madly and the tenement block is now a very swishy, very charming apartment complex with Range Rovers and Saabs parked out front. Richard begins to give details of Martha Tabram's story and subsequent slaughter. My mind wanders. It is wandering an enormous distance for maybe five to ten minutes, and then we're walking again. My attempt to loose concentration during the no-holes-barred, full-on-gore description of Martha's mutilation has been successfully achieved.

As a light aside we make a short stop on Middlesex Street, where on Sundays (which happens to be tomorrow), London's most famous outdoor market, Petticoat Lane Market, is chock-full with shoppers. I make a mental note to return tomorrow for a less ominous,

daylight experience of the East End.

"Mary Nichols was Jack's second victim. She was found at 3 a.m. in Bucks Row, Spitalfields. Mary's wounds were horrendous; her throat had been cut right down to her spinal column." Richard is incorrigible with the gruesome details. Actually, I'm quietly chuckling as the name "Spitalfields" is serving as an amusing distraction. I'm wondering if it is a literalization (as many British names are), such that at some point in the past there were fields in the area where consumptives went to spit and clear their lungs.

We hear about one more victim, Annie Chapman, at the site of her murder, before we stop off at Richard's en-route watering hole for a warming, whiskey-Guinness chaser. Not much group bonding takes place at this appointed stop; we're all slightly queasy and understandably short on small talk. Back out into the frigid night air, we head off briskly in the direction of three more murder sites. I'm reeling a bit from the chaser, but manage to keep up for fear of being left behind.

We arrive in Mitre Square and stand exactly where Jack's sixth victim was found. Number four and five are a Guinness blur, and number six would be too, if it weren't for Richard's grand finale: black and white copies of the original photos of all victims post-mortem! Suddenly I wish the bomb-scare crisis had closed down the entire underground system thereby leaving me no alternative but to forgo this evening of amateur sleuthing and head back to my hotel for a sensible tourist, early-to-bed night!